

## Vatican Condemnation of Bulányi's Teachings

*Four years after accepting the case from the Hungarian Bishops' Conference, the Vatican's Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith has condemned important aspects of the teachings of the basis community leader Fr György Bulányi. In a letter to Bulányi dated 1 September 1986, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Congregation's Prefect, stated that Bulányi's teachings contain "ambiguities" with respect to the nature of revelation, "misconceptions" about the authority of the hierarchy, and "relativism" regarding the New Testament. The Cardinal also found some of Bulányi's views "dangerous". No mention was made in the letter of Bulányi's pacifist views, to which the Hungarian state and the Bishops' Conference are in fierce opposition.*

*Cardinal Ratzinger's letter was published in the 14 June issue of the Hungarian Catholic weekly Új ember along with an accompanying statement by the new Primate of Hungary, Archbishop László Paskai. According to Ratzinger the condemnation was made public because Bulányi provided "unsatisfactory" answers to the questions raised in the letter. However, Paskai said that the Sacred Congregation sanctioned publication of the condemnation because the "foreign media . . . gave a political slant to the case, condemning the Bishops' Conference while disregarding the problems affecting Catholic teaching and church discipline". The publication of the Ratzinger letter coincided with the end of a long series of negotiations between the Vatican and the Hungarian state which resulted in the appointment in March 1987 of Archbishop Paskai as Primate and the completion of the Hungarian hier-*

*archy with the filling of three vacant sees in June.*

FROM THE CONGREGATION OF THE FAITH, No. 64/82.  
Rome, 1 September 1986.

Reverend Father,  
The Congregation of the Faith, in accordance with its agenda of June 1984, scrutinised certain (type-written) works attributed to you, as well as some other documentation relating to your teachings. These writings have received widespread attention in various circles in Hungary, particularly among the so-called "basis communities".

This investigation brought to our attention a number of teachings which are unsustainable, and were found to be contrary to the authoritative rules of Catholicism — indeed, they might imply a denial of revealed Truth. In some of your teachings, ambiguities were found in respect of the nature of the Holy Writ contained in the New Testament; your interpretation of the values inherent in church teaching and in dogmatic formulae seems to us to be wrong; there are also misconceptions about the authority of the church hierarchy.

In order to clarify these ambiguities and to establish whether the teachings mentioned should, in fact, be attributed to you (taking into consideration your special position), our Congregation wished to hold a dialogue with you. It therefore nominated a special delegate from its ranks for a personal encounter with you. The meeting between our delegate and yourself took place in Budapest towards the end of June and the beginning of July 1985. The Congregation had prepared a list of

12 doctrines taken from the text of the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council concerning the teaching office of the church; this list set out those fundamental principles of the faith which appeared to be ambiguous or obscure in your thinking.

Our delegate presented this list to you and explained the true meaning of the texts taken from the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council. He then handed these documents to you, to allow you to think them over before giving us your final answer.

On 3 June 1985, you put your signature to these doctrines, accepting their content with the following solemn declaration: "I vow to adhere to these doctrines sincerely and faithfully, and to defend them in their entirety; I undertake not to deviate from them in any of my teaching, in spoken word or in writing." You also added to the minutes containing your declaration a few words of thanks addressed to the Congregation and its Prefect, Cardinal Ratzinger, in appreciation of the opportunity given to you in this personal discussion.

In spite of these vows which you signed, our Congregation is bound to observe that not all doubts concerning your full and sincere adherence to the teaching office of the church have been resolved. The reason for this was your request to our delegate that a thirteenth proposition (formulated by you on the basis of certain quotations from the Encyclical *Dignitatis Humanae* relating to religious freedom) should be added to the list of 12 taken from the Second Vatican Council text:

Man receives the commands of divine law within his own conscience; and he is obliged to follow his conscience faithfully in order to reach God. But no-one should force him to act in contradiction to his conscience (*Dignitatis Humanae* 3) . . . consequently, he must

obey his own conscience (*Dignitatis Humanae* 11).

