

Cardinal Miroslav Vlk

Archbishop who worked as a window cleaner in communist Czechoslovakia

The Archbishop of Prague was once a window cleaner known as "Citizen Vlk" who, as he soaped glass panes in communist Czechoslovakia, was beseeched to hear confessions by passing Roman Catholics.

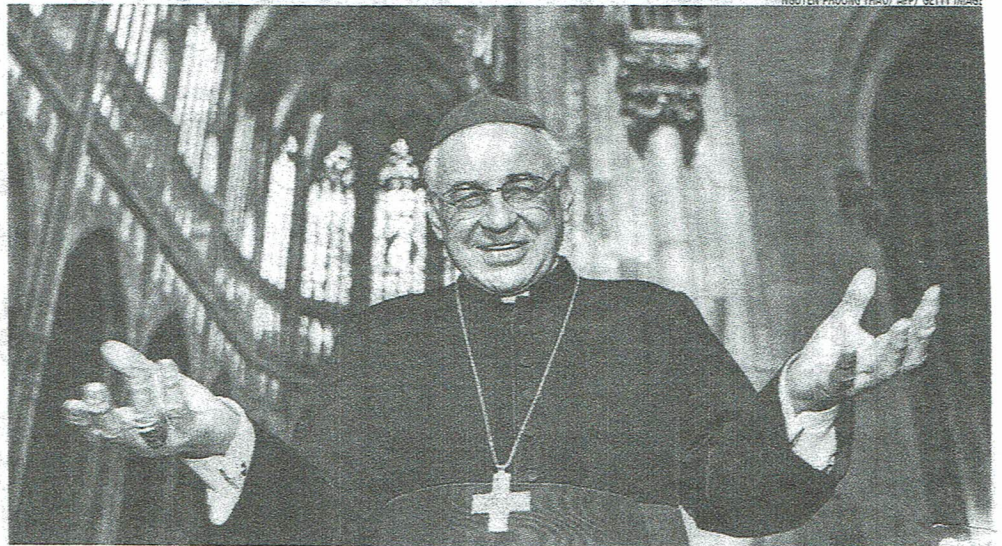
Knowing Vlk to be a clandestine priest, they would tap his shoulder to whisper a request for the sacrament or simply for prayer. And the window-cleaner, slipping down a Prague side street, hovering behind scaffolding, would discreetly oblige. In 1978 the popular Vlk had been stripped of his priestly faculties by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

Down-to-earth and modest, he adapted cheerfully to his changed circumstances. In later years Vlk would describe window-cleaning as an "ideal" job: he relished being outdoors, and it was easy for any Catholic who wished to approach him.

Some of his fellow clergy collaborated with the secret police. Vlk, blessed with courage, took especial delight in hearing confessions inside Prague's regional courthouse, a building run by the communist state. When named the city's archbishop after the fall of communism, he remarked: "The will of God is different at different times. Sometimes it is his will for you to be an archbishop, at other times, a window cleaner." Some drew satisfaction, given his meek guise, from his surname: Vlk is the Czech word for wolf.

Miroslav Vlk was born into a poor farming family in Lisnice, south Bohemia, in 1932. Food was scarce. He was obliged at an early age to help his father chop firewood and clean stables while other children frolicked in the snow. This, he said, taught him discipline. A first ambition, to become a pilot, was discarded after he saw a picture of a small boy gazing up at a crucifix. Beneath ran the caption "Would you like to be a priest too?"

"I couldn't get that picture out of my head," he recalled. "It was so compelling that sometimes I would enter the church from a side door in order to avoid it." His parents wanted him to study at a grammar school but, lacking the money to pay, they accepted a grant for him to study at the local seminary. Further theological studies were crushed by the communist takeover in 1948. His first job was in a car factory. After a spell in the army as a conscript, he entered Charles University in



Cardinal Vlk in St Vitus Cathedral in 2004. He resented having to pick up the keys from Prague castle

Prague, to study to become an archivist. However, by 1963, he felt a "strong urge to fulfil my heart's desire to become a priest". To do so required the permission of his communist bosses at the archive for the southern Bohemian city of Ceske Budejovice. "They did everything they could to dissuade me," he said. Vlk was amused to learn that his female comrades had been tasked with persuading him to marry one of them.

In 1968, thanks to the brief spurt of liberty during the Prague Spring, he was ordained. Blissful months as the secretary to the local bishop ended on the morning that a parishioner stopped Vlk as he scurried to the cathedral to celebrate Mass, and said, "I've heard on the radio that we've been invaded by the Russians."

Earmarked as a troublemaker, Vlk was dispatched, after the Soviet invasion, to a series of isolated mountain parishes. To the frustration of the Communist Party, his farming background made him an instant hit with rural parishioners, and the party obliged Vlk to change parish regularly. Sent to a large town, his success persuading parents to take their children to church displeased the communists further.

In 1978, they withdrew his authorisation to serve as a priest. Furious, his parishioners wrote a letter to the president, which was later printed in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as proof of how the Czechoslovak communists treated clergy. Accepting his fate, Vlk found work in the local

factory, arriving on his first day at 6am, "dressed in blue overalls, the same as the other workers, many of whom were my parishioners." The communists expected him to fail, but "to their amazement I was good at the job right away." The "bit of pride" this evoked hastily faded as he realised that his presence in the factory shocked his former parishioners. Some wept. Deciding it best to leave town, he headed for Prague. Once there, and established as a window cleaner, he was sought out by young Catholics wanting to confess their sins. The secret police began to notice so Vlk

Vlk is the Czech word for Wolf, a fact many thought apt

changed tactics, and while scrubbing windows at the courthouse in central Prague, began to minister in its corridors to those stuck in lengthy queues for court hearings.

His fortunes swiftly altered after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Within two years, Pope John Paul II had named Vlk the Archbishop of Prague. He was given the complex task of restoring the Church after years of communist suppression.

Invariably outspoken, he struck those he met as warm and accepting, in the mould of a country priest, although they noted that he sometimes struggled to keep a lid on stronger emotion. For 20 years Vlk led a relentless campaign to reac-

quire church properties worth £4.8 billion and seized by the communists. It was settled only after Vlk's retirement in 2010. While archbishop, he particularly resented needing to collect the keys from a clerk in the nearby Prague Castle in order to open St Vitus Cathedral.

As a bishop, Vlk chose for his motto Jesus's cry for unity "Let them all be one" (John xvii, 21). He influenced John Paul II's apology for the Church's burning to death of Jan Hus, the medieval reformer. Also, he was a pioneer in forging reconciliation between the Germans and those Czechs still simmering over Hitler's seizure of the Sudetenland. For this, Germany awarded Vlk the Grand Cross of Merit. And when, in 2007, neo-Nazis planned a march through the old Jewish quarter of Prague for the anniversary of Kristallnacht (the antisemitic program throughout Nazi Germany on November 9-10, 1938), Vlk joined Jewish protesters. The march was banned.

He saw beyond slights, supporting a gay Catholic who had once attacked Vlk in a book, when the man was later refused a position as a professor at Charles University.

There was, however, possibly one exception to Vlk's tolerance. In 2006 he suggested that just as being a Nazi is against Czech law, so should the Communist Party also be made illegal.

Cardinal Miroslav Vlk, Archbishop Emeritus of Prague, was born on May 17, 1932. He died of cancer on March 18, 2017 aged 84