

**THE VEIL OF GOD
AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST
BISHOP ORDASS' TESTIMONY IN
COMMUNIST HUNGARY**

Theological Reflections

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I wish to dedicate this book to the beloved memory of Bruck Andorné, (Mrs Clara Brooke, alias Maria Kegar) who passed away 25 years ago in England. As a member of the Budapest-Deák tér Lutheran Congregation in the late forties she persistently encouraged my father to study for ministry. When she and her husband managed to flee Communist Hungary they entirely devoted their lives to the support of the persecuted Hungarian Lutheran pastors' families with the help of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. She was the godmother of my sister and like a grandmother to me and my brother. I regularly visited her in England until the year of her death. Her faith and prayers expressed in her wide correspondance, were a constant source of inspiration to me as well as to several Lutheran pastors' families.

It was on her initiative that I first visited Bishop Ordass in his home in 1975 when I played her tape-recorded message to the Bishop:

„May the road rise to meet you / May the wind be always at you back / May God hold you in the palm of his hand / Until we meet again.”

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.

Ordass's Last Words at Court Before the Jury in
September 1948

60 years ago (1948) - imprisoned.

50 years ago (1958) finally removed from office.

30 years ago (1978) died.

20 years ago (1988) –his spritual heritage begins to come to light - The Ordass Lajos Society formed.

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Prologue

I have been concerned with the significance with the life and testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass ever since I first read his Autobiography published in Switzerland in 1985 and 1987. As early as Spring 1988 I wrote an essay „A Symbol of Steadfastness” and read it out in an inofficial circle of young Lutherans critical of the Communist regime. At the dawn of the political changes the Ordass Lajos Friendly Society was born and I was asked to read this essay at its inugural meeting in March 1989.¹ After the political changes in 1989-1990 I was approached several times to talk about Bishop Ordass at various conferences devoted to recent East European Church history both in Hungary and Western Europe. In the United States I gave two lectures on Bishop Ordass in 1993 and one on „Complicity and Perserverance” in 2006. In each case I was requested to submit my lecture for publication. All the forthcoming essays were published in various books or journals as indicated immediately in the footnotes of the titles. I have used the published materials with the courtesy of the editors but overlappings were eliminated and sometimes slight changes were introduced.

The author of these essays is not a church historian but a literary critic and a lay theologian. It is his conviction,

¹ „A megállás szimbóluma”. Delivered as lecture in Szekszárd, on April 22, 1988 and athe the iuagural meeting of the Ordass Lajos Friendly Society in March 18, 1989, published *Keresztyén Igazság* New Series, Vol 1. 1989, June, pp. 15-30. and also in a collection of of essays in Hungarian *A megállás szimbóluma*, published by the Author in 2001.

however, that the study of the outstanding life and testimony of Bishop Ordass as well as the three decades of „Ordass-oblivion” (1958-1988) is not only the agenda of church historians researching in archives but also of sensitive readers, scholars, especially ethicists and theologians. I consider the following essays merely as theological reflections. It is my hope that these chapters will address the – perhaps – „uneasy conscience” of Lutherans both home and abroad. The genre of the essay not only allows but even requires, a personal tone. This personal voice, however painful it is, will be especially poignant in the last essay.

2008 marks a multiple anniversary for Ordass-research. It is sixty years ago he was put into prison; it is fifty years ago he was finally removed from office; it is thirty years ago he died, it is twenty years ago the Ordass Lajos Friendly Society was established to bring about the spiritual heritage of the Bishop.

I wish to express my gratitude to two persons. The first is Dr.h.c.László G. Terray (Norway) has always commented on my manuscripts as well as the present edition. László G. Terray’s standard biography of Ordass was published also in English in 1997 as *He Could Not Do Otherwise: Bishop Lajos Ordass, 1901–1978*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge U.K.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997. The other person I owe gratitude is Dr. Sára Tóth my friend and colleague at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church who generously helped me in editing the present book.

Zuidzande (The Netherlands), July 2008.

1.

Theologies of Church Government in the Hungarian Lutheran Church During Communism (1945–1990)¹

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the history of the past five decades of the Hungarian Lutheran Church from a special perspective. I have grown up in the Hungarian Lutheran Church as the son of a church historian, but because of my critical attitude towards the church establishment I chose to pursue a secular career. Thereby I was able to preserve not only my freedom and independence, but also a critical distance. However, I have never ceased to be concerned for my church. As a layman I graduated in theology and have been involved in church-historical and hermeneutical issues.

This work was born out of my concern for the theological, intellectual and moral life of the Hungarian Lutheran Church. If one is sensitive member of the Hungarian Lutheran Church today she or he cannot but experience division, the lack of vision and energy, and an overall loss of identity. I am interested to learn about the process that has led to the theological and moral deterioration of my church. In order to understand this process I have chosen to concentrate on written and published texts, namely, on the inaugural addresses of ten Bishops of the Hungarian Lutheran Church between 1945 and 1990. What I am interested in is to learn what kind of theologies of church government these inaugural addresses reveal and how they anticipate the years to come. But the

1 Published in: *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. XXIV, Number 4, August 2004. This paper was given as a lecture at a conference on Protestant Churches During the Period of Communism in October 1999 in Denmark and was published in German: Tibor Fabiny, "Bekennner und Angepasste. Skizzen zu einem noch nicht geklarten Kapitel der jüngsten lutherischen Kirchengeschichte Ungarns," in *Glaube in der 2. Welt*, 6/2000, 14–21.

following study is not “(church) political” or just “church historical” but rather ecclesiological, and, as I am primarily interested in the theology of the discourse of church leaders; it is intended to be a hermeneutically oriented ecclesiological investigation.

As for methodology, I was stimulated by the work of my colleague Professor (bishop since 2003) István Bogárdi Szabó who published a book on church leadership and theology within the Hungarian Calvinist Church between 1948 and 1989.² Bogárdi Szabó reread the documents of the so-called “theology of service” and provided a theological evaluation of the deformation of the Hungarian Calvinist Church during the totalitarian dictatorship.

I reread and theologically analyzed the discourses of the inaugural addresses of the Lutheran Bishops. I did not study these texts in isolation, but my purpose was to read and interpret them in the context of Hungarian history. It is imperative to do so not only because no text can be separated from history but especially because most of the new bishops were installed into their offices at the turning points of Hungarian history: in 1945, 1948, 1957, 1958, 1990. So whatever they said also reflected the political turmoils of the outside world which necessarily had an influence on the life of the church. The church is, of course, never identical with her leaders and Christ is, naturally, the Lord and the Head of the church. My purpose is to show that the most destructive power of the church was not the atheist and totalitarian state but the one that has corrupted and destroyed the church from within. I think it is proper to speak about the “inner bleeding” of the church, to use the terminology of István Bogárdi Szabó.³ It is not my office and intention, however, to pass moral judgment in retrospect on the church leaders of the past, but I am convinced that the theological assessment of what was said and done is a moral duty especially since the theological evaluation of the past has not yet been carried out by the present leaders of the Hungarian Lutheran

2 István Bogárdi Szabó, *Egyházvezetés és teológia a Magyarországi Református Egyházban 1948 és 1989 között*, Debrecen, 1995.

3 István Bogárdi Szabó, “Long Period of Inner Bleeding: The Theology of Service as the Reflection of the Miseries of the Reformed Church in Hungary,” in *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 1989, I, 191–198.

Church. Therefore, it seems that there is more continuity than reversal in the conduct of the church leadership during the periods of communism and postcommunism.

I. The Historical Background

Throughout her history Hungary has always been on the side of losers: the Tatars, the Turks, the Hapsburgs, the Germans and the Russians have invaded this isolated nation in the Carpathian basin. With the Treaty of Trianon following the First World War, Hungary lost two third of her territories. Because of the unfortunate policies during the Second World War Hungary was stamped as the last ally of Nazi Germany. The Yalta Agreement made Hungary a part of the Soviet-Russian Empire.

Hungary adopted Christianity in the year 1000 and the 16th century Reformation greatly transformed the religious map of the country. However, due to the activity of the Jesuits, supported by the Hapsburgs, the Counter-Reformation was also very successful and thus by the 20th century more than sixty percent of the population were Roman Catholics. With two and a half million members the Reformed (Calvinist) Church was the largest Protestant denomination.

Lutheranism was a minority, even within Protestantism.⁴ With the Treaty of Trianon the Hungarian Lutheran Church lost several thousand members. Today out of the ten million inhabitants there are about three hundred thousand Lutherans in Hungary.⁵ From the time of the Church Synod in 1707 there were four dioceses: the Eastern (“Tiszántúli”), the Middle (“Dunáninneni”), the Central (“Bányai”) and the Western (“Dunántúli”) dioceses. Motivated by Stalinist centralizing tendencies the original four dioceses were decreased to two in 1952, the “Northern” and the “Southern” Dioceses.

During the first half of the 20th century there have been

4 Cf. an old but still balanced assessment of László Terray, “Europe’s Minority Churches,” in *Lutheran Churches of the World*, Foreword by Carl E. Lund-Quist (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1957), 41–94.

5 According to the census of 2001.

various influences that have had effects within the church such as the Luther Renaissance or the Finnish revival movements. However, the drastic political changes blocked their further development. After 1945 the newly elected leaders of the church reacted in different ways to the new political situation.

