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Open letter to President Kíbíra, General Secretary Mau, the LWF Executive Committee, and to all those in the LWF who feel a sense of responsibility for the Hungarian Lutheran Church

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Dear Brothers:

Forgive me for burdening you with my letter. My conscience compels me to do so. I consider it my duty to report to you without delay something which so many people think in the Hungarian Lutheran Church, but dare not say openly. I ask you, therefore, to take into consideration the pressing responsibility which I feel before God for the Hungarian Lutheran Church, which is here expressed.

Up to the present day the leadership of the Hungarian Lutheran Church /hereafter HLC/ has misled the world Lutheran community by stating that its pastors and congregations uniformly confess the so-called Diakonia Theology /hereafter DT/. The truth is that the concept of DT has not yet reached the consciousness of the congregations, and only a minority of pastors approve of it. Most of those who approve do so only out of personal interest or fear, and only in a public capacity. In confidential circles, however, they criticize and reject the concept. This rift is one of the most characteristic and saddest aspects of the spiritual and theological situation of the HLC.

In the following I would like to shed light on the true situation of the HLC, as one who for decades, to the present day, has been a direct witness to all that has happened and is happening in the HLC. I shall do this in connection with three questions:

1. What are the main reasons for the inner rift within the Church?
2. What has led to the present situation?
3. What are the chief characteristics of the present situation?

1. What are the main causes of the inner rift within the Church?
   a. The errors of DT and
   b. The practical application of DT by the Church leadership.
   a. It is common knowledge that "diakonia" is not the central theological
concept of the New Testament, neither in the Synoptic gospels, nor in the Johannine or Pauline literature. This bare fact makes it doubtful whether one is free to build up a theological concept, which emphatically holds itself to be Biblical, on one individual peripheral New Testament idea. Much more important is the recognition that "diakonia" is a formal concept in the New Testament which can suggest entirely differing things, from service at the table to the redeeming service of Jesus. But precisely because of this there is the danger that these different concepts might become mingled in a theologically inconsequential and illegitimate way, so that they are placed in the same category. In my opinion this is happening in DT. As an illustration of this, I would like to refer to one view of the nature of the church.

To the question as to what the task of the Church in the world is, DT gives the following answer: the task of the Church is the proclamation of the gospel, together with the distribution of the sacraments, and the practice of diakonia. With regard to the latter, special stress is laid on the point that it is not enough for diakonia to deal only with individuals, but must extend to the burning questions both of one's own society and of the whole of humanity - which in itself is worthy of approval. But given this definition, it immediately appears puzzling - especially to Lutheran ears - that one has to make special mention of diakonia, when this is simply the result, the ethical consequence, in the life of those who answer "Yes" in faith to the Gospel. DT, however, again and again emphasizes that diakonia is not merely the fruit of a faith awakened through the Gospel, but is also independent from the Gospel, ranked equally with the Gospel as the peculiar task of the Church. Such differentiation is justified by saying that in the Synoptic gospels Jesus sent out his disciples not only to proclaim the approach of the Kingdom of God, but also to exorcise demons and cure the sick. There is no need to comment in more detail about the correctness of this exegesis to those who are to a certain degree familiar with the exegesis of the New Testament.

On the basis of the above mentioned definition, the thesis of the Augsburg Confession "about the Church" has often been criticized as one which must be filled out with the task of practicing diakonia. It is said that neither Melancthon nor Luther gave a complete answer to the question of what the task of the church should be, because both held the proclamation of the word as the sole treasure and task of the church. But I am convinced that the "amplified
"gospel" is the fundamental error of DT and at the same time is, properly speaking, an erroneous teaching of church history. This false theology makes no distinction between the acts of God and the acts of man, but mixes them and makes them appear equal. When Bishop Kaldy repeatedly stresses, "that Church which only proclaims the Gospel is not a Church", it is apparent that DT subordinates the Gospel to diakonia, or to a socio-ethical concept. This ethical-ideological construction, however, robs the Gospel as the final gracious Word of God for sinners, of its independent freedom from every human activity, and thus weakens it.

