1985

The Hungarian Catholic Church in Tension Between Loyalty and Opposition

Emmerich András

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol5/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
THE HUNGARIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN TENSION BETWEEN LOYALTY AND OPPOSITION*

by Emmerich András

Dr. Emmerich András, S.J. has previously contributed to OPREE (see Vol. IV, No. 1, Vol. IV, No. 2, and Vol. II, No. 5). A native of Hungary, he is currently living in Vienna and directs the Hungarian Institute for Sociology of Religion. He is a prolific writer in the area of Hungarian church issues.

In its more than thousand-year history the Hungarian Catholic Church practically never experienced, with the exception of short episodes, uncertainties in its loyalties in regard to the state. Saint Stephen founded the Church in Hungary, and it was this same Stephen, Hungary's first king, who established the state. State and church had continually--so to speak, shoulder to shoulder--pursued the same goal, namely to be concerned with the spiritual and physical well-being of the people. The state extensively supported the church; and the church, in return, sided with the state by actively participating in the formation and leadership of public life. Such was the situation at the end of World War II: Catholicism was the religion of the state. Because of their official position, the bishops were members of the Upper House and consequently members of the law-making body of the land. The Archbishop of Esztergom maintained the right of "homo-regius"--at the very least according to law texts. The priesthood was protected by the law and benefitted as holders of public office.

This situation was brought to an abrupt end following the change in regimes at the end of the war. For a decade and a half the church suffered outright persecution. Later there developed what appeared to be an epoch-making change in relationship between church and state: legal separation. As events of the past 35 years demonstrated, however, that was true only on paper; in fact, relations between church and state continue in their centuries-old pattern, with a shift in power decidedly

in favor of the state. This not only applies to the period of confrontation under Cardinal Mindszenty, but also to the current era of adjustment by the church to the desires of the state.

A frequently recurring theme in the interviews and studies referring to Hungarian church politics is the reproach that the church leadership is all too flexible, if not to say complaisant. The position of the Polish Bishops' Conference is most often mentioned in this context as a comparison. In this respect, many years ago the Polish bishops criticized the Hungarian episcopate, saying that if the Hungarian bishops had been less subservient, then the Poles would have had an easier time defending their independence against governmental encroachment. Nor would they need to guard themselves against the reproaches made by their state, pointing to the example of their Hungarian colleagues, after whose model the Polish government wanted to mold them to be more cooperative.

When John Paul II was selected for the papacy the Hungarian government as well as the hierarchy feared that the "Polish" pope would apply stricter criteria in the future "Ostpolitik" of the Vatican. After all, one of the most significant results of Rome's "Ostpolitik" up to that time was the normalization of the relationship between church and state in Hungary. The pope did not justify these apprehensions. He was not concerned with changing the political positions of the Vatican; rather, he wanted to bring about pastoral renewal and, through this, the revival of the Hungarian Church.

The Hungarian politicians understandably disliked hearing any reference to the Polish example, and they also did not want comparisons drawn relevant to the distinct situation in both countries. The Hungarian bishops regarded these comparisons as unjustified, in particular because the Hungarian people, in contrast to the Poles, are denominationally divided, and Hungary's true believers do not stand by their bishops in the same way as is the case with the Poles.

Furthermore, it must not be overlooked that, in the average Hungarian's awareness, a conflict between church and state is fundamentally alien. The "national soul" traditionally longs for the working-together of the state and church for the well-being of the people. In Poland there appears even here a difference: the Polish people have
always been more drawn toward the church than to the state. An additional factor to be considered when making a Polish-Hungarian comparison is that the situation after the war was fundamentally different. While the Polish bishops and the future political leaders of the country were languishing together in German concentration camps, and the relationship between the church and state thus had a common basis, the new state leadership in Hungary was opposed to the leading ecclesiastical personalities, who played an active part in the public life of the previous regime and, consequently, could really be marked as opponents to the new regime.

Goals of the State

A description of the oppression that the state carried out against the church is not the topic here. It is more important to look at the state's objectives. Its first aim was the complete exclusion of the church from public life—as a social factor of power. To achieve this goal, rulers in the early 1950s were willing to use any means. Practically all that remained for the church, robbed of nearly all its institutions, was a certain freedom of worship which alone confirmed its existence. Simultaneously, the church was reproached—as justification for the rigorous actions taken against it—for past mistakes (including deeds which were later construed as mistakes).

