

# Opportunities for the Church in the 'Quiet Revolution' in Hungary

LÁSZLÓ LUKÁCS

## *The Liberation of the Country and of the Church.*

The quiet revolution in 1988-90 led to the threshold of a truly free democracy. The churches in Hungary did not take part in the political struggle but the overall liberalisation process brought new freedom for them too. Perhaps for the first time in our history the principle of 'a free church in a free state' can now become reality.

One can justifiably ask why the churches stood apart from the oppositional forces while in Czechoslovakia, the GDR and Poland they played a leading part in the struggle for freedom. There are several reasons for this, and they illuminate both the advantages and the disadvantages of the position adopted by the churches.

A critical analysis of church politics in the 1970s and 1980s could rightly point out that the church — above all through its leaders — became part of the whole system of compromises created by the Kádár regime. The nation was gradually achieving a relatively higher standard of living and a greater and slowly growing degree of freedom — but in return it had to accept and justify the political system (one-party rule, the Warsaw pact etc.) and the government in power. In a similar way more and more types of pastoral activity by the church were tolerated if not legally permitted (above all in youth work), but in return the church had to give up the right to question the basically unjust and antidemocratic limitations imposed on it. What is more, it had to speak publicly and continuously in praise of the excellent and warm friendship between church and state, and thus justify the pretences of Hungarian 'goulash liberty'.

The persecution of the church from the late 1940s was legalised by the so-called 'treaty' of 1950, which remained in force until the new law on freedom of religion and conscience was introduced in February 1990. The new law created a completely new situation for the church. (The activity of religious orders had already been permitted six months earlier, in August 1989.)

Until 1990 the life of the church was strictly controlled and to a great extent governed or at least manipulated by the party-state apparatus. Since 1950 the church had been deprived of most means of evangelisation. A great variety of activities which form part of the normal life of a church were forbidden or required special permits from the state. The State Office for Church Affairs was involved in most appointments — from professors in the seminaries to parish priests in the cities. This institution played a decisive role in the life of the church at all possible levels from the hierarchy to the individual parishes. The best and most active priests could be punished by being transferred to small far-away villages, while key positions in the church could be given to priests loyal to the government. Besides the State Office for Church Affairs the secret police, too, had a special department for church affairs, and could effectively manipulate and control church activities in a more secret way. Regulations covering church activities were withdrawn during the winter of 1988-89. In June 1989 the State Office for Church Affairs was closed down, but the activities of the security services were not stopped until spring 1990.

Complete freedom of the church was proclaimed in the new law on freedom of religion and conscience. It was only at the very last moment during the preparation of the new law that the government renounced its 'right' to give preliminary approval before any bishop could be appointed by Rome. Thus the church has really regained its complete freedom — no longer do public or secret oppressive measures hinder the inner life of the church or any of its activities.

It is understandable, however, that under such circumstances the church had not been able to play an active role in the life of society and had also lost a great deal of credibility because of its compromises. It is not our task here to judge whether these compromises were really a historical necessity or whether a better solution could have been found; whether the path of compromise or the path of open confrontation might have produced more freedom for the church. The question we are asking here are: what aspects of church life and witness were able to survive four decades of oppression? And what does the heritage of this past mean for the present and the future?

### *The Heritage of the Past Forty Years.*

The parish system remained untouched even if hedged about by innumerable limitations. The churches stayed open for worship and for the administration of the sacraments. The main arteries of the

ecclesiastical blood-system were able to function; but church life shrank to mere worship; Christian life was enclosed within the ghetto of the sacristy.

The 'partial agreement' of 1964 made it possible for the church hierarchy to be restored and for bishops nominated by Rome (with the preliminary permission of the government!) to govern the dioceses. In this respect the situation in Hungary differed from that in, say, Czechoslovakia. Within the system of compromises developed from the 1970s the institution called 'the church' was invited to play a certain representative role in the life of the country. Of its very nature a symbol of freedom within society, the church was used, primarily in the context of foreign policy, to prove the existence of political freedom in Hungary. This 'shopwindow' function was naturally humiliating and harmful to the church, although it also had some advantages.

The general public continued to some extent to be aware of the church, though more and more as a great Unknown, as a Utopia, as a beautiful Illusion. When communist ideology and power collapsed in 1988-89, a great expectation was born in Hungarian society. The communists were to be blamed for all mistakes and failures, and the church was expected to find a cure for the country's social illnesses.

The two most important spheres where public opinion expected the churches to bring about instant and miraculous change were those of education and social welfare. Many people thought that Christian schools and education would immediately create a more disciplined, diligent, honest population. Similarly they believed that the restoration of the religious orders would create a better, more humane and effective health service and solve all social diseases (drug addiction, alcoholism, juvenile delinquency and so on). This expectation still exists and it really means an immense challenge, a time of grace, a *kairos* for the church — though we have to recognise the fact that the church is simply not able to respond to all the challenges and do all the work that is expected of it by the public.

