

Caring Without Limits - Veronika Theresia¹ Rácková, SSpS: A Martyr in Christ's Ministry to Heal

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Veronika Theresia Rácková, SSpS

"When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. ... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:1,4).² These words from the Acts of the Apostles were read during the Mass on Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2016. The Catholic Church in the Diocese of Yei in South Sudan had united with the universal Church to celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost. The Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS), serving in the diocese, also celebrated on that day the titular feast of their congregation, dedicated to the Holy Spirit. To mark the occasion, the SSpS community in Yei had invited pastoral workers, known as "Apostolic Communities", for lunch at the sisters' convent. Like the apostles, they were all together in one place, joyfully praying to be filled with the Holy Spirit as they shared a meal, drinks and good humor. Among them was Veronika Rácková, SSpS, joyful and smiling. Afterwards, all returned home, a little tired but full of gratitude.

Later in the evening the phone rang; a doctor was urgently needed to assist two women in labor. Sr. Veronika, trained as a medical doctor, quickly got into the ambulance and drove to the woman's house to assist her. The first birth was quick and smooth and brought great joy to everyone present as a new life was brought into the world. The second birth was difficult and required special medical attention. Veronika met with the young lady in labor and determined that she needed to be transported immediately to the Harvester's Health Center in a nearby village. She didn't ask another sister to go with her, because it was almost midnight, and she could drive the ambulance to the hospital by herself. Arriving at the hospital, she made sure that the mother received the attention she needed and then drove alone back to the convent. She was very tired but happy; another healthy baby girl had been delivered.

Did Veronika intuit that the last medical service she would provide her beloved people in South Sudan would be to help a young mother give birth to a beautiful child?

She was already close to the convent when shots rang out. She didn't have time to think who was shooting or why. She did, however, feel a sudden and immense pain. One of the bullets that hit the ambulance she was driving, had entered her abdomen and hip.

Is that how a martyr is born in the healing ministry of Christ?

¹ Veronika is Rácková's baptismal name and the first name in her government documents. Theresia is the name she took when she joined the congregation. As government agencies use religious sisters' names as recorded in documents issued by governments, some sisters don't use the name they took in the congregation, particularly when they apply for government documents, such as visas and passports. This is what Veronika also did. Thus, we address her in this chapter as Veronika.

² New International Version (NIV).

The Sunshine of Her Family

Veronika Rácková was born on January 8, 1958, in Bánov, a village in the Nitra Region of south-west Slovakia. Her father, Thomas, worked for the national railways and her mother, Mária, was a housewife. They loved their children and tried to pass on to them the cultural and religious values that were the foundation of their lives. They also provided them with a professional education. Veronika was the youngest child in the family; all four siblings grew up happily. Her oldest sister, Pavla, studied medicine; Michal, her brother, walked in the footsteps of his father and worked for the railways, The other brother, Peter, became a diocesan priest.

From early childhood, Veronika was lively, full of ideas and always active. She was known and loved by both her family and the local community. One of the many stories from her childhood illustrates her energetic temperament. Women usually cleaned the village church. Veronika, who lived nearby, was often among them. The women were told not to switch on the public address system during the cleaning of the church and to be especially careful with the microphones. Taking advantage of the priest's absence, Veronika went to the pulpit and tried to preach a sermon, speaking and gesturing with both hands. Just as she got into it, the church door opened and the pastor came in. He pointed his finger at her, saying "Verona,³ come here." Of course, she was duly admonished not to play with the public address system in the church and not to use the microphone. She was obedient and never again played with the microphone.

