6-1990

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CHURCH RESPONSES IN EASTERN EUROPE TO GORBACHEV'S REFORMS
"THE LIBERALIZING CONTEXT: HUNGARY"

By Leslie Laszlo

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Mikhail Gorbachev did not bring reforms to Hungary since in Hungary these were initiated years before his arrival to power in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, his call for glasnost, perestroika and democratization strengthened the hands of the reformers and helped to speed up their time-table. Gorbachev's repeated assurances of non-interference in the internal affairs of other socialist countries\(^1\) seem to have removed the threat of Soviet intervention, the dread of a repeat of 1956 in Hungary, or 1968 in Czechoslovakia. This renunciation of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine was bound to embolden the reformers, while it must have disheartened the remaining die-hard Stalinists. In any event, the effect on Hungary was an upsurge of ever louder demands for sweeping reforms in all spheres of public life, including religion.

It should be noted that while the Communist leaders of Hungary accepted the need for thoroughgoing reforms already in the 1960's, it was done primarily because of economic necessity. But then they were forced, however reluctantly, to broaden the scope of "new thinking" to encompass other areas that lie far beyond their original intentions. As it was, the Hungarian movement toward reform time and again stalled and even reversed\(^2\) until the pent up frustration over unfulfilled expectations burst forth with force in all directions.

The Gates Open . . .

The need to involve the Churches in remodeling and revitalizing the stagnant society has been widely recognized. Since 1985, new regulations regarding church-state relations had
been promised by the state authorities. In their view the "agreements" between the State and the Churches dating back to 1948-1950, were obsolete and no longer enforced. In spite of this, nothing was done for years to change the situation--proof that religion was not among the priorities on the agenda either of the reform-minded Communists, or of the emerging "opposition." Nevertheless, in the context of demands for human rights and democratic freedoms, the question of freedom of conscience, including freedom of religion and the free activity of the Churches, was bound to and, indeed did emerge, as one of the basic premises of true democracy.

The course of events took a dramatic turn in the beginning of 1988 when the extent of Hungary's foreign indebtedness and the rapidly approaching bankruptcy of her economy had been revealed. This meant the end of the borrowed prosperity of recent years, of the much touted "Goulash communism"--a hard blow for the Hungarian consumer who was totally unprepared for such calamity. The old guard around János Kádár was now in full retreat, the reformers within the HSWP (Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party) were gaining decisive influence over policy making, and the opposition groups were clamoring for radical changes not only in samizdat publications but also in well-publicized public meetings and even in the government owned media. Interestingly, the call for freedom of conscience and for the end of government-imposed restrictions on the free exercise of religion came louder through the government media, especially on the pages of the daily *Magyar Nemzet*, than in the statements and publications emanating from the Churches. These latter remained tame and extremely cautious in face of the avalanche of reform ideas and the actual changes which were rumbling on.

Prime Minister Károly Grósz invited church leaders to a meeting to discuss with government officials pending legislation on church polity. This meeting, which took place in his own office at the parliament building on March 14, 1988, was the first step toward constructive dialogue between the government and Churches.

On this occasion, during a three-hour-long discussion with the Prime Minister, Primate László Paskai, the recently named Archbishop of Esztergom, recommended that the projected bill be of regulative and not restrictive character. Furthermore, he asked that the state should ensure the freedom for the Churches which is necessary for them to function according to their nature. This ability to function implies, according to the Primate, all that the Church needs to exercise its mission, i.e., freedom of worship, of teaching, of association (including religious orders), of maintaining schools, publishing houses, and access to the electronic media. He also asked the Prime Minister for legislation to permit conscientious objectors to perform an "alternative service" instead of bearing arms. Bishop József Szendi of Veszprém was more outspoken. He reminded the Prime Minister that the existing agreements with the state were signed by an intimidated hierarchy under duress. He called
for new, equitable legislation, for the removal of all restrictions on religious instruction, and
for the freedom to re-establish all the religious orders which were dissolved by government
decree. Furthermore, he demanded unrestricted opportunity for the Church to work with
the youth and for Catholic youth organizations to function and to have their own journals.
This intervention by Bishop Szendi was published only in "samizdat" form, but it quickly
spread all over the country, and not just among Catholics.8

