

Documents

Turning the Other Cheek

The two documents below give some background to a controversy which has been simmering in the Hungarian Catholic Church since autumn 1981. It is connected with the so-called "basis communities", small communities of Catholics seeking an intensification of their spiritual life, led by Father György Bulányi, a member of the Piarist order now in his seventies. The communities have been a matter of growing concern for the Bench of Bishops and the Church's primate, Cardinal László Lékai. The bishops first discussed the basis communities in December 1976 and March 1977, and this was reported in the official Catholic weekly *Uj Ember* (New Man). The bishops concluded that the basis groups were very useful provided that they remained within the regular organisations of the Church, respected the bishops' teaching functions and enriched church life with their religious fervour. However, the bishops' doubts grew, especially over two issues: Bulányi's attitude to the Church's teaching and to the hierarchy, and his pacifist stance. The pacifist theme was taken up by other priests, and at least one openly objected to compulsory military service. This alarmed Cardinal Lékai (who is aware that conscientious objectors fall foul of the Hungarian Constitution and are liable to criminal prosecution). After a sermon preached by this priest, Father László Kovács, at a Pilgrimage of Youth in Hajos on 22 August 1981, Cardinal Lékai suspended him for six months. Shortly afterwards, Father András Gromon was suspended by Bishop Imre Kisberk of Székesfehérvár for sermons which allegedly "threatened the unity of the Church". On 6 September the Cardinal preached a sermon condemning the spreading of pacifist ideas.

The two documents below, both written pseudonymously and apparently towards the end of 1981, reflect the situation at that time. The first, "Turning the Other Cheek", describes the suspension of Father Kovács and the strong reaction against it by church

members. The second, "An Open Letter to Hungarian Catholic Dissidents", a more general survey of the state of the Hungarian Catholic Church, maintains that the Church has become far more closely, albeit subtly, subservient to the State than is generally realised. Relatively few unofficially produced and circulated documents such as these have reached the West from Hungary until now. However, according to the document below, it has become "almost customary for believers to present one another at festive occasions with carefully typed and neatly bound volumes of samizdat literature. . .". In December 1982, however, the Hungarian authorities moved decisively against producers of unofficial literature.

The conflict between Fr Bulányi and the church hierarchy has intensified since these documents were written. Fr Bulányi had two hearings with Cardinal Lékai, following which an analysis of his views was discussed by the Bench of Bishops on 9-10 March. They then adopted a harder line, and called the basis communities a "grave subversive movement". Their view of Fr Bulányi's "errors" was published in *Uj Ember*. These complex theological issues cannot be summarised adequately here. The chief point at issue, however, was Bulányi's attitude to the Church and its hierarchy: the bishops believed that he was encouraging Catholics to emphasise subjective religious experience and personal response to the revelation of the Holy Spirit in a way that might undermine the authority of the Church and the bishops. At its summer conference on 8-9 June, the Bench of Bishops voted to pass his case to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican for a final decision. Until then, Fr Bulányi was suspended a divinis, that is, he is not allowed to celebrate Mass in public, preach or administer the sacraments.

The issue of pacifism, on which Fr Bulányi also differs with the hierarchy, is central to the affair, particularly as the Hungarian govern-

ment cannot be indifferent to it. It is thought that at least one reason why the bishops have proceeded so decisively against Fr Bulányi may be that pressure was put upon them by Imre Miklós, the Chairman of the State Office for Religious Affairs. On 20 February 1982 he gave an important interview in *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom; daily Party paper) in which he spoke on the whole favourably of the government's relations with the Catholic Church, but also stated unambiguously that the State "cannot tolerate the use of religious debates as a pretext for camouflaging political efforts and violating the laws of the State. . .". Although Miklós did not refer specifically to the Catholic Church and the basis groups, it was nonetheless a clear warning that the Church could not afford to ignore, and it

One can read quite often in the Hungarian press about Latin-American or European "progressive priests". Strangely enough, hardly any public attention is devoted to the ferment in the Hungarian Catholic church¹—in particular, to the case of László Kovács. Not only the daily press but even the ecclesiastical press has remained curiously silent about him.

László Kovács, the curate of the Dominican church in Budapest, appealed to the Vatican against a ruling made against him by László Lékai, the Cardinal Primate of Hungary, "exiling" him to a country parish (next door to the notorious prison at Márianosztra). At the same time, Kovács humbly complied with the Cardinal's order.

Within a short time, the case has generated a great deal of literature, often very outspoken: many members of Kovács's flock, as well as a good number of his fellow-priests, have written to the Primate protesting against his banishment. Lékai himself felt compelled to mention the case on several occasions, for instance in the basilica of Esztergom, on 6 September 1981, and also during his visits abroad. He further reacted by suspending one of the letter-writers, András Gromon, the priest of a country parish near the capital.

In the end, Kovács himself wrote to the Cardinal, demanding that Lékai should consult his own conscience. This letter, together with the text of the order, the appeal, the condemned sermons of Kovács and his farewell speech to a gathering of young people, have — together or separately — enjoyed a wide distribution in unofficial Catholic circles.

My summary of the events and of their documentation is that of a layman, so I ask

seems that the harder line adopted at the spring bishops' conference reflects this. Clearly the Hungarian government is likely to be pleased rather than otherwise at the spectacle of dissension within the Church and has no reason to discourage it. However, widespread attempts to refuse military service would be a different matter as they would involve breaching the law. No doubt the government is also concerned lest the pacifist movement should pass beyond the bounds of the Church to Hungarian young people in general, stimulated perhaps by reports of similar movements in the GDR and Western Europe.

(For further details, see *Radio Free Europe Research, Situation Reports on Hungary*, Nos. 16, 29.10.81; 5, 31.3.82; 10, 23.7.82.)

forgiveness from those who may put the emphasis differently. The story of László Kovács is not just an internal matter for the Church. His condemned sermons urged that the right of conscientious objectors to refuse military service be recognised. The homily which the Cardinal delivered at Esztergom was even less a purely ecclesiastical matter. In this sermon, he clearly stated the Church's obligation to defer to the State in the case of armed action. The various letters of protest demand the genuine separation of State and Church (as well as Party and Church); they call upon the ecclesiastical hierarchy to stand up for freedom of conscience, not to throttle it.

