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Faith and Culture in Dialogue: Tomáš Halík en Route from Vatican II to Synodality

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Abstract: This article examines how the Czech Catholic Church engages in dialogue with modern culture during two transformative periods: the post-conciliar and post-communist era of the 1990s and the current synodal process. The analysis is structured around a comparative reading of Tomáš Halík's early text *Víra a kultura* (1995) and his recent *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synodal Assembly* (2023), situating both within their historical and ecclesial contexts. The method combines historical-theological analysis with textual interpretation, focusing on Halík's concept of dialogue as a theological and pastoral principle. The study reveals that Halík consistently frames dialogue as essential for the church's credibility and mission, rooted in Vatican II's vision and adapted to contemporary challenges. While the first text emphasizes cultural engagement and overcoming a "ghetto mentality" after communism, the second calls for synodality as a pilgrim journey of reform and solidarity in a globalized, pluralistic world. The paper argues that Halík's dialogical approach offers a coherent response to secularization and internal crises, presenting dialogue not as a strategy but as an incarnational imperative for renewing both church and society.

Keywords: dialogue, Tomáš Halík, Vatican II, synodality, faith and culture, Czech Catholicism

In 2025, the Catholic Church celebrates the 60th anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican II, marked by the approval of important theological documents on the church's role in the modern world. It also signifies 30 years since Tomáš Halík entered public life and began writing. One of his earliest works, *Víra a kultura* [Faith and Culture], examined the Czech post-conciliar theological debate and predicted his rise as a highly respected and well-known author, with his faith-related books translated into 19 languages and numerous awards in literature and theology (Halík 2025).[1]

Looking back at Halík's numerous contributions, published as books, essays, homilies, and commentaries, dialogue remains a unifying and recurring theme. A relationship between faith and the world (culture, society, politics, seekers…) appears in various forms and themes throughout his work. The framework is historical and contextual: the concept of dialogue evolves slightly as the author matures and society around him changes. Some themes Halík emphasized shortly after the

1 In 2014, Halík received the Templeton Prize in recognition of his outstanding contributions to theology and his relentless efforts to facilitate interfaith dialogue.

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fall of communism have faded, and new themes have emerged as the world faces 21st-century challenges. His work demonstrates impressive thematic and stylistic consistency; it's difficult to distinguish texts written 30 years ago from those written more recently.

From this perspective, I examine Halík's study of post-conciliar dialogue in Czech theology and society. I focus on two periods in which Halík reflects in detail on the church's role: the enthusiastic period of new democracy in the early 1990s and the "afternoon of Christianity" in the current synodal era. By reading two texts separated by three decades, *Víra a kultura* (1995) and *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synod Assembly* (2023), I analyze Halík's ad intra dialogue: his theological and ecclesial visions for renewing spiritual life and church structures. Although both texts address dialogue between faith and society, the primary audience is the Catholic Church, represented by hierarchy and laity. The author offers a theological and ecclesial foundation for two transformative periods. First, a shift from a persecuted and disoriented church to an open church that discerns the signs of the times. Second, a transition from a clerical and disappointed church in a globally changing world to a synodal church that embraces new challenges. What defines these two periods? What traits do they share, and what is unique to each one? To what degree does Halík's focus on dialogue mirror these particular features? Before I proceed, I briefly outline the Catholic Church's situation under communism to provide context for Halík's theological background and reflection.

1. Catholic Church in Communist Czechoslovakia

Historians and theologians agree that the council's direct impact on the Czech church, which the communist regime had forcibly separated from the global church, was limited, and Czech scholarship still needs to explore the indirect influences (Fiala and Hanuš 2001, 175–76; Hanuš 2011, 93–94; Halík 1995, 18). When examining Vatican II and its effect on the church in Czechoslovakia, it is important to consider the social and historical context.

In the 1960s, the country had been under a harsh totalitarian regime for 15 years. This regime promoted an ideology that opposed Christianity and persecuted the Catholic Church, viewing it as a symbol of Western powers. Unlike Poland and Hungary, Czechoslovakia had a history of strong anti-clerical feelings before 1948, which made it easier for the church to submit to political power (Maier 1999, 45–46). Jiří Hanuš describes three groups within church life: the home official church, the home unofficial church, and the church in exile. The division within Czechoslovakia was shaped by reactions to state policies, such as the suppression of religious orders and education policies (Hanuš 2005, 175–77).

