

MY OLDER BROTHERS DREW ME TO THE REDEMPTORISTS

Jan Konzal (*1935)

Jan Konzal was born on 5 May 1935 at Zbuzany near Prague. He came from a large family of six children impacted by the premature death of their father; when Jan was just seven his mother was left to look after the children alone. She was a devout Christian and brought the children up in the Roman Catholic faith. During the war Jan Konzal began visiting a Redemptorist boarding institute for acolytes at Svatá Hora: "My three older brothers, who were already going there, drew me to Svatá Hora. I was there all week and only went home in the holidays or at weekends." After the war, when he was 11, he continued his studies at a church grammar school in Libějovice in Vodňany, south Bohemia. However, the school was abolished after the 1948 Communist takeover and Jan Konzal returned to Svatá Hora.

There he experienced the so-called Operation K, in which the Communists wiped out male religious orders, in April 1950. In this way the regime thwarted for some time his plans to study for the clergy. "In the night, when I was asleep, they took away the priests. But when they woke us in the morning I was suddenly the second oldest at the monastery as a 15-year-old. They had taken those aged 16 and older with the others. My two brothers too. After three weeks they let us go home."

Konzal completed his secondary school studies in Prague, graduating in 1953 and enrolling at the electrical engineering faculty at the Czech Technical University. Still drawn to religious studies, he studied Thomism under Professor Čulík and attended theological groups. He later led a number of youth theological groups and two choirs himself. He graduated from the Technical University in 1958.

In October 1960 he was arrested over his religious activities. "I was investigated at Ruzyně [prison] for around three months. I wasn't even slapped but I shook like a leaf – I couldn't take the mental pressure. In December I lost a huge amount of weight and lost my memory, so they left me alone. I think they put some chemical in our drinks." Konzal was accused of serving clandestine masses and being the leader of a seven-member group. Though the charge was completely fabricated he got three years in jail for subversion.

He ended up in Pankrác prison. He was assigned work at a projects institute but his memory did not return. "I had to learn everything again. They didn't believe I didn't know

about electricity from the faculty. My memory only returned gradually.” Konzal served the full sentence, continuing to work at the projects institute. “My monthly pay was 285 crowns. We weren’t allowed to put our names to projects – somebody always covered that up.” In prison too Konzal fulfilled a spiritual role. His mother smuggled the Eucharist to him in boxes of sweets. “The wafer was cut by razor into tiny bits, which were wrapped in cigarette paper.” He then distributed the host when he encountered others.

Jan Konzal got out of prison in autumn 1963. He was assigned a job in the Tatra enterprise, where he worked as an electrical engineer until 1967. He then moved to Armabeton. Jan Konzal continued to be drawn to the spiritual world and in the mid-1960s twice applied, without success, to a seminary. Finally in 1965 he signed up for distance learning at a faculty at Erfurt in the GDR. “I had no German whatever. With a dictionary in my hand, I translated the study texts word by word. I went to East Germany as a tourist for the exams.” Konzal later discovered he had been constantly followed on his trips.

After three years he completed his studies. However, instead of entering the priesthood in March 1968 he married Magdalena Mazancová. The Warsaw Pact invasion took place that August and Jan Konzal continued along his path in life as a layman. However, he kept attending seminars in Jircháře organised by Jiří Němec and Ladislav Hejdánek. He helped organise underground education courses headed by the theologians Oto Mádr and Josef Zvěřina, recording their lectures and securing textbooks.

At the start of the 1970s he learned of the existence of an underground church structure: “My brother Pavel sent two friends to me – I was living outside Prague then – asking whether I’d serve as a deacon. I was on my guard in those days. I was afraid of a provocation and didn’t wish to go to prison a second time.” It therefore took Konzal almost a year before he decided to accept the offer and return to the clerical path. Being married, he was assigned to the Greek Catholic Church. In March 1972 he was secretly ordained a deacon by Bedřich Provazník. Three months later he became a priest. Again his anti-state activities meant he was on thin ice.

For roughly four years he performed low-level priestly assistance: “Then Fridolín Zahradník suddenly appeared and told me we were going to Slovakia.” From 1976 Konzal travelled at weekends to provide pastoral care, mainly in Eastern Slovakia. When the so-called Prague community underground church was formed in the mid-1970s he became an active member. In the 1980s he was in charge of theology studies. When the noose began to tighten around the secret bishop Fridolín Zahradník, the leading figure in the Prague underground church, Konzal decided in May 1982 to accept ordainment as a bishop, again according to the Eastern rite, in case Zahradník was arrested. In August 1982 Bishop

Zahradník was indeed arrested and Konzal took his place in the Prague community. As a secret bishop Konzal ordained four priests.

Following the 1989 revolution Jan Konzal briefly became involved in the activities of the official Roman Catholic Church, when he was charged with arranging deacons for the České Budějovice and Prague dioceses. However, the incorporation of the secret church into official structures did not go idyllically. A problem arose as to how to deal with married priests, and especially bishops like Konzal. Furthermore, there were doubts regarding the validity of ordainments conducted in utter secrecy. The so-called Normae of 1992, which set out how to reincorporate priests and bishops into the official church, were meant to deal with the problem. What was referred to as provisional ordainment applied to all. However, Jan Konzal refused to submit to the contentious procedure. He is therefore not listed as a Catholic bishop and does not officially minister as a cleric. He entered retirement in 1995. Today he focuses on publishing work, cooperating with the magazine Getsemany and the Sít' publishing house. He also heads the theological committee at the Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Prague.

Text by Jan Horník