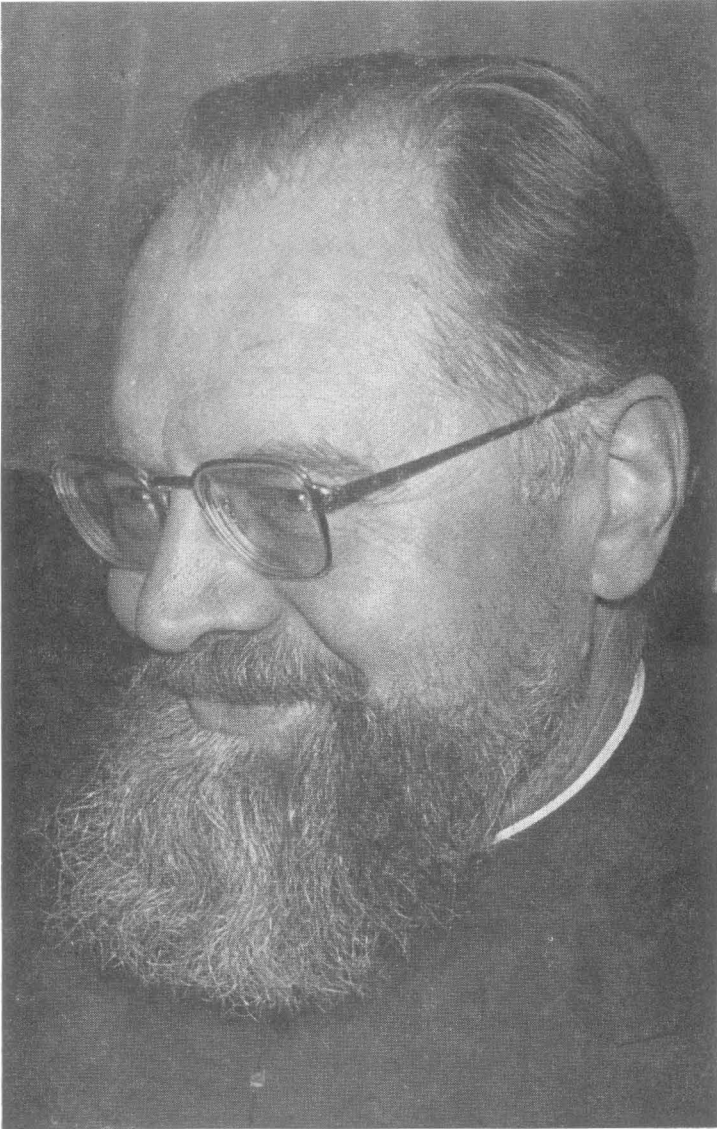


CESLAUS SIPOVICH IN MEMORIAM



Ceslaus Sipovich 1914-1981

Bishop Ceslaus Sipovich **1914-1981**

Bishop Ceslaus Sipovich, M.I.C., Titular Bishop of Mariamme and Apostolic Visitor of Byelorussians, died in London on Sunday 4 October 1981. His death, caused by a massive coronary, occurred during a meeting to mark the tenth anniversary of the Francis Skaryna Byelorussian Library and Museum, which he had founded. In his person Byelorussians have lost one of their most outstanding religious and national leaders of the century. One old friend expressed the feelings of many when he said that for him the death of Bishop Sipovich marked the end of an era.

Ceslaus Sipovich was born on 8 December 1914 into a farming family at Dziedzinka, a small village in the north-western corner of Byelorussia. At that particular time Byelorussia was incorporated in the Russian Empire, but some years later, as a result of changes brought about by the First World War, its western regions came under Polish rule. The parents of Ceslaus, Vincent (1877-1957) and Jadviha, born Tyčka (1890-1974) were both Catholics. They had eight children, of whom five — four boys and one girl — survived, Ceslaus being the eldest. The life of a Byelorussian peasant was not easy, and children were expected at an early age to start to help their parents with the farm work. Ceslaus was no exception, and from that time on, throughout his entire life, he retained a love and respect for manual labour, especially that of a farmer. According to his younger brother Peter, the decisive influence in the formation of his character was his mother. Although without any formal education, she knew how to instil in her children a love for their native language. She was endowed with a lively intellect and considerable poetical talent. Her songs and poems were learnt by others by heart, thus becoming part of local village folklore.

