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An Unknown Hungarian Lutheran Saint: Bishop Lajos Ordass’ Testimony During Communism

In the round sanctuary of the Lutheran Church of Willmar Minnesota there is an oak frieze encircling the sanctuary containing in gold-leaf letters 78 names of “the cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) from the Bible and church history. The list begins with the name of Enoch and ends with the names of Bonhoeffer and Ordass. Ordass was the only person who was still alive when the carving was made in the 1960s. ‘Who was this man?’ we may ask.

Lajos Ordass (1901-1978) was a Lutheran pastor who, as a sign of protest, changed his original German name ‘Wolf’ into the Hungarian ‘Ordass’ on the day of the Nazi invasion of Hungary on March 19th, 1944.

After the war he was consecrated as Bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. However, he was able to exercise his office for less than five years altogether: 1945-1948 and 1956-1958. The Communists first imprisoned him and, with the help of collaborators, forced him twice into total isolation.



The Experience of the Hidden God, the ‘Veil’ of God.

That God is a hidden God, inscrutable, unknowable, was first experienced by Ordass at his show-trial in September 1948. The real cause of his imprisonment was that he did not collaborate with the communists’ demand to nationalise church-related schools. Ordass was allowed to speak before the court withdrew for the verdict. Voluntary stenographers recorded what he said. This moving speech is a unique and shocking example of his personal testimony of the hidden and loving God:

If I am convicted, then the conviction will become a veil that hides God’s will from me and renders it incomprehensible to me. But I will accept it from the hand of God without grumbling. One thing I know - namely, that whatever happens to me is God’s beneficial will.

When Ordass got out of prison in 1950 he was forced to spend six years in total isolation. Even his pastors avoided him. He made a living by knitting scarves and gloves with his wife.

At The Foot of the Cross, Lenten Meditations.

By Lent 1955 he completed a devotional book *At the Foot of the Cross* in which he meditated on the Passion in the form of prayer. He conflated the texts of the four gospels and began each meditation as a dialogue between himself and the Lord. The Bishop, who had experienced what suffering, prison and being deserted meant, was now kneeling, preaching and praying under the cross. The volume was published anonymously in an English translation in the United States in 1958 and in Hungarian only in 1989. He spoke silently of how he came to understand the meaning of his suffering:

The meaning of my life has become that I might suffer for you and with you. People may regard perhaps what has happened to me as bankruptcy and shame of my life. As for me, I bless you, my Lord, that you have placed me at the foot of your cross. Now I know that this is why I had to live. And this is very good.

Back to Leadership in 1956-1958.

Bishop Ordass was rehabilitated just a few days before the Hungarian revolution in October 1956. He quickly reorganised the church and was able to stay in office until June 1958. He was even allowed to lead the Hungarian delegation to the Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Minneapolis August 1957. At the opening worship Ordass was honoured to deliver the sermon. The large congregation was especially touched by his modest testimony: at the end of his sermon he witnessed in the third person singular to the love of Christ he had experienced while he was in prison:

An elderly disciple of Jesus now speaks to you. He wants to conclude this official sermon with a personal testimony about his Lord and Saviour. He would like to say how often he has experienced already in his life the forgiving grace of Christ. When he had to experience being imprisoned, he was still able to be with Christ in royal freedom in the truest sense of the word. What happiness to have been allowed such freedom. How wonderful was the fruit of the death of Christ then, when the world offered only bitterness.

Once he was again its leader, the Hungarian Lutheran Church was able to flourish. This, however, could not last long, as he was unwilling to compromise his conscience. But when it became evident that he would never become a partner with the state running the church

Man spitting on decapitated head of Stalin statue, during the uprising in Hungary 1956.

from inside, the state slowly and slyly managed to remove him: the 'red' Bishops' resignation in 1956 was not recognised by the state. That period was the beginning of soft communism (1957-1989) which morally ruined the churches and divided families. With Ordass removed, the Hungarian Lutheran Church was 'beheaded'.

Útavaló (Food For Travel, 1989).

In his new isolation from December 1958 he began to write meditations again day by day. Every day he passed his new handwritten meditation to the former Deaconess-in-chief who was a doctor and lived in the same house with Bishop Ordass. She sent it further to her fellow sisters in Germany who typed them and thus they were smuggled into West Germany under the cover name 'handkerchief' where they were first published in 1967, and then, being printed, were re-smuggled into Hungary without, of course, the author's name.

Nem tudok imádkozni (I Cannot Pray, 1989, 1992).

This book was finished in 1961 but was eventually published after the political changes in 1989. The preface sheds light to Ordass' spirituality. First there is a deep humility before God; a sober sincerity and the flaming love for Christ reminiscent of hymns of Christ. Ordass addresses God with the shining, enthusiastic words of lovers even in the fearful depth of his sufferings. The book's subtitle is: 'Counsels to those who Pray and to those who want to Pray'.

