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## “The Night of the Churches” — a Pastoral Response to the Challenges of the Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*

**Abstract:** This article presents the Night of the Churches as one of the possible and effective responses to the challenges discussed in Pope John Paul II’s 2003 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, and introduces the history, spread and purpose of this activity. It focuses in detail on its implementation in the Czech Republic since 2009, with special emphasis on the years 2000—2002, marked by the pandemic of COVID-19. It also tries to show its positives (chances) and negatives (pitfalls). In this way, it can serve not only as a recapitulation of past actions, but also as an inspiration, especially for countries where this activity is not widespread and often not even known.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, Christian Churches, evangelization, Night of the Churches, ecumenism, John Paul II, exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*

### Introduction

In this article, we would like to present the Night of the Churches, one of the possible responses to Pope John Paul II’s challenge in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*,<sup>1</sup> all the more so in this periodical published in Poland, where this activity is not widespread and often not even known.

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<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II: *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Europa”* (28.06.2003), [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20030628\\_ecclesia-in-europa.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html) [accessed 18.07.2023].

In the first section, we want to introduce the history, extension and basic goal of the Night of the Churches. In the second and third, we will focus on its implementation in the Czech Republic: in the second section from 2009 to 2019, in the third from 2020 to 2022, marked by the epidemic of COVID-19. In the fourth section, we will discuss in more detail the positives and negatives of the Night of the Churches, which will help to show its multidimensional importance, especially evangelization-related one.

As these are very recent facts, we have to rely almost exclusively on internet sources. Besides these, there are the non-public minutes of the meetings of the Night of the Churches coordinators from the Catholic dioceses of the Czech Republic, which were kindly made available to us for the preparation of this article. The article therefore does not include the usual bibliography.

## 1. The origin, development, and the aim of the Night of the Churches

In 2003, Pope St. John Paul II issued the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, which, among other things, aims to revive the life of faith in Europe. In it, the Pope stresses in a very practical way the importance of primary evangelization, including through culture; it is therefore appropriate to recall the most important sections of the exhortation relating to this theme:

46. In various parts of Europe a *first proclamation of the Gospel is needed*: the number of the unbaptized is growing, both because of the significant presence of immigrants of other religions and because children born into families of Christian tradition have not received Baptism, either as a result of the Communist domination or the spread of religious indifference. Indeed, Europe is now one of those traditionally Christian places which, in addition to a new evangelization, require in some cases a first evangelization. [...]

58. The proclamation of Jesus Christ must also reach contemporary European culture. The evangelization of culture must show that in today's Europe too it is possible to live the Gospel fully as a path which gives meaning to existence. To this end, pastoral practice must undertake the task of shaping a Christian mentality in ordinary life: in families, in schools, in social communications, in cultural life, in the workplace and the economy, in politics, in leisure-time, in health and in sickness. What is needed is a calm critical assessment of the current cultural situation of Europe and an evaluation of the emerging

trends and the more significant contemporary events and situations in the light of the centrality of Christ and of Christian anthropology. [...]

60. Nor should we overlook the positive contribution made by the wise use of the cultural treasures of the Church. These can be a special element in the rekindling of a humanism of Christian inspiration. When properly preserved and intelligently used, these living testimonies of the faith as professed down the ages can prove a useful resource for the new evangelization and for catechesis, and lead to a rediscovery of the sense of mystery. [...] and because artistic beauty, as a sort of echo of the Spirit of God, is a symbol pointing to the mystery, an invitation to seek out the face of God made visible in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Night of the Churches is one of the ways of responding to this challenge. It has its origins in Germany,<sup>2</sup> even before the exhortation in question: it was first held in 1995 in Frankfurt am Main as a joint activity of the Protestant and Catholic Churches, in 2001 in Halle, in 2003 as an annual event in Hannover, in 2004 in Hamburg and then in other German cities and their surroundings, and to this day as a regional activity under the name *Lange Nacht der Kirchen* (corresponding to similar events such as *Lange Nacht der Museen*, *Lange Nacht der Forschung*, etc.). It usually takes place in autumn and the cities or regions stick to their own concepts and dates. The popularity grows year by year, as well as the organizational and technical support, for instance, its own YouTube channel and its own mobile app.

A new dimension has been added to the Night of the Churches in Austria, where it has been held in the Archdiocese of Vienna since 2005 and nationwide since 2008, on a single date in late May and early June, in cooperation with the Bishops' Conference and the National Ecumenical Council of Churches. Its popularity grows year by year.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2009, the Night of the Churches has been held in the Czech Republic (see the next section), and since 2011 in Slovakia in the Archdiocese of Trnava and the Diocese of Nitra,<sup>4</sup> since 2012 in the whole Slovakia<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Summary historical data could not be found elsewhere than on Wikipedia: *Lange Nacht der Kirchen*, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lange\\_Nacht\\_der\\_Kirchen](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lange_Nacht_der_Kirchen) (18.07.2023); and in: „Nacht der Kirchen“ im Elbe-Weser-Raum, in Hannover und in Lüneburg (6.08.2004), <https://www.landeskirche-hannovers.de/evlka-de/presse-und-medien/nachrichten/2004/08/06-1997> [accessed 18.07.2023].

