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THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SLOVAKIA: FIVE YEARS AFTER COMMUNISM

by Paul R. Hinlicky

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Historical Background

For about one hundred years, virtually the entire nation of Slovakia (at that time, 'upper Hungary') subscribed to the Augsburg Confession. Only at the cost of one of the cruelest episodes of the Counter-Reformation was the nation converted anew to Roman Catholicism. For example, in the historic town in which we live, Svaty Jur, near the capital city, Bratislava, Lutherans had worshipped here for over a hundred years. In 1654 they built the huge Renaissance church which dominates the village and is visible from its hillside location for ten miles. Twenty years later, the Hapsburg army arrested the three Lutheran pastors here. Like hundreds of other Lutheran clergy at this time, they were given the options of converting to Roman Catholicism or exile. The defiant were sold as galley slaves to the Muslims in the Adriatic, if not tortured, hung or beheaded.

The trauma of history is not so easily dispelled here, an American quickly learns. Slovak Lutherans will quickly tell a newcomer facts such as the preceding which have so profoundly determined their existence. And they will continue. At the end of the forced reconversion of Slovakia, the Lutheran church began a hundred-year period of illegal existence until an Edict of Toleration was declared by Emperor Joseph II in 1783. At that time, returning as an example to the village of Svaty Jur, the Lutherans were allowed to build a house of worship, provided it did not compete in public space with the Roman Catholic edifice--which, remember, had itself been built by Lutherans 130 years earlier! Thus the Lutheran church building in Svaty Jur is one of many similar so-called 'tolerance churches,' i.e., it could not have a steeple and from the outside looked like any other dwelling. No one could know by looking at it that it was a church.

The Lutheran congregation in Svaty Jur was a mixed group of Germans and Slovaks and that was typical in Slovakia. The Germans had settled in colonies throughout the region of Slovakia since the 1300s. They came as merchants, miners and in the St George area, vintners. Through the 19th century, despite other serious problems of underdevelopment and poverty, Hungarian oppression and nationalistic resistance, the Lutheran Church flourished and could claim the allegiance of about 30% of the population. But World War II brought the beginning of catastrophe.

On the one side, a nationalist Roman Catholic priest, Joseph Tiso, came to power and made a devil's pact with Hitler. In exchange for an independent Slovak state, Tiso sent Slovak troops to the Russian front to fight on Hitler's side and handed over the Jews. On the other side, many of the German Lutherans at this time broke the longstanding relationship with the Slovaks and formed an independent German Lutheran Church in Slovakia, in the spirit of *Deutschen-Christenheit*. The Slovak Lutherans were the losers in both of these developments. It is a historical fact that the Slovak Lutherans overwhelmingly supported the National Uprising in 1944 against Tiso and the Nazis troops who entered Slovakia in Tiso's defense. But after the war distinctions between the varying stances of religious groups were lost from consciousness. German nationals were expelled from reunited Czechoslovakia and their property was confiscated. By 1948 when the Communists came to power, the popular identification of Lutheranism with the Germans and with fascism served the ideological purposes of the new regime's categorical anti-religious zealotry. Liberal Lutheran laypeople left the Church in large numbers, finding in socialism the fulfillment of their progressive ideals. In the early 1950s, a Stalinist persecution crushed what remained of the open resistance among Lutherans and a long, long night began.

The Catastrophe

Five years after the fall of totalitarianism, conditions remain very difficult. The legacy of the past fifty years has been institutionally 'catastrophic' for the Church. Discussing this is a difficult and sensitive matter. It would be false and too easy for Americans to get the idea that there was no viable Christian life here during this period. In fact, there are many congregations filled with life and eager for mission today. Particularly striking in the past five years has been an exuberant return of the youth to the Church. In the

previous period, congregational and pastoral experiences varied considerably on the local level, depending upon the zealotry of the local party functionaries and general political climate. In some places, the Church worked relatively freely and at least held its own. The apolitical tendency of Pietism was an advantage and the militant spirit of Lutheran Orthodoxy often a disadvantage in these circumstances.

But the bitter fact is that official policy under Communism excluded active Christians from careers in the knowledge class, e.g., in teaching, confiscated church property on a massive scale, put the clergy on a state wage that was minimal, sharply restricted seminary enrollment, often prohibited church work outside the Sunday morning worship service, and held up Christian faith to ridicule in education and media. The cumulative effect of this after 45+ years has been in fact 'catastrophic.'

