

# BISHOP LAJOS ORDASS AND THE HUNGARIAN LUTHERAN CHURCH

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## 1. Ordass's Image in the United States

Strangely enough, in the English-speaking world not much scholarly work has been done on the Hungarian Lutheran Bishop Lajos Ordass (1901–1978). The most exhaustive study was a review-essay by John Eibner ten years ago<sup>1</sup> when Ordass's Selected Writings were published in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, however, the Bishop's two-volume autobiography was published by István Szépfalusi,<sup>3</sup> and a biography by László Terray, originally written in Norwegian,<sup>4</sup> came out both in German<sup>5</sup> and in Hungarian.<sup>6</sup> In the preface to the Hungarian edition Terray writes: "Today, the Ordass-theme is more up-to-date than ever."<sup>7</sup>

It seems to be imperative for us to bring the significance of the Bishop to the attention of the English-speaking church-historians and theologians, especially because during his lifetime his image was indeed in the limelight of the American church-related media. This was perhaps due to the fact that both his imprisonment in 1948 and his second removal in 1958 were in each case preceded by his visits to the USA in 1947 and 1957 respectively. His first visit coincided with the beginning of Stalinism in Eastern Europe, and his second visit with the failure of the Hungarian revolution in 1956. In both cases the impact he left on the American Lutherans was enormous. Perhaps the most conspicuous sign of the Americans' reverence for Ordass is the Vinje Lutheran church in Willmar, Minnesota, in which there is an oak frieze encircling the sanctuary with names of "clouds of witnesses" from the Bible and the history of the church. The list begins with Enoch and ends with the name of Ordass following the names of Bonhoeffer and Berggrav. When the oak frieze was carved, Ordass was the only person in the group who was alive.<sup>8</sup>

During his lifetime his enemies labelled him as "reactionary", and as "unbendingly stubborn",<sup>9</sup> but for 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",<sup>10</sup> a "typical Lutheran... loath to meddle in

politics",<sup>11</sup> "a symbol of indomitable belief",<sup>12</sup> a "man of indomitable belief",<sup>13</sup> "an undaunted and persistent church-leader";<sup>14</sup> "tall, gaunt, ascetic Hungarian [of] ... tremendous spiritual force",<sup>15</sup> "the chief obstacle of the subjugation of the Church as an instrument of the State",<sup>16</sup> "the martyr of Hungary",<sup>17</sup> "hero of faith",<sup>18</sup> a "saint of our time" ... a man who stood fast victoriously".<sup>19</sup> In the secular Western press he appeared as "one of Hungary's staunchest anti-Communist religious leaders".<sup>20</sup> When he died in 1978, American church-leaders, his old friends, also paid tribute to him, saying that he was a man "who took orders from no one other than his Lord" (Schioz),<sup>21</sup> and that he was "unmovable when he believed vital principles were at stake ... [whose] timeless legacy is his unflinching determination to place loyalty to the gospel above personal considerations, regardless of the cost." (Empie)<sup>22</sup> However, this was a tribute already in retrospect. As a matter of fact, throughout the sixties and the seventies he seemed to have been forgotten, or as a recent reviewer put it: "After a period of lionization in the West, Ordass came to be regarded as an embarrassment for many."<sup>23</sup>

## 2. The Dramatic Nature of a Life

First I shall argue that Ordass's life was inherently *dramatic*, then I shall attempt to draw the portrait of this dramatic life in a "double mirror": by reading his autobiography on the one hand; and also by following how his activity was reflected in the contemporary American church-related press.

Lajos Ordass was the Bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church from 1945 until his death in 1978, i.e., for thirty-three years, but he could exercise his office for altogether less than five years, which was evenly divided into two different periods: first between 1945–1948, and for the second time between 1956–1958.

If one carefully reads Ordass's autobiography it is simply impossible not to be impressed by the successive heights and depths, namely, the *dramatic quality* of this life. Being a Shakespearean scholar rather than a church historian, I cannot help but find many Shakespearean "themes" in this unique and breathtaking life-story. For example the topic of the "world turned upside down" becomes the story of "the church turned upside down"; the Shakespearean theme of "appearance versus reality" becomes the theme of "careerists or the fake versus the faithful or the real"; the "unlawful usurper versus the lawful banished ruler" topic comes to us here as the *de facto* Bishop imposed upon the church versus the *de jure* Bishop removed from office and sent into early retirement. Another obvious Shakespearean device is "dis-

guise”, which we get to know here as “undercover state-agents within the church”. And we could continue almost *ad eternum*: totalitarianism, dictatorship, deception, manipulation, fears, taboos, betrayals, on the one hand, and the faithfulness of a little minority (remnants, who stood fast in the tempests of history), on the other. Indeed, these are themes strikingly common in *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, and the past four decades of Hungarian church history.

But not only the themes are common. I find that Ordass’s life has a dramatic shape, reminiscent of the pyramidal shape of the rising and falling actions of the great tragedies, in this particular case with two pinnacles like the “M” of a MacDonalds-emblem. After I had envisaged this structure I came to see that Ordass himself must have been unconsciously aware of it as he structured his four-part autobiography: *Nagy idők kis tükré* (A Little Mirror of Great Times) dramatically, in a way similar to what I am proposing here. So this recognition of the dramatic quality of Ordass’s life encourages me to introduce it as a five-act drama rather than as a linear narrative. In Act I I will depict his life in pre-World War II Hungary from his birth to his elevation to the Bishop’s seat in 1945. The action gradually intensifies. In Act II I will discuss his episcopal activity between 1945–1948 at home and abroad. The climax of this gathering tension is, undoubtedly, his visit to the United States in 1947, which in Act III will be followed by his struggle, arrest and imprisonment in 1948, a sudden fall after the climax. This period of tragic depth covers almost two-years of imprisonment and the six years of enforced silence, the years between 1948–1956. In Act IV a new plot develops: he is rehabilitated before the Hungarian revolution, assumes office in the midst of the uprising, and remains in power even after its failure. The new zenith or climax is undoubtedly his visit to the third assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Minneapolis during the summer of 1957, where he is hailed as a hero of faith and elected to be the first Vice President of the World Federation. In Act V we shall see that soon after his return, despite his “new-found flexibility”,<sup>24</sup> he is gradually isolated, until he is officially removed by the state and the church in June 1958. The new *de profundis* period of silence and loneliness lasts for twenty years until his death in August 1978. In brief, the dramatic structure appears as follows:<sup>25</sup>

*ACT I. The Making of a Bishop (1901–1945)*

*ACT II. Episcopal Duties Home and Abroad (1945–1948)*

*ACT III. In Prison and in Silence (1948–1956)*

*ACT IV. Bishop Restored (1956–1958)*

*ACT V. Isolated and Silenced Again (1958–1978)*

### ACT I. The Making of a Bishop (1901–1945)

He was born as Lajos Wolf on February 6, 1901, in Torzsa in the Batschka district (known as Voivodina, an autonomous part of the former Yugoslavia) as the third son of a Lutheran German-speaking country-school teacher. His father came from the northern part of Hungary, but on his mother's side his family belonged to those Germans who were settled in the southern part of Austro-Hungary during the reign of Joseph II. He began his elementary education in his home village and continued his secondary education in the Lutheran *Gimnázium* of Bonyhád, in southern Hungary. Due to the Trianon-Treaty after World War I, he became separated from his home, which now became a part of Yugoslavia. In September 1920 he began his studies at the Lutheran Theological Academy, which had been temporarily based in Budapest. Cut off from any support from his home, he had to earn his livelihood while studying theology, now already in Sopron, Western Hungary. He was awarded a scholarship to study in the University of Halle in 1922–23, but the sudden inflation made his scholarship almost worthless. Therefore he had to work in the coal-mines in order to maintain himself. Having been ordained in October 1924, he served in various congregations as an assistant pastor for two years. With the financial help of his father, he managed to travel to Sweden in September 1927. He studied at Lund for a term, where he attended the lectures of Gustav Aulen and Anders Nygren. With regard to religious movements he was most impressed by the Lutheran piety of Henrik Schartau and his followers. In Uppsala, where he spent the Spring semester of the academic year, he was a frequent guest in the home of Archbishop Nathan Soderblom who even took him for his visitation tours in his archdiocese. During this year he made friends and lasting fellowships with Martin Lindstrom, Gunnar Hultgren, Ivan Hylander and, last but not least, Bo Giertz, who later became the well-known Bishop of Guthenburg and whose works Ordass translated during the 1940s into Hungarian.

After his return he continued as assistant pastor in various congregations. Already married, at the age of thirty he became a pastor of the Lutheran congregation of Cegléd, in central Hungary. He served there for ten years. The congregation was reported to have grown and flourished during this time. In 1941 he was invited to be the minister of the Kelenföld congregation in Budapest. Four years later, immediately after the war, at the age of forty-four he was elected as the Bishop of the Montana Diocese, the largest diocese of the Lutheran Church in Hungary.