Shortly after his historic meeting with the church representatives Károly Grósz was
elected on May 23, 1988, by a special Party Conference of the HSWP to replace János Kádár
as General Secretary of the Party. Thus, he became the leader of both the Party and of the
government.9 In mid-August, according to press reports, Primate Paskai, who received the
Cardinal's hat from Pope John Paul II on June 28, 1988, was notified by the government in
a letter about all the salient features included in the Law on Church Policy being drafted.10

The letter said that the government's aim was "regulation" rather than "restriction" of
religious life, and it asked for "active participation of the Churches" in preparing the draft,
stating that "only a Church that functions properly can be effective in helping us realize our
social goals." The letter holds out the prospect of "legal guarantees for the autonomous
activity of the Churches" and the elimination of "all discrimination on account of religious
belief," including discrimination against teachers for their religious convictions. As a further
concession, the Churches would no longer be required to request state permission to hold
religious instruction for the young or to report the names of those taking part to the
authorities. Moreover, religious instruction would no longer be restricted to Sundays. The
proposed law would lift the present limit on the number of pupils in church schools including
those run by Catholic monastic orders. Teachers in church schools would no longer have to
reapply for a new work permit each year but would receive a one-time unlimited permit.

According to the letter, the government was planning to "reduce the number of church
positions requiring state approval" and to ease restrictions on church building, repairs and
receiving gifts from abroad. Churches would no longer need permission to organize public
religious festivities and processions but would only have to notify the authorities of the dates
and places. Bishops would no longer be required to submit their circulars to state censors.
The government also indicated that it was prepared to allow clergymen wider access to
minister in hospitals, convalescent homes, and possibly in prisons and reformatories.

In two important areas, the government showed itself still reluctant to make concessions.
First, the letter made it clear that some of the monastic orders outlawed in 1950 would not
be "relegalized" although they did not rule out the possibility of re-establishing some others.
Second, the letter did not promise to fulfill the Churches' long-standing wish to increase
their publishing activities but said that the question would be examined.
The limits of the government's new-found generosity were demonstrated in the repercussions to an article written by Bishop Endre Gyulay of Szeged-Csanád entitled, "With Understanding and Patience," published in the government daily Magyar Hirlap on July 13, 1988. In that Gyulay challenged the authorities to "speak about the mistakes, abuses, and wrong-doings of their "predecessors,'" and to "acknowledge publicly that they need a living church able to do its work." Only this "would guarantee that (the authorities) words are not tactical tricks." Gyulay also demanded the rehabilitation of church figures condemned in show trials, writing that such a gesture "would help heal the wounds that the Church still bears." He ended his article with an emphatic plea for an end of all discrimination, especially in the hiring practices towards religious believers. Gyulay's article drew a public rebuke from the Chairman of the State Office for Church Affairs, Imre Miklós. At the reception in honor of Primate Paskai's elevation to Cardinal, Miklós broke into a tirade against a "Bishop, who sought popularity by publishing in a newspaper some pathetic and rhetorical questions that do not speak well of his leadership qualities." Gyulay's answer to Miklós' personal attack was not long in coming. In a speech at a birthday celebration the bishop repeated his conviction that "the era of blind subservience toward the authorities" was over. "The spirit of the new age bids us to speak out," he said. "We all have this responsibility."

There was evidently a new era dawning in church-state relations, affecting also the Protestant Churches which began re-claiming some of their "nationalized" schools. The new spirit of greater tolerance and even cooperation in a growing number of issues was reflected in a plethora of scholarly conferences and celebrations organized jointly by church and state organs, as well as in the way the media reported these events. Apart from such international gatherings as the Congress of the Lutheran World Federation in 1984, the International Symposium of Marxist and Catholic Scholars in 1986, the Meeting of the Executive of the World Jewish Congress in 1987, the General Assembly of the World Federation of Bible Societies in 1988 - all of which were held in Budapest, a city vying to become an international convention center - there had been symposia on Hungarian subjects which had been either neglected previously, or were given an unabashedly biased Marxist interpretation.

