

THEOLOGIES OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT IN THE HUNGARIAN LUTHERAN CHURCH DURING COMMUNISM (1945-1990)¹

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce the history of the past five decades of the Hungarian Lutheran Church from a special perspective. I have grown up in the Hungarian Lutheran Church as the son of a church historian but because of my critical attitude towards the church establishment I chose to pursue a secular career. Thereby I was able to preserve not only my freedom and independence but also a critical distance. However, I have never ceased to be concerned for my church. As a layman I graduated in theology and have been involved in church-historical and hermeneutical issues.

This work was born out of my concern for the theological, intellectual and moral life of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. If one is sensitive member of the Hungarian Lutheran Church today she or he cannot but experience division, the lack of vision and energy, and an overall loss of identity. I am interested to learn about the *process* that has led to the *theological and moral deterioration of my church*. In order to understand this process I have chosen to concentrate on *written and published texts*, namely, on the inaugural addresses of ten Bishops of the Hungarian Lutheran Church between 1945 and 1990. What I am interested in, is, to learn what kind of *theologies of church government* these inaugural addresses reveal and how they anticipate the years to come. But the following study is not "(church)political" or just "church historical" but rather *ecclesiological*, and, as I am primarily interested in the

¹ This paper was given as a lecture at a conference on Protestant Churches During the Period of Communism in October 1999 in Denmark and was published in German: Tibor Fabiny, Jr: "Bekenner und Angepasste. Skizzen zu einem noch nicht geklärten Kapitel der jüngsten lutherischen Kirchengeschichte Ungarns", In: *Glaube in der 2.Welt* No 6 (2000), pp.14-21. It is published here with the permission of the author.

theology of the discourse of church-leaders; it is intended to be a hermeneutically oriented ecclesiological investigation.

As for methodology, I was stimulated by the work of my colleague Professor (Bishop since 2003) István Bogárdi Szabó who published a book on *Church-Leadership and Theology within the Hungarian Calvinist Church Between 1948 and 1989*.² Bogárdi Szabó re-read the documents of the so-called "theology of service" and provided a theological evaluation of the deformation of the Hungarian Calvinist Church during the totalitarian dictatorship.

I re-read and theologially analyzed the discourses of the inaugural addresses of the Lutheran Bishops. I did not study these texts in isolation but my purpose was to read and interpret them in the context of Hungarian history. It is imperative to do so not only because no text can be separated from history but especially because most of the new bishops were installed into their offices at the turning points of Hungarian history: in 1945, 1948, 1957, 1958, 1990. So whatever they said also reflected the political turmoils of the outside world which necessarily had an influence on the life of the church. The church is, of course, never identical with her leaders and Christ is, naturally the Lord and the Head of the church. My purpose is to show that the most destructive power of the church was not the atheist and totalitarian state but the one that has corrupted and destroyed the church from within. I think it is proper to speak about the "inner bleeding" of the church, to use the terminology of István Bogárdi Szabó.³ It is not my office and intention, however, to pass moral judgment in retrospect on the church-leaders of the past but I am convinced that the *theological assessment* of what was said and done is a moral duty especially *since the theological evaluation of the past has not yet been carried out* by the present leaders of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. Therefore, it seems that there is more continuity than reversal in the conduct of the Church Leadership during the periods of Communism and Post-Communism.

The Historical Background

Throughout her history Hungary has always been on the side of losers: the Tatars, the Turks, the Hapburgs, the Germans and the Russians have invaded this isolated nation in the

² Bogárdi Szabó István, *Egyházvezetés és teológia a Magyarországi Református Egyházban 1948 és 1989 között*, Debrecen, 1995.

³ István Bogárdi Szabó, "Long Period of Inner Bleeding. The Theology of Service as the Reflection of the Miseries of the Reformed Church in Hungary", *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 1989, 1, pp.191-198.

Carpathian basin. With the Treaty of Trianon following the First World War, Hungary lost two third of her territories. Because of the unfortunate policies during the Second World War Hungary was stamped as the last ally of Nazi Germany. The Yalta Agreement made Hungary a part of the Soviet-Russian Empire.

Hungary adopted Christianity in the year 1000 and the 16th century Reformation greatly transformed the religious map of the country. However, due to the activity of the Jesuits, supported by the Hapsburgs, the Counter-Reformation was also very successful and thus by the 20th century more than sixty percent of the population were Roman Catholics. With two and a half million members the Reformed (Calvinist) Church was the largest Protestant denomination.

Lutheranism was a minority, even within Protestantism.⁴ With the Treaty of Trianon the Hungarian Lutheran Church lost several thousand members. Today out of the ten million inhabitants there are about three hundred thousand Lutherans in Hungary.⁵ From the time of the Church Synod in 1707 there were four dioceses: the Eastern ("Tiszántúli"), the Middle ("Dunáninnyi"), the Central ("Bányai") and the Western ("Dunántúli") dioceses. Motivated by Stalinist centralizing tendencies the original four dioceses were decreased to two in 1952, the "Northern" and the "Southern" Dioceses.

During the first half of the 20th century there have been various influences that have had effects within the church such as the Luther Renaissance or the Finnish revival movement. However, the drastic political changes blocked their further development. After 1945 the newly elected leaders of the church reacted in different ways to the new political situation.

