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The Lutheran Church in Hungary: Coming to Terms with the Past*

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The words of St Augustine seem to be an appropriate introduction to this paper as they are as applicable to our day as they were to his.

Perhaps it would be proper to say that there are three periods of time: the present of things past, the present of things present, and the present of things future. For these three are in the soul and I do not see them elsewhere: the present of things past is memory; the present of things present is immediate vision; the present of things future is expectation.¹

The title of this conference is 'Lutheranism in the Aftermath of Communism'. It is quite evident that we cannot live 'in the aftermath' without being conscious of what has shaped the present. For the Christian, this means examining living memory in order to be reminded of the mighty works of God and the humiliating experiences of human endeavour. It is a basic biblical insight that the people of God must pass on from generation to generation what it means to be guided by God and what it means to fall away from him though still rendering lip service to his authority in order to justify our words and deeds.

The importance of remembering the past is often emphasised, especially nowadays, as a way of preventing the repetition of sins already committed and of reminding us to rely on God's salvation and guidance. Where Christian congregations meet to worship they reenact the past in the Eucharist and focus on a new future; this experience then flows over into their daily lives and experiences. As we look at how the Lutheran Church in Hungary has been coming to terms with its recent past, the following document is of importance.

Declaration of the Southern Lutheran Diocesan Council²

The Council of the Southern Diocese of the Hungarian Lutheran Church, elected at the end of 1989, was inspired by the desire to bring about renewal in church life and to promote reckoning for past transgressions, in humility before God and with contrite heart. At its first session it looked back at the events of the past 40 years in the church in general and in the Southern Diocese in particular.

This reckoning is particularly appropriate following the termination of the

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Agreement made between state and church on 14 December 1948. An era has now ended, and we are forced to confront all that bound us to that era and all that we are responsible for before God, the church and ourselves. Nevertheless, as we are too close to these complex events, we find it hard to be objective, and so a comprehensive and detailed evaluation of this era will have to take place from a more distant perspective and on the basis of a common consensus. At the same time, however, our church's negligence and wrongdoings place such a heavy yoke on us that we are compelled to confess them in order to earn the forgiveness of God and of each other.

In the era now coming to a close, our church existed in a totalitarian state which has destroyed our institutional infrastructure, paralysed our missionary efforts, robbed us of our freedom and restricted our life even within the framework provided by the Agreement. Our church became the servant of this regime instead of pursuing its prophetic mission, thus shirking its responsibility as the mouthpiece of the nation's conscience. Those who dared to shoulder that responsibility not only became martyrs of that regime, but were also condemned by the official voice of the church. We have failed to give support to political victims, those removed by force, displaced persons, our brothers who were classified as *kulaks* and the victims of retributions in the wake of 1956. This was allowed to happen because a tentative consensus prevailed which found all to be in order and also theologically justified. What is more, while the church spoke in glowing terms about the regime and its dictators, their method of leadership infiltrated the church and the rule of terror prevailed. This situation continued even during the period when relations between church and state seemed to be becoming less constrained. There were some possibilities for a revival in church life, but they remained unexploited, because we were too rigid and afraid.

We do not want to be one-sided in our appraisal. God's Holy Spirit was active among his people even during those times, empowering many to remain faithful and steadfast. This fact does not excuse our transgressions, however. It has to be said that not all are responsible for past transgressions to the same degree. Some were obedient to the prevailing powers while others were the victims of them. Some violated their conscience in order to further their career, while others, driven by fear, acted in a similar way in order to protect themselves, their families or their congregations. Many were found wanting when they proved unable to refuse wicked demands or withstand the temptations of bribery of various kinds. While some served both regime and self by cooperating, others were guilty of conspiracy by their very silence. For all these reasons, individuals as well as the church as a whole must repent.

The Southern Diocesan Council in general, and its leading officials in particular, are charged with numerous unjust and harmful decisions made by them in the name of this corporate church body. By removing or convicting bishops and pastors alike, they have committed many iniquities and have dishonoured the church by their servile support for the autocratic system, which, though alien to the church, is prevalent in both secular and church life. In the spirit of continuity we, the Southern Diocesan Council, do penance for these iniquities. We ask pastors and congregations to do likewise. We ask for God's mercy on the transgressors, the diocese and the entire church.