The home official church consisted of clerics and laypeople who practiced their faith within the regime-controlled area, mainly through Sunday liturgies. Although some took part in communist organizations or even served as agents of the secret police (*Pacem in terris*), most people avoided conflicts with the authorities. The home unofficial (hidden, underground) church consisted of individuals excluded from public life and ministry, often persecuted and imprisoned. Priests were not allowed to serve publicly, so they participated in unofficial activities such as education, sharing, and liturgy. If necessary, priests were trained and ordained abroad, in places such as East Germany and Poland. Local groups kept strong international contacts, especially with Italy and Poland (Hanuš 2005, 175).

The church in exile reflected two main waves of emigration, closely linked to state politics, in 1948 and 1968. Catholic exiles in Rome were strongly represented by the Křesťanská akademie, which provided information, media support, and financial aid to Czechoslovakia through smuggling (Vrána 1995, 258–59). An important contact was also established with Kraków, which became a leading resource for literature and spiritual support for many Czech intellectuals during the 1950s (Hanuš 2005, 175). The division within the church caused by the council is noteworthy; it was evident in Czechoslovakia but was felt more intensely among exile communities. A key symbol of this division was the *Studie* journal published in Rome, which took a clearly conciliar stance under the guidance of theologian Karel Skalický. This position created significant challenges for more traditional Catholics both locally and internationally (Hanuš 2011, 81; 2005, 177).

The need for ad intra and ad extra dialogue was a vital challenge for the suffering church. The council was seen as a chance for renewal in many ways. In Czechoslovakia, it aligned with social awareness and the call for reforms in social, political, and economic areas during the Prague Spring of the mid-1960s (Felak 2016, 100–101; Hanuš 2011, 79–80; Balík and Hanuš 2007, 5).[2] Scholars note that the council's ideas reached Czech society on demand. In some ways, the church's persecution in the previous decade accelerated theological reflection and pastoral changes, and it occurred before the council (Halík 1995, 140; Hanuš 2011, 80–81; Petráček 2020, 90). Due to the regime's "mistake," many church members were imprisoned in prisons and labor camps for years, which facilitated unofficial education and theological exchange:

2 Some authors emphasize parallels between Vatican II and the Prague Spring reform movements: "As Vatican II did for the laity, Czechoslovakia's reform Communists sought a greater dignity and role for the citizenry. This meant, above all, everyone outside the ranks of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, cutting across broad strata of Czechoslovak society. Like the Council fathers, reform Communists were open to new ideas, including those that came from outside the system and its institutions. They sought a greater emphasis on dialogue, both within the Communist Party and with those outside of it. The new emphasis in the party was less on hierarchy and more on collegiality, again paralleling the aspirations of the Council. Finally, as with Vatican II, Czechoslovakia's reform was elite-driven, with new forces among the party leadership emerging in the course of the 1960s to challenge the old guard." (Felak 2016, 100–101)

> The prison "universities" were effectively established, where almost all Catholic prisoners studied. Working together, they discussed lectures and debated issues concerning the state of the Church from all sides. We want to put forward the thesis that certain preparations for the council took place here, despite the complete isolation from world events and even from basic domestic information. (Hanuš 2005, 178)[3]

This dialogue began in prisons, labor camps, factories, and workplaces where priests, often secretly ordained or lacking official approval, and laypeople, who lead convincing Christian lives, interacted with Christians of different denominations, people with Tomáš Masaryk views, and even communists involved in regimes they helped establish during purges. After 1968, the dialogue continued through unofficial lectures, samizdat publications, and groups like Charter 77, growing stronger until the November 1989 events. Halík suggests that some Catholics saw the church's challenges as a chance for internal change. They believed persecution was a means of refining the church, akin to Old Testament prophets. Priests in communist prisons saw their suffering as a form of atonement, hoping for a simpler, more honest church rooted in its spiritual essence rather than its past institutional forms (Halík 1995, 140–142).