Education and Search for Meaning in Life

Veronika attended primary school in Bánov from 1964 to 1973. After graduating, she continued her education at the secondary school in the nearby town of Šurany from 1973 to 1977. The church in Slovakia was persecuted at that time,⁴ but young people like her were yearning and searching for spiritual values. In the church in Šurany, some of them met with the Norbertine Sisters (OPrem)⁵ who worked in the village of Lipová at an institution for children with intellectual disabilities.⁶ Among the sisters was Zita, whom Veronika always recalled with emotion. In fact, she traced the beginnings of her own religious and missionary vocation to Zita's positive influence. Veronika found Zita to be a kind and balanced person who enjoyed working with the disabled. Veronika remembered that her encounter with Zita inspired her to ask herself: "Why couldn't I too belong to Jesus?" She began to realize that her heart's desire was to help people, especially children in need.

Since her own sister, Pavla Rácková, was a medical doctor, Veronika's dream was also to dedicate her life to God through that profession and alleviate people's suffering by providing them medical care. So, after her high school graduation in 1977, Veronika studied at the Medical Faculty of the Karlová Univerzita in Prague.⁷ During summer holidays she attended retreats organized by the Holy Spirit Sisters (SSpS). It was then that her vocation was both nurtured and strengthened. At that time, the retreats had to be held secretly in family homes, due to the persecution of the Catholic Church by the totalitarian and oppressive political regime in Czechoslovakia.

Veronika Rácková was officially welcomed into the congregation on November 1, 1982, in Zlaté Moravce, which at that time was the SSpS regional⁸ house in Czechoslovakia.⁹ She was still a

³ "Verona," that's how the family and others called her.

⁴ The Catholic Church responded to persecutions by establishing an underground church, the so-called Secret Church, which clandestinely ordained many priests, who were not allowed to officially serve in pastoral ministry but who were providing spiritual and pastoral care outside the formal ecclesial structure controlled and constrained by the government. Thanks to the activities of the Secret Church, small religious groups and communities started to be established in the 1970s, sustaining Catholic beliefs and keeping the faithful alive through illegal and clandestine prayer meetings and religious instruction. These brought together mainly young people, who gradually began to lose their fear of being persecuted by the totalitarian regime (Ústav Pamäti Národa, 2023).

⁵ The Norbertine Sisters congregation's Latin name is Ordo Praemonstratensis, abbreviated as OPraem. It is one of the branches of the Norbertine Order, which live according to the inspiration of St. Norbert and the rule of St. Augustine.

⁶ During the communist period young women secretly joined religious congregations and secretly took vows. The sisters were working, without wearing habits, in many different types of work, depending on their education. Nobody knew that they were religious sisters. Formation and community life were always done in secret.

⁷ The Faculty of Medicine at Charles University in Prague was founded in 1348 by Emperor Charles IV and is one of the oldest schools of medicine in Europe. It is a state university and the language of instruction for international students is English.

⁸ The SSpS began to work in Czechoslovakia in 1931. The SSpS Region was established in 1941 and the SSpS Province in 1984.

⁹ The dissolution of Czechoslovakia took effect on December 31, 1992, as was the self-determined split of the federal republic of Czechoslovakia into the independent countries of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

student at the Medical Faculty of the Charles University in Prague, when she secretly started the pre-novitiate program of formation.¹⁰ Her last exam at the university was on May 24, 1983; she graduated on July 8, 1983 (Rácková, 1988). During her studies in Prague she kept in touch with the SSpS and, when she had time, visited their community in Brtníky, near the German border. She was welcomed into the congregation during her last year of studies with the intention that she would begin her novitiate after graduation.

From 1983 onwards, some of the young SSpS who had taken at least their first vows, began to secretly leave Czechoslovakia in order to serve as missionaries. They were approached by Sr Aleška, Mária Miksová, SSpS who at the time was the novice directress and later the provincial leader. One day, Aleška asked Veronika if she would like to secretly leave her home country and join one of the overseas missions of the SSpS. After reflection and prayer, she agreed. In those days in Czechoslovakia young medical doctors, who had just finished their studies, were expected to work for three years in government institutions. Afterward they received their accreditation, called "atestácia" in Slovak, that enabled them to work independently as medical doctors. However, it was never certain that a graduate would ever be allowed to go abroad. Therefore, Aleška suggested to Veronika that she should go abroad before receiving the "atestácia" and continue her religious and medical formation outside the country. Veronika agreed and, after a year of working in the hospital in Bánovce nad Bebravou, she left Czechoslovakia on September 9, 1984, and secretly and illegally emigrated to Germany, via Rome, traveling with a group of tourists from her country. Early in the morning on September 13, 1984, she arrived at the SSpS Generalate in Rome, to the surprise and joy of the SSpS community there. In order to protect her from the communist regime, the sisters called her Theresia and addressed her as a medical doctor (*Chronik der Kommunität des Generalates in Rom, 1984*). As was usual in such situations, the communist government had assigned a young woman to travel with Veronika to guard her all the time. Veronika recalled:

