

Homily
September 16, 2021
In celebration of the 1,100 Anniversary of the Martyrdom of
Saint Ludmila
Bishop Gary W. Janak
Shiner, Texas

We gather in faith to commemorate the 1,100 anniversary of the martyrdom of Saint Ludmila. The preserved documents describe Saint Ludmila as a kind, merciful and zealously pious woman. Like her grandson St Wenceslas, who also died a martyr's death, she was to symbolize the beginnings of Czech statehood.

The Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, OP, has been selected as the special envoy of Pope Francis for the celebrations of the first Bohemian saint. A host of commemorative events have been occurring throughout this year in the Czech Republic, with the main celebration to be held on September 18 of this week, in the city of Tetin, near Prague, which is the site of Saint Ludmila's martyrdom.

In our celebration today, we join with our brothers and sisters throughout the Czech Republic, as we remember the witness of Saint Ludmila and all that her life and martyrdom has come to represent in the land of our ancestors and for all of Eastern Europe.

Saint Ludmila, and her husband Bořivoj, were converted from the Slavic paganism to Catholicism by St. Methodius, in approximately 875 A.D. He, and his brother Cyril, are referred to

as the apostles of the Slavs. In turn, Ludmila and her husband brought Catholicism to their subjects, the Bohemian Slavs and her martyrdom in 921 A.D. is one of the earliest among the Slavic people.

Less than a decade later, her grandson, Duke Václav, to whom we refer as Saint Wenceslaus, suffered the same fate for his faith. Both became the most prominent saints of Bohemia, which today is located in the eastern province of the Czech Republic. A large equestrian statue, which survived forty-one years of communism, depicts Saint Wenceslaus surrounded by his grandmother, Saint Ludmila, and three other saints important to the Bohemians: Saints Adalbert, Procopius and Agnes of Bohemia, stands in Saint Wenceslaus Square in the center of the City of Prague. Like you who have visited the Czech Republic, I vividly recall viewing that statue on a pilgrimage several years ago and the venerating the remains of these saints.

As we recall in history, Saint Ludmila was born into a noble family around 859 in Lusatia, a historical region located in Central Europe, which lies in the intersection of the modern-day territories of Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic. After her baptism, she soon became a leading figure in Christian education and the spread of Christianity in the region.

An early widow, two of her sons, Spytihněv and Vratislav, continued the family's political activity and consolidated the country's role in the Christian world by building churches, some of which are still standing today in Budeč, including the round

Romanesque church of Saints Peter and Paul and, in Prague, the Basilica of St. George.

Ludmila donated all her possessions to the poor and was known for her love of Jesus and her charitable works. After the death of her eldest son Vratislav, in 921, the nobles entrusted the duchy's regency to his wife, Drahomira, and the education of their eldest grandson Wenceslaus to his Christian grandmother. However, in a fit of jealousy, the regent, Drahomira, accused Ludmila of seeking to rule the duchy by influencing Wenceslaus and forced her to retreat to the castle of Tetin.

There, on the night of September 15, 921, she was strangled by the order of her daughter-in-law. Wenceslaus, who had just come of age and was himself a duke, had the relics of his grandmother transferred from the church of St. Michael's at Tetin to the Saint George's Basilica in Prague. Since she was strangled by her own scarf or veil, the strip of cloth became her attribute and symbol to commemorate her martyrdom.

Over a thousand years later, Pope Saint John Paul II included Saint Ludmila in the Roman Martyrology and proclaimed her patron saint of Eastern Europe. Saint Ludmila is considered the first Christian martyr of Bohemia, a symbol of Christianity in the Czech Republic, and at the same time the expression of Bohemian unity within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially in the second half of the last century.

According to the research of Mr. Marvin Marek, two Catholic institutions in Texas were named after Saint Ludmila: Saint

Ludmila Academy, here in Shiner, and a church established in Wied, Texas in 1911, where a recreational hall was converted to a church with the assistance of Fr. Karel (Charles) Beneš. The church's patroness was Saint Ludmila. The church was abandoned a few years later and the Czech Catholics began attending nearby churches in the area. Seven K. J. Z. T. Family Life local fraternal societies in Texas were named after Saint Ludmila by 1939, with three presently in existence and two of them located here, in the Diocese of Victoria.

Today, as we gather in faith, many of us with deep, Czech roots, we offer thanksgiving to God for the gift of our Catholic faith and to celebrate our heritage. We are grateful to The Czech Catholic Foundation of Texas (the CCFT) for gathering us together to commemorate this important occasion. It is a testimony to the mission of the CCFT: to join with the Church's *new* evangelization, by increasing awareness of our Lord's presence among us, through the beauty of our cultural heritage. Culture and faith are united. They enable us to know the richness and beauty of life and the opportunity to celebrate and worship our loving God.

In his recent papal trip to Slovakia, Pope Francis reminds us of how culture and faith support one another. Reflecting on the ministry of Saints Cyril and Methodius, the Holy Father said, *"They invented a new alphabet for the translation of the Bible, the liturgy and Christian doctrine and thus became apostles of the faith's inculturation. They teach us that the Gospel cannot grow unless it is rooted in the culture of a people, its symbols and*

questions, its words and its very life. Evangelization is a process of inculturation. It is a fruitful seed of newness, the newness of the Spirit who renews all things”.

While language, culture, food and music have provided the connective tissue to which we, of Czech descent, remain rooted in our heritage here in Texas, it is our faith in Jesus, in particular the practice of our Catholic faith, which ultimately binds us together and calls us to evangelize. For this tremendous gift, we are most grateful.

It is through our faith, enriched and supported by our cultural heritage, that we are compelled to bring the Good News to others. This is what our ancestors did, when they first arrived in Texas. They brought with them their faith in Jesus and their commitment to the Catholic Church. We only have to look at the beautiful churches they built and the tender care given to these churches by the generations of Czech-American Catholics that would follow.

In our ancestral homeland, many Catholic churches have become virtual museums or cultural event centers, admired for their architectural beauty, but devoid of prayerful worship to our living God. It is the lasting effect of communism. Foreign powers invaded our ancestral homeland and did not attempt to eradicate Christianity by burning down the beautiful churches. Instead, they sought to make God and religion irrelevant and so they attempted to deafen the soul of the people.

Many would say they succeeded, but we know the Catholic Church remains alive and well in the Czech Republic. Therefore, we join our prayers and efforts to those faithful Czech Catholics who remain, many in the beautiful rural areas where so many of our ancestors originated, in re-evangelizing our ancestral homeland, while never ignoring the same attempt by some to deafen the souls of us here in the United States.

We pray the beautiful churches constructed by our ancestors in Texas, and throughout the United States, often brick by brick and utilizing their own labor and financial resources, will continue to be active communities of faith, where the sacraments of Christ are celebrated and the souls of many are strengthened.

May this commemoration of the martyrdom of Saint Ludmila, who continues to be a unifying force for our brothers and sisters in the Czech Republic and for us who are as Czech-Americans, be not merely a cultural or historic event, but one which calls us to draw closer to Jesus and emboldens us to be evangelizers of his Good News.

Saint Ludmila...pray for us.

Saint Wencelslaus...pray for us.

Saints Cyril and Methodius...pray for us.