<sup>3</sup> *Die Lange Nacht der Kirchen in Europa*, <https://www.langenachtderkirchen.at/ueber-die-lange-nacht/in-europa/> [accessed 18.07.2023].

<sup>4</sup> TRNAVA: *Prvá Noc kostolov otvorí neznáme zákutia v chrámoch* (10.11.2010), <https://www.netky.sk/clanok/trnava-prva-noc-kostolov-otvori-nezname-zakutia-v-chramoch> [accessed 20.07.2023]; *Noc kostolov 2011 v Nitre*, <https://www.nitralive.sk/kam-v-nitre/podujatia-v-okoli/1224-noc-kostolov-2011-v-nitre> [accessed 20.07.2023].

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *Noc kostolov 2012*, <https://www.vyveska.sk/noc-kostol-2012.html> [accessed 18.07.2023].

also in ecumenical format,<sup>6</sup> but still in the Catholic Church with significant restrictions<sup>7</sup>; since 2012 also in Hungary and Estonia (although in Estonia for the first time on a different date), since 2014 also in South Tyrol in Italy in German and Italian-speaking churches, since 2016 in Switzerland every two years.<sup>8</sup>

In Vienna, a Night of Mosques was also held for the first time in 2011 on a separate November date, not under the auspices of the Islamic Religious Society in Austria (Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich), but organized by the Islamic Federation in Vienna<sup>9</sup>; since 2012, also in Berlin as part of the *Lange Nacht der Religionen* event, which, in addition to Christian churches and mosques, also opens sacred places of other religions such as synagogues, temples, meditation centres and prayer rooms — offering encounters with Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Pagans, Alevis, and Sikhs.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of the Night of the Churches is (similarly to the Night of the Museums) a kind of “peek behind the scenes”: not only to open spaces that are usually not accessible to the public, but above all to “taste” the meaning, atmosphere, beauty and history of sacred places. From a secular point of view, this is primarily a cultural event; this is why a tradition of close cooperation with local government officials has developed. In Berlin, in the form of the Long Night of Religion, the declared aim is friendly coexistence and tolerance of different religions.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. EVANJELICKÁ CIRKEV AUGSBURSKÉHO VYZNANIA NA SLOVENSKU: *Noc kostolov 2012*, <https://www.ecav.sk/archiv/archiv-2012/noc-kostolov-2012> [accessed 20.07.2023].

<sup>7</sup> The *spiritus movens* of the Night of the Churches in Slovakia was Archbishop Róbert Bezák of Trnava, appointed in 2009 and dismissed in 2012, the Archdiocese of Trnava was the national coordinator. After the dismissal of Archbishop Bezák, there is no national coordination in the Catholic Church in Slovakia, and the action depends on local activities, which vary a lot in scale; see *Noc kostolov: Bezákov projekt stále žije, jeho popularita však upadá*, <https://svetkrestanstva.postoj.sk/4594/noc-kostolov-bezakov-projekt-stale-zije-jeho-popularita-vsak-upada> [accessed 20.07.2023]; *Tohtoročná Noc kostolov bude komornejšia: Vieme, ktoré chrámy sa zapoja* (13.05.2019); <https://trnava.dnes24.sk/tohtorocna-noc-kostolov-bude-komornejsia-vieme-ktore-kostoly-sa-zapoja-330309> [accessed 20.07.2023]; *Počas Noci kostolov zostanú niektoré kostoly otvorené dlhšie* (1.06.2023), <https://mytrnava.sme.sk/c/23176598/pocas-noci-kostolov-zostanu-niektore-kostoly-otvorene-dlhsie.html> [accessed 20.07.2023].

<sup>8</sup> *Über die Veranstaltung: Geschichte & Gegenwart*, <https://langenachtderkirchen.ch/v/mQksCNib/ueber-die-veranstaltung> [accessed 19.07.2023].

<sup>9</sup> *Erste „Lange Nacht der Moscheen“ in Wien* (19.11.2011), <https://wien.orf.at/v2/news/stories/2509893/> [accessed 19.07.2023].

<sup>10</sup> *Die Lange Nacht der Moscheen*, <https://www.berlin.de/kultur-und-tickets/archiv/3020988-2805649-die-lange-nacht-der-moscheen.html>; *Lange Nacht der Religionen*, <https://www.buendnis-toleranz.de/arbeitsfelder/anlaufstelle/initiativen/175906/lange-nacht-der-religionen> [accessed 19.07.2023].

<sup>11</sup> *Lange Nacht der Religionen*, see the previous note.

From the point of view of Christian churches, it is a way of “low-threshold” invitation to people who do not normally attend church, although for most of them the primary reason is either a cultural experience or simple curiosity: to get to places they cannot normally visit. It is important not to dwell only on the cultural and historical dimension, but to gently and non-violently point to the religious significance — in this way, Church Night also becomes an instrument of first evangelization. In doing so, it is advisable to make sure that the invitation of the Night of the Churches can continue throughout the year.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. The Night of the Churches in the Czech Republic until 2019

In this section, we rely mainly on the minutes of the meetings of the diocesan coordinators of the Catholic Church, which are non-public documents. These meetings are held twice a year: the first time in June to evaluate the previous year and to prepare for the coming year, and the second time at the beginning of the calendar year to fine-tune the preparation for the next year. References to sources in the footnotes will therefore be added only if other sources are used.