Forty-five years of massive secularization took place (particularly in what is now the Czech Republic). This created the profound psychological sense, especially among well-educated Protestants (especially Lutherans in Slovakia), that Christian faith had to be left behind as belonging to the prescientific past. Disillusionment with Marxism-Leninism has not meant that one simply returns to the faith of the fathers and mothers. In fact, more often one sees today grandparents bringing grandchildren to church. This loss of a generation between the ages of thirty and sixty today has increased the Lutheran Church's already powerful sense of cultural marginalization vis-a-vis the predominance of Roman Catholicism on the one side and the horrible effects of the Second World War, after which, as previously mentioned, millions of Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia. This expulsion removed a major component of the Lutheran Church in Slovakia. It reinforced the nationalistic prejudice, *Evanjelici su Nemci*, Lutherans are Germans. Exploiting this post-war confusion, the Communist regime deliberately built the most powerful walls of isolation and mutual suspicion among church groups in order to weaken any potential opposition. After the initial Stalinism of the early 1950s, the Party's strategy was 'divide and conquer,' especially encouraging schism among apolitical pietistic splinter factions. We will return to the question of the institutional catastrophe later when we discuss the massive shortage of church workers. Now we must discuss the more difficult question of what spiritual 'catastrophe' occurred under forty-five years of totalitarian oppression.

The Question of the Church's Guilt

Only a small fraction of clergy or lay leadership were active and willful collaborators with oppressors. Even here the motivations of such behavior are not at all clear. A larger percentage actively and bravely defied restrictions on their activity in service of the Lord--and they paid severe prices personally and professionally. Others were singled out for persecution for no discernible reason, simply, one suspects, to intimidate. The vast majority did what they had to do, avoided confrontation, worked quietly, prayed and hoped for a better day. Some were corrupted by personal opportunism. The whole range of human responses to a most difficult situation occurred in the Church. As a result, a diffuse, still poorly articulated sense of guilt attends all. For everyone had to make some accommodations to the regime.

The continuing tragedy of this legacy of marginalization, isolation, mutual suspicion and unarticulated guilt is seen in the difficulty of generating a penitent, air-clearing, non-punitive deliberation about the Church's role in the past period. Recently, in September of 1994, Dr. Ivan Toth, professor of church history at the Evangelical Faculty in Bratislava, published an article in the Church's monthly theological magazine, *Cirkevne Listy*. It consists chiefly of a long list of direct quotations of Communist propaganda that were published under the names of church leaders and seminary professors during the preceding forty years. Several representative examples, the first from 1974 (i.e., five years after the Warsaw Pact invasion and suppression of Dubcek's Prague Spring, the period of Communist 'normalization'):

The Christian Peace Conference must support and strengthen the basic battle of the progressive forces which tend toward the structural transformation of society in the direction of socialism, which flows from Scripture, from the christology of the New Testament, which blesses those who work for peace.

Or this from the obligatory February Revolution celebrations in 1977:

The decisions placed into the hands of the people who understood the direction of the

development of human history brought about epochal consequences in those days of February 1948. We are rightly proud that we are citizens of such a state in which a new social structure triumphed, the most progressive in this phase of history: socialism. Our nation invoked for itself in February 1948 the socialist way of development. . . . We condemn the efforts of the so-called Charter 77 group. We regard as error and worthy of condemnation everything which is intended against the socialist fatherland.

And so on, and so on.

Let me digress momentarily to note the obvious: Americans church leaders of the preceding period often did not avoid a similar error, if not naively parroting the cold war bombast of the American State, then even worse, willfully parroting the same 'peace and justice' propaganda of the Soviet Union which was disseminated by front organizations like the above mentioned Christian Peace Conference or its Roman Catholic twin, Pax Christi. Among American Christians there has also been no honest reckoning with the church's role in the Cold War. How well I recall as a graduate student listening to Dorothee Soelle railing against Reaganism and rhapsodizing on the worker's paradise in East Germany! How many delegations returned from visiting the Sandanistas in Nicaragua or from cutting cane in Cuba with glowing reports of religious freedom, social harmony, and the birth of a new humanity! The particular guilt of the past period, which churches in Central and Eastern Europe are struggling to begin to assess, is not one-sidedly theirs.