II. Towards Modeling the Attitudes

In a parliamentary democracy there is the “right” and the “left” as the political power is horizontally polarized. In a totalitarian dictatorship, however, there is only one “Power” that is concentrated at the “top” and therefore in practice everybody is dependent on it. The relationship of the “one top” and the rest is rather “vertical.” Individuals or churches have to develop degrees of conformism in order to survive. Those who are not willing to compromise by any means become martyrs. Then there are some who remain confessors and are reluctant to compromise, those who remain confessors and are willing to compromise, the next degree is of those who consciously or unconsciously give up confession and become collaborators. The policies by which the Bishops responded to the new challenges were those of valour, discretion⁶ as well as conformism, opportunism or even, betrayal. Having analyzed the inaugural addresses of ten Bishops with their historical contexts between 1945 and 1990 I have divided them into four groups: 1) Confessors 2) Compromisers 3) Collaborators, and 4) Cautious Innovators. Let me immediately add that whenever I use the category of “confessor” it does not entail that the person was “stubborn” or unwilling to compromise in minor issues and whomever I call “compromiser” was, to a certain extent, also a “confessor” necessarily. But it means that in unexpectedly difficult political situations there were some who managed to remain loyal to the Gospel and remained unmoveable when they believed that vital principles were at stake. The “compromisers” also tried to remain faithful to the Gospel but they wished to find a rational *modus vivendi*. A “confessor” never becomes a politician while the

6 Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour, Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, Glasgow: Collins, 1982.

“compromiser,” though temporarily, adopts the attitude of the “real-politician,” believing that this course of action is taken for the sake of the church. The collaborator is the one who is only nominally chosen by the church: it is ultimately the state that places him into his office. Again, I would not immediately stamp them as traitors or betrayers; they may have been convinced that their theology of church government was the only “way” for the church. Within the group of collaborators there were passive and active ones, or, it might happen that when somebody begins as passive could end up as an active collaborator. I would consider the leadership elected in 1987 and 1990 as “controversials” because their positions depend on the past: they took their offices without letting the cleansing processes, coming from below, prevail within the church.

1. Confessors

Though I have used the plural “confessors” I can only find one example of a confessor, i.e. one who had a steadfast, unmoveable attitude when vital principles were at stake. It is the example of Bishop Lajos Ordass.⁷ No wonder that there is an oak frieze in a Lutheran church in Minnesota encircling the sanctuary with a “cloud of witnesses” from the Bible and church history beginning with Enoch and ending with the names of Berggrav, Bonhoeffer, and Ordass.

Lajos Ordass (1901–1978) 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, during two different periods: between 1945–1948 and 1956–1958.⁸ He was committed to the public responsibility of the

7 The standard English biography of Ordass is by László G. Terray, *He Could Not Do Otherwise: Bishop Lajos Ordass, 1901–1978*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge U.K.: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.

8 See also my articles on Ordass: “Bishop Lajos Ordass and the Hungarian Lutheran Church,” in *Hungarian Studies* 10/1 (1995) 65–98; “The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and Its Aftermath in the Lutheran Church: The Case of Bishop Ordass,” in §1m Riiderwerk des ‘real existierenden Sozialismus’. Kirchen in Ostmittel-und Osteuropa von Stalin bis Gorbatschow Herusgegeben von Hartmut Lehmann und Jens Holger Schjorring, Gottingen, Wallstein, § 2003, 31–40; “The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass During Communism in Hungary,” in *Zwischen den Mühlsteinen. Protestantische*

church while he was still Senior in Middle Hungary and Pastor of a Budapest congregation. During the war he translated an account of Gustav Aulén, Bishop in Sweden about the Norwegian Lutheran Church's struggle and with the help of the Swedish Red Cross he helped the persecuted Jews in Budapest. He decided to change his original German family name "Wolf" into the Hungarian "Ordass" on the day of the Nazi occupation of Hungary. His ecclesiology is already manifested in the writings he published in the early 1940s. He frequently wrote that the church was the "conscience of the nation,"⁹ an institution that was founded by God even before the family; it is the first and the last refuge against the flood when there is storm."¹⁰

In his inaugural address on September 27, 1945, he started with two theses: 1) One should not be anxious about the church as the church carries the treasure of the gospel that God founded with the creation of the world. Therefore, the church will survive the storms of history as the church is invincible. 2) however, one should be anxious about the members of the church, therefore there is much to be done in the church and she badly needs workers.¹¹

As for the relationship between the church and the state Ordass firmly stood on the principle of mutuality. The church can offer to help the state, therefore it is the interest of the state to provide freedom for the spreading of the Gospel. Ordass's argument reflected a typical Lutheran antithetical logic when he said that "the church should preserve her freedom and independence from the state so that she could remain the conscience of the state during political turmoils, but at the same time she should bind herself to the state so that she could share the sins, sorrows, the joys and the hopes of the

Kirchen in den der Errichtung der kommunistischen Herrschaft im ostlichen Europa, Hg. Peter Maser und Jean Holger Schjorring, Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 2002, 303–320; "Bekenner und Angepasste. Skizzen zu einem noch nicht geklarten Kapitel der jüngsten lutherischen Kirchengeschichte Ungarns," in *Glaube in der 2. Welt* No 6. 2000. 14–21.

⁹ Ordass Lajos, *Válogatott írások*, Bern: 1982, 29.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ordass Lajos, "Püspöki székfoglaló" [Inaugural Address], *Keresztyén Igazság, Új folyam*, 27, autumn, 1995, 7–14.

nation.”¹²

To the totalitarianism of the Communist Party between 1945–1948 the three historical churches responded in three different ways. In the Roman Catholic Church Cardinal Mindszenty launched the program of “political resistance.” In the Reformed Church Bishop Albert Bereczky proposed a “theology of contrition,” suggesting that the churches were responsible for the social evils of the past as they were beneficiaries of that order. Ordass defended the church on the theological principles of the Lutheran idea of the “two regiments (realms):” “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 teaching and preaching activity should not be hindered.”¹³ Ordass’ purpose was to work out a fair, theologically justified relationship with the state. He offered to support the state but not unconditionally as was the case with some of his followers for whom the church became subservient to the state. In Ordass’ theology the church and the state were meant to mutually recognize their spheres of interest and the field of their activity. Ordass argued that the church, by virtue of her cultural and social activity (schools, hospitals, charitable institutions, and so on) contributes to the welfare of the state and society. Therefore, she should 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 church should not have a political program, neither should she meddle into politics, as it is not her mission. However, when political events interfere or harm the body or the members of the church then it is her duty to speak out publicly on those issues. Such issues were, for example the Hungarian-Czechoslovak repartition agreement in 1946 or the arbitrary deportation of the members of Hungary’s German-speaking community. Last, but not least, the great issue in 1948 was the nationalization of the church schools. Ordass found that giving up the schools would mean giving up the historical mission of the

12 Ibid., 13.

13 Ordass Lajos, *Válogatott írások*, Bern: 1982, 112.

church, for him the schools belonged to the body of the church, especially in the time of persecution.

Ordass was also pressured to dismiss the lay leaders of the church. He refused to surrender the schools as well as to dismiss the leaders. The state also wanted the church to sign an “Agreement,” but Ordass was reluctant to accept the text of this agreement. This attitude of his led to the typical Stalinist show trial in September 1948 where he was charged with violating the country’s currency laws. In 1947 Ordass traveled to Northern Europe (in Lund he was elected as first Vice President of the Lutheran World Federation) and then to the United States where he received support for rebuilding the Lutheran Church after the Second World War. The accusations, were, of course, false but Ordass was sentenced to two years in prison. Thus the Communist state could remove its greatest obstacle. Ordass was freed in May 1950 but rehabilitated only in October 1956, restored to office during the revolution and removed from office, for the final time, in June 1958.

Ordass was willing to be a partner of the state on fair and mutual agreement but he was unwilling to make a compromise against his conscience. From the perspective of *Real politik* he was perhaps “stubborn” or even “reactionary,” but from the perspective of faith he remained a confessor as he consequently acted according to his belief. We are mistaken if we consider him as a figure of “resistance” against Communism. His great example was §Eidvin Bergrav, the Bishop of Oslo; he said 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.”¹⁴

We should emphasize that Ordass’s attitude was “defence” rather than “resistance.” This was recognized by László Terray as early as 1956: “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 ‘resistance.’ His spiritual mentor was

14 Ibid., 153.

Gandhi and not Gregory VII.”¹⁵ The confessing attitude was motivated by Luther’s theology of the cross, which helps to explain why Bishop Ordass wrote so many meditations on the cross.¹⁶

2. Compromisers

This compromising line is associated mainly with the names of Bishop Zoltán Túróczy (1893–1971) and Bishop József Szabó (1902–1986). Let me emphasize what I have said before: in my vocabulary “compromiser” is not as negative a category as the “collaborator”. I would not go so far as saying that a compromiser is not also a confessor, but this conduct has a rational, explicitly “political” or “church-political” element in its theology. The compromisers, recently, and mistakenly, I think, have been described as representatives of “the third way of the church”¹⁷ characterized themselves by “two-sentence church politics” which meant that in the first sentence they acknowledged the secular power (“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”) while affirming faith in the second statement: (“Render unto God the things which are God’s”). The representatives of this attitude came from the pietist background of missionary societies or the revival movements and they were willing to compromise in so far as, for example, surrendering the schools to the state, because they wanted to protect the proclamation of the word (undoubtedly a Barthian influence). It was also confessional and a genuinely Christian attitude, but Ordass’ view was, as we have seen, influenced more by Luther’s *theologia crucis* and it was in accordance with the teachings of the confessional writings of the church, namely, that the otherwise secondary (adiaphora) issues (such as the schools) during the time of persecution should be seen also as primary ones (*Formula Con-*

15 László Terray, “A Symbol of an Indomitable Belief,” *British Weekly*, December 6, 1956. Repr. by LWF Department of Information, January 7, 1957.