Radical Catholics

The new radicalism emerging within the Church is in many ways a fundamentalist movement. It wants to strip away from the Church and its teaching two thousand years' symbiotic accumulation of cosy relations with the secular power. It demands a return to the attitude of Jesus and of primitive Christianity, brooking no compromise with the State; its aim is to become the support of the oppressed, the poor, the minorities, of voluntary communities, *against* the secular power of the day. A very important feature of this new movement, distinguishing it from similar groupings elsewhere — for instance, in Latin America — is its strong emphasis on non-violence. Like Gandhi's original teachings, or those of Martin Luther King, it is firmly against *any* kind of violence, be it individual or institutional, even if it is in self-defence or in national defence, and whether it is "just" or "unjust" in its motives.

This fundamentalism is expressed in a demand for the principles of the Gospel to be united with daily life. The fact that Christianity has ceased to be the state religion is considered to be a favourable development. It strongly rejects the excuse that the Church must be subjected to the powers-that-be, and that spiritual rights must be voluntarily curbed for the sake of safeguarding the existence of the Church. In the view of these radicals, the existence of an atheist state power — a similar situation to that of primitive Christians two thousand years ago — offers a marvellous opportunity to the Church: it could attract ever-increasing numbers of people, instilling in them the true ideals of Jesus — solidarity of the faithful, patience towards the “enemy”, if need be, self-sacrificing humanism. An essential condition of all this is, of course, that the Church should support, and not punish, those devoted Christians who are willing to work in the spirit of Jesus Christ. The Church cannot serve two masters, they believe.

Contrary to the movement of the “peace-priests”, supported by state subsidies, these radicals suggest a new attitude to the dangers of war, especially those of nuclear war. The Church (the Hungarian Catholic Church in particular) must draw its conclusions from the bankruptcy it suffered during the Second World War, when it failed to stand up against Nazism. It must withdraw its support from every kind of military action, and it must fight for the right of conscientious objection.

The spokesmen of this new attitude remind us that the Vatican itself — and quite a few state constitutions — recognise the right of conscientious objection, the right of refusal to kill or to take up arms. Objectors should be allowed to spend a period (not exceeding that of statutory military service) doing useful social work, in conditions safeguarding their human dignity. There is an example for this even in Hungary: towards the end of the 1970s, the Nazarene sect made a bargain on these lines with the State (only after a long series of prison sentences, it is true).

Our radical Catholics, however, are setting their sights higher than that. Quoting the various pronouncements of Pope John Paul II, they insist that only by rejecting every kind of militarism, including all ideologies of self-defence, can mankind break out from the diabolical circle that is holding humanity captive: the possession of weapons capable of destroying the world, and the division of countries into two hostile camps.

This pacifist movement within the Catholic Church is linked to the teaching of György Bulányi, the Piarist theology professor. His followers call their movement the “Basis” movement — that is, one based on small, close communities. These communities work at creating linkages between the faithful and ecclesiastical office-holders, in a non-hierarchical manner, but without upsetting the accepted framework of religious observances. During the terror régime of Rákosi in the ‘fifties, Bulányi and many other small-community leaders were imprisoned. The State — and the “peace-priests” — still disapprove of their activities today.

The precepts of Bulányi set out in great detail the ideas of a “religion of love”, discarding the remnants of medievalism in religion and drawing up the desired shape of a Church that would refuse to serve the secular power and would reject all violence. There are about a hundred such small communities active today, trying to put Bulányi’s teachings into practice. There are also many priests who are in favour of Bulányi’s attitude. László Kovács belongs to their number: in his appeal to the Pope, he said that it was Bulányi’s influence on him (about ten years ago) that led him to an unequivocal interpretation of the Gospel and also to more effective pastoral work.

Of course, the activities of György Bulányi are not the only source of the varied movements of Catholics criticising the official Church. Similar trends have been noticeable in Catholic public opinion for several years past. There is a growing literature of criticism spreading among Catholic believers, and not only among the followers of Bulányi.

It is, for instance, almost customary for believers to present one another at festive occasions with carefully typed and neatly bound volumes of *samizdat* literature; there is an unspoken duty to copy-type it and pass it on to others. Older or younger priests, novices and simple believers are practising this kind of thing, probably in greater numbers than laymen would guess. (Lay *samizdat* literature has until now dealt only with similar activities in the Protestant churches.) The case of Kovács has become a *cause célèbre* precisely because the State Office for Religious Affairs has become tired of this ferment and instructed the Catholic hierarchy to stamp it out.

The story actually began in 1979: a group of Catholic priests and believers submitted a petition in that year to the Bench of Bishops,

asking it to intervene — in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council — in favour of the principle of unarmed service. Today — thanks, in no small measure, to the “peace offensive” of John Paul II — this demand is better known and more popular than ever. The demand has been reinforced by the imprisonment of a number of Catholics for their refusal to do military service. This outrage has created a widespread solidarity with the victims.

On the other side, the picture is simpler. The Office for Religious Affairs is determined to destroy the pacifist movement, and therefore puts pressure on the Primate to dismiss and discipline the recalcitrant priests and to challenge a strong body within Catholic public opinion — as he has done in his sermon at Esztergom.

The Pilgrimage to Hajós

Hundreds of people were attracted to the church where László Kovács usually officiated, many coming from far beyond his parish. His fame as a pastor to the young spread throughout the country. Thus, in 1981, he received an invitation to a Pilgrimage of Youth, to be held on 22 August in the village of Hajós. This was one of those events that have been viewed with increasing suspicion by the Office for Religious Affairs — in particular since they are increasing in frequency with time — and one of their officials has always been present on these occasions. About twenty priests and five hundred youthful believers took part in this pilgrimage.

The sermon which Kovács preached at Hajós justifies his fame, even in the eyes of non-believers. He is preaching the complete renunciation of all and every kind of violence; the effect on his audience must have been electrifying. He does not mince his words in giving his views, and his youthful, sometimes even slangy, style must have made his message even more telling.

His sermon invites us on a dangerous adventure: to love our enemy. Jesus has no need for hand-clapping, he is no high wire acrobat, said Kovács. But his path is as narrow and as perilous as a single wire over the Niagara Falls. The question for us is: do we dare to sit in Jesus's wheelbarrow, when he promises us to push us across safely? The dangers he speaks of are only too real:

If we are Christians, we must not take the oath that would compel us to kill. And if we refuse to kill, we must also re-

fuse military training for licensed murder. . . We must suffer blows, jail if need be — and we must not hit back. We must preach to the violent, the way Jesus did. . . For those who fail to bring up their children in this spirit, religion is — as Marx said — opium only, never mind how many times they take communion.