The book has twelve chapters and sixty five sub-chapters. Each sub-chapter begins with a quotation from the Bible. Ordass' voice is pastoral throughout. He is both the caring teacher and a man of concern and compassion. His mysticism is explicitly manifested in the last chapter which is on adoration. Here it is:

From the gospel and other biblical scenes it is evident that one can bow down before God in adoration on his own initiative but it remains an unforgettable deep experience when it is God who takes the hands of men and women and shows Himself to them so much that they cannot but fall on their knees and adore Him.

In such circumstances men and women become filled with God in a particular way, that for them God will be all in all. What seems to be a dominating feature in human life ceases to exist totally. One can entirely forget about oneself. His otherwise permanently rebelling dissatisfaction stops. He is not any more strangled by the concerns of world or everyday life. He is not consumed by his own sorrow any more. Joy is going to triumph in his soul.

In most cases this adoration is entirely wordless. It is, of course, not a necessary rule but in most cases it works like that. One instinctively feels that by speaking one would break the silence of adoration. In such cases only an awkward clumsiness can leave his lips (cf. Peter's words Luke 9: 33). If there is word here at all it can only be the voice of God. The heavenly voice. Whatever we experience during adoration is always a foretaste of the happiness of eternity. This cannot last on earth forever. Whenever God gives us the gift of this elevating experience of adoration He does not want to free us from the world of earthly struggles. Here on earth



adoration is not yet our constant way of life. But by this experience – when descending the hill of adoration – God helps us not to forget, in the bustle of life, what we have seen and heard. With the heavenly vision and with the clear sound of the word of God in our souls we can live with the lesson we have learned: God is to be adored in spirit and truth. Now we know that the Father seeks such worshippers.

(Translation by Tibor Fabiny)

The last sub-chapter ‘Corona’ is a personal yet cosmic *Te Deum*, a five-part hymn by the author. On the last page the author expresses his hope that he will see his readers face to face in eternity.

In his lonely isolation Ordass translated into Hungarian *The Passion Hymns* of Iceland’s famous pastor and poet Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674), whom Ordass considered a soulmate.

Bishop Lajos Ordass was a lonely Lutheran mystic in communist Hungary. Unlike those of the majority who compromised their consciences for a so-called *modus vivendi* with the communist state, Ordass remained steadfast and faithful to his Lord even in the dark hours of temptations.

His as yet unpublished diary will reveal more about his readings and personal reflections. Nevertheless the body of his devotional writings is now available for the public, some of them even in English. In the history of Christian spirituality one chapter should be devoted to Ordass.

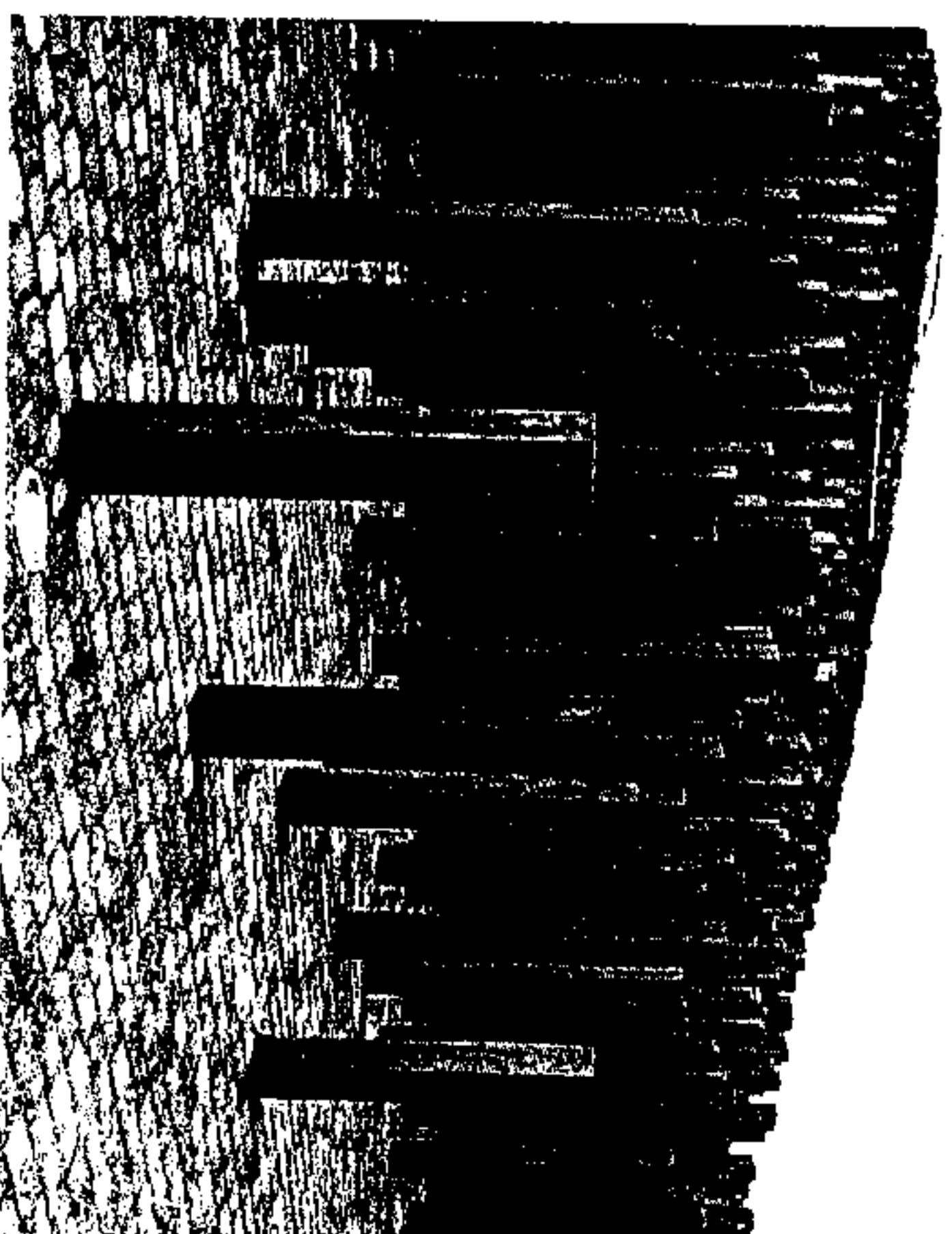
No wonder that the Minnesota Lutherans recognised this already in the 1960s when they decided that the Hungarian bishop’s name should be seen on the oak-frieze of their church’s sanctuary, among the ‘cloud of witnesses.’

