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Uncovered Problems: The Flip Side of Personal Triumph (Editorial)

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UNCOVERED PROBLEMS: THE FLIP SIDE OF PERSONAL TRIUMPH

When the Hungarian Lutheran Church acted as host for the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in August, 1984, and its main bishop, Dr. Zoltán Káldy, was elected the President of Lutheran World Federation for the next seven years, it seemed that the brilliant ecclesiastical career of an able clergyman had reached its zenith, bringing recognition not only to him but also to his minority church which comprises 5% of the population. Yet strangely, even his country, whose ruling ideology pursues the "withering away of religion" saw in this a vindication of its policy toward the churches: it exhibited a degree of cooperation and tolerance not often seen in more repressive societies.

Before the Assembly convened, the question was posed by many regarding the rather dubious tradition of electing the host bishop as President of LWF. Was it prudent in this case? Káldy's candidacy was dramatically challenged on the eve of the election by an Open Letter from a minister, Rev. Zoltán Doka, a member of Káldy's diocese. He leveled serious charges against Káldy, which can be examined in the documents of this issue. The "Doka Case" raised three problems. One is Káldy's style of leadership. The next, more fundamental, questions of what policies and what church polity should be pursued by Hungarian Lutherans. And the last entails the truth about the condition of the church in Hungary.

Curiously the discussion did not center on Káldy at the outset but on the ill-treatment of the famous Bishop Lajos Ordáss, who had been falsely tried in 1948, then rehabilitated just before the 1956 revolution, returned to his bishopric and then, according to a group of men who respected Ordáss, shamefully pushed aside into oblivion until his death, thus making more space for the rising star, Káldy.

The case was first opened not by a clergyman but by a young Budapest pianist, Árpád Fasang, who wrote a letter to Káldy asking for the posthumous vindication of Ordáss. This was followed by the sensational Open Letter of Zoltán Doka to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly and then by Laszlo Chengődi, the minister of the congregation where Ordáss worshipped in silence in his last years, and by a retired lawyer, Professor Dr. Lorand Boleratsky and other admirers of Ordáss' integrity, courage, and leadership.

One may wonder why the rehabilitation of Ordáss is so important to these people. The answer is that they see Káldy, the present leader, as the symbol
of values at odds with those of Ordáss. So in the first instance their complaints are serious accusations against Káldy, formerly a successful evangelist and pastor from Pecs who appeared to possess a gift for untainted leadership but who is now accused of absolutism, intolerance, careerism, political aspirations (Káldy is member of the Hungarian parliament), selling out the interests of the church to advance himself, forcing upon the church the "theology of diakonia" and other sundry failings. It is obvious that these men don't like Káldy any longer. But more is at stake than objection to unbound ambition.

The reason why Doka waited until the Lutheran World Federation meeting to raise this issue is found in the nature of the Hungarian church problem and the response of the outside world to it. Had he cited the grievances which he and the others had experienced for years, they would have been hushed up, silenced while those in the West in responsible ecclesiastical positions would have done nothing because they officially work together with the present Hungarian Church leadership. Symptomatic of this is that fact that those to whom the open letter was addressed showed no desire to share it with the delegation until the letter was widely circulated among them. So Doka waited for years for the golden moment when such a complaint could not be easily set aside. He calls it the "kairos" moment. (Please note that Doka had previously been given a choice of either ten years in prison or transfer from Budapest to the small village of Hevizgyör - he chose the latter and has spent the past 26 years in this rural parish.)

The second, and more fundamental issue, is the question of the direction, theology, politics and even policy of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. At one time lay people had a great deal of influence, sometimes even crucial say, in the work of the church. Now the number of bishops has diminished from four to two. Both are men who can be characterized by the first trait - political compromise - of Trevor Beeson's Discretion and Valor. The critics object that the true interests of the church are jeopardized when such enormous power is lodged in the presiding bishop. Why should the Hungarian government want such a strong cleric at the head of the church? Because by controlling him, and he controlling the entire church, it could make governing the church relatively simple.
The critics also claim that no theological options have been allowed except for Káldy's "theology of diakonia" and that the hardworking Káldy even heavily edits theological works by others, inserting into them unwanted aspects of the theology of diakonia without consulting with the author about the change.

