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EVERYTHING IS CONDITIONAL IN HUNGARY
Thoughts on the U.S. Bishops' Statement on Religious Freedom
in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union

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The timing of the U.S. Bishops' statement on religious freedom in the Soviet bloc was very appropriate and fortunate especially from a Hungarian point of view. In some of the socialist countries we can witness an overall fermentation which includes the life of religious people as well. The constitutions of these countries usually provide for the liberty of conscience and religion. On the other hand generations have grown up whose knowledge about religion and religious freedom is next to nothing. Some young Hungarian Marxists, for example, claimed even five years ago with firm conviction that everything was all right regarding religious life in the country. Nowadays they do not understand why the Communist regime wanted to abolish religiosity forty years ago if the help of the churches can be useful now.

It might seem to us that at least in Hungary religious people will have the opportunity to live according to their faith. Of course this requires a new legal framework which will be ready hopefully in the first half of the next year. Those who are preparing this new legislation have a huge responsibility. Unfortunately the greater part of the parliament, approximately 75%, consists of members of the Communist Party. The question immediately arises: how can they create a new law to regulate religious affairs without proper knowledge of the subject? We have to admit that in the preparation of this law not only party members participate but also those who are most interested, the believers themselves. On January 28, 1989, for example, a forum was organized in the Political College of the Hungarian Socialist Labor Party where Marxist philosophers and officials with church leaders and theologians discussed the questions and problems of freedom of conscience and religion. The statement of U.S. bishops might be a useful guideline to check how appropriate the new law will be concerning religious freedom.

Not only the timing but also the structure and the content of the statement are very appropriate. Religious freedom cannot be separated from basic human rights. When the Catholic Church deals with this issue it must do it in an universal way corresponding to its name. This is precisely how the U.S. bishops discussed the freedom of conscience and religion. They could hardly overemphasize that the denial or the limitation of human rights,

including religious liberty, "to one faith group or in one country is a threat to all faiths in all countries and must be the concern of all who value human rights"(1a).

This statement of the bishops of the U.S. is a vivid proof of solidarity with the universal Catholic Church. Their brotherhood with the Eastern European bishops and their compassion for the believers of these countries are well expressed. We have to pay special attention to the goodwill of the American bishops when they warn us that we "should be slow to judge the many different ways that believers have chosen to respond in faith to a very difficult situation"(1b). Furthermore, they are right when they say that in order to understand the situation of the believers in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union we have to examine their life in the complexity of historical, cultural, religious and political factors.

In the first part of the "Principles and Practices" the statement presents the components of the right of religious liberty. This is a very good summary by which the U.S. bishops evaluate the current situation of Soviet Union and the different countries in Eastern Europe. There is only one point here to which I would like to add something. The statement accentuates that it focuses "here primarily on the situation of Catholics"; on the other hand, the bishops are keen on emphasizing the universal character of the freedom of conscience and religion. This right involves a personal and a social dimension, namely the freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion. My problem is related to this latter one. First of all it is very difficult to decide the definition of religion. This is not only an academic wrangling among sociologists but also a continuing controversy in modern societies (2). Concerning the free exercise of religion, the statement says that "no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs . . . within due limits" (1a). The whole of humankind, including Catholics, must face the question: what do we consider religion and what are those due limits? The events of religious life of the world in these days prove that religious liberty can be a controversial issue. Again, the American bishops deal with a well defined religion in a well defined part of the world. Nevertheless, if we want to explain the components of the right of religious liberty according to the Catholic teaching we might need to be more cautious.

In the second part of the "Principles and Practices" the statement gives an overview of how the Communist Parties have dealt with religion in those countries. The different policies are grouped in three models. The situation of Hungary is characterized very precisely: it is a hybrid of the second and third models. But everything is changing now in Hungary, hopefully in a good direction. In order to understand the possible future of Hungarian Catholicism we need a short review of the church policy of the Hungarian government in the last forty years.

It is well known that the Communist Parties of the socialist countries had a meeting in Karlový Váry, Czechoslovakia, in 1948 where they decided what policy should be followed in their relationship with the churches in their countries. It is probable that already this conference laid down the principle that their church policy would be led by the "theory of legality modified by the theory of agreement". This means that the churches are given some rights by the government. Furthermore, these rights are the results of negotiations between the government and the different churches. It was also decided at the conference of Communist Parties that the governments of socialist countries would negotiate exclusively with the hierarchy of their own countries. Only the Soviet Union was to start negotiations with the Vatican (3).