It was very stressful. I didn't know how to get away from her. At one point I thought "it's now or never." It happened on a beautiful morning when sightseeing in Rome. As a group we had stopped at a traffic light. When the light turned green, the group moved forward. I bent down and started doing something with my shoes. And then I ran to a standing taxi and gave the driver the address of our generalate in Rome. Shortly afterwards, I arrived at the generalate and met our SSpS sisters, having with me only a few documents in a small bag. So, I disappeared and didn't see the rest of the group again. I had made it! It must have been the Holy Spirit who guided me and gave me strength, because afterwards, when I was abroad, I felt a deep inner pain thinking of home and my parents. I realized that I would never see them again. My family knew about my departure, but we couldn't communicate about it openly. It was all very carefully kept inside. I felt a great inner pain and my heart was about to burst, but I survived. I went on, but it was not without tears, even when I was abroad (*Kongregácia, 2021: 60-61*).

After arranging the necessary documents in Rome, Veronika went to the SSpS convent in Laupheim, Germany, where she arrived on October 26, 1984. For five months she studied German in order to prepare to enter novitiate, to be able to communicate with the sisters and to continue her medical studies and work as a doctor.

¹⁰ When the communist government in Czechoslovakia forced religious women to live in so-called concentration convents or deported them to work in factories in 1950 and 1951, it had a single aim: to take them out of public life and let the congregations gradually die out. During the Dubček government from 1968 to 1972, the political system became more open, the religious could return to more visible apostolates and vocations were accepted into their congregations. However, in 1972 a new government again forbade accepting new members to any religious congregation. Nevertheless, religious women had been working in homes for people with disabilities or for the elderly. Hence, they were "visible." People could visit them, meet them and talk with them. This was an opportunity for young women to join them, but it had to be done in secret. They, for example, could work with the sisters in the same home, not as fellow sisters but as employees. These homes usually had a manager who was appointed by the government, but all the work in the home was done by the sisters. The sisters could, with the consent of the manager, employ other women. Other groups of young religious were employed in factories, hospitals, administrative offices and so on. Two to three of them lived together in a flat or a rented house. On weekends the novice directress, dressed in lay clothes, would visit them for formation classes. That was the reason why their novitiate took 3 years instead of the usual two years. The time of pre-novitiate, also called postulancy, could last up to five years.

A True Missionary Life

One of the community chronicles recorded that "postulant Veronika received the religious habit on August 15, 1985 and was given the religious name of Theresia" (*Chronik des Dreifaltigkeitsklosters, Laupheim, 1985*). Veronika had chosen that name because her patron saint was St. Teresa of Ávila. She officially began her novitiate in Laupheim, Germany, and on April 21, 1986, moved to the SSpS motherhouse in Steyl, Netherlands, to prepare to pronounce her first vows. She spent more than a year in Steyl and then returned to the SSpS community in Laupheim on July 29, 1987, where she took her first vows on August 15, 1987 (*Chronik des Dreifaltigkeitsklosters, Laupheim, 1987*).

After taking a medical language course in Ulm, Germany, she received a certificate that allowed her to practice medicine as a doctor at the Laupheim District Hospital, the "Kreiskrankenhaus," from 1988 to 1993. At the same time, she continued her education and in April 1993 passed the medical examination in Tübingen for specialization in general medicine (*Chronik des Dreifaltigkeitsklosters, Laupheim, 1993*).