### 2.1 Predecessor of the Night of the Churches on the basis of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic

The Night of the Churches in the Czech Republic had its predecessor in the Night of Open Churches, organized by the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic. It was held in many places in the Czech Republic at different times of the church year, in Prague always at the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January. The first edition took place in 2007, when the main focus of attention in Prague in January was the signing of the European document *Charta Oecumenica*, a document on the strengthening and growth of cooperation

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. *Informace pro pořadatele noci kostelů (rok 2019)*, <https://nockostelu.cz/informace/cile/> [accessed 18.07.2023].

between churches in Europe.<sup>13</sup> Representatives of the Catholic Church also attended the opening of the Open Church Night in Prague. A total of four editions were held until 2010.

## 2.2 First edition in 2009 — pilot project

The Night of the Churches, following the Austrian model and on the same date with Austria, was held in the Czech Republic for the first time on 29 May 2009 with the motto “yours is the day, yours also the NIGHT; you established the luminaries and the sun” (Ps 74:16).<sup>14</sup> Because of the novelty of this activity in the Czech Republic, it was preceded by a press conference at the Bishopric of Brno on Friday 22 May 2009, a week before the Night of the Churches.<sup>15</sup> The event was still held on a relatively limited scale: the first edition of the Night of the Churches in 2009 involved 25 churches in the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Brno and 9 churches in the Diocese of Plzeň; despite the bad weather, 90,000 visitors were recorded in Brno and its surroundings, and another 10,000 in Plzeň. Following the example of Austria, the Night of the Churches had an ecumenical dimension: six other Christian churches in the Czech Republic joined this first edition of the Night of the Churches in 2009.<sup>16</sup> It can therefore be said that this first edition was a kind of “pilot programme.”

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<sup>13</sup> EKUMENICKÁ RADA CÍRKVÍ: *Tisková zpráva z Noci otevřených kostelů* [Ecumenical Council of Churches. Press release from the Night of Open Churches] (21.12.2010), [https://ekumenickarada.cz/in/1620/tiskova\\_zprava\\_z\\_noci\\_otevrenych\\_kostelu](https://ekumenickarada.cz/in/1620/tiskova_zprava_z_noci_otevrenych_kostelu) [accessed 20.07.2023].

<sup>14</sup> The motto of the individual editions of the Night of the Churches is mentioned rather sporadically in the minutes of the coordinators' meetings, it was necessary to search for it on the Internet in the images associated with the Night of the Churches. Due to the complementary function of the motto information, we do not list the individual websites where the motto was found.

<sup>15</sup> BISKUPSTVÍ BRNĚNSKÉ: *Tisková konference k Noci kostelů 2009 v Brně*, <https://www.biskupstvi.cz/2009-05-22-tiskova-konference-k-noci-kostelu-2009-v-brne> [accessed 20.07.2023].

<sup>16</sup> EKUMENICKÁ RADA CÍRKVÍ: *Noc kostelů 2010*, [https://ekumenickarada.cz/in/1667/noc\\_kostelu\\_2010](https://ekumenickarada.cz/in/1667/noc_kostelu_2010) [accessed 20.07.2023].

## 2.3 Second edition in 2010 — for the first time on a national scale

The second edition of the Night of the Churches was held on 28 May 2010 with the motto “All day and all NIGHT they shall never be silent” (Isaiah 62:6), in all dioceses of the Catholic Church and in many Christian churches associated in the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic, and a separate website [www.nockostelu.cz](http://www.nockostelu.cz) was created for it; the national coordination was carried out in the Diocese of Brno. As the Night of the Churches was held on a much larger scale than in 2009, it was again preceded by a press conference at the Brno diocese on Tuesday 18 May 2010.<sup>17</sup>

The official patronage was assumed by the Czech Bishops’ Conference and the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic<sup>18</sup>; in many cases, local authorities, especially municipalities and towns, have also assumed official patronage. Thus, there was a risk of undue politicization of this activity, which is why the meeting of diocesan coordinators in January 2011 stated that the organizer must be the church entity itself (public benefit associations, municipalities and towns can join, but not be independent organizers), and that it is not allowed to present any political party in connection with the Night of the Churches, neither on the [nockostelu.cz](http://nockostelu.cz) website nor in the Night of the Churches programme in individual locations. It was emphasized that the term Night of Churches will be used exclusively for activities that meet the aims, thesis, unified term and unified visual style. The Night of the Churches cannot be used for other activities.

The broader scope was also reflected quantitatively: 418 churches, chapels and places of worship were open and there were approximately 252,000 visitor entries.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> BISKUPSTVÍ BRNĚNSKÉ: *Tisková konference k Noci kostelů 2010 v Brně*, <https://www.biskupstvi.cz/2010-05-18-tiskova-konference-k-noci-kostelu-2010-v-brne> [accessed 20.07.2023]. The press conference before the Night of the Churches in Brno became a traditional part of the event, and press conferences were also held in other cities, usually under the auspices of the respective diocese.