Hanuš reflects that, in hindsight, the insights applicable to Western European countries can similarly be applied to Czech society, albeit with some differences. Key milestones—such as liturgical reform, the adoption of national languages in worship, a shift in understanding of religious freedom and conscience, ecumenical efforts, and interfaith dialogue—are now fundamental to Catholic Christians' worldview and lifestyle. However, the depth and scope of Western discourse on these topics have not yet been fully realized locally. So, although the council succeeded in transforming the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia, the details of the changes still need to be examined and discussed (Hanuš 2011, 94).

2. Post-Conciliar Dialogue in *Víra a kultura*

Amid the excitement of the early 1990s, Halík transitioned from a concealed, persecuted church into a free society and began contributing to theology and public debate. In 1995, Halík published *Víra a kultura*, a study of post-conciliar developments in Czech Catholicism in the journal *Studie*.[4] It was a new opportunity to address contemporary challenges for a broader audience, drawing heavily on the

3 Translations from Czech into English are by the author.

4 Earlier, Halík published a first essay collection, *O přítomnou církev a společnost* [On the Present Church and Society] (1992).

recent experiences of the persecuted church. Halík presented his understanding of faith and the church in the modern world, emphasizing respect for historical sacrifice and hope for the church's role in a free society. In analyzing the theological journal, Halík followed a specific direction in Czech Catholicism that he called "dialogical, open, and conciliar." (1995, 16) Halík acknowledged that his methodical approach could not offer a fully representative or objective insight into Czech Catholicism as a whole. Nevertheless, Halík maintained that it would be hard to find a more meaningful direction that encompassed the history of persecuted Czechs and produced more results. Halík (1995, 19) viewed *Gaudium et spes* as the Magna Carta of the church's new dialogical relationship with modern society and culture. Culture is the legitimate locus theologicus, and Halík (1995, 14–15) aligned with its concept of culture.

> The word "culture" in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family. (*GS* 53)

Representatives of the pro-reform theological school responded positively to his early work. Even before Halík published the collection of essays in 1992, his teacher from the unofficial persecuted church, Oto Mádr, questioned the point of publishing "an author as well-known and popular in the Czech and Moravian churches as Tomáš Halík … Everyone has read him or heard him on television. People in Europe enjoy listening to him." (Mádr, quoted in Halík 1992, 5)[5] Mádr might be surprised to see how Halík's later writings continue to inspire a wide international audience with their eloquent and timely analysis of the human pursuit of meaning and transcendence. Or, perhaps, his teacher would not be too surprised. After all, he already advised readers on how to approach Halík: "Read carefully and thoroughly. Let the elegant form entice you to imagine the content. Accept his brilliant ideas as a call to action, but also—even before that—to dialogue, critical reflection, and internalization." (Mádr, quoted in Halík 1992, 5) Similarly, Skalický, a representative of the exile church, recognized Halík's ability for theological reflection during the transformation period: "His work is a rare resource and catalyst for the process of self-awareness

5 In fact, given to his psychological training and profession during communism, Halík co-authored two psychological books with Zbyněk Kuchyňka—*Lidé a konflikty* [People and Conflicts] (1981) and *Člověk a konflikty* [Man and Conflicts] (1979)—as well as meditations for healthcare workers, *Sedm úvah o službě nemocným a trpícím* [Seven Reflections on the Service to the Sick and Suffering] (1991); all were published before 1992.

that every national, state, and church community desperately needs if it is not to degenerate into a mere mass that does not know what is happening within it or where it is heading." (Skalický, quoted in Halík 1995, 8)

So, Halík, who received his theological education and pastoral training from leading post-conciliar Czech theologians Antonín Mandl, Josef Zvěřina, and Mádr, conducted a thorough study of the *Studie* journal to explore Czech theology after Vatican II. Building on a detailed examination of three decades of journal existence (1958–91), Halík proposed a concluding essay, "Post scriptum," in which he summarized research results and provided an insightful perspective into the future of the church. In a 22-page-long text, dialogue appears 33 times, making it the central concept of Halík's reflection. It is not only dialogue between faith and culture, but also interreligious, ecumenical, and societal dialogue. Karel Vrána, another theologian of the exile church, observed that Halík succeeded in demonstrating that both branches of Czech Catholicism, the home and exile churches, developed a dialogical approach to culture (see Halík 1995, 161).