Towards Modeling the Attitudes

In a parliamentary democracy there is the "right" and the "left" as the political power is horizontally polarized. In a totalitarian dictatorship, however, there is only one "Power" that is concentrated at the "top" and therefore in practice everybody is dependent on it. The relationship of the "one top" and the rest is rather "vertical." Individuals or churches have to develop degrees of conformism in order to survive. Those who are not willing to compromise

⁴ Cf. an old but still balanced assessment of László Terray, "Europe's Minority Churches", in *Lutheran Churches of the World*, Foreword by Carl E. Lund-Quist, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1957), pp. 41-94.

⁵ According to the census of 2001.

by any means become martyrs. Then there are some who remain confessors and are reluctant to compromise, those who remain confessors and are willing to compromise, the next degree is of those who consciously or unconsciously give up confession and become collaborators. The policies by which the Bishops responded to the new challenges were those of valor, discretion⁶ as well as conformism, opportunism or even, betrayal. Having analyzed the inaugural addresses of ten Bishops with their historical contexts between 1945 and 1990 I have divided them into four groups: 1) Confessors 2) Compromisers 3) Collaborators, and 4) Cautious Innovators. Let me immediately add that whenever I use the category of "confessor" it does not entail that the person was "stubborn" or unwilling to compromise in minor issues and whomever I call "compromiser" was, to a certain extent, also a "confessor" necessarily. But it means that in unexpectedly difficult political situations there were some who managed to remain loyal to the Gospel and remained unmoveable when they believed that vital principles were at stake. The "compromisers" also tried to remain faithful to the Gospel but they wished to find a rational *modus vivendi*. A "confessor" never becomes a politician while the "compromiser," though temporarily, adopts the attitude of the "real-politician," believing that this course of action is taken for the sake of the church. The collaborator is the one who is only nominally chosen by the church: it is ultimately the state that places him into his office. Again, I would not immediately stamp them as traitors or betrayers; they may have been convinced that their theology of church government was the only "way" for the church. Within the group of collaborators there were passive and active ones, or, it might happen that when somebody begins as passive could end up as an active collaborator. I would consider the present leadership elected in 1987 and 1990 as "cautious transitionaries" because their positions depends on the past: they took their offices without letting the cleansing processes, coming from below, prevail within the church.

1. Confessors

Though I have used the plural "confessors" I can only find one example of a confessor i.e. one who had a steadfast, unmoveable attitude when vital principles were at stake. It is the example of Bishop Lajos Ordass.⁷ No wonder that there is an oak frieze in a

⁶ Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valor, Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1982).

⁷ The standard English biography of Ordass is by László G. Terray, *He Could Not Do Otherwise: Bishop Lajos Ordass, 1901-1978*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge U.K., William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

Lutheran church in Minnesota encircling the sanctuary with a "cloud of witnesses" from the Bible and church history beginning with Enoch and ending with the names of Berggrav, Bonhoeffer, and Ordass.

Lajos Ordass (1901-1978) was the Bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church from 1945 until his death in 1978, i.e. for thirty three years, but he could exercise his office for altogether less than five years, during two different periods: between 1945-1948 and 1956-1958.⁸ He was committed to the public responsibility of the church while he was still Senior in Middle Hungary and Pastor of a Budapest congregation. During the war he translated an account of Gustav Aulén, Bishop in Sweden about the Norwegian Lutheran Church's struggle and with the help of the Swedish Red Cross he helped the persecuted Jews in Budapest. He decided to change his original German family name "Wolf" into the Hungarian "Ordass" on the day of the Nazi occupation of Hungary. His ecclesiology is already manifested in the writings he published in the early 1940s. He frequently wrote that the church was the "conscience of the nation"⁹ an institution that was founded by God even before the family; it is the first and the last refuge against the flood when there is storm."¹⁰

In his inaugural address on September 27, 1945, he started with two theses: 1) One should not be anxious about the church as the church carries the treasure of the gospel that God founded with the creation of the world. Therefore, the church will survive the storms of history as the church is invincible. 2) however, one should be anxious about the members of the church, therefore there is much to be done in the church and she badly needs workers.¹¹

As for the relationship between the church and the state Ordass firmly stood on the principle of mutuality. The church can offer to help the state, therefore it is the interest of the state to provide freedom for the spreading of the Gospel. Ordass's argument reflected a

⁸ See also my articles on Ordass: "Bishop Lajos Ordass and the Hungarian Lutheran Church", in *Hungarian Studies* 10-1 (1995) pp. 65-98, "The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and Its Aftermath in the Lutheran Church. The Case of Bishop Ordass", in *Im Räderwerk des 'real existierenden Sozialismus'. Kirchen in Ostmittel-und Osteuropa von Stalin bis Gorbatschow* Herausgegeben von Hartmut Lehmann und Jens Holger Schjorring, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2003. pp.31-40; "The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass During Communism in Hungary", in *Zwischen den Mühlsteinen. Protestantische Kirchen in den der Errichtung der kommunistischen Herrschaft im östlichen Europa*, Hg.Peter Maser und Jean Holger Schjorring, Erlangen, Martin Luther Verlag, 2002, pp.303-320.; "Bekenner und Angepasste. Skizzen zu einem noch nicht geklärten Kapitel der jüngsten lutherischen Kirchengeschichte Ungarns", In: *Glaube in der 2.Welt* No 6.2000. pp.14-21.