In the context of your pronouncements, the exact meaning of these words is not quite clear — on their own they are, of course, completely true. Naturally, no-one would try to force you to act against your conscience; but elsewhere the encyclical quoted by you teaches that

in the moulding of their own conscience, believers in Christ should pay great attention to the firm and holy teaching of the church. Because — so willed Our Lord Jesus Christ — the Catholic Church teaches the Truth; its main task is the proclamation and faithful profession of Truth alive in Christ; its main duty is to demonstrate and to justify the moral order rooted in human nature, by its authority (*Dignitatis Humanae* 14).

When our Congregation asked you to accept the texts approved by the Council, it wanted to give you an opportunity openly to express your adherence to these doctrines, which have been given to mankind once and for all and which, as they express certain aspects of revealed mystery, no future pronouncement of the church can ever change.

It seems to us, in this context, that to take only certain extracts from *Dignitatis Humanae* and then make your clear and honest acceptance of the church's teaching conditional upon them betrays a very subjective attitude on your part.

Therefore, at the close of the first stage of our scrutiny, certain doubts about your position in conflict with the teaching office of the church remained unresolved.

In the meantime, a new element has come into play, and this has given rise to the second and final stage of our investigations: in conversation with our delegate (2 July 1985), you admitted that you were the author of the work *Church Order*

and you declared:

I wrote this work on the basis of my experiences over 35 years with basis communities; in my humble opinion, it is possible that, in future, the church may adopt a structure which differs from the present one — one founded on the basis communities.

Our detailed examination of this work has unearthed a number of erroneous, dangerous and misleading statements in respect of the authoritative teaching of the church: on the apostolic succession; on the hierarchical order of the church; on the office of bishops; and on the clear distinctions between priest and layman.

We found your views on the hierarchical structure of the church and on the surrender of priestly powers to members of religious communities particularly dangerous.

For these reasons, our Congregation indicated its reservations in its letter to you of 31 January 1986, to which you gave a lengthy reply on 28 March.

Our Congregation has studied your letter with due attention. In this letter you related the story of your sufferings (in the context of the "ordeals" of the whole Hungarian Catholic Church), of your pastoral experiences and of the development of your theological thinking. Further on, you criticised — quite severely — the activities and current practices of our office. You said that our interpretation of your work *Church Order* was groundless (p. 40) and, from a scholarly point of view, lacking in seriousness. You also said that the points we had criticised might fall into the category of undefined teaching, i.e. *questiones disputatae* and, as such, no withdrawal of them should be demanded (p. 52).

Referring to the exceptions taken against your teachings, you wrote that you had no objection to

the Apostolic Succession (p. 53); however, you also stated that so far you had not found any convincing historical proof as to whether, at the time of the Apostles, one of the Twelve was actually present at every consecration. You noted in passing that another form of Apostolic Succession might also have been possible: the elected leaders of Christian communities might have received the legacy of Christ from the Apostles in a different manner (p. 52).

Further, you said that your work did not deny the reality of the difference between priest and layman (p. 54), in so far as only priests can celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments, and laymen cannot. You also added: "Not in my wildest dreams about the ordinance of the church would I wish to abolish this clear line of demarcation." You then stated your conviction that the church needed disciples who were already leaders of a group, and other disciples who, for the time being, were members of a group led by someone else. The task of the latter — in your view — was to develop into leaders proper, ready to be presented to bishops, being worthy of consecration.

Later on (p. 55) you wrote: "No-one can say Mass unless a bishop's hand has been laid upon him" and therefore the practice of your basis communities "faithfully follows this rule".

Finally, concluding your long letter, you declare: "My final answer to your request that I withdraw my assertions presented in *Church Order* can only be an unequivocal *No.*"

With regard to this letter, the Congregation would like to remind you that it is not its business to enter into theological disputations. Acting in accordance with its mission — the defence and the strengthening of the faith — it has scrutinised your work

solely from the point of view of the church's teaching, and has indicated the points which cannot be reconciled with its established doctrines.

Consequently, the Congregation does not wish to engage in any kind of disputation — about, for instance, the interpretation you give to Canon 6 of the Council of Chalcedon, an interpretation which, in any case, appears to have no historical basis. Nor do we wish to argue about various historical aspects of the development of the concept of Apostolic Succession.

