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About The Boy Who Wanted to be a Polar Bear

Text of the presentation of *Diante de Ti, Os Meus Caminhos*, the autobiography of the theologian *Tomáš Halík at the Capela do Rato, Lisbon, 22 Nov 2018.*

Diante de Ti, Os Meus Caminhos

By *Tomáš Halík*

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What can we possibly learn from the story of a boy who wanted to grow up to be a polar bear? This is also the concern of *Tomáš Halík* in the initial pages of his autobiography entitled *Diante de Ti, Os Meus Caminhos* (Before You, My Paths). Would his autobiography be merely a pandering to his own vanity, or does he have insights to share from his life that would benefit the reader? Having read the rather weighty text, I can say that indeed the story of the boy who did not grow up to be a polar bear, nor to be the President of his country, though he did have the possibility to be the latter, does have much to offer us. Broadly – but not entirely – arranged chronologically, the thirteen chapters of the book are bound together by the theme of *caminhos*, or routes, which, while rooted in the experience of a single individual, speak to a number of universal experiences.

If only to fulfill the norms of a formal presentation of the book, allow me to quickly run through its chapters. Not surprisingly the first chapter titled *O Caminho para a fé* (the road to faith) discusses the circumstances of *Halík*'s birth and the context of this early life, one that could possibly be described as an immersion in cultural Catholicism, where the faith is a cultural marker, rather than part of a system of quotidian exercise. Already by the end of this chapter, however, we are introduced to the manner in which *Halík* comes to be attracted to commit to the Church in a more substantial way. There is a context to this attraction, given the manner in which the Catholic Church was being repressed by the Czech state authorities under communism. The second chapter, *O caminho da primavera* (The road to spring) captures the sentiments in the spring of 1968 which, in his words:

> foi a primavera da minha vida, a primavera da minha fe, a nova primavera da Igreja depois do Concílio Vatiano II, e tudo ao nosso redor e em nós foi impregnado com a inebirante fragrância primaveril da esperança de um desanuviamento político e duma vida mais livre (p.54).
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> It was the spring of my life, the spring of my faith, the new spring of the Church after the Vatican Council II, and everything around and in us was impregnated with the intoxicating spring fragrance of hope for a political thawing and a freer life (p.54).

The political spring was not to last, however, and instead ended with the military occupation of Czechoslovakia by the combined military of the countries comprising the Soviet Block, which lays the foundations for the history that is to unfold in the subsequent chapters. *O caminho para o Sacerdócio* (The road to the priesthood) is self-evident, and is followed by the chapter *O caminho da Clandestinidade* (The road towards the underground) which discusses not only the personal trials of being a priest in hiding, but reflects on what it means to be a priest at all, and a priest in scenario marked by repression and persecution. Given that the dawn must come even after the longest night, *O caminho do despertar* (The road to awakening) speaks of the eventual relaxation in the hold of communism over Central and Eastern Europe and the role of the church in aiding this thaw, challenging the regime and also engaging the population spiritually through a Decennial to commemorate the centenary of Saint Adalbert. *O Caminho do Catarse* (The road to catharsis), begins with the first year of the Decennial, the year of Saint Agnes, also the year of her canonization. It was around this time the protests in Prague commenced, which would eventually lead to the face of the country being changed forever. The discussion in *O Caminho da Transição* (The road to transition) is perhaps one that interested me the most, because it demonstrated the way in which all too often the promised day of political liberation does not translate into an era of unimpeded operation for the church, rather, it heralds the opening of ever new challenges. *O Caminho da Fundação* (The road to foundation) engages with the creation of the Czech Christian Academy, *Halík*'s long standing dream to reestablish the student chaplaincy (which later became the Academic Parish) at the Church of the Holy Saviour in Prague and the site for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. *O Caminho da Noite* (The Road of Night) describes the traumatic experience in which things did not run so well when *Halík* ran into opposition with the head of the Department of Theology. *O Caminho da Politica* (The road towards politics) deals with the scenarios when *Halík*'s name emerged as a possible successor to Vaclav Havel as President of the Republic. I have to highlight that the portion that really appealed to me here was that where he indicates that he decided

não dizer um não absluto. Um não absolute aplica'se apenas a coisas que são realmente moralmente erradas em si mesmas. Um não que disse à polìcia secreta quando me tentou dobrar para uma cooperação. Aceitar uma candidatura presidencial é certamente arriscada, incomum, etc. etc., mas não e immoral.