16 See the second half of my article: “The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass During Communism in Hungary,” in *Zwischen den Mühlsteinen. Protestantische Kirchen in den der Errichtung der kommunistischen Herrschaft im astlichen Europa*. Hg. Peter Maser und Jean Holger Schjorring (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 2002), 303–320.

17 Veöreös Imre, *A harmadik egyházi út, 1948–1950*, Budapest: Evangélikus Sajtóosztály, 1990.

cordiae, Article X).¹⁸

Thus by 1948 the Lutheran church was far from being unanimous in her theology concerning church government and with regard to her relationship with the more and more totalitarian Communist state. While Bishop Ordass was fighting in defence of the church, Bishop Túróczy and Bishop Szabó were to go along with the demands of the state and compromise. Ordass, in his *Autobiography* has referred to it as the “Túróczy-line.” Zoltán Túróczy came from a well-known Lutheran family with famous pastors and bishops and he was much influenced by the Finnish revival movements of the 1920s and 1930s. He became Bishop of the Eastern Diocese in May 1939. The missionary zeal and sound Lutheran theology characterized both his inaugural address of 1939 and his episcopal activity in the years to come. Right after World War II, however, because of his right-wing political speeches during the war, he was sentenced to ten years’ in prison. Partly due to the intervention of his church he was freed from prison in 1946 and eventually received an amnesty on June 14, 1948. Throughout 1948 he was much in favor of accepting and signing the Agreement proposed by the state. He resigned as Bishop of the Eastern Diocese and was installed as Bishop of the Western Diocese in December 1948. However, the installation of Bishop József Szabó into the Middle Diocese in March 1948 comes first in chronology.

In his inaugural speech on March 18, 1948, the new Bishop gave a very thorough diagnosis about the spiritual decline of the church which is due not only to the external but to the internal factors of secularization. He powerfully contrasted the vegetation and apathy of contemporary Christianity with the dynamic life of the early church. Therefore, he launched a program of mission and evangelization. But when it came to church-state relations he emphatically said: “Whoever says that in Hungary there is persecution of Christians today is deceived or wants to deceive”¹⁹ and added that the Lutheran church that was always open to progress

18 As pointed out by Gábor Ittész, in “Létezett-e (létezik-e) harmadik egyházi út? Kerekasztalbeszélgetés.” *Keresztyén Igazság Új folyam*, 9. szám, 1998. 1. 16.

19 Szabó József, Püspöki székhely, Balassagyarmat, 1948. március 18. Győr, 1948. 9.

in the past will not be the “refuge of political reactionism.”²⁰ However, mutuality was also an important element in his views on church-state relations: “It is the duty and not the mercy of the Hungarian Democratic Republic to let the church fulfill her task. We have to insist on our theological conviction that the secular authorities have received the power of the sword also from God in order to protect the cause of God. If so, then the state fulfils its task, if not, it would harm itself. The church should not be ungrateful for the support of the state and the state would be mistaken if the freedom of the church would be asked as a price for its protection. The church is not to be a flatterer of the state but the conscience of the state so that she could represent and proclaim the will of God for the secular power as well.”²¹

Right after the inauguration ceremonies the representative of the President of the Hungarian Republic, Imre Mihályfi (son of a former Lutheran minister), launched a very sharp attack against the lay-leaders of the church and demanded urgent election of new officers. Two days after that event Pastor Imre Veöreös, Vice President of the Pastor’s League and editor of a Lutheran journal, wrote to the General Curator of the church accusing the church leadership of not having understood the elemental changes in the political life, and urging the church to find a confessional answer, without political reactionarism, to the new historical challenge. “The state’s political desire to cleanse the church from the politically unwanted leaders have long coincided with the purely church-concerned demand of the valuable members of the clergy.”²²

Having received an amnesty in the summer of 1948 Bishop Túróczy became full supporter for accepting the Agreement with the state. Túróczy’s conviction was that the schools do not directly belong to the body of the church. Therefore “no martyr-blood should be shed for the schools.”²³ Túróczy advocated the “two-sentence”

20 Ibid., 10.

21 Ibid., 11.

22 Veöreös Imre beadványa az egyetemes felügyelőhöz, March 20, 1948. Manuscript, EOL, MELE, 14/1948.

23 Veöreös Imre, “Mit szólunk az iskolák államosításhoz?” in *Új Harangszó*, June 6, 1948. Ordass, *Önéletírás*, 293.

church policy and it was his conviction that whenever God closes a door he will open another one. He was probably convinced that with the loss of schools, the church can concentrate more of her evangelizing and missionary task. Bishop Ordass was arrested on September 8 and condemned on October 5. The Agreement was signed on December 14 by the President of the Synod Bishop Túróczy (still as Bishop of the Eastern Diocese) and Lay President §Zoltán Káldy on behalf of the church.

Two days after signing the Agreement Bishop Túróczy was installed as Bishop of the Western Diocese. He began his rhetorically and spiritually attractive inaugural speech by distinguishing between the “priest” and the “man of God,” or the prophet. In church history, he said, the man of God was “deformed” into the “priest” and “bishop,” but the new political situation “reforms” the “priest” into becoming again the “man of God.” Such is the prophetic task of church leadership. Bishop Túróczy, however, introduces secular terminology into his speech when he mentions the Western Diocese as a “church-political problem” where “reactionary” views are most widespread. He explicitly speaks about his “politics” which resulted in the signing of the Agreement. Alien phrases are introduced into theological discourse as, it was believed, by conforming to the state in our “first sentence” one can affirm and preserve faith in the second one.

Bishop Túróczy’s outstanding significance as preacher, organizer, pastor, cannot be denied. But this newly adopted flexibility was to have grave consequence in the years to come. With the decision of the Synod of 1952, motivated by the centralizing tendencies of Stalinism the Western Diocese ceased to exist and thus Bishop Túróczy lost his office. It was due to the restoration of Bishop Ordass in 1956 that Bishop Túróczy was chosen as Bishop of the “Northern” diocese. This was now the third time he became Bishop. In his inaugural address of February 6, 1957, he first spoke about the “supremacy of the Word.” “It is not politics that should determine our attitude to the Word, but it is the Word that should determine our attitude to politics.”²⁴ He approved the Agreement as

24 Az Északi Egyházkerület Elnökségének beiktatása.” Manuscript.

the document” of God’s closed and newly opened windows. Within this short period there was unique harmony between Bishop Ordass and Bishop Túróczy.

3. Collaborators

We call collaborators those leaders who are ultimately chosen by the state and who whether consciously or unconsciously represent the interest of the state against the church. There have been passive and active types of collaborators both in the pre-1956 and the post 1956 period.

a) The pre-1956 period

When Bishop Túróczy resigned as Bishop of the Eastern Diocese to become the Bishop of the Western Diocese, Lajos Vető (1904–1989) was chosen as his successor. At the end of the second world war, thanks to his knowledge of Russian, Vető was the interpreter of the Russian army. However, his election was the result of a pressure of the state against the original nominee, István Rózse. Bishop Vető in his inaugural speech of December 22, 1948, quotes Psalm 121:1: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.” For him such “hills” were the Gospel, the church, and Protestantism. To be Protestant to him meant “progressive” and he considered Luther as the champion of religious, social, intellectual and cultural progress.²⁵ He expressed his conviction that the Agreement signed a week before is not the grave of the church as pessimists believed, but it would contribute to the inner strengthening and external development of the church. Thus, by the end of 1948 the Marxist state managed to put its man into an episcopal office for the first time.

On August 20, 1949, Hungary became a “People’s Republic” and the form of the state was “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” In April, while Bishop Ordass was still in prison, the special court of the Lutheran church condemned him. Thus he was deposed by his own church. Only after this could he be freed from prison in May

25 “Vető Lajos székfoglaló beszéde,” Manuscript, EOL Tiszai Egyházkerület, III 2. See also the article in *Evangelikus Élet*, January 1, 1949, 5.

1950. The Central Diocese had to choose his successor. The only nominee was László Dezséry, formerly university chaplain and now pastor in Budapest. Dezséry was originally a member of the Social Democratic Party and after their merging with the Communist party he became a Communist party member. In October 1948 he wrote a thirty-page “Open Letter in the Matter of the Lutheran Church.” In this letter he spoke about the crisis in the leadership and urged the replacement of the conservative leadership by progressive-minded persons.

On June 12, 1950, he was installed as the successor of Ordass in the Central District.

He was probably influenced by the phraseology of the Calvinist Bishop Albert Bereczky when he spoke about the “prophetic vocation” of the church. In their vocabulary this meant political, pro-Communist commitment. His speech is a document of a low-style, vulgar conformism: he identifies the liberation of the country with the Christian’s liberation from sin unto new life. With regard to ecumenism he condemns the “crusade” of Western fellow Christians that the world organizations cease to financially support the home church when she declared her unwillingness “to resist” the people’s state.

Due to his initiative the original four dioceses were merged into two in 1952: the “Southern” with Bishop Dezséry and the “Northern” with Bishop Vető. While Dezséry was in office between 1950–1956 the Lutheran church entirely became subservient to the Communist state.

By the summer of 1956 the course of events began to reverse: several factors began to point towards the rehabilitation of Bishop Ordass. First, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches was to meet in Galyatető, Hungary. Second, the pastors’s conferences in September urged the rehabilitation which eventually took place on October 6. The revolution broke out on October 23 and within a few days both Bishop Dezséry and Vető resigned. Both of them praised the glorious revolution of the Hungarian youth. Ordass was restored as Bishop on Reformation Day.

Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this paper to characterize the period of eighteen months while Bishop Ordass was

restored. After the oppression of the Hungarian revolution by the Russian tanks on November 4, the Lutheran church, due to Bishop Ordass' quick reshuffling of the leadership became an "island." Church life flourished; the church, indeed, became church. It took until June 1958 for the state to remove Bishop Ordass. They imposed lay leaders on the church who unconditionally carried out what the state demanded. The state issued Decree 22 in 1957 concerning the prior governmental approval of nominations for church leadership. As it was valid retroactively they were able to remove Bishop Túróczy at the end of 1957 replacing him by Bishop Vető. They waited more than six months to depose Bishop Ordass. It took place in June, a few days after Prime Minister Imre Nagy, leader of the 1956 revolution, was executed. Bishop Dezséry, who in the meantime began a secular career, returned to his office only for three hours, so that he could resign. Later he became a successful journalist and he openly proclaimed himself an atheist. Moscow's puppet government, the Kádár-regime, found the suitable person to install into the episcopal office of the Southern Diocese. This man was a 39-year-old Senior from southern Hungary, Zoltán Káldy. He determined the profile of the church in the next three decades.

b) The post-1956 period

The "unanimously" elected Zoltán Káldy (1919–1987) was installed on November 4, the second anniversary of the oppression of the revolution. Zoltán Káldy also came from a Pietist background; throughout the 1940s he was a very popular evangelist. Zoltán Káldy's name is associated with the "theology of diaconia" which became a totalitarian "official" theology imposed upon the church.

His inaugural speech²⁶ does not yet use this terminology: it was elaborated only six years later when he was about to receive the honorary doctorate from the Slovak Theological Academy in Bratislava. The germs of his doctrine of church government, his "theology of diaconia" are, however, already present in his 1958

26 "Káldy Zoltán püspöki székfoglaló beszéde," *Lelkipásztor*, December, 1958, 568–585.

address. We shall reconstruct and criticize this theology on the basis of these two documents. Káldy's speech, unlike Dezséry's or Vetó's, was undoubtedly elaborated theologically though whatever he said can be challenged theologically.

Káldy wished to found the theology of church government on the three principles of "biblicism," "confessionalism," and "common sense." However, neither the Bible nor the confessions are to be applied literally: they should be adjusted to the new historical and political context. He quotes the Barmen Declaration which also appealed to the natural law. Therefore, he concluded, in public life one should act according to the principle of common sense.

The central motif of his train of thought is the worship of the church. He makes a distinction between the "shorter worship" that is within the church and the "longer worship" that is outside of the church. "Diaconia" is not secondary to the gospel, it belongs to the heart of the Gospel. The climax of his argument is the idea of "political worship" which means that the church and her members work for the "correct" order of the world. He justified his ideas for the political activity of the church by saying that according to Luther the world is also a part of God's realm, the world is the mask of God and the Christian is the citizen of the two realms. The Lutheran ethics does not differentiate between secular and church ethics, secular work or church-related work. And last, but not least, the love of Jesus should commit the Christian to political activity.

His attitude to the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches was similar to that of Dezséry: he regretted that these organizations saw our church only through certain persons (i.e. Ordass). He also added that their declarations to condemn social injustice and protect world peace were not powerful enough. Now the lay leaders of the church are the commissars of the state and they condemn the "counter-revolution" in the country as well as within the church.

What can we conclude from Káldy's inaugural speech? It is a theology one-sidedly concentrating on the world, politics, and society. He reversed the order proposed by Bishop Turóczy in 1957 by founding his theology on politics and not politics on theology. His theology was built upon the *hic et nun* of post-1956 Hungary.

By equating the “long worship” within the world with the “short worship” of the church he wanted to dissolve theology within the world. In the concept of general grace, special grace and the scandal of the cross is lost. (That was the essence of Ordass’ theology.) If the church existed only to serve in the world then the idea of mission is lost (the essence of Turóczy’s theology). His theology onesidedly concentrates upon the “deeds” (“service”) and the idea of the justification by faith entirely disappears; and above all, there is no soteriology in such a theology.

The church is summoned to be politically committed but this politics means following the instruction of the Communist state which is in no way to be criticized. Thus the church surrenders herself again to the state, church government means collaboration with the Communist state, or, as then they put it, “with our country building socialism.” Last but not least there are psychological consequences: the feeling of inferiority, subordination, dependence was planted into the soul of the church people; there is no other way but subservience.

Káldy’s “theology of diaconia” was elaborated in his 1964 inaugural address when he received the honorary doctorate from the theological faculty of Bratislava. Káldy’s 1964 speech is the document of a new, “totalitarian theology.” The term “diaconia” becomes the exclusive focus of each aspect of theology. Káldy began with New Testament biblical exegesis in which he elaborated a “diaconial christology” suggesting that Jesus came to this world to do the act of diaconia and (sic!) – for nothing else.²⁷

There was no mentioning of sin and redemption, hamartology and soteriology was entirely missing from such a “christology.” Then he turned to ecclesiology arguing that “the whole church was made into diaconia” by Jesus. The church cannot exist for her own sake, she should not be engaged in saving herself: the church will have a future only if she surrenders herself to the people. István Bogárdi Szabó when recognizing similar theological attitudes in the “theology of service” of the Reformed Church in the 1950s

27 §21 Káldy Zoltán: “Az egyház életformája a diakónia,” in *Lelkipásztor*, 1964/8, 385–397.

remarked that this is nothing but the “theological appropriation” of the Marxist thesis about the disappearance of religion in which there is only “kenotic” *ecclesia crucis* in which there is no resurrection or *ecclesia triumphans*.²⁸ For Káldy the church fulfills her function if she dissolves into the world. The last part of the speech was about the “wider aspect of diaconia” which is about the social commitment of the church. In this part Káldy made the church entirely a part of Marxist propaganda.

One of the greatest defect of this “theology” is a dangerous one-sidedness which want to make a total idea out of a partial term like “diaconia.” This totalizing tendency is entirely in tune with the totalizing nature of Marxist ideology and Communist practice. From time to time it appealed to Luther but Lutheran theology is exactly the opposite as it works with antitheses and paradoxes: it teaches that the human being is both just and sinful, free and servant, and Jesus Christ is both Lord and servant at the same time.

By neglecting soteriology and justification i.e. preaching “the sermon about Christ,” the church “beheaded” itself. “Káldyism” became a totalitarian, incorporating principle in the Hungarian Lutheran Church. Instead of being the “body of Christ” this church became – as somebody phrased it during Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Budapest in 1984 – the “body of Káldy” which he managed to keep alive by his personal dictatorial style of conduct. The frightened deans and ministers almost unanimously approved whatever he did and said for three decades. Whoever happened to disapprove of his conduct or church-policy was stamped and dismissed to a small countryside congregation. True, he did, indeed, elevate pastors from poor congregational positions, but then these people were meant to pay the price and soon became spokesmen of the grand mechanism of “Káldy’s body.” In 1966 he managed to enforce new church laws that conformed to the demands of the Marxist state that declared that for the nomination of church-leaders the prior agreement of the state was needed.. One should add that there were positive events during his episcopal activity: a new Protestant Bible translation came out, a commentary series was

28 Bogárdi Szabó, *Egyházvezetés és teológia*, 99–100.

launched, new hymn books were published, new churches were built, and so on. All these activities were the manifestations of his “theology of diaconia” which one-sidedly emphasized the “deeds” against faith and justification. Much was, indeed, to be shown for the delegates of the Lutheran World Federation in the summer of 1984. Only the head and the soul of the church was gone – the rest remained. He believed his greatest “good deed” was inviting the Lutheran World Federation to hold its Assembly in Budapest in 1984. The most controversial event of this Assembly was that he was elected as its President.²⁹

When Lajos Vető retired as Bishop of the Northern Diocese in 1967 the Professor of Church History Ernő Ottlyk (1918–1995) was elected as his successor. Thus Bishop Káldy became senior, or, as he called himself, “Presiding Bishop.” Ottlyk was a conformist and a radically left wing church historian. His simple and vulgar commitment is reflected in his inaugural address of June 20, 1967³⁰ as well as in his “progressive” books which he published. Káldy made him and Káldy deposed him fifteen years later. After it had been decided that the Lutheran World Federation Assembly was to be held in Budapest in 1984 Káldy felt uncomfortable with Ottlyk whose provincial significance and especially his left wing style would not be acceptable for Western European or North American delegates of the Assembly. Káldy needed a person who would be more presentable to represent the homechurch at the Assembly. That person was Gyula Nagy (1918–), Professor of Systematic Theology, who spent several years in Geneva mainly in the service of the Lutheran World Federation.

Bishop Nagy’s inaugural address of September 25, 1982, is a document of trying to save Káldy’s “theology of diaconia” by unnoticeably correcting it. He completed the principle of “love” by its preceding “faith” and diaconia by its preceding soteriology. This

29 László Terray, “Was the ‘Reality’ Cut Out? The Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Budapest,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 5, No. 6, 1–17. See also: “Hungarian Lutheran Controversy,” in *Religion in Communist Lands*, 1985/13, 99–106.

30 Ottlyk Ernő, “Püspöki beköszöntő beszéd az Északi Evangélikus Egyházkerület 1967. június 20-i közgyűlésén,” *Lelkipásztor*, 1967/8, 449–458.

was not a critique but an explicit manifestation and affirmation of the theology of diaconia by trying to suggest that it is entirely compatible with mainstream “Western theology.”³¹ Bishop Nagy, who had traveled widely in the world, knew several delegates and it was comfortable for the LWF to be hosted by a former LWF man. When Káldy’s “theology of diaconia” met the first theological critique by Vilmos Vajta in 1983 Bishop Gyula Nagy and other lay leaders of the church publicly defended Káldy by declaring that “We refuse the allegations!”³²

When Káldy died in May 1987 Bishop Gyula Nagy became President Bishop. He installed Káldy’s successor Béla Harmati. By that time, however, there were new circles that demanded theological and structural changes within the church. Bishop Nagy was also unprepared for the unexpected political changes of 1989 in Eastern Europe, however much he tried to keep up with the events. (By, for example, hastily proposing to confer honorary doctorate to Vilmos Vajta in 1989.) After eight years in office Bishop Nagy retired in 1990.