According to the testimony of Bishop Sipovich himself, he felt an inclination towards the priesthood from early childhood. This inclination became a firm resolution in 1928 when he entered the High School run by Byelorussian Catholic priests of the Congregation of Marian Fathers in the nearby town of Druja. The school was Polish, because at that time there were very few Byelorussian schools in Western Byelorussia. The reason for this was that the Polish authorities considered the whole territory to be Polish, and made it very difficult for the more than two million Byelorussians inhabiting it to maintain and develop their own ethnic and cultural identity. Byelorussian Catholics were in a particularly invidious position, because in the

eyes of many Poles the Catholic religion and Polish nationality were virtually synonymous.

The idea of a Byelorussian monastic foundation in Druja came from Bishop George Matulaitis-Matulewicz (1871-1927), a Lithuanian who, as Bishop of Vilna in the years 1918-25, was deeply concerned with the spiritual welfare of the Byelorussian faithful in his diocese. Given the delicate political situation, the Byelorussian Fathers exercised considerable moderation in their work, hoping thereby not to antagonize the authorities. Thus schooling was conducted in Polish and Byelorussian was not even taught as a subject. Similarly, in the parish church of Druja, for which they were responsible, two out of three sermons every Sunday were preached in Polish and only one, at vespers, in Byelorussian. At the same time they never made any secret of the fact that they were Byelorussians; they always spoke Byelorussian among themselves and with the faithful, and used that language to teach the catechism to peasant children who in any case did not understand Polish. But even this discreet attitude failed to placate the Polish civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The Byelorussian Fathers were subjected to all kinds of harassment, unfounded accusations and attacks in the press. The situation deteriorated after 1925 when their protector, Bishop Matulaitis, resigned the See of Vilna and was replaced by a Pole, Romuald Jałbrzykowski. A particularly traumatic event occurred in 1929, when a special commission appointed by the latter came to investigate various alleged misdeeds of the Byelorussian Fathers, including that of attempting to poison a Polish priest, Józef Borodzicz, who for years had conducted a campaign against them. The commission was compelled to concede the complete absurdity of all the allegations. The true reason for this whole disagreeable affair, however, was made manifest by the subsequent demand of Bishop Jałbrzykowski that Druja should divest itself of its Byelorussian character and admit two Polish priests. The Superior of Druja monastery, Father Andrew Cikota, in his comments to the Superior General of the Congregation of Marian Fathers on the findings of the commission, put it very succinctly when he said: 'The only crime, to which we freely admit, is that we are Byelorussians'. Four years later, in 1933, Father Cikota himself became Superior General of the Congregation and went to reside in Rome, whilst a Pole, Father W. Łysik, was appointed in his place in Druja . . . By that time the Byelorussian community there had already been weakened by the transfer of some of its members to missionary work among the Russians in Manchuria. They were sent there by the Holy See, but to this day it is not clear at whose instigation. The Byelorussian Catholic paper *Chryścijanskaja dumka* expressed the feelings of all Byelorussian Catholics over this affair on the occasion of the departure in 1932 of Father Joseph Hermanovič (who was also a well-known Byelorussian poet, and the favourite teacher of Bishop Sipovich): 'Fr J. H. is leaving for missions in a faraway country at a time when there is much missionary work to be done in Byelorussia, which has been neglected for centuries'.