The dialogue between the church and culture, as presented in Vatican II and reflected in Halík's *Víra a kultura*, marks one of the most important shifts in modern Catholic thought. The council moved away from a defensive "fortress mentality" and adopted a more open approach, recognizing that culture is not an external threat but a vital space where the Gospel can take hold (Halík 1995, 139). Culture is understood holistically: as the collective expression of human life, thought, and creativity. The church acknowledges the independence and freedom of cultures, supports their diversity, and insists that evangelization must engage with culture as a whole rather than just with individuals. This means that the Gospel should be inculturated—embedded in the lived experiences of different peoples—while also renewing and lifting up those cultures through dialogue.

In the Czech context, this dialogue was not mainly imported from abroad but developed from the church's own experience of persecution under communism. Isolated from the broader Catholic world, Czech believers and theologians found dialogue in prisons, labor camps, and underground communities. There, Catholics met Protestants, liberals, and even disillusioned communists, and together they pursued truth and freedom. This experience eliminated the remnants of a ghetto mentality and opened the church to solidarity with other ideas. In the 1970s and 1980s, dialogue continued through parallel culture, samizdat publications, and dissident groups such as Charter 77. The persecuted church became a moral authority, inspiring unofficial culture and providing a spiritual depth that secular humanism alone could not sustain (Halík 1995, 141–42).

Halík stated that the council's principle of engaging with the modern world aims to recognize the "maturity of the world," acknowledging diverse opinions and religions and the universal right to freedom of conscience and belief. *Gaudium et spes* endorses modern values such as democracy, tolerance, and political and cultural

liberty. It examines the rise of civilization rooted in these ideals, providing a balanced view of its strengths and weaknesses (Halík 1995, 139). He highlighted that similar development can be observed in both the home and exile church theology, despite limited mutual exchange. Halík's research identified significant similarities among leading Czech theologians isolated from the global church (Zvěřina, Mandl, Mádr) and those in exile (Vrána, Skalický, Alexander Heidler) (Halík 1995, 144).

> The development of a dialogical relationship between faith and culture arises in the persecuted Czech Church primarily through reflection on its own historical experiences. Openness to dialogue is born in the minds and hearts of theologians and believers who bear the cross of severe persecution and live in a church deprived of many external supports. This persecuted church does not succumb to a ghetto mentality, but, on the contrary, it largely rids itself of the remnants of this former mentality. It enters dialogue with other spiritual and intellectual currents in society, especially with those representatives and advocates who are also persecuted by totalitarian power and long for truth and freedom. (Halík 1995, 140–142)

The journal *Studie* was a crucial witness to this process. It served as a platform for Catholic intellectual life, bringing together voices from exile and, later, from within Czechoslovakia. *Studie* documented and influenced the new relationship between faith and culture, covering theology, politics, economics, and human rights. It engaged critically with Marxism, supported dialogue with dissenters, and emphasized the European and Christian roots of Czech culture. By encouraging discussion on national identity, history, and the moral renewal of society, the journal became both a record and a catalyst of the church's cultural involvement. It accompanied the Czech church through the major stages of the Prague Spring, normalization, and the spiritual revival that contributed to the fall of communism (Halík 1995, 145–47). Halík asserts that the success of this dialogue relies on balance. The church must avoid the extremes of rigid traditionalism, which isolates it from the modern world, and excessive liberalism, which erodes its identity into secular culture. Instead, it must communicate with honesty, creativity, and depth, providing a language that resonates with modern humanity. In this way, the dialogue between church and culture becomes not a compromise with modernity but a faithful continuation of Christianity's incarnational movement—God's Word entering human history and transforming it from within.

The author expands on the importance of dialogue between the church and culture, highlighting both its potential and its dangers. He emphasizes that dialogue is not just a superficial adaptation to modernity but an extension of Christianity's incarnational principle: just as the Word became flesh, faith must also engage with the real-world experiences of human culture. This entails openness to diversity, respect for freedom of conscience, and a willingness to learn from philosophy,

science, and the arts. Simultaneously, the author warns that dialogue must uphold the church's identity; it cannot dissolve into secular liberalism nor retreat into nostalgic traditionalism. The key challenge is to communicate genuinely in a language that connects with today's humanity, avoiding both confrontational rhetoric and superficial slogans.

