

## ***VICTOR TURNER'S THEORY OF SYMBOLS: The Symbolism of a Religious Site and Object in a Rural Environment in Eastern Slovakia***

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is dedicated to the symbolism of a religious site (the church) and a religious object (the cross) in Christianity in a concrete locality and community. The study was based on Victor Turner's theory of rituals and symbols. I used Turner's definitions and classifications of symbols as well as his theses related to rituals. My aim was to demonstrate that the church and the cross can be categorised as dominant symbols in Christianity, even though they bear distinct characteristics of dominant symbols. The data analysed in the present text were collected by the ethnographic interview and participant observation methods during ethnographic field research. The research was conducted in eastern Slovakia, in a village in which the majority of residents are affiliated with the Greek Catholic faith. Building on the analysis of ethnographic data, I will demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of Turner's theory of symbols. During the analysis, I will suggest possible answers, stemming mainly from cognitive anthropology, for certain questions left unanswered by Turner.

**KEYWORDS:** symbol, ritual, church, cross, ethnography.

### **INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

Perhaps the greatest contribution of ethnology and anthropology in researching religion are the research methods (participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews) used during long-term field research (Bernard 2002). These methods enable the researcher to convey a deeper view of the people living inside the society under study – or, as the founding father of anthropological field research, Bronislaw Malinowski, said in 1922, these methods allow researchers to 'grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, and to realize his vision of the world' (Malinowski 2014, 25).

This paper is devoted to the topic of the symbolism of a religious site and a religious object in a rural environment in contemporary Slovakia. Its primary aim is to present the native's point of view. The presented data were collected during ethnographic field research and have been interpreted from the perspectives of symbolic and interpretive anthropology, both

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of which draw attention to the meanings that actors themselves attach to symbols and the behaviours associated with them. Specifically, in this paper, I apply the theoretical approach to symbols of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1968, 1970, 1974, 2004). Turner defined a symbol as the smallest unit of ritual that retains the specific characteristics of ritual behaviour: it is a part of a specific structure in the context of ritual (Turner 1970, 19). A symbol does not have to be a material object. Geometric shapes, colours, animals, body organs or body parts, gestures, events, spatial units, relationships, and activities are among the myriad objects that can become symbols. Turner considered symbols to be the basic building blocks, or 'molecules', of rituals (Turner 2004, 26).

Turner distinguished between dominant and instrumental symbols. Symbols produce actions, and dominant symbols tend to become the focus of interaction. Groups mobilise around dominant symbols, worship them, perform other symbolic activities in their vicinity, and add other symbolic objects to them, often with the aim of creating complex ritual places. Dominant symbols refer to values that are considered axiomatic of a given society (Turner 1970, 20–22).

In the present paper, I focus on the symbolism of the cross and the church in their various forms. Based on the data gathered during ethnographic research, I will illustrate that the church as a building in a concrete locality in an Eastern Slovak village and various forms of the cross can be interpreted as dominant symbols in Turner's theory. Building on the analysis of ethnographic data, I will demonstrate strengths and weaknesses of Turner's theory of symbols. During the analysis, I will suggest possible answers, stemming mainly from cognitive anthropology, for certain questions regarding theory and methodology left unanswered by Turner.

In the first part of the paper, I present the theory of symbols developed by Victor Turner. In the next chapter, I describe the research site as well as the research methods and techniques I used. In the subsequent two chapters, I present the results of the data analysis and put these results in the context of Turner's theory and as broadened by cognitive anthropology.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Symbolic anthropology developed as a theoretical perspective in the 1960s and 1970s. Its quintessential characteristic is the research of culture as a system of shared symbols and meanings (Kanovský 2004; Soukup 2011). According to one of its founding fathers, American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, symbols are external sources of information that allow a person to understand, make sense of and organise the physical and social world (Bell 1997; Eller 2007; Geertz 1977; Soukup 2011). For Turner, just as for Geertz, symbols express shared meanings. The emphasis for Turner was also on behaviours affected by symbols. However, Turner, unlike Geertz, argued that the shared meanings of symbols additionally enhanced group solidarity (Collings 2006, 157–158; Little 2006, 170). Turner's theory of dominant and instrumental symbols provides an analytical tool for the analysis of religious symbols. Turner stated that the structure and properties of ritual symbols can be derived from three types of data:

1. External form and observable characteristics.
2. Interpretations of experts and lay people.
3. A meaningful context created by an anthropologist (Turner 1970, 20).

As Turner pointed out, there is a discrepancy between the interpretations of the meanings of dominant symbols provided by respondents and their actual behaviours in situations affected by the symbolism of the dominant symbols. In other words, there are contradictions between theory and practice (Turner 1970, 25). However, contradictions between meanings (norms) and actual behaviours are not only associated with dominant symbols but can also be observed in various contexts of human behaviour.

The methods of ethnographic interviews on the one hand and participant observation on the other allow a comparison between the statements of respondents (theory) and their actual behaviours (practices). However, Turner did not provide theoretical explanations of some phenomena regarding memory, the acquisition of cultural concepts and emotions. In this case, we can turn to the concepts of cognitive anthropology as well as to theoretical works of Turner's contemporaries, such as Rodney Needham (1975). As I will seek to illustrate, selected concepts of cognitive anthropology effectively complement Turner's explanatory framework.