4) Controversials

Káldy was succeeded by Bishop Béla Harmati (1936–) in October 1987 in the Southern Diocese and Gyula Nagy by Bishop Imre Szebik (1938–) in March 1990 in the Northern Diocese. In their inaugural addresses³³ both of them emphasized that the spiritual renewal should come before the structural one. It is important to bear in mind that for the nomination of Bishop Harmati the advance approval by the state was still necessary, but as the notorious State Office for Church Affairs ceased to exist with the political collapse of 1989, this was not the case with the nomination of Bishop Szebik. The Agreement between the state and the church was annulled after

31 Nagy Gyula, “A reményseg programja”, *Lelkipásztor*, 1982, 642–652.

32 Hungarian Church Press, July 15, 1983.

33 “‘Lábam előtt méces a te igéd.’ Dr. Harmati Béla püspök székfoglalója,” *Lelkipásztor*, 1987/11, 646–651. And “Beiktatták Szebik Imre püspököt,” *Evangélikus Élet*, April 1, 1990. “Szebik Imre püspök székfoglalója. Folytatás,” *Evangélikus Élet*, April 8, 1990.

41 years in March 1990.

One of the priorities Bishop Harmati mentioned in his inaugural address of 1987 was the *magnus consensus* within the church. However, in retrospect we have to say that hardly ever was there a period in the history of Hungarian Lutheranism in which there was such a division as in the first decade of the post-Communist era. The long urged Synod was eventually convened in 1991, and after six years of struggle, managed to pass a law that the two-diocese centralized church structure should be abandoned in favor of a more decentralized three-diocese model. Throughout these struggle the Bishops have insisted on the two-diocese model³⁴ imposed upon the church by Stalinist centralization. Their argument was based on financial, bureaucratic and management aspects and they did not have an ear for the theological demand coming from the lower clergy, namely that the pastoral function was badly needed.

III. Perspectives from Below

Káldy's "theology of diaconia" petrified the church only for three decades. The major breakthrough was the "Open Letter" of Pastor Zoltán Dóka (1929-2000) to the leadership of the Lutheran World Federation during its Assembly in Budapest in 1984. The Open Letter gave a thorough theological critique of the "theology of diaconia" analyzing how Káldy was adopted thuis to church-government. Dóka called this the "social-ethical manipulation of the gospel" and openly protested against the "theological terror" by which Bishop Káldy imposed his theology on the ministers of the church. He criticized Káldy's dictatorial conduct and demonstrated that it led to a theological deterioration and to the destruction of the spiritual and intellectual life of the church.³⁵

Dóka's Open Letter was not publicly discussed during the Assembly, but everybody knew about it both among the delegates

³⁴ A sign of promising development was that in 2000 Pastor János Ittész was elected to be the Bishop of the newly re-established Western (Transdanubian) Diocese.

³⁵ Dóka Zoltán, "Nyílt levél," *Keresztyén Igazság*, 3/1989, 26—31. See the full text of the document and the reactions in English in the article "Hungarian Lutheran Controversy," in *Religion in Communist Lands*, 13/1985, 99—106.

and members of the home church. It was circulated as a samizdat among the pastors. After three decades of fearing a single man, a village pastor dared to shout the truth unto the world. This was not part of the planned choreography of the Budapest Assembly!

The Open Letter was written while Pastor Dóka was abroad in West Germany. The church leadership hoped he would remain in the West and thus he could have been dismissed as an emigré. But he returned home at the end of August after the Assembly. He was about to be sentenced by a church court, but then the charge against him was suspended due to international pressure. The church leaders were probably shocked to learn how many sympathizers he had.

In December 1985 Bishop Káldy became seriously ill. Stimulated by the Open Letter a group of pastors and laymen began to meet regularly since November 1985 and they signed a document entitled “Brotherly Word” in March 1986 and openly criticized that diaconia becomes equal to the gospel in the teaching of the church thereby distorting and weakening the gospel. They urged that the church should be decentralized and that the election of leaders should not be based on principles alien to the church. The rights of the church, including the right to have its own schools, should be granted again. It harms the identity of the church, they argued, if it is corporally forced to be involved in politics. Engagement in politics is the right of the members of the church as citizens and not as church members.³⁶

However, the unity of those who signed the Brotherly Word was split within a year. The initiators, Pastor Zoltán Dóka and Pastor Gábor Ittész (1932-2007), disagreed with those who were willing to compromise. Professor Robert Frenkl (1934-), another person who signed the document, accepted the nomination to be the Inspector of the Southern Diocese when Bishop Harmati was elected as Bishop two years before the political changes. By 1989 he became the General Inspector of the Hungarian Lutheran Church.

By the beginning of 1989 Pastor Dóka and Pastor Ittész with a

36 “Testvéri Szó (1986),” *Keresztyén Igazság*, December, 4/1989, 21–25. See John Eibner, “Pressure for Reform in the Hungarian Lutheran Church,” in *Religion in Communist Lands*, 14/1986, 323–6; “Brotherly Word,” in *ibid.*, 330–31.

dozen pastors and laymen regularly came together discussing the burning issues of the church. In July 1989 another document entitled „Crying Voice” was signed by some thirty members of a “Renewal Movement” in which they demanded radical changes in the church, the theological evaluation of the past, decentralization and the convening of the Synod.³⁷

In March 1989 “The Ordass Lajos Society” was founded in Budapest with the purpose of promoting the recognition of Ordass’ s heritage and the radical renewal of the church. Its members almost entirely coincided with Dóka’s group. The great advantage of the Society was that it was legally recognized. Pastor György Kende Sen., a former colleague and friend of Bishop Ordass, became its first secretary. The Society launched (probably the first church-related) independent journal, *Keresztyén Igazság* [Christian Truth] which has been a medium of a critical, dissenting voice in the Lutheran Church, Hungary since 1989.

37 “Kiáltó Szó a Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház minden tagjához,” *Keresztyén Igazság*, September, 3/1989, 1–3.

2.

The Dramatic Life of Bishop Lajos Ordass

in Five Acts¹

I. 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 ago² when Ordass's Selected Writings were published in Switzerland.³ Since that time, however, the Bishop's two-volume autobiography was published by István Szépfalusi,⁴ and a biography by László Terray, originally written in Norwegian,⁵ came out both in German⁶ and in Hungarian.⁷ In the preface to the Hungarian edition Terray writes: "Today, the Ordass-theme is more up-to-date than ever."⁸

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

¹ Published as „Bishop Lajos Ordass and the Hungarian Lutheran Church”, in *Hungarian Studies* 10-1 (1995) pp. 65-98. Originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Bloomington IN and at Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary PA, in April 1993.

² Eibner, 1983.

³ Ordass, 1982.

⁴ Ordass, 1985; Ordass, 1987.

⁵ Terray, 1984.

⁶ Terray, 1990a.

⁷ Terray, 1990b.

⁸ Terray, 1990b, 5.

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.⁹

During his lifetime his enemies labelled him as "reactionary," and as "unbendingly stubborn,"¹⁰ 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,"¹¹ a "typical Lutheran ... loath to meddle in politics,"¹² "a symbol of indomitable belief,"¹³ a "man of indomitable belief,"¹⁴ "an undauntable and persistent church-leader,"¹⁵ "tall, gaunt, ascetic Hungarian [of] ... tremendous spiritual force,"¹⁶ "the chief obstacle of the subjugation of the Church as an instrument of the State,"¹⁷ "the martyr of Hungary,"¹⁸ "hero of faith,"¹⁹ a "saint of our time ... a man who stood fast victoriously."²⁰ In the secular Western press he appeared as "one of Hungary's staunchest anti-Communist religious leaders."²¹ When he died in 1978, American church-leaders, his old

9 Larson, 1976, 38.

10 Mathe, 1949, 365.

11 CC, 1949, 1028.

12 Empie, 1949, 588.

13 Terray, 1956; Stone, 1971.

14 [Terray], 1957.

15 CC, 1957, 68.

16 *Lutheran Herald*, 1957, 602 (July 9).

17 CC, 1958, 820.

18 Knutson, 1970.

19 *Lutheran Standard*, 1976, 15.

20 Larson, 1976, 38.

21 *New York Times*, 1958, November 6.

friends, also payed tribute to him, saying that he was a man “who took orders from no one other than his Lord” (Schiotz),²² 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)²³ 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.”²⁴

II. 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

22 Schiotz in *The Lutheran Standard*, 1978, 16.

23 Empie in *The Lutheran Standard*, 1978, 16.

24 Hoffmann, 1985, 49.

removed from office and sent into early retirement. Another obvious Shakespearean device is “disguise,” 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 kistükre* (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”,²⁵ 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:²⁶

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

25 Eibner, 1983, 185.

26 Instead of the conventional narrative terms I have chosen the dramatic terminology which I think is more appropriate for my present purposes.

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 Aulén 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.²⁷ 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."²⁸ The other principle of his mission, according to Eibner, was Ordass's

27 Eibner, 1983, 180.

28 Ordass, 1982, 11-16.

“dedication to the principles of national unity and independence.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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.”³¹ 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.³²

29 Eibner, 1983, 180.

30 Ordass, 1982, 32–33, 34–39.

31 Eibner, 1983, 182.

32 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

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.

