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Chapter 20

A Lonely Lutheran Mystic During Communism. The Spiritual Heritage of Bishop Lajos Ordass (1901–1978)

Tibor Fabiny

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 Bible and from the history of the Church. The list begins with the name of Enoch and ends with that of Ordass, the only person who was still alive when the carving was made in the 1960s. Lajos Ordass (1901–1978) was the Bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church from 1945 until his death in 1978, i.e. for 33 years. However, he could exercise his office for altogether less than 5 years; between 1945 and 1948 and between 1956 and 1958. The Communists, with the help of collaborators in his own Church, forced him twice to live in total isolation, first for 6 years (1950–1956) following his release from prison; and secondly for 20 years (1958–1978) following his second and final removal from office in 1958.

20.1 The Roots of Ordass’ Mysticism: *Luther’s Theologia Crucis*

In and with his own life’s story, Ordass was a theologian of the cross. He was not a bookish theologian in an academic sense, but he was a theologian of the cross who put his theological insights immediately into practice and life. It is remarkable, however, that in his library we can find a hardback copy of the first edition of Walter

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von Loewenich's *Luther's Theologia Crucis*¹ (first published in 1933) with his own marginal remarks, which show that he thoroughly studied this work. Loewenich devoted the last chapter of his groundbreaking work to the discussion of *theologia crucis* and mysticism (Tauler, *theologia Deutsch*, *Devotio moderna*, Thomas Kempis, Staupitz etc.)

In order to understand who the theologian of the cross is, we now turn to Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* and to its recent commentary by the American theologian Gerhard O. Forde.²

Luther contrasted in the *Heidelberg Disputations* "the theologian of glory" and "the theologian of the cross." The theologian of the cross is in constant polemics with the theologian of glory. For Luther the great divide between the two theologians is stated in these 19–20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*:

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who claims to see into the invisible things of God by seeing through earthly things. But that person deserves to be a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross.

Who is the theologian who does not deserve to be called a theologian, and who is the theologian of the cross who deserves to be called a theologian? The theologian of glory claims to know God by means of analogy, as he thinks he is able to see into the invisible things of God through the things that are made. He claims he can see what is "behind" the secrets; thus he can contemplate the glorious acts of God. The cross emotionally moves him, but he claims he can see "through" the cross.

For Luther this is a basically mistaken view: the cross is never transparent, one can never see "through" it. The cross is more like a mirror than transparent glass. As theologians of glory we see the world turned upside down: good to be evil and evil to be good, wisdom to be foolishness or foolishness to be wisdom.

But the cross twists our wrong way of seeing. The theologian of the cross sees only the visible and the manifest things of God, the *posteriora*, as Luther put it, which means the "back" or "hinder part." In Exodus 33: 18–23, Moses wanted to see God's glory, which means he had an aspiration to be a theologian of glory. But God covered Moses' eyes and allowed him to see his back, the *posteriora*, as He passed by. God was both gracious to Moses (as no one can see God face to face) but it was also a supreme "put-down" for the theologian of glory. "In Luther's mind here it is the suffering, despised, and crucified Jesus that takes the place of God's backside."³ Luther uses a rather offensive image to shock the theologian of glory in us. We can only contemplate the backside of God: the dirt, the sin and suffering.

But God is *deus absconditus*; he hides himself under the contrary: *deus absconditus contrario suo*; he hides his real self (that is, his love) in his unusual "strange" work (Isaiah 28: 21), the *opus proprium* hidden in the *opus alienum*. God hides

¹Walter von Loewenich, *Luthers Theologia crucis*, München, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1929. (The bookmark in Ordass's library: 31.569.)

²Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputations*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans, 1997.

³Forde, 78.

himself under the form of opposites. Only faith can recognise his saving grace in his judgment, or the merciful anger (*ira misericordiae*) in his judgment and terrible anger (*ira severitatis*). This leads us to the explanation of thesis 21:

A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

The cross, Luther says, wants to change us from being theologians of glory to being theologians of the cross. As faulty seeing leads to false speaking, the cross finds us out; *crux probat omnia*, as Luther said. The cross gives us back our proper way of seeing: what was evil now becomes good, what was foolishness now becomes wisdom. "The cross does not merely inform us of something, something that may be 'above' or 'behind' it. It attacks and afflicts us. The knowledge of God comes when God 'happens to us,' when God does himself to us."⁴ Meanwhile we are constantly tempted by God (*Anfechtung*); we are attacked and humiliated by the cross. This is our passion. But by the intervention of the cross our old ego becomes crucified with Christ so that it can be made new.