The three main characteristics of dominant symbols are:

1. Condensation of meanings.
2. Unification of meanings.
3. Polarisation of meanings.

Condensation means that a variety of meanings and events are represented in a single formation. The dominant symbol itself is the unification of apparently conflicting or contradictory meanings. Furthermore, dominant symbols have two poles of meaning: an ideological pole and a sensory pole. With a sensory pole are associated meanings that are expected to evoke desires and feelings (i.e. mostly natural and physiological phenomena and processes). Around the ideological pole we find an arrangement of norms and values that govern and control people as members of social groups. These meanings and associations refer to components of the moral and social order of society, to its social groups, norms and values (Bowen 1998, 143; Turner 1970, 28–30).

Turner distinguished three kinds of meanings in symbols: exegetical, operative and positional. Exegetical meaning is ascertained with the help of in-depth ethnographic interviews, in which questions about observed ritual behaviour are asked. At the same time, Turner emphasised the need to distinguish between interpretations by lay people and religious experts (Uhrin 2015, 2018). It is also important to determine whether the explanations provided are representative of these categories or are specific to the individual. The operational meaning is derived by comparing the assigned meaning of a given symbol with the way it is used by people and with a variety of behavioural patterns that can be observed in relation with it. Thus, it is necessary not only to ask for the meanings of the symbols but also to observe how the symbols are used during a broad range of activities (Turner 1970, 50–51). It is therefore essential to utilise both ethnographic interviews and participant observation.

Positional meaning is derived from the relationship of one symbol with other symbols, particularly in a ritual complex, a relationship of which ritual participants are unaware. In each ritual, only one or a few meanings of the polysemic symbol may appear, or different meanings may manifest during different phases of the ritual.

## FIELD RESEARCH

The field research took place from the end of June 2013 to the beginning of August 2013 in the eastern part of Slovakia, near dam Zemplínská šírava (nicknamed Slovak Sea) in the village of Poruba pod Vihorlatom. The village belongs to the Košice region and the Michalovce district. It was founded in the 14th century based on an emphyteusis by German colonists. According to the latest census, in 2019, the village had 609 inhabitants. In terms of religious

affiliation, the Greek Catholic denomination predominates. Greek Catholic believers visit the local parish church, which is dedicated to St. Mark. Poruba has been an independent parish since 1997 (Starják 2010, 152–154).

The ethnographic interviews served to clarify the exegetical level of meanings associated with the symbols. During the research, I conducted mainly unstructured and semi-structured interviews with laypeople and with a local religious expert. The expert was a Greek Catholic priest living in the village with his wife and children. One of the interviews with the priest took place inside the church. The priest provided a detailed description of the ritual objects and the place in which the rituals are performed. In addition, the method of participant observation was utilised. In total, I attended 18 Greek Catholic masses and spent time near the church outside of attending services. During participant observation, I paid close attention to the behaviours and activities people performed inside the church as well as near the crosses.

I conducted ethnographic interviews with 35 informants. The average age of the informants was 45 years. The ratio of men to women was about 2 to 5. Most informants identified with the Greek Catholic faith. The selection of informants was mostly random, via the snowball method/snowball sampling (i.e. asking a few key respondents to recommend someone they knew whom the researcher might be able to interview [Bernard 2006, 192-193]). I purposefully chose only the local priest since, according to various researchers, interpretations by religious experts and laypeople may differ in fundamental respects (Boyer 2001; Bužeková 2009, 2011; Turner 1970, 1974, 2004).

The subject of the research was the cross as a symbol in houses, cemeteries and chapels, and as a jewellery pendant on chains or on a rosary. I also paid attention to the function of the church in the life of the village community: whether the church and its premises are visited even when there is no mass, as well as whether certain prohibitions or specific patterns of behaviour are associated with the premises.

According to Turner, dominant symbols have a constant or consistent meaning in concrete culture, society or religion, while the meaning of instrumental symbols often depends on the context in which they are used. The aim of my field research was to test whether the properties and characteristics of dominant symbols, as distinguished by Turner, are applicable to the cross and to the church. My assumption was that the characteristics of the church and the cross would match those of dominant symbols because of their central position and significance in Christian religion in general. Also, I assumed that in a small village of 600 inhabitants, the only church would be a dominant site (dominant symbol) around which most religious life would be concentrated.

### **CHURCH AS A BUILDING AND RITUAL PLACE**

The church in Poruba pod Vihorlatom is dedicated to the Holy Apostle and Evangelist St. Mark.<sup>2</sup> The space is surrounded with a metal fence about 160 centimetres high. Village residents have claimed that the fence fulfils the function of a boundary, one which distinguishes the sacred space from its surroundings. The fence clearly determines where the beginning of the sacred place is and where it ends. It thus defines the space belonging to the church. Specific restrictions and patterns of behaviour apply to this space.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1.





**Appendix 1:** The church in Poruba pod Vihorlatom dedicated to the Holy Apostle and Evangelist St. Mark. Source: author's photo.