<sup>18</sup> EKUMENICKÁ RADA CÍRKVÍ: *Noc kostelů 2010*, [https://ekumenickarada.cz/in/1667/noc\\_kostelu\\_2010](https://ekumenickarada.cz/in/1667/noc_kostelu_2010) [accessed 20.07.2023].

<sup>19</sup> *Noc kostelů v číslech*, <https://www.dltm.cz/noc-kostelu> [accessed 20.07.2023]. The number of visitor entries (or more accurately, an estimate, as organizers are rarely able to record completely accurate numbers, although some have attempted to do so, e.g. with electronic counters) is reported by the organizers of individual places immediately after the event to their coordinators designated along church lines, from which broader summaries are then created.



## 2.4 Third edition in 2011 — cooperation with Slovakia

The third edition was held on 27 May 2011 with the motto “I commune with mine own heart in the NIGHT; I meditate and search my spirit” (Ps 77:7). In the Catholic Church, it was marked by the extension to Slovakia, especially by the merit of the then Archbishop of Trnava, Róbert Bezák.<sup>20</sup> In the Czech Republic, it was held under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. As many as 939 churches, chapels and houses of prayer from seven Christian churches (Roman Catholic Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Church of the Brethren, Old Catholic Church, Unity of the Brethren, Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands) participated and more than 300,000 visitors were recorded. At the same time, it was agreed on the ecumenical platform that churches that are not members or associate members of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic cannot participate in the Night of the Churches.

## 2.5 Fourth edition in 2012 — underlining the Christian character

The fourth edition took place on 1 June 2012 with the motto “For you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the NIGHT or of darkness” (1 Thes 5:5), again under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. Nine Christian churches participated (Roman Catholic Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Church of the Brethren, Old Catholic Church, Unity of the Brethren, Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Baptist Brethren).

More than 1,200 open churches, chapels and houses of worship were involved and there were over 400,000 visitor entries.

At the meeting of the coordinators of the Catholic Church, the necessity to take into account the religious character of the event was recalled, also in view of the statement of the Liturgical Commission of the Slovak Bishops’ Conference<sup>21</sup> and that in the context of the statistics, we cannot expect a further significant increase in the number of churches and

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<sup>20</sup> More about the Night of the Churches in Slovakia in section 1.

<sup>21</sup> This topic is discussed more extensively in the final section 4.



visitors, and therefore it will be necessary to emphasize other qualities of the Night of the Churches and to focus on their development. At the same time, the coordinators agreed that the Night of the Churches is first and foremost a presentation of Christianity and that Christian parishes, religious orders, congregations or church communities can participate with their churches; since Jewish and Muslim communities do not fulfil this basic objective, they cannot participate in the Night of the Churches.

## 2.6 Fifth edition of 2013 — pilgrim passports and cards

The fifth edition was held on 27 May 2013 with the motto: “The light is succeeded by the NIGHT, but against wisdom evil does not prevail” (cf. Wis 7:30). This time the patronage was held by the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Petr Nečas and other top politicians, in regions by governors and in cities by mayors.

More than 1,300 open churches, chapels and houses of prayer were involved, and there were more than 450,000 visitor entries, despite frequent inclement weather.<sup>22</sup>

Nine Christian churches participated (Roman Catholic Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Church of the Brethren, Old Catholic Church, Unity of the Brethren, Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Unity of the Brethren Baptists).

The organizers noticed that in preceding years visitors had not been coming to churches randomly, but rather particularly to specific programmes that they had chosen in advance from the offer, and the interest in spiritual programmes had been increasing. Pilgrimage passes and possibly even collector cards were prepared for the participants, and information brochures on the Night of the Churches were published in several cities and distributed both in churches and in city information centres.

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<sup>22</sup> The interest therefore surpassed the forecasts of the coordinators of the Catholic dioceses that a quantitative increase could no longer have been expected.

## 2.7 Sixth edition in 2014 — pexeso, magnets, mobile apps

The sixth edition was held on 23 May 2014 with the motto: “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the NIGHT; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen 1:14).

More than 1,400 sacred buildings were opened, with approximately 450,000 visitors. Ten Christian churches participated (Roman Catholic Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Church of the Brethren, Old Catholic Church, Unity of the Brethren, Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Unity of the Brethren Baptists, Apostolic Church).

New features were the publication of a pexeso with prayer houses, churches and temples involved in the project, magnets with the logo of the Night of the Churches and the mobile application iKostel, which provided interesting information about the project and the churches themselves.

## 2.8 Seventh edition in 2015 — improvements to the web application

The seventh edition was held on 29 May 2015 with the motto: “The darkness is not dark to you; the NIGHT is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:12). The event was held under the auspices of the Prime Minister and of Presidents of both chambers (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate) of the Parliament of the Czech Republic.

Quantitatively, the year in question did not differ significantly from the previous one: more than 1,400 open sacred objects, 450,000 visitors.