⁹ Ordass Lajos, *Válogatott irások*, Bern, 1982, p.29.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Ordass Lajos, "Püspöki székfoglaló" (Inaugural Address), *Keresztyén Igazság*, Új folyam, 27. 1995 ősz, pp.7-14.

typical Lutheran antithetical logic when he said that "the church should preserve her freedom and independence from the state so that she could remain the conscience of the state during political turmoils, but at the same time she should bind herself to the state so that she could share the sins, sorrows, the joys and the hopes of the nation."¹²

To the totalitarianism of the Communist Party between 1945-1948 the three historical churches responded in three different ways. In the Roman Catholic Church Cardinal Mindszenty launched the program of "political resistance.," In the Reformed Church Bishop Albert Bereczky proposed a "theology of contrition," suggesting that the churches were responsible for the social evils of the past as they were beneficiaries of that order. Ordass defended the church on the theological principles of the Lutheran idea of the "two regiments or realms:" "Our church knows her duties with regard to the state and democracy, and she wants to accomplish them faithfully. But the church also expects from the state that her teaching and preaching activity should not be hindered."¹³ Ordass' purpose was to work out a fair, theologically justified relationship with the state. He offered to support the state but *not unconditionally* as was the case with some of his followers for whom the church became subservient to the state. In Ordass' theology the church and the state were meant to mutually recognize their spheres of interest and the field of their activity. Ordass argued that the church, by virtue of her cultural and social activity (schools, hospitals, charitable institutions, and so on) contributes to the welfare of the state and society. Therefore, she should accept financial support from the state and she should count on the state's guarantee of her established rights to enjoy autonomy, to preach the gospel, and to provide Christian education. The church should not have a political program, neither should she meddle into politics, as it is not her mission. However, when political events interfere or harm the body or the members of the church then it is her duty to speak out publicly on those issues. Such issues were, for example the Hungarian-Czechoslovak repartition agreement in 1946 or the arbitrary deportation of the members of Hungary's German-speaking community. Last, but not least, the great issue in 1948 was the nationalization of the church schools. Ordass found that giving up the schools would mean giving up the historical mission of the church, for him the schools belonged to the body of the church, especially in the time of persecution.

Ordass was also pressured to dismiss the lay leaders of the church. He refused to surrender the schools as well as to dismiss the leaders. The state also wanted the church to

¹² Ibid., p.13.

¹³ Ordass Lajos, *Válogatott írások*, Bern, 1982, p.112.

sign an "Agreement," but Ordass was reluctant to accept the text of this agreement. This attitude of his led to the typical Stalinist show trial in September 1948 where he was charged with violating the country's currency laws. In 1947 Ordass traveled to Northern Europe (in Lund he was elected as first Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation) and then to the United States where he received support for rebuilding the Lutheran Church after the Second World War. The accusations, were, of course, false but Ordass was sentenced to two years in prison. Thus the Communist state could remove its greatest obstacle. Ordass was freed in May 1950 but rehabilitated only in October 1956, restored to office during the revolution and removed from office, for the final time, in June 1958.

Ordass was willing to be a partner of the state on fair and mutual agreement but he was unwilling to make a compromise against his conscience. From the perspective of *real politik* he was perhaps "stubborn" or even "reactionary" but from the perspective of faith he remained a confessor as he consequently acted according to his belief. We are mistaken if we consider him as a figure of "resistance" against Communism. His great example was Eidvin Bergrav, the Bishop of Oslo; he said to him: "On the basis of our confessional writings and the Holy Scripture our fight was purely a defence of the church...If you have to fight for the spiritual freedom of the church, be careful not to mix it up with political aspects."¹⁴

We should emphasize that Ordass's attitude was "defence" rather than "resistance". This was recognized by Laszló Terray as early as 1956: "Bishop Ordass has not become a symbol of the Hungarian people's struggle against Communism, as Cardinal Mindszenty has. Ordass's attitude should be characterized by the word 'defence' rather than 'resistance'. His spiritual mentor was Gandhi and not Gregory VII:"¹⁵ The confessing attitude was motivated by Luther's theology of the cross, which helps to explain why Bishop Ordass wrote so many meditations on the cross.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ordass, *Válogatott írások*, Bern, 1982, p.153.

¹⁵ László Terray, "A Symbol of an Indomitable Belief", *British Weekly*, December 6, 1956. Repr. by LWF Department of Information, January 7, 1957.

¹⁶ See the second half of my article: "The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass During Communism in Hungary", In: *Zwischen den Mühlsteinen. Protestantische Kirchen in den der Errichtung der kommunistischen Herrschaft im östlichen Europa*, Hg.Peter Maser und Jean Holger Schjorring, Erlangen, Martin Luther Verlag, 2002, pp.303-320.

