Terray's "Ordass" - Book Review

Bengt Hoffman
Lutheran Seminary

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BOOK REVIEW

Laszlo G. Terray, *Ordass*, Oslo:1984, Luther Forlag, 250 pp., (Norwegian Language)

When Lajos Ordass, once the leading bishop in the Hungarian Lutheran Church and vice-president of the Lutheran World Federation, died in 1978, 77 years old, his friends in the Lutheran world family and the rest of the ecumenical movement recalled his struggle for church independence in a totalitarian communist setting.

Some of them also remembered his moving address before the LWF Assembly in Minneapolis in 1958, about the grain of wheat which has to fall into the earth and die in order to bear fruit. The speech came right out of personal experience, originated in a prison cell in Budapest and was a testimony about the living Christ.

Lajos Ordass was installed as bishop in 1945, condemned to imprisonment in 1948, under phony charges, rehabilitated in 1956, during the political thaw, and removed from office again in 1958, under political pressure exerted by the state inside the congregations. Until his death twenty years later Ordass lived in Budapest as a private citizen, writing devotional books (under pseudonym) which appeared in English and translating religious works from Swedish and Icelandic into Hungarian. His autobiography, covering the years up to 1963, has never been published.

The latter carries some significance. After a period of lionization in the West, Ordass came to be regarded as an embarrassment by many. This was a gradual affair, as the leadership of his own church became increasingly beholden to Hungary's socialist-totalitarian pattern. Ordass was often described as "reactionary." The subject "Ordass" has been treated with caution for quite a while both in East and in West.

The book under review is written by Laszlo Terray, a Hungarian now serving as a pastor in the Lutheran Church of Norway. One of Terray's major points is that Ordass was not "reactionary" but rather the defender of the Church's independence and integrity. Independence and integrity were also Ordass' personal characteristics.
The book gives us Ordass' life story, framed by two world wars and a bloody Hungarian uprising. It contains such varied experiences as solitary prison confinement and the address before thousands in Minneapolis. Terray devotes special attention to the bishop's struggles with secular authorities and temporizing leaders in his own church.

Two illustrations, among many, bring this home. On arrival in New York in 1958 Ordass was, of course, well aware of the all-encompassing claims of the communist state. For instance, a commissar for church affairs had established his office at church headquarters! After his first meeting with the press two Hungarians, present at the session, introduced themselves as embassy officials. On his return to Budapest he was upbraided for not having told the Americans how satisfactory was the church's situation in Hungary, how great were the achievements in the realm of socialist upbuilding and how optimistically the Hungarian people looked toward the future. Obviously Ordass was not trusted as an all-out defender of the totalitarian order. The second illustration of Ordass' difficulties comes from the intramural contacts with Zoltan Kaldy, Ordass's successor as leading bishop and since the summer of 1984 president of the LWF. Kaldy said to Ordass in 1957: "I honor you." In 1969 he reversed his stance and said: "I take that back. Ordass is in favor of non-cooperation [with the state] and in favor of confrontation... we don't identify with atheism but we cooperate with the state. During the years of Ordass's ecclesial exile Kaldy never visited Ordass; at the Budapest Assembly 1984 he praised Ordass. Terray's book on Ordass is well documented and well written. Will there be an English translation?

Bengt Hoffman
Professor Emeritus
Lutheran Seminary
Gettysburg, PA