Halík reflects on the Czech Catholic experience under communism as a powerful example of how dialogue can arise from hardship. Deprived of privileges and institutional support, the persecuted church gained new credibility and moral authority. In prisons, labor camps, and secret communities, Catholics engaged in dialogue with Protestants, liberals, and even disillusioned communists, all united by a quest for truth and freedom. This solidarity fostered a culture of resistance and moral renewal, which later helped fuel the broader dissident movement and the regime's eventual fall. For Halík, this demonstrates that dialogue is not a luxury but a necessity: it begins in suffering and becomes a source of strength.

The challenges the author identifies are therefore twofold. For the church, the task is to maintain its distinctiveness while engaging openly with modern culture, avoiding both isolation and assimilation. For Christians, the challenge is to live responsibly in a pluralistic world, defending human dignity and contributing to a "civilization of love." He acknowledges that postmodern society presents new difficulties—skepticism, relativism, and the crisis of rationality—but insists that these are precisely the contexts in which dialogue must continue. The church's credibility depends on its ability to speak honestly, embody solidarity, and offer a vision of hope that transcends both ideological rigidity and cultural conformity. In Halík's view, this is the path by which faith and culture can enrich each other and remain vital in today's world.

3. Synodal Dialogue in *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synodal Assembly*

Halík delivered a spiritual impulse to the delegates at the continental assembly in Prague in February 2023. He gave a 30-minute speech, *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synodal Assembly*, which became a resource for further synodal discussion (Synod on Synodality 2023). Halík begins by recalling the earliest Christian self-understanding: Christianity was not primarily a new philosophy or religion, but "the Way." This dynamic view of faith as a journey needs to be revived in times of crisis. The synod, he explains, is an act of anamnesis—remembering and reawakening the pilgrim nature of the church. Synodality means walking together, listening to the Spirit, and staying open to change. The church is not a fixed institution but a living organism that is constantly evolving (Halík 2023).

The author places this reflection in the Czech context, characterized by reform movements, religious conflicts, and persecution under totalitarian regimes. In prisons and camps, Christians learned practical ecumenism, solidarity, and dialogue with nonbelievers. He identifies three waves of secularization in Czech history: the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society; the violent secularization during communism; and the postmodern pluralism of recent decades. These crises, he argues, challenge the church to rediscover what is essential.

He warns against triumphalism—the temptation to see the church in history as already perfect. The church must distinguish between its historical form and its eschatological fulfillment. When the church confuses itself with the "ecclesia triumphans," it risks idolatry and the misuse of militant power. Instead, its mission is to inspire transformation, honor freedom of conscience, and reject manipulation. Scandals of abuse demonstrate how easily spiritual authority can be misused. Today's mission should not be reconquest or proselytizing, but accompanying others in dialogue, broadening boundaries to include seekers and the marginalized. Synodality is a process of mutual learning, not one-sided teaching (Halík 2023).

Halík expands on Pope Benedict's idea of the "courtyard of the Gentiles," emphasizing that the church must stay open to seekers who feel close to Christianity but do not fully identify with it. He recalls Pope Francis' metaphor of the church as a "field hospital," called to diagnose, prevent, and heal a world wounded by populism, nationalism, fundamentalism, and violence. He emphasizes that truth is not an ideology or a possession; Christians are not owners of truth but lovers of it. Orthodoxy should be combined with orthopraxy (right action) and orthopathy (right passion and spirituality). Without this balance, faith can become cold or ineffective.

The author reflects on the paradox of secularization: while Christianity lost cultural dominance, elements of the Gospel—such as freedom of conscience—were incorporated into secular humanism. Vatican II aimed to end the culture wars and integrate these values into church teachings. *Gaudium et spes* expressed the church's promise of solidarity with modern humanity, even though modernity itself was already fading. Postmodern globalization now presents both intense interconnection and significant diversity, along with darker issues: terrorism, pandemics, ecological destruction, fake news, and ideological extremism. He references Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's vision of globalization culminating in a conscious shift toward love, a force that unites without destroying.