17 May 1990, Budapest.

This important document certainly deserves much sympathy.³ It is sincere in its intention to renew a church which until the recent historical events had permitted no criticism and had seemed to share the ideological absolutism of the political power

by making itself its servile collaborator, justifying its actions with theological arguments. Statements such as 'the servant of this regime' and 'theologically justified' are certainly serious admissions which call for sympathetic dialogue.

One year after the publication of the Declaration the leading lay inspector of the Southern Diocese, Dr Jenő Sólyom,⁴ expressed his regret that there was no evidence of its having produced reconciliation in the church. His explanation was general lack of confidence in the church leadership.⁵ His disappointment raises the preliminary and basic question of what the intention, significance and function of such a collective declaration should be, especially at this critical point in history, when evaluating the past should be of help in understanding the present and inspiring hope for the future. In this context, it might be helpful to consider the following points.

1 Why was it necessary to make a public statement, passing judgment on the recent history of the church? It has been said that it is easier to confess sins before a congregation at worship than to do so face to face with individuals who have been affected by mistakes or sinful actions. Why did this declaration fail to create confidence in the church? To be credible verbal statements must be backed up by the measures necessary to heal those areas of church life where harm has been done.

2 In the communist era, public statements confirmed the *status quo*. Church statements were no exception. The churches often lent their authority to political policies; the ecumenical movement, for example, lost credibility because of the politically motivated peace declarations.⁶ A declaration by the church, if it is to be a sign of renewal, must be followed by a change of direction, despite the fact that a final critical presentation of recent history will be a task for later historians. As long as those who previously bore serious responsibilities are still alive they should be interviewed in order to find out in concrete detail what part they played in the oppression of congregations. Anonymous confessions do not clarify the issues. History has to identify those people who in church life as in politics made declarations to suit the moment.⁷

3 The declaration talks about theological justification for subservience to the political system. The theological need to reassess this justification is evident from authoritative lectures, books and articles in the church press. It will be necessary to expose the misuse of the New Testament concept of *diakonia* to justify collaboration with socialism and political terrorism. So far, however, 'open criticism and rejection of the theology of *diakonia* has not taken place. The church is in not only judicial but also theological confusion.'⁸ To be silent now would be as dangerous as was the administrative persecution of those who did not conform to the directives of the leadership.⁹ The theology of *diakonia*, as contrived by church leaders in support of their ideology, has, it is true, come under a cross-fire of criticism both in Hungary and abroad.¹⁰ But one question still begs to be answered: when will the Hungarian Lutheran church leadership itself have the moral courage and theological integrity to acknowledge its misuse of the *diakonia* concept?

4 One sore point in the contemporary history of the Hungarian Lutheran Church was dealt with by the Diocesan Church Council at the same time that it issued the above-mentioned Declaration. This at least was one situation where it would have been easy to demonstrate a historical injustice being corrected. I refer to the final rehabilitation of Bishop Lajos Ordass, who was twice removed from office and spent most of his time as bishop in prison and under house arrest, where he was observed nervously by both church and state until his death. The credibility of the Lutheran church leadership subsequently suffered because Ordass was never fully rehabilitated.¹¹ Even in 1990, however, the fact is that the Diocesan Council leadership was

merely repeating what had just been stated in a letter by a government minister, namely that Ordass had in fact been a legally appointed bishop during his lifetime.¹² The Diocesan Council forwarded its statement to the General Council of the Hungarian Lutheran Church, evidently in order for the latter to define the church's position on the matter. The General Council responded with a brief statement to the effect that the rehabilitation was final, but no resolution of the General Council was ever documented and to this day nobody has been able to verify the existence of official minutes. Although it is clear that for the church and the general public the subject is closed, church historians may wish to continue to ask for documentation. Unless this is presented, ambiguity regarding the past will remain.¹³

5 An extremely disturbing ambiguity also surrounds the announcement in May 1992 by the church court, commissioned by the General Council, rehabilitating 84 pastors and churchworkers who were active between 1945 and 1989.¹⁴ More than a year after this announcement was made, none of those concerned or their relatives had received any information about the rehabilitation, despite an open letter requesting clarification written by one of those most discriminated against, the pastor György Kendeh (a friend of Lajos Ordass), and addressed to Bishop Béla Harmati.¹⁵ When a list of 96 people was published in a Hungarian church paper in the USA, and in the *Ordass Society's Periodical*,¹⁶ Lutheran church spokesmen criticised those responsible for indiscretion.