What are the most important features of Ordass's pre-1945 activity? The historian Eibner, focusing mainly on the social dimensions of the Bishop's

activity, finds that there are two prominent features.<sup>26</sup> The first is Ordass's (at that time his name was still Wolf) effort to regenerate Hungarian society. His sermons, speeches and articles reveal his deep concern for social justice, his sensitivity to such issues as poverty, class-division, urbanization, breakdown of family-life, growing materialism, and so on. In this respect his model was the 19th century Danish poet Grundtvig, who introduced the democratic system of "People's Schools".<sup>27</sup> The other principle of his mission, according to Eibner, was Ordass's "dedication to the principles of national unity and independence".<sup>28</sup> Here Eibner refers to two contemporary articles by Ordass, the first one was on Hungary's regaining some southern territories after the 1941 invasion of Yugoslavia. The other one was a theological reflection on "Jesus Christ and the war".<sup>29</sup> Eibner finds that some passages of these articles reveal Ordass's "identification with anti-Trianon Treaty sentiment". He even suggests that the latter article "implicitly sanctioned the action of the Hungarian Government... [of declaring war on the Soviet Union] by supporting the just war doctrine".<sup>30</sup> According to László Terray, the passages taken out of context and slightly misunderstood by Eibner were further distorted in a recent Swedish book that used only Eibner as a source. Thus a false image was created that Ordass was briefly supportive of Hitler's war. Terray pointed out to Eibner in a letter that in the first quoted article Ordass was not speaking about the invasion of Yugoslavia but about the Lutherans reunited with their mother-church; in the second case Ordass theologically meditated on the evident contradiction between war and the Gospel and raised simultaneously the occasional necessity of a "defensive war" (which is, in my view, in accordance with Luther's doctrine of the "two kingdoms"). But, as Terray concludes, that was something different from supporting the just war doctrine.<sup>31</sup>

However, it is obvious both from Ordass's writings and actions that the political dimensions of Ordass's activity as a churchman (and always as churchman and never as politician!), during the Second World War, were undoubtedly anti-Nazi. But we are mistaken if we one-sidedly concentrate upon the socio-political aspects of Ordass's pastoral activity and disregard his less visible daily involvement with congregations living in diaspora and his commitment to translating books on religious education. Nevertheless by becoming a pastor in Budapest he was immediately confronted with some church-related social or political problems. By 1942 Ordass became aware of the extensive Nazi influence in Hungary. The wind of Nazi Germany had also touched the Lutheran Church in Hungary. One-third of the Hungarian Lutherans were of German origin. Some ministers of German origin compiled a *Memorandum* in which they not only sought remedy for their offences but

also declared their effort to form a church-organization that would break with the Hungarian church and would be linked administratively with the church in Germany. Ordass, who always believed in the integration rather than the division of the Church, wrote a long *Response to the Memorandum* in which he strongly condemned this effort and defended the interests of the Church in Hungary. In February 1942 he published it at his own expense and sent it to many church leaders.<sup>32</sup> As a sign of personal protest against Hungary's occupation by the Germans on March 19, 1944, Ordass "magyarized" his surname from the German "Wolf" into the Hungarian "Ordass".

When Ordass read a Swedish Bishop's (Gustaf Aulen) account of the Norwegian Lutheran Church's purely defensive struggle under Bishop Berggrav against Hitler in 1943, he was so much impressed that he immediately translated it and distributed it to the leaders of the Church. Moreover, he openly lectured on this theme at an assembly of pastors and teachers in Békéscsaba, in the southeastern part of Hungary. Such an act was not without risk in the Hungary of 1943.<sup>33</sup>

A new church-related issue was the Jewish-question. Many Jews were keen on formally joining the Christian church in order to save their lives. Among the members of the clergy there were some severe abuses: some clergymen were willing to issue certificates of baptism only at the expense of considerable payment. Ordass protested at such abuses. He tried to protect the Jews with the help of the Swedish Red Cross and he was even able to obtain a Swedish passport in one case. In 1944 there was a Swedish initiative that the three Hungarian historical churches (Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran) should openly and concomitantly protest against the pro-Nazi Szálasi government's deportation of the Jews. Thus Ordass, on behalf of the sick Bishop Sándor Raffay, paid an official visit to the residence of the Primate of the Roman Catholic Church in Esztergom. He travelled together with the Swedish Embassy Councilor, Valdemar Langlet. The Primate's response to this initiative was negative: the Catholic Church, said he, had already expressed her protest. During the siege of Budapest Ordass found shelter with some members of his congregation in the cellar beneath the building of his congregation. While living underground for many weeks he translated the dramas of the Danish poet Kaj Munk (who himself was executed by the Gestapo), into Hungarian. The devastating war eventually came to an end. Throughout the spring Ordass was busy with burying the dead, sometimes digging the graves himself.

In the summer of 1945 the 79-year-old Bishop Raffay resigned. Ordass was elected (with an absolute majority) to be the Bishop of the Montana District.

## ACT II. Episcopal Duties Home and Abroad (1945-1948)

Lajos Ordass became a new bishop in an entirely new historical period. In 1945 Hungary was a country that had experienced both Nazi invasion and Soviet occupation. It had suffered great devastation but was still a democratic country. The Communists' totalitarian takeover took place only three years later.

The Protestant churches responded to the new political situation in different ways. Pastor Albert Bereczky, later Bishop of The Reformed Church, for example, proposed a theology of contrition which stressed that the churches are responsible for the social evils of the past as they were beneficiaries. Now, therefore, God punishes his people just as he punished the people of Israel. If the state wants to nationalize their historical institutions they should interpret it as a judgement from God. The Lutherans did not see the church's task in such prophetic terms and, they "did not abandon the historic tradition of the church".<sup>34</sup> In an advent pledge Ordass wrote: "We shall not allow anything to be deleted from our Hungarian past that God has given with his manifest blessing, and thus judges worthy of life."<sup>35</sup>

In letters written to the ministers of his diocese, Ordass frequently discussed the theological relationship of the church to the state. It is important for us to understand that the basis of all his action was *Lutheran theology*. It was only his enemies that tried to create an image of him as a political reactionary. He was simply defending his church on theological, though not always explicit, principles. The following sentence, for example, undoubtedly reflects Luther's famous idea of the "two kingdoms", "our church knows her duties with regard to the state and democracy, and she wants to accomplish them faithfully. But the church also expects from the state that her preaching and teaching activity will not be hindered..."<sup>36</sup> So Ordass's purpose was to work out a fair, theologically justified, relationship to the state. He offered to support the state, but *not unconditionally*, like some of his followers for whom the church became totally subservient to the state. In Ordass's theology the church and the state were meant to mutually recognize their spheres of interest and activity. He found that the church, by virtue of her cultural and social activity (schools, hospitals, charity institutions and so on) contributes to the welfare of the state and society. Therefore she could accept financial support from the state; and she should count on the state's guarantee of her established rights to enjoy autonomy, to preach the gospel, and to provide Christian education. The image Ordass frequently used was that "the church is the conscience of the state".<sup>37</sup> The church should never have a political programme. Neither should she directly meddle in politics because that is not her mission. However, when

political events or measures touch either the body or the members of the church, it is the church's duty to speak out publicly on those issues.

Before the great debate over the nationalization of church-schools in 1948, there were at least two political issues on which Ordass felt that the church could not be silent. The first was the Hungarian-Czechoslovak repartition agreement in 1946, which he found incorrect in principle and immoral in practice.<sup>38</sup> He also felt it was dangerously weakening the power of the Lutheran Church in Hungary.<sup>39</sup> Another issue was the arbitrary deportation of the members of Hungary's German community. Since this practice also affected the Lutheran church, Ordass repeatedly protested officially against the deportations.<sup>40</sup> While a couple of years before he had attacked the nationalism of the German minority in a country under German influence, now he defended this minority in a country hostile to the Germans.

The political situation became gradually more and more severe as the government began its centralizing programme. The Ministry of Religious and Public Education began to interfere with the administration of church schools, and state censors were appointed to control the radio-broadcasts of church services. Ordass never failed to protest.