Ceslaus Sipovich was a witness to all these events. The deportment of the Byelorussian Marian Fathers and their dedication to their work seemed to strengthen his affection and respect for them. In 1933 he interrupted his studies for one year to enter their novitiate and in 1934, after taking temporary monastic vows, he returned to school to finish his secondary education. In 1935 he was sent to Vilna University to follow a course of philosophical and theological studies in preparation for the priesthood. The Byelorussian Marian Fathers had a small house in that city which served as a residence for their students. In 1936 Father Joseph Hermanovič returned from Manchuria for reasons of health and was appointed superior of that house. Bishop Sipovich remembered the two years that followed as one of the happiest periods in his life. It ended abruptly in 1938 with the expulsion by the Polish administration of the Byelorussian Fathers from Druja. Ceslaus Sipovich, together with other students, had at that time returned to Druja from Vilna for the summer vacation. In his diary he left an eyewitness account of how on 23 June the monastery was surrounded by armed police and the Fathers were ordered into a police car and conducted out of the so-called 'frontier zone' (Druja was near the frontier with Latvia) where their presence was considered to be dangerous to the security of the Polish state. The true reason for their expulsion, however, was, as he noted in his diary, that 'they were all Byelorussians'. The students were not expelled at the same time as the Fathers, but on 8 July the order came for them to leave Druja within twenty-four hours. It thus happened that on the evening of Saturday 9 July 1938 Ceslaus Sipovich left Druja and his native Byelorussia forever.

The next day Father Hermanovič received his expulsion orders from Vilna and decided to go back to Manchuria. The Byelorussian Marian students were refused permission by Bocianski, the governor (*wojewoda*) of Vilna province, to return to Vilna to continue their studies. The expulsion of the Byelorussian Marian Fathers was accompanied by attacks on them in the Polish press, in particular in the Cracow-based *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny* and the Vilna *Głos Narodowy*. Among the few voices raised in defence of the Byelorussian Marian Fathers was that of *Przegląd Wileński*, which shortly afterwards was itself forced to cease publication because of harassment on the part of the administration. In its last issue of 6 October 1938 it likened the role of the Polish Catholic ecclesiastical authorities in these unhappy events to that of Joseph's brothers in the Old Testament when they sold him into slavery in Egypt. The sad irony of the story was that while the Polish authorities were thus engaged in combatting Byelorussian Catholic priests and clerics, the fate of the whole Polish state hung in the balance. One year later the Second World War broke out, Poland fell, and Western Byelorussia was reunited with its Eastern part within the Byelorussian Soviet Republic. Whatever trials and tribulations were in store for Byelorussians in the years that followed, of Polish rule there remained nothing beyond unpleasant memories.

Having lost hope of returning to Druja, the Byelorussian exiles settled for the most part in Warsaw. A few students, however, at the suggestion of the Superior General, determined to go to Rome to continue their studies there. One of these was Ceslaus Sipovich, but before leaving he made the momentous decision to adopt the Byzantine Rite. The Catholic Church of the Byzantine Rite (better known as the Uniate Church) had been the church of the majority of Byelorussians from the end of the 16th century until its suppression by the Russian government in 1839. Attempts to revive it began soon after 1905 and were intensified after the First World War, but with only moderate success. This was largely because of strong opposition on the part of the russified Orthodox and Polish Catholic Church authorities, the latter fearing that the Uniate Church would strengthen the national self-awareness of her faithful, as was the case in the Ukraine. Whatever motives led Ceslaus Sipovich to adopt the Byzantine rite, from that time on he dedicated his life to healing the old wounds and filling the breach between Catholics and their Orthodox brethren, the latter constituting nearly three-quarters of all Byelorussians.

In Rome Ceslaus Sipovich continued his studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University which he finished in 1942, obtaining a Licentiate in Sacred Theology. In the meantime on 16 June 1940 he was ordained a priest. On the commemorative card to mark his elevation to the priesthood, he chose the following stanza from a traditional Byelorussian canticle in honour of the Mother of God:

Matačka Božaja,
Matačka dobraja,
Biednyja dzieci —
My kličćam Ciabie!

(O Mother of God, / Our good Mother, / We, your poor children / Call upon You.)