Ten Christian churches participated again (Roman Catholic Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Church of the Brethren, Evangelical Methodist Church, Unity of Brethren, Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Unity of the Brethren Baptists, Apostolic Church). The web application for registration was gradually improved, where it was also possible to order printed materials. Current anniversaries were considered: 70 years since the end of World War II, 600 years since the burning of Master Jan Hus and the Year of the Eucharist.

## 2.9 Eighth edition in 2016 — plus morning entries for schools

The eighth edition took place on 10 June 2016 with the motto: “His gates shall remain open by day, NIGHT shall be no more there” (cf. Rev 21:25). The Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn OP, the spiritual father of the Austrian Night of Churches, expressed his support for the event in the Czech Republic and sent his greetings.

There was another quantitative increase: more than 1,400 open sacred buildings and 500,000 visitors.

Eleven Christian churches participated (Roman Catholic Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Church of the Brethren, Old Catholic Church, Unity of the Brethren, Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Unity of the Brethren Baptists, Apostolic Church, Church Christian Communities).

The web application included the holding of morning entries for schools. The 700th anniversary of the birth of the Roman Emperor and Czech King Charles IV, known in the Czech lands as the Father of the Fatherland, and the Holy Year of Mercy were given as appropriate themes.

## 2.10 Ninth edition in 2017 — further improvements to the web application

The ninth edition was held on 9 June 2017 with the motto: “She became a shelter to them by day, and a starry flame through the NIGHT” (cf. Wis 10:17).

Quantitatively, it was close to 2015: more than 1,400 sacred objects opened, more than 450,000 visitor entries.

Eleven Christian churches participated (Roman Catholic Church, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Church of the Brethren, Old Catholic Church, Unity of the Brethren, Orthodox Church in the Czech Lands, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Unity of the Brethren Baptists, Apostolic Church, Church Christian Communities).

At the coordinators’ meeting, additional functionalities of the web application were discussed (confirmation e-mail after login, addition of recommendation to editors to copy the password sent by e-mail, order

of greetings when inserting, warning about exceeding the number of characters when inserting the programme of a given place). For next year's event, converting the web application to a new responsive platform with the addition of a category for foreign language programmes and how to use the Church Night Facebook page were discussed.

### 2.11 Tenth anniversary edition in 2018 — a variant for cyclists

The tenth anniversary edition was held on 25 May 2018 with the motto: "They would spend the NIGHT near the house of God" (cf. 1 Chron 9:27). There was again a quantitative increase: more than 1,500 churches and houses of worship and over 500,000 visitor entries.

An interesting novelty in the Diocese of Hradec Králové was the variant for bicyclists the "Night of the Churches on a Bicycle."

### 2.12 Eleventh edition in 2019 — new webhosting

The eleventh edition was held on 24 May 2019 with the motto: "Sing as on the NIGHT of the dedication of the feast" (cf. Is 30:19). Quantitatively, this edition did not differ significantly from the previous one: more than 1,600 open sacred objects, for 460,000 visitor entries.

The web application migrated to a new webhosting while maintaining all existing functionalities. As a specific topic, activities were proposed at the coordinators' meeting aimed at the mission month of October 2019.

### 3. Night of Churches in the Czech Republic during the coronavirus epidemic 2020—2022

#### 3.1 The Night of the Churches in 2020 — twelfth edition — uncertainty, postponement, online broadcasts

Preparations for the twelfth edition of the Night of the Churches, originally planned for June 5, 2020, with the motto: “You have made the moon to tell the time... You make darkness, and it is night... The sun rises... People go out to their work” (Ps 104:19—23), proceeded as usual until February 2020. However, the measures associated with the COVID-19 disease epidemic since March have brought great uncertainty to the whole situation. In Austria, the organizers have decided not to hold the event and to postpone it to 2021.<sup>23</sup>

There was also uncertainty in the Czech Republic. Some of the originally registered churches, which numbered over 1,000, opted out. Epidemic restrictions were eased from May 2020 and the state of emergency ended on 17 May 2020.<sup>24</sup> As it was not necessary to be tied to the date of the event in Austria, the organizers in the Czech Republic decided in mid-April to postpone the date to 12 June in connection with the release schedule and finalized the preparations with regard to the still valid but ever-changing hygiene measures: a maximum of 300 people were finally allowed to participate at the same time both indoors and outdoors, and relatively strict hygiene rules applied, for instance, wearing masks, hand disinfection, etc. The motto remained the same. Some churches that had originally opted out re-registered in the changed circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

Due to the limitations to public gatherings, accommodations have been made for transmissions via multimedia means and the Internet. At the national level, this was in collaboration with the Christian private television station TV NOE, where live broadcasts were made from 7.00 pm to 11.00 pm for 30 minutes each from each of the eight dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church on the day of the Night of the Churches.

<sup>23</sup> *Die Lange Nacht der Kirchen in Europa*, <https://www.langenachtderkirchen.at/ueber-die-lange-nacht/in-europa/> [accessed 21.07.2023].

<sup>24</sup> Resolution of the Government of the Czech Republic No. 219/2020 Coll., on the extension of the state of emergency in connection with the SARS CoV-2 virus pandemic.

