

ST. LAJOS ORDASS

Tibor Fabiny

Vinje Lutheran Church in Willmar, Minnesota, is decorated with an oak frieze encircling the sanctuary containing a verse from Hebrews 12: “We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Written in gold-leaf letters are the names of seventy-eight witnesses from biblical and church history, including patriarchs, prophets, kings, apostles, church fathers, reformers, missionaries, and other leaders. The list begins with the name of Enoch and ends with that of Lajos Ordass (1901–1978), the only person who was still alive when the carving was made in the 1960s.

Ordass was the bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church for thirty-three years, from 1945 until his death in 1978. He was able, however, to exercise his office for less than five years in all: from 1945 to 1948 and between 1956 and 1958. During his lifetime, his enemies labeled him as a “reactionary” and “unbendingly stubborn,”¹ but to those who respected him he was a man of “courageous sufferings,” “a symbol of the kind of churchmen the world needs... a valiant man of God,”² a “typical Lutheran... loath to meddle in politics,”³ “a symbol of indomitable belief,”⁴ a “man of indomitable belief,”⁵ “an undaunted and persistent church-leader,”⁶ a “tall, gaunt, ascetic Hungarian [of]... tremendous spiritual force,”⁷ “the chief obstacle to the subjugation of the Church as an instrument of the State,”⁸ “the martyr of Hungary,”⁹ a “hero of faith,”¹⁰ a “saint of our time... a man who stood fast victoriously.”¹¹ In the secular Western press, he appeared as “one of Hungary’s staunchest anti-Communist religious leaders.”¹² When he died in 1978, his old friends among American church leaders also paid tribute to him, saying that he was a man “who took orders from no one other than his Lord.”¹³

Ordass was indeed a witness. His life and ministry, his deeds and words all witnessed to the cross of Christ. He was a twentieth-century disciple of Luther, a theologian of the cross. It must be emphasized that Ordass was a witnessing *theologian*, because there has been a misleading tendency during the last decade in the Lutheran Church of Hungary to suggest that Ordass’s defense of the church was ultimately motivated by nontheological considerations.¹⁴ As we shall see, Scandinavian theology undoubtedly influ-

enced Ordass; nevertheless, it is true that Ordass has not bequeathed to us thick volumes of theological treatises. He was a man of action; during the time he was silenced he expressed himself in meditative or contemplative writings rather than systematic works. Ordass was not a bookish theologian in the academic sense but a theologian of the cross who put his theological insights into immediate practice and life. It is remarkable, however, that in his library we can find a hardback copy of the first edition of Walter von Loewenich’s *Luthers Theologia Crucis* with his own marginal remarks, which shows how thoroughly he studied this work.¹⁵

Ordass himself must have been aware of the dramatic quality of his life, as the structure of his four-part autobiography *A Small Mirror for Great Times* seems consciously to follow the dramatic heights and depths of his life. A dramatic work is usually marked by a rising and falling action; the exposition is followed by conflicts, then by the climax, which is in turn followed by the dénouement and conclusion. Ordass’s life can be presented as a double drama in five acts, in which two climaxes are followed by two spectacular falls.¹⁶

In Ordass’s life, the first climax or peak was the first assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund in 1947, when Ordass was elected vice president. Soon after his return to Hungary, however, there was a spectacular fall: in September 1948 he was arrested on false charges because he opposed the nationalization of church schools and resisted the removal of the old lay leaders of the church. After his trial he was imprisoned for almost two years. In the second drama, Ordass was restored to his office after his rehabilitation in 1956 in the wake of the revolution. In the summer of 1957 he even led the Hungarian delegation to the Minneapolis assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, where he was once again elected vice president. Ordass addressed about thirty thousand people in his sermon during the assembly’s opening worship service. After the bishop’s return to Hungary, the ever more dictatorial state of János Kádár began to intervene aggressively in the affairs of the church, but its initiative failed because of Ordass’s defense of the church. As a result, Ordass was

permanently removed from office in the summer of 1958 through the power of the state and with the assistance of some church members. He lived in total isolation until his death in 1978.

Ordass's Temptation in 1949

Let me describe a moment of severe temptation in the life of Bishop Ordass, which is probably the most dramatic episode in twentieth-century Hungarian church history. The date was January 9, 1949. Ordass had been jailed on false charges in the Star Prison in Szeged in southern Hungary. Soon after Ordass's arrest, Bishop Zoltán Túróczy (1893–1971) signed an agreement with the Communist state on behalf of the Lutheran Church in Hungary. Túróczy had been sentenced to ten years in prison in 1945 but received amnesty in 1948. As a representative of the revival movement, Túróczy was one of the most effective preachers in the twentieth-century history of Hungarian Lutheranism.

