

***Guardians of the True Faith: The Catholic Church and Images of Suffering and Sacrifice in the Slovenian lands of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914-16*** – PAVLINA BOBIČ

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Fran Ksaver Meško, a Slovenian priest and writer, conveyed his experience of the Great War (in literary circles suggestively called "universal death") in the novel *Sin (The Son)*: "God hit the world with the wrathful fist and erased all beauty from it, and He drove all merrines deep into the earth. It may never rise again from the grave". This paper will concentrate on the religious ideas and values that the Catholic priests in the Slovenian lands of the Habsburg monarchy transmitted to their flocks in the rear through sermons and devotions which in turn helped mould the parishioners' attitudes about the war. According to the Catholic Church's teaching, war was a divine intervention to punish "modern unbelief and immorality" with the purpose of bringing the people, "created in God's image, back to their divine source and make them begin to pray". The war with its complex web of political and national alliances, however, radically questioned the power of the old pillars of wisdom, and along with them that of Austria-Hungary. Given that during the Great War the Catholic Church ardently promoted the spiritual fight (presented as the means for mental "purification" and enhancement of bodily strength) against the vileness of materialism, a "godless disease of modern time" - in that manner creating religious dimensions in the understanding of war - the investigation raises two main issues. Taking into account the clergy's role in imparting the basic messages (political as well as theological) about war to believers, the question emerges as to how the religious notions of suffering and sacrifice were reflected in the civilians' imagery of war. What interpretive attempts were made at associating the suffering on the home front - in particular the women's suffering - to that in the theatres of war? Secondly, on a more fundamental level, we need to clarify whether the war had a significant effect on tradition, the Catholic faith being its constituent part.

The people's attitude about the war became all the more important in 1915 when, following Italy's declaration of war on Austria-Hungary, all Slovenian lands became a war zone and people came to grips with hunger, displacement and unemployment. By examining religious devotions that were held across the parishes, can we trace any significant patterns, or were there, perhaps, any deviations from conventional expressions of faith? With regard to aesthetic expression, what were the effects of the war on the major institutions in Ljubljana, and can we discern any noticeable performances that reinforced the sense of artistic continuity rather than abrupt change?

By highlighting the people's religious response, can we argue that the clergy's predictions at the outbreak of war about moral renewal and the invigoration of faith were right? Is it instead correct to assume that the "years of horror" (and military semi-absolutism) were the grave of moral values and everything that was thought civilized? Perhaps the main role of Catholic devotions was to satisfy the spiritual needs of people torn between the comforting, but disappearing, world of yesterday and the dread of facing an unknown future that was promising very little of what could be recognised as romantic.

For reasons of organization, I will distinguish between urban and rural reactions, concentrating on larger towns and selected villages from across Slovenia, although the major focus will be on the duchy of Carniola as the Slovenians' heartland. My body of cases will be drawn from the contemporary Catholic press, parish chronicles and reports of the Carniolan clergy, addressed to the prince-diocesan office in Ljubljana in 1915 and 1918.