<sup>25</sup> BISKUPSTVÍ BRNĚNSKÉ: *Noc kostelů 2020*, [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwig2ufI85-AAxVNvgv0HHdp4CRYQFnoECBEQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.biskupstvi.cz%2Fstorage%2Fakt%2F12458.pdf&u sg=AOvVaw2YxwhgEW1Kp\\_0RYDHfQt1L&copi=89978449](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwig2ufI85-AAxVNvgv0HHdp4CRYQFnoECBEQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.biskupstvi.cz%2Fstorage%2Fakt%2F12458.pdf&u sg=AOvVaw2YxwhgEW1Kp_0RYDHfQt1L&copi=89978449) [accessed 20.07.2023].

At the local level — based on the experience gained with the transmission of the services — some churches made it possible to follow the programme of the Night of the Churches online (fully or partially); centrally, information about these transmissions was available on the national website [nockostelu.cz](http://nockostelu.cz). Many organizers also moved some activities to outdoor areas near churches, which they announced, among other things, via the same website.<sup>26</sup>

Despite so many limitations and the use of online space, the decline was not as significant as estimated: more than 1,100 churches and houses of worship participated and more than 205,000 visitor entries were recorded.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2 Night of the Churches in 2021 — thirteenth edition — emphasis on ecology while maintaining hygiene measures

In the autumn of 2020, the epidemic situation worsened (not only) in the Czech Republic, so the Government of the Czech Republic declared a state of emergency from 5 October 2020, which, after several extensions and a new (legally disputed) declaration, lasted until 11 April 2021.<sup>28</sup>

The experience of the first “coronavirus” year in 2020 and the earlier end of the state of emergency allowed better preparation for the next, already thirteenth, edition of the Night of the Churches, despite all the uncertainties connected with the current hygiene situation and the changing measures that had to be observed (e.g. hand disinfection, wearing of masks, distances, etc.). The possibilities of online transmissions and outdoor events were also used.

The Night of the Churches was again held on 28 May 2021, together with Austria and other countries, with the motto: “You bring darkness, the NIGHT descends, the whole forest is swarming with beasts” (Ps 104:20). It was also necessary to respond to the current hygiene measures by changing the programmes, which is why the programme brochures were not printed (especially in the cities) and why the information on the [nockostelu.cz](http://nockostelu.cz) website became all the more important. The mobile application *Noc kostelů* for Android also facilitated orientation.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> *Noc kostelů 2020* (24.06.2020), <https://www.nockostelu.cz/aktuality/863> [accessed 21.07.2023].

<sup>28</sup> *Nouzový stav v Česku*, [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nouzov%C3%BD\\_stav\\_v\\_%C4%8Cesku](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nouzov%C3%BD_stav_v_%C4%8Cesku) [accessed 21.07.2023].

The main theme (originally intended in Austria for 2020) was ecology, for which a discussion by experts was broadcast on Christian TV NOE. Ecology in Prague was underlined by the company Rekola Bikessharing, which allowed free bike sharing in the centre of Prague for 20—30 minutes.<sup>29</sup>

A gradual increase in the number of participants became apparent, although the situation was still very uncertain: More than 223,000 people visited 1,230 churches across the Czech Republic.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.3 Night of Churches in 2022 — fourteenth edition — a gradual return to normal

In the autumn of 2021, there was another significant wave of COVID-19 infections, with a state of emergency in the Czech Republic from 26 November to 25 December 2021. However, another state of emergency from 4 March to 30 June 2022 was related to another fact: the refugee wave from Ukraine after Russia invaded Ukraine at the end of February 2022 (and by then the news regarding the COVID-19 epidemic had died down).<sup>31</sup> Hygiene measures were phased out by the end of April 2022 and the state of pandemic alert ended on 5 May 2022.<sup>32</sup>

The fourteenth edition of the Night of the Churches took place on 10 June 2022 with the motto “By day may the Lord give his grace, all NIGHT I will sing to him and praise him” (cf. Ps 42:9), still marked by the receding pandemic of coronavirus (at least in the minds of part of the Czech population). A more stable situation allowed the use of traditional printed advertising materials (programme brochures, etc.), and a mobile app was also extended for Apple iOS.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> ARCIBISKUPSTVÍ PRAŽSKÉ: *Tisková zpráva Noc kostelů 2021 — první festival 2021 v celé ČR*, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjijOJlqCAAxWhQuUKHfQ5AwUQFnoECAYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fapha.cz%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2021%2F05%2Ftiskova-zprava-nockostelu-2021.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2aj4fS6Jv07-CKd2aIFLvm&copi=89978449> [accessed 21.07.2023].

<sup>30</sup> *Noc kostelů v číslech*, <https://www.dltm.cz/noc-kostelu> [accessed 20.07.2023].

<sup>31</sup> *Nouzový stav v Česku*, [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nouzov%C3%BDstav\\_v\\_%C4%8Cesku](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nouzov%C3%BDstav_v_%C4%8Cesku) [accessed 21.07.2023].