An example of the re-evaluation of the Church's role in Hungary's past was the Péter Pázmány symposium organized jointly by the Bishops' Conference, the Academy of Sciences and the University of Budapest, February 29 - March 12, 1988. Péter Cardinal Pázmány, who died 350 years ago, was the leader of the Counter-Reformation in 17th century Hungary. Founder of Budapest University and numerous other schools, he was a great patriot, politician, orator and writer. He, more than anyone else in his time, helped to transform the archaic structure of medieval Hungarian to an easily flowing modern idiom. After World War II, for obvious reasons, the name of this Catholic prelate, a giant in Hungarian history, was barely mentioned, while his great contributions to Hungarian culture
were minimized if not altogether ignored. Now, however, Cardinal Pázmány was rehabilitated by the Marxist and non-Marxist participants in the symposium and, figuratively speaking, he was restored to his pedestal.\textsuperscript{13} Shortly after this event, and perhaps inspired by it, a Workshop of Church History was created with the participation of Marxist and non-Marxist, Catholic and Protestant historians.

Over and above the propitious beginnings of a real thaw in church-state relations, the year 1988 had a special significance for the Hungarian Catholic Church. In addition to the celebrations of the world-wide Marian Year, proclaimed by Pope John Paul II, Hungarians remembered the 50th anniversary of the XXXIV Eucharistic World Congress of 1938 in Budapest, and also the 950th anniversary of the death of Saint Stephen, the founder of the Christian kingdom of Hungary. A symposium devoted to the memory of the holy King was jointly held by the Bishops’ Conference and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, June 21-22, 1988. The "feudal king Stephen I," whose role as builder of the state was belittled in the history books of the last forty years, had regained his title "Saint" as he is called now even by the Marxist historians and in the government media. He is highly praised for his statecraft and his accomplishments which have been of lasting significance for the Hungarian nation. This "rehabilitation" process reached its high-water mark when on August 20, the feast day of St. Stephen, renamed Constitution Day since the Communist take-over, Politburo member János Berecz, the HSWP's Central Committee Secretary for ideology, hailed Stephen as "the first among the great Hungarians and great ancestors whose memory and work is sacred to all decent patriots." Furthermore, he assured the public that the present government was willing to act "in the spirit of St. Stephen's continually valid message."\textsuperscript{14} Religious celebrations of St. Stephen's Year, as 1988 was named by the Catholic Bishops' Conference, were organized countrywide. At specific dates, the ornate reliquary with the Holy Right--the preserved right hand of St. Stephen--was transported by armored car of the state police to each episcopal see, and there it was exposed to veneration in the cathedral and/or the largest public square. On August 19, at Székesfehérvár, the city where the holy King was buried, Brüno Straub, the President of the Hungarian People's Republic, gave the festive address. In the presence of the special Papal Legate, Archbishop Francesco Colasuonno, and other distinguished guests, Straub praised St. Stephen for his wisdom of learning about the world surrounding his country and for recognizing the necessity of timely constitutional changes in order to survive. Applying this wisdom to today's situation, he declared that the key to Hungary's further development was "the respect for democracy." This was unimaginable "without constitutional arrangements of the relations between the state and the citizens and also between the state power and the church."\textsuperscript{15}

On August 20, St. Stephen's Day, an outdoor mass was celebrated by Cardinal Primate Paskai on the steps of the St. Stephen Basilica in Budapest before a crowd estimated at

5
40,000. Before the mass the Cardinal read the letter of Pope John Paul II addressed to Hungarian Catholics and then he repeated St. Stephen's offering the country to the Holy Virgin, the *Magna Domina Hungarorum*. At the end of the ceremonies, he announced that the government and the bishops had invited His Holiness the Pope to visit Hungary. The entire event was broadcast live by the Hungarian state television. Perhaps the most noteworthy in all this is what was transpiring in the official speeches and writings celebrating the first king, namely the message that Hungary is at a difficult turning point, just as it was at St. Stephen's time. The leadership, therefore, needs the support of a united people in facing the arduous task of a complete overhaul of the socio-economic structure.

*. ... and the Tide Rushes in*

The process of revolutionary changes in Hungary which began in 1988 accelerated by 1989 to an astonishing degree. The "establishment" Communists were forced into the defensive even within their own party. The reform-wing, led by Politburo member Imre Pozsgai who advocates the transformation of the Party into a Western European type of Social Democracy, is slowly but surely gaining the upper hand. The government of Miklós Németh, a young Harvard educated economist, has committed itself to hold multi-party free elections by June 1990 at the latest. The Communist Party (HSWP) was pressured to sit down to round table discussions with the opposition groups and to agree to a new constitution which would effectively put an end to its monopoly of power. As to the Party's monopoly of information, that seems to have been finished for good. In Hungary today the freedom of speech, of press and of assembly is a fact, regardless of the Party's intentions or wishes. TV and radio commentators, journalists, cameramen, professionals, students, workers and people in general, do not ask and wait for permission to organize clubs and associations, or to write, broadcast, publish, and to sell publications, but just go ahead and do it.

