



The Pillars of Faith

Missionary Strategies of the Charismatic Branch of the Greek Catholic Mission among Roma in Slovakia

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From Illegality to Official Mission

1950

Prešov Sobor (“Akcia P”):
the Greek Catholic Church is
declared dissolved; clergy
and property forcibly
transferred to the Orthodox
Church

1989

Fall of communism:
full institutional
reconstruction begins
(property, seminary,
theological faculty,
eparchies)

2007

Fr Martin Mekel
initiates the Roma
gospel band F6 and the
FestRom festival

1968

Church restored after
18 years of clandestine,
“catacomb” existence —
but remains restricted

2005

**Greek Catholic formation
centre for Roma founded**
in Čičava — only 15 years
after the Church's own
restoration

2017

**Greek Catholic Roma
Mission (GRM) officially
established** by
Archbishop Ján Babjak
SJ





Romfest 2013, Čičava, T. Zachar Podolinská

Christ in the Hearts of the Roma – Roma in the Heart of the Church



“The Church in your country is called to advance in the pastoral care of the Roma, in the work of extensive evangelisation, which will strive to reach all those who, unfortunately, still live in a certain social isolation.”

POPE FRANCIS



15+

years of pastoral service among Roma

4

districts of the Prešov region

18

municipalities served

9

Greek Catholic priests, 50+
collaborators

Where the Mission Works

■ District of Vranov nad Topľou

Čičava, Sol', Jastrabie nad Topľou, Hlinné, Zámotov, Kamenná Poruba, Vechec, Vranov – Čemerné, Sačurov, Prosačov

■ District of Stará Ľubovňa

Čirč, Šarišské Jastrabie, Jakubany

■ District of Bardejov

Lenartov, Malcov, Snakov

■ District of Prešov

Abranovce, Varhaňovce



Theoretical Framework I: Normative and Lived Religion

LP

Leonard Primiano

Vernacular Religion (1995)

Religion is by definition **vernacular** — it always involves **interpretation**. No believer — however exalted their institutional position — lives an “officially” religious life in a pure, unmediated form.

MM

Meredith McGuire

Lived Religion (2008)

Directs attention away from doctrinal abstraction toward the **lived religion** — **embodied, everyday practice** through which belief becomes real for individuals.

*(1) the mission's public self-presentation, (2) the priest's pastoral exegesis, and (3) the believer's testimony are approached as **co-existing registers of one structure** — not stages of increasing authenticity or distance from doctrine.*

Theoretical Framework II: Embodiment and the Roma Charismatic Context

Thomas Csordas (1994)

The “**sacred self**”: participation in a coherent ritual system produces embodied dispositions — a habitus — through which believers inhabit charismatic experience.

Tanya Luhrmann (2012)

“**Absorption**”: the capacity to experience God as real is a trained skill, cultivated through structured practices of attention — such as small prayer groups.

L. Fosztó · Š. Řipka · R. Roman ·
J. Belišová, K. Povedák, etc.

Conversion as **communicative process**; the charisma of the “ethnic pastor”; embodied and sonic dimensions of Roma Pentecostal/charismatic worship, building on the author's own earlier research.

Working thesis:

Internalisation is neither purely doctrinal nor purely social, but a trained, embodied, gradually acquired capacity for religious experience.

Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork in the Bardejov district

APVV–22–0389 RELIROMA · Research of Religiosity, Spirituality and Non-Religiosity among the Roma in Slovakia



Ivan

Roma priest/pastor active in the Bardejov region — pastoral exegesis of the mission's four pillars



Nina

Leader of the Roma gospel band and of a women's and children's formation group — lived, embodied testimony



Roma convert 1

Testimony centred on a Marian apparition at Medjugorje and an account of healing through prayer



Roma convert 2

Studies theology and iconography; has left the settlement and chosen a path of complete celibacy

Data (recorded, transcribed interviews and participant observation) are read alongside the public self-presentation of the mission on its official website.