2. Compromisers

This compromising line is associated mainly with the names of Bishop Zoltán Túróczy (1893-1971) and Bishop József Szabó (1902-1986). Let me emphasize what I have said before: in my vocabulary "compromiser" is not as negative a category as the "collaborator". I would not go so far as saying that a compromiser is not, also a confessor, but this conduct has a rational, explicitly "political" or "church-political" element in its theology. The compromisers, recently, and mistakenly, I think, have been described as representatives of "the third way of the church"¹⁷ characterized themselves by "two-sentence church politics" which meant that in the first sentence they acknowledged the secular power ("Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's") while affirming faith in the second statement: ("Render unto God the things which are God's"). The representatives of this attitude came from the pietist background of missionary societies or the revival movement and they were willing to compromise in so far as, for example, surrendering the schools to the state, because they wanted to protect the proclamation of the word (undoubtedly a Barthian influence). It was also confessional and a genuinely Christian attitude but Ordass' view was, as we have seen, influenced more by Luther's *theologia crucis* and it was in accordance with the teachings of the confessional writings of the church, namely, that the otherwise secondary (adiaphora) issues (such as the schools) during the time of persecution should be seen also as primary ones (Formula Concordiae, Article X).¹⁸

Thus by 1948 the Lutheran church was far from being unanimous in her theology concerning church government and with regard to her relationship with the more and more totalitarian Communist state. While Bishop Ordass was fighting in defence of the church, Bishop Túróczy and Bishop Szabó were to go along with the demands of the state and compromise. Ordass, in his *Autobiography* has referred to it as the "Túróczy-line." Zoltán Túróczy came from a well-known Lutheran family with famous pastors and bishops and he was much influenced by the Finnish revival movements of the 1920s and 1930s. He became Bishop of the Eastern Diocese in May 1939. The missionary zeal and sound Lutheran theology characterized both his inaugural address of 1939 and his episcopal activity in the years to come. Right after WWII, however, because of his right-wing political speeches during the war, he was sentenced to ten year's in prison. Partly due to the intervention of his

¹⁷ Veöreös Imre, *A harmadik egyházi út 1948-1950* Budapest, Evangélikus Sajtóosztály, 1990.

¹⁸ As pointed out by Gábor Itzész in "Létezett (létezik)-e 'harmadik egyházi út'? Kerekasztal-beszélgetés." *Keresztyén igazság* Új folyam, 9.szám, 1991.p. 16.

church he was freed from prison in 1946 and eventually received an amnesty only on June 14, 1948. Throughout 1948 he was much in favor of accepting and signing the Agreement proposed by the state. He resigned as Bishop of the Eastern Diocese and was installed as Bishop of the Western Diocese in December 1948. However, the installation of Bishop József Szabó into the Middle Diocese in March 1948 comes first in chronology.

In his inaugural speech on March 18, 1948, the new Bishop gave a very thorough diagnosis about the spiritual decline of the church which is due not only to the external but to the internal factors of secularization. He powerfully contrasted the vegetation and apathy of contemporary Christianity with the dynamic life of the early church. Therefore, he launched a program of mission and evangelization. But when it came to the church-state relations he emphatically said: "Whoever says that in Hungary there is persecution of Christians today is deceived or wants to deceive"¹⁹ and added that the Lutheran church that was always open to progress in the past will not be the "refuge of political reactionism."²⁰ However, mutuality is also an important element in his views on church-state relations: "It is the duty and not the mercy of the Hungarian Democratic Republic to let the church fulfill her task. We have to insist on our theological conviction that the secular authorities have received the power of the sword also from God in order to protect the cause of God. If so, then the state fulfils its task, if not, it would harm itself. The church should not be ungrateful for the support of the state and the state would be mistaken if the freedom of the church would be asked as a price for its protection. The church is not to be a flatterer of the state but the conscience of the state so that she could represent and proclaim the will of God for the secular power as well."²¹

Right after the inauguration ceremonies the representative of the President of the Hungarian Republic, Imre Mihályfi (son of a former Lutheran minister), launched a very sharp attack against the lay-leaders of the church and demanded urgent election of new officers. Two days after that event Pastor Imre Veöreös, Vice President of the Pastor's League and editor of a Lutheran journal, wrote to the General Curator of the church accusing the church leadership for not having understood the elemental changes in the political life, and urging the church to find a confessional answer, without political reactionarism, to the new historical challenge. "The state's political desire to cleanse the church from the politically

¹⁹ Szabó József, *Püspöki székhelyi székfoglaló*, Balassagyarmat, 1948 március 18. Győr, 1948. p.9.

²⁰ Ibid. p.10.

²¹ Ibid. p.11.

unwanted leaders have long coincided with the purely church-concerned demand of the valuable members of the clergy."²²

Having received an amnesty in the summer of 1948 Bishop Túróczy became full supporter for accepting the Agreement with the state. Túróczy's conviction was that the schools do not directly belong to the body of the church. Therefore "no martyr-blood should be shed for the schools."²³ Túróczy advocated the "two-sentence" church policy and it was his conviction that whenever God closes a door he will open another one. He was probably convinced that with the loss of schools, the church can concentrate more of her evangelizing and missionary task. Bishop Ordass was arrested on September 8 and condemned on October 1. The Agreement was signed on December 14 by the President of the Synod Bishop Túróczy (still as Bishop of the Eastern Diocese) and Lay President Zoltán Mády on behalf of the church.

Two days after signing the Agreement Bishop Túróczy was installed as Bishop of the Western Diocese. He began his rhetorically and spiritually attractive inaugural speech by distinguishing between the "priest" and the "man of God", or the prophet. In church history, he said, the man of God was "deformed" into the "priest" and "bishop" but the new political situation "reforms" the "priest" into becoming again the "man of God". Such is the prophetic task of church leadership. Bishop Túróczy, however, introduces secular terminology into his speech when he mentions the Western Diocese as a "church-political problem" where "reactionary" views are most widespread. He explicitly speaks about his "politics" which resulted in the signing of the Agreement. Alien phrases are introduced into theological discourse as, it was believed, by conforming to the state in our "first sentence" one can affirm and preserve faith in the second one.