He also chose a Latin text from John 17,3: 'Haec est autem vita aeterna: ut cognoscat te, solum Deum verum, et quem misisti Iesum Christum'. On the following day Father Ceslaus Sipovich celebrated his first divine liturgy at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. Thus the young priest, as befitted a true member of the Congregation of Marian Fathers, placed all his endeavours for the glory of God among men under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In 1942 Father Sipovich was enrolled into the Pontifical Oriental Institute, where he studied for four years. On 19 December 1946 he obtained his doctorate after successfully defending a thesis on the penultimate Byelorussian Uniate Metropolitan, Jason Junoša Smahažeŭski (1780-8).

One positive result of the expulsion of the Byelorussian Fathers from Druja — certainly not one intended by its instigators — was that while Europe was being ravaged by war, Father Sipovich was able to continue his studies uninterrupted in the comparative tranquility and safety of Rome. He later liked to quote this as an example of how God could turn the evil deeds of men to His own good purpose.

Eventually, however, war came also to Italy, and with it a considerable number of Byelorussians. Many of these, as former Polish citizens, were serving in the ranks of the Polish army. Others began arriving as refugees soon after the cessation of hostilities. News of the presence of a young Byelorussian priest in Rome quickly spread among them and soon Father Sipovich found himself engaged in meeting people, assisting them in their needs, helping to reunite families and old friends who had lost contact during the war. He was a one-man link between Byelorussians in Italy as well as with those in other countries. His warm personality and friendliness, the ease with which he could adapt himself to any company, coupled with a willingness to help and a considerable measure of practical common sense, earned him great popularity among all those who met him. It was here that he made many life-long friends. Among the new arrivals in Rome were two other Byelorussian Catholic priests, Fathers Peter Tatarynovič and Leo Haroška. The three of them made representations to the Holy See concerning the plight of Byelorussian Catholics at home and abroad. As a result of their efforts, the Holy See appointed an Apostolic Visitor of Byelorussians in the person of Bishop Boleslaus Sloskans. He was a Latvian who spent much of his life among Byelorussians and spoke Byelorussian fluently. In 1926 he was secretly consecrated bishop and appointed Apostolic Administrator of Mahilou and Minsk in Soviet Byelorussia. However, he was soon arrested and had to spend many years in Soviet prisons and concentration camps. Age and declining health precluded him from being very active in his later years but he always retained a special affection for Byelorussians and helped them with all the means at his disposal to realize their legitimate religious aspirations.

In the meantime it was becoming clear in which European countries the largest concentrations of Byelorussians would settle in the post-war period. Consequently Father Haroška went to Paris, where he established the Byelorussian Catholic Mission in France and founded the Byelorussian religious paper *Božym šlacham* which began to appear late in 1947. Father Tatarynovič remained in Rome and became the first head of Byelorussian broadcasting programmes on Vatican Radio. Father Sipovich chose England, where he already had many friends who had preceded him from Italy. He arrived on 9 April 1947, and immediately threw himself wholeheartedly into his work. He joined the recently founded Association of Byelorussians in Great Britain and represented this organization on the Co-ordinating Committee of Refugee Welfare Organizations from 1948 to 1960. He also held various offices in the Association and played an important role in its welfare and cultural activities. His special concern was young people and he considered it his duty to encourage and help those who wished to study. His pastoral duties took him all over the country, visiting groups of Byelorussians, many of them recent arrivals. He also actively collaborated with Father Haroška in the publication of *Božym šlacham*, and there was hardly an issue of this journal without an article by him.