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. He considered this a right decision and a just war (according to the review by John V. Eibner in *Religion in Communist Lands*, of book containing articles of Ordass edited by István Szépfalusi). [Terry's translation]

Terry: "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 worrisome that this misunderstanding may lead to the idea that the church supported 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 Terry for sending me a copy of this letter. (T. F.)

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.³³ 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 Aulén) 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 south eastern part of Hungary. Such an act was not without risk in the Hungary of 1943.³⁴

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

33 Ordass, 1982, 58–69.

34 Ordass, 1982, 40–57.

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.”³⁵ 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.”³⁶

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 ...”³⁷ 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.”³⁸ 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

35 Eibner, 1983, 181.

36 Ordass, 1981, 91. Eibner, 1983, 181.

37 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.

38 Eibner, 1983, 181.

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.³⁹ He also felt it was dangerously weakening the power of the Lutheran Church in Hungary.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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

39 The Slovaks in Hungary could voluntarily leave the country while in Czechoslovakia only those had to leave 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.

40 Ordass, 1982, 123–124; 127–130.

41 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 census.

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.⁴²

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,

42 Ordass, 1972, 242.

be careful not to mix it up with political aspects.⁴³

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 church structure and spirituality were basically different in these two countries.⁴⁴ 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."⁴⁵

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.'⁴⁶

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

43 Ordass, 1982, 153.

44 Terray, 1990b, 68–69.

45 Terray, 1956, 3. [Terray] 1957, 664.

46 [Terray], 1957, 663–664.

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 Ivan Reok, 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."⁴⁷

In June 1948 the Bishops of the four diocese (Lajos Ordass, Zoltán Túróczy, 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

47 Eibner, 1983, 182.

wanted to maintain the schools that they had fought for in the past.⁴⁸

Though the episcopal letter was signed by all the bishops, it soon became obvious that for Bishops Túróczy 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.⁴⁹ The "Túróczy-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*⁵⁰, 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

48 Ordass, 1982, 177–179.

49 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.

50 Ordass, 1985, 292–293.

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 Túróczy could attend. The participants (though in their theology they were undoubtedly closer to the visiting Túróczy than to Ordass) all kneeled down to pray in support of the “Ordass-line.”⁵¹ As it was described those days, the “Túróczy-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”).⁵² 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

51 Terray, 1990b, 95; Ordass, 1985, 295.

52 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 “Túróczy-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 Túróczy 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 my 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 Túróczy 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.

demand our *soul*?⁵³ That was the real issue, or the controversy, between the “Túróczy-line” and the “Ordass-line.” The “Túróczy-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.⁵⁴

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

53 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.

54 This is a perceptive insight of Gábor Ittész in *Keresztyén igazság*, Nr. 9. March, 1991.

much that I could not work and serve my fatherland. But in any event, the blessed will of God will be done.⁵⁵

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.”⁵⁶ The state achieved its purpose to break the spirit of resistance within the Lutheran church: while Ordass was in prison, Bishop Zoltán Túróczy 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...”⁵⁷

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.”⁵⁸

The World Council of Churches immediately protested:

„The World Council replies that it has assurances from American Lutheran headquarters that the black market allegations

55 Quoted in [Terray], 1957, 664.

56 Ordass, 1985, 330.

57 Eibner, 1983, 184.

58 CC, 1948, 990 (September 29).

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.”⁵⁹

There was also Bishop Berggrav, among others, who immediately wrote a letter of protest to the Hungarian Prime Minister.⁶⁰

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 throughout their history. Bishop Ordass and Bishop László 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 ...”⁶¹

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 with the Roman Catholic position in the matter, but as a typical Continental Lutheran he was loath to meddle in politics ...”⁶² 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

59 CC, 1948 (November 10).

60 Ordass, 1985, 384–385.

61 Mathe, 1949, 365.

62 Empie, 1949, 588.

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.⁶³

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 Túróczy 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 Túróczy. When Túróczy 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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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 Lutheranism is now virtually complete. From now on this branch of

63 Empie, 1949, 590.

64 Ordass, 1985, 360–361.

65 Ordass, 1985, 373–374.

Protestantism must be regarded as being as subservient to the Communist state as is Orthodoxy in Russia and its eastern satellites.⁶⁶

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.”⁶⁷ 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 “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

66 CC, 1950, 604.

67 Quoted by Eibner 1983, 183., as a non-identified death bed confession according to Szépfalusi.

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 ...”⁶⁸

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.”⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ 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.

68 See Note 48.

69 *CC*, 1955, 937 (August 17).

70 *CC*, 1955, 937 (August 17).

71 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.

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.⁷² 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.⁷³ On July 7, János Horváth, the President of the Hungarian State Bureau for Church Affairs, also came to Ordass's home.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ 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.

72 Ordass, 1987, 471–487.

73 Ordass, 1987, 489–508.

74 Ordass, 1987, 489–508.

75 Ordass, 1987, 508–514.

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,"⁷⁶ 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 America⁷⁷ (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."⁷⁸ 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).⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ The excited atmosphere and the delegates' concern for Ordass is well reflected in an article of *The Christian Century* on August 29, 1956.⁸¹

76 Ordass, 1987, 518.

77 Ordass, 1987, 518–524.

78 Ordass, 1972, 244.

79 Ordass, 1987, 530–536.

80 Ordass, 1987, 536–539.

81 CC, 1956, 991 (August 29). "Freedom for Bishop Ordass [Editorial

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.⁸² He explained to Ordass that the Bêlatedness 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.⁸³ 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,”⁸⁴ 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

Correspondence 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.”

82 Ordass, 1987, 539–552.

83 See notes, *ibid*.

84 Ordass, 1985, 413.

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.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶ 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.”⁸⁷ And with the resignation of Bishop Lajos Vető on All Saints Day,⁸⁸ 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* (italics added) 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

85 [Terray], 1957, 664. In Hungarian: Ordass, 1982, 288–291. Terray, 1990b, 148–149. Ordass, 1992, 246–249.

86 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.

87 Quoted by Eibner, 1983, 185.

88 Ordass, 1987, 574.

the name of the church” but “in the name of the nation”⁸⁹ (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.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹

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,

89 “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 all mighty [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. 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.

90 Ordass, 1987, 579–581.

91 CC, 1956, 1318 (November 14).

but despite his open association with the revolution, Ordass was allowed to continue at his post⁹² – 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.”⁹³ 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

92 Eibner, 1983, 185.

93 Ordass, 1987, 626.

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 "newfound flexibility" in dealing with state-authorities.⁹⁴ 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."⁹⁵ 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."⁹⁶ 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

94 Eibner, 1983, 185.

95 Quoted by Eibner, 1983, 185. Ordass, 1982, 194.

96 Eibner, 1983, 185.

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.⁹⁷

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

⁹⁷ *Lutheran Herald* 1957, 822 (September 3).

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 freedom⁹⁸

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.”⁹⁹

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.¹⁰⁰

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.

98 *Lutheran Herald* 1957, 824, and Ordass, 1992, 320.

99 *Time*, 1957 (August 19).

100 Ordass, 1972, 245; Terray, 1990b, 162.

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 ..."¹⁰¹ 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."¹⁰² 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

101 Eibner, 1983, 186.

102 CC, 1958, 36 (January 8).

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 harassed.

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; Karoly 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 Túróczy 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.¹⁰³

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.”¹⁰⁴ “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.”¹⁰⁵ 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 Túróczy 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.

103 CC, 1958, 36 (January 8).

104 Ordass, 1987,708.

105 Ordass, 1987,709.

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 correspondence and activity. The task was given to Karoly 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."¹⁰⁶ 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 Túróczy, 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."¹⁰⁷ (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.¹⁰⁸ "To

106 CC, 1958, 36 (January 8).

107 Ordass, 1987, 799.

108 Ordass, 1987, 794–795.

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.”¹⁰⁹

Due 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 Túróczy. The more I study Ordass’s

109 Stone, 1971, 6.

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.

Bibliography (1993)

This bibliography is organized under the following headings:

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 the spring of 1993.

Abbreviations:

CC = *The Christian Century*

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

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3.

The Veil of God and the Cross of Christ

Ordass' Testimony as Reflecting *Theologia Crucis*¹

In the previous essay of this volume I have presented Ordass's witnessing of dramatic truth in a five-act drama, describing his life-history and his conflicts with the communist authorities and with the leaders of his church as a series of victories over temptations to deviate from the truth. We are now in a position to give a theological evaluation of the *content* of his testimony.

Ordass was a witness. His life and ministry, his deeds and his words all witnessed to the cross of Christ. He was a twentieth-century successor to Martin Luther, as a theologian of the cross. I emphasize that Ordass was a witnessing theologian because during the 1990's in the Lutheran Church of Hungary there was a misleading suggestion that Ordass was not ultimately motivated by theological considerations.² Although Scandinavian theology undoubtedly influenced Ordass, he did not leave us thick volumes of theological treatises; during his ministry he was a man of action and

¹ The Second Part of an Article published with the title "The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass during Communism in Hungary", In, *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol.XVIII, Winter 2004, pp.435-454. Also in: *Zwischen den Mühlsteinen. Protestantische Kirchen in den der Errichtung der kommunistischen Herrschaft im östlichen Europa*, Hg .Peter Maser und Jean Holger Schjorring, Erlangen, Martin Luther Verlag, 2002, pp.303-320. Originally delivered as lecture in Gallneukirchen Austria, January, 2001.

² Imre Veöreös, *A harmadik egyházi út 1948–1950* [The third way of the church] (Budapest: Evangélikus Sajtóosztály, 1990), 130.

when he was silenced he expressed himself in meditative, contemplative genres. 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. In his library we can find a hardback copy of the first edition of Walter von Loewenich's *Luthers theologia crucis*³ with Ordass' own marginal remarks showing how thoroughly he studied this work.