In Toth's article, attributions are not made because it is not Toth's purpose to undertake a witch-hunt focused on individuals. Rather, he concludes,

In our society since 1989 a medley of reevaluations has taken place. Only the representatives of the church and the theological faculty are silent, are acknowledging no errors in thinking or in the adaptations to the period of socialism and its ideology. . . This is not about and cannot be about punishment. . . It is about and has to be about knowledge and the acknowledgement of error.

It is too soon to say whether Toth's article will be greeted with more of the silence and suspicion that has surrounded this topic since 1989. The immediate defensive reaction one hears is that this "article stirs up a foul-smelling pot." It will "only generate more quarrels" when what the Church needs today is unity. And who is this Toth to throw stones? "How did he get his nice church and parsonage, without also collaborating?" Many of the tensions in the Church today strike an outsider as unconscious reflections of the traumatic legacy from the previous period. At the same time, the habits of reading and objective research, civilized debate and rigorous reflection have been damaged by years of tendentious ideology and material deprivation. Overcoming this dysfunction represents an enormous task and a spiritual commitment for truth and justice which is well tempered by the final word of mercy.

Present Conditions and Future Hopes

For all these troubles, however, the Lutheran Church has survived with a genuine measure of spiritual vitality deriving from its powerful liturgy and vital commitment to Scripture and the Lutheran Confession. Western European visitors are often astonished, in view of their own empty churches, at the popular vigor of Slovak Lutheranism. The Slovak Lutheran Church today numbers 327 parishes each representing about 1000 souls. Of these about a third remain more or less permanently vacant, and another third are staffed by clergy past retirement age. In addition, many of these parishes count two, three or even four worship sites. With a renewal of evangelical outreach, the need for pastors in the coming decade is as obvious as it is urgent. But theological books in Slovak hardly exist today. Certainly, since 1947 theological reading and writing have not flourished. The instructional system inherited from the previous period revolved around this central fact of life. Students in their fourth or fifth year of university level education have been expected to sit in classrooms 30 hours a week as professors read lectures. It is not surprising that in the new situation which has evolved since 1989, this system produces educational disillusionment.

Connect this inadequate curriculum with several other negative factors. First, because of the clergy shortage and the official discouragement of theology as a potentially alternative ideology in the past, virtually all professors had to care for congregations. In Slovakia, this is not trivial duty. Pastoral salaries are so bad that pastors actually make a living by marrying, burying and baptizing, which activities

fill up their weeks and must, if a family is to be supported. The negative impact of this circumstance on the ministry and on the work of theological professors is obvious. Second, the flood of new students (enrollment at the seminary has quintupled since 1989) has created unanticipated problems. Theological students are housed in three scattered dormitories across Bratislava. This physical situation excludes proper spiritual and social formation of these young people in pastoral vocations. So the students often feel isolated and neglected, and educationally defeated.

The essential presupposition to reform and modernization is the creation of a usable and economical stock of theological books, cultivation of English and German among those students so gifted, and the successful expansion of the teaching faculty. Physically, this entails the dream of a new and adequate lecture hall and administrative center and provision for a single dormitory or cafeteria to provide some common life for the students. That is a tall order in the problematic situation that exists politically and economically in Slovakia. Slovak independence has not so far been an economic blessing; quite the contrary.

A hopeful counterbalance to the foregoing lies in the work of the Evangelical Lyceums, especially the dual language Slovak and English High School level programs staffed by American volunteers of both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, as well as outstanding Slovak teachers. The brainchild of theologian Igor Ki..., these Lyceums capitalize on the tradition from the 19th century of educational excellence in Slovak Lutheranism. They also capitalize on the huge interest among young people in learning English. The Lyceum's are recruiting, evangelizing and catechizing a whole generation, drawing in the best and the brightest. A steady stream of church leaders will emerge from these Lyceums which are now established in Bratislava, Tisovec, Kosice and Banska Bystrica, i.e., across the whole nation.

A window of opportunity is open for the church over the next five years. It is estimated that the new law of restitution of church property that had been confiscated under Communism will take about five years to implement. When this process is completed, chances are that the system of State salaries for the clergy will also come to an end. No doubt this will be a very difficult transition for a Church that does not even have an Offertory in its liturgy--so single-minded has been its devotion to Gnesio-Lutheran principles! Those parishes, amounting to a third of the whole, which have been without a pastor for so many years may well close their doors. Of course the returned property and the many benefits of complete independence from the State could and should be viewed as a new opportunity for the Church in a post-Constantinian Europe. But whether that opportunity will be recognized and seized remains to be seen. Fortunately, the Slovak Lutheran Church now has a real opportunity to seize the moment of opportunity that stands before it.