<sup>32</sup> *Kompletní přehled právních předpisů Sbírky zákonů, Ministerstva zdravotnictví a dalších zdrojů souvisejících s koronavirem SARS CoV-2*, <https://www.fulsoft.cz/33/prehled-pravnich-predpisu-sbirky-zakonu-a-dalsich-zdroju-souvisejicich-s-prokazanim-vyskytu-koronaviru-oznacovaneho-jako-sars-cov-2-zpusobuje-onemocneni-covid-19-uniqueidgOke4NvrWuMkmaNigtjQulrL-J1k5knUT6QOQea68B8/> [accessed 21.07.2023].

<sup>33</sup> *Mobilní aplikace Noc kostelů*, <https://www.nockostelu.cz/informace/aplikace/> [accessed 21.07.2023].



It is understandable that in this situation the statistics have increased significantly: 1,729 sacred spaces were involved in the event and there were 408,800 visitor entries.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Pastoral positives and pitfalls of the Night of the Churches

The Night of the Churches brings with it a number of opportunities and positives, among which are:

- common term — the adoption of the Austrian model leads to a concentration of forces and attention;
- a common motto — this gives a common focus that is positive for participants and organizers so that their efforts do not revolve around the preferences of individuals or small groups;
- uniform corporate design — leads to easier orientation of participants and is a guide for the organizers;
- one common website and Facebook page — prevents the fragmentation of basic information, but does not impede appropriate additions on the websites of individual sacral places;
- unambiguous support from the churches — the patronage of the Czech Bishops' Conference and the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic, including extensive information mainly on the websites of these institutions and their components (in the Catholic Church, the dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church and the Apostolic Exarchate of the Greek Catholic Church);
- use of other communication tools — especially mobile apps for Android and Apple iOS;
- ecumenical dimension — mutual cooperation and information, but deliberately limited to the framework of Christianity;
- involvement of local communities — not only active participation in the organization and course, but a true presentation of the life of the communities of believers without trying to create an illusion (e.g. by hiring musicians and singers from elsewhere);

<sup>34</sup> *Hodnocení Noci kostelů v pražské arcidiecézi* (24.06.2022), [https://www.cirkev.cz/hodnoceni-noci-kostelu-v-prazske-arcidiecezi\\_10401](https://www.cirkev.cz/hodnoceni-noci-kostelu-v-prazske-arcidiecezi_10401) [accessed 21.07.2023]. For comparison: in 2024, in the fifteenth anniversary year, there were already a record 1,806 sacred spaces and more than 454,000 visitor entries; see *Noc kostelů 2023 uzavřelo setkání diecézních koordinátorů* (15.06.2023), [https://www.cirkev.cz/noc-kostelu-2023-uzavrelo-setkani-dieceznych-koordinatoru\\_24654](https://www.cirkev.cz/noc-kostelu-2023-uzavrelo-setkani-dieceznych-koordinatoru_24654) [accessed 21.07.2023].

- openness — individual Christian communities often give the impression of a “closed club”; here the universality of God’s call is emphasized, which is not limited (like good pastoral care) to regular worshippers;
- social impact — the event is implemented in cooperation with representatives of state and local government;
- cultural impact — it shows the roots of culture in praising God, that is, in the focus on goodness and beauty;
- spiritual “breathing in” — meeting with the *genius loci* imbued with a spiritual atmosphere;
- the aspects of evangelization — enrichment for believers, non-violent and gentle presentation of the truth about the Christian life and the breaking down of prejudices, which is important both in the new evangelization (especially towards people with prejudices) and in the first evangelization (many people in the Czech Republic have not yet encountered questions of faith, and many of them are yet to enter a church thanks to the Night of the Churches).

Besides these many positives, the Night of the Churches also has certain pitfalls and dangers:

- a mere one-off — it is necessary to show and offer in a non-violent way other, usually ordinary activities of the community of believers, especially those aimed at seekers (e.g. Alpha courses, possibilities of thematic meetings during the year);
- abuse for political purposes — despite cooperation with local government in particular, it is necessary to resist overt or covert political agitation;
- agitational evangelism or proselytism — the call to faith is given by God, not by us, hence the need for our humble service;
- the absorption or usurpation of the church by visitors — it is necessary that the *genius loci* of the church be perceptible, namely, that the sacredness of the church persist and prevail;
- inappropriate agenda items — not everything befits a sacred space.

Especially these last two points were the subject of an official critical statement in Slovakia: the document of the Liturgical Commission of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia entitled *Noc kostolov — upozornenie ohľadom rešpektovania posvätného priestoru* (The Night of the Churches — A Notice Regarding Respecting Sacred Space) of 18 May 2012.<sup>35</sup> It calls

<sup>35</sup> *Noc kostolov — upozornenie ohľadom rešpektovania posvätného priestoru* (18.05.2012), <https://www.kbs.sk/obsah/sekcia/h/dokumenty-a-vyhlasenia/p/dokumenty-komisii-a-rad-kbs/c/noc-kostolov-upozornenie-ohladam-respektovania-posvatneho-priestoru> [accessed 22.07.2023].

for the conscientious preservation of the sanctity of the space, since it is permanently reserved for worship (can. 1210 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law), and the only other use regulated by the universal Church is for concerts (Circular Letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments to the Presidents of the Conferences of Bishops, *De concertibus in ecclesiis*, November 5, 1987). Therefore, the consent of the local Ordinary is required for any other use of the church. The final paragraph of the Slovak document relates to the Night of the Churches and states: “Especially in the context of the forthcoming event the Night of the Churches, which will take place on 1 June 2012, we must be aware that it would be a mistake to make our churches into multipurpose halls or houses of culture on this occasion. We must strive to offer participants and visitors the very sacredness that many people are seeking today. And in preserving the identity of the church as a place where God dwells among people, the upcoming event can also convey such sacredness and contact with God.”