### *The Spirituality of the Silent Church.*

The era of oppression was a fruitful time for the church. Christians were not involved in political life, and they therefore had a chance to create a genuine religious life based on the Gospel. It was a simple and pure life of prayer and contemplation, a life of intellectual reflection on divine revelation, a life of community where all the members learned mutual respect and responsibility, a life of solidarity and selfless service of others, not only members of the community but all

those in need and marginalised by society.

From the mid-1980s all observers of Hungarian society noticed a growing religious interest among young intellectuals. These young people wanted to find genuine meaning in their lives, to have a living, family-like community as their safe home and background, to obtain true answers to their philosophical questions, and to live in a purer and more human atmosphere.

A new generation of young Christians and a new type of religiosity were born in Hungary in the recent past. A number of these young people were not born into Christian families. Faith is not an inherited way of thinking, but a final decision taken after inner personal growth. In the countryside, in the villages, religion is mostly for the elderly, and young people are absent from the church; but in the towns, and mainly among young intellectuals, religion is a serious and exciting adventure, a deliberately chosen alternative way of life. Though relatively small in number, these young Christians are strong in their commitment to Christ, which they demonstrate not only in their activities in the church, but also in their selfless service of the poor, helping the homeless, lonely, sick and elderly.

Youth pastoral work was strictly forbidden in the 1960s (the last time priests were imprisoned for such activities was as late as 1971), but was tolerated in the 1970s. Some priests resisted all prohibitions on youth pastoral work and tried to gather young people for retreats and excursions, forming groups and helping them in their community life. Many such groups were also formed spontaneously.

The different renewal movements (for example Focolare, The Neocatechumenal Way, Charismatic Renewal, Cursillo, Marriage Encounter) gave a fresh impetus to the activity of the base communities, though their work had to be concealed below the surface of regular parish work, with all its restrictions. The various renewal movements held their first public meeting in February 1989. Nine different movements were represented at the conference, and it opened the eyes of many a bishop taking part, who learned with astonishment the joyful fact that there were so many committed lay Christians in the Hungarian church.

The base communities were formed in Hungary long before the Second Vatican Council, at a time when the very expression 'base community' was hardly known. They represented the only practical way of living a dynamic and active religious life, and right from the start young people joined them. In the course of their development over the past decades they have found their place and role in the institutional church, in three different ways.

1. There are parishes where the parish itself offers a home to the various renewal movements and base communities. The priest in such a parish wants to avoid being 'a man for all seasons'. He is aware of the role of lay Christians in the church and acts as coordinator and animator for the different communities, and also assumes responsibility for keeping them within the orthodox teaching of the church. These active and dynamic parishes can be found mostly in town; they attract many outsiders as well: the geographic boundaries of parishes do not exist any more for ordinary Christians.

2. Other base communities are formed and animated by one of the renewal movements. The most active and numerous ones in Hungary are the above-mentioned movements, together with two native Hungarian movements (Regnum Marianum and the so-called Bush). The Taizé community also exercises great attraction. Until 1989 they had to conceal their activities, and they were allowed no publicity. The international renewal movements thus help the local church in Hungary to become integrated into the life of the church in the wider world.

3. There are some base communities which have practically no link with the official church. Some of them have a strong ecumenical tendency, but some promote a deliberately arbitrary selection of different truths or biblical interpretations. Such communities show a strong inclination to become sects in that they accept only a small section of the Christian revelation and of the teaching of the church, and form small independent groups with certain Christian elements.

#### *New Possibilities and Challenges for the Church Today.*

Freedom has now come to the church as an unexpected miracle. The church is completely unprepared for the new situation: it has no intellectual, spiritual, structural or economic background to enable it to cope with freedom, and it suffers from a tremendous shortage of personnel. Religious orders can now restart their activities, but they have no houses in which to begin community life, and their youngest members are over the age of 60. Many parents want to send their children to Catholic schools but the religious orders are not yet in a position to open and run such schools; hospitals would like to use the services of nuns, but the youngest are at the age of retirement; religious instruction has been introduced as an optional subject in schools, but there are not enough teachers or catechists to teach it. The list of needs and possibilities could be continued endlessly.

The most important and urgent tasks and challenges can however be enumerated, albeit in a haphazard way.

1. The church in Hungary needs a new spiritual understanding of unity and community. One of the worst consequences of anti-religious oppression was that everybody had to work in isolation and concealment, even within the greater community of the church. The pastoral activity of individual priests was similar to the lonely struggle of partisans in war-time. The general situation strengthened feelings of solidarity within small groups, fostered personal responsibility and encouraged independent decisions; but it weakened or even destroyed any sense of the church as a whole community, and the solidarity of all the priests and lay Christians with each other. We need a conversion: the church of small catacombs has to be changed into a unified church which brings together all its members, the virtue of lonely perseverance has to be superseded by the virtues of obedience and of team spirit, and the lonely, courageous partisans have to become members of a regular army.