The main function of the fence is the protection of a sacred place against contamination, which may be caused by animal excretions. The fence also protects against physical damage to church property. The village church is located near a main road. According to respondents, the fence prevents potential damage to the church by motor vehicles. Thus, it protects the church and the crosses on its premises not only from pollution but also from physical damage while at the same time serving as a means of defining the property belonging to the church.

During ethnographic interviews, the respondents stated that the entry of any animals into the area is considered inadmissible and inappropriate. In this context, the function of the fence is interpreted by respondents as protection against the entry of animals onto land belonging to the church. According to them, animals could contaminate this area with bodily excretions, i.e. faeces and urine.

Turner himself was not concerned with the question of pollution. However, another representative of symbolic anthropology and a contemporary of Turner, Mary Douglas, drew attention to the issue of pollution in the 1960s (Douglas 2002, 2003). Various contemporary researchers, following her arguments, claim that faeces and urine are considered polluting, impure and disgusting substances. This applies not only to the bodily excretions of animals but also to those of humans. Cigarette butts, ash from their consumption, used tissue paper, or any waste can pose a threat of contamination and pollution (Bužeková and Išová 2010; Jerotijević 2011; Rozin, Haidt and McCauley 2000).

Next to the church is the chapel of the Virgin Mary.<sup>3</sup> There are multiple benches and two free-standing crosses on the chapel grounds. Both crosses are made of stone and stand on a concrete pedestal bounded by a fence, about 40 centimetres high.<sup>4</sup> A wooden, three-armed missionary cross is situated on the right side of the wall at the main entrance of the church.<sup>5</sup> A golden-coloured cross is situated at the top of the church tower. The interior of the church is divided into several parts: the vestibule, the nave, the sanctuary, the sacristy and the perch.

The space behind the iconostasis is also called *the sanctuary (svätyňa)*, or *the sanctuary of the saints (svätyňa svätých)*. Enclosed in this space are several objects and sacred vessels of importance for performing rituals: the altar (*oltár*) and the prosthesis, the tabernacle (*bohostánok*), the holy chalice (*svätá čaša*), the spoon and the spear (*lyžička a kopija*), the holy Gospel (*sväté evanjelium*), the ripids (*ripidy*), and the *naprestolný a zaprestolný* cross (I will explain these terms below).<sup>6</sup>

The iconostasis represents the boundary that separates the sanctuary from the rest of the nave of the church. It contains three doors. The middle door is called the imperial or royal door. Only a religious expert should pass through it. The iconostasis separates the space of the laypeople from the space of the saints. According to the local priest, only the priest and deacon should enter behind the iconostasis. It is often emphasised that this rule applies specifically to women. As stated by the priest, only a deacon or priest should clean the sanctuary. However, this rule is not followed in everyday situations.

Cleaning of the *sanctuary* is not done solely by the priest, who stated that this is due mainly to practical reasons, including lack of time. Cleaning activities are thus performed by the churchwoman. During the larger religious feasts and holidays, other residents of the village can help with cleaning and maintenance of the *sanctuary*. Laypeople should not touch any of the ritual objects that are stored on the altar or prosthesis. Laypeople can enter the sanctuary, but only with the consent of the priest or in ritual situations in which it is considered acceptable. One of the respondents - let us call him Adam - commented on this issue as follows:

*'What would it look like if everyone went there as they wished?!'.<sup>7</sup>*

Churchwoman duties include, among other acts, lighting candles in the sanctuary before the service and extinguishing them thereafter. During the interview, the priest emphasised that, in the past, there were only churchmen, precisely because women were not allowed to enter behind the iconostasis. Respondents also stressed that women should not enter the *sanctuary*. Some respondents also expressed the opinion that the churchperson should be a man. However, they raised no explicit objections and seemed to respect the fact that this function is performed by a woman in the village.

During the field research, I noticed that despite the availability of seats inside the church, some worshipers preferred to sit or stand in the outer space of the complex. However, according to village residents believers should be inside the church during the service for the following reasons: when outside, believers cannot sufficiently focus on the course of the mass, cannot listen closely to the sermon or to the words of the priest, and thus cannot reflect on their own sins and misbehaviours. Respondents also emphasised that, when outside, believers communicate with each other, and that doing so distracts them from the service itself. However, there are some circumstances in which attending the service outside is considered appropriate: (1) mothers with small children, and (2) people with health problems.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendices 3 and 4.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendices 6 and 7.

<sup>7</sup> All respondents were given fictional names. Adam is of Greek Catholic denomination and is in his 50s.





**Appendix 2:** Chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary, located near the church. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 3:** Cross on the church premises. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 4:** Cross on the church premises. Source: author's photo.





**Appendix 5:** A wooden, three-armed missionary cross placed on the right side of the wall at the main entrance of the church. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 6:** The spoon and the spear and the *naprestolný* cross. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 7:** *Zaprestolný* cross. Source: author's photo.



However, in the end, villagers – in this case, a respondent I call Eva – emphasised that:

*'It is better... better to be inside. I think inside it feels more sacred'.<sup>8</sup>*

What Eva called *more sacred* can be understood from a research perspective as a higher concentration of symbols, being closer to ritual practices, and being nearer to fellow believers as well as to religious experts. Inside the church, not only are the believers in the field of action of several symbols, but they are also located directly *inside* one of the symbols – the church.