Veronika did her tertianship in 1993 in the SSpS community at St. Koloman in Stockerau, Austria, and prepared to make perpetual vows. In her request to the SSpS Congregational Leadership Team in Rome to take perpetual vows, she expressed her readiness for a total and life-long commitment to God as a sister and physician. With great gratitude for the gift of her missionary vocation and, above all, for the opportunity to complete her medical studies, she asked permission to take perpetual vows. During her formation she had clearly integrated both of her vocations. She was a doctor, providing medical care to relieve people's suffering, and provide healing as an SSpS ambassador of God's love to those in need. She felt called to be a religious and missionary through the practice of medicine. On February 6, 1994, she professed perpetual vows in Laupheim, Germany. Afterwards, she continued her medical education in Berlin, Germany, and a year later received a diploma in tropical medicine. With great joy she accepted her first missionary appointment to Flores, Indonesia, where she worked as a medical doctor at St. Elisabeth Hospital in Lela. After three months, unfortunately, her Indonesian visa was not renewed, so her mission appointment was changed to Ghana. Before leaving for Africa, she went to England in 1995 to learn English in Bristol.

Dedicated Medical Doctor in Ghana

In Ghana, Veronika served at West Gonja Hospital in Damongo, from January 1996 to June 1999. Due to her specialization in tropical diseases, she was able to provide much needed medical services to the afflicted. In 1998 she also served as the local leader of the SSpS community in Damongo. In October 1998, the District Health Management Team in Damongo announced a Cholera outbreak. The very next day, she discovered that some of her patients were infected, in need of a rapid response. Veronika was the hospital's Senior Medical Officer and acted very quickly and effectively. She reorganized the wards, quarantined the Cholera patients, and moved patients to other wards so that they would not be infected by the Cholera patients. A loving and caring doctor, she won the trust and hearts of the patients with her gentleness, tenderness and kindness. She had a sincere smile and a caring respect for her patients. Her dedication to the sick and suffering has been recognized by others. AFRICAID, a medical mission organization that promotes research into tropical diseases, medicines and vaccines, awarded her the "Most Dedicated Doctor" award. The West Gonja Hospital in Damongo, where she ministered, also received the award for "Excellence in Medical Service."¹¹

In June 1999, after four years of dedicated service as the hospital's Senior Medical Officer, Veronika went on her first home leave to visit her family in Slovakia. This was possible since the communist regime was no longer in power. After this visit, in order to be able to serve people better, she did additional studies for three months in Leeds, United Kingdom, obtaining a degree in Public Health. At the beginning of 2000, she returned to Ghana, this time to the Holy Spirit Convent in Wiaga where she was the senior doctor at the Wiaga Clinic's maternity ward (*Chronicle of Holy Spirit Convent in Wiaga, 2000*). She professionally prepared the staff at the clinic, both sisters and lay employees, to operate the clinic on their own, without her, as she discerned another calling from God. She wrote, "I feel that after 19 years of work as a general practitioner, God is calling me to a deeper life and to a specific service in the healing ministry"

¹¹ This special event took place at the "Golden Tulip Hotel" in Accra, Ghana on March 13, 1999.

(Rácková, 2002). While she enjoyed her mission in Ghana and considered it meaningful, she asked to be transferred to another province. Clearly, she felt called to join a new SSpS community in South Africa and serve there in the church's HIV/AIDS apostolate. In June 2002, Veronika left Ghana for good and, after she visited her home country Slovakia, she pursued further studies in Ireland and England. From 2002 to 2003, she attended the Kimmage Mission Institute (KMI) of Theology and Cultures in Dublin, Ireland, and graduated with a diploma in theology. She had also participated in the "Ruhama Project: Women in Prostitution" (Ruhama, 2018). In 2003-2004 she graduated with a Diploma in Counselling from the Institute of St. Anselm in Kent, United Kingdom.