20.2 Ordass's Experience of the Hiddenness of God

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

You will now withdraw in order to decide the verdict...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.⁵

When Ordass got out of prison in 1950 he spent 6 years in total isolation. His pastors avoided him. He made a living by knitting scarves and gloves with his wife. In 1951, a theologically deep and even poetically beautiful testimony reached the West from Bishop Ordass in his own handwriting:

For as we have more than our share of suffering for Christ, so also through Christ we have more than our share of comfort. But if we endure affliction, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we receive comfort—the feeling you acquire patiently when patiently you endure the same sufferings as we also endure [*sic!*]. And our hope for you is firm; for we know that as you are sharers in the sufferings, so you are also sharers in the comfort. 2 Cor. 1:3–7.⁶

⁴Forde, 90.

⁵László G. Terray, *He Could Not Do Otherwise: Bishop Lajos Ordass, 1901–1978* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 1997), 84.

⁶A photograph of the original can be seen in Terray, between, 96–97.

20.3 *At the Foot of The Cross (A keresztfa tövében; 1955, 1958, 1989)*

By Lent of 1955 he had completed a devotional book, *At the Foot of the Cross*, in which he meditated on the story of 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 English translation in the United States in 1958, but in Hungarian only in 1989. It is the deepest personal confession and testimony by somebody who has experienced the love of God in 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 bankruptcy and the 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 knew 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.⁷

Ordass, having been suspended from his pastoral and episcopal duties, confesses to his Lord that while in the time of his freedom he had many occasions to talk about God to people, now in his forced isolation he has more occasion to talk with God:

Now, swept off the path of a turbulent life and speaking less about you and more with you, now you have enabled me to see the scene at Jerusalem in a different perspective.⁸

Ordass well knew that carrying our own cross is nothing compared to the weight of Christ's cross. When in his meditations he came 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 endeavoured 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!⁹

⁷ *At the Foot of the Cross: Meditations by an Imprisoned Pastor Behind the Iron Curtain* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1958).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 166–167.

20.4 *Food For Thought (Étravaló; 1967, 2001)*

Bishop Lajos Ordass was rehabilitated soon after the reburial of the Communist martyr László Rajk and a few days before the Hungarian revolution in October 1956. He quickly reorganized the Church and remained in office until June 1958. He was even allowed to lead the Hungarian delegation to the Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Minneapolis in August 1957. During the 18 months he was again its leader, the Hungarian Lutheran Church was indeed a green island and a flourishing garden in the early days of the Kádár regime. This, however, could not last long, as he was unwilling to compromise his conscience. Unlike Cardinal Mindszenty, who had to flee to the American Embassy when the Soviet tanks came in, Bishop Ordass was not a politician and therefore, in the interest of his Church, he was willing to make small gestures or compromise until this touched his conscience. But when it became evident that he would never become a partner in ruining the Church from inside, the state had to remove him. He was not willing to resign and thus the state had to find some legal solution for his removal. After a mutual struggle it eventually took place 1 day after the execution of Prime Minister Imre Nagy in June 1958.

Ordass was isolated again. But while his first isolation lasted only for 6 years, the second isolation lasted until his death in August 1978. With Ordass removed, the Hungarian Lutheran Church was beheaded. In his new isolation from December 1958 he began to write meditations day by day.

Every day he passed on his new handwritten meditations to the former Deaconess-in-Chief Dr Mária Farkas (who lived in the same house as Ordass). Dr Farkas sent them on to other Deaconesses, to type them, and they were then smuggled, under the cover name "handkerchiefs," into West Germany, where they were first published in 1967.¹⁰ The Hungarian edition was published only on the centenary of his birth in 2001.¹¹

Ordass wrote a Preface to the book at Pentecost 1959, in which he says that it is neither a prayer book nor a collection of sermons, but rather a book of meditations similar to prayers, which he recommends to be read as morning meditations before the day begins. For each day from December 3 to November 30 there is a short text from the Gospel with two short paragraphs each beginning "Uram!" (My Lord!)

20.5 *I Cannot Pray (Nem tudok imádkozni; 1989, 1992)*

This book was finished in 1961 but was eventually published with the original title only in 1992 by the Lajos Ordass Society. Interestingly, there was a rushly promoted edition of the book by the Church leadership in 1989, with the title *On Prayer*. With the political changes at the end of the 1980s, the Church leaders who had been

¹⁰ Ordass L. *Étravaló. Az év minden napjára*. Kőln, Útitárs, 1967.