In early 1947 he was given official permission to travel to Western Europe and the United States. His primary mission was to discuss the Western churches' financial support of their Hungarian brethren. He was invited to take part in a session of a post-war relief agency in Geneva (Department of Reconstruction of the World Council of Churches in Process of Formation) and also received an invitation to take part at the first assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (still in the process of formation) in Lund, July 1947. It was decided that between the Geneva meeting in March and the Lund Assembly in July he should visit the Lutherans in the United States. Several years later he described how he met Dr Franklin Fry, President of the United Lutheran Church:

Thus in April I traveled to the United States. I felt I was in a rather difficult situation. For many years we had had no connection with our brothers of the faith in America. This meant that I would be meeting strangers. Most difficult, however, was the realization that I would appear as a beggar from a totally impoverished church. I met Dr Fry... I related how I conceived of my visit to America... I wanted to visit all the Hungarian Lutheran congregations... I mentioned that... I would like to visit the Swedish settlements... Then Dr Fry spoke. I learned that the Lutheran churches of America intended to raise ten million dollars in two years, to help the damaged churches in Europe. He assured me that the Hungarian church would not be forgotten. He then proposed that I should indeed visit the Hungarian and Swedish churches, according to



my plan, but that I should also help promote our common campaign with addresses. I should explain the European situation at several synod conventions. In this way I could make a contribution to the success of the campaign... Dr Fry's words greatly eased my mind. Now I had the feeling that I was not in America as a beggar, but that I could regard myself as a co-worker in the relief-work for all Europe.<sup>41</sup>

In Norway he met, for the first time, Eivind Berggrav, the Bishop of Oslo. He had been familiar with the Bishop's confrontation with the Nazis; now he became even more impressed by the personal encounter. Upon his return to Hungary Ordass was interviewed about his visit and he also quoted Berggrav's advice to him:

On the basis of our Confessional Writings and the Holy Scripture our fight was purely a defence of the church... If you have to fight for the spiritual freedom of the church, be careful not to mix it up with political aspects.<sup>42</sup>

Ordass's enemies frequently accused him of ambition to become a "Hungarian Berggrav". But as Terray points out, Ordass knew that Berggrav was the Bishop of a national church while he was the Bishop of a minority denomination. Moreover, he was aware that churchstructure and spirituality were basically different in these two countries.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, as Terray had observed as early as 1956, the basic difference between the Roman Catholic attitude, led by Cardinal Mindszenty, and the Lutheran conduct of Bishop Ordass is that between "resistance" and "defence". "Bishop Ordass has not become a symbol of the Hungarian people's struggle against Communism, as Cardinal Mindszenty has. Ordass's attitude should be characterized by the word 'defence' rather than the word 'resistance'. His spiritual mentor was Gandhi not Gregory VII."<sup>44</sup>

In Lund Ordass was elected to the Vice Presidency of the Lutheran World Federation. In Terray's words: "There he gave one of his memorable sermons, short, simple words, expressing profound truth with great force and beauty. He called upon his hearers to 'Work while it is day'. Everyone knew how short Lajos Ordass's day might be. Many begged him not to return to communist-dominated Hungary but he refused to desert his post... 'You pray,' he said, 'we'll do the suffering.'<sup>45</sup>

Having returned to his home-country from the heights, the fortunes of Bishop Ordass were speedily beginning to decline. That takes us to the third act.

### ACT III. In Prison and in Silence (1948-1956)

When Ordass returned to Hungary from his five-month-visit to Western Europe and North America he found that the political climate was gradually hardening, becoming more and more totalitarian. The tensions between the churches and the state began to grow, especially in connection with the nationalization of church schools. The historical churches were divided in their policies towards the state. The Roman Catholics led by Cardinal Mindszenty launched the programme of political resistance, while the Reformed churches following the advice of Karl Barth, went along with the nationalization programme. For the Lutheran church a severe conflict was about to develop with the state. But the Lutheran church was also divided internally. The majority, following the leadership of Bishop Ordass, found that giving up the schools would mean giving up a historical mission of the church. In order to impose its will upon the church the state turned to the strategy of using some laymen such as Iván Reök, MP and an active member of the Deák-tér congregation, and a government minister Ernő Mihályfi (a Lutheran clergyman's self-proclaimed atheist son) to split, manipulate and frighten the leadership and believers. Their task was to create an image of Ordass as reactionary. Moreover, they insisted that the lay-leaders of the Lutheran church, such as Baron Albert Radvánszky, the General Inspector, or Gábor Vladár, the former minister of justice and Inspector of Ordass's diocese, should resign. But Ordass was unwilling to dismiss these leaders, just as he was unwilling to give up the schools. Government newspapers launched heavy attacks on him: they wanted to discredit the Bishop's person in front of the members of the church. By May 1948 the state prepared an "Agreement" in which the desire of the nationalization of all church-related schools was expressed. It guaranteed, however, the free exercise of church life and that the state subsidy to the churches would terminate after twenty years. The government made undoubtedly clear "that if the Church refused to agree, nationalization would still go ahead, but other established rights, financial assistance in particular, would be in jeopardy".<sup>46</sup>

In June 1948 the Bishops of the four diocese (Lajos Ordass, Zoltán Turóczy, József Szabó and the Deputy Bishop Károly Németh) issued an episcopal letter to the congregations in which they informed them about the state's nationalization programme and proposed "Agreement". In the letter they also suggested that congregations would have to make financial sacrifices if they wanted to maintain the schools that they had fought for in the past.<sup>47</sup>

Though the episcopal letter was signed by all the bishops, it soon became obvious that for Bishops Turóczy and Szabó the schools of the church were

less important than for Ordass. They were supported by some younger clergymen like Imre Veöreös and Gyula Groó. Their conviction was similar to Barth's suggestion that the churches' primary task was the proclamation of the Word and not the defence of a church's structure.<sup>48</sup> The "Turóczy-line" found that the schools did not belong to the body of the church. "No martyr-blood should be shed for the schools" – wrote Imre Veöreös, the editor of a Lutheran weekly *Új Harangszó*,<sup>49</sup> a few days before the Parliament was to vote for the confiscation of the schools. Ordass wanted to be informed how the congregations felt about the tense situation. At various meetings he informed the members of his diocese about the alternatives facing the church. The first alternative was to keep the schools and the legally elected leaders, and, as a consequence, possibly lose the state subsidy. The other alternative was to "offer" the schools and dismiss the church leadership but consequently to keep the state subsidy. There was a dramatic moment at a conference arranged by the Lutheran evangelistic association "Friends' Movement" in Fót, outside Budapest. All the Bishops were invited to this conference but only Szabó and Turóczy could attend. The participants (though in their theology they were undoubtedly closer to the visiting Turóczy than to Ordass) all knelt down to pray in support of the "Ordass-line".<sup>50</sup> As it was described those days, the "Turóczy-line" was characterized as a "two-sentence church politics" while the "Ordass-line" as a "one-sentence view". According to the two-sentence view the church acknowledged the secular power ("Render unto Caesar which be Caesar's") in the first statement, while affirming faith in the second statement ("[Render] unto God the things which be God's").<sup>51</sup> Here the great theological-ethical question of compromise is at stake: how far should we go in our compromise? Should we give everything a Caesar demands from us? Or is there a limit where we should *stop*? But what if a Caesar cunningly, in disguise does nothing but demand our *soul*?<sup>52</sup> That was the real issue, or the controversy, between the "Turóczy-line" and the "Ordass-line". The "Turóczy-line" was more inclined to compromise because it wanted to protect the proclamation of the word (undoubtedly, even if implicitly a Barthian influence) but Ordass's view (probably also explicitly) was more in accordance with the teaching of Luther and of the Confessional Writings of the Church, namely, that during the time of persecution the otherwise secondary issues should be taken as primary.<sup>53</sup>

Since Ordass's consequent and persistent defence of the church's autonomy and historical rights could not be broken, the Communist state turned to some new means to discredit him and to remove him from his office as an obstacle to "normal church-state relations". First, on August 24, 1948, he was briefly detained without charge. On September 7 he was given 24 hours to resign as

Bishop. Having refused to do that, he was rearrested. This was followed by the typical Stalinist show-trial where he was charged with violating the country's currency laws. That is, he had failed to report receipt of relief funds which the Church had received from the American Lutherans. He was sentenced to two years in prison. Albert Radvánszky, the Supervisor General, and Sándor Vargha, the Secretary-General, were also imprisoned. At the trial Ordass, according to a contemporary shorthand record, maintained his innocence saying:

During these five weeks I have asked myself and God many times if I am guilty. I have had plenty of time to ponder the question... I must state that I ...have never lived with such a peace in my heart as I have received during this time... As I now stand here I carry a wound... If the judge sets me free, then the wound will not hurt so much that I could not work and serve my fatherland. But in any event, the blessed will of God will be done.<sup>54</sup>

In this *Autobiography* Ordass later recorded as follows: "It has become my conviction that God has called me for the episcopal service because he wanted to use me to utter the word which he thought the Lutheran church was meant to utter."<sup>55</sup> The state achieved its purpose to break the spirit of resistance within the Lutheran church: while Ordass was in prison, Bishop Zoltán Turóczy and the lay Supervisor-General Zoltán Mády signed the "Agreement" in December 1948. Eibner is probably right in perceiving that, "although the concordat enshrined most of the principles of religious freedom that Ordass thought fundamental to the mission of the Church, it implicitly annulled the Church's claim to autonomy, upon which all its other freedoms ultimately depended. The government thus gained control of the Church's governing apparatus..."<sup>56</sup>