For Halík, synodality represents the church's contribution to this transformation: a communal journey that can inspire humanity to avoid a clash of civilizations and instead foster a "civitas ecumenica," a universal brotherhood. The church must be "semper reformanda," continually renewed through spirituality. Empty churches in Europe serve as a warning, but also a call to "go to the deep" with courage and faith. The synod is a journey from *paranoia* through *metanoia* to *pronoia*—discernment and openness to God's future. Halík sees synodality as a path of Easter

transformation: dying to old forms, rising to new life, and seeking the living Christ in unexpected places. The church's mission is to combine contemplation and action, prayer and political love, building bridges of solidarity and integrating the Gospel into today's pluralistic world. In essence, Halík's (2023) *Spiritual Introduction* frames synodality as a pilgrim's journey of dialogue, humility, and transformation, rejecting triumphalism and fear, and calling the church to serve as a sign of universal brotherhood in a fractured, globalized age.

4. Evaluation and Critical Discussion

Both of Halík's texts explore the role of the church in transforming society, but their genres and audiences differ. Halík chooses language and symbols carefully; he appeals to readers and listeners in various stylistic ways. *Víra a kultura*—written in Czech—adopts a scholarly, historical tone, rich with references to Vatican II, papal documents, and cultural theory. It employs analytical vocabulary (e.g., dialogical relationship, inculturation, and plurality) and cites theologians (Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger), and philosophers (Martin Heidegger, Romano Guardini). Its style is systematic and argumentative, emphasizing cultural analysis and ecclesial strategy. It aims at an educated but unseen readership. *Spiritual Introduction*—presented in English—uses biblical metaphors (I am the Way, grain of wheat), Latin theological terms (ecclesia militans, kenotic ecclesiology), and rhetorical questions. Its tone is pastoral and visionary, designed to inspire transformation and synodality. The language is universalist, addressing global Christianity and humanity. It functions as a spiritual and motivational message for church leaders, who sit directly in front of the speaker.

Both texts emphasize the importance of dialogue, reform, and cultural engagement, while rejecting triumphalism and fundamentalism. *Víra a kultura* provides a historical and sociological analysis, focusing on cultural dynamics and practical church strategies, especially in the Czech Republic and Europe. It navigates postmodern pluralism without losing its identity; advocates for avoiding both traditionalist isolation and liberal dissolution; addresses clerical weaknesses and cultural marginalization; and fights against relativism while promoting dialogue. *Spiritual Introduction* frames the dialogue within a spiritual, eschatological vision of synodality and global solidarity. It urges overcoming fear and nostalgia, revitalizing spirituality amid empty churches, resisting ideological extremes, and transforming globalization into communion.

This analysis highlights Halík's sensitivity in engaging with different partners across various eras. Sometimes, Halík addresses secular humanists; at other times, he speaks to fellow Catholics. After a period of "discussion" with seekers, the author

shifts to an exchange with nones. In interfaith dialogue, Halík aims for a universalist language that is not syncretic. Nevertheless, as shown in the two texts examined, Halík values meaningful articulation, maintains theological consistency, and exhibits pastoral sensitivity. This paper explores dialogical thinking in Halík's work, from his early writings on Vatican II to his reflections on synodality, illustrating how central themes of dialogue and transformation shape his theology.

5. Dialogue Outward and Inward

Halík has served as a messenger of dialogue for the past 30 years, and his academic and ministerial work combines external and internal dialogue. He uses the concept, which originated in Vatican II and later theological reflection, to frame the church's mission in the modern world. In his publications, speeches, and homilies, Halík sees both dimensions as inseparable. The church cannot credibly engage in external dialogue with the world if it lacks internal dialogue. Conversely, internal dialogue becomes sterile if it does not reach outward. For Halík, dialogue is not a tactic but a theological necessity: it reflects the Incarnation, in which God enters human history, and embodies the church's mission of universal service.