The Reform and Renewal Program of newly-consecrated General Bishop Julius Filo

Well known internationally after five years in Geneva at the Youth Ministry Desk of the Lutheran World Federation, Julius Filo, 43, was elected general bishop in August, 1994. He entered apostolic succession (which was extended to the Slovak church from Nathan Soederblom in the 1930s) in a moving, two-hour nationally televised service on October 30, 1994. This service featured a striking statement by Slovak President Michal Kovac (a devout Roman Catholic) which publicly affirmed the importance of the Lutheran Church in Slovakia's spiritual heritage and called for full ecumenical cooperation among all Christian traditions in view of the nation's moral need and political crisis. For the church, Filo's election represents a vigorous convergence around renewal and reform which may have significance well beyond the borders of this new, little nation at the 'heart of Europe.' It is fitting to conclude this report with a summary of Filo's program which he presented to the meeting of the General Synod at the time of his consecration.

Filo took up the text, Philippians 1:27, as the frame of reference for his program: "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that... you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel." He derived from this a "basic model of relationships which are possible in the church," of a unity which realizes the love of Christ. This relationship of *koinonia* originates in common worship life and is reinforced by personal prayer life and study of Scripture. Filo's summons to a spiritual but visible, tangible unity of love around the means of grace is directly aimed against the all the disintegrative forces at work within and without the Slovak Lutheran Church. Later in his address, Filo returned to this text to articulate the goal of the program which he put before the Church:

It is our common desire that people believe, believe steadfastly and believe more intensively in the gospel of God's love, in order that they become citizens of God's eternal kingdom, and thus also become useful people in love and for the building of just relationships.

Filo went on to articulate this goal as a reformatory criterion for judging the life of the Church:

If this is for us the highest goal, then everything which we do we submit to this goal and we do not do anything which would be in conflict with this goal. The Church wants to be an instrument of God's on-going mission. Also our Church in this time of open possibilities wants to see all his activities and ways of doing work as serving this single goal--the one for which Jesus Christ came into the world. . . The reason of Christ's coming into the world must be the enduring basis for everything which we do as the Church. Thus we are to do only that which supports Christ in his redeeming intention. *Was Christen treibt*, said Luther, that is what strives for the faith in the gospel.

In this sharply accented, pointedly Lutheran theological framework, Filo took up some highly problematical organizational issues that were created by a new church constitution. This new constitution was written under the motto of 'decentralization' in reaction to the authoritarian excesses of the general bishop's office under Communism. But some of its reactions may themselves be excessive. A proposal for term limitations, which would create a group of emeriti bishops, raises the question, according to Filo: "What actually does the office of bishop mean for us, an office which even in the environment of the Lutheran Church has attained elevated importance and attention. The understanding of this office is tightly connected with the understanding of the church," especially with the Church's unity. The practical problem of the distribution of funding and resources related to 'decentralization' also elicited from Filo this statement of principle: "Interest in the one Church, which as a participant of the body of Christ empathizes with the weaker of her members, must remain a priority also in this synod. It would be terrible if our Synod became a parliament in which two parties sought only their own interests..." Rather, a *koinonia* ecclesiology which works by means of a broadly based process of deliberation is envisioned. According to Filo, this process of fraternal conversation is to extend beyond the borders of Slovakia. He stated sharply:

One of the unfavorable effects of the period prior to 1989 was the spiritual isolation in which we were placed. Our contacts with the rest of the parts of the body of Christ in other countries in the framework of our confessional family and in the ecumene were controlled and limited. Nevertheless we gratefully remember the courageous attempts of the Lutheran World Federation and the Slovak Zion Synod [among others] to cultivate living contacts with our Church. . . In English they have a phrase, splendid isolation. It means something like this, that it often happens that those who get isolated finally get to singing the praises of isolation. . . I myself will endeavor to contribute to the realization of the goal of the *koinonia* of the Church throughout the world, in order that we live as those worthy of the gospel of Christ also in these times of freedom.