Four Pillars in Three Registers

PUBLIC SELF-PRESENTATION (romskamisia.sk)



Quality



Pass It On



Formation



Residential Activity

PASTORAL EXEGESIS (Ivan)

Quality — small groups

Evangelisation — giving

Leaders — “healthy core”

Removal from settlement

LIVED TESTIMONIES (Nina; convert 1, 2)

Isolation from coarse
talk/TV; ascetic dress

Prays through song-writing

Leads by personal example

Left the settlement,
returned

Four Registers of a Single Missionary Structure

From Naming to Living: How One Structure Travels

The same fourfold pillar structure is articulated, interpreted, lived, and received differently at each step



Register 1 — Institution

The website names four pillars; Pastor's own toolbox of activities implements them in practice



Register 2 — Pastor

Authority that is already interpretation — grounded in his own Roma identity and his wife's role in a married clergy



Register 3 — Lived (Group leader)

Self-authored and generative: a fifth pillar, “Negating the Story”, exceeding all four institutional pillars combined



Register 4 — Reception (Converts 1,2)

A spectrum among her own followers: from partial continuity to a rigour that exceeds official doctrine (Convert 2)

Pillar	Public self-presentation	Pastoral exegesis (Ivan)	Lived testimony (GroupLeader) (Nina)
 Quality	“We do not skim the surface but go into depth”	Small, gender- and age-segregated groups meeting weekly; teaching the “open question”	Isolation from coarse talk and television series; a self-imposed ascetic dress code exceeding institutional requirement
 Pass It On	“If you have received, you must also give”	Evangelisation as linguistic and ethnic labour — giving through Slovak	Prayer lived through song-writing; unsolicited personal testimony wherever she goes
 Formation	“Forming people in small groups”	Building leaders from among the Roma; the “healthy core”	Forms others by personal example; an individualised, personally-owned bond with God
 Residential Activity	“For young people and adults, outside the community”	Taking people out of the settlement as a precondition of change	Physically left the settlement herself, then returned to serve within it
 Negating the Story	 <i>Not named on the website</i>	 <i>Not formally articulated</i>	 Ascetic dress; Slovak not Romani; American gospel, no Romani chords; renounces partnership — a self-authored rupture



Quality

The Small Formation Group as a Training Ground for Absorption

PASTOR (Ivan)

Quality is achieved through small groups, segregated by gender and age, meeting at least weekly. The pastoral task: teaching people to ask an “open question.”

“When you ask the right question, you learn something; but if you only think you already know, you know nothing.”

GROUP LEADER (Nina)

“vykazovanie sa” — rendering account of oneself to a confidante:

“I lived in the lie that I couldn't sing... when a person keeps thinking they can't, eventually they believe it, even when everyone around them says otherwise.”

Also cut herself off from coarse talk and TV series; added, unprompted, an ascetic dress code (long sleeves/skirts, black only, no jewellery or make-up) — a personal surplus beyond what the mission requires.



Passing It On

Evangelisation as an Ethics of Giving

PASTOR (Ivan)

Teaching converts to pray and sing in Slovak, not Romani, is itself an act of giving, not self-interest:

“It is easy for me to speak Romani, but that is not giving, that is my selfishness, my pride; but if I want to give, I must speak Slovak.”

GROUP LEADER (Nina)

“Wherever I go, my task is to talk about God — that what God did for me, and pulled me out of, he can pull you out of too.”

Her group prays mostly in Slovak — not as a strategy of giving, but because “we don't really use proper Romani ourselves anymore.”



Building Leaders

The “Healthy Core” (zdravé jadro)

PASTOR (Ivan)

Rather than converting an entire settlement, the mission nurtures a small “healthy core” of converts who remain and gradually influence others — like light spreading, as in the early Church.

Target: 10–12% conversion — often women first.

GROUP LEADER (Nina)

Conversion narrative structured around “sacrificing my Isaac.” Now leads a gospel band and a girls'/children's group.

“I need to be aware of what I put into people's mouths — God created the world by the word.”



Residential Activity

Removal from the Settlement as a Precondition of Change

PASTOR (Ivan)

The settlement environment makes durable change difficult; formation centres are built at a physical remove.

“Once a Rom takes a step outside his home, it already means he wants to; and that means one can work with such a person.”

