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ON THE THRESHOLD OF A NEW ERA IN HUNGARY

By László Lukács
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I can only wholeheartedly greet the U.S. bishops' statement on religious freedom in Eastern Europe. They are completely right saying that religious freedom is most closely connected with human rights in general. The freedom of religion and conscience in a country is one of the most sensitive seismographs of human rights.

I would like to make two comments--one is more general, the other, refers to my own country.

I

We must not forget two important facts. One is, that even the Catholic Church declared religious freedom and tolerance not so long ago. It was the second Vatican Council, that stated: "The human person has a right to religious freedom." And: "It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of divine law. . . He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience." (Dignitatis humanae 2.) The same document enumerates also the rights of religious communities in a modern state. We are glad of this attitude today, but cannot help remembering different attitudes from the past. Almost all articles referring to the Rushdie case made some ironical hints of similar measures by the medieval church inquisition.

The basic idea of a secularized modern state is that no government can be legalized by divine authority and cannot force any religion or ideology on the people of the country. In our days we have come to the end of the (Christian!) secularization process: there are hardly any governments in the world of today that would forcibly introduce any type of Christianity in their countries. We can find, however, Muslim states and Marxist ones, where public and perhaps also private life is controlled by the principles of a special ideology or religion.

The secularization process of our century taught us the lesson: states must remain neutral in ideological questions, tolerant of the beliefs of their citizens, otherwise they lead to totalitarian systems, to a type of tyranny. (We have to be honest and self-critical admitting that there were times in history when Christianity played a similar role.) All the governments which claim to be based on human rights must be tolerant of the individual consciences of the citizens, granting them the freedom of religion both in their private lives and in community.

Freedom, however, cannot mean the negation of moral responsibility and of absolute moral values. We can find a great number of modern "liberal" economic and political systems, where absolute values as such have failed to be respected, both in public and in private life. The quest for truth has been reduced to scientific and technological investigation, respect for justice and human rights has been qualified by the majority of votes; what matters is the useful and effective, not the just and the right. We cannot fail to call attention to this new type of tyranny, which is not nearly so obvious as the former one. This lack of values, this overwhelming influence of pragmatic materialism, cannot be called by the simple name of a religion or ideology. But it can lead to a similarly dangerous and harmful tyranny. Here, too, a great number of people can be oppressed and marginalized, can be hindered in following the word of their conscience. The only difference between the two systems is that the latter is achieved not by brutal political or public measures, but by the nonetheless violent force of advertisements and mass media. People are manipulated by the dream of a self-sufficient and omnipotent material progress and happiness, and the illusion of a perfectly functioning society, in which, if it is "foolproof" nobody is responsible for anything.

People in Marxist countries must fight for an ideologically neutral state, which is tolerant and respectful to religion and conscience. But people of liberal states have to fight also, against the tyranny of a secularized materialistic ideology.

Referring to my own country, Hungary, the first of the two fights is ours today, but we must be aware of the dangers of the second, too: that of liberal, valueless societies. Otherwise, we risk not to achieve real freedom, but simply to change one slavery for another.

II

In Hungary we are living in a period of rapid transition. We can rightly compare it to the time of Emperor Constantine, who proclaimed the famous Edict of Milan (313 A.D.), making an end to the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Our country is seeking a way out of its economic crisis, and has to realize that it cannot be found without political reforms. The accelerating move towards greater political freedom (which can be seen e.g. in the new atmosphere of freedom of the press, birth of free associations, alternative political movements and parties, etc.) has had far reaching consequences also in and for the life of the church.

The church has lost almost all its institutions (we use the word in singular, but all the churches are meant by it); only the parish system survived in the years of oppression during the 1950s. All of a sudden the church has gained a whole range of new possibilities and has

to face the immense expectation on part of the society, especially of the younger generations, who were educated practically without any type of religious instruction.

The church in Hungary has to wake up from its Cinderella dream. In the past forty years the church was forced to exist and act within a very limited framework. Church life was restricted to worshipping and "administering" the sacraments with some, but very small, possibilities for catechesis, only for small children. The church has lost not only its institutions but its imagination and its dynamic as well. What we urgently need is not only the reestablishment of the former institutions but an overall change in our mentality. Hierarchy, clergy and lay people alike have to realize that worshipping is only one activity among others in and of the church; that Christianity must not be enclosed within the ghetto of private life; that the church is no longer Christian if it gives up its missionary endeavor; that we need new type of public presence in our society, exercising a prophetic and critical role in it--not as a political opposition but insisting on the moral values without which no state or society can lead a human life.

The church in Hungary stands on the threshold of a new era. We are living in a time of special grace "Kairos"--perhaps in a more favorable position than many churches in Western Europe. But if we miss this chance and do not begin urgently the reevangelization of our country, we commit the grave sin of carelessness before the Lord.

I am writing these lines at the end of March 1989: it is early springtime--the whole of nature is ready to be reborn with the coming sun and its warmth. In a few weeks, it will appear which tree is living which has died: those living will blossom and bring forth new leaves. We are having a similar historical moment in our church: we have a whole range of new possibilities. The church is called to be reborn, and some new initiatives can already be seen. We have again the chance to start new schools, to enter the hospitals and help the sick (after forty years of being excluded), to enter the field of public life with the help of mass media, to found or refound religious communities, to form religious associations and join spiritual renewal movements.

What do we lack? Experience, money--and first of all human forces. The first two items must and may be asked from abroad--and we desperately need the help of our Christian sisters and brothers from all over the world. But volunteers who offer their lives for the new tasks, in the service of the church and of their country must come from our people. We need a great and growing number of young people who can say with the prophet: "Here I am, Lord, send me."