



Laudatio Comenius Prize 2020 for Professor Tomáš Halík,

Today is a very festive day, because we will honour you, Professor Tomáš Halík from Prague, as the 2020 recipient of the Comenius Prize. It is for the first time that this honour will be bestowed on a person originating in the Czech Republic. And 2020 was a very special year because we commemorated that Jan Amos Comenius passed away 350 years ago.

The Comenius Prize was established in 2011 by the Comenius Museum Foundation here in Naarden and has been awarded every year since. The Prize is meant to honour a person, who through his or her line of thought and work, has acted in the spirit of Comenius, being a strong and outspoken advocate of the importance of education, science and culture in a society that is becoming more and more international. The interrelationship between these topics is an important feature of the Comenius Prize, because this represents the basic philosophy of Comenius' thoughts and writings. The Comenius Prize is not a scientific prize, but it is meant to honour a person who has succeeded in integrating various knowledge domains for serving and enhancing important societal developments.

And this is exactly why the jury has come to the conclusion that Professor Tomáš Halík is such an eminent recipient of the 2020 Comenius Prize. Let me explain this further.

In preparing for this brief laudatory speech, I have visited Professor Halík in Prague, I have reread Jan Amos Comenius' biography and I read the recently published autobiography of Professor Halík entitled: "From the Underground Church to Freedom" (which by the way will soon be published in the Dutch language). Both are most interesting to read, because they contain such remarkable similarities in lines of thought and even in life events. Comenius had to flee his country for reasons of his religion (and that is why he ended up here in The Netherlands), while Professor Halík had to go underground for reasons of his Christian faith that was forbidden under the communist regime.

Comenius considered himself primarily a priest and theologian and his wide-ranging interests as a scholar were in line with this mission (as it is stated in his biography). Professor Halík is also a priest and a scholar in theology, philosophy and sociology and he has also shown to have wide-ranging interests in culture and society at large.

Both scholars have expressed strong belief in a more united Europe with all its implications and challenges. And there is much more, too much to dwell on in this short speech.

I will now concentrate on a few elements that characterize Professor Halík's life and work. He was born in 1948 and he studied sociology and philosophy at the University of Prague. At his graduation ceremony, at the age of 24, he presented such a frank and critical public speech, that the oppressing communist regime made it clear that Tomáš Halík would never be allowed to fulfil an educational or academic position. Then and there he already manifested himself as a courageous, independent scholar, who would not shy away from criticizing those who try to minimize freedom of speech and societal freedom in general. While he was a student he had converted to the Roman Catholic faith, at a time of the communist persecution of the church. Nevertheless, he was ordained to become a priest in secret, which even his mother was not allowed to know for reasons of her safety. Tomáš Halík worked for over a decade as a psychotherapist and at the same time he was active in the underground church and in the political dissident movement together with Cardinal Tomášek and Vaclav Havel. After the fall of the communist regime at the end of 1989, he served as general secretary to the Czech Conference of Bishops and he became advisor to Pope John Paul II and to the then President Vaclav Havel.

In 1997 he was appointed professor of sociology at the University of Prague, a position that he holds until this very day. Educating and inspiring young people is one of the greatest joys of his life, is my sincere impression. But he also celebrates mass regularly in the academic parish St. Salvator Church in Prague, often together with representatives of other religions, trying to build bridges and reaching out to the world community at large

Over the past 25 years Professor Halík has become one of the most authoritative spiritual philosophers in the world today, because of the numerous books that he has written – several of which have been translated in the Dutch language – in which he not only writes on religious themes, but in which he also addresses important societal issues like societal inequalities and intolerance, migration and integration and the need for greater European unity.

Professor Halík fundamentally preaches against indifference and injustice in the world and against lack of freedom and he is a fervent advocate of more solidarity on our planet. In all his books one experiences his talent to use words that touch and inspire the hearts of so many individuals, wherever they live and whatever they believe.

Professor Halík has received several prestigious prizes and distinctions for his work, including an honorary doctorate from the University of Oxford and the Templeton Prize in 2014, which is often regarded as the Nobel Prize for the Humanities. It is interesting to note that in 2013 it was Bishop Tutu from South Africa who received this Prize.

Finally, let me return to Comenius and to what extent his line of thought is resonating in society today through the work of Professor Tomáš Halík. Because that is one of the most important criteria for the jury on which the selection is based. Well, what I explained before in terms of Professor Halík's journey through life and his inspiring publications and lectures worldwide, is very much in line with what Comenius published more than 350 years ago. We are all citizens of one world (Comenius), we are all living in an ever changing world, but the basic principles that determine living together in harmony and peace are still the same and should be lived up to as Jan Amos Comenius taught us long ago, and Professor Halík teaches us today,. They are our educators par excellence - let us take their wisdom at heart, for the sake of the world becoming a better place!

Dear Professor Halík, this is all about you and I know that you are a humble person, who may not have liked all the praise in my laudatio. But according to the jury of the Comenius Prize, praise is what you deserve today, being such an eminent – may I say – disciple of Comenius. Congratulations!

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