The Cardinal's Judgement

The suspension of Kovács was not entirely due to his sermon; he and his fellow priests have been declaring these principles for many years. But it probably precipitated his punishment, because the bishop in whose diocese the village of Hajós is had been instructed by the Office for Religious Affairs — two days before the pilgrimage — to forbid Kovács to speak. Kovács protested against this and openly asked his audience whether he should speak or not. The prohibition in fact came rather late, and Kovács was told of it only on the spot in Hajós; so the bishop told the local priest to “find a solution”. In the end the priest allowed Kovács to “comment” on the matter; so Kovács openly told his audience why he was not allowed to preach a proper sermon. In this manner, although on the face of it he only protested against outside intervention, he also pointed an accusing finger at the higher clergy.

The Cardinal's judgement gives no reason why Kovács was not permitted to speak at Hajós. Disregarding the agreement between the parish priest and Kovács, the judgement mentions only “refusal to obey” and “scandalous behaviour”. Both accusations have in fact been refuted by the reports of the parish priest and of the diocesan Vicar-General: both can be read among the documents of the case. The reports emphasise that the prohibition caused “very great tension” among the audience: that was the main reason why a “comment” by Kovács was permitted, as only in this way could a peaceful conclusion to the pilgrimage be ensured.

In his appeal to the Vatican, Kovács also refers to a point in ecclesiastical law, namely that the Cardinal did not wait for his replies in respect of the questions put to him in the course of disciplinary proceedings, although the priest conducting them had given Kovács two weeks to prepare his replies in writing. Instead, on the basis of “*ex conscientia informata*” (“in the certain knowledge of . . .”) he summarily sentenced Kovács to the suspension of his priestly rights and duties, directing him to reside in the parish of Márianosztra.

According to experts in canon law, the principle of "ex conscientia informata" must be used only in cases of "secret sins". Therefore the judgement of the Primate was not only iniquitous, it was also unlawful.

However, neither Kovács nor his defenders believe — and in this they have been quite outspoken — that the Cardinal acted on the basis of wrong information or unsound legal advice only. There is only one sentence in the judgement factually condemning the teachings of Kovács:

I must also emphasise that he [Kovács] publicly criticised the regulations prescribing military conscription according to the laws of the State. His views on this matter may be interpreted in the sense that military service is a matter for personal conscience only.

This is the crux of the matter. Even a layman can clearly see that the first half of the quoted sentence denies the right of free criticism — a right enshrined in the Constitution. True believers in the Catholic creed are, on the other hand, voicing their despair, in so far as the second half of the sentence denies one of the strongest commands of their religion.

Not so much "thou shalt not kill", but rather that no one should do anything against his own conscience. Whether one is a member of the Church or not, these words do not inspire trust, coming as they do from the mouth of the highest dignitary of the Catholic Church.

The Homily at Esztergom

The Cardinal himself did his best to ensure that this disciplinary action should not seem to be a personal matter concerning only Kovács, nor indeed that it should be regarded as an internal matter for the Church. Three days before the judgement was issued (sentencing Kovács to the ecclesiastical equivalent of police surveillance and internal exile), in a widely reported speech, he strongly condemned the spread of pacifism among Catholic believers. He read a ceremonial Homily on 6 September 1981, commemorating the 125th anniversary of the re-consecration of the basilica in Esztergom — the seat of the Cardinal Primate of Hungary for many centuries. His speech was published in the official Catholic journal on 20 September. The "severe punishment" meted out to Kovács by him on 9 September was already widely known by then among many Catholics.

First the Cardinal drew a parallel between the day of the re-consecration in 1856 and our own days. He paid homage to the three patrons of the Church: St Stephen, the Emperor Franz Joseph (!) and . . . well, it is difficult to say whether the Office for Religious Affairs or the Political Committee of the Communist Party? . . .

The presence of King Franz Joseph at the re-consecration of the new basilica in Esztergom proved that the King had this holy day of the Hungarians — indeed, the whole Hungarian people — near to his heart. This was the meaning of his speech, addressed to Cardinal Scitovszky, who received the King on his arrival by boat from Vienna: "I am following in the footsteps of the great king, St Stephen and, like him, I consider the happiness of all my subjects as my principal duty. I assure you, my Lord Cardinal, and all inhabitants of this country, of my imperial goodwill." The Church has no other duty today than 125 years ago: to unite by the bonds of peace the whole community, Church and State alike.

It might be conceded that the head of the Catholic Church might look at 1981 in the spirit of 1856 — that is, he might discern a historical moment similar to the antecedents of the great compromise of 1867, between the house of Hapsburg and the Hungarian nation. But it is also proof — if proof be needed — of his adherence to the loyalist traditions of Hungarian Catholicism, and of his rejection of the Polish model; a precondition of the position of the Polish Catholic Church is the physical and spiritual independence of the Church, however precarious that may be.

Next, the Cardinal touched upon the disputes raging within the Church, saying: "A Church at odds with itself cannot radiate peace to the world outside". He cited St Paul, who had threatened with "dire punishment" all those who dared to criticise the hierarchy.

As to whom and what he was aiming at, this was clearly revealed in the historical examples he quoted. Without exception, he cited only those occasions — in words of praise and gratitude — on which the Hungarian State had been fighting wars or civil wars:

Here, before our basilica, stands the statue of our king, Louis the Great, who fought many wars and conquered many lands.

Then:

Can we, as Hungarians, condemn St Stephen for protecting this country against foreign invaders, for safeguarding the unity of our country against the revolt of the heathen tribal chieftains?

Finally, he put his finger on the sore spot:

I, the Primate of this country, am disturbed to see that certain extremist priests and members of our flock are inciting our youth to refuse their bounden duty of military service. What is worse, these people are doing this with reference to the Bible and the teaching of our Church; they are goading our young people to say "Nay" to military service, precisely because they are Catholics of profound faith. And my disturbance turns to shock when I hear that there are young people who obey their siren song.