In and with his own life's story, Ordass was a theologian of the cross. Based on Scripture, Luther, and Walter von Loewenich's Luther's *theologia crucis*, Ordass also witnessed to the cross of Christ in his words, that is, in his speeches, writings and especially his sermons. In the first half of his pastoral service Ordass felt detached from contemporary practices of evangelization; yet later, having gone through the sufferings of his short second period of episcopal service, Ordass very frequently completed his sermons with a personal testimony.

In order to understand who the theologian of the cross is, now we turn to Luther's Heidelberg §Disputation and to its most recent commentary by the American theologian Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputations*.⁴ The theology of the cross is an offensive theology as it attacks not only sin but also the theology of sinful man. The theology of the cross is of a polemical nature: it wishes to reveal and point out how man covers himself with his theology, how he conceals his own infidelity behind a pious facade. The theology of the cross is in constant struggle with the theology of glory. What Luther contrasted in the Heidelberg §Disputations was not the theology of glory and the theology of the cross but the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. The theologian of the cross is in constant polemics with the theologian of glory, or, we may perhaps say, in each proper theologian there is a struggle between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross.

3 Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theologia crucis*, Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1929. (The bookmark in Ordass's library: 3 1. 5 69).

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

For Luther the great divide between the two theologians is stated in theses 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 as on the cross **God makes visible what he made for man**. 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.”⁵ 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 hides his real self (that is, his love) in his unusual

5 Forde, 78.

“strange” work (Isa. 28:21), the *opus proprium* hidden in the *opus alienum*. God hides 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 2 1:

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

We must be careful not to let the theology of the cross be a “negative theology of glory”! We should not praise suffering in itself, as suffering in itself is bad. But the cross 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.”⁶ 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 should be made new.

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 for 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 your task to weigh and examine everything that has been said about me according to your conscience. I do not know what kind of verdict will be returned. If your conscience compels you to an acquittal then the wounds I carry away for my battle for society will not be so bloody

6 Forde, 90.

and painful, so that I will be able to do my work with complete dedication and the same fervour as before. It is my intention to continue my service. God will help me to forget these five weeks. I am prepared to continue my service for my homeland and for my church.

It is also possible that you will find me guilty after your consideration and impose a punishment on me. In that case I will accept it peacefully and with humility in my heart. If I am convicted, then the conviction will become a veil that hides God's will from me and renders it incomprehensible to me. But I will accept it from the hand of God without grumbling. One thing I know – namely, that whatever happens to me is God's beneficial will.⁷

When Ordass got out of prison in 1950 he spent six 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:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. He comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction by the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God. 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 when** patiently you endure the same sufferings as we also endure. 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. 1:3–7.⁸

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

8 A photograph of the original can be seen in Terray, between pp. 96–7.

By Lent of 1955 he 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 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.”⁹

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, know 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

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

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!¹⁰

After his rehabilitation by the state and the church, Ordass was allowed to preach again and some of these sermons allow us to hear his personal testimony. In the congregation of Budahegyvidék on October 14, 1956, the text was Matthew 22:1–14, the parable of the royal wedding feast. We can see that Ordass was consciously bearing witness to the cross:

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

To him the cross, to me his peace. To him death, to me his fruit: life.¹¹

Three weeks after he was restored to his episcopal office in 1956, Bishop Ordass ordained a young pastor, Kálman Havasi, in the Deák-tér Congregation of Budapest on November 18. The text of his sermon was the verse that was so dear to him: “But the one who en-

¹⁰ Ibid., 166–7.

¹¹ Lajos Ordass, *Jó hír a szenvedőknek* [Good News for those who suffer], Budapest: OLBK, 1992. In English: in Terray, 118.

dures to the end will be saved” (Mt. 24:13). There is again solemnity in Ordass’ personal testimony:

Now I am telling you a secret ...

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

And I wish to open this secret not only by pointing to the testimony of others. In this most solemn hour of your life I am, perhaps, permitted to address you with my most personal experience. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave me this biblical verse when I lived the hardest days of my life, when my personal fate turned most hopeless. And now I wish to tell you with utmost joy that my Lord Jesus Christ has always kept his promise until now. He has never let me down. And there is nothing in my soul but the firm certainty that Jesus keeps his promise until giving us the crown of salvation.¹²

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

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

For Jesus Christ reveals his soul only on the cross. One can get close to this soul if one knows that Jesus sealed all his words and deeds when he was willing to bear all the consequences of the love he proclaimed. Even the very consequence that he should be crucified in the congregation by those whom he so deeply loved.¹³

12 Ibid., 248.

13 Ibid., 138.

On the sixth Sunday after Easter, June 2, 1957 Ordass delivered a sermon in Swedish in the cathedral of Copenhagen. The text was §John 15:26 tOI6:4 and his subject was testimony:

The task our Lord gave is that we should be witnesses in our life on earth. That the world should get to know God by the testimonies of our lives. Please allow me to bear a personal witness about it. When I had again the opportunity to proclaim the word of God after eight years of silence I felt committed not only to teach the truth of our faith in the Gospel in the congregations where I address the people but also to bear a personal witness. Today let me do this for you with great joy I am telling this not that you should be sorry for me but to bear witness. Christ keeps his promise. In the deepest crisis when the cross presses you §never so hard he comes to his people with the victorious power of the Holy Spirit. He does not make your cross less heavy but he helps us to bear this cross. It happens to those who belong to him. It is the most wondelful experience to be the witness of the Saviour. Moreover: this is the only meaning of life.¹⁴

At the opening worship of the Minneapolis Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Ordass was honored to deliver the sermon. The topic of the Assembly was “Christ Liberates and Unites.” The text of his sermon was taken from John 12 about the grain of wheat that must fall into the earth and die so that it could bring forth life. The large congregation was especially touched by this modest testimony on August 15, 1957; at the end of his sermon he witnessed in the third person to the love of Christ experienced while he was in prison:

An elderly disciple of Jesus now speaks to you. He wants to conclude this official sermon with a personal testimony about his Lord and Saviour. He would like to say how often he has experienced already in his life the forgiving grace of Christ

14 Ibid., 202.

When he had to experience being imprisoned, he was still able to be with Christ in royal freedom in the truest sense of the word. What happiness to have been allowed such freedom. How wonderful was the fruit of the death of Christ then, when the world offered only bitterness.¹⁵

By the spring of 1958 the conflicts between the Communist state and Ordass were getting sharper. The second removal from his episcopal office was already looming over his head. Within this tense period he did not cease visiting his congregations and he kept on witnessing to the cross of Christ. On Palm Sunday (March 30, 1958) he preached about suffering on the famous passage, “a cloud of witnesses” of Hebrews 12:1–6 with the title: “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.”

Suffering is a question for all of us. And let us add immediately that it is a painful, unsolved question for us...

This was the way that I got to know God’s love in my life in the service of the kingdom of God. I do know what suffering is. But it did not remain an unsolved mystery for me. Its key has become so simple when I understood: He chastens because he loves us.¹⁶

Conclusion

We began and have now ended with the allusion to the “cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12. This is proclaimed by the names of the circular oak-frieze in Vinje Lutheran Church in Willmar, Minnesota. (See also Ordass’ letter to the Vinje pastor of May 1976 at the end of this essay). The form of Ordass’ testimony was his witnessing to a dramatic truth in his life. Consciously or unconsciously, he seems to have been touched by the dramatic theology of his Swedish Professor Gustaf Aulén. The drama of his life, his standing firm and remaining steadfast to truth, gave birth to his verbal testimonies.

15 *Ibid.*, 312; Terray, *op. cit.* 127–8.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Speaking about the content of his testimony, we have heard Ordass' own voice witnessing to the love of Christ in suffering.

I hope it has now become clear how and why Ordass was a theologian of the cross in the sense of Luther or Loewenich. He had to suffer and carry the cross because of his firm commitment to truth. As Luther once recognized, he also realized that the hiding God revealed himself "in the form of the opposite." Ordass experienced the warmth of God's flaming love in rejection and suffering under the cross. This was the testimony he passed on during the short period of his second episcopal and pastoral ministry. And this is the testimony he passes on to us today.

Appendix

A Letter from Lajos Ordass to Lowell Larson, Pastor of Villje Lutheran Church, Willmar, Minnesota

§1101 S.W. Willmar Avenue
WILLMAR.
Minnesota 56201,
USA

Márvány u. 23.
H-1126,
BUDAPEST XII.
Hungary

10th of May 1976

My very dear Pastor Larson,
my dear brother in the Lord Jesus Christ,

Returning from his long American trip, my friend and brother in the Lord, lawyer dr. Boleratzky handed me the booklet of the Vinje Lutheran Church, Willmar, Minnesota entitled "The Centennial Jubilee 1867–1967", as well as the kind letter you were good enough to write to dr. Boleratzky.

I read the magnificent booklet about the Centennial Jubilee with great interest. I got to know from it the hundred years old history of the Vinje Church, its life which has been so richly blessed by God after the initial very trying and difficult years. I found it

uplifting to read how the congregation erected a churchbuilding on four occasions during its 100 years of existence to the glory of the name of God and to serve as spiritual home to the members of the congregation. These are shining examples of love to the Church and to her Lord. I would like to believe that God's blessing will continually rest on your congregation. To this end I also pray to my God from the bottom of my heart.

Something that concerns my person in particular is the fact that you chose verses 1–2 of the 12th chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews to be the motto verses of your new church, and as an illustration you wrote round the inside of the church the names of many human witnesses of God and of Jesus Christ. And my name was also included as last in this list of Witnesses. I could even verify this fact with my own eyes looking at one of the many beautiful photos in the Centennial Album.