¹¹ Ordass L. *Étravaló. Az év minden napjára*, Harmat, Ordass Lajos Baráti Kör, 2001. The story of the book is recorded in the preface to this second edition by István Gémes, 7.

subservient to the Communist regime, or who had served it as secret agents, sought to cover themselves. In competition with the Lajos Ordass Society, they published this book without the permission of the Bishop's widow. The authorized publication came out with the original title *I Cannot Pray*, with a preface by Pastor Zoltán Dóka (1929–2000), an outstanding figure of the opposition, and a founding member of the Lajos Ordass Society. In this preface to the new edition, Pastor Dóka recounted the unworthy circumstances of the first edition, and mentioned three features of Ordass' spirituality. The first is deep humility before God; the second is sober sincerity; and the third is flaming love for Christ, reminiscent of hymns to Christ. Ordass, Dóka says, addresses God with the shining, enthusiastic words of lovers, even in the fearful depth of his sufferings. Though Dóka does not explicitly call him a mystic, I hope to show that this work is another evident mark of Ordass's mysticism.

The book's subtitle is "Counsels to those who Pray and to those who want to Pray." In his own Preface from 1961, Ordass reports how his praying life has grown since his childhood, throughout his ministry, and especially in the time of his forced isolation. He has always respected the Church's rich tradition of formal prayers, a tradition he had grew up with, while at the same time adding to them his own composed prayers. But he recognized how people were struggling with the question when they approached him with their problems. Therefore, instead of publishing an anthology of prayers, he decided to compile a guide-book for those who want to be pupils in the school of prayer.

The book has twelve chapters and sixty-five subchapters. Here are the chapters: I. On Prayer—In general; II. Objections; III. Caveats; IV. Where and How to Pray; V. Distressing Questions; VI. Uncertain Beginnings; VII. Difficulties and Exhortations; VIII. Thanksgiving Prayers; IX. Intercession—for Ourselves; X. Intercessions—for Others; XI. Prayers of those Struggling with Sin; XII. Adoration.

Each subchapter begins with a quotation from the Bible. The author's voice is pastoral throughout. He is both a caring teacher and a man of concern and compassion. His mysticism is explicitly manifested in the last chapter of the book. He begins with the Gospel stories of Transfiguration (Matthew 17: 1–9; Mark 9: 2–13; Luke 9: 28–36). Let me quote what he writes on the features of adoration:

1. "From this (that is the Transfiguration, not the Gospel in general) gospel and other biblical scenes, it is evident that one can bow down before God in adoration on one's own initiative; but it remains an unforgettable or unforgettably deep experience when it is God who takes the hands of men and women and shows Himself (Godself) to them, so that they cannot but fall on their knees and adore Him.
2. In such circumstances men and women become filled with God in a peculiar way, so that for them God will be all in all. What seems to be a dominating feature in human life totally ceases to exist. One can entirely forget about oneself. One's otherwise permanently rebellious dissatisfaction ceases. One is no longer strangled by the concerns of the world or of everyday life. One is no more devoured by one's own sorrow. Joy is going to triumph in one's soul.

3. In most cases this adoration is entirely wordless. That is, of course, not a necessary rule, but in most cases it works like that. One instinctively feels that by speaking, one will break the silence of adoration: only an awkward clumsiness can leave one's lips (See Peter's 'words').
4. If there is a word here at all it can only be the voice of God. The heavenly voice.
5. Whatever we experience during adoration is always a foretaste of the happiness of eternity.
6. This cannot last on earth forever. When God gives us the gift of this elevating experience of adoration, He does not want to rip 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 sounding 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 in truth. Now we know that the Father seeks such worshippers."¹²

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 of meeting the readers of this book in eternity.

20.6 Ordass's Translation of *The Passion Hymns* Hallgrímur Pétursson

Ordass first heard about Iceland's most famous pastor and poet, Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1674) when he was a pastor in Cegléd in the 1930s. He recognized then that they were soul-mates, and yearned to translate his work, but during his active ministry as pastor and bishop it was impossible for him to do so. Hallgrímur Pétursson was one of the most influential pastors in the Age of Orthodoxy. He has sometimes been called the Icelandic Paul Gerhardt because of his contribution to Lutheran hymnody.

The Passion Hymns are a collection of 50 poetic texts exploring the Passion narrative, as traditionally presented, from the point where Christ enters the Garden of Gethsemane to His death and burial. Hallgrímur began composing the work in 1656, while serving as pastor; it took him 3 years to complete it, with the final poem being written in May 1659.

The first edition was published 7 years later, in 1666. By the end of the century the hymns had become so popular in Iceland that five editions had been published. Since that time, they have been reprinted more than 75 times, a unique achievement in Icelandic literature. The poems were translated into many other languages, including Latin, English, Chinese, Danish and Hungarian.