In conclusion Filo turned to the actual shape steps toward reform and renewal would take. He began with a call for spiritual maturity over against a traditional passivity, especially among the laity. He painted a picture of spiritual maturity as attending those who lead others to faith in the gospel, wherever the opportunity occurs, whether in the family, among friends, or at work. In general, Filo urged far greater attention to the task of re-evangelizing Central Europe, including the theologically appropriate use of mass media techniques. In the past, he observed, "under the cross of an unfriendly regime," the classic forms of strengthening the inner life of the faithful were all that was possible for the work of evangelization. But today we have to ask, "What existing forms of evangelization that are practiced under the conditions of freedom are agreeable to our confessional framework?" Filo attributed inspiration for this renewed emphasis on evangelization to a mission document that the Lutheran World Federation approved at its last assembly in Brazil which urged that "holistic mission means the connection of evangelization and diaconal work as two mutually supporting tasks." Under Communism, diaconal work (i.e., charitable works and social ministries) had also been removed from the Church's ministry, and Filo welcomed the renewal of Evangelical Diakonia and pledged his support, noting that here as elsewhere in the church's present struggle, "the need for strengthening of personnel by qualified workers."

Accordingly the heart of Filo's program will be a massive effort for the improvement of theological education, beginning with "the procurement for the first time in our Church history" of the Church's own facility, adequate to its needs. These needs extend well beyond the preparation of new pastors. Because "our priests were not able to acquire adequate knowledge and skills, for example, in pastoral practice and

educational methods, in the past," Filo envisions an extensive program of continuing education for the existing ministerium. Closely related to this will be a multi-year program of conferences involving the laity, the ministerium and the theological faculty to form a "common reaction to questions of faith which our world, the ecumenical environment in which we live and our own confessional identity place before us." Filo elaborated:

I am thinking of the stance of the Church toward ethical questions, for example, the ethical principles of the activity of employers, the stance of the Church to social problems of the day, the question of the defense of unborn life and of the aged. And equally I am thinking of our stance to new and old theological problems of our time, spiritual gifts, baptism, the Lord's Supper, evangelical freedom, and questions which Lutheran theology puts to us, in connection with diaconal work and office in the Church and relationships of various specialized services in framework of the Church, and many others.

Filo envisions such series of conferences extending over several years to be themselves unity-producing events, overcoming the isolation and suspicion of the past. "In terms of content and method, these seminars will be prepared so that every participant will see the importance of participation and the goal of the meeting in the production of a common, written perspective." We can add to this list of continuing education programs, church-worker training programs, and issue-oriented conferences of theology and ethics, also the first serious ecumenical platform in the history of the Slovak Lutherans. Filo stated:

Very important is the relation to the Roman Catholic church, the largest Christian church in our nation. Acknowledging that our reformation fathers intended to contribute to the purification of the one, universal Church of Christ, it is necessary for us to seek possible signs of visible unity among Christian churches. It is necessary also for the sake of an unambiguous public witness of our mutual love to unbelievers and the doubting world around us, in order that they understand our subordination to the one head, to Christ.

At this crossroads of Lutheranism, Calvinism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, what could be more indicative of the renewal of Christian faith after Marxism than the prospect of such ecumenical reconciliation?

Conclusion

The problems facing the Slovak Lutheran Church are daunting, but the depth of Christian faith and the uncorrupted devotion to Scripture and Confession among its pastors and people provided enormous resources for renewal and reform. I venture to predict that with an infusion of fraternal support in the present time of opportunity, this Church will arise and become itself a beacon of church renewal in Europe, both to the East and to the West. God grant it.

For further information:

Several excellent English language journals are devoted to covering the religious situation in the former Soviet sphere of influence.

RCDA (formerly Religion in Communist Dominated Areas), edited by Olga S. Hruby is published quarterly by the Research Center for Religion and Human Rights in Closed Societies. It may be subscribed for \$25/year at RCDA, 475 Riverside Drive, # 448, New York NY 10115.

Religion in Eastern Europe, edited by Paul Mojzes, is published bi-monthly by Christians Associated for Relations with Eastern Europe, an ecumenical association related to the NCC in the USA. It may be subscribed for \$36/year at Dr. Mojzes' address: Rosemont College, Rosemont College, Rosemont PA 19010.

The Zion, "America's only Lutheran English/Slovak language publication," is published six times a year by the Slovak Zion Synod, ELCA. It is edited by Rev. David Blank, and includes a regular column by Dr. Hinlicky, reporting on his work and that of many others in Slovakia. It may be subscribed at \$5/year at Administrator, The Zion, Rev. Jerry Mraz, 1370 Washington Ave., Northampton PA 18067.