The most extraordinary feat of the "opposition" and the most spectacular showing of their strength was the solemn reburial of Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of the 1956 Revolution who had been executed as a traitor by his erstwhile cabinet colleague, János Kádár. The rehabilitation of Nagy and the Revolution had been fiercely opposed by Party General Secretary Károly Grósz and the majority of his Politburo until virtually the last minute; however, the preparations went ahead and when the date arrived on June 16, the 31st anniversary of the executions, over 200,000 paid their homage on Budapest's Heroes' Square to the victims of the repression which followed the 1956 Revolution. Since it was a day of work, the rest of the nation watched on TV at their work place or at home the impressive ceremonies which included prayers and blessing of the graves by clergy of the Christian and Jewish faiths. Among those present were Prime Minister Németh, the leader of the reform-
wing of the Party, Minister of the State and member of the Politburo Pozsgai, as well as official representatives of the Soviet Union and of nearly all of the socialist countries and of the most important non-governing Communist parties, plus the Ambassador of the United States among other dignitaries from the world over. Three weeks later, on July 6, the very day János Kádár died, the Supreme Court of Hungary annulled all criminal charges against Imre Nagy and his fellow defendants, declaring them to have been innocent victims of a politically motivated frame-up.

Strange as it may sound, the reaction of the official leadership of the Churches to these momentous events was timid and hesitant. On the eve of the reburial of Nagy, the leaders of the Christian Churches and the Chief Rabbi of Hungary did issue a joint statement in which they made a passing reference to the "crucible of grave moral, spiritual, economic and political crises" which the nation was passing through, but the rest of the document was only a plea to all Hungarians for mutual forgiveness, exhorting them to renounce all thought of revenge and to work instead together for a better future in harmony and love.21

During the ever more heated debate about the re-evaluation of Hungary's recent past and her future direction, the Churches remained passive; their muted voice was only rarely heard. The discussions concerning the new constitution and its clause on the freedom of conscience and of religion was conducted between the government, i.e., the Communists, and the opposition groups, notably the most vocal among them, the Democratic Forum.22 It was the opposition which first raised the issue of the rehabilitation of the victims of religious persecution and demanded the abolition of the notorious State Office for Church Affairs which kept the Churches in bondage since its creation in 1951, while the Churches were dutifully collaborating with the Office and were obeying its orders apparently without murmur until its very demise in June 1989.23

To understand, if not to excuse this servile attitude, one should bear in mind the severe oppression the Churches had to suffer for the past forty years and also the fact that it was that very State Office for Church Affairs, and notably its long-time head Imre Miklós,24 who had a decisive say in filling all important posts in the Churches. This was especially true in the Protestant denominations where the traditional right of the congregations to elect their presiding officers had been subverted and effectively eliminated by the Communists. Even in the Catholic Church, the Holy See needed the consent of the government to all episcopal appointments;25 otherwise, the bishop was prevented to occupy his see and exercise his office. As a result, all church leaders were Miklós' appointees who were selected by him exactly because of their propensity to follow government orders and not show too much independence. It is no surprise therefore that in the Protestant Churches the clergy and the laity are in the process of forcing the resignation and replacement of their bishops and lay leaders whom they accuse of excessive collaboration with the Communists;26 in the Catholic
Church there is pressure on Primate Paskai from some of his fellow bishops, but also from the lower clergy and from laymen, to show more initiative and vigour vis-à-vis the regime in demanding the restoration of the rights of the church.

This pressure from below was perhaps behind the unprecedented decision of the Catholic Bishops' Conference to call a meeting of all the superiors of the religious orders, male and female, which existed in Hungary before 1950 when, with few exceptions, they were banned, and to urge them to reorganize their orders and congregations immediately, in other words, without waiting for the impending new legislation on religion. While the bishops had the verbal assent of the government to this action, it was still a bold decision to go ahead without proper legal authorization.

