

# The Mindszenty Affair

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The removal of József, Cardinal Mindszenty from his office of Primate of Hungary and Archbishop of Esztergom, announced by the Vatican on 5 February 1974, provides a number of interesting clues to the Vatican's *Ostpolitik*. Mindszenty has evidently been a major problem from Rome's point of view in improving relations with Hungary specifically and with the communist countries of Eastern Europe in general – so much so that even in exile he had remained a stumbling block.

Mindszenty has a record of opposition to the Nazis during the war and after the war, he was equally strongly determined to resist the attacks of the communists on the freedom of religion (about three-fifths of the population of Hungary is Roman Catholic). He was eventually tried in 1949 and sentenced to life imprisonment on various patently false charges. He was freed during the Revolution of 1956, but was forced to take refuge in the United States legation (later embassy) with the crushing of the Revolution and remained there for fifteen years. In September 1971, under pressure from the Vatican and with the agreement of the Hungarian authorities, Mindszenty went into exile in Vienna, where he has been ever since.

Meanwhile the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary itself has been rather dismal. Although four limited agreements have been concluded between the Vatican and the Hungarian authorities (September 1964, January 1969, February 1972 and February 1974 – the last in conjunction with Mindszenty's dismissal), little progress has been made towards the Vatican's primary objective: the appointment of residential bishops in all sees and an adequate number of ordinands at the parish level. The picture at the moment is that the archdioceses of Kalocsa and Eger have residential archbishops and that of Esztergom an apostolic administrator. Of the eight bishoprics, only two (Pécs and Székesfehérvár) have residential bishops and the others are governed by apostolic administrators. At the parish level, the supply of ordinands is dwindling slowly and, at the present rate, the proportion of priests under 45 is expected to fall to about a quarter of the total over the next decade. The fact is that the Hungarian authorities treat the Roman Catholic Church as though it were capable of mounting a serious political challenge to its power, which it neither can nor wants to in practice.

From the Vatican's point of view, the dismissal of Mindszenty was a considerable concession, but to Budapest it was probably the minimum price for any movement at all. However, the affair has further implications. Mindszenty, as Primate of Hungary, was the legitimate guardian of the Apostolic Crown of Hungary, an object of semi-mystical veneration, which under pre-communist constitutional doctrine conferred legitimacy on its possessor. The crown was taken to Germany as the wartime pro-German Hungarian régime collapsed, fell into the hands of the Americans and has been in their safekeeping ever since. (By a curious irony, Colonel Máriássy, the former Commander of the Crown Guard, died in London not long after Mindszenty's dismissal.)

The current government of Hungary, the least royalist group ever to have ruled the country, has been almost obsessively determined to regain the crown. The removal of its keeper from office, Mindszenty, brings the desired objective a step nearer. Nor was it lost on any of the parties involved that the Vatican chose to make Mindszenty's dismissal public precisely 25 years after he was sentenced by the communists – a major concession.

But the repercussions of the Mindszenty affair go beyond Hungary. The dismissal was made public while Archbishop Casaroli, the Pope's "foreign minister", was negotiating with the Polish government in Warsaw and could well have been intended as a warning to Cardinal Wyszyński against an excessively tough stance. Although no details have been published on Casaroli's talks with Olszowski, the Polish foreign minister, both sides are said to be satisfied with their outcome. The Vatican is known to be anxious to establish full diplomatic relations with Poland and to arrange for a papal visit. The Polish episcopate, on the other hand, feels that its position could be undermined vis-à-vis the régime by any far-reaching concessions made by the Vatican.

The entire Mindszenty affair raises serious questions about the impact of the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* on the morale of Roman Catholics in Eastern Europe. Many of them will interpret the Vatican's tortuous diplomacy as weakness and will point to the fate of the Church in Yugoslavia, regarded by the Vatican as the model for relations with all communist régimes, which has come under ever increasing pressure since Tito embarked on his recentralization campaign in 1972. Evidently the Vatican feels that the position of East European Roman Catholics can only be improved by persuading communist governments that the local Roman Catholic Churches represent no threat to their rule, even if this approach necessarily implies a weakening of the position of Roman Catholicism in Eastern Europe.