To not offer an absolute not. An absolute no is to be used only when things are inherently morally wrong. The no that I offered the secret police when they tried to bend me into cooperation. To accept a presidential candidature is certainly risky, uncommon, etc. etc. but not immoral.

Os Caminhos para Mundo (The roads to the world) describe *Halík*'s travels, which extended to all of the continents and were always, it appears, moments for learning. And the final chapter is titled *O caminho para o silencio eterno* (The road towards eternal silence).

In his essay, 'The Death of the Author' Roland Barthes argues that to "To give a text an author" and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it "is to impose a limit on that text". Respecting both Barthes, and *Halík*, therefore, what I will do in this presentation of the book will be to offer my own responses to the book, speaking from the various locations that I inhabit, a Catholic from Goa in India, and currently living in Portugal. Such a presentation would not, I believe, be out of place given that both Goa and India feature in the book, India more so than Goa.

There were two aspects of *Halík*'s description of the early years of his life that I instinctively identified with. The first was that of a society and Church under oppression, and the second that the changes following the Vatican Council II and political change came together. In Goa, which was invaded by India in 1961, the years of hard political change, the suffocation of a Catholic culture, and the changes of the Council came in quick succession. It is true that Christian society in both Goa and India do not, in the large part, face the kind of repression that the Church in Czechoslovakia faced. However, the repression in India is more insidious, where hiding behind the rhetoric of democracy, Christians are not only forced to live within the constraints of an increasingly fascist power, but in corners of the country where there is no or little spotlight, Christians, their churches and property are ferociously attacked. This kind of oppression, as in Czechoslovakia, and so compellingly narrated by *Halík,* cannot but have a profound impact on the life of the Church.

On the one hand it forces us, clergy and laity, to operate with an enemy in mind, to the extent that even when the enemy is no longer there, we go looking for an enemy with the intention of establishing orthodoxy as a safe space. This has devastating impacts on a society, impeding the possibility for dialogue, which is at the heart of the social contract. Such were the circumstances that ensured that *Halík*, who was teaching in the faculty of theology, encountered resistance from his department head leading to his departure to the faculty of the liberal arts where he has been happily based for years now.

Another aspect of living with oppression is that this situation is also encountered those who collaborate with "the enemy" or the powers that control the state. *Halík* documents this aspect of those within the institutional Church in Czechoslovakia. Collaboration comes in different forms, however, and I would like to suggest that in the Indian case, this comes in the form of the much misunderstood project of inculturation. In his chapter *Os Caminhos para Mundo Halík* refers to the way in which this project has been articulated in India. *Halík* observes that, in various dioceses in India, efforts were made to bring the liturgy more in line with local practices. He recounts that at one time he was invited to dance a Czech dance at the liturgy, just as was done by the locals there. Fortunately *Halík* refused suggesting that dancing was not the way in which Czechs expressed themselves in the course of the liturgy! In my opinion, one of the major problems with inculturation in India is that it is an effort by the institutional church to align itself with the brahmanical culture of the Indian state. Thus, what it does is to dismiss non-dominant caste cultures, to undermine European cultures that have become part of the local culture, and museumize cultural practices of tribal groups. The outreach that takes place in terms of inter-religious dialogue is largely with Hinduism, and little or none with Islam, speaking to the manner in which consciously or unconsciously the institutional church seeks to dialogue with power.

In this context *Halík* offers us, as have many other persons with sharp insight, such as Pope Benedict XVI, that, rather than be seen as the adoption of discrete practices, inculturation is the process of dialoguing with those around us, and bearing testament to the values of the gospel. A great example of this process of inculturation and evangelization are, perhaps, the conversations initiated by the Czech Christian Academy. These discussions touched on a variety of topics, racism and nationalism, the constitution and the new juridical system, energy policy, reforms in education and health, and including such sensitive issues as homosexuality. These debates go beyond the invitation of the usual suspects, but more

importantly take place outside of centres of privilege, such as the national capital in Prague.

Conversation, or dialogue, is, perhaps, the *leitmotif* of this book. I have to confess that I was particularly impressed by two episodes in particular. One, where, when in Rome, *Halík* travels to the centre of the *Opus Dei* and familiarizes himself with the institution, and secondly his visit to *Écône* where he attended the controversial consecration of bishops by Bishop Lefebre. What struck me in these episodes was that this was the attitude of the genuine scholar. Someone who will not base his opinion on what s/he hears, but will form it subsequent to personal engagement with, and reflection on the issue. As he says on page 234 "*Tudo precisa de ser visto de vários ângulos*" (everything needs to be seen from various angles). At the same time, *Halík* recalling Fr. Josef Zverina, one of the significant figures in his life, who suggested that the basic Catholic principle is "*não só, mas também*" (Not only, but also), also suggests that this attitude, of examining, being open to nuances, is also necessarily Catholic. Perhaps there is a history here. My own impression is that the history the 14th century Czech theologian Jan Huss, who was accused of, and executed for, heresy has a role to play in this attitude. This history has profoundly influenced *Halík*, not only in his childhood interest in Huss, but also in emphasizing the importance of openness to dialogue- which could have avoided the execution of Huss, but also in the need for dialogue with evangelical groups who build on the memories of the Hussite movement.

