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The Base Community - A Challenge to the Peaceful Co-existence between Church and State in Hungary

by Leslie Laszlo

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INTRODUCTION

Yearning for a return to a simpler lifestyle, as a reaction to the depersonalization and alienation of the individual in our age of rapid industrialization and urbanization, wanting to live in small communities where close human contacts are still possible, is a worldwide phenomenon which found its best expression in the catchy slogan "small is beautiful." Hungary is no exception as shown in the recent study by the sociologist Elemer Hankiss.

Belying the Marxist prediction that socialism will end man's alienation, it was exactly the new system after 1945 which through the destruction of the old social forms and by precipitating an unprecedented mass migration of people to new employment and habitation, disturbed the traditional patterns of social relations and created a vacuum in human contacts. These could not be filled by joining the new giant mass organizations, nor by participation in the organs of the over centralized and bureaucratized Communist state. There remains an acute sense of something being amiss, a loss of the security of belonging. There is a call for some kind of recreation of small entities, perhaps communities based on housing units, or social clubs, where people would find their proper place again.

In the same way, the desire to have closer human contacts with fellow men of the same interest, to share the religious experience with one's brothers and sisters, rose as a groundswell everywhere in the church, encouraged by the Second Vatican Council which spoke of the People of God who should join together in prayer and the breaking of the Bread. Finding the traditional parish structure too large and impersonal for the purpose of a true community, those who sought a more intense religious life formed small, closely knit groups which are called base, or basic, communities; in French communauté de base. Latin America, especially Brazil, became best known as the home of socially and politically active base communities, but they exist also in Western Europe, Africa and Asia, and even in Canada, especially in Quebec. In Hungary they became known as ecclesiastical small communities
(egyházi kisközösségek). It is not my intention to give a historical, or socio-logical analysis of this phenomenon. Rather, I shall concentrate on the unique political problem which the very existence of these small communities, dedicated to intensive religious life and activity, created in a professedly atheistic Communist state.

CATHOLIC SMALL COMMUNITIES IN HUNGARY

In what follows I shall deal exclusively with the developments within the dominant Catholic church, although the principal Hungarian Protestant churches, the Calvinist and Lutheran, also engendered their small communities, not to mention the smaller denominations, such as the Baptists, Pentecostals, etc., whose structure and modus operandi could be regarded as the archetypal model for all base communities. My excuse for not giving the latter the attention they deserve - apart from the time and space limitation of this paper - is the realization that, since the primary target of the Hungarian Communists was and is the Catholic church, my purpose, namely, to demonstrate the political implications created by the upsurge of religious base communities, would be best served by focussing on the Catholic church.

The origins of the Hungarian base communities can be traced back to 1946 when the Communist Minister of the Interior, László Rajk, with the stroke of a pen dissolved thousands of religious associations and clubs. Some of the activists, both belonging to the clergy and laymen, continued to meet in private discussion groups to study the Bible and pray together. In spite of waves of arrests for illegal assembly and alleged anti-state conspiracy which have from time to time decimated their ranks, they continued to grow and expand. In the mid-seventies when police repression eased - the last mass clean-up and monstre-trial took place in 1972 - and their existence could be publicly admitted, an estimated 4,000 Catholic small communities were already functioning. While many of these are nothing more than bible circles and choral societies which enrich the liturgy with singing either in the old tradition of sacred music, or with the contemporary rock-and-roll, attracting the youth to the "guitar masses", others are bent on searching for new ways of interpreting their faith and living according to the gospels. These latter are often dissatisfied with existing affairs within the church, criticise the hierarchy, jealously guard their autonomy while drifting farther and farther away from the parish which in the Catholic church remains the basic unit and hub of all activities at the people's level. Small communities of
this type are the ones which cause concern to the church authorities who fear that these tendencies of separation from the main body of the church, coupled with the elitist belief in a higher vocation and the cult of inward looking self-contained cells, might lead to schism, sectarianism.

Strange as it may sound, this danger of an internal breakup of the church, seems to worry the Communists too. This kind of development simply does not fit into their carefully designed long range policy toward religion and the churches which imposes rigid control on all church activity in order to ensure the slow death of religion. The small communities which operate in defiance of these controls and aim at the revival and spread of religion, are clearly a challenge to the stated goal of the regime.