The world was outraged. It is interesting to observe how well and accurately informed the contemporary American press was. *The Christian Century*, for example, wrote:

The arrests in Hungary charged that Bishop Ordass and his lay companions had engaged in black market transactions with \$ 500,000 they received from America. Lutheran officials in this country call this a lie out of whole cloth, since Bishop Ordass never received any such sum, and all money sent from this country has been forwarded through the National Bank of Hungary. Newspaper reports from Budapest state that no one in Hungary believes the financial charges. But the Lutherans in Hungary have refused to go along with the Reformed Church in approving the nationalization of all schools. Arresting the Primate is the government's retaliation.<sup>57</sup>

### The World Council of Churches immediately protested:

The World Council replies that it has assurances from American Lutheran headquarters that the black market allegations are false, that it has reason to believe that the imprisonment was actuated by political motives, and that it is forced to bring the case to the attention of the world as an example of the denial of religious liberty.<sup>58</sup>

There was also Bishop Berggrav, among others, who immediately wrote a letter of protest to the Hungarian Prime Minister.<sup>59</sup>

What is perhaps most shocking is that the Hungarian authorities could arrange that their version of the bishop's story should also appear in the American press. The man responsible was a Reformed theologian Alexis Mathé who wrote an article for *The Christian Century* with the title: "Are Hungary's Churches Persecuted?" He argued that the Hungarian Protestants, unlike the Catholics, had always been progressive in throughout their history. Bishop Ordass and Bishop Ladislas Ravasz, however, were following the Roman Catholic lead to oppose the present regime. On Ordass's "personal tragedy", he said, "The Bishop unfortunately allowed his political convictions to influence his duties and activities as a church leader... Secretary Varga kept the books in a confused and inexperienced manner ... large sums cannot be accounted for ... the court gave Bishop Ordass the mildest possible sentence..."<sup>60</sup>

It was Paul Empie of the National Lutheran Council, whom Ordass had met two years before and who denied Mathé's false allegations in an article "The Case of Bishop Ordass". He said that the allegations that Ordass joined Roman Catholics in opposing the present regime "is not true... Bishop Ordass not only held no sympathy whatever for with the Roman Catholic position in the matter, but as a typical Continental Lutheran he was loath to meddle in politics..."<sup>61</sup> He demonstrated that the funds in question were cabled from New York directly to the National Bank of Hungary, and pointed out that the real issue was the nationalization of the parochial schools. Empie confirmed that "Bishop Ordass saw his fate well in advance... He felt that ... the Church in Germany had blundered by failing to resist immediately when Nazi ideologies crowded in upon Christian principles. The lesson was clear – the church cannot do business with a police state. For that reason, and for that reason alone, he now lies in prison. That's the tragedy of the Mathés, the Mihályfis and the Reöks."<sup>62</sup>

So much for the unsuccessful protest of the West. In the meantime Ordass at the "Star-Prison" of Szeged shared his cell with fifteen Roman Catholic priests. One day Bishop Turóczy visited him and conveyed to him a message

from the state: if he resigned, he would be freed immediately. Ordass was given an hour and a half to think about this offer. He asked for a Bible that he wanted to read during this time. He went through the Acts of the apostles. At first he stopped at the fifth chapter, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (v.29). Then he came to chapter sixteen, which is about the imprisoned Silas. Having read this, Ordass gained peace and confirmation that he should stay in prison. He told Turóczy. When Turóczy had left, Ordass returned to his cell. The Catholic priests were curious about what had happened. When he had related everything to them, they were relieved. They admitted that in the meantime they were praying that Ordass should be able to stand firm and protect his soul from damage or injury.<sup>63</sup> On Christmas 1949 he preached for the Catholic priests. In prison he worked out a ten-point daily agenda for himself including devotions in English and in Swedish, as well as imaginary visits to members of his congregation; a recollection of the faces whom he had met; proverbs, hymns, jokes and folksongs. On April 1, 1950, shortly before his release, the Special Disciplinary Tribunal of the Hungarian Lutheran Church formally stripped him of his office.<sup>64</sup> The American press commented on the event as follows:

This action by the Hungarian Lutherans in deposing their bishop at the government's behest shows that the division between them and the rest of world Lutherianism is now virtually complete. From now on this branch of Protestantism must be regarded as being as subservient to the Communist state as is Orthodoxy in Russia and its eastern satellites.<sup>65</sup>

The American Lutherans, of course, could not know that the action of the deposition was taken because of the threat from the Stalinist Dictator Rákosi, namely, that "if the decision of the tribunal in the case against Ordass is not condemning, they [the State] will raise a charge of treason against him, and the sentence will, without any doubt, be death".<sup>66</sup> The frightened Tribunal of the church felt forced to choose, what they believed to be, the lesser evil.

On May 30, 1950, the doors of the Vác prison opened for Bishop Ordass. He returned to Budapest to begin six years of total seclusion, earning his living by knitting. He and his wife had to work hard to provide bread for their children. In Lutheran circles it was fashionable for a while to wear a scarf that was knitted by Bishop Ordass. During this time of silence he began to write Passion meditations and to work on a translation from Icelandic. At the same time he completed the first part of his *Autobiography* with the title: *Little Mirror of Great Times*. During these years Bishop Ordass was completely isolated. His pastors, being frightened, deserted him. There is only depth, suffering and silence. But this is only the end of Act III.

#### ACT IV. Bishop Restored (1956-1958)

Stalinist terror was in its full swing in the early 1950s in Eastern Europe. But after the death of Stalin in 1953, and particularly after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, the hard political line softened somewhat. The Protestant churches claimed to have found their place in the “socialist Hungary”. The leaders of the Reformed Church were Bishop Albert Bereczky and Bishop János Péter (after 1956 openly Communist and the Foreign Minister of the Kádár Government). The leaders of the Lutheran Church were Bishop Lajos Vető and Bishop László Dezséry (after 1956 a Communist publicist, self-proclaimed atheist, and Parliament representative). In the beginning, the Reformed leadership received open support from the theologian Karl Barth. But some years later Barth, in a famous letter, reproved Bereczky of being “on the way to making [his] affirmation of communism a part of the Christian message...”<sup>67</sup>

The Lutherans, fortunately or not, had no such authoritative voices behind them.

On August 17, 1955, *The Christian Century* reported that “the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches ... in Davos ... has accepted the invitation of the Hungarian churches in the World Council to hold its annual meeting next year in or near Budapest”.<sup>68</sup> Why should this meeting take place in an Eastern-bloc country? The point of the Western churches is easy to understand:

By this decision the executive agency of the council has told the world that it does not intend to allow political or social barriers to balk the spread of the ecumenical movement. At the first sign of lessening cold war tension, the World Council has voted to make this spectacular gesture of fellowship with the churches in communist areas.<sup>69</sup>

But why were the “Red” bishops so keen on having this meeting behind the iron curtain if they were representing the interests of the state and not of the church? Recent research in archives has shown that in the early fifties these church leaders had been commended to try to occupy important posts in the world organizations.<sup>70</sup> In their home-rhetoric they cunningly condemned these organizations as “anti-Communist” bodies. But in the meantime they tried to exert their influence by grasping these positions.

Indeed, the meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches was to take place in Galyatető in August 1956. During this summer, Ordass’s home, unvisited in the past six years, now suddenly became a very busy place. The first unexpected visitor to knock on his door was Bishop László Dezséry. Ordass usually recorded his significant meetings as *Pro*

*memoria* notes immediately after the events. His conversation with Dezséry is also recorded in his *Autobiography*, this time in the form of a dramatic dialogue. Therefore we can get an authentic and vivid image of what actually happened.<sup>71</sup> The reason for Dezséry's visit was the impending WCC Central Committee meeting in Galyatető. The leaders of the great church organization would undoubtedly want to meet Bishop Ordass, who had been the Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation between 1947 and 1952. It was in the interest of the leaders of the Hungarian church that this meeting should proceed smoothly and that Ordass's report should not discredit them. The Hungarian leaders did not want the visit of the foreign church-leaders to turn into a pilgrimage to Ordass's home. Therefore they planned to organize a "package-visit" with one of the bishops accompanying the visitors.<sup>72</sup> On July 7, János Horváth, the President of the Hungarian State Bureau for Church Affairs, also came to Ordass's home.<sup>73</sup> He immediately offered financial support: an increase in pension and a recompensation for the loss of the past six years. On July 24, four days before the arrival of the delegates, Horváth visited Ordass again.<sup>74</sup> Now he raised the possibility of his rehabilitation by the state. In the mutually courteous dialogues on the present situation of the church, Ordass never failed to mention that his possible rehabilitation could not be separated from the rehabilitation of two Budapest Pastors: András Keken of the Deák-tér congregation, and György Kendeh of Kelenföld congregation. Both of them had been imprisoned in 1950 in order to force the Disciplinary Tribunal to formally strip Ordass of his episcopal office.