As the work progressed, the need for a Byelorussian religious centre became apparent, especially when on 27 October 1947 the Byelorussian Catholic Mission of Byzantine Rite in England was officially established, with Father Sipovich as its first Rector. Initially he resided at the house belonging to the Lithuanian Marian Fathers in Hackney in East London, and celebrated the divine liturgy for Byelorussians at Brompton Oratory. This was not a particularly satisfactory arrangement but had to suffice at the beginning. Early in 1948 the Lithuanian Marian Fathers acquired a house in North Finchley, London, and gave permission to Father Sipovich to make temporary use of it. However, the house subsequently proved unsuitable for their purpose and they agreed to Father Sipovich's suggestion that they sell it to the Byelorussians. So it was that the Byelorussian religious and cultural centre commonly known as Marian House (so named in honour of the Mother of God) came into being. It has continued in existence ever since. Today it is known among Byelorussians all over the world, and the number of those who have visited it and enjoyed its hospitality can be counted in thousands. Its beautiful chapel of SS Peter and Paul with its iconostasis and fine collection of ancient and modern icons was the first Eastern Catholic chapel in England, attracting the attention of many English and other persons interested in Eastern Christianity. Many who came out of curiosity were to become lifelong friends. Marian House also became instrumental in spreading knowledge about Byelorussia among English people. In 1954 the Anglo-Byelorussian Society was established, one of its founders being Father Sipovich. In the ecumenical field he was one of those who revived the Society of Saint John Chrysostom, an organization devoted to promoting a better knowledge and understanding of Eastern Christianity among English-speaking people. Marian House has become the permanent address of the Society.

Marian House accommodates two institutions, namely the Byelorussian Marian Fathers and the Byelorussian Catholic Mission. Initially both these institutions were represented in the sole person of Father Sipovich. For the first eight years he was alone, but later other priests, not necessarily belonging to the Congregation of Marian Fathers, came to join him in the work of the Mission. It was, however, his dream to make out of Marian House a second Druja. The first step to this end was achieved in 1952 with the arrival of Nicholas Bahovič, a lay brother from Druja who had worked in Manchuria but had been allowed to leave it in 1948 by the Chinese Communists who arrested the priests. In 1959 Father Haroška from Paris decided to join the Marian Congregation and entered their novitiate in Rome. Later in the same year came the joyous news of the arrival in Rome of Father Joseph Hermanovič after six years in Soviet prisons and concentration camps. Both these priests settled in London during February 1960, and thus the dream of Father Sipovich began to take shape. Later in the 1960s other former members of the Druja monastery, Fathers Felix Žurnia and Thomas Padziava, joined the Marian House community. Father Sipovich was not however destined to be its first superior.

A meeting of Byelorussian priests was held in January 1960 in Rome. It was presided over by Bishop Sloskans who announced that by reason of poor health he was no longer able to fulfil the duties of Apostolic Visitor of Byelorussians. As his last act he presented a petition to Pope John XXIII, stressing the need for a Byelorussian bishop. Nothing was heard for some months, but early in July Father Sipovich was summoned urgently to Rome, where he was informed that the Holy Father had elevated him to the dignity of Bishop. The episcopal consecration took place on 4 August 1960 in Munich during the World Eucharistic Congress. The chief consecrator was Archbishop John Buchko, a Ukrainian, together with Bishops Platon Kornyljak and Andrew Katkov. The church of St Anne in the centre of the city was full to capacity. For Byelorussians, who came from all over Europe, it was a most solemn and joyful occasion; for the first time in almost two centuries they had again their own Catholic bishop. It was as if the Holy Church had finally recognized their legitimate religious aspirations, and wished to proclaim that Byelorussians had a rightful place in God's family of nations. The fact that this occurred on the eve of the Vatican Council ensured that the voice of a Byelorussian bishop would be heard for the first time in this august assembly. Soon after his consecration Bishop Sipovich was appointed Apostolic Visitor of Byelorussians living outside Byelorussia, but since there was no Catholic bishop in Byelorussia, he often had occasion to act as a spokesman for all Byelorussian Catholics both at home and abroad.

One of Ceslaus Sipovich's first acts as bishop was the establishment in London of a boarding-house for boys of Byelorussian parentage. In it the boys, who attended local English Catholic schools, could live in a Byelorussian atmosphere and learn the language and culture of the country of their origin.

The publication of *Božym šlacham* was also transferred from Paris to London under the new editorship of Father Hermanovič.