Simultaneously, the free Christian act is deprived of its well-spring and is deformed into justice through work and piety, through service. This false theological basis of DT makes the theological thinking and the preaching of the clergy uncertain, and this uncertainty continues to have an impact on the piety of the congregations.

b. The socio-ethical manipulation of the Gospel especially shows itself in practice when DT is applied by the Church leadership. To be sure, only a few people within the member Churches of the LWF know that there is no religious freedom in the HLC. I again stress in the HLC there is no religious freedom. The Church policy of the State, surprising though it may seem, operates with more loyalty to the pastors and congregations than that of the Church leadership. It is all the more scandalous and unendurable that the Church leadership has declared DT to be the official and obligatory theology of the HLC. Everyone who resists this pressure, even in the smallest way, exposes himself to existential danger, as Bishop Kaldy continually stresses it in a style designed to intimidate the pastors.

Dear brothers, you must know this and you ought not to pass over in silence the fact that theological terror reigns in the HLC. This is the truth, which members and representatives of the Church leadership try to hide from the foreign Churches in every possible way. The Church leadership maintains this terror by telling the civil authorities that those who dare criticize DT are enemies of the State. In this way they skillfully make theological debate impossible. This is a true and perilous slander!

With many of my colleagues I must admit patiently and with understanding that it is no easy task for the State to develop a Church policy which will remain faithful to its fundamental ideological position, and at the same time
allows ideas of humanity rooted in universal human rights to prosper. During my 32 years of Church service, however, I have recognized more clearly that the Church leadership, which manifests loyalty to the State, has not offered true and genuine help in the development of its Church policy. A few years ago Bishop Kaldy frequently stressed in words and writing that it is not enough for a pastor to be an obedient citizen, who maintains good relations with the local and State authorities, and is not enough if a pastor of the HLC only fulfill their calling correctly and in an up to date manner when they accept socialism -- with the exception of atheism -- and when they support actively and directly the socialist aims of the State. Such statements, however, only appear in the Hungarian Church press, but never in foreign languages!

Here I must make a personal remark. I always was and still remain sensitive to questions of social justice, because I myself came from a poor family. My ancestors were for the most part agricultural proletarians and day laborers. I did not learn the truth of socialism from books, but I recognized it in the tears of my dear mother, who with my father educated and taught five children. But Bishop Kaldy, precisely as bishop, presented his own DT to us pastors as an obligatory theology, and socialism as a mandatory ideology. I protest against that, and I am not inclined to accept that it is just.

2. What had led to the present situation?

In 1958 the State proposed to the congregations that they should elect Zoltan Kaldy as Bishop. The congregations accepted this proposal. The majority of pastors and congregations looked with expectation towards the work of this one time pietistic evangelist, because at the time of his induction he promised a just order of church life corresponding to the Gospel. At that time there was no question of obligatory DT. Moreover he stressed freedom of theological work.

But from the beginning there were opponents in the Church who attacked him. A shameful power struggle began, which destroyed much of the HLC's strength. Bishop Kaldy used five different methods to strengthen his power:

a. He accused Bishop Ordass and his co-workers in public and condemned them as enemies of the State, and as those who would drive the coach of the Church into the ditch. This frequently happened and always with crude and threatening words, and without allowing the accused and condemned the
possibility of freely defending themselves. The so-called "Ordass affair" is an unsettled affair of the HLC to this very day. The humiliations which accompanied Bishop Ordass to his death burden the consciences of many.

b. He [Kaldy] always endeavored to win the confidence of the State and to thus find a defense from his opponents. According to his own words he strove to "beat" his enemies in the race to the State office. Here then is the most powerful motive of his whole political activity.

c. An especially important tool of his was the cultivation of foreign relations. In the past he spoke, and still speaks, two kinds of language. This was evident at one pastors' conference at Lake Balaton. He does not use his domestic language when on foreign travels, but instead accuses his opponents of such faults and presents himself as defender of the faith. With this method he has succeeded in winning to his side numerous foreign churches, bishops, and moreover, the LWF itself.

d. The role of Bishop Kaldy in his struggle for power is evident also in the Church press. After his installation, he quickly took over the leadership of the press office of the HLC, and since then all publications bear his name as nihil obstat. On the basis of his ever increasing power he feels himself justified in censoring articles, studies and books, in other words, striking out sentences or larger sections, or simply inserting his own views in the text. He handled many of my articles in this way, and also my commentary on Mark. But there is no forum in which to protest against this, because the press is in his hands.