On July 28, 1956, two leaders of The Lutheran World Federation indeed arrived in Ordass's home: the President Hans Lilje and the General Secretary Dr Lund-Quist. Hans Lilje said that it was not an accident that they had accepted the invitation to organize the meeting in Hungary. They came with the purpose of helping their Christian brothers in Hungary, especially Bishop Ordass, the former Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation. "Your steadfastness in faith has become a symbol of Christian steadfastness in the Western world",<sup>75</sup> said Lilje when they were leaving. This first visit lasted only for half an hour, for Bishop Vető was waiting for them in front of Ordass's home.

On August 1, he was revisited by these leaders. Their company was joined by Dr Franklin Fry, President of the United Lutheran Church in America<sup>76</sup> (from 1957 President of the Lutheran World Federation). Fifteen years later Ordass remembered this visit as follows: "Dr Fry, weighed down with work, still found time ... to deal with the Hungarian government regarding my case."<sup>77</sup> Two days later the negotiations took an official form in the State Bureau for Church Affairs with the foreign church-leaders present (this time including Willem A. Visser't Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of



Churches).<sup>78</sup> An agreement was made the following day, August 4, and was announced officially at the closing section of the Galyatető-meeting. According to the declaration, 1. The World Council of Churches will be entirely satisfied only if Bishop Ordass is restored as Bishop. 2. The official rehabilitation of Ordass on behalf of the state is in progress. 3. Both the state and the church will work out the possibility of Ordass's practical episcopal activity. 4. Temporarily Ordass will lecture as a Professor at the Theological Seminary.<sup>79</sup> The excited atmosphere and the delegates' concern for Ordass is well reflected in an article of *The Christian Century* on August 29, 1956.<sup>80</sup>

However, the rehabilitation was not going to take place as quickly as expected. Almost two months passed without anything happening. On September 21, János Horváth eventually called Ordass to his office.<sup>81</sup> He explained to Ordass that the belatedness of his rehabilitation was due to the recent American press-image of Ordass having been "the Lutheran Mindszenty" and with the excited, anti-Dezséry mood of the Pastors' Conferences of Fót in early September.<sup>82</sup> But because of letters urging the rehabilitation from abroad, the state did not want to delay it any longer. On October 6, when the Communist martyr of the Stalinist era, László Rajk, was officially reburied, Ordass also received the letter of the Supreme Court announcing that they had overturned Lajos Ordass's conviction on the grounds that no crime had been committed. Three days later, in Ordass's words: "tottering after the measures of the state",<sup>83</sup> the General Court of the Lutheran Church declared the 1950 deposition illegal. Ordass preached first on October 14 to the Budahegyvidék congregation. His text was on the King's Marriage Feast in Mt.22:1-14. He said among other things:

When everybody deserted me and I shook with fear my Savior called me and took me in his two strong arms. He led me through a burning flame and showed me the beginning of a new life. I know that if nothing is constant in this world, God is unchanged; and to Him which was sin yesterday remains sin today and that which was holy yesterday remains holy today.<sup>84</sup>

Ordass was to begin his lectures on Scandinavian research on Luther at the Lutheran Theological Academy on October 24 but the sudden political changes interfered with the ecclesiastical plans. The Hungarian revolution broke out on October 23. Bishop Dezséry resigned on October 30, "giving over the episcopal seat" to Bishop Ordass.<sup>85</sup> Thus on October 31, Reformation Day, Ordass could preach from the pulpit of Deák-tér congregation as the restored bishop. He was reported to have been greeted by "eyes glistening with tears of joy".<sup>86</sup> And with the resignation of Bishop Lajos Vető on All Saints

Day,<sup>87</sup> Ordass was automatically restored to the primacy of the whole church. When it became evident that the Soviet troops were reinvading the country on November 2, Bishop Ordass was asked to give a Radio-Appeal along with Cardinal Mindszenty and the restored Reformed Bishop, László Ravasz. Ordass delivered his speech in Hungarian, Swedish, German and English. The speech was more confessional than political in tone: it addressed the Lutheran brethren abroad to support the Hungarian people with medicine, food and so on. The only political touch was his request "to give us any possible *help* [it (T.F.)] you can for the recognition of the declaration of the neutrality". But if we read the text carefully, we can recognize that he was saying this not "in the name of the church" but "in the name of the nation"<sup>88</sup> (again, a careful distinction between the "two kingdoms"! ). On November 3, the Bishop organized a meeting for Pastors and Seniors and Professors he could reach. If one reads the minutes of the meeting one cannot but be impressed by the dynamic revitalization and restructuring of all aspects of church life, including ministry, education, media and so on.<sup>89</sup>

The Russians invaded Hungary on November 4. Ten days later the American journal *The Christian Century* reported on the Protestant churches as follows:

The picture is one of a vital and vigorous Protestantism, ripping through the terrible tarpaulin of repression, springing out to reorder and redirect its own valiant life. The bloody brutality of Russian butchers has now pole-axed all that new life and hope.<sup>90</sup>

However, this "pole-axing" was not so obvious, not so immediate in the case of the Lutheran church. "Large-scale arrests, executions and deportations characterized the restoration of Communist authority, but despite his open association with the revolution, Ordass was allowed to continue at his post."<sup>91</sup> – writes Eibner.

Here we arrive at a very exciting question. Why and how could Ordass and the Lutheran church under his leadership survive for almost two years? At first sight we receive a disturbingly incompatible image: exodus from Hungary, terror, imprisonments in the country and the Lutheran church meanwhile flourishes. How is it possible? Various solutions can be given to answer this dilemma. The first and most obvious answer is that changes within the churches usually follow the political changes with a certain delay. But two years seem to be too long a delay! Another reply is perhaps of minor significance: it concerns the initial good relationship between János Horváth, President of the State Bureau for Church Affairs, and Ordass: it is recorded in the minutes of the November 3 meeting that Ordass offered protection and help for János

Horváth and his family during the time of the revolution. When in March 1957, Decree 22 of 1957 was issued about the "advance state-approval of higher church-office nominations", Horváth called Ordass saying that "the Lutheran church is all right in this question".<sup>92</sup> This humanitarian reason may be a factor, but again not a full explanation. A more rational argument could be that Ordass was extremely skillful to restructure the church by appointing new persons to key positions immediately, in the first days of November 1956. His enemies later called this "the counterrevolution in the Lutheran church". Another reason, not unrelated to the previous one, could be that Dezséry resigned not only his episcopal seat but also his "church-membership". By this I do not mean any formal resignation but only the fact that he ceased to be interested in church affairs. He had probably no ambition to know what course the church was going to take: he was in the process of reconverting the direction both of his life and professional career. The lack of his presence could undoubtedly suggest a sense of liberty within the church. We may argue that the state wanted to keep Ordass for tactical reasons: to uphold him as the sign of the freedom of the churches in postrevolutionary Hungary. They were keen on his leading the Hungarian delegation to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly to be held in Minneapolis during the summer of 1957. We may continue with various explanations. But it is undoubtedly true that during his twenty months of leadership the Hungarian Lutheran Church was reactivated, the church-press and theological work revitalized, the congregation-life and the intercongregational conferences began to flourish again. *The church became a church*, and not a subservient tool of the state.

Eibner is probably right when he finds the explanation in Ordass's "new-found flexibility" in dealing with state-authorities.<sup>93</sup> Far from being "unbending" or "stubborn", as his enemies earlier called him, now he was willing to compromise. He must have recognized that the church was in a totally different situation in 1957 than in 1948. He accepted this new situation: that "the Church fulfills its mission in Hungary by following the course of socialism".<sup>94</sup> We could draw up two lists: the first containing those questions on which he was willing to compromise and another list of questions on which he was not. What may surprise us at first sight is, perhaps, that now he approved and accepted the same 1948 "Agreement" that he so much opposed ten years earlier. Eibner remarks: "he could not have taken such a step lightly, for he was implicitly abandoning the Hungarian Lutheran Church's historic claim to autonomy, formerly at the root of his conception of the Church's service to the nation."<sup>95</sup> Moreover, he agreed that the Church should participate in the work of the government-sponsored National Peace Council and accepted the request to become a member of the Presidium of the Patriotic

People's Front, an organ of the Kádár-regime's "politics of alliances". We get a more subtle picture of these compromises from the *Autobiography* of Ordass that was published four years after Eibner's article. We can understand the necessity of compromise. Though Ordass's acts seem to be at first sight somewhat different from those ten years before, he still remained true to himself. My thesis is that the "new" Ordass is ultimately the same as the "old". In both cases, though in different situations, he fully understood that he had to defend his church or people against the state. Ordass *did* represent the interest of the church against the state and not the other way round as interim Bishops Dezséry or Káldy, the latter being the one who was made to fill Ordass's place after his removal in 1958.