Mass arrests and stiff jail sentences are out of fashion in today's Hungary; such measures would create bad blood at home and adverse publicity abroad, tarnishing the carefully cultivated image of Kádár as a good democrat and the most liberal statesman in the Eastern bloc. Thus the regime decided to drop the whole issue into the church's lap, obligingly handing over to the bishops from the police files the names of their priests implicated in working with the small communities. More specifically, it was expected from the new archbishop of Esztergom, László Cardinal Lékai, Primate of Hungary, who was chosen to this exalted post in 1976 jointly by the Holy See and the Hungarian government, that he would "restore order" within the church, meaning the suppression of the small communities as autonomous entities. This meant, first of all, the disciplining of Father György Bulányi and his followers, dubbed by their adversaries the "Bulányists" (Bulányisták).

Who are the Bulányists and why are they regarded as subversive and dangerous by both the state and the church? The answer to these questions will, in fact, demonstrate in a nutshell the painful dilemma and dangerous division created by the emergence of small communities in a church under the control of a totalitarian state, irreconcilably hostile to religion.3

THE BULÁNYISTS

Father György Bulányi, born in Budapest in 1919, member of the Piarist teaching order before the 1950 suppression of the religious orders in Hungary, was professor of Hungarian and German language and literature in the Piarist gymnasium of Debrecen and, after 1948, chaplain of the University of Debrecen. Arrested in 1952 and sentenced for life on the charge of anti-state activity, he was released from prison only in 1960. After unsuccessfully applying for assignment as a priest, he found employment only as a labourer for a moving company.
Father Bulányi has been active in organizing and leading small communities ever since 1944 when at the height of the war he met Father Kolakovich, a charismatic Croatian Jesuit. During his short stay in Debrecen Kolakovich assembled three groups of ardent Catholics whom he left in the spiritual care of Father Bulányi when he proceeded in his daring missionary journey across the front to the Soviet Union where, after long imprisonment, he met his martyr's death. Today the Bulányists are grouped in over one hundred small communities across the country, each of them counting between ten and fifteen members. Among the group leaders between twenty to twenty-five per cent are priests, the rest laymen or women from all walks of life. Incidentally, there are priests also among the ordinary members, obeying the directives of lay leaders.

The "new" theology of Bulányi and his confrères, collected in thick type-written samizdat volumes, while based on the Scriptures, does challenge the ecclesiastical politics and practice of the present church leadership. They, first of all, censure the Bench of Bishops - but implicitly also the Vatican - for "collaboration", i.e. for meekly accepting interference in church affairs from the secular power, which in Hungary's case means the atheistic Communist regime. In his highly controversial essay "Marketing Religion" (Leákipásztori marketing) Bulányi accuses the leaders of the church of having concentrated solely on the need to continue the administration of the sacraments, and for this reason having entered into shameful compromises with the atheistic government only to have the vacant bishoprics filled and a limited number of priests be allowed to administrate the parishes, while closing their eyes to the reality of the empty churches and the catastrophically diminishing demand for the sacraments. He advocates a radical change of direction. This would, first of all, entail an explicit rejection of the so-called "Normalization" of church-state relations which in recent years gradually reestablished a cosy co-existence between the two when it restored to the bishops and priests honorable status and financial comfort in exchange for a tacit renunciation of any "aggressive" evangelization that would transcend the strict limits set by the state. In Bulányi's view Christians should not be bound by worldly political considerations, but follow only the precepts and example of Christ: be the yeast in the secular world, aim at the re-Christianization, total spiritual transformation of society. The emphasis should be on evangelization by example, to follow, as did the early Christians, the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount: peace-making, brotherly love, humility, rejection of consumerism, living in poverty, practicing charity. Had not Christianity taken root and expanded in the morally
corrupt Roman society by the example of clean living and charity? Similarly, only through the attractive image of pure hearts and selfless love will the church gain strength again in our consumer-oriented, spiritually bankrupt society.

Another thesis put forth by Bulányi is that the church's almost exclusive concern with the issue of religious instruction of children is largely misdirected—in fact, the majority of children who receive religious instruction cease to attend church after reaching maturity. Moreover, Jesus of Nazareth did not preach to children, but to the adults; nor did the early Christians teach religion in schools, but attracted followers by their shining example.

The Bulányist small communities practice what they preach. In their weekly, or bi-weekly meetings, and during their yearly retreats, they study the Bible, pray and sing together, encourage each other in their faith in conversation and discussion, but also help each other in their spiritual and/or material need. They advocate peace and disarmament, are against the bearing of arms, and are ready to suffer the dire consequences for such refusal. They give witness of their faith in their place of work by exemplary behaviour, conscientious work performance and transparent honesty. They also practice various good deeds of Christian charity, such as visiting old and/or sick, people, helping the poor, giving a helping hand to their neighbours, baby-sitting, etc.