Provincial Leader in Slovakia

In 2004, she was elected provincial leader of the Slovak Province and willingly accepted this service, dedicating her work and life for six years not only to the local province but also to the community's mission in Europe. She was the chairperson in the office of the SSpS Euro-Council (SSpS Euro Council, 2021: 66-67). As a responsible leader of the Slovak Province she did not neglect her medical vocation; she showed concern for the sick by providing care for the elderly sisters at every opportunity. She was committed to her work but, at times, also showed signs of irritation. This is how the sisters of the Slovak Province remember her: "...after the storm, there appeared a smile adorned with genuineness and joy" (Pešťová, 2016).

Her heart burned with missionary zeal and, after completing her leadership service in Slovakia and Europe, she asked for a missionary appointment back to Africa. Her request was granted! In 2010 she received the appointment to join the SSpS community in Yei, South Sudan.

The month before leaving for Africa, Veronika traveled to Austria to do a silent directed retreat, thanking the Lord for the gifts and ministry she had received, and asking God's blessing on her new mission. She spent a month at the SVD's St. Gabriel Mission House, accompanied by Ludwig Hauser, SVD, who had been her spiritual director for several years.

Medical Mission in South Sudan

Together with two other sisters, Veronika pioneered the SSpS mission in Yei, Sudan,¹² settling and living among the poor. From the beginning, the sisters were convinced that they were in Sudan to bear witness as a community and not just as individuals. In September 2010, they launched with others, a campaign to support the ongoing political process in the country, called "101 Days of Prayer for a Peaceful Referendum." In February 2011, after more than 20 years of civil war, the south of the country became independent from Sudan, and the new nation of South Sudan was established. Veronika reported that "we SSpS missionaries in South Sudan, rooted in the Triune God and guided by the Holy Spirit ... strive to give authentic witness as disciples in mission. Together with the people, we are committed to giving birth to new life in their brokenness" (Rácková, 2011). As the community's leader, Veronika tried to put this into practice. She was very enthusiastic about life, never giving up on her dreams, but at the same time also a realist, recognizing what could be done in the challenging circumstances in South Sudan and Yei. She recognized that the post-war situation, with many people facing immense trauma, required the sisters to have a robust understanding of the local culture. The sisters started to learn the history, culture and the daily life of the people in their suffering new nation. She and the other sisters sought ways to identify with those who were suffering; they wanted to live in communion with them, particularly those suffering the consequences of the war. The sisters recognized the importance of understanding the language of the people in order to serve them and so they started to learn Arabic. From the beginning, they provided health and pastoral care, visited families and listened to people's stories of pain and suffering, especially their experiences during the war and then as refugees. The people visited the sisters in their common *tukul*, a large grass-thatched round mud hut, which served also as the sisters' dining, prayer, and storeroom. Their doors were always open, especially to receive young women and children. They worked to promote the dignity, rights and education of women and girls. Veronika reported that

¹² The first SSpS community was established in Yei, Sudan, on September 16, 2010. However, already earlier, two SSpS sisters worked in Wau as members of the "Solidarity with South Sudan" project, an inter-congregational initiative of the International Union of Superiors General (International Union of Superiors General, 2023). The SSpS community in Yei was attached to the SSpS Region in Ethiopia. Sisters in Yei lived in cone-shaped mud huts with thatched roofs, so-called *tukuls*, that belonged to Malteser International until they moved to a renovated convent in 2011.

“being aware of our identity as women disciples, centered in God and inspired by the Holy Spirit, we strive to live our creative way of life and to work with others while sharing responsibilities. The people noticed this very soon after our arrival in Yei and appreciate it very much. The face of the Church in Yei is slowly changing and getting a feminine face too” (Rácková, 2011).



Veronika Rácková, SSpS holding the first baby born in the newly opened maternity ward at the health center in Yei, South Sudan. On her side is the baby’s mother. The newborn girl was named Veronika.