There is also another group of questions in which he was not willing to compromise because he found that by doing so he would damage his soul and that of the church. He insisted that on these issues there should be a "halt", otherwise he would lose himself. However, they will dramatically emerge only in the autumn of 1957, after his return from the Lutheran World Assembly in Minneapolis. Again, before his "downfall", he has yet to reach the "heights".

In August 1957 Ordass led the delegation of the Hungarian Lutheran Church to Minneapolis for the third Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. When he arrived in New York he met Paul Empie, the old friend whom he had seen ten years before. He learned from him how some of his compatriots tried to undermine his reputation in the West and that efforts were being made by the Americans on his behalf. In Minneapolis at the opening service he preached before an audience of 12,000. The *Lutheran Herald* that published his sermon, "The Fruits of the Death of Jesus Christ", also described the dignity and modesty of his appearance,

hero of faith ... whom the Lutheran World Assembly chose to honor by designating him preacher at the opening service... His eyes are deep-set... For they are the eyes that have looked deeply into the hell that evil men can make for one another ... that have seen the suffering and deprivations of his people: that have witnessed the perfidy of those who had been his friends.<sup>96</sup>

In his simple sermon of brief sentences he referred to himself in third person singular and the congregation was deeply moved:

You have heard these words from an aging disciple of Christ. The disciple would now in concluding his formal message give a personal testimony of his Lord and Saviour. He would like to say how many times in this life he has experienced the

forgiving grace of Jesus Christ. And he would also like to say that when he was in bondage in the most literal sense of the word, Christ gave him kingly freedom. And what a joy it was to be able to experience this freedom!<sup>97</sup>

When he gave an interview to the reporter from *Time* magazine, instead of praising the political system (which was expected by the government officials in Hungary) he praised the vivid church-life. This was no lie: "today there is tremendous enthusiasm for the church and its leaders".<sup>98</sup>

It was a joy for him to learn that another old friend, Dr Franklin Clark Fry, the President of the United Lutheran Church in America, had been elected President of the Lutheran World Federation. Ordass was elected as the first Vice-President and his old Swedish friend, Bo Giertz, the other Vice President. Ordass later reported that on August 1957 Franklin Fry spent his fifty-seventh birthday with the six-member Hungarian delegation at his home in New Rochelle.<sup>99</sup>

The last days of this summer mark the second zenith of this dramatic life. When Ordass returned to Hungary in the autumn of 1957 a new confrontation with the state was about to develop which would necessarily lead to his isolation and his second and last tragic downfall. This will be the subject of the last Act of his dramatic life. Here we shall try to show that we can speak about a "downfall" only in a material sense. With the eye of faith one sees the opposite. With the well-known words of the apostle, unlike the "natural" person, the "spiritual" person is able to discern that what actually was taking place was not defeat but victory.

#### ACT V. Isolated and Silenced Again

Upon his return from the United States Ordass had to experience that the political climate was becoming more and more unfavourable towards the churches. Now it would become obvious that Ordass's "new-found flexibility" was different not only in degree but also in kind from that of those who had made the church simply subservient to the state. We have seen the questions in which Ordass was willing to compromise, and now we will come to see that this compromise had clear-cut limits. He was conscious of how far he could go, and where he had to stop. He knew that only by stopping, standing and remaining firm could he preserve integrity and identity. For Ordass "standing firmly" meant, of course, standing and remaining in faith. He found that any further compromise would result in a fall (not simply "falling into line" but becoming "fallen in faith": *lapsi*, as the Fathers put it).

Wherein lies the particularity of Ordass's compromise? To be sure, to a certain extent and to a certain point, he was willing to cooperate or even support the Kádár-regime! But as Eibner rightly perceives it, this was a *conditional* support: "He placed conditions on the Church's cooperation ... he made the Church's support for the Kádár government conditional upon its efforts to work for national reconciliation, the establishment of the rule of law, the cultivation of patriotic virtue, the creation of a healthy and just social order..."<sup>100</sup> His participation in the Peace Council and the Patriotic People's Front were both conditional. He was willing to take part in these activities as long as the church's participation did not harm the integrity and the identity of the church. He knew that if he went any further, he would harm the church's integrity, and this would be a betrayal. "Further flexibility would be infidelity."<sup>101</sup> He had no particular ambition, personal, political or whatsoever. His purpose was modest: he only wanted to let the church be a church and nothing else. The state, however, had a different "vision".

What were the questions that he found non-negotiable, in which he was not willing to compromise? They become evident from the sincere and courteous twelve page letter he voluntarily wrote to János Horváth in October 1957. He began with the personal questions. He protested that the state wanted to restore the church's secular leaders: Supervisor-General Ernő Mihályfi and Supervisor of the Southern Diocese, József Darvas who had abandoned their offices during the 1956 revolution. Both of them were self-professed atheists and wanted to subjugate the church to the interests of the state. Another issue was that of the press. Ordass's position was that the church press should serve the interest of the church and nothing else. Therefore he protested against censorship or external demands of any kind. As the publisher of the *Hungarian Church Press* he disagreed with the publication of an article that condemned missionary work as imperialistic activity. When the article was nevertheless published, he resigned. He was astonished to discover at the meetings of the Patriotic People's Front that those who were publicly supporting the state were condemning it in private conversations. Towards the end of the letter he complained that pastors were arrested, persecuted or unjustly harrassed.

Due to the letter the official negotiations between the Lutheran church and the state began in November 1957. Ordass's *Autobiography* at this point, as in most cases, perfectly coincides with the report in the American press. Therefore I shall quote from the latter source:

The government arranged negotiations. János Horváth, director of the state office for church affairs, tried first to select the church's representatives for the negotiations. To sit with Bishop Ordass he appointed four officials ousted by the church after the

October revolt! The four are Bishop Lajos Vető; Nicholas Pálfi, former dean of the Lutheran seminary in Budapest; Károly Grünvalszky, former general secretary of the church; and Ádám Mekis, former assistant to the ignominiously deposed László Dezséry. Bishop Ordass rejected Mr Horváth's proposal. But when he was then allowed to appear at the negotiations seconded by Bishops Zoltán Turóczy and Bishop Szabó, the three discovered the four rejected government [recte: church] men sitting in as representatives of the state. As in the August 1956 negotiations to reinstate Bishop Ordass, it was these government "Lutherans" who were more violently opposed to the church's freedom than was the Communist state.<sup>102</sup>

There was disagreement not only concerning the membership of the delegation but also over the agenda. The subjects to be discussed were the relationship between the state and the church, the question of the press, personnel questions and the church's relationship to Hungarian ecumenical efforts. The representatives of the state tried to negotiate from a position of power. János Horváth said: "We came together not on the basis of the law but on the basis of utility."<sup>103</sup> "All churches, including the Lutheran church, have power. If she is not willing to give this power over to the state, the state may be offended."<sup>104</sup> So the state demanded extensive control over the church and openly wished to interfere in her life, including the election of leaders, deans, determining what should be published in the church-press and so on. These issues, however, for Ordass were non-negotiable. The negotiations continued, then were suspended, continued again and eventually reached an impasse. Ordass's views were incompatible with those of the state's. The state then decided to take action without seeking the approval of the leaders of the church. They restored Ernő Mihályfi as the Supervisor General of the Northern Diocese. On December 19, Mihályfi proposed that Bishop Vető's resignation not be accepted by the state because Decree 22 of 1957 concerning the advance civil approval of nominations for church leadership was valid in retroactive force. That was the way Bishop Turóczy was removed as a Bishop of the Northern Diocese (he was installed in his office by Ordass on February 6) and he was replaced by Lajos Vető whom the state considered as Primate.

But what happened in Ordass's diocese? When the negotiations failed and Ordass remained unbending, János Horváth announced promptly that the church was forbidden to have foreign connections and a government commissioner was appointed to run the affairs of the Lutheran Church, to control her correspondance and activity. The task was given to Károly Grnák at the end of November. With the appearance of "The Voice of a Stranger ... in the church", as the American press well observed: "The church, instead of being God's, is on the way to becoming an instrument in the hands of somebody else, in this case the Hungarian state."<sup>105</sup> From here on Ordass refused to open any letters.

By the end of the year it became clear that the battle had been won by the state. Ordass, as always, refused to resign in the face of external pressure. Then why was Ordass allowed to be in office for another six months? Why was he not removed as drastically as Turóczy, by appealing to the retroactive force of Decree 1957? The answer, I think, lies in a sentence of Horváth, "In 1948 the Rákosi-system committed a mistake when they made a 'world-affair' out of Ordass's 'affair'. They could have kept Ordass in his office while at the same time creating a 'moral zero' out of him".<sup>106</sup> (This sentence, a crucial one in my view, well illustrates the difference between the short-term "hard" Communism and the long-term "soft" Communism; how the latter by being more subtle, was able to demoralize the church, ultimately a moral body in society!)