Hungary, like the other socialist countries, wanted to liquidate religiosity. In 1950 the government finally managed to make an agreement with the Catholic Church too. The other churches had already signed an agreement in 1948. Until 1958 the church policy of the government was basically an "all-out assault on religion", as the statement of U.S. bishops says. After the evaluation of the 1956 revolution, which can be called now a popular uprising instead of a counterrevolution, the policy of liquidation was replaced by the "policy of national unity". In 1964 the Hungarian government and the Vatican made a partial agreement, which had been only the privilege of the Soviet Union. The "policy of national unity", the partial agreement, and Cardinal Lekai's "policy of small steps" resulted in a state in the life of the Catholic Church which was characterized accurately by the American bishop's statement as a hybrid. More has been allowed to the Church than in the model of containment through administrative measures but it has not been a coexistence and limited accommodation.

The policy of national unity was introduced in order to make use of the different forces of the country, among others that of the Catholics. It became, however, evident by 1988 that this policy did not work. The country was in ruins economically, and morally as well. The communist government realized that the churches, especially the Catholic Church, could help. This might be the main reason why the Catholics, who make up 67.2% of the population according to a new statistical account (4), can live more freely.

Since the U.S. bishops approved their statement many improvements have happened in Hungary. Új Ember [New Man], a weekly Catholic newspaper, reported that priests could visit hospitals and celebrate the Eucharist there. The Ministry of Defense offered an alternative solution for conscientious objectors which could be effective from the second half of this year. In Magyarország, [Hungary], a weekly political newspaper, Mr. Sarkadi, the general deputy president of the State Office for Church Affairs, spoke in an interview about the right of religious liberty in such a way that one could believe Mr. Sarkadi echoes the statement of the U.S. bishops. Nevertheless, from the same article we can learn some

disenchanted facts as well. The ill-famed State Office for Church Affairs will function in the future too, only its name might be changed. Mr. Sarkadi said that the government would need an organization that could coordinate between the state and the churches. It is noteworthy that this office, which executed the Stalinist church policy, was already abolished once in 1956 but reestablished in 1959 with the old staff. Furthermore, some problems still wait for solution. We do not know yet whether priests will be allowed to visit prisoners or not. The ministry to young men who are in military service is still unsolved. The future of banned religious orders is not entirely clear, though permission for them to do pastoral work has been announced in March 1989.

Moreover there is a special problem for the Hungarian government. The number of Hungarians who live in neighboring countries is very significant. Not only the right of religious liberty but the basic human rights of the Hungarian minority are abused, mainly in Romania and Czechoslovakia. The Romanian government wants to divide Hungarian Catholics by using another religious group, Eastern Catholics whose mother language is Romanian. Romania abolished Eastern Catholicism in 1948. The believers started to go to Roman Catholic Churches where the language of the liturgy became mostly Hungarian after the reforms of Vatican II. Now the government wants to do the banned Eastern Catholics a "favor" by forcing the Hungarian Catholics to introduce bilingualism in their churches. The exclusive use of Hungarian language in the liturgy was a main and almost the last resource for the Hungarian minority to save their national identity. The most simple solution, the legalization of Eastern Catholicism cannot or must not be taken into account by the government (5). It is well known around the world that many Romanian refugees, not only from the Hungarian minority, live now in Hungary.

The facts that the Hungarian government intends to create a new constitution and a new law to regulate religious affairs, that it has already eased the restrictions on religious life, that a socialist government made a protest against the unjust policy of another socialist government, show that Hungary is on the way to becoming a democratic country. Everything is possible now in Hungary but everything is conditional. There are many who are uncertain whether the reform policy of Gorbachev and other socialist leaders will be successful or not. There are many within the socialist countries, who want to turn back to the "good old Stalinist days". Therefore the use of actions, recommended by the U.S. bishops in the third part of their statement, can play a very important role in the life of nations in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. I am sure that the believers of these nations pray not only for Gorbachev but also for what the U.S. bishops suggest can be put in practice in the political arena.

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