In their private life they are committed to work for peace and harmony in their family, frugality and modesty, bordering on real poverty. Any money that can be spared is used for charity, including donations sent to Mother Theresa in Calcutta.

New members are inspired to join the small communities by the exemplary behaviour and life style and the strong bond of charity and friendship found there, proving Bulányi's thesis that religious revival in the church can only be expected through witnessing in truly Christian living in brotherhood with other believers.

THE SWORDS ARE CROSSED

The severe criticism of the way in which the church is run could not be left unanswered even if it had remained an internal matter of the church. However, this was not the case, since the Hungarian Communists could not remain indifferent either to this remarkably vital and resilient grass roots movement which works against the officially promoted atheistic ideology, and wants to re-animate religion and openly defies the carefully worked out accommodation between church and state, one of the proud achievements of the Kádár regime. As mentioned earlier, the authorities, finding police repression inopportune at this time, handed over to the Primate the delicate task of silencing the Bulányists and other small communities with similar
tendencies. The very first pastoral letter of Cardinal Lékai, emanating from the winter 1976 conference of the bishops, was, in fact, directed against the small communities, warning them not to stray from the true church and calling them to obedience to the hierarchy and re-integration into the parish structure. Inside information coming from the meeting of the bishops revealed that the Primate wanted to adopt much stronger measures, including the prohibition for Catholics, under severe censure, of membership in practically all but the most innocuous choral societies. However, he ran into unexpected difficulty when some members of the Bench of Bishops, notably József Cserháti, bishop of Pécs, and András Szennay, archabbott of Pannonhalma - both known rivals of Lékai and suspected aspirants to his position - defended the small communities and refused to endorse the Primate's alarmist views. More significantly, Cserháti, Szennay, and Hungary's most noted Catholic theologian Tamás Nyíri, took up their pen and wrote articles in favour of the small communities which they praised as the best hope for the survival and renewal of religion in our times. Bishop Cserháti went as far as to recommend to all his parish priests in his diocese to encourage the formation of small communities and actively participate in them.

Reluctantly, the Primate had to accept the continued existence of small communities, especially, since Pope Paul VI himself described the basic communities in his apostolic admonition Evangelii Nuntiandii (December 1975) as the hope of the church in its evangelizing mission. However, just as the Pope warned of danger of schism and heresy should these communities distance themselves from the teaching of the church and refuse obedience to the bishops, so the Hungarian Cardinal also made a sharp distinction after the spring 1977 conference of the bishops in his second pastoral letter dealing with the problem between the good, obedient small communities which could be, and should be integrated into the parish framework, and the sectarian type small communities whose religious beliefs and practices are of questionable orthodoxy, who pay only lip-service to obedience while not ceasing to criticise the hierarchy. The Primate's chief target was, of course, Father Bulányi. Since the latter is not a member of the diocesan clergy, but lives on his modest pension which he receives as former labourer, the Primate cannot pressure or discipline him by ecclesiastical suspension from his functions, or transfer him away from Budapest. His attempt to remove Bulányi from the scene by the command of the latter's religious superior, the father general of the Piarist order residing in Rome, misfired when, heeding Bulányi's ardent pleas to be left in Hungary, Father Angelus Ruiz Isla refused to accommodate the Cardinal.
Until now Bulányi has masterfully succeeded in parrying every move by the Primate. When Lékai accused him in Rome of schism and heresy, Bulányi sent assurances to the Holy See of his total loyalty and obedience. Moreover, he voluntarily submitted all his voluminous theological writings (in Latin translation) to the scrutiny of his superior general and also to the Sacred Congregation of the Faith. The verdict was unanimous; there was no trace of schismatic thinking or heresy in them.

The futility of the Primate's efforts to suppress the Bulányists became even more apparent with the encouragement given to the small communities by Pope John Paul II in his 1980 Easter letter to the Hungarian Catholics. In it the Pope commends the faithful for their participation in small communities and asks the bishops to support these in the interest of a more efficient catechesis among the adults. Nevertheless, the combat continues. This last spring the Primate consented to visit in Nagymaros the joint eucharistic celebration of the Catholic youth active in the small communities, but only on condition that the Bulányists would be kept from co-celebrating mass with him. His sermon on this occasion was addressed not to the young, but to the priests present, exhorting them to strict obedience to their bishops. He has also been trying to purge the seminaries of Bulányist influence with the result that several candidates for the priesthood have been dismissed, while the ordination of others has been postponed, pending investigation and recantation.