Romani convert 1

At Medjugorje: lost all bodily awareness — hunger, thirst, time — was carried through the crowd, then wept “like a small child,” feeling a breeze pass through him.

Later attributed his daughter's recovery to prayer.



A Quiet Pillar of Pastoral Practice

Register 2 Extended — What Ivan Counsels, Privately/Internally

Media, Substance & Morals

No cinema, no television telenovelas, no secular Romani song.

No alcohol, no tobacco.

The classical decalogue: not stealing, not lying, marital fidelity.

Recruitment & Leadership

Pursued most intensively with young people neglected by their own parents despite evident potential.

Sought out, gathered into small formation groups, sometimes a band.

Drawn into forming the next generation — the mechanism behind Building Leaders.

*Never named among the mission's four public pillars — an internal, unformalised undercurrent of pastoral discourse. **Nina makes it public, loud, and generative.***



Negating the Story

Register 3 Extended — Nina's Fifth, Self-Authored Pillar

Visual & Linguistic

Ascetic dress — long sleeves/skirts, black only, no jewellery, no make-up, tied hair, flat shoes — negates conventional Romani female self-presentation.

Prays and speaks in Slovak, not Romani — negates the presumption that authentic Roma religiosity must be voiced in Romani.

Quiet, contemplative comportment negates a stereotyped narrative of loudness or excess.

Musical & Relational

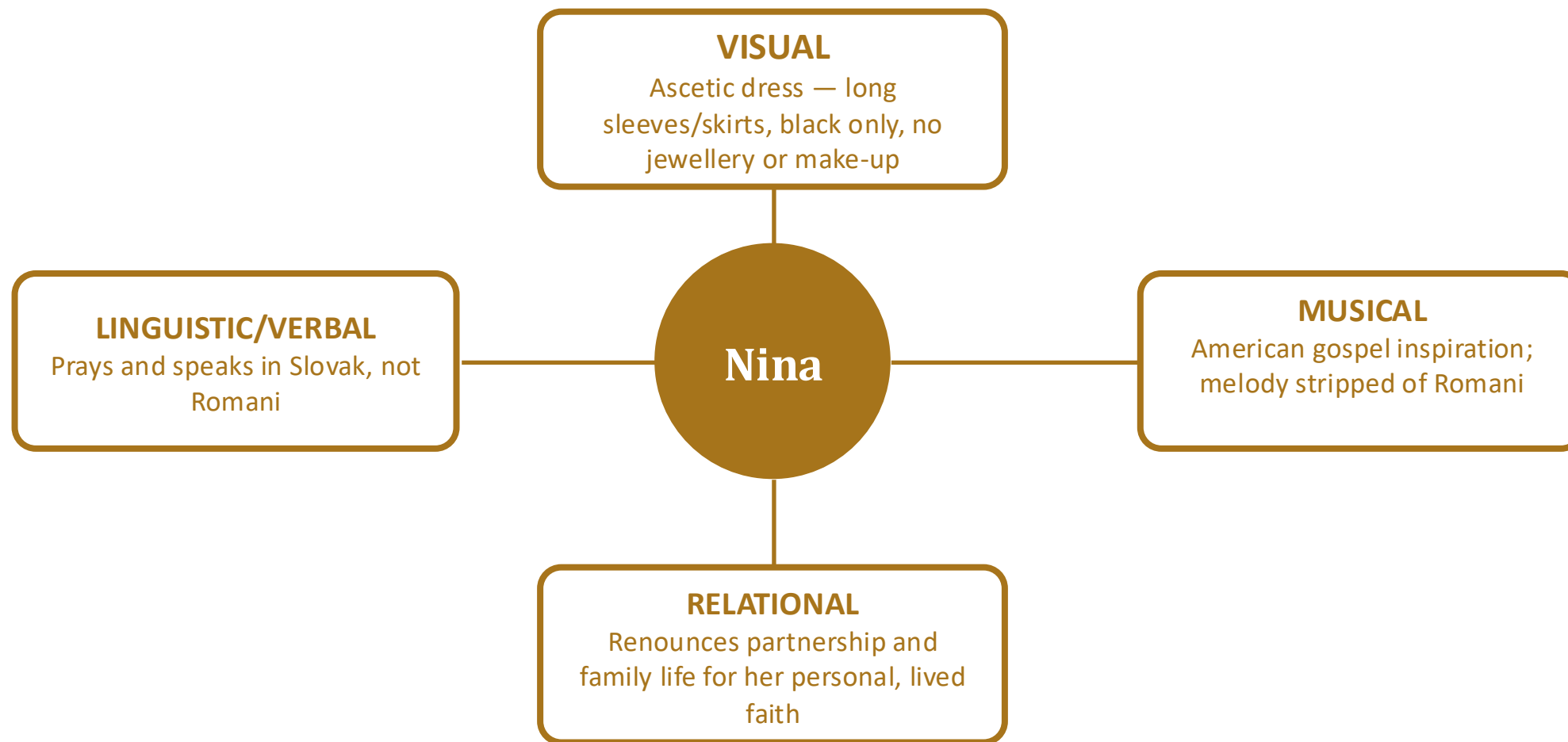
Has set aside partnership and family life altogether for her personal, lived faith — an ongoing renunciation, not just “sacrificing my Isaac.”