Therefore, our Congregation, confining its attention to the matter of doctrinal teachings, takes note of the statements contained in your letter, although on the whole your thinking does not seem to us to be very clear; on the other hand, it reaffirms its judgement that *Church Order* (a work fairly widespread among your followers) does contain certain statements which, as they stand, have proved to be false, dangerous and misleading.

For example, taking only the core subject of your treatise, we find that whilst you concede that the Second Vatican Council laid down "the division of the people of God into two categories, and this forms the basis for the present church order", you also wish to prepare the ground for the future, and you therefore call into question "the present church order and the foundations thereof" (2.2).

In fact, when you deal with the difference between priests and laymen, all you attempt to do is to draw a dividing line "between those who have attained different levels of the universal Christian priestly vocation" (2.1.3.). You state, amongst other things, that "he who is actually leading a community is already a priest; he who is as yet only a member of a community, but has not so far formed a community, is not

yet a priest."

In your definition of the essence of priesthood, you make no mention of the special power given to priests by the laying on of hands by bishops, who are the successors of the Apostles.

Contrary to the teaching of the Council, your views about priests in general and priests in service seem to be a matter of gradation only, not one of principle.

The letter addressed to you by our Congregation on 31 January of this year reminded you that the teaching office of the church was authoritatively declared at the Council of Trent (see DS 1710, 1711, 1773, 1776) and set forth also by the Second Vatican Council (see LG 10, 18-29; PO 2). Our Congregation reaffirmed these rules in the letter entitled *Sacerdotium Ministeriale* addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church on 6 August 1983 (see AAS, LXXV (1983), 1001-1009).

Further, it has to be pointed out that your suggestions about the consecration of women (2.2.1; 2.3) are utterly contrary to the traditional teaching of the church; this was reaffirmed by our Congregation in its declaration *Inter Insigniores* dated 15 October 1976 (see AAS, IXIX (1977), 98-116).

In view of these official declarations, there can be no room for theological debate on such points.

For these reasons, and in consonance with the statement contained in your letter that you do not wish to introduce novelties into Catholic teaching at the level of authoritatively formulated principles of dogma, the Congregation requests (in the interests of those of your followers among whom your writings are widespread) that you should openly and publicly declare your full adherence to the teaching of the church, in the spirit and to the letter of the documents indicated above.

Our Congregation hereby notifies you that this letter will be published in full, the Lord willing, together with your own declaration of assent.

If, as is desired, you will openly vow your adherence to the official teaching of the church in respect of the points mentioned, then your status in canon law will be reconsidered.

The Congregation of the Faith, in sending you this letter — whose contents represent the decisions which it passed at a regular session and which were approved by the Holy Father himself — is not forgetful of the sufferings which you have endured for the Gospel of Christ in the service of your brothers and sisters. In the hope that you, as priest and monk, will find it in your soul to accept the revealed Truth of the church, so that your apostolic commitment should not be in vain (Galatians 2:2), our Congregation expects a reply worthy of a servant of the Gospel and of a priest of the Catholic Church.

Your servant in Christ:

Joseph Ratzinger

Cardinal Prefect

†A. Bovone, Secretary

*Translated from Hungarian by  
Julian Schöpflin*

*To enable our readers to put the above document into context, we print below a bibliography of published materials concerning György Bulányi.*

György Bulányi, *Church Order, English translation to be published shortly by Keston College.*

John Eibner, "Controversy in the Hungarian Church: Fr Bulányi on Trial", *The Month*, April 1987.

János Wildmann, *Das Kirchenverständnis der Katholischen Basisgruppen in Ungarn, Diploma der Theologischen Fakultät Luzern*, 1983.

"Turning the Other Cheek", *RCL Vol. 11 No. 1*, pp. 95-105.

Steven Polgar, "A Summary of the Situation of the Hungarian Catholic Church", *RCL Vol. 12 No. 1*, pp. 11-41.

"The Vicissitudes of the Hungarian Catholic Church", *RCL Vol. 12 No. 2*, pp. 215-26.

János Wildmann, "The Catholic Church in Hungary", *RCL Vol. 14 No. 2*, pp. 159-71.

Michael Walsh, "Father Bulányi's Church Order", *RCL Vol. 15 No. 1*, pp. 79-82.

"Hungarian Catholics and Conscientious Objection", *RCL Vol. 15 No. 1*, pp. 96-101.