The work of the press is superficial and irresponsible. With certain publications it is quite clear that they appear in print not because of their content but because the authors are who they are. Really important things do not appear, or only in a limited edition. The most recent example of this is that the new mandatory hymn book, published in 1982, is not available. The limited edition soon ran out and Bishop Kaldy suggested that a new edition cannot be expected for some years. Pastors are forced to send away empty handed the believers who want to buy the hymn book. A press working in this way is directly destructive to the congregations.

e. The last and best weapon of Bishop Kaldy against his enemies, as it later emerged, became the implementation of the concept of DT. In part only, and not in the first instance, the aim was to give the Church an unambiguous
place within socialism. This he had already in large measure accomplished before he became Bishop, otherwise the State would not have proposed him to the congregations for election, and at the same time there was still no question about DT. His primary aim, however, was to make himself theologically independent from a few theologians, to "beat" them in the race to the State office, because he could not answer their criticism with political mud-slinging and intimidation. When he succeeded in declaring DT the official and mandatory theology of the HLC there was no more doubt that he had vanquished his opponents in every way -- politically and theologically.

3. What are the main distinguishing marks of the present situation of the HLC?

a. The theological imprint is naturally connected with a cult of personality. The most recent manifestation was the diverse celebration last autumn which accompanied the 25th anniversary of his installation as Bishop. This was the main theme of the Church press for one whole month. On the other hand, however, Bishop Kaldy looks down on the pastors with a self-assured lack of regard, from the unattainable heights of infallibility. He has no time for them and has no brotherly relations with them. The pastors have no spiritual guardian. Many of them live in spiritual isolation, with inner bitterness and with a continually diminishing love of their vocation. The monthly pastors' assemblies are "morally" obligatory. One must submit speeches in three copies. They register remarks in an official note book, on the basis of which the speakers can afterwards be disciplined by the Bishop. Because of this, the atmosphere in these meetings is not one of frankness, and rarely provides any help with parish work.

b. The most serious consequence of the theological terror and the cult of personality, however, is that the standard of theological work in the HLC falls ever lower. Scholarly work is impossible where freedom of research is missing and where researchers must confirm already established answers. The chief task of professors is the justification of DT. This also means that theological work in the HLC has no scholarly world perspective, because it cannot keep pace with foreign research. Bishop Kaldy upholds this situation when he says: DT is the world's best theological conception, and so we have no need of foreign, especially "western" theology. This conceited theology will do incalculable harm to the spiritual and intellectual life of the
Church. The damage is already great and it is vastly important that there should be a complete rethinking in total freedom and openness of the HLC's theology, church law and church politics, before suitable pastors have run out of energy for the rethinking, before the congregations are dispersed or absorbed by the sects, before the inner life of the HLC finally collapses.

The LWF could do a great service to the HLC if it were to help bring into existence as soon as possible a free and brotherly dialogue within the HLC. Till then all relations -- except for material support -- are only an appearance, which only help to conceal the internal situation of the HLC. Without this help the LWF's Budapest Assembly will only cause more damage because it will further the decay. One will spend comfortable weeks in Hungary, enjoy Hungarian hospitality, see flourishing congregations. One will listen to fine words of greeting and "everything is in order" speeches, with many Biblical quotations and fashionable socio-ethical and theological phrases. Nevertheless with blindfolded eyes and blocked ears one will return home without having noticed even a solitary splinter of the cross which the HLC bears in reality.

I ask all who read this letter that they should not regard it as an attack on the person of Bishop Kaldy. Please understand this letter to be a cry for help from pastors of the HLC, of which they would approve -- of this I am sure -- even though they are forced to deny it from fear.

I ask forgiveness if with this letter I cause Bishop Kaldy pain. He well knows that I have many times made statements critical of DT, and of the method by which he thrusts it on the Church. But he has always rejected my criticism, or has failed to reply to me. Now I feel myself compelled to go public. I have consciously avoided speaking about the fateful impact of his activities on my personal life. If his activity had touched only me, I would henceforth be silent. But what we are talking about here is not personalities, but before all else, the Gospel of God, and if this is taken away from us, we are all lost.

The Grace of God be with us!

With brotherly greetings

/signed/

Zoltan Doka

Kuchen, [West Germany,] 10 July, 1984.