Dialogue in Halík's work is not just about conversation or debate. It is a way of life that embraces openness to many perspectives, diversity, and otherness. It involves genuine, respectful curiosity about another person's experience and reflections. While the traditional idea of dialogue involves mutual discussion between two or more people, Halík often "leads dialogue" alone by asking challenging, reflective questions. These are like a literary genre, engaging with a fictional character; when words, images, and symbols are presented in public space for those who "have ears to hear" without necessarily expecting a reply.[6]

Halík considers dialogue outside of his own church essential for credibility—faith must connect with contemporary people, including atheists, the non-religious, seekers, and followers of other religions, rather than remain confined within a closed community. To those outside his church, the author offers a "human face of Christianity" through inclusive and sensitive language. He does not abandon his theological roots, but without romanticizing, he approaches a secular landscape with a vision of ongoing dialogue rather than a static set of ideas (McGrath 2023, 399). In this context, Alister McGrath regards Halík's main contribution to modern Christian thought as cultural witness. This involves the delicate and vital practice of demonstrating, living out, and expressing the Christian faith within a cultural

6 Halík's most recent book, *Dopisy papeži* [Letters to the Pope] (2024), employs a highly dialogical genre: the author writes 12 letters to the fictional Pope Raphael to discuss the future of the church.

environment often skeptical of simple solutions to complex issues and cautious of relying on traditional certainties (McGrath 2023, 399). It is notable that, while in his writings and public speeches Halík offers witness rather than aiming for conversion, his parish ministry draws hundreds of candidates into the Catholic Church. His compelling, non-normative Christian message appeals to people seeking existential meaning. In this view, dialogue is not a tool for forced conversion but a way to live one's faith and share it through actions and words. Conversion, then, is a personal choice (Muchova 2025a).

Halík emphasizes that inward dialogue is essential for authenticity—without internal openness within the church, outward dialogue risks remaining superficial. We previously saw that Halík offered clear visions for the church in post-communist democratic societies. In *Víra a kultura*, e.g., he addressed various aspects of church life that need development and discussion. Alongside his role as a university professor, he became a parish priest at the Academic Parish of Prague and has served that community since then. While enjoying his civil profession, he criticized the church hierarchy for isolating itself in a ghetto mentality and fearing a free society. His inward dialogue is primarily characterized by a prophetic call for openness, listening, and seeking meaning. Halík is unafraid of confrontation and openly challenges, for instance, the misuse of religion for political purposes (Muchova 2025b). Interestingly, Halík's early publications in psychology from the 1970s and 1980s addressed conflicts. However, Halík consistently portrays dialogue as the solution to conflict.

Having studied two of Halík's texts spanning three decades, we must also consider his other writings and speeches along the way: Halík's thought and theology evolve and respond to contemporary challenges. So, who are, e.g., Halík's partners in dialogue? Are they atheists, nones, seekers, fellow Christians, or members of the Catholic hierarchy? While readers from outside Christianity may see terms such as "nones" and "seekers" as insensitive and paternalistic, Jan Loffeld recently questions the Christian assumption that everyone is seeking a spiritual end (Loffeld 2025). I argue, however, that Halík's contribution is primarily pastoral and attentive, not philosophical or argumentative. There is a biographical reason: for 30 years, hundreds of people have visited Halík's community at the Academic Parish of Prague, students have attended his lectures at Charles University in Prague, and thousands are reading his books translated into dozens of languages. Halík's primary audience truly consists of seekers with existential questions who arrive at the Christian doorstep (Muchova 2025a). So, while his themes address dialogue outward, his methods are also inward—persuading the church to believe in dialogue with society. Following McGrath, I argue that, in addition to being a cultural witness in secular society, Halík is also a Christian witness within his own church.

Conclusion

Readers often see Halík as a philosophical writer rather than a theologian. The professor of philosophy and religious studies prefers to emphasize this view because it makes his works more accessible to readers outside the church. McGrath (2023) and Aden Cotterill (2024) highlight that Halík's writing skillfully combines philosophical inquiry with theological reflection. This paper, therefore, identified two distinct periods during which Halík actively participated in church and theological debates. Both are linked to church reform processes: the post-conciliar era in the 1990s and recent synodal discussions. While the middle period focuses on interreligious dialogue, societal conversations, and interactions with seekers and nonbelievers, Halík's recent work again addresses the church's role in society—specifically, the dialogue between faith and culture—as he described 30 years ago. In this way, Halík's writings serve as a prophetic voice for internal church dialogue—addressing current challenges and issues within the church while also proposing solutions. The author believes that openness, dialogue, and listening to other cultures are essential responses to a secular society, which still includes people seeking transcendence and meaning. He maintains his faith in the Christian message and the transformative power of individual spiritual exploration.

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