On the other hand, Bulányi and his followers have no difficulty in finding priests sympathetic to their cause, who permit them to use their churches and parish halls for meetings and retreat. Father Bulányi himself, in spite of a lack of authorization to work as priest, is saying mass and preaches publicly in various Budapest churches, and administers the sacraments when requested. He is well aware of being watched and is prepared to be arrested at any moment. However, he is confident that the small communities which he helped to organize are strong enough to survive renewed persecution and even the loss of their leaders.

CONCLUSION

Father Bulányi and his followers consider the efforts of the Primate to suppress them a shameful kow-towing toward the Communist state and a true tragedy for the church. They would not mind persecution from the Communist police as much; they would be willing to go to jail for their faith as many of them had already in the past. They never expected that the Communists would succeed in having the Primate do the dirty job for them. This saddens them beyond measure.
Those defending Cardinal Lékai argue that he has to act in the interest of the whole church. No doubt, he does perceive a real danger to the unity of the church in the Bulányist criticism and challenge to the hierarchy. Furthermore, the argument goes, while it is true that the Primate acts in conformity with the express wish of the government, the question is: can he act otherwise without retaliation from the authorities and serious harm to the church? To support this point, one is told of the humiliation and threat to which the Primate was recently exposed when the authorities discovered that members of several small communities went on a pilgrimage to the shrine at Mariagyüd in Southern Hungary and stayed there for three days in tents for religious retreat. This was done without asking for permission from the state authorities. The Primate was called into the State Office for Church Affairs, held responsible for the illegal camping, given a severe dressing down and was told that in case he was unable, or unwilling, to prevent a recurrence of such unauthorized gatherings, the government would reconsider its latest concession and will withdraw the permits to teach religion which were just recently granted to the graduates of the correspondence courses in theology at the Budapest Catholic Theological Academy. Thus once again it was demonstrated that the Primate is not a free agent but at the mercy of the state authorities.

Nevertheless, it is sad that the head of the Hungarian Catholic church sees as his most urgent task to suppress exactly those groups of the faithful who take religion most seriously and who give shining example of the Christian virtues. This seems to be, indeed, as an observer noted, a diabolical device by the regime to create a false crisis which would divide the church, pitting the hierarchy against the most ardent believers, while the more acute problems of church reform, recruitment of clergy, lay apostolate and evangelization, questions of ethics and morality, are put on the back burner. One can only pity both the Primate and the small communities grouped around Father Bulányi that instead of harmoniously cooperating for the common good, they let themselves be used as pawns in this clever game, to the detriment of religion and the church.

NOTES

2. During my month-long stay in Hungary in June 1981 I had the opportunity of discussing the issue of small communities with several highly placed and well informed clergymen, Catholic and Protestant, who wished to remain anonymous. A close observer, the Rev. Imre András S.J., director of the Vienna based Hungarian Institute for Sociology of Religion, has written extensively about the
Catholic small communities in Hungary. His two seminal studies published in Katolikus Szemle (Catholic Review, a Hungarian scholarly quarterly appearing in Rome) are indispensable for the understanding of the problem. "Bázisközösségek Magyarországon" ("Base Communities in Hungary") 1977/4, and "Az egyházi kisközösségek" ("The Ecclesiastical Small Communities") 1980/2.

3. My description of the Bulányists is based on a three hour interview with Father Bulányi on June 9th, 1981, and on my reading the voluminous documentation he provided. These include his study "Marketing Religion", the stenographic reports of two of the spiritual retreats with his small communities, as well as his correspondence with Cardinal Lékai and with his superior general, P. Angelus Ruiz Isla.


5. This incident was related to me by Father I. András. He also provided a copy of the invitation with the program of activities for the camping at Mariagyűd.

Footnotes for W. Zademach's "The 'Fifth International'"

* This article appeared in German as "Eine 'V. Internationale'?' in Deutsches Pfarrer Blatt, Vol. 80, No. 5 (May, 1980), and in an English translation in the Information Letter (Lutheran World Federation, Dept. of Studies, Geneva), No. 30 (August, 1980). Used with permission of the author.

1. Europa-Archiv No. 6, 78. Quoted from R. Neudeck, with name and address, in Lutherische Monatschellschaft, Hamburg, 4, 79, p. 222.

2. W. Strauss, Bürgerrechtler in the UdSSR (Freiburg, 1979), p. 45.

3. Ibid., p. 52. 4. Ibid., p. 55.


10. Ibid., pp. 42 ff. 11. Ibid., p. 44.