Bishop Túróczy's outstanding significance as preacher, organizer, pastor, cannot be denied. But this newly adopted flexibility was to have grave consequence in the years to come. With the decision of the Synod of 1952, motivated by the centralizing tendencies of Stalinism the Western Diocese ceased to exist and thus Bishop Túróczy lost his office. It was due to the restoration of Bishop Ordass in 1956 that Bishop Túróczy was chosen as Bishop of the "Northern" diocese. This was now the third time he became Bishop. In his inaugural

²² Veöreös Imre beadványa az egyetemes felügyelőhöz. 1948.március 20. Manuscript, EOL, MELE, 14/1948.

²³ Veöreös Imre): "Mit szólunk az iskolák államosításához?" *Új Harangszó*, 1948, június 6 .Ordass *Önéletírás*, p. 293.

address of February 6, 1957, he first spoke about the "supremacy of the Word." "It is not politics that should determine our attitude to the Word but it is the Word that should determine our attitude to politics."²⁴ He approved the Agreement as the document of God's closed and newly opened windows. Within this short period there was unique harmony between Bishop Ordass and Bishop Túróczy.

3. Collaborators

We call collaborators those leaders who are ultimately chosen by the state and who whether consciously or unconsciously represent the interest of the state against the church. There have been passive and active types of collaborators both in the pre-1956 and the post 1956 period.

a) the pre-1956 period

When Bishop Túróczy resigned as Bishop of the Eastern Diocese to become the Bishop of the Western Diocese Lajos Vető (1904-1989) was chosen as his successor. At the end of the second world war, thanks to his knowledge of Russian, Vető was the interpreter of the Russian army. However, his election was the result of a pressure of the state against the original nominee, István Rőzse. Bishop Vető in his inaugural speech of December 22, 1948, quotes Psalm 121:1: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills". For him such "hills" were the Gospel, the church, and Protestantism. To be Protestant to him meant "progressive" and Luther being the champion of human, religious, social, intellectual and cultural progress."²⁵ He expressed his conviction that the Agreement signed a week before is not the grave of the church as pessimists believe but it would contribute to the inner strengthening and external development of the church. Thus, by the end of 1948 the Marxist state managed to put its man into an episcopal office for the first time.

On August 20, 1949, Hungary became a "People's Republic" and the form of the state was "the dictatorship of the proletariat." In April, while Bishop Ordass was still in prison, the special court of the Lutheran church condemned him. Thus he was deposed by his own church. Only after this could he be freed from prison in May 1950. The Central Diocese had to chose his successor. The only nominee was László Dezséry, formerly university chaplain and now pastor in Budapest. Dezséry was originally a member of the Social Democratic Party

²⁴ Az Északi Egyházkerület Elnökségének beiktatása" Manuscript.

²⁵ Vető Lajos székfoglaló beszéde, Manuscript, EOL Tiszai Egyházkerület, III/2. See also the article in *Evangelikus Élet*, January 1, 1949 p. 5.

and after their merger with the Communist party he became a Communist party member. In October 1948 he wrote a thirty-page *Open Letter in the Matter of the Lutheran Church*. In this letter he spoke about the crisis in the leadership and urged the replacement of the conservative leadership by progressive-minded persons.

On June 12, 1950, he was installed as the successor of Ordass in the Central District. He was probably influenced by the phraseology of the Calvinist Bishop Albert Bereczky when he spoke about the "prophetic vocation" of the church. In their vocabulary this meant political, pro-Communist commitment. His speech is a document of a low-style, vulgar conformism: he identifies the liberation of the country with the Christian's liberation from sin unto new life. With regard to ecumenism he condemns the "crusade" of Western fellow Christians that the world organizations cease to financially support the home church when she declared her unwillingness "to resist" the people's state.

Due to his initiative the original four dioceses were merged into two in 1952: the "Southern" with Bishop Dezséry and the "Northern" with Bishop Vető. While Dezséry was in office between 1950-1956 the Lutheran church has entirely become subservient to the Communist state.

By the summer of 1956 the course of events began to reverse: several factors have begun to point towards the rehabilitation of Bishop Ordass. First, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches was to meet in Galyatető, Hungary. Second, the pastors's conferences in September urged the rehabilitation which eventually took place on October 6. The revolution broke out on October 23 and within a few days both Bishop Dezséry and Vető resigned. Both of them praised the glorious revolution of the Hungarian youth. Ordass was restored as Bishop on Reformation Day.

Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this paper to characterize the period of eighteen months while Bishop Ordass was restored. After the oppression of the Hungarian revolution by the Russian tanks on November 4, the Lutheran church, due to Bishop Ordass' quick reshuffling the leadership became an "island." Church life flourished; the church, indeed, became church. It took until June 1958 for the state to remove Bishop Ordass. They imposed lay leaders on the church who unconditionally carried out what the state demanded. The state issued Decree 22 in 1957 concerning the prior governmental approval of nominations for church leadership. As it was valid retroactively they were able to remove Bishop Túróczy at the end of 1957 replacing him by Bishop Vető. They waited more than six

months to depose Bishop Ordass. It took place in June, a few days after Prime Minister Imre Nagy, leader of the 1956 revolution, was executed. Bishop Dezséry, who in the meantime began a secular career, returned to his office only for three hours, so that he could resign. Later he became a successful journalist and he openly proclaimed himself an atheist. Moscow's puppet government, the Kadar-regime, found the suitable person to install into the episcopal office of the Southern Diocese. This man was a 39-year-old Senior from southern Hungary, Zoltán Káldy. He determined the profile of the church in the next three decades.

b) the post 1956 period

The "unanimously" elected Zoltán Káldy (1919-1987) was installed on November 4, the second anniversary of the oppression of the revolution. Zoltán Káldy also came from a Pietist background; throughout the 1940s he was a very popular evangelist. Zoltán Káldy's name is associated with the "theology of diaconia" which became a totalitarian "official" theology imposed upon the church.