On this particular cold January morning, Túróczy and the president of the pastors' association came to visit Ordass in prison. They arrived with a message from the head of the communist party, Mátyás Rákosi: if Ordass resigned, he would be set free at once. Moreover, he would receive a state pension so that he could support his family. He would spend the rest of his life in peaceful retirement, and if there was no conflict between him and the state, he might even become the pastor of a congregation in due course. Túróczy was supportive of this proposal and told Ordass that though no church court would condemn him, most pastors in his diocese had deserted him, and that even his wife said that he had hardly any remaining followers. In the interest of the church, argued Túróczy, it would be helpful if he resigned.

Ordass could not accept Túróczy's argument, saying that he required justice and not amnesty. Túróczy con-

tinued his rational line of thought by appealing to the church's condition and added that Ordass perceived the situation only through the prism of selfish reasons, motivated only by vainglory. Then Ordass was given an hour and a half to reflect in a separate cell with a Bible that Túróczy had brought him. Ordass began to pray and read the Bible. He reread the most famous passages concerning believers and worldly authority in Romans 13, together with Acts 5:29, which says, "We must obey God rather than men." Then he came to Acts 16, about the unjust imprisonment of Paul and Silas: "And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace.' But Paul said to them, 'They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out'" (Acts 16:36–37).

When Túróczy and the other pastor returned, Ordass could declare even more emphatically that he would stay in prison. And when he returned to the cell where he had been kept together with some Catholic priests, he learned that these priests prayed for him for two and a half hours that he would stand firm and not harm his soul.¹⁷ No wonder that Ordass's favorite Bible verse was Matthew 24:13, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

My recounting this episode in no way intends to diminish the outstanding significance of Bishop Túróczy for the church in Hungary. My only aim is to illustrate that the prince of this world can deter, if only for a moment, the best of the church, whether the confessor Peter or the confessor Túróczy. An incredibly strong faith is needed so that the witness can recognize the tempter, can resist him, and remain firm in faith. It is again not by accident that in the summer of 1956, when Ordass was still prohibited from active ministry, Hanns Lilje, then president of the Lutheran World Fed-

eration, said on visiting Ordass in his home, "Your steadfastness in faith has become a symbol of Christian steadfastness in the Western world."¹⁸

Ordass's Temptation in 1958

In April 1950, two months before his release from prison, Ordass was stripped of his episcopal office by a special disciplinary tribunal. His successor was László Dezséry (1914–1977), a member of the communist party under whose leadership the original four Hungarian dioceses were decreased to two in 1952, a northern diocese led by the conformist bishop Lajos Vető (1904–1989) and a southern diocese headed by Dezséry. Four years later came the Hungarian uprising of October 1956.

Ordass was able to fulfill the duties of his episcopal office for the second time between October 31, 1956, and June 19, 1958. Those eighteen months were a short period of special grace in the history of the Lutheran Church in Hungary. Ordass returned to his office during the October revolution when Bishop László Dezséry, who had been subservient to the communist state, resigned. Even after the failure of the revolution, however, the Lutheran Church in Hungary was able to preserve its inner freedom and autonomy under the leadership of Ordass. Ordass did, however, recognize that the situation was already very different from what it had been in 1948. The church was smaller, it had no schools, and even Ordass admitted that the 1948 agreement was the basis of church-state relations. There was a paradox at work: the Russian tanks crushed the Hungarian revolution but the life of the church flourished. This paradox can be explained by the fact that Ordass was extremely skillful in restructuring the church by appointing new persons to important positions in the first days of November 1956. Vető also resigned and Túróczy was asked to administer the northern diocese. New persons were appointed to the editorship of the

Lutheran weekly journal, distribution of ship relief, and other responsibilities. Due to these quick measures, the congregations came to life, theological work attained a high standard, and the church press flourished. A church delegation headed by Ordass participated in the Minneapolis assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. For a while it seemed that Ordass had the confidence of the state, and indeed it was his intention to have a workable relationship with the state.

After the delegation's return from Minneapolis, however, it became more and more evident that the state wanted to intervene in church affairs yet again. Ordass resisted an attempt to prohibit church services on Good Friday, since it fell that year on April 4, the day of the Russian "liberation" of Hungary. Ordass was unwilling to recognize the restored atheist lay leaders of the church and he protested having articles published in church media that described missionary outreach as imperialistic activity. Ordass was ready to negotiate but the negotiations were not successful. The state wanted to dictate everything, even the membership of the church delegation.

