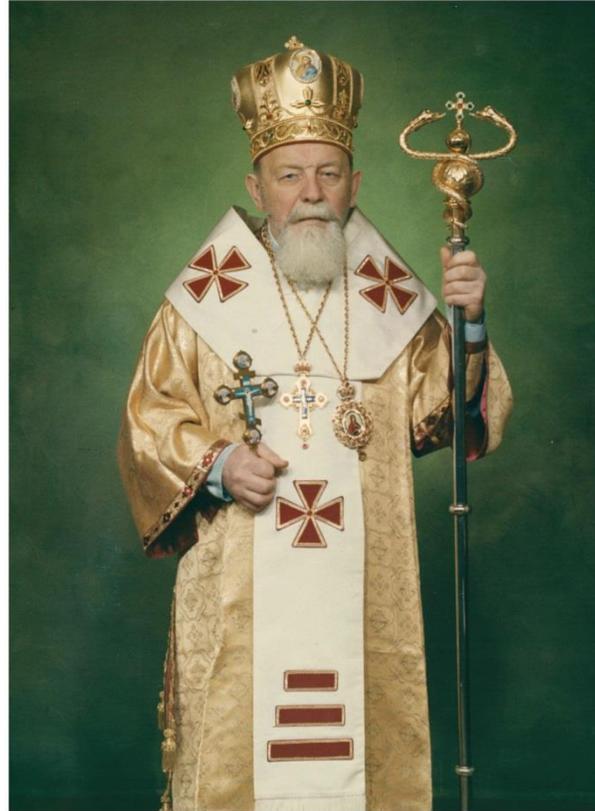


**Blessed Vasyl Velychkovsky (1903-1973):
Ukrainian Catholic Redemptorist, Bishop,
Martyr, and Patron of Prison Ministry
Feast day: June 27**



His Life

Vasyl Velychkovsky was born in 1903 in Stanyslaviv (now Ivano-Frankivsk), in Eastern Galicia, today's Western Ukraine. His father, Volodymyr, was a priest (a married priesthood being a part of the tradition of many Eastern Catholic Churches) and his mother Anna was also devout. Both came from families in which there were priests and members of institutes of consecrated life.

When he was only 15 and still a student, Vasyl joined the Ukrainian Galician Army to fight for the independence of Ukraine during World War I. In 1920, he entered the seminary in Lviv. In 1924, he was ordained a deacon by Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, Metropolitan Archbishop of Lviv and the Major Archbishop of Ukrainian Catholics. He then followed what he believed to be God's call to join the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (the Redemptorists) and become a missionary. In August 1925, he professed the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Because he had completed theological studies, in October 1925, he was ordained a priest by the Most Reverend Josyf Botsian, Bishop of Lutsk.

He taught and conducted missions and served as Superior of the Redemptorist monastery in Stanislaviv. After the Soviets occupied Western Ukraine in 1939, he continued his apostolic work even as the Church was being persecuted. In 1941, he went to Central Ukraine. His activities caused suspicion among the Germans who had recently occupied the town and only

three days after his arrival, Father Velychkovsky was ordered to leave. He moved to Ternopil in Galicia and became Superior of the Dormition monastery.

The Soviets occupied Galicia again in 1945 and the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (the official name for the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Ukraine) was made illegal by the Soviet Communist government. On the night of April 10, the regime arrested the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Bishops. On August 7, 1945, Father Vasyl was arrested "for anti-Soviet propaganda". He was transferred to prison in Kyiv, where the investigation of his case lasted for almost a year. At his trial on June 26, 1946, the Kyiv regional court sentenced him to death by firing squad.

During three months on death row, Father Velychkovsky taught prisoners to pray; he instructed them on the truths of Christian faith, and prepared them for receiving the Sacraments. Finally, he was informed that his death sentence was commuted to a ten-year prison term in the coal mines of Northern Russia. Despite the exhausting work, Father Velychkovsky celebrated the Divine Liturgy almost every day, using whatever was available for the vessels of the altar. On July 9, 1955, he was released.