**The Bishops Speak**

Amidst the rapid political changes in 1989, it became increasingly difficult for anybody to avoid taking a position. The burning need for "glasnost," "transparency" as to the Christian attitude for the restructuring of public life finally prompted the Catholic Bishops' Conference to issue a rather long statement "On the Renewal of Church Life and of Society," dated July 4, 1989. The introductory part of the statement deals with the post World War II history of Hungary and contains a clear indictment of Communist policies in general and their persecution of religion and of the Churches in particular. Among the injustices suffered, the imprisonment and show trials of the clergy are listed, and the rehabilitation of the victims (among whom József Cardinal Mindszenty is mentioned by name) is demanded.

Gone are past platitudes about the "freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution" and about the "harmonious and satisfactory relations between State and Church under Communism" which Hungarian churchmen were forced to repeat ad nauseam both at home and abroad. Instead, there is a sober assessment of the present economic and moral crises; the blame for which is laid squarely on the shoulders of the Communists. Their blind obedience to an atheistic-materialistic ideology, their disregard of human dignity, their gross incompetence and mismanagement of the economy, are held chiefly responsible for the current ills. In the bishops' view, only a spiritual and moral renewal can bring about a successful restructuring of society. To this end they urge all believers to redouble their efforts in order to achieve a true renewal of Church life which would revitalize society at large. Moreover, the bishops pointed out, while the Church refrains from prescribing or recommending any particular type of political system, she did develop the broad principles of a Catholic social doctrine and this should help Christians in their endeavor to build a just society. The Church pledges its support to this great task, although the Church is concerned that after forty years of enforced silence and various disabilities imposed on it, it might not
be able to live up to all expectations and demands. These greatly exceed its actual strength and resources.

The Road Ahead

There is indeed a difficult road ahead for Hungary, not only on the way to economic recovery but even more so in terms of moral renewal. The bankruptcy of the so-called "communist morality" which was supposed to replace traditional Christian ethics and morals, has been evident for some time and had been admitted even by the Communists. The main reason for the latter's change of attitude toward religion and the Churches was precisely their awareness of a deepening moral crises, the phenomenal growth of alcoholism, the rise in crimes of all kinds, of suicide, abortion, and juvenile delinquency. One could say that the regime turned to the Churches for help in desperation over these worsening social ills. But how much help will the Church be able to give?

To be sure, it is an immense relief for the Churches to have regained their freedom from state interference in their internal life and to be able to exercise their mission of unhindered evangelization. But would it not be too much to expect from the clergy whose number had greatly diminished and whose average age is over 60 years to shed suddenly all traces of the dependence and subservience to which they were accustomed and to show a vigorous spirit of creative initiative and apostolic zeal in mastering and applying up-to-date pastoral care to their flock? Similarly, while the readmission of the religious orders and congregations to their ministry is certainly an invaluable bonus for the Catholic Church, one has to bear in mind that the dissolution of these communities was ordered in 1950, so that the very youngest of their few surviving members are now in their sixties. It would take years before they could rebuild their human resources to such strength that they might again staff the number of schools, hospitals, and other institutions for which they once have cared.

What makes, however, the situation even more serious is that in the meantime two generations have grown up without religious instruction; in fact, they were taught that religion was nothing but superstition, contrary to science. Most of today's adults are woefully ignorant of the basic tenets of the Christian faith and morals. Although the prohibition on religious instruction has been lifted, where would the Churches find enough qualified teachers of religion needed for the schools which up until now were the temples of atheism? And then the gravest question of all: how many of the parents--the majority, even in baptized, are non-practicing Christians--would ask for religious instruction to be given to their children?

To balance this rather gloomy outlook for the immediate future of religion in Hungary, there are some indicators which point toward a more positive outcome. The most significant
among these, and of the greatest importance, is the strong religious revival in recent years. This was observed among the population at large, but it seems to have the most remarkable impact on young people, especially the students.\textsuperscript{31} The phenomenon can be explained, at least partially, by the general disillusion with Marxism-Leninism but also with the materialism of Western consumerism, prompting people to turn toward spiritual values. In any case, this change of hearts, if it means true conversion and is not just a fad, does give hope for a genuine revitalization of Church life and, in a larger sense, provides hope for a restructuring of the whole society along more humane and spiritual values.\textsuperscript{32}

The Soviet Connection

Returning now to the starting point of this essay the question remains, what influence, if any, has Gorbachev had on the developments in Hungary described on these pages? The connection is indeed tenuous; however, in my opinion it was and is of decisive importance.