In the case of standing and sitting on the church premises during the mass, we also encounter a discrepancy between exegesis and observed behaviour. For example, according to one man and his wife - let us call them Peter and Petra - if the believer is on the church premises during the service but not inside the church, even though seats or standing room are available, then the liturgy is invalid for this believer. Invalidity in this context means that standing outside is the same as not attending the mass at all. However, at Sunday Mass, Peter and Petra, along with their small child, were standing outside, even though seats were available in the sacristy, which is the part of the church dedicated to serving mothers with small children.<sup>9</sup>

One informant, Charles, expressed the opinion that believers may stand or sit on the church premises during the service, but in no case outside of them. If they were to stand behind the fence, i.e. outside the church premises, then their participation in the service would be invalid. He further commented on this issue as follows:

*'On the church premises, yes. I remember that one priest even said that, "yes, on the premises", but if they were standing behind the fence... then it is no longer valid'.<sup>10</sup>*

The validity of this statement is legitimised or confirmed by the fact that it originated with a religious expert: the priest is a source of reliable information. This means that laypeople refer to the statements of experts when describing religious rules (Bužeková 2005, 2011; Uhrin 2018). Cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer pointed out that we should not narrow the causal criterion of veracity (meaning truthfulness from the perspective of respondents) of statements of laypeople to questions of traditional authorities (Boyer 1990, 2001). Not every person with a position of authority is recognised as a source of credible information, and their statements may not always be perceived as a criterion of truth (Boyer 1990; see also Tužinská 2006; Uhrin 2018).

One local priest considered participation in the service to be valid when the believer sits or stands on the church premises. However, he emphasised that, outside, several factors can divert the attention of believers away from the course of worship, away from the performance of rituals and other symbolic acts. He also stated that he stresses to believers the importance of being in the interior of the church during the service.

Research participants named several activities that should not be performed in the church, on its premises or during the service. They declared smoking and the consumption of alcoholic beverages to be unacceptable. One of the previous priests allegedly drew attention to the ban on smoking on church grounds. As most respondents stated, the priest justified this by saying that the church grounds are a *sacred place* on which smoking is unacceptable.

Communication between believers during worship and especially during sermons is discouraged, as it is attributed to insufficient concentration during mass. However, this does not mean that those informants who considered this activity to be undesirable did not

<sup>8</sup> Eva is of Greek Catholic denomination and is in her 70s.

<sup>9</sup> Peter and Petra are of Greek Catholic denomination and are in their late 30s.

<sup>10</sup> Charles is of Greek Catholic denomination and is in his early 70s.

themselves perform it. During one of the services, I observed a situation in which two believers communicated with each other. One of them, during the interview, expressed the opinion that communication during the service between believers is undesirable. As we know, people often describe ideal patterns of behaviour (norms) rather than their actual behaviour: frequency of mass attendance; behaviour during mass; frequency of performing symbolic activities during rituals, etc. This is consistent with Turner's assertion that there are discrepancies between exegetical interpretations and actual behaviour in situations affected by the dominant symbol. In the following subchapter, I will attempt to illustrate that it is possible to consider the church in Poruba pod Vihorlatom as a dominant symbol.

### CHURCH AS A SYMBOL

Let us assess whether the church meets Turner's criteria for dominant symbols. The church and its grounds serve as a space in which a majority of rituals are performed throughout the year. These include not only sermons and masses, but also baptisms and weddings. The Greek Catholic mass can be described, in Turner's terms, as a daily ritual. Turner considered ritual to be a stereotypical sequence of activities with individual phases that follow one another in a predetermined and known order. They are designed to affect supernatural entities or forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests. One of the reasons why village residents of Poruba pod Vihorlatom attend masses may be to ask for help or guidance from Jesus and God. The church is often referred to by respondents as a '*house of God*'. The church also evokes strong emotions in respondents, thus possessing another characteristic of dominant symbols.

We can further specify the church as a permanent, physical, non-transferable symbol. These properties refer to the church as a specific building in the village of Poruba pod Vihorlatom. In the statements of the respondents, the mass is associated with the church and *vice versa*. Thus, the ritual and the church building, as a symbol, are firmly connected.

Turner claimed that groups mobilise around dominant symbols. This fact is also confirmed by empirical data. The church and its grounds are places in which we can routinely find the highest concentration of believers. Those who gather here do so to participate in some form of ritual activity. The strong concentration of dominant and instrumental symbols at this location influences respondents' perceptions that the site is sacred or holy.

I asked the priest what would happen to sacred objects that could no longer be used during masses, sermons and other religious rituals. He responded by stating that items that are no longer used should be burned, each item or object separately. If the object cannot be burned, it should be stored or buried in a *dignified/worthy/sacred* place. Ash and remains of burned objects should also be stored or buried in such a place. What place can be considered *worthy, dignified* and *sacred*? According to a local priest, the soil inside the church complex, which is bordered by a fence, as well as the interior of the church, are *worthy, dignified* and *sacred* in this sense. Ritual and sacred objects, or the ash from them, are often stored or buried on the premises of the church or inside of it.