6 In any sound democracy the existence of opposition is essential to government. For this reason it is somewhat disconcerting to hear of remarks made by Hungarian church leaders referring to an opposition within the church as quantitatively negligible. As long as many capable members of the church are finding it difficult to carry out their tasks faithfully, the return of a renewed authoritative tendency in the Hungarian Lutheran Church must be regarded as a real danger. At a time when the traditional churches are being challenged by numerous imported sectarian movements, the atomisation of religious life can only be afforded further impetus by this kind of attitude inherent in the church. Any church is made up of diverse elements, each of which participates in the gracious gift of our unity in Christ.

My comments might sound extremely critical. What I want to do, however, is to develop those positive intentions verbally formulated in the Declaration of May 1990. I wish my contribution to be seen as an attempt to express expectations for the future based on this fundamental and important document.

Notes and References

¹ St Augustine, *Confessions*, XI 20, as quoted by Vilmos Vajta, 'From Generation to Generation', *LWF Report*, no. 16, 1983, p. 1.

² *Evangélikus élet*, Pentecost Sunday, 3 June 1990, p. 3.

³ The significance of this document is further demonstrated by the fact that neither the Northern Diocese nor the General Council made any similar statement.

⁴ His father of the same name, a professor of Hungarian church history, was removed from his chair in 1958, a victim of the political domination of church affairs.

⁵ Dr Jenő Sólyom, report at the Council's annual meeting on 18 April 1991. An excerpt from the report published in *Evangélikus élet*, 26 May 1991, p. 3, reads: 'Reference made in his report to the level of mistrust in leading officers is quite shattering. He pointed out that he has not experienced any impact or furtherance in reconciliation as a result of the Council's penitential declaration made on 17 May 1990.'

⁶ A comparison between the Lutheran churches in East Germany and Hungary will help to illustrate this point. While most of the postwar church leaders in East Germany were men of

great strength of character, like Bishop Ordass and some of his friends in Hungary, the same cannot be said of the leaders of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. Taking Romans 13 seriously, as Lutherans have always done, both churches pledged their loyalty to the state, but for the former it was never unconditional loyalty. The watchword of the German Lutherans was 'critical solidarity' with the new social order. They held together as a confessing brotherhood; and thus they won the state's respect. For the church in Hungary it was only solidarity.

⁷ Dr Ernő Ottlyk, *Az Evangélikus Egyház útja a Szocializmusban* (Budapest, 1976) is a good example of communist-influenced church history.

⁸ Dr Zoltán Dóka, *Keresztyén igazság* (the periodical of the Lajos Ordass Society), no. 16, 1992, p. 9, column 2.

⁹ 'Administrative persecution' can be well demonstrated by the activities of two bishops in the days leading up to the Seventh Assembly of the LWF held in Budapest in 1984. Earlier that year, in a circular letter, the two bishops, Zoltán Káldy and Gyula Nagy, threatened with 'administrative measures' those pastors who might disturb the preparations for the Assembly. 'Those who are not prepared to listen to this request should not be surprised if they are dealt with by a "legal" voice, according to Luther's theology, rather than the voice of the "gospel", as soon as time permits.' (From identical circular letters: Southern Diocese no. 150-7/1984 and Northern Diocese no. 36/1984). A year earlier, the clergy had been warned: 'If pastors and congregations cause problems or difficulties for our church leadership during the LWF Assembly, they will be acting against the entire church, and what is more, against Jesus Christ himself.' (Quoted from *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, no. 33, 12 August 1984). The entire quotation is from the Hungarian version of Dr László Terray's article published in *Kevesztyén igazság*, no. 17, 1993, p. 31. The original English text appeared in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Volume V, no. 6, November 1985, pp. 1-17.