For Ordass, the task was to defend the liberty of the church as it was established in the national constitution. The government was again successful in manipulating the pastors of Ordass's diocese against their bishop, promising to provide larger subsidies to pastors if their bishop improved their relationship with the state. A pro-communist theological professor openly attacked Ordass in the church media. The state wanted Ordass's deputy to resign but Ordass again resisted. The conflicts accelerated: a state commissar was nominated to control everything in the church while Ordass's response was passive resistance. Eventually Ordass was removed from office by the state in June 1958.

What was Ordass's temptation in 1958? He could easily have remained bishop because the state had envisaged the future of the church with him as its leader for a long time. Some

of his close colleagues wanted Ordass to remain as bishop even at the cost of yielding to the state. Had he complied with the demands of the state, he would have been allowed to continue as leader. His friends drafted a solution plan, as they thought that it was in the interest of the church for Ordass to be less inflexible. The arguments of his close associates would have sounded rational, constructive, and love-oriented. But Ordass had to stand firm against their arguments, just as he had refused Túróczy's request a decade earlier in the Star Prison in Szeged. Five years later, when Ordass was completing *A Small Mirror for Great Times*, he wrote about the 1958 confrontation as follows.

During the past years some of my friends said that in the autumn of 1957 the state seemed to have been keen on keeping me as bishop if I were to conform. This is probably true. Well, would not it be better if I improved my relationship with the state? I am convinced that this way the flow of events could perhaps be slowed down but it would have been impossible to stop them. And I would not assist in getting the church into bondage!¹⁹

In the twenty years that followed, Ordass had to live in total isolation in the nation under János Kádár and in the church under Zoltán Káldy (1919–1987), and he had to bear the burden of being misunderstood. When his autobiography was published in the West, the leaders of the Hungarian church created an atmosphere of hysteria at a pastors' conference in 1970. Bishop Ernő Ottlyk even charged that Ordass was a traitor to his country and then added, "Once again here is this 'martyr-theology.' Again the theology of suffering! That is what he recommends. He wants conflict and sufferings. For him the prophetic service can only be negative in socialism! His critique is nothing but negative!"²⁰ A full decade passed after Ordass's death before the first authentic words were

said about him in public, or rather semi-public, circles; until his long-buried truth could come to light.

Ordass's Condemnation in 1948 and the Deus Absconditus

That God is a hidden God, inscrutable, unknowable, was first experienced by Ordass at his trial in September 1948. Before the court withdrew to deliver its verdict, Ordass was allowed to speak. Voluntary stenographers recorded what he said. This quiet and slow-moving speech is a unique and startling example of his personal testimony to the hidden yet loving God.

You will now withdraw in order to decide the verdict. It is your task to weigh and examine everything that has been said about me according to your conscience. I do not know what kind of verdict will be returned. If your conscience compels you to an acquittal, then the wounds I carry away for my battle for society will not be so bloody and painful, so that I will be able to do my work with complete dedication and the same fervor as before. It is my intention to continue my service. God will help me to forget these five weeks. I am prepared to continue my service for my homeland and for my church.

It is also possible that you will find me guilty after your consideration and impose a punishment on me. In that case I will accept it peacefully and with humility in my heart. 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.²¹

When Ordass was released from prison in 1950, he spent six years in total isolation. The pastors avoided

him. He made a living by knitting scarves and gloves with his wife. In 1951 a theologically deep and poetically beautiful testimony reached the West in Ordass's own handwriting, copying out the words in II Corinthians 1:3-7 about comfort and affliction.²² By Lent 1955 he had completed a devotional book, *At the Foot of the Cross*, in which he meditates on the story of Christ's passion in the form of prayer. Here Ordass conflates the texts of the four Gospels and begins each meditation as a dialogue between himself and the Lord. The bishop who has experienced suffering, imprisonment, and abandonment now kneels, preaches, and prays under the cross. The volume was published anonymously in English translation in the United States in 1958 and in Hungarian only in 1989. It is the deepest personal confession and testimony by one who has experienced the love of God within the experience of human suffering.

My gratitude longs for expression because You blessed and illuminated the most important mystery of my life. You have permitted me to discover the meaning of my life in 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 a 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.