That was indeed now the policy of the state: to humiliate Ordass by creating, if not a "moral zero", a scapegoat out of him. Ordass, who was so much supported by his people, was now gradually being abandoned. On the one hand he was openly attacked by men like Lajos Vető, Miklós Pálffy, Károly Grünvalszky, Emil Koren and eventually Zoltán Káldy who tried to force the pastors to issue statements of no-confidence in him. They hoped to achieve this because the state announced it would withdraw the financial aid owed to the Pastors of Diocese unless their bishop relented.<sup>107</sup> "To forestall the possibility that pastors would be forced to issue statements of no-confidence against their bishop, he asked the church court to investigate whether he retained the confidence of his diocese, but no action was taken."<sup>108</sup>

Thanks to the manipulations of the pastors by these "Government Lutherans", the bishop became somewhat isolated. Nevertheless, as long as he could, he continued to visit the parishes throughout his diocese.

The state waited until mid June 1958, when it eventually brought forth a decision. Throughout the long and tense period of the first six months of the year the state seems to have achieved its purpose of seriously damaging (if not mortally wounding?!) the small body of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. The removal of Ordass (the "beheading" of the Church) seems to have been motivated by some immediate political events. On June 19, three days after the execution of Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister during the 1956 revolution, Ordass received a letter from Ernő Mihályfi. Due to the retroactive force of Decree 22 of 1957, he wrote, the state did not recognize the resignation of Bishop Dezséry in October 1956. It meant that Bishop Ordass had been removed for the second time from his office by the force of the state.

During the summer László Dezséry was restored for two hours so that he could now "officially" resign. In November 1958 the thirty-nine-year-old Zoltán Káldy, the Dean of Pécs was consecrated as Bishop.

For Ordass the rest was *twenty years of silence*.



### Epilogue

Imre Veöreös in his recent book *A "harmadik" egyházi út* [1990] (The "Third" Way of the Church) argues that Ordass in the second period of his episcopal activity, unlike in 1948, was ready to compromise with the state. That reveals that he had changed his style of conduct, and now he recognized the "truth" of the "third way", then led by Bishop Turóczy. The more I study Ordass's writings, the more I realize that this is basically a mistaken view. Ordass did not change his attitude or "policy" (a wrong word in connection with Ordass) despite the apparent differences in his conduct. In both cases Ordass was defending the church. In 1948 the parochial schools were parts of the body of the church. Ten years later that was not the case any more. By endorsing the 1948 "Agreement" (perhaps a difficult decision) Ordass conceded that the boat of the church was now smaller. But he found that it was still a boat that could be navigated, provided its inner autonomy was respected. As he himself noted in his *Autobiography*, in 1948 he had felt that God wanted to use him to speak the word, and in 1958 the mission he had from God was to try to defend the rights of the Church provided by the constitution. Indeed, he took orders from no one other than his Lord. He did what he had to do. He could not do otherwise.

### Notes

1. Eibner, 1983.
2. Ordass, 1982.
3. Ordass, 1985; Ordass, 1987.
4. Terray, 1984.
5. Terray, 1990a.
6. Terray, 1990b.
7. Terray, 1990b, 5.
8. Larson, 1976, 38.
9. Mathe, 1949, 365.
10. CC, 1949, 1028.
11. Empie, 1949, 588.
12. Terray, 1956; Stone, 1971.
13. [Terray], 1957.
14. CC, 1957, 68.
15. *Lutheran Herald*, 1957, 602 (July 9).
16. CC, 1958, 820.
17. Knutson, 1970.
18. *Lutheran Standard*, 1976, 15.
19. Larson, 1976, 38.

20. *New York Times*, 1958, November 6.
21. Schioz in *The Lutheran Standard*, 1978, 16.
22. *Empie* in *The Lutheran Standard*, 1978, 16.
23. Hoffmann, 1985, 49.
24. Eibner, 1983, 185.
25. Instead of the conventional narrative terms I have chosen the dramatic terminology which I think is more appropriate for my present purposes.
26. Eibner, 1983, 180.
27. Ordass, 1982, 11-16.
28. Eibner, 1983, 180.
29. Ordass, 1982, 32-33, 34-39.
30. Eibner, 1983, 182.
31. Unpublished letter by László Terray to John V. Eibner (October 24, 1989). The Swedish book is by Sam Dahlgren *Politik och kyrka. Lutherska kyrkor i Osteuropa* (Politics and Church. Lutheran Churches in Eastern Europe), Verbum, Stockholm, 1989, 325 pp. With regard to the invasion of Yugoslavia the views are as follows:  
 Eibner: "When Hungary as a result of her participation in Hitler's 1941 invasion of Yugoslavia, regained land taken away by the treaty, Ordass declared: 'the partial solution of that oppressive problem fills us with candid joy'."  
 Dahlgren: "The criticism of Ordass against the peace treaty after the First World War appeared also in connection with Hitler's invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941 when Hungary got back a part of the lost territories, as thanks for their contribution to the war operation. Ordass expressed his joy over this..." (Terray's translation)  
 Terray: "This [Dahlgren's sentence], of course, is built on your quotation...: 'The partial solution of that oppressive problem fills us with candid joy.' Now, a more precise translation of this sentence from the Ordass article should be: 'The partial alleviation of this straining grief (pain) fills us with sincere joy.' What is Ordass, then, speaking about at this point? Not about the participation of Hungary in the invasion of Yugoslavia, neither about regained territories. He speaks about those 70.000 Lutherans (among them was also the congregation of Torzsa, the birthplace of Ordass himself), who were lost for the Lutheran Church in Hungary in 1920 (this was the grief) but now became united with this church (membership at this time about 500.000) and thus represented a numerical strengthening (számbeli erősödés) of the church (this was the joy)."  
 With regard to the "just war" these are the views:  
 Eibner: "One year later, when Hungary was allied to Germany in the war against Russia in the hope that more former Hungarian lands might be recovered, Ordass implicitly sanctioned the Hungarian Government in an article supporting the just war doctrine."  
 Dahlgren: [Ordass] "supported also the decision [of the Hungarian government] to participate in the war against the Soviet Union. This was a right decision and a just war, he meant (according to the review by John V. Eibner in *Religion in Communist Lands*, of book containing articles of Ordass edited by István Szépfalusi). [Terray's translation]  
 Terray: "If you read this article once more, you will see that Ordass does not use the expression of 'just war', except when he dissociates himself from it (two long passages on p. 37). First he states that every war is in clear opposition to the Gospel of Christ... Second he admits that the state has some power means... at disposal (to restrain the evil). Third, he raises the question of a 'defensive war'. To be sure, he concludes: 'If our country is attacked, we cannot simply step aside.' But this is something different from supporting the just war doctrine... this is not a quarrel about bagatelles. It is rather worry about the misunderstand-

- ings that may arise then joy about the strengthening of the church becomes support to Hitler's invasion of Yugoslavia... and when discussing 'defensive war' becomes support to the war against the Soviet Union as a 'right decision and a just war'. (These assertions stand, to be sure, also in contrast to what both yourself and Dr Dahlgren are referring, right in addition, about Ordass' stand against Nazi influence, about his support to the Norwegian Church resistance and his action to help Jews. But even therefore, they also represent a certain degree of self-contradiction.)" – I am grateful to László Terray for sending me a copy of this letter. (T. F.)
32. Ordass, 1982, 58–69.
  33. Ordass, 1982, 40–57.
  34. Eibner, 1983, 181.
  35. Ordass, 1981, 91; Eibner, 1983, 181.
  36. Ordass, 1982, 112. On the "two kingdoms" see "Christ and Caesar" in Gritsch, Eric W.: *Martin – God's Court Jester. Luther in Retrospect*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983. 111–129.
  37. Eibner, 1983, 181.
  38. The Slovaks in Hungary could voluntarily leave the country while in Czechoslovakia those had to leave only who were summoned by the government. The Slovakian Lutheran Church took an active part in this action and even wanted the Hungarian Lutherans to assist them, which, however Ordass refused to do.
  39. Ordass, 1982, 123–124; 127–130.
  40. The Government decided that not only former members of the Volksbund were to be deported but all who declared themselves of German mother-tongue at the last "népszámlálás".
  41. Ordass, 1972, 242.
  42. Ordass, 1982, 153.
  43. Terray, 1990b, 68–69.
  44. Terray, 1956, 3; [Terray] 1957, 664.
  45. [Terray], 1957, 663–664.
  46. Eibner, 1983, 182.
  47. Ordass, 1982, 177–179.
  48. See e.g. Karl Barth, "How My Mind Changed, 1938–1948." Part IV. *CC*. 1949, March 16, p. 333. "I maintain that the positive way taken by the Hungarian Reformed people is preferable to the glory they might win as standard-bearer for the so-called 'Christian West'." The American Lutheran theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Christian Century* was frequently critical of Barth's support of Protestant church leadership. "Karl Barth... despite an explicit disavowal of all secular ideologies, is influenced by a Marxist estimate of America as a 'capitalist' country and a 'confidence' in the 'socialist' economy of Russia which obscures the nature of her totalitarian regime... Niemuller... is influenced by Barth... Hromadka... is influenced by Barth... Berezky is influenced by Barth.", in "Communism and the Clergy", *CC*, 1953, August 19. 937. Several years later, after the failure of the 1956 revolution in Hungary Niebuhr wrote another article "Why is Barth Silent on Hungary?" in which he called Barth "a kind of unofficial pope of the Hungarian Reformed Church". *CC*, 1957, January 23. 108–110. There was a defence of the master from Barth's English-speaking seminar in Basel to which Niebuhr immediately responded: "Barth on Hungary: An Exchange" *CC*, 1957, April 10. 453–454. and "From Dr Niebuhr in New York", *CC*, 1957, April 10. 454–455. As it is well-known, Barth after his early support to Berezky reproved him in a famous letter: "Barth to Berezky. A Letter." *CC*, 1952, July 30. 876–877. The letter