Musical inspiration from American gospel, not Romani tradition — melody stripped of Romani chords and playing style, lyrics restricted to spiritual content.

Influences her band and formation group chiefly through personal example, not instruction.



Negating the Story – Multilevelled personal rupture



Four dimensions, one rupture (Robbins 2007) with the ascribed Roma narrative — **unspoken in Register 1, unformalised in Register 2**

REGISTER I: From Pillars to Instruments

How the mission's own "focus" categories operationalise the four pillars (romskamisia.sk)



Formation

Small groups · mentoring · residential stays · courses



Quality + Residential



Future

Vocations · priest formation · leadership school



Building Leaders



Service

Evangelisation · community centre · charity



Passing It On



Production

Video clips · songbook · CDs/DVDs · books



Passing It On



Art

Dance ensemble · icon workshop · bands · woodwork



Quality + Leaders + Giving



Outreach

Media · family pilgrimage · Savore · FestRom



Passing It On

4

A Spectrum of Reception

Register 4 — Two Followers, Two Responses to Nina's Example

Convert 1

Despite his own intense embodied rupture at the pilgrimage site, he declines Nina's total detachment from the Roma story.

Lives within a family of musicians who play secular Romani music; joins them at family celebrations.

Does not intend to give up alcohol entirely; married, with no interest in celibacy.

Convert 2

Now pursuing theological studies; learned iconography through one of the mission's own formation activities.

Has left the settlement entirely and chosen complete celibacy — a discipline Greek Catholic clergy are not required to observe.

A personal surplus exceeding, not merely fulfilling, institutional requirement — like Nina's dress.

Nina thus functions as a second source of religious authority alongside Ivan — one whose currency is personal example, capable of producing followers considerably more rigorous than official doctrine requires.

Five Pillars

Public self-presentation (romskamisia.sk)



Quality



Pass It On



Formation



Residential Activity



Pastoral exegesis (Ivan)

Quality —
small groups

Evangelisation —
giving

Leaders —
“healthy core”

Removal
from settlement



Lived testimonies (Nina, converts)



Conclusion

Not four different missionary strategies, and not a relationship of doctrinal original to popular corruption —

but four registers — institutional, pastoral-authoritative, lived-vernacular, and a differentiated spectrum of reception — in which a single fourfold structure is continuously re-articulated, re-internalised, and operationalised through a concrete toolbox.

Most importantly, the lived register does not merely receive: at its most intense, in NB's fifth, self-authored pillar of Negating the Story — a pillar neither the website nor IC ever puts into words — it generates content of its own, and it recruits unevenly: producing, in Patrik, a follower more rigorous than official doctrine requires, even as the Medjugorje convert retains continuity with Romani cultural life.

A hybrid model of faith and action, reproduced — and, in NB's case, exceeded — across registers of official presentation, pastoral authority, personal biography, and reception — belonging to a church that, within living memory, was itself illegal.



Thank You!

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SRDA



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