One of the questions that animates a portion of this book is what is the role of a priest? This is not an unsurprising question given that, as a clandestine priest, *Halík* in communist Czechoslovakia could not simply take on the traditional external markers of a priest. We see the possible image of the new priest in the words of the Jesuit Mikulasek to *Halík* when the latter spoke to him about his desire to enter the priesthood on p. 96 "o sacerdote do future: deveria ter duas profissões, trabalhando numa profissão secular e, aí, estar principalmente disponível para as pessoas sem fé e para as que andam à procura" (The priest of the future: should have two occupations, working in a secular profession, and from there, always available to people without faith, and those who seek for it). Later, on pages 258 and 259 he warns, as a trained psychologist of the dangers of "cultivar em nome do ideal romantic de um sacerdote santo e a pressao psicologica causada pela interiorizacao deste ideal no decorrer da formacao no seminario" (cultivating the image of a saintly priest in the name of a romantic idea, and the psychological pressure caused by the internalisation of this ideal in the course of formation at the seminary). At other times in the book, once again highlighting the fact that Bishops and priests are also ordinary people, he imagines what people would

think if they saw their bishops in swim suits having fun on the beach.

If these are aspects I identified with, however, there were also portions that I just could not. *Halík*'s autobiography is marked by a strong identification with the nation, and the national. As a Catholic from Goa, and one who is particularly sensitive to the way in which various groups in India have been minoritized by the state, this intense identification with the national is not something that rocks my world. Indeed, I often wonder whether the twining of the Church with the national, so much the flavour of Catholicism in Europe goes against the universal vocation of the Church we are called to "make disciples of all the nations" (Mt. 28: 19) but in doing so are also called to ensure that as instructed in Galatians 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female" but be one nation (?) in Christ Jesus. It is right that the Church identify with the local. After all, as an anthropologist, I recognise that this is where the faith is rooted. However, we should do our best to make sure that this local does not get conflated with the national, the latter being the product of ancient, and ever-continuing projects of violent disciplining.

On this note, I will end with a final observation on another idea that struck me and which I think speaks not only to *Halík*'s emphasis on dialogue, but to us in Portugal.

> Por outro lado, apercebi-me tambem de que a tão condenanda sociedade pluralista secular, com os seus ideais iluministas de tolerância, direitos humanos e liberdades civis, protege a Igreja da tentação das infelizes recaídas do passado. É bom que vivamos numa sociedade democrática, não anseio de todo por um «Estado católico». Onde quer que a fé se torne numa ideologia estatal, eu serei, em nome da fé e em nome da liberdade, o primeiro dissidente." (pp. 253- 254)
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> (On the other hand, I realized that the much condemened pluralist secular society, with its Enlightenment values of tolerance, human rights and civic liberties, protects the Church from temptation of the unhappy relapses to the past. It is good that we live in a democratic society, not at all desirous of a "Catholic State". Were the faith to turn into a statal ideology, I would be, in the name of liberty, the first dissident.)

Reading these lines brought to my mind the role of the Catholic church in the entire debate around euthanasia in this country. As much as I recognise the ethical problems with euthanasia, even recognise it as a sin, there were times, when I felt that the Catholic church, or bodies of Catholics in Portugal, overstepped the mark, moving too close to an insistent identification of Portugal with Catholicism. Our job, I believe, is to make the moral position clear, to advertise it, but to remember that conflating the legality of the State, as the only possible legality in society is to make the mistake that marked the variety of political organisations that marked the 20th century – whether communism, fascisms, early liberalisms, or indeed, our very own corporate state in Portugal, embodied in the Estado Novo. It would be worthwhile to go back to the Catholic intellectuals who preceded these situations and remember that their voices were very often raised against the centralization of all power in the state, making an argument for a dispersal of power through society.

I will end on this note, but not before thanking you for your attention, Fr. Antonio Martins, for the opportunity to present this book, and to Fr. *Tomáš Halík* for sharing his life story with us.