Turner further stated that in the presence of dominant symbols, other symbolic activities are performed. Such a symbolic activity is, for example, the sign of the cross itself (*signum Crucis* in Latin). Informants often stressed that the sign of the cross should always be made when walking near a church. Additional symbolic objects are added to dominant symbols, often in order to create compound shrines. In this case, such a shrine is the church. In addition, this symbol and its symbolic space comprise the place of storage of other ritual symbols, such as crosses, the holy Gospel, the tabernacle and the holy chalice.

Dominant symbols evoke strong emotional reactions in people. Most informants emphasised the positive emotions they experience during mass. According to them, it is essential to concentrate on and perceive the preaching of the priest. The church is also referred to as the place where God 'dwells'. The village residents also refer to the church as the house of God. Such an association, inherent to this dominant symbol, is found in the statements of both the laity and the religious expert, who described the sermon as an encounter with God or as a conversation with God.

Specific emotions are associated with attending mass or other church rituals; for example: awe, wonder, happiness, peace, calmness, relaxation or joy. Cultural psychologist Jonathan Haidt considered these emotions and feelings as *moral emotions* and classified them into four groups. Awe, wonder, happiness, peace, calmness, relaxation and joy can be related to the group of *other suffering emotions* (compassion and sympathy) and *other praising emotions* (awe and wonder) (Haidt 2003). According to the research participants, they experienced the strongest emotions during Holy Communion – namely awe or wonder. Turner's assertion that dominant symbols can evoke strong emotional responses seems to be correct in this case. As most village residents stated, the church is a place where an encounter with God and Jesus Christ takes place. With the church, as well as with the cross, as I will illustrate in subsequent chapters, are associated certain norms, ideas and emotions.

According to a number of authors, ideologies and religious beliefs could be perceived as internalised into and mediated by material objects. By internalisation, these authors mean that ideologies and beliefs essentially materialise in an object (Berniunas 2009). A monument(s) or object(s) can in general be viewed as external 'cognitive anchors'. They 'hold' certain ideas, associations, norms and rules. The term *cognitive anchor* refers to processes of thinking which equally use cognitive and material resources (Berniunas 2009). These cognitive anchors can activate processes of remembering and therefore affect collective and individual behaviour and emotional states. Thus, material culture, referring to cognitive anchors, is of great significance in relation to cognition in general and to religious cognition in particular (Berniunas 2009; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Day 2004; Hutchins, 1995, 2005; Mithen 1998). The church represents one such cognitive anchor, since it evokes associations about the life and deeds of Jesus, axiomatic norms of Christianity, as well as local norms, and it is perceived as a place where God dwells.

We can conclude that the church meets several of the criteria of dominant symbols as described by Victor Turner. Thus, in Turner's terms, the church itself can be considered as a dominant symbol (1968, 1970, 1974).

## Cross

The cross is perhaps the most well-known symbol of Christianity in general and has been in use as early as the second century A.D. The first part of the chapter dealt with the material form of the symbol; the second addresses its intangible form.

Apart from one case, both laypeople and priest claimed that the material from which an individual cross is made is not strictly defined. It can be metal, wood, plastic or even fabric. Only one man expressed the opinion that all crosses should be made of wood, because Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross. What is more significant is its place of origin. In general, people emphasised the importance of objects, not just crosses, purchased at pilgrimage sites (Máriapócs, Medjugorje, Israel or Lourdes – on the anthropological study of pilgrimage, see Albera and Eade 2017; Eade and Katić 2014; Eade and Sallnow 1991; Turner and Turner 1978). The cross as a physical object can evoke strong memories, associations and emotional states, as it serves as a cognitive anchor. i.e. not only evoking emotional states, specific associations and memories regarding certain pilgrimage sites (e.g. Lourdes) but also evoking axiomatic religious norms.



There are several crosses placed in the vicinity of the church as well as inside of it: two free-standing crosses around the church depicting the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and a wooden missionary cross at the door of the church. The cross is also part of the iconostasis and is a common part of decorations on the clothes of saints, apostles and evangelists, as well as on ceremonial objects. During the ritual, the priest wears a large silver cross (*cross of the priest*) on a chain around his neck. Wearing this cross during the ritual is not mandatory. The *Naprestolný* cross is placed on the altar.<sup>11</sup> It is a metal-gilded cross about 20 centimetres long and 8 centimetres wide. It depicts the crucifixion of Christ and also portrays the four evangelists. It is used especially during the Easter period. This cross is used exclusively by the priest; however, laypeople are not permitted to touch the cross. Behind the altar, on the wall, is a *zaprestolný* cross.<sup>12</sup> It is a three-armed, wooden cross, about 2 metres in size, on which the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is painted. According to the priest, its function is mainly aesthetic.

On the main road, near the boards that provide information to visitors entering the village, are single-armed crosses made of stone. These crosses were built by people as an expression of gratitude to God for, e.g. the healing of a family member. One of the functions of these crosses is to protect against natural disasters, such as severe storms, hail and floods, but also from war, thieves and, in the past, bandits. Respondents also referenced the ability of these crosses to protect against evil spirits, demons and, in general, anything that could harm the village residents or damage their property. This function of protection is associated with Jesus and God, with their omnipotence and ability to protect through these crosses.