Back in Lviv, he lived in a small room. During this period of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church's underground existence, he celebrated the Divine Liturgy daily, conducted spiritual exercises, and provided spiritual leadership for many devoted Christians. In 1959, the Apostolic See appointed Father Velychkovsky a Bishop of the underground Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. He was ordained a Bishop in 1963 in a Moscow hotel room by Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj, who had just been released from prison and was on his way to the Second Vatican Council. Metropolitan Slipyj made him the *locum tenens*, the person in charge of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine during his absence. Bishop Velychkovsky worked to strengthen the underground Church. In 1969, he was arrested after writing a book on Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

He was sentenced to three years in a psychiatric hospital where he was tortured and given drugs that ruined his health and mind. Released in January 1972, he was exiled from Ukraine. He spent some time in Yugoslavia and went to Rome, where he met with Major Archbishop Josyf Slipyj and Pope Paul VI. Following the invitation of the Ukrainian Catholic Archbishop of Winnipeg, Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk, who was also a Redemptorist, Bishop Velychkovsky came to live in Canada. He gave retreats to clergy, but his visit among the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada did not last long. On June 30, 1973, Bishop Velychkovsky died at the age of 70 in Winnipeg, where he was buried.

During his pastoral visit to Ukraine in 2001, Pope (now Saint) John Paul II beatified him along with other Ukrainian Greek-Catholic martyrs, including the first Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Bishop of Canada, Blessed Nykyta Budka.

His Spirituality

Vasyl Velychkovsky expressed zeal for the salvation of souls even in his childhood. Born into a family of devoutly religious people, his father a priest, his childhood was spent in an atmosphere of faith. In 1938, in a poem dedicated to his mother, he wrote, "She knelt / at ... the feet / of the Holy Icon of the Mother of God. / ... There he too / ... kneels on his tiny knees: / 'Pray, my son, pray ... / "Dearest Mother of God, / give me the grace to become / a holy priest, a monk!" ' ... / He prayed / And these last words of the prayer / -- though he comprehended them / not at all -- / somehow were sown / deep in his childish soul."

As a teenager, he wanted to enter a religious community, but there was a national uprising in Ukraine in 1918 and he postponed it to do military service. He had a generous heart and sought life in the mission-oriented Redemptorist congregation in order to dedicate himself more perfectly to God.

He promoted faith and served the faithful in the most difficult of circumstances and at the risk of his life while he was imprisoned and during the long years of forced labour north of the Arctic Circle.

Taking into account the testimonies of Bishop Vasyl Velychkovsky's virtuous life, and particularly his endurance, courage and faithfulness to Christ's Church during the period of persecution, in April 2001, his martyrdom was recognized by the Holy See and the decree of beatification was signed by Pope John Paul II.

On July 20, 2014, at the Marian Shrine of Our Lady of Zarvanytsia in Ukraine, His Beatitude Sviatoslav Shevchuk, Major Archbishop of Kyiv-Halych, solemnly proclaimed Blessed Bishop Vasyl Velychkovsky patron of prison ministry for the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. His courage, faithfulness, and zeal for the salvation of the most abandoned gives witness and encouragement to those who themselves do prison ministry.

In 1945, while on death row, he began his prison ministry to people who had lost hope in life. Through Blessed Vasyl's ministry, they not only recovered hope, but found a new freedom in Christ as they faced their imminent death. Later, while working in the coal mines, he began a ministry with his fellow prisoners. The prisoners began calling him their chaplain.

In the deep mine shafts, he created a small chapel. Here he would spend time praying the rosary for the prisoners and the guards, hearing the confessions of prisoners, counselling and consoling them, and on occasion celebrating the Divine Liturgy, using a tablespoon for the chalice and paten, prison bread for the hosts, and wine made from raisins which he received in care packages from home. He prayed the rosary daily on a rosary made of string and dried prison bread.

He is a patron of all those who find themselves enslaved by the circumstances of their life. He is an example for all of persevering in the Gospel even in the face of adverse conditions and persecution.

His relics, a fully intact body, are now enshrined in Saint Joseph's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Winnipeg.

For further information:

<http://www.bvmartyrshrine.com/>

<http://www.cssr.com/english/saintsblessed/velychkovskyi.shtml> \

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZFgj6xxr94>

<http://www.bccatholic.ca/canadian/4206-blessed-velychkovsky-named-patron-of-prison-ministry>

Photo: Courtesy of Bishop Velychkovsky Martyr's Shrine.