- was originally written as a private one on September 16, 1951 but soon was published in France, The Netherlands and Germany before the American publication.
49. Ordass, 1985, 292–293.
  50. Terray, 1990b, 95; Ordass, 1985, 295.
  51. After Ordass's *Autobiographical Writings* had been published in Hungarian in 1985 and 1987, Imre Veöreös collected a bunch of his articles written in support of the "Turóczy-line" between 1948–50. In: Imre Veöreös: *A "harmadik" egyházi út*, Budapest, A Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház Sajtóosztálya, 1990. (NB. The Hungarian Lutheran Church sponsored the quick publication of this book.) He created a conception of three "ways" of the church in the period between 1948–50: the way of "opposition" (Ordass), the way of "conformity" (Dezséry, Ordass's successor, the "Red" Bishop) and the third "way" was represented by Turóczy and Szabó who were following the theologically narrow path between the extremes. Some of the reviews praising the book associated these so-called extremes of the political "right" and "left", implying again an image of Ordass as a "political reactionary". In our view the concept is untenable and mistaken in several aspects. First, as we have seen Ordass's line or "way" was not "opposition" but "defence". Second, Dezséry's "way" is not as legitimate as the "ways" of Ordass or Turóczy since the latter ones were representing the interest of their churches against the state while Dezséry—who later himself admitted to have become atheist—(Ordass, 1985, 252–253) represented the interest of the state against the church). See also Zoltán Dóka's remark in *Keresztyén igazság*, Nr. 9. March, 1991.
  52. Paul Empie in defence of Bishop Ordass quoted a book by Stewart Hermann: *It's Your Souls We Want* in which the author described the relation of the Nazis to the church in Germany. Empie adds that the "title could apply to the Communist Government's attitude toward the schools in Hungary": Empie, 1949, 589.
  53. This is a perceptive insight of Gábor Itzész in *Keresztyén igazság*, Nr. 9. March, 1991.
  54. Quoted in [Terray], 1957, 664.
  55. Ordass, 1985, 330.
  56. Eibner, 1983, 184.
  57. CC, 1948, 990 (September 29).
  58. CC, 1948 (November 10).
  59. Ordass, 1985, 384–385.
  60. Mathé, 1949, 365.
  61. Empie, 1949, 588.
  62. Empie, 1949, 590.
  63. Ordass, 1985, 360–361.
  64. Ordass, 1985, 373–374.
  65. CC, 1950, 604.
  66. Quoted by Eibner 1983, 183., as a non-identified death bed confession according to Szépfalusi.
  67. See Note 48.
  68. CC, 1955, 937 (August 17).
  69. CC, 1955, 937 (August 17).
  70. I am alluding to research by Zoltán Balogh, Jr., Reformed Minister in Hungary. I heard his lecture on this subject in June 1991 at a conference organized by the Renewal Movement within the Reformed Church. I am not aware whether or not he published the results of his research.
  71. Ordass, 1987, 471–487.
  72. Ordass, 1987, 489–508.

73. Ordass, 1987, 489–508.
74. Ordass, 1987, 508–514.
75. Ordass, 1987, 518.
76. Ordass, 1987, 518–524.
77. Ordass, 1972, 244.
78. Ordass, 1987, 530–536.
79. Ordass, 1987, 536–539.
80. CC, 1956, 991 (august 29). T.A.G. “Freedom for Bishop Ordass [Editorial Correspondance-Continued] Galyatető, Hungary, August 6.” The author first praises the skills of Dr Fry and then describes the excitement of the participants: “Dr Fry has been a masterful diplomat in his conduct of the negotiations for the W.C.C. His fine-honed intuitions and/or the Holy Spirit have shown him when to stand on his representative dignity, when to bow in Christian humility, and how to laugh... Everyone knew that something was going on, and most guessed that the conferences with government leaders had something to do with the scandalously mistreated Hungarian Lutheran bishop, Lajos Ordass... The chiefs of the Lutheran World Federation served fair notice that if the Central Committee came to Budapest they would of course pay friendly calls on the respected, lonely man who is still a bishop in their eyes. There was consternation among the present Hungarian Lutheran leaders, and the Lutherans from outside were strongly dissuaded from the visit. But one does not easily dissuade a Hans Lilje or a Franklin Clark Fry or a Carl Lund-Quist; who would want to try to stand up against such a trio—or the quartet formed when W. A. Visser’t Hooft joined the party?... Can’t you just hear Dr Fry before the government officials, carefully, and placing precisely the most devastating emphasis on his words, calling Ordass ‘*Bishop Ordass*’ and referring to the two new bishops as ‘*Mr.*’?... the glad announcement was ready for the conference at the very end of the last session... The announcement of the agreement was a smashing end to a great meeting.”
81. Ordass, 1987, 539–552.
82. See notes, *ibid.*
83. Ordass, 1985, 413.
84. [Terry], 1957, 664. In Hungarian: Ordass, 1982, 288–291; Terry, 1990b, 148–149; Ordass, 1992, 246–249.
85. See Dezséry’s pro-revolution resigning letter in Ordass, 1987, 570–571., and Vető’s similar revolution-praising but at the same time “penitent” letter *ibid.* 573–574.
86. Quoted by Eibner, 1983, 185.
87. Ordass, 1987, 574.
88. “In the name of the holy God I send the word to you our Lutheran brethren all over the world. Not long ago your representatives were among us. They actually assured us of your help which usually has supported our church struggle for freedom. Dear brethren, I speak to you in the name of our church... on the way of freedom and in the name of our country which is surely tried at this moment. The National Government of the independent Hungary has declared the neutrality of our country which is surely tried at this moment. The National Government of the independent Hungary has declared the neutrality of our country and I should like to ask you to give us any possible help you can for the recognition of the declaration of neutrality from where we should be able to find a way for the future. We would like to live in perfect agreement and harmony with all the nations of the world under the guidance of the allmighty [sic] God. At present we are to face very difficult problems in fact. Our war of independence has demanded victims and... [sic] of sacrifice. There are many people here who lost the provider in these days. There are many who were wounded in the...

[sic] They need medicine badly. We suffered a lot of the buildings and many other... [sic] In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ I ask you to help. We by our church organization do our best that your gifts do come to those who are in want for the help of Christian charity. We beseech God to the force of presence upon you." In: Ordass, 1982, 190.

89. Ordass, 1987, 579–581.
90. CC, 1956, 1318 (November 14).
91. Eibner, 1983, 185.
92. Ordass, 1987, 626.
93. Eibner, 1983, 185.
94. Quoted by Eibner, 1983, 185. Ordass, 1982, 194.
95. Eibner, 1983, 185.
96. *Lutheran Herald* 1957, 822 (September 3).
97. *Lutheran Herald* 1957, 824, and Ordass, 1992, 320.
98. *Time*, 1957 (August 19).
99. Ordass, 1972, 245; Terray, 1990b, 162.
100. Eibner, 1983, 186.
101. CC, 1958, 36 (January 8).
102. CC, 1958, 36 (January 8).
103. Ordass, 1987, 708.
104. Ordass, 1987, 709.
105. CC, 1958, 36 (January 8).
106. Ordass, 1987, 799.
107. Ordass, 1987, 794–795.
108. Stone, 1971, 6.

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- I. Primary Sources: 1. Autobiography; 2. Published Books; 3. Writings (Articles, Sermons) Published in English;
- II. Secondary Sources: 1. Monographs; 2. Major articles; 3. Editorials. (Articles are listed in the alphabetical and editorials in the chronological order.)

NB. The author is grateful to Pastor L. G. Terray of The Ordass Foundation (Norway) for his kind help in providing important documentation while the author was working on this project in The United States in Spring 1993.

Abbreviations:

CC = *The Christian Century*

OPRE = *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*  
(Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ)

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