The crosses are also associated with concrete people, narratives and events. One of these crosses was erected by a villager as a memorial to his murdered sons. A second cross was built in the first half of the 20th century by the grandfather of one of the informants. Crosses such as these thus also serve as boundary points, defining the beginning and end of the village. They also have an identification function. According to informants, they inform newcomers about '*what kind of people live here*'. Thus, the newcomer can distinguish the religion of the village residents. In the past, these crosses also served as places where people passing by could pray. The informants stressed that the area around the crosses should be cleaned on a regular basis. Thus, the symbol, in this form, requires care and demands that the environment in which it is located be kept clean. As in the case of the church, the crosses should not be contaminated with human or animal bodily excretions or other waste.

The crosses that people keep in their homes are laid on tables or furniture, and are hung above beds or doors, and they are frequently sanctified by clergy with holy water. They are often placed close to other objects with religious symbolism and themes, such as images depicting saints. These places, therefore, can serve as places where believers pray and are thus sometimes called the '*prayer corner*' or '*corner for praying*'.<sup>13</sup> The crosses in houses also serve as an expression of respect, devotion and homage to Jesus and his crucifixion, as well as affiliation with a religious group.

<sup>11</sup> The prefix *na* means 'on'. The word *prestol* can be translated as 'altar'. Therefore, *naprestolný kríž* – 'cross that is placed on the altar'.

<sup>12</sup> In this case, the prefix *za* means 'behind', and therefore *zaprestolný kríž* means 'cross that is placed behind the altar'.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendices 8 through 12. Appendix 12 depicts such a prayer corner.



**Appendix 8:** A cross with a plastic depiction of the crucified Christ placed above the door of the house of one of the informants. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 9:** A cross with a depiction of the crucified Christ placed on the wall of a house of one of the informants. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 10:** Embroidered depiction of a cross placed on a wall. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 11:** Prayer corner in the home of one of the respondents. Source: author's photo.





**Appendix 12:** Prayer corner in the home of one of the respondents. Source: author's photo.



**Appendix 13:** Rosaries belonging to one of the respondents. Source: author's photo.



One of the functions of crosses placed above doors is to inform a person entering the home of the faith of its inhabitants and to welcome fellow Christians. In the words of Charles, the crosses are there:

*'So that the newcomers may see that we worship Jesus. That we are Christians'.*

The most frequently described function of crosses placed above doors in houses is protective in nature. Respondents stated that these crosses protected their dwellings and themselves from natural disasters, diseases, misfortune and attacks by the devil, as well as from all evil things in general. The devil and evil were not always personified by respondents. When informants did not personify or more closely characterise such threats, they described them more generally, as all bad things or misfortunes. Conversely, when such threats were personified during interviews, they assumed the following forms: evil spirits, unclean spirits, devils, the undead, demons, Lucifer and Satan. These beings were perceived as wanting not only to harm people but also to tempt them to sin. In some cases, the phrase 'evil spirits' represents a broader category that includes devils, demons and Satan. Since crosses are also associated with Jesus and his role as a protector of believers, then, according to informants, these '*crosses of Christ*' weaken the power of all foul and wicked things. Believers often emphasised that these crosses did not only fulfil an aesthetic purpose. They were not merely a decoration; on the contrary, they were an important part of religious life and faith (for further ethnographic details, see Uhrin 2015, 2018). The same functions were attributed to crosses placed above beds or dinner tables. Informants did not define the reason for placing crosses over their beds or doors. They often only commented with the following words: '*there was always a cross over the bed or door... it is tradition*'.

The local priest called the placement of crosses over doors a custom and stressed that doors are not the only place where crosses can be placed. According to him, not only crosses but other sacred and blessed objects in general act as protection against an evil spirit. He said that people think of an evil spirit as a '*devil with hooves and fork*'. However, according to him, this is not right, because '*An evil spirit is a spirit. No horns, no hooves, forks. It is evil*'. This spirit, in his understanding, represents something vague. The possibility of salvation that believers can attain arouses envy, and therefore the evil spirit seeks to harm believers. Sacred objects, such as crosses, serve as an aid in the fight against these evil spirits. At the same time, the priest contended that the mere presence of these objects will not protect a person from falling into sin. Equally important is the believer's effort to prevent any sin from being committed.

Crosses in the form of necklaces, most often made of gold, which are worn on chains around the neck, are associated by respondents with the presence of Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit and their ability to protect believers. The phenomena from which these crosses protect their bearers are evil forces or diseases. The association of disease protection with this form of the cross was not common. It typically occurred in individual cases in which a respondent overcame a serious health problem, or a long hospital stay. If, during this stay, the person owned such a cross or a rosary, then a healing function was often thereafter attributed to the object.