From 2010 to 2016, Veronika served in various roles as leader of the SSpS community and as a medical doctor and director of St. Bakhita Health Center in Yei, South Sudan. When she first visited St. Bakhita Health Center, she experienced the shock of seeing the facility in a dilapidated state and immediately took the initiative to rebuild it. However, as St. Bakhita Health Center belonged to the local diocese and as the sisters had no funds for renovations, rebuilding the center could only be done slowly.¹³ Fortunately, due to her managerial skills and success in getting sponsors and benefactors for this project, soliciting financial support from friends in Western Europe, Veronika was able to renovate St. Bakhita Health Center and to recruit additional staff, in time reaching a total of 41 staff members. Together with her team she began to improve the quality of clinical and other services at the center. She started seeing patients in October 2011 and worked tirelessly for the service of the needy of South Sudan.

¹³ Veronika Rácková, SSpS reported the following on the initial hurdles the sisters faced: “A big challenge for our mission is the male-dominated society. We feel that the clergy, who are in charge of all the important apostolates in the diocese, dominate, maintain their power and do not allow us and others to move and give birth to new life. We feel blocked by them and those who work with them. The diocese tells us that it does not have money to manage the clinical and other services the SSpS are providing. Due to underfunding, these services are almost collapsing with many employees resigning. In spite of everything, we are convinced that it is good that we are in Sudan (Rácková, 2011).



Veronika Rácková, SSps in the health center in Yei, South Sudan, praying with members of her community and staff for patients.

Veronika managed the leprosy program, which was coordinated by the German Leprosy and Tuberculosis Relief Association and opened the medical admission rooms, improving the outpatient department at the center (St. Bakhita Health, 2016). In order to cover a larger geographical area to serve the whole Yei region, Veronika received two cars from donors, one for the SSps community and the other to be used as an ambulance for St. Bakhita Health Center. She also hoped to obtain one more vehicle to serve the ever-growing outreach programs. She visited leprosy patients and served as their voice in their homes and in the local community. Advocacy for leprosy patient was an important aspect of her ministry because the disease was heavily stigmatized and those suffering from the disease were excluded from the local community. Together with others, she created social and formative programs that aimed at building a society in which every person, including the sick, would be respected and live with dignity. As a missionary doctor, she felt a deep compassion for the sick, an empathy with those with physical and spiritual needs. In 2013 she began a mental health program to assist the mentally ill in the Yei area. She even proposed to build a new laboratory and mental health department (St. Bakhita Health, 2016).



Veronika Rácková, SSps with her SSps community in front of the SSps House in Yei, South Sudan, 2015.

Veronika loved and respected the people of South Sudan. She once wrote: "I admire them for being strong and not giving up. I am convinced that God loves them immeasurably and sends missionaries to them so that they can feel his love." She was convinced that medicine could cure disease, but not heal the sick; the sick recover only through loving care. We do not know how many sick persons she cured with medicine, how many with loving care, and how many through ardent prayer. However, we know that she was always full of gratitude to God for his presence, guidance and help. She showed appreciation to all those who supported and accompanied her missionary work. She included in her prayers the concerns of the people she served and asked her benefactors to pray for them too. "There are situations in which we feel helpless and cannot move, but we can pray and love" (Rácková, 2011).

Veronika was a committed, generous and joyful missionary. She was a woman who believed in the love of Jesus Christ and believed that she had been chosen by the Holy Spirit to minister among those most in need. She served them with a mother's passionate heart, like a mother who does not abandon her children even when life becomes very difficult. In the name of love, she persevered faithfully in prayer and offered her personal pain and suffering for others. Her sacrifice made her love even stronger, helped her to work with greater zeal and gave her the strength to endure personal suffering more patiently. She was ready to give her life for others. She knew that her life and work in South Sudan were always at risk. When the civil war flared up anew in South Sudan at the end of 2013, she decided to remain in the country. When asked why she made this decision, despite the political struggles in the country, she replied: "Jesus went his way consistently. He did not withdraw when things became difficult. He stayed all the time among the people and did not reject them. He was even ready to accept death, because he loved people. He loved them with boundless love. As a disciple of Jesus, I follow him in the power of the Holy Spirit. I cannot leave these people in South Sudan because I love them" (quoted in: Keler, 2017).