Quoting more historical parallels — St Ladislav against the Cumans, John Hunyadi against the Turks — Cardinal Lékai clearly and openly stated: "Self-defence is justified, strength is right". He avoided making the Marxist distinction between "just" and "unjust" wars, but did utter something suspiciously similar:

To avoid all wars, that would be the ideal solution. We must struggle for this. However, this requires organised force. The Church, far from condemning this, approves of it. We must stand up against one thing only — and that is deliberate violence.

His example for "justified force" was that St Ladislav vanquished the Cumans; for rejection of deliberate violence, that St Ladislav did not allow the massacre of Cuman prisoners. Conclusion: the Cumans peacefully merged into the Hungarian nation.

The Cardinal gave not a single instance of an "unjust" war fought by the Hungarian State. Nor did he mention that the Catholic Church always gave its blessing to all wars — just or unjust — probably in words similar to those of Lékai. Alas, all those living today can only remember "unjust" wars or, at any rate, lost wars. The Cardinal did not even attempt to answer the call of Catholic pacifists. He never mentioned the terrible heritage of the twentieth century, nor did he speak about nuclear weapons, let alone the ancient Commandment: "Thou shalt not kill" . . .

In another paraphrase of St Paul the Primate stated: "There are a few amongst you

who are trying to confuse you, distorting the message of Christ's Gospel" — meaning the turbulent pacifists. In the light of the flood of letters arriving at his office, this statement caused the greatest hurt. He went beyond the command: "Render under Caesar the things that are Caesar's", and attributed the obligation for military service to Jesus Christ himself, thereby underlining the subservience of his Church to past and future belligerence.

Abandoned Martyrs

A simple layman cannot interpret the Cardinal's homily otherwise than as an open affirmation of the feudal traditions of the Catholic Church, even in the present-day context of a not too independent Hungary and a not too god-fearing state power. There is, however, nothing new in this, so one needs an explanation: why has a not inconsiderable part of Catholic public opinion reacted so angrily to this homily?

Lékai calls all those who refuse the duty of military service the "misled" who, in his words, blindly and unfeelingly turn their backs on the lessons of national history. *Uj Ember* (The New Man), the official journal of the Church, discussing the Primate's sermon, goes further and brands them as the enemies of Church and people.

This is the first time since the early 'fifties that the hierarchy has openly pilloried those believers who have suffered punishment by the State on account of their religious beliefs. It is only now that they give their blessing to measures leading to prison sentences, psychiatric "treatment" or punitive battalions. No doubt, in their view, all this comes under the concept of "rightful, organised force". Let us examine a few examples.

The doyen of those "young folk" who are bound to do military service is the mathematician Dr József Merza — he is 49 years old. When he was 47 — in 1979 — he unexpectedly received his call-up papers; no doubt, to put to the proof his openly admitted pacifism. Following six months in prison, he was transferred to a lunatic asylum, with the diagnosis "paranoid psychosis". Once released from the (so-called) psychiatric hospital after having been "cured", he lost his job as a research scientist at the Institute of Mathematics; it was a mercy that he was allowed to work there as a librarian.

His son, also József Merza, is at present enduring a two-year prison sentence, for the same reason that put his father into the psychiatric hospital.

Imre Besze was sentenced to 30 months' imprisonment in 1981 by the military court at the provincial town of Kaposvár. His "crime": he refused armed service.

Istvan Pintér, a mechanic in the city of Székesfehérvár, is currently serving in the army. At first he refused to take the oath and persisted in his refusal in the military prison for a considerable time. Finally — according to his family, under severe physical and mental pressure — he agreed to take the oath; in spite of this, he was subsequently sentenced to 33 months in a punitive battalion. Those who know this modern means of torture are saying that he would have fared better by staying in prison or in a psychiatric hospital.

All these people are Catholics — now treated even worse than the hated Nazarenes.

It is understandable that Lékai's "organised force", unaccustomed to refusal, is quite unwilling to excuse a sizeable part of the largest religious group in the country from military service. This would increase the attraction of the Church, not to speak of creating a precedent for those outside the Church. By the same token, it is also understandable that many Catholics are indignant that their Primate angrily denies those who are trying to live up to their freedom of conscience and are willing to suffer for it.

Letters of Protest

Hundreds of letters have arrived at the office of the Primate; among others, one signed by 114 believers from László Kovács's parish in Budapest. Dozens of letters were composed by groups of friends spontaneously taking action. Many priests, and more believers, have written individual letters. Many of these letters have not reached "religious *samizdat*", so only the Cardinal knows what is in them.

Every single letter, even the most condemnatory, gives voice to an attachment to the faith, to a sentiment of anguished love. Many of the writers see only weakness or misguidedness in the sentence passed on Kovács; but ever since the Homily became public knowledge, increasing numbers accuse the Cardinal of abandoning Christ and serving alien interests. Every single letter concludes with the hope of more understanding within the Church, offering prayers for enlightenment — but every writer demands that the Primate should consult his own conscience.

The mildest letter is the earliest one — from the 114 parish members — protesting only against the removal of Kovács.

Most Reverend Cardinal, our Primate

and Archbishop, We felt the profoundest shock when we heard that Your Eminence had suspended László Kovács from his priestly functions, banished him from Budapest and ordered him to stay under the supervision of the parish priest in Márianosztra. László Kovács has been not only our curate, our pastor, the leader of our small-community movement, but also our friend in Jesus Christ, a pioneer of the rejuvenation of our Church. We disagree with the accusations brought against him and find his punishment most unjust. We strongly believe that László Kovács has always been a priest most concerned with the cause of the Church, one whose greatest care has been for the young, a man willing to stand up for the sake of the teachings of Christ. Therefore, we must protest against his suspension and transfer. A copy of our protest has also been sent to the Holy See in Rome.

(114 signatures)

The following letter was signed by nine people:

We, the undersigned, do not belong to the congregation cared for by László Kovács, but we have attended Sunday Mass in his church, whenever possible. His clear and inspired sermons have attracted more and more of the faithful; besides, the spirit of Christian communion enveloping his church is rarely to be found in other congregations.

The parish priest of a small village writes:

I can only consider the "internment" of Father Kovács to be a fatal mistake. This man deserves the strongest recognition by the Church, not a punishment. I have been a witness to his words. It is my dreadful suspicion that Your Eminence has judged him not in the spirit of Jesus Christ but at the prompting of Atheism.