I submit that the developments in Hungary would not have occurred so fast and would not have been so far reaching in such a short time, had it not been for Gorbachev and his own commitment to radical reforms. As I had mentioned already, reformers everywhere in the Communist world were encouraged by the General Secretary's bold actions against those dragging their feet and trying to sabotage the reforms, while the conservative hard-liners were disheartened.

Also, in the area of church-state relations, it must have been easier for the Hungarian Communists to grant concessions and, ultimately, to put into effect significant reforms, when they saw Raisa Gorbachev at the Bolshoi Opera join the highest church dignitaries from all over the world to celebrate the millennium of the conversion of Rus to Christianity. Furthermore, they must have read about the draft legislation prepared for the Supreme Soviet on freedom of religion and learned about the gradual relaxation of anti-religious activities and of the modest but real improvement in Church life in the Soviet Union.

Conversely, there is a real fear in Hungary and elsewhere that should Gorbachev fail—and that would most likely mean a backsliding into a Stalinist restoration, or a military dictatorship—then the reforms within the Soviet Bloc might be also doomed. The massacre on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, seen on live television in Hungary, still haunts those welcoming reforms. It is said that there are quite a few good Christians nowadays who offer daily prayers for the good health and long life of CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.
ENDNOTES


3 For church-state relations in post-WWII Hungary, including recent developments, see my chapter in Pedro Ramet (ed.), Catholicism and Politics in Communist Societies, to be published shortly by Duke University Press.

4 "The Opposition" became the collective designation of the various groups of dissidents, critics of the regime, such as the Democratic Forum led by writers and intellectuals, or FIDESZ, a group of young protesters. They were joined by the pre-1948 political parties newly reconstituted. These disparate groups and parties have little in common, except that they all "oppose" the communist regime and want to replace it with a freely elected democratic government.

5 A special Party Conference in May 1988 removed János Kádár from the leadership which he held for 32 years. The newly elected Central Committee then proceeded to remove seven other members of the 13 member Politburo. Together with Kádár these men were the eldest in that leading organ of the Party. They were blamed for the mistaken political and economic direction in recent years. The six new members elected to the Politburo—trimmed to 11 members—included the Party's leading reformers Rezső Nyers and Imre Pozsgai.

6 Kathpress (Vienna), 3 February 1988.

7 Interview with László Cardinal Paskai in Montreal, Canada, 25 September 1988. The issue of conscientious objection has been a sore point under Paskai's predecessor László Cardinal Lékai who supported the Kádár regime's contention that Catholics should have no right to refuse to bear arms on religious grounds. For this Lékai was denounced both at home and abroad by defenders of human rights. With the passing of legislation in July 1989 providing for "alternative service" the matter is now closed.

8 Kathpress, 14 April 1988. Primate Paskai published his recommendations in an article in the Catholic weekly Új Ember, 15 May 1988. These were essentially the same as Bishop Szendi's demands, only in a less bellicose, more diplomatic language.

9 Grósz resigned from the Prime Ministership on 23 November 1988. This did not diminish his power, since in the Communist system the Party dominates the government. The new Prime Minister is Miklós Németh.

10 Kathpress, 26 August 1988, attributed the letter to HSWP General Secretary and Prime Minister Károly Grósz. According to Edith Markos, Hungarian Church sources say that the letter was signed by State Secretary Imre Miklós, the Chairman of the State Office for Church Affairs. My account follows closely the article by Edith Markos, "The Government Promises the Church More Religious Freedom," RFE Research, Vol. 13, No. 38 (23 September 1988), pp. 13-14.
11The incident was reported by the Budapest correspondent of the Viennese daily Die Presse, 20 July 1988.


14Markos, p. 16.


16The numerous guests included Archbishop Francesco Colasuonno, Apostolic Nuncio in charge of extraordinary affairs and personal Legate of the Pope, Jozef Cardinal Glemp, Primate of Poland, bishops from Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia, and the Orthodox Metropolitan Simeon of Bulgaria.

17The date of the papal visit to Hungary had not been fixed. According to government spokesmen it is expected to take place in September 1991. No reason for this long delay has been given.

It should be noted that earlier in the summer, on 24 June 1988, over 50,000 Hungarian pilgrims attended the papal mass in Trausdorf which lies just across the border in Austria. The Hungarian authorities, in cooperation with their Austrian counterparts, did everything to facilitate the smooth transport of this unprecedented number of people crossing the "Iron Curtain"--which still existed then between Hungary and the West--twice in a single day.