The specific form of the cross is the rosary. At the research site, it was also referred to as *pacerki*.<sup>14</sup> It is used especially during rosary prayers. Some believers also carried rosaries to services and held them in their hands, which, according to other believers, was an incorrect practice, since, during the service, people should pay attention to the service itself and to the words spoken by the priest. The rosary can have a protective function. For example, it can be suspended in a car to protect passengers from accidents and dangers on the road. It can also act as a protection against health problems, illnesses and diseases. One of the informants received a rosary as a gift from her mother during her stay in the hospital. According to her,

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 13.

this rosary and the prayers associated with it helped her to overcome the period she spent in the hospital, i.e. the illness itself.

### CROSS IN THE FORM OF GESTURES AND WORDS

The word *cross* is used by religious experts during services, especially during sermons, as a metaphor for suffering. The phrase *Christ's Cross* expresses the crucifixion and torture of Jesus Christ and symbolises the sacrifice of Christ by which he saved his followers. Another frequently used phrase is *We all bear our own cross*. According to the respondents, this expresses the fact that all people experience problems, suffering and hardship during their lifetime. The phrase can also be used in reference to the life path or destiny of the individual.

The cross is, in general, considered a sign of salvation and redemption. It is also associated with the Holy Trinity. For some, it represents the '*foundation and essence of faith*'. The cross is also the most significant symbol of the passion and suffering of Jesus Christ. Gazing upon a cross acts as a reminder of this suffering and, according to respondents, helps one cope with their own problems. As one informant, who I call Anna, put it:

*'What kind of cross can I have? What kind of cross did he have! So, it's easier to sort out your own hardships'.<sup>15</sup>*

Another villager expressed the opinion that it was the cross and no other icon that reminded him of crucifixion. In the words of a local religious expert:

*'More than other icons or images, (the cross – author's note) I think it is a sign of Christ's passion and of our redemption'.*

Associated with the cross is not only the process of crucifixion itself, which is considered a significant moment of the Christian faith, but also the image of Jesus carrying the wooden cross on his back to Calvary, otherwise known as Golgotha. The image of the suffering and crucifixion of Christ is amplified by the depiction of the crucified figure of Christ on the cross.

The intangible form of the symbol, and the one with the highest frequency of occurrence, is the gesture of the sign of the cross. It is considered a universal sign of Christians and Christianity. The three connected fingers symbolise the Holy Trinity – that is, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The two bent fingers represent the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. Every respondent could explain the meaning of the three connected fingers. Only one expert could elaborate on the meaning of the two bent fingers.

The sign of the cross is not performed only during masses but also in a range of other situations, such as during individual prayers performed at bedtime and upon waking up, or when passing near the cross or church. Upon entering the church, believers should dip their fingers in a vessel of holy water and bless themselves. A religious expert explained this phenomenon as a form of greeting. By blessing oneself and bowing:

*'First of all, I greet the one who is the most important in that place, and the most important is the Lord, Jesus'.*

However, blessings do not always have to be associated with Jesus Christ, or God, or the Holy Trinity. If a blessing is performed at the chapel devoted to the Virgin Mary, then the associations are slightly different. This is an expression of respect to the Virgin Mary. Thus, crossing oneself expresses respect, homage and gratitude. To whom respect is expressed

<sup>15</sup> Anna is of Greek Catholic denomination and is in her early 80s.



depends on the context of the situation in which the crossing occurs as well as on the place and object in which and with which people perform it, respectively.

### CROSS AS A SYMBOL

Based on the empirical data provided in the previous sections, I will now seek to demonstrate that the cross can be classified as a dominant symbol. The cross is a bearer of several meanings and functions as described by research participants. Symbols do not have to be material objects alone. Individual crosses differ not only in their material and external features (i.e. size, material, colour) but also in some of their properties and the characteristics ascribed to them. For example, in relation to a cross placed above a door, the protective function is much more often emphasised compared to a cross worn on a chain as a ornament.

Dominant symbols stimulate the performance of activities that bear symbolic meaning in a given ritual complex and religion. In the case of the cross, the stimulated activity is making the sign of the cross, bowing, removing a hat from one's head, prayer, etc. It should be noted that although crosses act as triggers for symbolic activity, thereby fulfilling one of the properties of the symbols defined by Turner, these activities are not performed by all persons passing near crosses. Believers emphasised that the sign of the cross should be made whenever a person is in the presence of the cross. Participant observation showed that blessing oneself in the presence of the cross does not occur in every case.

Victor Turner distinguished three main features of dominant symbols: condensation, unification and polarisation of meanings. I will attempt to show that the cross bears all three qualities. Condensation means that many things and events are represented in a single formation. The cross can be a symbol of salvation, suffering, devotion, hope and faithfulness. It is attributed a protective, identifying and communicative function. It protects not only from natural disasters, such as storms and floods, but also from wars. It also acts as protection against evil spirits, the devil, Satan and other beings, such as ghosts, that were described above. Crosses worn on chains as jewellery can serve as a means of expressing group membership. The sign of the cross, blessing oneself, represents an expression of respect and devotion. The cross can be a metaphor for worries, suffering or a strenuous life path. It can also act as a reminder to believers that their problems are not so serious compared to the events that happened during the life of Christ. Associated with the cross are Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit – that is, the whole *Holy Trinity*. Therefore, several meanings and associations are found in a single symbol. Condensation of meanings is thus a core characteristic of the cross.