His inaugural speech²⁶ does not yet use this terminology: it was elaborated only six years later when he is about to receive the honorary doctorate from the Slovak Theological Academy in Bratislava. The germs of his doctrine of church government, his "theology of diaconia" are, however, already present in his 1958 address. We shall reconstruct and criticize this theology on the basis of these two documents. Káldy's speech, unlike Dezséry's or Vető's, in undoubtedly elaborated theologically, though whatever he said was highly debatable.

Káldy wished to found the theology of church government on the three principles of "biblicism", "confessionalism," and "common sense." However, neither the Bible nor the confessions are to be applied literally: they should be adjusted to the new historical and political context. He quotes the Barmen Declaration which also appealed to the natural law. Therefore, he concluded, in public life one should act according to the principle of common sense.

The central motif of his train of thought is the worship of the church. He makes a distinction between the "shorter worship" that is within the church and the "longer worship" that is outside of the church. "Diaconia" is not secondary to the gospel, it belongs to the heart of the Gospel. The climax of his argument is the idea of "political worship" which means that the church and her members work for the "correct" order of the world. He justified his ideas for the political activity of the church by saying that according to Luther the world is also a

²⁶ Káldy Zoltán püspöki székfoglaló beszéde, *Lelkipásztor*, 1958 December, pp.568-585.

part of God's realm, the world is the mask of God and the Christian is the citizen of the two realms. The Lutheran ethics does not differentiate between secular and church ethics, secular work or church-related work. And last, but not least, the love of Jesus should commit the Christian to political activity.

His attitude to the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches was similar to that of Dezséry: he regretted that these organizations saw our church only through certain persons (i.e. Ordass), they did provide proper help to solve the problems. He also added that their declarations to condemn social injustice and protect world peace are not powerful enough. Now the lay leaders of the church are the commissars of the state and they condemn the "counter-revolution" in the country as well as within the church.

What can we conclude from Káldy's inaugural speech? It is a theology one-sidedly concentrating on the world, politics, and society. He reversed the order proposed by Bishop Túróczy in 1957 by founding his theology on politics and not politics on theology. His theology was built upon the *hic et nun* of post-1956 Hungary. By equating the "long worship" within the world with the "short worship" of the church he wanted to dissolve theology within the world. In the concept of general grace, special grace and the scandal of the cross is lost. (That was the essence of Ordass' theology.) If the church existed only to serve in the world then the idea of mission is lost (the essence of Túróczy's theology). His theology one-sidedly concentrates upon the "deeds" ("service") and the idea of the justification by faith entirely disappears; and above all, there is no soteriology in such a theology.

The church is summoned to be politically committed but this politics means following the instruction of the Communist state which is in no way to be criticized. Thus the church surrenders herself again to the state, church-government means collaboration with the Communist state, or, as then they put it, "with our country building socialism." Last but not least there are psychological consequences: the feeling of inferiority, subordination, dependence was planted into the soul of the church people; there is no other way but subservience.

Káldy's "theology of diaconia" was elaborated in his 1964 inaugural address when he received the honorary doctorate from the theological faculty. Káldy's 1964 speech is the document of a new, "totalitarian theology". The term "diaconia" becomes the exclusive focus of each aspect of theology. Káldy began with New Testament biblical exegesis in which he

elaborated a "diaconial christology" suggesting that Jesus came to this world to do the act of diaconia and (sic!) - for nothing else.²⁷

There was no mentioning of sin and redemption, hamartology and soteriology was entirely missing from such a "christology". Then he turned to ecclesiology arguing that "the whole church was made into diaconia" by Jesus. The church cannot exist for her own sake, she should not be engaged in saving herself: the church will have a future only if she surrenders herself to the people. István Bogárdi Szabó when recognizing similar theological attitudes in the "theology of service" of the Reformed Church in the 1950 remarked that this is nothing but the "theological appropriation" of the Marxist thesis about the disappearance of religion in which there is only "kenotic" *ecclesia crucis* in which there is no resurrection or *ecclesia triumphans*.²⁸ For Káldy the church fulfills her function if she dissolves into the world. The last part of the speech was about the "wider aspect of diaconia" which is about the social commitment of the church. In this part Káldy made the church entirely a part of Marxist propaganda.

One of the greatest defect of this "theology" is a dangerous one-sidedness which want to make a total idea out of a partial term like "diaconia". This totalizing tendency is entirely in tune with the totalizing nature of Marxist ideology and Communist practice. From time to time it appealed to Luther but Lutheran theology is exactly the opposite as it works with antitheses and paradoxes: it teaches that the human being is both just and sinful, free and servant, and Jesus Christ is both Lord and servant at the same time.