An additional story is that of András Gromon, the country curate who not only wrote a letter to the Primate but, in his sermon, openly made common cause with the persecuted Kovács. In his letter he emphasises that the message of the Gospel can have only one meaning, then continues:

The official teaching of the Church, deplorably though, allows the obligation for military service. But the same tenet also allows the refusal of military service when it is a matter of individual consci-

ence. Indeed — at least on paper — the Church recommends that the laws of the State should take into account those who are willing to choose this stony path, and in a humane manner. I have read Your Eminence's Homily with great dismay and anguish. To see that the Head of our Catholic Church is as good as glorifying war, through his historical parallels — today, when mankind is being threatened by the catastrophe of total annihilation. . . I deeply regret, Your Eminence, that I have to quote against you the lines of our great poet, Mihály Babits, from his review of the book *Le Trahison des Clercs*:

“There is no greater treason than the prostration of the Spirit before Facts. . . Christ always preached against War — therefore the priest who speaks of peace and fraternity, and then goes and blesses the arms, is a tragic spectacle. . . But even more demoralising for a Christian is the priest who puts not only his acts but also his words at the service of brute force and, instead of preaching peace and fraternity, preaches war and destruction. The first one may be a weak servant of God — the latter one is a traitor priest, a traitor cleric.” Nevertheless, I humbly hope, Your Eminence, that your actions are a sign of weakness and error only.

Finally, Gromon assures the Cardinal of his love for him in Christ and expresses his hope that the Cardinal's reply will similarly prove to be that of fatherly love.

Shortly afterwards, András Gromon was also stripped of his priestly rights and duties by the Cardinal.

Another group of the faithful, in a country parish, put the following questions to the Primate:

Why should we not attribute to the influence of the Holy Spirit the fact that Christ's teaching of love for your neighbour is interpreted differently by people of our age from those living in 1456? Can we not differ from John Hunyadi and St John Capistran, the defenders of Belgrade* against the Turk? Did not Jesus embrace the whole of humanity in his love?

Why should it be disobedience against the disciplines of the Church, if someone

refuses to take the oath compelling him to kill? Is not the human conscience that prefers to turn the other cheek the true repository of Christ's spirit?

Why should it be an impermissible excess, if someone is so firm in his belief in Jesus Christ that he is willing to suffer prison and punishment for his faith?

Are not these people the ones who should be embraced by the Purple Robe? Is not Your office that of the protector of our Church, following God's will?

We implore you, our Father Archbishop, to help us with your understanding and love, instead of repudiating us.

Those letters which deal with the case of Kovács and the Homily together, are usually longer and more argumentative. Here is one from a nun:

I am unwilling to assume that even atheists of good will would sing the praises of a distant past when dismemberment and the stake were matters of course. Our criterion is Jesus Christ and his Gospel, not the attitudes of the Middle Ages. “Force” and “Violence” are but two words for the same thing: let us not forget the Fifth Commandment, which does not admit of circumlocution. Is it not a sad failure of ours, that the desire for power, in the course of centuries, has cast this Commandment into abeyance, even among Christians?

Our Lord Jesus Christ promised that the gates of Hell would have no power over his Church — but he gave no guarantee for the survival of the Hungarian Catholic Church. This would require our own contribution too.

I know only too well what it means to live in a socialist state. I spent seven and a half years in prison. Therefore, I cannot comprehend why it is that single persons, in their sixties or seventies, who have dedicated their lives to the service of God, are still afraid? Of what? What could happen to them? Nobody is cast before lions nowadays . . . maybe not even in prison. The worst that could happen would be a reasonably furnished room, with plenty of opportunity for communing with Our Father and His Holy Son. Not to speak of the irreplaceable brotherly and sisterly love of millions, paying homage to a courageous witness to God. Not to speak of the rewards of a clear conscience, and the

*At this time, Belgrade was a Hungarian fortress-town — *Ed*.

knowledge that the seed falling to the ground would grow into a harvest a hundredfold.

A couple (parents of six children) write:

What is the use of our Holy Father making a pilgrimage to Hiroshima, when the Primate of our country glorifies military might? We are praying that our children should not become soldiers but people living a life of creative love. It will be difficult to beat swords into ploughshares if the smiths are to find themselves up against the discipline of the Church.

We know the blessed service given by our Father Kovács. Why put a stop to this? Will there be fewer Hungarian soldiers in consequence of his teachings? Five million soldiers died in the First World War — and how many more in the Second? . . .

Mrs. J. B.:

I have been deeply distressed by your Homily, Your Eminence. Not only have you disregarded Christ's command to love our enemies — you have also given a wholly anachronistic meaning to our love for the fatherland. All peace-loving people have been deeply shocked by your sermon.

Owing to our lack of love, we in the Catholic Church have gradually lost the majority of workers and peasants. We ought to learn from this painful fact and renew our lives in Christ, lest we may lose all peace-loving people. A leader anointed by the Lord ought to know the mind of his flock. He ought to know about the shock he has caused by his Homily and by his unjust treatment of László Kovács. We must not sacrifice our best priests on the altar of secular power. The danger is that not only our unfortunate country but our Church too would be split from top to bottom.

An elderly priest:

Where does the Gospel tell us that we should distinguish between "authorised violence" and any other kind of violence? Hitler's army was an "organised force" — should the German Catholic Church have praised it for this reason?

A group using "revolutionary violence" may become, from one day to the other, the possessor of power, an "organised force"; perhaps, they only had better weapons or were more skilful in the art of killing. What is the difference in kil-

ling, yesterday and today?

Personally, I am ready to bear the cross of my vocation; I suffered six months in prison in 1953 and did a stretch of forced labour in the coalmines. Now it is just the confiscation of my passport I have to suffer. Why the frequent transfers, why a new start almost every two years? I have no rest, though the end of my road is near.

A curate in Budapest:

If it were not so tragic, one could find your fine distinction between "War" and "Violence" quite amusing, Your Eminence. Is there murder without violence? And what about the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ who preferred to die rather than to defend himself? Should not his example stop all circumlocutions? The humble and the mighty should become one in the Church of Christ. But this is possible only if they are of one heart, of one belief, and both are prepared to reject service to two masters. Look into your own conscience, Your Eminence, I implore you! . . .