The issue of silencing the opposition is another grievance. The aftermath of the "Open Letter" resulted in the commencement of a church trial against Doka, presumably not by Káldy and not because of criticism against Káldy but for offenses against church law. It should be noted that in recent years Lutheran Church law was dramatically rewritten into a small, vague document which can be easily manipulated (a little laughable booklet according to Dr. Boleratsky). Only because of pressure from the Scandinavian and German Lutherans has the case against Doka been dropped.

The question of truth, of course, must be raised. Why do Doka, Csengődi and others want people outside their church to ready these documents? Why are they eager to make the correspondence, minutes, declarations, and other minutiae public when church leaders prefer to handle the issue discretely? According to the critics, it is a question of truth. They feel that truth had been flagrantly betrayed by many present Hungarian church leaders both at home and abroad. Contradictions, discrepancies, fallacies, and, to be blunt, the lies of their present leaders have been discovered and documented by them.

Needless to say, many of us are aware that truth sometimes has many faces and that it is hard to come to absolute truth and that there may exist both a "Doka truth" and a "Káldy truth." But thus far the "Káldy" truth has had the privilege of monopolistic communication. The "Káldy truth" was proclaimed not only officially throughout Hungary in sermons, pastoral letters, church journals, and the official press but also abroad at meetings of church leaders, in the Christian Peace Conference, in the Lutheran World Federation, in the World Council of Churches. It will continue to have even more exposure from Káldy as the President of the Lutheran World Federation. The weight of office in these matters counts for much. The "Doka truth" has fewer avenues of reaching people. The "Doka truth" and some of the "Káldy truth" is being presented here. It is indeed eye-opening. We hope to hear about and then publish other responses: the "Káldy", "Doka" and other versions.
It should be noted that the Hungarian Lutheran case is by no means isolated. The Hungarian Reformed Church has a bishop Tibor Barta; whose detractors find him even more objectionable than Kaldy is to Lutherans. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Gleb Yarkunin, and Lev Regelson have turned the world's attention to the accommodations of Patriarch Pimen of Moscow. The Slovak Lutheran Bishop, Jan Michalko, acts in a servile manner toward the government which impress some of his ministers as being more positively inclined toward the state than toward them. Janusz Narzynski, bishop of the Lutheran Church in Poland, propagates, what he calls, a "dynamic loyalty to the State." According to a Polish Catholic observer Narzynski exceeds Kaldy's "theology of diakonia" in his accommodations to the state since he does not even bother to use theological terms. Narzynski criticizes the Polish government only when he perceives the government action as being pro-Catholic.

And there are others whose integrity or wisdom is questioned. For Western church leaders and lay people this raises the sharp question: Whose truth is closer to the Truth?

Finally, one more point. Why highlight the case of Kaldy when in the immediate post-Communist takeover period there were other church leaders such as János Péter and László Dezséry who more blatantly did the government's bidding at the expense of the independence of the Church? The critics of Káldy, perhaps unfairly, see this comparison to the disadvantage of Káldy. They say that those times in the past were far more bloody, the oppression exceedingly more cruel, and the deception more thorough. Under the present more moderate conditions they wonder why it is still necessary that their leaders carry on a charade of disinformation to their Western counterparts and the Western public about the true conditions in their church. They put it this way: "Don't the Western Church leaders know that the representatives of the Eastern European churches are beholden and answerable to the government to a degree which may be intolerable? Do not methods of so-called 'discrete and silent diplomacy' on the part of Western church leaders actually entrench such indebtedness?"

On the other hand, is it not too risky to blow up the cover of pretended church harmony and contentedness in the manner in which Doka, Chengödy, and company have done? They admit the risk to themselves and the possible harm to others. They appear not to intend these as personal attacks but as policy
critiques. They act in the conviction that this public airing of their problems will have a liberating rather than a repressive effect on the future of the church.

I am aware of the controversial nature of publishing some of the documents and correspondence. It is done in the hope of opening a much needed discussion on the direction of church life in Hungary and Eastern Europe. I also wish to contribute to our understanding of the less visible aspects of how things operate in Eastern Europe. Several other articles which elucidate the strife within the churches will appear in future issues.

Paul Mojzes
Editor