An additional goal of the state was reorganizing the church in such a way that it fit into the state's political concept. One of the means for attaining this was the establishment of the "Priests For Peace" movement on August 1, 1950. In the beginning, its members acted within the scope of the Catholic country-wide peace council as internal church opposition to the bishops; later they became ecclesiastical confidants of the state. To prevent an inner fissure of the clergy, the bishops, in 1957, brought into existence their own ecclesiastical peace undertaking, named "Opus Pacis," that was to serve as a framework for the participation of the clergy in the peace movement. From the two peace movements there arose, after a short period, a series of personal unions: the same people took over the same office in both movements, and "collective" meetings were held. In practice, however, it happened that in the end the church itself legitimized the ecclesiastical peace movement.
schism of the priesthood was actually avoided, but the reputation of the church suffered. The state hurried to ensure that those clergymen who cooperated with the state appeared relatively believable. A tested means in cases such as this, for example, was the custom of surrounding the priest who was loyal to the state with eager chaplains, therewith guaranteeing a good spiritual advisor.

Of substantial importance for the continuing development of the church-state relationship was the agreement signed on August 30, 1950, between the Hungarian government and representatives of the Hungarian Bishops’ Conference. The agreement stated, in part, a desire for "peaceful coexistence between the state and the Catholic Church, and therewith also the unity of the Hungarian people . . . as well as fostering the peaceful development of our homeland." With this agreement, the assembly of bishops pledged, among other things, "that it will proceed appropriately against any church members who oppose the legal order of the Peoples' Republic of Hungary or who interfere with the government's social improvements" and "that under no conditions will misuses of religious convictions of believers or activities of the Catholic Church which aim at political goals contrary to the regime's interest be permitted." This agreement indeed could be interpreted as agreeing with the ecclesiastical statutes, but actually it opened up all kinds of political interpretations by the state based on its vague wording. As a result of the arbitrary interpretation, such paradoxical situations arose, for example, which made it impossible for the diocesan bishop to defend his priests when they were tried because of "unpermitted" pastoral activities; the bishop even had to personally enact disciplinary sanctions and oversee their enforcement.

Peaceful Coexistence

These fruits of the Stalin era, including administrative measures and an agreement open to various political interpretations, resulted in the state's regarding church policy as "historically developed." A status quo was established, and this served as a starting point for consolidation, which in political terminology is called "peaceful co-existence."

Within this context, on September 15, 1964, a shared agreement was
signed—a preliminary one—by the Holy See and the Hungarian government, in which the atheistic state acknowledged the Vatican as a responsible negotiating partner in all important affairs of the Hungarian Church. It resulted in bi-annual negotiations on all unresolved questions. A visible result of these regular negotiations is the appointment of bishops from among that circle of persons who enjoy the confidence of both the Vatican and the Hungarian state. On February 5, 1974, the Archbishopric of Esztergom was declared vacant. In 1976 it was filled by Dr. László Lékai, and the Hungarian hierarchy now can be regarded as restored. It was Cardinal Lékai, the Primate of the Hungarian Church, who embossed the future development of ecclesiastical life through legislative measures and church-political practices.

The strong church-political system that the new Hungarian Primate established holds to the principle that the legal foundation is the Constitution, especially the declaration regarding the rights and responsibilities of citizens. In a study of this text, a member of the Academy, Imre Szabó, interprets this by means of the international category of human rights corresponding to fixed rights of the citizen: "What one refers to as human rights on an international level, . . . means . . . nothing else but the formulation of the basic rights of the citizens within the state. The Constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic offers a framework for these rights, with which it declares that the observation of these rights are indivisibly bound together with the compliance to the civil duties. The Constitution also establishes that these civil rights and duties are determined by laws of the Hungarian People's Republic. ¹ Human rights are viewed in this way. Therewith the right to religious freedom depends upon a double condition: the performance of civil responsibilities and the adherence to other legal provisions.

Now, however, the state, which serves as an instrument of the Party, is by no means neutral in the construction of socialism. Instead it undertakes the expansion of the "scientific" worldview and sees to the lawful structure to which the church must commit itself. András Holló believes "The statutes regarding religious instruction can be regarded as basic guarantees of religious freedom. These legal norms . . . further reflect those political principles which offer the
foundation for the socialist freedom of conscience as a civil right guaranteed and practiced.\textsuperscript{2}

These measures provide the state with so-called "well-ordered conditions," that warrant the utmost transparency and possibilities for control by the state. The provisions of the law which the church was pressured to accept divide the individual religious operations into a scheme consisting of three parts, namely legal, not legal, and illegal operations. The administrative agencies of the state are the ones who categorize the areas of church activities according to these criteria. Practically all legal functions are controlled by the "State Office for Church Affairs" and even enjoy a certain degree of state protection. Other operations could—according to governmental understanding—damage the internal order and, therefore, fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. The terms "legal," "not legal," and "illegal" are important categories for the church, and the differences, especially their rigid demarcation, is of great import to church politics. Since, in reality, differences that separate the legal from the illegal are often minute, the above-mentioned departments and agencies work together closely and transfer a matter from one to another.