Professor Tibor Fabiny
Professor Fabiny spent a recent sabbatical at the College of the Resurrection, Miffield

See also: Tibor Fabiny: The veil of God, the testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass in Communist Hungary. Budapest Centre for Hermeneutical Research. 2008. Isbn 978 963 87986 0 2.



Fr Thomas Seville CR with other participants at the Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in Révfülöp at the Lajos Ordass Study and Conference Center September 2014



The Hungarian Revolution Memorial 1956

Preaching Easter

One of the joys for us CR Brethren is preaching Holy Week in parishes around the country. It is often quite a lot of work, but it takes us to new places, introduces us to new people, helps us to see very good things that are happening in the church and even in this broken society in which we live. And preaching Holy Week is such a privilege, contemplating the mystery of Christ’s suffering and sacrificial death, walking with him as we seek to understand what this should mean in our lives and witnessing the very moving responses so many people make to this.

Then Easter Day comes and can be an anti-climax. Of course there is usually wonderful liturgy and that says a lot. The preacher has little really to add to that. Probably he is intimidated at preaching about Resurrection which of course none of us has yet experienced! There may well be a lot of relative strangers in church along with a number of children clutching Easter eggs or other Easter gifts. It is not quite the time for a long sermon on the meaning of the Resurrection; and of course there is probably a splendid lunch to follow! So we preach quite briefly, everyone goes off to enjoy Easter Day (which is very right and proper). Next day we come home, clergy take post-Easter breaks. Everyone relaxes. Low Sunday is very thin. Holidays start looming. Probably it is only around Pentecost we begin to think seriously again about the Christian Faith; maybe not till Summer is over.

So the Resurrection and the 40 days after (or 50 if you consider Pentecost as the end of Easter-tide) get very little attention compared with Lent or Christmas, or even the patronal festival. Is it not strange, more than strange, that we Christians neglect the central mystery of our faith? One reason for that, as I suggest above, is the exhaustion which follows Lent and Holy Week. Lent and Holy Week are very rich and important times in our life but maybe we need to pace ourselves a bit and think in terms of running the extra 50 days after Easter as well as the 50 days before. Yet I suspect there is a deeper reason for this neglect. We simply do not know what the Resurrection means and struggle to say anything much about it that is not banal, vacuous or idealistic. That is not really surprising as the Resurrection has so far only happened to Christ. It is something that happens beyond this life and so is hard to understand within this life. Yet Christ did leave us lots of clues as to what it is about and we in the family of the Community of the Resurrection need to put our dedication mystery right in the centre of our Christian lives and consider what these clues mean.

First, as many before me have observed, the Resurrection of Jesus was not like the raising of Lazarus. It was not simply a continuation of ordinary life. Quite clearly Jesus’ body was raised from the dead. There was no sign of it in the grave