Veronika Rácková, SSpS in St. Bakhita's Health Center in Yei, South Sudan, with one of the nurses and a patient.

From the beginning, a major challenge for St. Bakhita Health Center was to introduce and maintain transparency, develop appropriate management and accounting processes, lay out a division of responsibilities and improve communication among all working at the center. Despite many difficulties, she accepted the reality, saying that "it was sometimes a painful and challenging process. We thank God for bringing us to Sudan, for his loving presence, guidance and blessings and for the people of Sudan with whom we strive to cross over to the other side at the dawn of a new Sudan" (Rácková, 2011). In every letter to the SSpS, she thanked them for their trust, prayers, support and help. She continued to work at the health center to improve its conditions. For example, in July 2014, she directed installation of solar panels to ensure that

the facility could be open 24 hours daily. Together with others, she installed an incinerator and improved the admission wards. She then started a water project that not only provided clean water to the center but also to the primary school of Christ the King Church, the nursery school and other local diocesan institutions. If all of that were not enough, she planned to open an up-to-date surgical center. Veronika had other long-term plans for the development of the center which included sending young South Sudanese to the nursing school in Wau, as well as expanding the living facilities for staff members (St. Bakhita Health, 2016). However, she was not able to implement these ideas and plans.

Death of a Medical Missionary

Around midnight, May 15, 2016, after taking a pregnant woman on an emergency call to Harvester's Health Center in Yei, Veronika was on her way home to the convent, when a group of soldiers attacked her car. The St. Bakhita Health Center ambulance, which she was driving, was shot at several times, wounding her gravely in the hip and the abdomen. After undergoing surgery at the Hospital for Women and Children in Yei, she was airlifted to Nairobi Hospital in Kenya on May 16, 2016, for necessary treatment and surgery. The physicians did everything possible to save her life. The SSpS communities and their friends started praying continuous rosaries for her recovery. On May 20, 2016, the feast of Blessed Mother Josepha, SSpS, Veronika passed away after nearly a week of agony. Her death was an irreparable loss for the Holy Spirit Sisters, her family and the people she served, especially in Yei.

The body of Veronika was laid to rest on May 27, 2016, in the diocesan cemetery of St. Joseph's Parish in Lutaya.¹⁴ Thousands of mourners from different parts of South Sudan, including representatives from various church denominations and a notable number of Muslims, attended her burial. The Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated at Yei's Christ the King Cathedral, attended by a large number of sisters, brothers and priests of the Arnoldus Family.¹⁵

A service celebrating her life was held at her birthplace in Bánov, Slovakia, on May 30, 2016, at the Parish of St. Michael the Archangel. The Mass was celebrated by the Archbishop of Trnava, Monsignor Ján Orosch, then President of the Council for Missions at the Bishops' Conference of Slovakia. The archbishop described this moment as "unsurpassable" because he had the honor of celebrating the Eucharist "for the martyr in her birthplace." He said that the people of Bánov could be proud of her. The Mass was also attended by Monsignor Jozef Jarab, the rector of the Catholic University in Ružomberok, as well as Father Pavol Kruták, the provincial of the Society of the Divine Word, SSpS sisters, sisters from other communities, priests, the mayor of the village of Bánov, relatives, friends and classmates of Veronika. At the end of the celebration, her sister, Pavla Rácková, spoke a few words. "The witness of your life is associated with the Holy Year of Mercy," she noted. "We ask for God's compassionate love for the people who have hurt you and whom you have surely forgiven" (*Rímskokatolícka Cirkev Farnosť Bánov, 2023*).