Because of the many regulations that fall under the jurisdiction of the government office for church affairs, this authority has not only the potential to legislatively control but also to influence the direction of the life of the church. In this manner, not only will the direction of the church be influenced but also its every significant step will be prescribed. How serious the consequences are can already be seen in the fact that under such conditions long-term ministerial planning is impossible. It is of no use to plan in advance, when one can never predict to what the state will consent. If one forward step succeeds, then it pertains only to one specific concrete need of the church. In any case, it is always only a small step.

In this age of "relations of a new type,"\textsuperscript{3} the supervision and directing takes place in a more pleasant, negotiable manner, that means, in an obliging way, permits requests, grants counsel, states reasons for refusals, avoiding threats and obvious means of pressure. In order to avoid turbulence in the relationship between state and church—and one
always means the church needing to avoid turbulence—the state strives to make the ecclesiastical negotiating partner complaisant. This is not all too difficult because the bishops know only too well that they must repeatedly appear as petitioners before the authorities. And, lastly, there are unlimited possibilities available that reward cooperativeness, or, conversely, to allude to the consequences which would follow in case of disturbed relations.

The authorities negotiate only with the individual bishops and never with the entire episcopal collegium. In matters that affect everyone, they confer with the leader of the Bishops' Conference. This method of the state, to only negotiate with individual persons, becomes exceedingly opportune, since in Hungary the chairman of the Bishops' Conference is not elected—and hence there are no frequent changes—but that, according to the statutes the Archbishop of Esztergom automatically holds this position. If he is unable to do so, the Archbishop of Kalocsa represents him. Having in advance determined a chairman of the Bishops' Conference is not very helpful for the church.

A further complication makes it easier for the state to legitimate its influence. Although the statutes of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference require that the official contacts between the representatives of the church and state must be conducted in writing, or that verbal negotiations should be transcribed in the form of a Protocol, this provision has never been honored. Because the negotiations are handled by individuals representing the church, the lack of a formal Protocol which documents the content of the negotiations is frequently disadvantageous for the church.

The Bishops

Before discussing the influence of the state upon the bishop's personal problems, I would like to stress that the hierarchs in Hungary at this time can be considered persons of integrity. Their education, like their human qualities, are no better or worse than those of the Hungarian priesthood in general; in fact, that the state had sanctioned their appointment does not mean that they were totally committed to the state. They work within the existing system without necessarily wholeheartedly embracing it. But it is naturally also clear that the
state has many more possibilities than the Holy See, which it also uses quite systematically to probe the persons nominated for the position of bishop. The authorities are thoroughly informed about each individual candidate; one knows his way of thinking, can estimate how much he can put up with and to what extent he can be church-politically pressured. The authorities can then prepare themselves, adjusting their endeavors in penetrating the church according to each individual bishop.

Also working against the welfare of the church is the fact that the new episcopal candidates belong to that generation which no longer has the possibilities to develop leadership qualities in an episcopal professorship and to gather experience in the area of leading a diocese. As clergymen they might have performed their functions outstandingly, but that still does not enable them to efficiently take over leading positions and to make decisions with far-reaching ramifications in matters that cannot be directly overseen. Their political education, their knowledge of universal church matters, are quite insufficient in judging specific occurrences and in reacting appropriately. Their personal stance is therefore made more difficult because they are unable to choose their own subordinates. Contact with priests within the diocese is also maintained with some difficulty. They sit isolated upon their episcopal chair, practically left to themselves. Their possibilities to develop initiatives in the area of ministerial responsibilities, as already mentioned, are also very limited. And when their priests are struggling with difficulties and expect the bishops to stand by them and give them advice, they have little to offer and therefore receive little respect. At the same time, as leaders of the church, they are responsible for all concerns and problems, with which those thrust to the periphery of the church by society must contend.

With this background it is understandable that the bishops found critical differences in opinion about their administration coming from abroad quite unfair and, therefore, they complained. Those living in foreign countries, they thought, should not express their concern by means of well-intended advice or even criticism, but by understanding their domestic situation. The problem of the Hungarian bishops who find themselves in a field of tension between loyalty and opposition cannot be depicted in such a manner that one blames the "too weak bishops" for
everything, setting them up as scapegoats. However, nor should it be
done in such a way that one be content with simply "understanding" their
situation and--looking beyond all shortcomings--simply ignore all
present church problems and tasks.

Politicization of the Church

The last section of this analysis attempts to present a summary
view of the results that have brought to maturity the development of the
aspect categorized as the "politicization of the church."