18Markos, p. 16.

19During a heated two-day meeting of the 113 member Central Committee of the HSWP on June 23-24, 1989, the reformer Rezső Nyers was elected as Chairman of the Party. Although Karoly Grosz retained his post of General Secretary, he had to share power in the newly created Party Presidium with the two top reformers Nyers and Pozsgai, and Prime Minister Németh who in recent months tended to side with the reformists. At the same time a leading "conservative," János Berecz was removed as Secretary in charge of ideology and propaganda. It should be noted that the reform-wing of the Party, composed of "Reform Circles" from across the country, held a national conference at Szeged on May 21-22, 1989. Although an open split was avoided, it was evident that the HSWP is deeply divided, almost to a point of being two parties in rivalry with each other.

20Parliament gave its ex-post-facto sanction to an already existing situation when in September 1989 it passed a most liberal piece of legislation regarding freedom of press and information.


The government's proposal, "Principles of a Law on Freedom of Conscience, the Right of Free Exercise of Religion, and Church Affairs," was submitted for public debate in June 1989. These "principles" are basically the same which were communicated to Primate Paskai the year before, as I have described earlier in this essay. This new, public document is currently being discussed in church forums and by congregations of the various denominations throughout the country. A revised and enlarged version, incorporating new proposals and amendments formulated in the course of these debates, will serve as the basis

23 The Office was abolished on June 15, 1989.

24 Miklós was a high ranking official in the Office since its establishment in 1951 and its head for the past 18 years. He was unceremoniously forced into retirement on May 1, 1989.


27 The historic meeting of the heads of all religious orders, male and female, was held under the chairmanship of the recently appointed Coadjutor-Bishop of Székesfehérvár, Carmelite friar Nándor Takács, 12 April 1989 in Budapest. Some 200 persons were present. See the report by one of the participants, Emeric András, S.J., director of the Vienna based Hungarian Institute for Sociology of Religion (HIS) in HIS-Press-Service, No. 36 (April 1989), pp. 1-4.

28 The text of the Declaration was printed in the July 9, 1989 issue of the Catholic weekly Uj Ember but otherwise it was given scant publicity: only few priests read it from the pulpit, or recommended its reading to their parishioners, nor was it mentioned in the secular media. Otherwise well-informed Hungarians profess complete ignorance as to its existence and content. In view of the importance of this pronouncement by the Catholic hierarchy at this turning point in Hungarian history, the lack of publicity is baffling.


30 See, Tamás Nyíri, "Egyház a mai magyar társadalomban" (The Church in Today's Hungarian Society), Katolikus Szemle, Vol. XLI, Nos. 2-3 (1989), pp. 151-166. This double issue of Katolikus Szemle reproduces the lecture series "Földindulás Magyarországon" (Earthquake in Hungary), which was the theme of the Thirty-first Congress of the Catholic Hungarian University Movement-Pax Romana, held March 27 – April 1, 1989 in Reichenau, Germany. (NB. "Earthquake" was used as a simile for the dramatic socio-political changes in Hungary.)

31 The 9 July 1988 issue of the official organ of the HSWP, Népszabadság, contained a report of a round-table conference on the topic "Is the Influence of Religion Increasing in Hungary?" State Secretary Imre Miklós, as well as the leaders of the KÍSZ, the Federation of Young Communists, had to concede that there was indeed a resurgence of interest in

An 18 page confidential report in my possession which was prepared for the Politburo by the Social Policy Committee of the HSWP Central Committee, entitled "On the State of Church Policy and Proposal for Its Reform," recognizes as a fact that a religious revival is taking place in Hungary, first of all among the youth. The report dated 14 March 1989, suggested that the Party drop its unpopular anti-religious stance, permit freedom of religious belief and practice to party members and start recruiting new members among religious believers. The plenum of the HSWP Central Committee meeting on 28 July accepted the report's definition of the HSWP as "a party of social progress but not an atheist party" and invited religious believers to join the Party without fear of discrimination.

A hopeful sign pointing toward a better future is the resolution passed by the overwhelming majority of the delegates to the Extraordinary Party Congress of the HSWP meeting in Budapest 6-9 October 1989 which, in effect, transforms the Party into a new Hungarian Socialist Party whose platform includes respect for human rights, multi-party parliamentary democracy and an economy responsive to market forces. Reformist Rezső Nyers replaced Károly Grósz as leader of the Party.