In 1963 Bishop Sipovich was elected Superior General of the Congregation of Marian Fathers. In the years that followed he was very active, combining the duties of Superior General with those of Apostolic Visitor and participating in the Vatican Council, during which he was member of the Commission for the Religious. To these were later added other responsibilities, those of a member of the Sacred Congregation for Eastern Churches, and of the Commission for the reform of Oriental Canon Law. He travelled much and made two round-the-world trips, visiting the houses of the Marian Congregation and Byelorussian communities in countries such as Italy, Germany, Portugal, France, the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand. In 1969 his term as Superior General came to an end, and he returned to London to Marian House. The strain of the last six years had told on him. His health deteriorated and he was beginning to suffer from a heart complaint. Yet he was as usual full of energy and plans for the future. No sooner did he settle in London than he embarked on his last great project — that of founding a Byelorussian library. Two years later, in May 1971, the

Francis Skaryna Byelorussian Library and Museum was opened. This was the realization of Bishop Sipovich's earliest and innermost dreams, his gift of love to the Byelorussian people. Today the Library stands as a lasting monument in honour of its founder.

During the last ten years of his life Bishop Sipovich remained very active, but found long travels and visiting increasingly difficult. He remained for the most part in London, spending much time in his beloved Library, where he had one room reserved for him as his study. He had always been attracted towards scholarly work, but had been hindered by a mass of other duties. Now he was able to devote more time to writing in Byelorussian and English, always on subjects connected with Christianity in Byelorussia. Articles by him appeared in *Božym šlacham* and *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*. His *magnum opus*, however, was the facsimile publication in 1978 of the 17th-century manuscript of Byelorussian origin giving the text, in Church Slavonic and Latin, of the Pontifical Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. His extensive commentaries are a model of scholarship and clarity and in fact amount to a history of liturgical development in Byelorussia. At the time of his death he was working on the origins and development of Christianity in Byelorussia up to the 13th century.

During his last years Bishop Sipovich saw many of his close friends pass away, among them several Byelorussian priests. His own health, too, was deteriorating rapidly. Often he was so weak in the morning that he could not get up to celebrate the liturgy. Yet he never complained and always appeared serene and cheerful. A few months before his death he had to undergo an operation on the prostate gland. Complications arose and he had three operations in the short space of six weeks. On his return home from hospital he appeared to be making a good recovery, although he never felt completely well. In August he took part in the Congress of 'Kirche in Not' in Königstein near Frankfurt, and only one week before his death he conducted a pilgrimage to Walsingham. Most of all he looked forward to the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Francis Skaryna Library. On the morning of Sunday 4 October he celebrated the divine liturgy in the chapel of SS Peter and Paul in the presence of guests and friends who had come literally from all over the world. In his sermon he underlined the right of every nation to develop freely the particular gifts given to it by God. During the reception after the liturgy he greeted all those present; then whilst sitting and listening to the speeches of others commending the Library's work he suddenly collapsed. An ambulance conveyed him to the Barnet General Hospital, where he died shortly after being admitted.

Bishop Sipovich died surrounded by his friends from far and near, having lived to see the results of his work. It was as though he wanted to say, having done his duty, it was time for him to go to his well-deserved rest and leave to others the task of carrying on the work begun by him. And that is how it was understood by many, both on that fateful Sunday and during the funeral. This was held on

Tuesday 13 October in the parish church of St Albans, North Finchley, in the presence of a great number of bishops, priests and people, his friends of all nationalities, races and creeds, who had come to bid him farewell.

Bishop Sipovich was a man of great courage and vision, founded on his deep faith in God, whom he loved above all things. Without this faith he cannot be understood. He loved life passionately and considered it to be the greatest of God's gifts which therefore should be used properly. He saw in every person, irrespective of his or her race, creed or social status, a child of God and he treated them accordingly, with love and respect. His love of his native Byelorussia had nothing narrow in it, but was based on a strict sense of justice and his conviction that every nation and ethnic group has a right to develop its potential freely for the greater glory of God. And God, whom he loved so dearly, gave him the strength to achieve much.

Alexander Nadson