Another country priest tries to analyse the Homily of Cardinal Lékai. He challenges the statement that 1856 and 1981 are comparable from the point of view of the Church:

The régime today does distinguish in practice between believers and unbelievers. It tramples underfoot the basic tenets of humanism day by day. There is no freedom of religion, there is no freedom of conscience, in spite of their being enshrined in the Helsinki Agreement.

One unchanging goal of this régime is the elimination of religion.

On the question of the proper attitude to violence, the writer refers to the various pronouncements coming from the Vatican:

Our problem today is not whether a war is "aggressive and unjust" or "defensive and just". The problem today is the protection of all mankind. Peace can only be one and indivisible: we must condemn every kind of violence.

There are some of us who prefer to be faithful to God and not to Moloch; why banish them (one suspects) on secular instructions? We ought to be in the forefront of the struggle to achieve an honest accord: if someone cannot square with his own conscience the use of weapons, and the oath obliging him to kill his fellow human beings, he should meet understanding and not prison; he should

be allowed to do some useful work for the sake of the country. We find examples of this in many other countries. In fact, we can point to an example even in our own country — but not in respect of Catholics.

I concede that the thoughts of Your Eminence are those of a realist; I, however, cannot accept and follow them. I do not dare to accept a shallower truth in the face of God's Truth.

Preach us the Gospel, Your Eminence, in its purity. This will at once dissolve the tensions you mentioned, and make "one shepherd, one flock" of our Catholic Church again.

Observations of a Layman

Having tasted these letters, I find it difficult to switch back into the style of an objective chronicler.

If we look at these internal critics of the Church, we can distinguish (perhaps somewhat arbitrarily) two main streams among them. The first, larger, group does not urge structural changes and does not deal with the interpretation of the Gospel. Their concern is the intrusion of state power into the everyday life of the Church: the activities of the "peace-priests", the difficulties of religious tuition (in schools and seminaries alike); the veto power of the Office for Religious Affairs regarding consecrations and nominations. These critics demand more courage from the hierarchy, they urge the genuine separation of Church and State, no matter how difficult. This group is growing in numbers, swollen by successive generations of thoughtful novices.

The list of grievances is long, from the overlordship of the State (based on ancient rights of patronage) to the obstacle race simple believers must run in the practice of their religion. The main anxiety of the critics is their conviction that the compliance of the hierarchy would actually weaken the influence and attraction of the Church, not strengthen it.

The other, somewhat smaller, group — whilst sharing the same concerns and demands — cannot see how the Church could regain its stature without a thorough structural and spiritual rejuvenation. In their view, the lack of a dialogue between the hierarchy and the masses of the faithful can serve only the interests of the State. They demand a simpler, more popular, more inspiring interpretation of the Gospel. In essence, they want to scrape off the feudal barnacles of centuries

from the body of the Church.

It follows from the nature of such criticism that its spokesmen are also experimenting with the creation of livelier, more intimate communities. The small communities acting in the spirit of Bulányi, although numbering over a hundred, are only one element in this radical movement.

Of course, we could divide the critics according to their attitude to tradition. Many of them — especially the older ones — draw their optimism from the thousand-year history of Hungarian Catholicism. They think that a more courageous Church could fulfil a national role, similar to that of the Polish Church. Others, although respectful of accepted ecclesiastical rules, also want to reassess history. They point to the subservience to Hapsburg rule always shown by the Church and to its immense landholdings up to the Second World War; in their view, both the blessing of arms that helped Hitler and the present weak-kneed subordination to the communist power are a direct consequence of that past.

These critics, then, rely less on the national character of the Church and tend to draw their arguments more from "universalist" sources: from the Gospels or from the general history of mankind. Non-violence, for example, has very shallow roots in Hungarian Catholicism. This kind of radical pacifism, the complete refusal to serve in the army, has so far been the attitude of tiny sects, usually looked upon with some contempt by Catholics (never mind ecumenism). For this reason, the allies of the State within the hierarchy are trying to isolate the small communities by slandering them as "sectarian".

Of course, since all these people are members of the same flock, their differences are never as profound as those of secular movements. The indignation caused by the Cardinal's Homily swept up not only the small communities but a very large part of general Catholic public opinion too — they all reject his arguments in favour of the State. The small communities themselves are — needless to say — no sectarians. They expect the Church to become stronger by supporting the groups and the outspoken priests, by upholding freedom of conscience. The Cardinal accuses them of wanting to disarm the nation. Their reply to him is that armaments are not only against Christ, they are also against the nation. "Universalist" or "nationalist", both trends have the same direction.

It is not quite clear yet whether all Catholics

desirous of renewal would actually embrace pacifism. It is not impossible that the radicals among Catholics will remain the only ones demanding the right of refusal to bear arms. Be that as it may, it is certain that their example, their stand taken in the spirit of age-old struggles for civil rights, will keep awake the conscience of believers and laymen alike.

Laymen and believers, they must all stand up for the defence of these rights, in the name of democracy. And we could all learn a lesson from them: by their defiance, they may show us the way to peace with honour in a heavily rearméd East-Central Europe.

MIKLÓS HARASZTI

An Open Letter to Hungarian Catholic Dissidents

"Jesus Christ promised that the gates of Hell would not prevail against his Church . . . but he did not promise that the Hungarian Catholic Church would survive — this depends on us", said someone to me recently. Indeed, it seems that the Hungarian Catholic Church is ceremonially proceeding towards collapse. We all know that the numbers of priests are decreasing, as fewer and fewer young people contemplate this career; still, I do not believe that the shortage of priests alone should mean the end of Catholicism here. There is a much greater danger: the Church is being successfully diverted from its vocation. And, since this is taking place with pomp and circumstance, with smiling appearances on television, anyone who sounds the alarm is unlikely to command attention. Friends of the alarmist would soothe him, as they did the blind beggar crying out to Jesus: "Son of David, have pity on me"; others would consider him a mischief-maker, one who does not think realistically.

I trust I am not one of the latter, nor a hopelessly shouting blind beggar. I am just a simple believer. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe that He set out our tasks for all time, according to the age and to circumstances. But without appeasement! We must believe in the whole Christ, we cannot narrow Him down; and we must not allow others to distort Him. "Sober human considerations" must not be allowed to do this — not even for the sake of more effective pastoral care.

The crisis of the Hungarian Catholic Church — in spite of its magnitude — is so successfully covered up that the sheer fact of saying aloud: "There is a crisis", must have some significance. I cannot do more than say this at present.