¹⁰ Two unpublished manuscripts by Árpád Fasang deal with the subject: *A diakonia teologia D. Káldy Zoltán prédikációnak tükrében*, September 1977, 63 pp.; and *Az 'ÚT' teológiája, 1977-8*, 72 pp. Two important articles by the New Testament scholar István Gémes appeared in *Koinonia*, the periodical of Hungarian Lutheran churchworkers abroad: 'Párbeszéd-kísérlet a diakonia teológiával', *Koinonia*, no. 26, December 1980; and 'Századunk és a protestantizmus: hozzászólás a diakonai teologia marxista kiértékeléséhez', *Koinonia*, no. 27, November 1982. Vilmos Vajta, 'Umstrittene Theologie der Diakonie', *Lutherische Monatshefte*, no. 3, March 1983, is an in-depth study of the subject. The church historian Dr László Terray examined the relationship between church and state in his article 'Állam és egyház a mai Magyarországon', *Koinonia*, no. 28, December 1983, pp. 1-11. Robert Patkai, 'Analysis or slander?', *Keston News Service*, no. 189, 15 December 1983, pp. 11-13, was provoked by the Hungarian church leaders' vicious attack on Dr Vajta. An *Open Letter* from Hungarian Lutheran pastor Zoltán Dóka to the late Bishop Joseph Kibira, then president of the LWF, also made a powerful contribution to the debate: Zoltán Dóka, 'Nyílt levél', *Keresztyén igazság*, no. 3, September 1989, pp. 26-31.

¹¹ 'Káldy was well known for his irreconcilable attitude towards his predecessor, Lajos Ordass. Two days before the opening of the (LWF, 1984) Assembly, however, he found his way to the grave of Ordass and, in the presence of the members of the LWF Executive Committee and representatives of the press, he gave a speech paying homage to Ordass and speaking of Ordass's "spiritual heritage" which he wanted to preserve.' (LWI/GE 29/1984, 26 July, p. 10). This and similar statements, however, were not reported in *Evangélikus élet*.

¹² Letter from the Minister of Justice, Dr Kálmán Kulcsár, 23 April 1990, no. 40014 (1990) 711. IM IV. In it the minister declares that to remove Bishop Ordass from his office again in 1959 was unlawful and begs the pardon of the Hungarian Lutheran Church and Bishop Ordass's widow.

¹³ The issue of rehabilitation is slowly becoming a matter of shame for the church. It is to the discredit of the church that three years have been insufficient to deal with the cases of candidates for church rehabilitation while the cases of those who deserved political rehabilitation

have been brought to a conclusion as a matter of priority. There is a widespread impression that the church leadership is still not ready to make a clean sweep of the injustices of the past. This is also clearly demonstrated by the issue of Lajos Ordass's rehabilitation, which has still not been unequivocally resolved. Three leading individuals delivered a letter personally to Ordass's widow before Christmas 1991. The letter dealt with the bishop's rehabilitation, but contained no reference to the resolutions to the Southern Diocese and the General Council. There is some doubt as to whether the latter resolution actually exists: it was not made available to the Reverend Andersson when he asked to see it. The Southern Diocese has only referred to the unbroken continuity of Bishop Ordass's ministry. All this can hardly be regarded as a satisfactorily completed rehabilitation procedure. *Keresztyén igazság*, no. 18, 1993, p. 26.

- ¹⁴ The ruling of the National Church Court reads as follows: 'The Hungarian Lutheran Church's National Court, at its meeting held in Budapest on 14 May 1992, examined the cases of pastors and church officials who suffered injustices between 1945 and 1989 as a result of different church and political motives. It concluded that 84 individuals had had their judicial rights curbed undeservedly, and that this had led to restrictions on the carrying out of their church duties. At its meeting today, the National Church Court decrees that these past rulings are considered annulled. With the pronouncement of this decree rehabilitation is being extended by the Church's highest judicial body, responsible also to God. Budapest, 14 May 1992. Signed by: Dr Jenő Luthár, Dr Gábor Tőrök, Tibor Szirmai, Béla Kalácska and Dr Tibor Fabiny.' *Evangelikus élet*, 31 May 1992, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ The General Council ruled that rehabilitation procedures within the church had to be completed by 31 May 1991. The list of individuals rehabilitated was to be presented to the General Council's 7 June 1991 meeting together with relevant minutes in order that the synodical meeting, to be held on 8 June 1991, could put a formal conclusion to the whole affair. *Evangelikus élet*, 2 June 1991, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ *Erős vár* (bimonthly paper of the Hungarian Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), no. 1, February 1993; *Keresztyén igazság*, no. 17, p. 43.