By neglecting soteriology and justification and "the sermon about Christ," the church "beheaded" itself. "Káldyism" became a totalitarian, incorporating principle in the Hungarian Lutheran Church. Instead of being the "body of Christ" this church became--as somebody phrased it during Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Budapest in 1984--the "body of Káldy" which he managed to keep alive by his personal dictatorial style of conduct. The frightened deans and ministers almost unanimously approved whatever he did and said for three decades. Whoever happened to disapprove of his conduct or church-policy was stamped and dismissed to a small countryside congregation. True, he did, indeed, elevate pastors from poor congregational positions but then these people were meant to pay the price and soon became spokesmen of the grand mechanism of "Káldy's body". In 1966 he managed to enforce new church-laws that conformed to the demands of the Marxist state.

²⁷ Káldy Zoltán: "Az egyház életformája: a diakónia" *Lelkipásztor*, 1964/8, pp.385-397.

²⁸ Bogárdi Szabó, *Egyházvezetés és teológia* pp.99-100.

One should add that there were positive events during his episcopal activity: a new Protestant Bible translation came out, a commentary series was launched, new hymn books were published, new churches were built, and so on. All these activities were the manifestations of his "theology of diaconia" which one-sidedly emphasized the "deeds" against faith and justification. Much was, indeed, to be shown for the delegates of the Lutheran World Federation in the summer of 1984. Only the head and the soul of the church was gone--the rest remained. He believed his greatest "good deed" was inviting the Lutheran World Federation to hold its Assembly in Budapest in 1984. The most controversial event of this Assembly was that he was elected as its President.²⁹

When Lajos Vető retired as Bishop of the Northern Diocese in 1967 the Professor of Church History Ernő Ottlyk (1918-1995) was elected as his successor. Thus Bishop Káldy became senior, or, as he called himself, "Presiding Bishop." Ottlyk was a conformist and a radically left-wing church historian. His simple and vulgar commitment is reflected in his inaugural address of June 20, 1967³⁰ as well as his "progressive" books which he published. Káldy made him and Káldy deposed him fifteen years later. After it had been decided that the Lutheran World Federation Assembly was to be held in Budapest in 1984 Káldy felt uncomfortable with Ottlyk whose provincial significance and especially his left wing style would not be acceptable for Western European or North American delegates of the Assembly. Káldy needed a person who would be more presentable to represent the home-church at the Assembly. That person was Gyula Nagy (1918-), Professor of Systematic Theology, who spent several years in Geneva mainly in the service of the Lutheran World Federation.

Bishop Nagy's inaugural address of September 25, 1982, is a document of trying to save Káldy's "theology of diaconia" by unnoticeably correcting it. He completed the principle of "love" by its preceding "faith" and diaconia by its preceding soteriology. This was not a critique but an explicit manifestation and affirmation of the theology of diaconia by trying to suggest that it is entirely compatible with mainstream "Western theology."³¹ Bishop Nagy, who had traveled widely in the world, knew several delegates and it was comfortable for the

²⁹ László Terray, "Was the 'Reality' Cut Out? The Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Budapest", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol.5 No.6. pp. 1-17. See also: "Hungarian Lutheran Controversy," in *Religion in Communist Lands*, 13 (1985), pp. 99-106.

³⁰ Ottlyk Ernő, "Püspöki beköszöntő beszéd az Északi Evangélikus Egyházkerület 1967.június 20-i közgyűlésén", *Lelkipásztor*, 1967/8. pp. 449-458.

³¹ Nagy Gyula, "A reménység programja", *Lelkipásztor*, 1982, pp. 642-652.

LWF to be hosted by a former LWF man. When Káldy's "theology of diaconia" met the first theological critique by Vilmos Vajta in 1983 Bishop Gyula Nagy and other lay leaders of the church publicly defended Káldy by declaring that "We refuse the allegations!"³²

When Káldy died in May 1987 Bishop Gyula Nagy became President Bishop. He installed Káldy's successor Béla Harmati. By that time, however, there were new circles that demanded theological and structural changes within the church. Bishop Nagy was also unprepared for the unexpected political changes of 1989 in Eastern Europe however much he tried to keep up with the events. (By, for example, hastily proposing to confer honorary doctorate to Vilmos Vajta in 1989). After eight years in office Bishop Nagy retired in 1990.

4) Cautious Innovators

Káldy was succeeded by Bishop Béla Harmati (1936-) in October 1987 in the Southern Diocese and Gyula Nagy by Bishop Imre Szebik (1938-) in March 1990 in the Northern Diocese. In their inaugural addresses³³ both of them emphasized that the spiritual renewal should come before the structural one. It is important to bear in mind that for the nomination of Bishop Harmati the advance approval by the state was still necessary but as the notorious State Office for Church Affairs ceased to exist with the political collapse of 1989, this was not the case with the nomination of Bishop Szebik. The Agreement between the state and the church was annulled after 41 years in March 1990.

One of the priorities Bishop Harmati mentioned in his inaugural address of 1987 was the *magnus consensus* within the church. However, in retrospect we have to say that hardly ever was there a period in the history of Hungarian Lutheranism in which there was such a division as in the first decade of the post-Communist era. The long urged Synod was eventually convened in 1991, and after six years of struggle, managed to pass a law that the two-diocese centralized church structure should be abandoned in favor of a more decentralized three-diocese model. Throughout these struggle the Bishops have stubbornly insisted on the two-diocese model imposed upon the church by Stalinist centralization. One of the priorities Bishop Harmati mentioned in his inaugural address of 1987 was the *magnus consensus* within the church. However, hardly ever was a period in the history of Hungarian

³² *Hungarian Church Press*, July 15, 1983.