¹²Ordass Lajos, *Nem tudok imádkozni. Imádkozóknak és imádkozni akaróknak*. Budapest, Ordass Lajos Baráti Kör, 1992, 143–144.

The Passion Hymns are still well known to Icelanders and they are read during Lent, once a day, on Icelandic Radio. "There is great rivalry among actors and intellectuals to have the honour to be chosen to read them," writes Roy Long.¹³ After surveying various translations, Roy Long writes:

Bishop Ordass ... had to live in a grim economic situation, similar to that endured by Hallgrímur himself. In the most trying circumstances, Ordass taught himself Icelandic and translated the hymns into his native Hungarian.¹⁴

In 1971, when the University of Iceland celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, it conferred an honorary doctorate on Bishop Lajos Ordass. Ordass was, of course, not given the permission to travel to Reykjavík. However, he was pleased with having been honoured by the university. The commendation read:

For his valuable engagement in international Church labour, for his outstanding service in promoting interchurch and international relations, for his efforts to make known Christianity and the culture of the North of Europe, and not least for his translation of that significant work of Icelandic literature, *The Passion Hymns*.¹⁵

When I visited Bishop Ordass in his home, first in 1975 and for a second time in 1977, as a 20 or 22-year-old university student of literature, I vividly remember that when I asked him about this translation, with his slow-moving deep voice he told me that he had never written verse or poems before, not even when he was a young lover, and therefore he decided to learn the elements of versification to translate this work.

20.7 Conclusion

However useful the biographies of Ordass by László Terray and more recently by Enikő Böröcz,¹⁶ they approach the heritage of the bishop from the angle of history, church history, or theology. It is significant to assess him through these lenses, but it is not enough. In the present paper I have tried to argue and demonstrate that among twentieth century Hungarian Protestants his heritage is perhaps closest to the tradition of mysticism. Bishop Lajos Ordass was a lonely Lutheran mystic in Communist Hungary. His yet unpublished diary will reveal more about his reading and personal reflections. Nevertheless the body of devotional literature he authored or translated and made available for the public is remarkable in itself, not only in quantity but also in quality. These works should be better known, published and republished for every generation. In the history of Christian spirituality one chapter should be devoted to Lajos Ordass. No wonder that the Minnesota Lutherans have recognized this already in the 1960s when they decided that the bishop's name should be seen on the oak-frieze of their Church, among the "cloud of witnesses."

¹³ A manuscript kindly sent by Dr Roy Long to the author.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Quoted by László G. Terray, *He Could Not Do Otherwise. Bishop Lajos Ordass 1901–1978*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, UK, W. B. Eerdmans, 1997, 151

¹⁶ Enikő Böröcz, *Egyházió viharban és árnyékban. Ordass Lajos evangélikus hívalló püspöki szolgálata (1945–1978)* Vol. 1. Budapest, Luther Kiadó, 2012.

Chapter 21

“It is the Mind That Hears it, Not the Ear...” Sounds, Lights, Visions in Peasant Mysticism

Iren Lovász

21.1 Introduction

This article is based on a fieldwork-study of the religious life of a peasant woman in Southern Hungary. The interviews took place in the 1990s, in her home.¹

Her everyday life is determined by her special, intimate relationship with her sacred beings, whose immediate presence she experiences day and night. She considers herself to be a servant and clerk of God. She gets the holy messages as suggestions, and perceives them “in her forehead”—as she says: “It is the mind that hears it, not the ear.” She writes down these texts immediately and regularly just after the vision. These texts form “The Scripture”—as she calls it—which she regards as a sacred text, consisting of the “Truth.” She receives not only sounds but also different lights and visions. She takes them as meaningful heavenly signs to be decoded, and she makes regular notations and interprets them in “The Scripture.”

This study first tries to understand the role of these divine suggestions appearing in the form of acoustic sounds and visual images. Secondly, it tries to show how “The Scripture” as a diary documents her everyday practices of sacred communication, and the concepts and rituals of her daily religious practices. Thirdly, it tries to understand the peasant mysticism underlying the worldview of a contemporary

¹ It was in 1993 when my supervisor and professor of folklore and folk religion, Zsuzsanna Erdélyi, first took me to the village of Madaras, to study the folk prayers of this lady. But her special mystical religiosity provided such rich anthropological material, that it needed a deeper and more complex study of religion, and I myself went back to the village several times, conducting lots of interviews with her. We also kept on writing letters to each other for years. That is how I started to approach visions and other elements of her peasant mysticism within an anthropological study of religion.

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