2. Unity and community are not simply a function of spirituality. We need some basic structures and organisations, too, otherwise the church community cannot function properly. The churches in the West are overorganised, but their huge institutions are often empty and their structures ineffective; while the churches in the East are underorganised — so much so that they can hardly fulfil their basic duties.

During the past year, plans have been laid to create five central church organisations in Hungary. A central Bishops' Conference Secretariat will cooperate with the bishops, coordinate the various interdiocesan pastoral activities, and convoke a consultative body alongside the Bishops' Conference. A Press and Media Office for the Bishops' Conference will establish regular contact with the secular media and coordinate the activity of the Catholic press and other media (from the beginning of May we have had 25 minutes per week broadcasting time on television). A Pastoral Institute will help priests to introduce innovations into their pastoral work and to include new activities in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, taking advantage of possibilities afforded by the new freedoms; and to create a system of 'model parishes' where more effective pastoral methods can be tried out. A Caritas Organisation will coordinate social work and provide more effective help to those in need. A Council for the Laity will bring together the various Catholic associations which were dissolved in 1950 and which are now able to restart their activities, and also base communities, parish councils and renewal movements.

These central organisations have been set up at national level (only the Council for the Laity has not been founded yet); their task for the future is to establish branches at diocesan and at parish level as well.

3. Up to now the basic efforts of the church have been aimed at ensuring its survival. The church of tomorrow, however, has to recognise its true essence, formulated by the Second Vatican Council: the church is a missionary church or it is no real church. Pope John Paul II has repeatedly spoken about the re-evangelisation of Europe. Hungary and all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are now in a position to start the re-evangelisation of their homelands. Generations were brought up without any idea about Christianity; a tremendous gap in knowledge has to be overcome.

For the past few decades religious instruction has been excluded from the school curriculum and could be held only in church buildings — within the ghetto of the church sanctuary. After a long debate the new parliament adopted a new bill on religious instruction. It can now be taken as a voluntary subject at school, but it is not part of the regular curriculum and it does not qualify for any kind of school certificate. It will become clear in the near future how many parents wish religious education for their children — probably far fewer than the older generation of priests and Catholic lay people expect.

The new missionary spirit in the church will have to accept the harsh fact that even Hungary has undergone a process of secularisation and that Christians have become a minority group within Hungarian society. We should renounce dreams about any kind of church of 'power and glory', but accept the role of humble servant of the nation, inviting everyone to share in God's love.

#### *Christians in the New Society.*

During times of oppression Christian life was enclosed within the intimacy of family life and the inner lives of individuals. It was impossible for Christians to play an active role in the life of society. The fields of culture, ideology, the arts, the social sciences and especially economic and political life were all closed to those who did not claim to be devoted Marxists. Most Christians changed their careers accordingly and went into engineering, or health care, or other such 'neutral' callings rather than give up their convictions.

Earlier in my article I noted the fact that the church did not take part in the recent activity of the opposition in Hungary. The church as an institution has thus distanced itself from all party politics, and the bishops have repeatedly declared their political neutrality. But this

does not mean that they feel no responsibility for the life of society. They have urged lay Christians to involve themselves in political activity and have declared their willingness to play a prophetic role in society — something which has been sadly lacking over the past few decades.

Many people initially thought that newly-gained political freedom was going to mean automatic paradise. They had the illusion that freedom can be identified with happiness. A few months with a parliament and a free press made it clear to us however that freedom must be learned, cultivated and guaranteed; otherwise it can endanger the freedom and dignity of individuals and can destroy basic human values. After decades of totalitarian dictatorship a new nightmare has taken shape: the danger of a liberal dictatorship, with a profit-orientated economic and cultural life and an irresponsible press.

The church — willingly or not — has to accept the challenges of the new era. It offers infinitely more possibilities than the old era, but also more numerous and more subtle dangers. The church fathers often compared the church to a ship being steered by the Holy Spirit over rough seas towards the eternal shores. Over the last few decades the ship which is our Hungarian church has been firmly anchored in the harbour of private life. Doomed to inactivity and indeed eventual non-existence, it nevertheless still had a life, circumscribed by the particular comforts and privileges of the harbour. Now the ropes have been taken away, the anchor pulled up — the ship of the church is not only free to move but is actually being forced to sail out of the harbour and into rough weather. What we need now are a captain and a crew who have the experience, training, diligence and commitment to battle with the winds and the waves while the Holy Spirit guides the ship towards the eternal shores.