On the one hand, this general remark is true; on the other hand, it illustrates the reservations of the Slovak Episcopate towards Archbishop Róbert Bezák of Trnava, the promoter of the Night of the Churches in Slovakia, who was removed from his office shortly afterwards on 2 July 2012.<sup>36</sup> After his dismissal, there is no national coordination and support for the Night of the Churches provided by the Catholic Church in Slovakia and the website [nockostolov.sk](http://nockostolov.sk), the equivalent of the Czech and Austrian websites, is still not functional.<sup>37</sup>

These positives and pitfalls must always be taken into account not only on a national scale, where they are the subject of meetings of diocesan coordinators in the Catholic Church, but especially on a local level. In this way, the Night of the Churches can become a good instrument of God’s action, especially of the new evangelization and the first evangelization.

## Conclusion

It turns out that the Night of the Churches, if well prepared and implemented, can be a good tool for new evangelization and first evan-

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<sup>36</sup> Archbishop Róbert Bezák, C.Ss.R., <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bbezak.html> [accessed 22.07.2023].

<sup>37</sup> Cf. footnote 7.

gelization, namely, for people who either have some kind of, but often very distorted, awareness of Christianity, or for those who have hardly or not at all encountered Christianity. Such persons are becoming more and more numerous in Europe, especially in the German-speaking area. From there comes this activity aimed at encountering and learning about lived Christianity, which has had an ecumenical dimension from the beginning. It originated in Germany, where it is usually called *Lange Nacht der Kirchen*. The Austrian modification with the same name is significant, characterized by a nationwide ecumenical coordination with a unified term and motto.

In 2009, the Austrian version was transferred to the Czech Republic, where it was widely disseminated and publicly appreciated. Unlike in Austria and some German regions, it has not been interrupted even in the years marked by the COVID-19 epidemic, that is, from 2020 to 2022, albeit with necessary restrictions.

Experience demonstrates the opportunities and pitfalls of this activity, which are discussed in the article. In this way, the article can serve not only as a recapitulation of past actions, but also as an inspiration, especially for countries where this activity is not widespread and often not even known.

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DAMIÁN NĚMEC

« La Nuit des Églises » —  
une réponse pastorale aux défis de l'exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*

Résumé

Le présent article présente la Nuit des Églises comme l'une des réponses possibles et efficaces aux appels contenus dans l'exhortation apostolique post-synodale *Ecclesia in Europa* de saint Jean-Paul II, publiée en 2003. Il retrace également l'histoire, l'expansion et la mission de cette initiative. L'étude se concentre en particulier sur sa mise en œuvre en République tchèque depuis 2009, avec une attention particulière aux années 2020—2022, marquées par l'épidémie de COVID-19. L'article tente aussi de mettre en lumière les aspects positifs (opportunités) et négatifs (pièges) de cette initiative. Il peut

ainsi servir non seulement de bilan des actions entreprises jusqu'à présent, mais aussi de source d'inspiration, notamment pour les pays où cette activité n'est pas encore répandue, voire reste largement méconnue.

**Mots-clés:** Église catholique, Églises chrétiennes, évangélisation, Nuit des Églises, œcuménisme, Jean-Paul II, exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*

DAMIÁN NÉMEC

«La Notte delle Chiese» —  
una risposta pastorale alle sfide dell'esortazione *Ecclesia in Europa*

Riassunto

Il presente saggio presenta la Notte delle Chiese come una delle risposte possibili ed efficaci agli appelli contenuti nell'esortazione apostolica postsinodale *Ecclesia in Europa* di san Giovanni Paolo II, pubblicata nel 2003. Il testo ripercorre la storia, l'espansione e la missione di questa iniziativa. In particolare, l'articolo si concentra sulla sua messa in atto nella Repubblica Ceca a partire dal 2009, con una particolare attenzione agli anni 2020—2022, segnati dalla pandemia di COVID-19. L'autore si propone inoltre di evidenziare sia gli aspetti positivi (opportunità), sia quelli negativi (insidie) legati a questa iniziativa. In questo modo, il contributo può servire non solo come bilancio delle attività svolte finora, ma anche come fonte d'ispirazione, specialmente per i paesi in cui l'iniziativa non è ancora diffusa o risulta ancora poco conosciuta.

**Parole chiave:** Chiesa cattolica, Chiese cristiane, evangelizzazione, Notte delle Chiese, ecumenismo, Giovanni Paolo II, esortazione *Ecclesia in Europa*