The second feature is unification, by which Turner meant the unification of opposing meanings. The cross symbolises the salvation of believers and, at the same time, the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Both salvation and suffering are further associated with Christ's crucifixion. The crucifixion of Christ can have two different meanings, which are unified in one symbol.

The last property is bipolarity, which means that the dominant symbols have two poles of meaning. The first is the ideological pole, referring to meanings associated with the moral and social order, the principles of social organisation. The cross is associated with identity. Informants often referred to it as an object expressing their belonging to a certain group. At the research site, it was mainly a group of Greek Catholics, but also a group of Christians in general. So, the cross refers to a major means of social organisation in the village community. This shows that there is at least one specific group bounded together by religious affiliation.

The second pole is the sensory pole, which groups natural or physiological phenomena and processes that evoke desires and feelings. For example, the death of Christ, symbolised by the cross, evokes in believers feelings of gratitude and respect expressed through the sign

of the cross. By crucifixion, Jesus saved his believers, and therefore the desire for salvation is associated with the cross.

Turner went on to say that the larger the symbol, the simpler its form. This size correspondence is understood as a measure of the meaning of a symbol for a given ritual or religion. The cross is one of the most important symbols of Christianity and is also characterised by a very simple form. Based on the empirical data and analysis, I would thus concur that the cross is a dominant symbol *par excellence*.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the present paper was to describe the symbolism of religious ritual in a rural environment in eastern Slovakia. The two central analytical concepts I utilised during the research were symbol and ritual (Turner 1970, 2004). I gathered data through the methods of participant observation and ethnographic interviews. According to Turner (1970), there are differences between the meaning of dominant symbols (in our case, church and cross) as described by respondents and the forms of behaviour that are associated with it: ideal patterns of behaviour and rules that are present in exegesis (statements of respondents) differ in various degrees from observed behaviour. I provided several examples of this contradiction in previous sections.

The Greek Catholic mass meets the definitions and characteristics for the ritual set forth by Turner. It is a stereotypical sequence of activities with a predetermined order. This sequence of activities includes gestures, words and objects. More specifically, gestures and movements include standing, kneeling or bowing. Various forms of symbols are used during the ritual course, examples of which include the cross, the holy chalice and the holy Gospel. The ritual is performed in a separate place and is designed to affect supernatural entities or forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests. One of the reasons why believers attend services may be to ask for help or for the advice of Jesus and God. The church as a 'house of God' also evoked strong emotions in respondents, thus demonstrating another characteristic of dominant symbols.

Groups gather in the vicinity of dominant symbols to participate in rituals and perform ritual practices. As Turner stated, additional symbols are added to the dominant symbols with the goal of creating often complex shrines. The church as building can be considered a shrine used for performing rituals. The high concentration of symbols in the church and on its grounds affects the patterns of behaviour that can be observed in their surroundings.

The cross meets all three characteristics of dominant symbols, as distinguished by Turner. In a single formation, several meanings are condensed into one symbol and, at the same time, the symbol unifies opposing meanings. It has two poles of meanings – the ideological pole and the sensory pole. According to Turner, dominant symbols appear in many different ritual, religious and social contexts, but their meanings have a high level of autonomy and consistency throughout the symbolic system. The cross is one of the most important and characteristic symbols in the overall system of the Christian religion.

Based on the empirical data and analysis, I would concur that the cross and church can be classified, in Turner's terms, as dominant symbols. Turner's theoretical approach thus represents an effective explanatory framework for the analysis of symbols in a religious context. In itself, Turner's theory is, however, insufficient for the analysis of a certain type of data regarding memory, emotions or acquisitions of cultural concepts, because it does not pay attention to cognitive and psychological processes that contribute to the formation of social and cultural phenomena.

As was demonstrated, the church and the cross meet different criteria of dominant symbols. Therefore, I would suggest that Rodney Needham's classic distinction between *monothetic* and *polythetic* classifications can be of use and implemented in concert with Turner's theory of symbols (Needham 1975). In short, according to Needham, each component of the *polythetic* class possesses a set of properties from a certain larger set of properties, and no property or set of properties is characteristic for all the components of the *polythetic* class (Kanovský 2004; Needham 1975).

Therefore, I would argue that if we consider Turner's concept of dominant symbols as a *polythetic* class and concrete dominant symbols (e.g. cross and church as a building) as components of the *polythetic* class, then this would increase its explanatory potential. Turner's theoretical perspective, broadened by Needham's concept of *polythetic classifications* and certain cognitive and psychological theories regarding emotions (Haidt 2003; Rozin, Haidt and McCauley 2000), memory (Berniunas 2009) and the acquisition of ideas (Boyer 1990, 2001) can potentially result in a more comprehensive theoretical perspective and explanatory model.

As Eller pointed out, anthropologists and a number of scholars researching religion have offered theoretical perspectives, each of which is productive and limited in its own way (Eller 2007, 13). Also, no single theoretical approach can likely explain the whole essence of religion. This concluding remark may be an implication for further research, not only in terms of developing theoretical concepts but, as Needham suggested, with respect to an empirical demonstration of the applicability of these concepts (Needham 1975, 366).

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