³³ "Lábam előtt mécses a Te igéd". Dr. Harmati Béla püspök székfoglalója", *Lelkipásztor*, 1987/11, pp.646-651. And "Beiktatták Szebik Imre püspököt." *Evangélikus Élet*, 1990 április 1. "Szebik Imre püspök székfoglalója. Folytatás", *Evangélikus Élet*, 1990. április 8.

Lutheranism in which there was such a division as in this post-Communist era of the past fifteen years. The long urged Synod was eventually convened in 1991 which, after six years of struggle managed to pass a law that the two-diocese centralized church structure should be abandoned in favor of a more decentralized three-diocese model.³⁴ Throughout these struggles the Bishops have stubbornly insisted on the two-diocese model imposed upon the church by Stalinist centralization. Their argument was based on financial, bureaucratic and management aspects and they did not have an ear for the theological demand coming from the lower clergy, namely that the pastoral function was badly needed.

III. Perspectives from Below

Káldy's "theology of diaconia" petrified the church only for three decades. The major breakthrough was the *Open Letter* of Pastor Zoltán Dóka to the leadership of the Lutheran World Federation during its Assembly in Budapest in 1984. The *Open Letter* gave a thorough theological critique of the "theology of diaconia" and followed by its application as a principle of church government. He called this the "social-ethical manipulation of the gospel" and openly protested against the "theological terror" by which Bishop Káldy imposed his theology on the ministers of the church. He criticized Káldy's dictatorial conduct and demonstrated that it led to a theological deterioration and to the destruction of the spiritual and intellectual life of the church.³⁵

Dóka's *Open Letter* was not publicly discussed during the Assembly but everybody knew about it both among the delegates and members of the home-church. It was circulated as a *samizdat* among the pastors. After three decades of fearing a single man, a village pastor dared to shout the truth to the world. This was not part of the planned choreography of the Budapest Assembly!

The *Open Letter* was written while Pastor Dóka was abroad in West Germany. The church leadership hoped he would remain in the west and thus he could have been dismissed as an emigré. But he returned home at the end of August after the Assembly. He was about to be sentenced by a church court but then the charge against him was suspended due to

³⁴ A sign of promising development was that in 2000 Pastor János Ittész was elected to be the Bishop of the newly re-established Western (Transdanubian) Diocese.

³⁵ Dóka Zoltán, "Nyílt levél", *Keresztyén Igazság*, 3. szám, 1989 szeptember, pp.26-31, See the full text of the document and the reactions in English "Hungarian Lutheran Controversy", In, *Religion in Communist Lands*, 13 (1985), pp. 99-106.

international pressure. The church leaders were probably shocked to learn how many sympathizers he had.

In December 1985 Bishop Káldy became seriously ill. Stimulated by the *Open Letter* a group of pastors and laymen signed a document entitled *Brotherly Word* in March 1986 and openly criticized that diaconia becomes equal to the gospel in the teaching of the church thereby distorting and weakening the gospel. They urged that the church should be decentralized and that the election of leaders should not be based on principles alien to the church. The rights of the church, including the right to have its own schools, should be granted again. It harms the identity of the church, they argued, if it is corporally forced to be involved in politics. Engagement in politics is the right of the members of the church as citizens and not as church members.³⁶

However, the unity of those who signed the *Brotherly Word* was split within a year. The initiators, Pastor Zoltán Dóka and Pastor Gábor Ittész, disagreed with those who were willing to compromise. Professor Róbert Frenkl, another person who signed the document accepted the nomination to be the Inspector of the Southern Diocese when Bishop Harmati was elected as Bishop two years before the political changes. By 1989 he became the General Inspector of the Hungarian Lutheran Church.

By the beginning of 1989 Pastor Dóka and Pastor Ittész with a dozen pastors and laymen regularly came together discussing the burning issues of the church. In July 1989 another document entitled *Shouting Voice* was by some thirty members of a "Renewal Movement" in which they demanded radical changes in the church. the theological evaluation of the past, decentralization and the convening of the Synod.³⁷

In March 1989 "The Ordass Lajos Circle" was founded in Budapest with the purpose of promoting the recognition of Ordass' s heritage and the radical renewal of the church. Its members almost entirely coincided with Dóka's group. The great advantage of the Circle was that it was legally recognized. Pastor György Kendeh Sen, a former colleague and friend of Bishop Ordass, became its first secretary. The Circle launched (probably the first church-related) *independent* journal, *Keresztyén Igazság* (Christian Truth) which has been a medium of a dissenting voice since 1989.

³⁶ "Testvéri Szó (1986)" *Keresztyén Igazság*, 4. szám, 1989 december, pp.21-25. See John Eibner, "Pressure for Reform in the Hungarian Lutheran Church", in *Religion in Communist Lands*, 14 (1986), pp.323-6, "Brotherly Word," in *ibid.* pp. 330-31.

³⁷ "Kiáltó Szó a Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház minden tagjához", *Keresztyén Igazság*, 3.szám, 1989 szeptember, pp.1-3.