Modern Martyr

Sr. Aleška, Mária Miksová, SSpS, was aware of how difficult the mission in South Sudan will be and, when Sr. Veronika was ready to start her assignment there, said to herself, "You will be our first martyr" (Peštová, 2016).

On April 22, 2017, Pope Francis presided over a Liturgy of the Word in the Basilica of St. Bartholomew in Rome, organized by the Community of Sant' Egidio, to honor the "new martyrs" of the 20th and 21st centuries. Veronika was remembered at the service together with other modern martyrs. Her bible and stethoscope were placed in the chapel on the left side of the basilica, dedicated to the African missionary martyrs. She has a place in the Roman basilica where she is venerated with others who gave their lives for faith, justice, truth and peace. Her death is a strong inspiration for missionary lives and apostolic work. She was a daring, adventurous, heroic and prophetic religious missionary. She manifested a sincere love for God's

¹⁴ The town is about 170 Kilometres south-west of the capital Juba.

¹⁵ Arnoldus Family refers to the three congregations founded by St. Arnold Janssen: the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters (SSpS), and the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (SSpSAP).

people by giving her life totally to the service of the most deprived, disadvantaged and poor. Many people from all over the world visit the Basilica dedicated to St. Bartholomew and pray through the intercession of Veronika and other martyrs of our day. Her heroic witness inspires not only the SSpS and SVD but countless pilgrims from around the world.

"Rejoice in Hope" was the theme of another prayer vigil to invoke God's blessing on Pope Francis' apostolic visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. That prayer gathering was also held in the Basilica of St. Bartholomew (January 30, 2023). It was there, at the altar with the mementos of Veronika, that I met seminarians from Yei who knew her personally. One of them was proud to acknowledge that he had had a medical check-up with her. Today they are studying theology in Rome and wish to become priests. Kennedy La Amosa, one of the seminarians, said the following:

One of the greatest gifts of the late Sr. Veronika that impressed and inspired me, was her example of courage, which I can look to when I face pressure or challenges to my faith. While in South Sudan, she lived at a time of war in which even the citizens of the country could escape to the neighboring countries of Uganda, Kenya, Congo, and Ethiopia, seeking refuge, but, because of her patriotic and devoted heart and love for us South Sudanese, she persisted and remained in that situation, serving the most suffering. Sr. Veronika was a committed, generous and joyful missionary endowed with a charitable heart and true missionary zeal. Her death is a severe, irreversible and irreparable loss for us in the Diocese of Yei, for her family and the people she served. The good deeds of Sr. Veronika will remain deep in my heart (Kennedy, 2023).

Without doubt, the life, mission and death of Veronika have been one of the seeds of these and many other vocations.



Three SSpS sisters with three South Sudanese seminarians in front of the altar in the Basilica of St. Bartholomew in Rome that contains two items that belonged to Veronika Rácková, SSpS. Leema Rose Savarimuthu, SSpS (third from the right) lived in the South Sudanese community with Veronika. Kennedy Lo Amosa, second from the right of the group, is the seminarian quoted in this chapter.

Joseph Ratzinger, writing about martyrdom (Bachanek, 2012), stated that martyrs are witnesses of Jesus Christ in whom our Lord suffers anew. They are a sign of God's presence in the Church. In a world full of injustice, the suffering of the martyrs provides the light to find the presence of the Lord God in the midst of darkness. Their witness touches the hearts of those who do not know him; they continue to bear fruit for the future of the world Church. The memory of these witnesses is an important part of Christian identity.

Let us pray together, inspired by the following words of Veronika, that she will help us by her powerful intercession before God: "Our mission in partnership with others empowers our family of God to become bigger, stronger, richer and more joyful. We need each other, but above all we need Jesus, who loves us, unites us, leads us, comforts us, enlightens us, teaches us and is with us always. May he be the King of our hearts; with him in our hearts even darkness becomes light" (*Rímskokatolícka Cirkev Farnosť Bánov, 2023*).

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- Chronik des Dreifaltigkeitsklosters in Laupheim, 1987-1994
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