I am writing this under a pen-name — but not because I am doing something shameful or criminal; I am confident that these lines are well within the rules of the Constitution. It is

not my aim (in the short or in the long term) to overturn the current regime; no Christian person or group would want to do that. I do not intend to organise political action against the system. My calling is not in politics, only in the service of the Gospel. However, I feel I have to disguise my identity, because the communist state always tends to interpret the law according to its own interests. I must avoid becoming an entry on some "blacklist". I do not want to be followed, spied upon, exposed to harassment, to be limited even more in my freedom of movement — all these would prevent me from pursuing my true vocation, that is, pastoral care.

Marxist Catholicism

According to Marx, religion is the consequence of alienation. In his "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Laws", he writes as follows about capitalism:

This state, this society, produces religion: a world view turned inside out.

After all, capitalism is a world turned inside out.

This statement is often swept under the carpet nowadays in the countries of so-called "socialism" — after all, the disappearance of religion is hardly likely in the near future. At the same time, it is only natural that those in power should attempt to prove in practice this important tenet of their ideology; they would like to achieve the alienation of religion, its representation of a "world turned inside out". This is not a very difficult task: all they have to do is to ensure that leading posts in the Church are filled by men who (willingly or not, it is all the same) are prepared to serve the interests of the secular power. Having settled this, they can even proclaim the independence of the Church — at least as far as appearances go. Once this has been achieved, they have to interfere only infrequently in

ecclesiastical matters — church leaders will follow the rules of the game.

The cunning of worldly leaders is truly admirable: they can lay down the rules of the game in ecclesiastical terms. For instance, they recognised that — in order to create a “world turned inside out” — the education and training of priests can be entrusted to people who are alien to the crying needs of the faith, who will teach a distorted view of the world to their pupils.

The fierce “peace-priests”, the army of those tarred with a left-wing brush, are gradually fading into the background — they were too openly and blatantly the mouthpiece of state direction and interventionism. The style of state policies has become more refined: the leadership of the Church will gradually be handed over to people who are honest and sincere, who have proved their faith through imprisonment; the only snag is that they are rigid traditionalists who have not learnt from their own past. They would be most surprised if told that their attitudes are doing harm to the Church. Unfortunately, with their principles, their value system, their educational methods, they simply cannot rise to the challenge of the present; thereby they are hindering those entrusted to their care. The novices therefore cannot find their bearings in the world, they will harbour all sorts of complexes, their capacity for establishing human linkages will wilt and decay. Once they become priests, they cannot properly assess their true tasks in pastoral care, they do not really understand other people. It is to be feared that the education of priests may become the “opium for the people”. Certainly, it is opium for the priests themselves: a distorted personality and attitude induces a kind of stupor that paralyses the will for action, prevents the recognition of, and resistance to, disguised oppression. Is this not what we may call alienation?

The most dangerous area where this strategy operates is the manipulation of the priest’s vocation. The majority of those who want to enter a seminary do not really have, strictly speaking, a priestly vocation; rather, it is that of a “prophet” or perhaps, “prophet-priest”: to bring good tidings to the poor, release to prisoners, sight to the blind . . . or just to proclaim the year of the Lord’s grace (cf. Isaiah 61: 42 and Luke: 18-19). It is true that in Hungary today there is hardly any legal possibility for responding to this vocation outside the ranks of the priesthood; on the other hand, throughout the history of the

Church, “charisma” has been gradually and increasingly expropriated by the higher clergy. Therefore it would be more than difficult to find a suitable frame for the vocation of “prophet-priest”. The novice may speak of his priestly vocation, but really he means the call to become a “prophet”. His superiors are also talking in terms of the priestly vocation, but they mean, on their part, an identification with priestly institutions, a formal loyalty to the Church, nothing more. The novice slowly completes his five years’ course and hardly notices at the end that the “priestly vocation” he had been taught is far from his original “call”. Everything is in aid of this formalism: from the daily routine, through lifeless ideologies, to the virtual automation of spiritual life. The novices are in no position to control the shape of their vocation, they are lost in the jungle of ideology and dry-as-dust theories. Unconsciously, they become alienated from their true vocation, and never realise that they are, in fact, serving the interests of the rulers. Their manipulation is so subtle that they take it for liberty. (This is the mechanism so aptly described by Marx in his discussion of the “fetishist character of goods”.) Vocation thus becomes priestly bureaucracy. I believe it is here that we should look for the reasons why there is such a large number of “embittered seminarists”.

We do not really know the true relationship between society and our own field of work. Internal criticism within the Church is necessary, but in our case we should dig deeper. Our problems are rooted in the political and social system in which we are living. Our task is, therefore, to unmask the manipulative activities and the inherent alienation of this system itself; this is the only way to reach Truth and to enable us to devote ourselves to our Christianity, to Jesus Christ. This work of disclosure, analysis and evaluation would have an enormous effect.

The Oppression of the Church

The State has complete control over all churches and governs ecclesiastical life by indirect methods. We have lost every means for legally valid defence. The priest would turn in vain to his bishop, the novice to his superior, a parish member with a grievance to his priest. In actual practice, every single institution or office that ought to protect the freedom of the Church acts against such protesters. Initiatives by individuals are suppressed, hopes of a community are dissipated, flocks are dispersed — all in all, the foundations of

the Catholic Church are in danger. There are many who are tempted by the thought: let us leave this vicious circle!

There are some amongst us who do believe that the State is willing to enter into an honest dialogue with us, if only we were ready for it. The two-faced policy of the "peace-priests" has seduced many a priest of good will. These people do not realise that every new agreement between State and Church, trumpeted around the world as a great new achievement, only gives back ridiculous crumbs of the rights originally due to the Church of Christ and to all human beings. In exchange for these "concessions", they become the tools of totalitarian state power; a power that has never given up its aim to gag every kind of dissident. Their slogans are "compromise" and "realism". All right, but a compromise is meaningful only if it is being kept by both partners. Let me quote from an essay by the Polish activist Adam Michnik:

Communist power has expunged the word "compromise" from its vocabulary. They accept it as a policy only if it is forced upon them. Otherwise compromise with them only leads to self-destruction. (*New Evolutionism.*)

He is speaking of the Polish religious grouping "Znak", but his words apply with even greater accuracy to our "peace movement". To continue quoting Michnik:

This group [Znak] consented, under pressure from the State, to replace its members of parliament; this was the first step on a road of compromise. Because of their concessions, the Znak-MPs have lost their authority, in the eyes of both the State and society as a whole. In spite of its powerlessness, our society does value courage and steadfastness. The members of the Znak group stepped on to the slippery slope that leads from compromise to becoming compromised. Hard words, maybe, but — alas — true.

