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THE POSSIBLE ROLE OF RUMANIA'S CHURCHES IN THE SOCIAL RENEWAL OF THE COUNTRY

by László Tökés

László Tökés (Hungarian Reformed) is a minister and as of 1990 a bishop of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania. He was a minister in Timisoara where he was the target of persecution, but his bravery and the support of volunteers triggered the Christmas revolution that toppled Nicolae Ceausescu. This speech was delivered to the World Council of Churches in the Spring 1990.

A scandalous clash took place in 1975 at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya. The American Bishop Zoltan Beky's sharp criticism addressed at Rumania for oppressing the minority's Hungarian Reformed Church produced a vehement denial by the Rumanian representatives. The Bishop from Oradea and his companions sided with the official Rumanian Church policies, rejecting with "noble indignation" the so-called "irredentist calumnies" of Bishop Beky.

The event was characteristic of a genre. In the same way, both previously and later on, there was a refusal to present the true condition of churches in Rumania pretending that in our country everything is fine and that the churches perform their mission in peace and freedom. It was this mischaracterization that gave birth to a gross misconception which for decades defined the impression abroad of our churches and of Rumania. Practically all well-known public personalities and church organizations abroad--including the World Council of Churches--fell victim to this false impression.

Visser't Hooft, for example, made the following statement about Rumania: "I saw realized here what I have struggled for all my life: the fraternal community of churches is a reality in the Socialist Republic of Rumania." Wilhelm Niesel uttered similar words of praise in 1968: "I became convinced that in this country not only do the various denominations coexist in fraternal relation with one another, but at the same time the freedom to preach the Gospel is guaranteed, and the state supports the churches both morally and financially."

How untrue! The Rumanian church authorities, opportunistic and collaborating bishops and preachers of ecumenism succeeded in misleading their sister churches and the public opinion of the ecumenical movement abroad in exactly the same fashion as the Ceausescu regime deceived the international diplomatic community. The international representatives of the churches in Rumania were deeply intertwined with the state policy structure, and
under the label of ecumenism "successfully" represented the direct interests of an inhuman, ungodly and oppressive regime—all at the expense of their own believers. We are beyond this now. It is of historic importance that following the long era of the Babylonian captivity and falsehood, we are now finally able to present freely, for all the world to see, the undisguised truth about our "bondage," and while speaking the truth, we can pursue the true mission and evangelical role of the church in society. It is an extremely important development that the WCC, breaking the strait jacket of ecumenical diplomacy, now pays attention to the real situation of churches in Rumania and furnishes moral support and Christian solidarity to our churches' search for the way.

During the past period, Rumania's churches—indeed, the population as a whole—lived under severe and brutal repression. The minority churches were subjected to a dual form of oppression. In the absence of religious freedom, the churches were limited in the ability to fulfill their mission in the world; they were pushed to the periphery of society, and they had no real means to become the "light of the world." The worship of God was coopted by the personality cult raised to the level of state religion, and the majority of our leading clerics, out of fear or servility, became servants of the dictatorship, reproducing within our churches the monolithic control structure of the state and producing a kind of imperial-papal repression. Ecumenism as well was subjected to this repressive structure, distorting the concept of Christian unity and manipulating the international contacts of the church to serve the purposes of state propaganda and falsehood.

An ever-widening gap appeared between the Church's original mission and actual practice, between faith and church policy, between word and deed. The church hierarchy and officialdom grew distant from the people and clergy, in fact persecuting the genuine representatives of the Gospel and themselves restricting the life of the congregations and the freedom to worship.

Apart from all of the above, the Church and its congregations remained the last refuge of the oppressed people, deprived of their human rights and freedom and cast into misery. They remained the "mighty fortress" of the "meek and the infirm," which the opportunistic church leadership subjected to continuous assault, undermining them from inside as well. The churches became guardians of evangelical, historical, traditional and human values. Struggling with internal and external circumstances and drawing strength from their faith, the churches kept alive in the people the hope of liberation, becoming in this way the repository of a better and more just future.

An extreme duality characterized the churches, therefore. To a greater or lesser extent, all denominations became compromised in their relations with the totalitarian system, but at the same time they also tried to fulfill their Christian calling in the world. This duality
produced a deep schizophrenia in questions of faith and in the realm of church organization matters alike.

The revolution last Christmas did away with this diseased and untenable situation, sending shock waves through our churches and, by divine providence, opening the path to their cleansing and renewal.

The Church has an unmistakable mission in the world; it bears a responsible role in society. As the Apostle Matthew wrote, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (3:3). Or, as the Lord sends Jeremiah on his way: "To all to whom I shall send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak... See I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:7-10). Christ our Lord says the following to his disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves." (Luke 10:2-3)

Christ sent his disciples out into a divided, miserable, and broken world, the same as Rumania's society today. There is no escaping the responsibility--it is the imperative of obedience through faith. This mission, to serve the world and the people in it, must be accepted not just out of a sense of responsibility for our fellow human being, but out of duty toward society as well. We must assume the responsibility especially now, when society is in crisis and has to find its way out of the darkness.

Our churches are obliged to serve society not only according to the parting words of Christ but also because of the opportunities resulting from their unique situation. The Church is the only institution, organized community, or potential oppositional force which survived the downfall of the monolithic one-party state. This feature, in actuality, predestines the Church to assume a role in the given situation, where the Communist system has left no credible leadership in its wake, with the Church representing the genuine interests of the people and maintaining the lasting standards of evangelism and humanitarianism.

It is a general phenomenon pointing in the same direction that in the countries of East Central Europe the churches assume a significant role in the process of social transformation and renewal. One need only think of the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Polish society, or the struggle of the Lutheran Church in East Germany. Similarly, I think it is no accident that the Rumanian revolution began at the Reformed Church in Temesvár [Hungarian name for Timisoara]. These cases eloquently illustrate that God wants to use his churches for the renewal of society, supplementing with God's power our powerlessness (see II Corinthians 12:9).

I think that our churches are faced with a clear and unmistakable challenge by the Word of God and the plain reality that they shoulder the most universal type of service imaginable:
the renewal and transformation of society, and the cause of democratization. In East Central Europe—and therefore in Rumania as well—God offers an unprecedented opportunity for the Church to play, once more, a decisive social and historical role and thereby to serve the greater glory of God and good of people.

Our churches have yet to sufficiently recognize their present historic mission and have not really prepared themselves to perform this service. The burdensome heritage of the past and the after-effects of their compromised relationship with the dictatorship weigh heavily upon them. The opportunism of the clerical hierarchy also seeks to salvage and preserve the privileges of position and rank into the new era. The clarification of moral issues and matters of faith has only just begun.

Consequently, our churches must renew themselves before they can take part in the renewal of society. They must heed closely and obey the teaching of the Gospel. They must convert, and they must be cleansed. If they are successful, they can truly become blessed instruments of God in the transformation of society, in the promotion of the cause of universal reconciliation, and in the creation of a new, dignified and just world order pleasing to the Lord. In all likelihood, this task will be at least as difficult as it was to stand in opposition to the dictatorship.