This is why, even now, I long to talk with You at the foot of Your cross.²³

Ordass knew well that carrying our own cross was nothing to the weight of Christ's cross. When he came in his meditations to Simon of Cyrene, he said,

I, of course, have known since my childhood, my Lord, that You

can be followed only with a cross. All through my life I have endeavored to follow You in this way. With my cross I have walked in Your footsteps. But I carried my own cross. Then the time came when Your cross again became very heavy. Then I—Your weak servant—lifted Your cross a little, just a little.

I am happy that You know well—perhaps You alone know—that, like Simon of Cyrene, I lifted Your cross a little without complaining.

I bless you for it, my Lord!²⁴

After his rehabilitation by the state and the church, Ordass was allowed to preach in the congregation of Budahegyvidék on October 14, 1956. The text was Matthew 22:1-14, the parable of the royal wedding feast. Ordass consciously bore witness to the cross.

I have the feeling that God forces me not only to explicate the substance of the biblical messages but also to bear witness to the joy of Christian life as I have experienced it. When two people want to get married they often say to each other: "You are my one and all! I will love you until death and forever." I have heard the same words in my life with my Lord and Savior. He said to me, to His unworthy servant: "You are my one and all." I know that He said that to me in the moment when I wanted to give up. He said it as if I were the only human being on earth. I have heard it from Him: "I love you until death, eternally!" When there was no human hand I could hold, He firmly held mine.

To Him the cross, to me His peace. To Him death, to me His fruit: life.²⁵

Three weeks after he was restored to his episcopal office in 1956, Ordass ordained a young pastor in the Deák Tér congregation in Budapest. The text of his sermon was the verse that

was so dear to him, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." There is again solemnity in Ordass's personal testimony.

Now I am telling you a secret...

The secret is this: Jesus endured, uniquely endured, not only while he was on this earth but he remains true to his promise forever.

And I wish to open this secret not only by pointing to the testimony of others. In this most solemn hour of your life I am, perhaps, permitted to address you with my most personal experience. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave me this biblical verse when I lived the hardest days of my life. When my personal fate turned most hopeless. And now I wish to tell you with utmost joy that my Lord Jesus Christ has always kept his promise until now. He has never let me down. And there is nothing in my soul but the firm certainty that Jesus keeps his promise until giving us the crown of salvation.²⁶

In March 1957, Ordass visited the congregation of Cegléd where he had been a minister for ten years. The subject of his personal testimony was "the test of the soul is the cross."

Never have I felt the blessing mercy of Jesus so deeply as when he forced me under his cross and most clearly let me know: he wants me to carry this cross...

For Jesus Christ reveals his soul only on the cross. One can get close to this soul if one knows that Jesus sealed all his words and deeds when he was willing to bear all the consequences of the love he proclaimed. Even the very consequence that he should be crucified in the congregation by those whom he so deeply loved.²⁷

On the sixth Sunday after Easter in June 1957, Ordass delivered a sermon in Swedish in the cathedral of Copen-

hagen. The text was John 15:26–16:4 and his subject was testimony.

The task our Lord gave is that we should be witnesses in our life on earth. That the world should get to know God by the testimonies of our lives. Please allow me to bear personal witness about it. When I had again the opportunity to proclaim the word of God after eight years of silence, I felt committed not only to teach the truth of our faith in the gospel in the congregations where I address the people but also to bear a personal witness. Today let me do this for you with great joy... I am telling this not that you should be sorry for me but to bear witness. Christ keeps his promise. In the deepest crisis, when the cross presses you never so hard, he comes to his people with the victorious power of the Holy Spirit. He does not make your cross less heavy but he helps us to bear this cross. It happens to those who belong to him. It is the most wonderful experience to be the witness of the Savior. Moreover: this is the only meaning of life.²⁸

Also in 1957 at the opening worship of the assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Minneapolis, Ordass was given the honor of delivering the sermon. The topic of the assembly was "Christ liberates and unites." The text of his sermon was taken from John 12 about the grain of wheat that must fall into the earth and die so that it can bring forth new life. The large congregation was especially touched by his modest testimony. At the end of his sermon he witnessed in third person singular to the love of Christ that he 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 Savior. He would like to say how often he has experi-

enced 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.²⁹

I hope it has become clear how and why Ordass was a theologian of the cross in the sense of Luther or Loewenich. He had to suffer and carry the cross because of his unmoveable, firm insistence on the truth of the gospel. As Luther had learned long ago, so also Ordass realized that the hiding God reveals Himself "under the form of the opposite": Ordass experienced the warmth of God's burning love in rejection and suffering under the cross. This was the testimony he passed on during the short period of his second episcopal and pastoral ministry. And this is the testimony he passes on to us even today. IF

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