And what about our own "peace-priests"? What is the use of a flood of marvellously courageous articles, when it can happen — as it has recently — that a bishop reports a priest of another diocese because he holds catechism classes at his presbytery? When policemen surround the pupils and take their names, in order to intimidate them and their parents? When the State Office for Religious Affairs holds dozens of snapshots taken at religious gatherings as material exhibits against the participants? What about those ecclesiastical office-holders who are using

similar underhand ways to remove "awkward" people? What should we believe? The rousing declarations about the freedom of the Church, or the statement by an official at the Ministry of Home Affairs: "Everything concerns us, including whether you are a churchgoer or not. Everything is in our hands, everything depends on us."

Another, even more dangerous, aspect of the opting-out process is that of becoming an informer. Some people may be kept on a string, as a result of some moral peccadillo; they are forced to "grass" for the files of the Office for Religious Affairs. Others turn informer simply because they cannot bear the constant tension. These "supergrass" priests are perhaps the most dangerous, as they are inside the Church. They are to be pitied most, too, as they are degrading both their own moral being and their vocation. And, of course, they cannot opt out: on the contrary, they are locked in. They remain friendless, even among their new "friends", who also despise them. This is the road to tragic perdition and moral depravity, not that of breaking out.

There is also the army of the inert, that of "loyalist" church members. They are realists too: they may reject the tragi-comic kowtowing of others, but they also avoid anything that may throw doubt upon their reliability. György Konrád, the well-known "dissident", had these people in mind, when he said at the 1977 Venice Biennale:

The concentration camps of Hitler embodied the absolute Evil of our century. They were established not by mad criminals but by loyal — over-loyal — citizens. The epitome of the totalitarian state is not the executioner but the model bureaucrat: the man more loyal to the State than to his friends.

Nevertheless, the majority of priests — especially the younger ones — reject these crooked ways of "opting out". They are throwing themselves into their work with enthusiasm, they visit the sick, help the needy, look for new avenues of pastoral care, gather followers around themselves. Their activities are impressive and effective — but not without their snags. In exchange for being able to work relatively undisturbed, they may give up another, equally important factor of their vocation: the creation of a confident and strong consensus among the clergy, as a result of the harmonisation of their daily work. Being convinced that they are doing their duty in the proper manner, they do not realise

that their solidarity towards their fellow-priests will be lost along the way: their moral obligation to the Church will be subtly subverted by an obligation to the powers-that-be.

There are questions galore to be answered, my friends. We should throw ourselves into the work of answering them, lest we, too, become adapted to the organic distortions of the system. "He who was born lame learns to live with his lameness." The Church has always been the repository of the noblest principles. Our Catholic Church, however — burdened by a long and often dubious history — seems to accept the surrender to Caesar, the identification with the interest of the rulers of the day. It considers that its situation cannot be changed, therefore it is not worth trying to change it.

New Responsibilities and Social Obligations

Viewing the present state of the Catholic Church, one has the impression that the Hungarian State is pioneering new methods of persecuting religion. Hungary may have succeeded in acquiring a certain respect abroad, rare among so-called socialist states; our standard of living is relatively high, there is freedom of religion, dissidents are not always thrown into prison. It is certainly true that the religious policies of our State are less crude than those of Czechoslovakia or Romania. Unfortunately, the essence remains hidden from the eyes of the innocent bystander. Maybe the Party is attempting to shape a new, national Church — a new historical phenomenon? In addition, it strives to gain the blessing of the Vatican on its actions; the execution of its moves is usually entrusted to our religious notables. This is doubly dangerous: not only may this shake the faith of many believers — it may also undermine our trust in Rome. The Hungarian method of refined religious persecution may become the paradigm for the next decade . . . or even for the next century.

This state of affairs puts the burden of new, very hard, tasks on our shoulders, priests and laymen alike. Before the Second Vatican Council, the faithful might have considered that Church and Hierarchy were one and the same thing; the problems of the Church were not quite their problems, they might have thought — so they retired into passivity. If, however, we follow the steps for renewal put forward by the Council, we cannot brush aside the problems of the Church. It is "our Church", in every sense of the word.

The Council has rejected every kind of integrationism and renounced intervention by the Church in secular matters. Many people interpret this as meaning that we must turn away from the outside world and remain indifferent to social questions and neutral towards the system of secular power — all these have nothing to do with the mission of the Church.

Far from true! Renunciation of earthly power does not mean that Christianity refuses to be present and active within social structures, and of course, this works mostly through the behaviour of individuals. It cannot mean that we should stay neutral in the cause of the rule of God on earth: it must not mean that we refuse to fight those who degrade God and Man. . .

"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we say in the Lord's Prayer. *On earth*: this means that we must accept the work and take on the responsibilities. We cannot and must not renounce responsible service to our fellow men.

Will the Hungarian Catholic Church remain faithful to the mission of Christ? This will depend on us. I can only say with St Paul: "The gifts may be different but the spirit is the same". We must shoulder our tasks to the best of our capacity. I firmly believe that some of us are allotted the task of surveying fresh ground: that of social obligations.

We are in need of written testimony that would describe our situation without embellishment and would also point out our goals in the future. The truth of our stance can be attested only by our frequent and sincere meetings with Jesus Christ himself. He is the source of Life and Truth. He is the measure of the breadth and depth of our vocation. Only through Him can we recognise the true content of our vocation. He is our example for every obligation. He came — and He is sending us — to bear witness to Truth. Therefore we must withdraw from the circle of lies and infamy; we must expose all falsehood.

We are witnesses to the slow, deliberate debasement of all religious and human values. It is our duty to join those who dare to speak out in defence of our values, be they called "dissidents" or otherwise. We must take this decisive step, and the sooner the better. I cannot believe that the complete putrefaction of our Church may somehow result in a "more favourable moment".

"MARTON HARTAI"

September 1980

Translated by Julian Schöpflin