Politicization means transformation according to the principle of
political advantage. When, by the appointment of the key church
positions, the bestowal of clerical distinctions, the planning of
clerical programs, the solution of conflict situations, the views of the
state are always taken into consideration or even given priority, a
counterselection develops whereby the church finds itself in an identity
crisis that is no less dangerous than persecution. The continuous
"serving two masters," the juggling and compromising between the
political viewpoints of the state and the demands of the gospel, sooner
or later must lead to uncertainty and resignation. Consequently, an
identity crisis is then practically unavoidable within the church.

The church-political ideology does try to establish a new identity
on its own by offering its guiding principles and guidelines in terms of
"the construction of socialism." In this manner, the church can claim
that it has mediated a "spiritual-emotional asset" to the believers, by
which these individuals would become righteous and honest members of
society, who can deal more adequately with life's frustrations, manage
better marriages, agree to have more children, protest less frequently,
etc. For the church as such, however, the situation thereby does not
become more positive. Self-interpretation of this kind does make it
easier for the church to find the modus vivendi within the state.
Essentially, though, the church's identity crisis heightened rather
than eased because of the ceaseless desire for a better position on the
part of the church.

The church is furthermore seen as being a type of "trade-union" of
religious people, that ensures order among the members and stays in
contact with the state. Because of its positive attitude toward the
official aims of society, it fulfills an important function in the interest and for the promotion of national unity. One should not neglect the contacts of the church with foreign countries which present a considerable factor of prestige for the nation.

Along these lines, the church was able to adapt itself to the given social constellation. Ideologically stated, "the church has found its place in the building-up of socialism," under which it can naturally be understood that the church is to submit to the mechanisms of the state's executive power.

Loyalty and Opposition

It is clear that those visions for the future which the state intends for the church do not suffice. Nevertheless, the church must fulfill its mission and live with the facts. The reality is indeed not easy; the church is confronted with the rejection of ideological plurality, with the monopolistic claim of the state for child and youth education, with handicaps in the carrying out of ministerial duties, with influence peddling in the personnel appointments to ecclesiastical positions, etc. These are fields of tension for the church, and yet the church is not permitted to seek alternatives. It is not allowed to take the standpoint of "loyalty or opposition," but must accept both attitudes. Therewith, the church can relate to all matters— even the almighty state executive power. Then, by securing a certain degree of legality, the church gradually "purchases" a certain measure of individual and social freedom, an environment (i.e. milieu) in which community and sacramental life can be witnessed and practiced in a truly human manner.

The Hungarian Catholic Church, having lived between the altar and throne for hundreds of years, must learn a new language in order to be able to accept the attitude of "loyalty and opposition." This language must, on the one hand, bear witness to the gospel in a non-ambiguous manner, in order to secure the respect of the atheistic state, which stands unsympathetic vis-à-vis the faith and religion of the Christian. On the other hand, the church must learn to adapt itself to the state's methods of political struggle. The "familiar liaison" established throughout the centuries no longer exists; in its place must appear a
politically balanced Christian behavior. Several preconditions must be considered as given: there exists no doubt that the political leadership wishes the cooperation of the church in the "construction of socialism," and thereby the church receives a firmer standing in the life of the land.

In the meantime, there still exists a large chasm in respect to the future functions of the church between the conceptions of Marxist ideology and clerical self-understanding. The church looks for its own place and must, thereby, become active. In this way, it must produce the proof for the pastoral need of the faithful and, namely—in order to achieve political validity—with the active support of the faithful believers themselves. The church must realize its interests by concretizing them on its own, formulating and sorting the attitudes, and representing them before the state in an objective and determined manner. Likewise, the church must also insist on pursuing a written form of handling the negotiations between church and state representatives. The political logic, on which the relations between the church and state are founded, must appropriately follow that with each step the church will come forth with additional demands and will insist on everyone receiving reciprocal concessions from the state for any concessions the church must make.

The acquisition and perfecting of this new negotiating language is the supposition that the church, which "had found its place in the building up of socialism," can clearly establish its legal position in the political and social environment. This pertains to all areas of life and spheres of interest of the church, in which it can call upon concrete, defined rights, like religious instruction, work with the youth, pastoral duties, building of churches, decisions over clerical appointments, i.e. in all areas in which the state only has the right to control the activities of the church yet is not allowed to get involved in the direction of their implementation. In other words, in all areas in which the autonomy of the church should obtain a firm, defined structure. Most important for the Hungarian Catholic Church, which instead of a harmonious relationship had to discover a different kind of co-existence with the state after the war, is to learn, as soon as possible, to assume a differentiated attitude vis-à-vis the state, which
consists of both loyalty and opposition.

Translated from German by
Iris S. Krueger
Lafayette College
Easton, Pennsylvania

NOTES

1. I. Szabó, Menschenrechte in Ungarn (Budapress, 136/179).