I must humbly confess the honour you conferred upon me in this way seemed to me almost like a dream, one of those acts of God which are past understanding. The main reason why I feel it is beyond understanding is, because the names listed, I presume, retain in remembrance witnesses of Christ who died either centuries ago or in more recent times, and I consider it probable that my name represents the only Christian witness who is still living on this side of life and only carries in himself the desire for eternity.

I wish to make one further comment. On the list of witnesses my name stands immediately next to that of Bishop Berggrav. I continue to remember him with a feeling of gratitude. When Bishop Berggrav was fighting his hard and by no means dangerless battle for the cause of Christ, I did not know him yet personally. I could only bear him up in prayer and make his struggle known in our church in Hungary. It was after the World War that I had the privilege of meeting him personally. Being young, I was at that time in the initial years of my ministry as a bishop, my trials still lay in the future. Bishop Berggrav provided me with advice and wise directions with the experience of a man who stood fast victoriously amid fierce strife and with his fatherly benevolence. I am very grateful to him for this. Thus you will understand why my heart is filled with joy over having my name next to his.

I must emphasize once again my own unworthiness for getting unto the list. This I feel with trembling. For I still belong to those witnesses of our Lord Jesus Christ who have not yet resisted unto blood (Hebrews 12:4). I am only endeavouring to order my life in the light of the Scripture I received from God in one of the most decisive hours of my life: “He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Mt. 24:13).

Further I long to tell the members of Vinje Lutheran Church that since the day I heard of your faithfulness towards Christ and of your distinguishing love to me, I remember the church, her ministers, every worker and member in my daily prayers. With this I would like to draw my letter to a conclusion in the name of God.

May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Ghost rest upon you and remain with you all!

Courtesy of Steven §Knudson, current pastor of Vinje Lutheran Church (Willmar, Minnesota)

4.

Complicity and Perseverance:

Hungarian Lutherans During and After Communism¹

In this essay I will be talking about the struggles within my small Lutheran church in the heart of Europe, in Hungary. But let me immediately offer a corrective: this is not only about my church but also your church, for “the church is catholic, universal,” as John Donne, the seventeenth-century English poet said in his celebrated meditation. “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent... therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”²

I hope that my story, colleagues and friends, sisters and brothers, is going to turn into your story at the end of the day because, as the apostle Paul says, we are part of one another and we as Christians are meant to bear each others’ burden. I come from that part of our common globe where Christian faith, the faith of the church, was tried and was found wanting because of persecution. Good for you that you were never exposed to such pressure and persecution. Or, perhaps, bad for you that you have never had this experience. You have your own latent dangers and pitfalls, perhaps not as harmful and painful as ours, lurking after you to threaten your faith, such as prosperity and materialism and empire-building.

The story I am going to share with you is going to be rather grim and tragic. But nothing is written in vain. The story is also

¹ Published in *Lutheran Forum*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Spring ,2008, pp. 43-48.

The original version was delivered as the Copenhaver lecture at Roanoke College, VA on November 9, 2006.

² John Donne, “Meditation XVII,” in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

written for our and your learning as the good old “Lutheran” St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10.

From Hard Communism to Goulash Communism

Hungary is a small nation with a thousand-year-old history. The Hungarian language is a small, strange linguistic island in the vast sea of Germanic and Slavonic languages. It is related to none of these groups, as it is not an Indo-European but a Finno-Ugric language. The pagan Hungarians converted to Christianity in the year 1000, and ever since the history of the nation has been a constant fight for integrity and independence since geographically and geopolitically it is on the border of east and west. We had Tatar and Turkish invasions in the Middle Ages and early modernity. For centuries the Hapsburgs wanted to colonize the country; their conflicts were solved by the Compromise of 1867 that marked the beginning of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. However, due in part to re-emerging improper conduct – Hungarian “pride” over ethnic minorities during the peaceful and prosperous Austro-Hungarian monarchy – Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory with the end of the First World War. Due to another ill-fated alliance, Hungary again found herself on the side of losers in 1945. The Soviets came to liberate the country from Nazi occupation, but as somebody in the movie *Freedom’s Fury* said, they liberated us also from our freedom as they forgot to go home. The western world admired the courage of this small nation but ungraciously let it down because of its involvement with the occupation of the Suez Canal in 1956.

The history of communism has two phases: we may call the first phase of the late forties and the early fifties “hard communism” or “Stalinism.” This cruel suppression of the Hungarian revolution by the Russian tanks on November 4, 1956, marked the beginning of the Kádár era, or “soft communism,” better known here as “goulash communism.” For a couple of decades Hungary became “the happiest barracks in the eastern European concentration camp.” Party Secretary János Kádár, traitor to the revolution, could provide a relative welfare for the inhabitants, but he had no inhibitions against joining the Soviets in crushing the Prague Spring of 1968.

Some 200,000 people fled the country from the Russian tanks in 1956, and soon after the revolution hundreds were executed. During the three decades of soft communism (1957–1988) we Hungarians were not sent to concentration camps any more. We were even allowed to travel to the west once every three years. All in all, I daresay, this “soft communism” was psychologically and morally more dangerous than Stalinist tyranny. During the Stalinist terror everybody knew who was who, while during the Kádár regime we were gradually hypnotized to take our situation as reality, both ultimate and penultimate, and there was no way out. Most people believed that communism, or socialism as they called it, would have no end, as these were the limits of our existence not just for our generation but also for several generations to come. Not even two years before 1989 would any Hungarian, or any citizen of the world, predict that this system would collapse like a pack of cards. I heard once the German theologian Gerhard Sauter say that for him the sudden fall of communism with the disappearance of the Berlin wall was hard evidence of the judgment of God.

A Minority Within a Minority

My topic is “complicity and perseverance.” The Christian churches have, unfortunately, not proven better than any other earthly institution. That is to say, they were just as ill-prepared for the advent of communism as for its collapse forty years later. They proved to be the foolish virgins without oil in their lamps and thus were unready, not for the coming of the bridegroom, but for the coming and going of the enemy. God forbid that we should call communism the enemy! No, the enemy is much more sophisticated than any secular ideology, however hostile it might appear to Christian faith. Evil was, and is, I am afraid to say, lurking in our midst, among ourselves, in ourselves.

If Hungarians with their ten million inhabitants are a minority among the peoples of Europe, the Lutherans (3%) in Hungary are also a minority among the Roman Catholics (60%), and Reformed Christians (20%) of the population. My story, therefore, is going to be a story of a minority within a minority. But we have learned from

our Bible, both the Old and the New Testament, that might is not necessarily a virtue, since God frequently chooses the oppressed, the marginal, and the minority.

Hungarian Lutherans have a different theology both from Catholics and the Reformed. The Roman Catholic church has always held that the country was a *regnum marianum*, a country protected by the Virgin Mary ever since King Stephen offered his crown and land to the Blessed Virgin. For Catholics, the communists' anti-religious Marxist ideology did indeed seem to be the devil incarnate, as this modern totalitarian system, so alien from the soul and religion of the people, seemed indeed to be demonic. Their most outstanding leader, Cardinal Mindszenty, identified himself not just with the Catholics but with the whole people and developed a theology and practice of resistance. The communists put Mindszenty into prison: he was released in the midst of the 1956 revolution when he made an impressive radio address blaming "the inheritors of the fallen system." When the Russian tanks crushed the revolution, he got shelter from the American embassy for 15 years. He was a hero of resistance, but the Roman Catholic Church began to adopt a more cautious *modus vivendi* policy, called the "policy of small steps," which was soon also approved by the Holy See. All the arrangements suited the international climate of the 1960s and also the inclusive ideology of the Kádár regime: "He who is not against us is with us." When Cardinal Mindszenty was allowed to leave the American embassy for western Europe in 1971, he found himself a forsaken and lonely figure.

The Reformed church at the beginning of communism was following the rather unfortunate advice of their "pope" Karl Barth. They developed a special theology of judgment arguing, in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets, that we should take communism as the judgment of God, since in the past our churches have lined up with reactionary powers: Protestant bishops, for example, had voted for the law discriminating against the Jews. The Reformed also had a hero, namely Bishop László Ravasz, who emerged in the 1956 revolution but was removed after the failure of the revolution. The Reformed, just as the Catholics, have always been more politically committed than their Lutheran brethren. The Calvinists were proud

to uphold their progressive political history when they rebelled against the Hapsburgs and the Catholics and were keen on using this credit both in the Stalinist and the soft communist period. A “red” bishop of the Reformed church left the church after 1956 and became the foreign minister of the Kádár regime. The Reformed bishops of the Kádár era developed a so-called “theology of service,” an ideology that tried to tame pious church members to serve not only their Lord but also the communist state.

Confessors, Compromisers, Collaborators, and Controversials

The Lutheran story is, however, more colorful, exciting, and dramatic. In a 1999 lecture, which later was published as an article, I introduced the twentieth-century history of the Hungarian Lutheran church by analyzing the inaugural speeches of bishops between 1939 and 1990, as their different theological or pseudo-theological emphases reflected well the various drifts that the boat of this small church was taking. The typology I offered was as follows.

- the confessing bishop, Lajos Ordass
- the compromising bishops, Zoltán Túróczy and József Szabó
- the collaborating bishops pre-1956, László Dezséry and Lajos Vető
- the collaborating bishops post-1956, Zoltán Káldy, Ernő Ottlyk, and Gyula Nagy
- the controversial bishops, Béla Harmati and Imre Szebik³

In the aforementioned article I described my typology thus:

Whomever I call “compromiser” was, to a certain extent, also necessarily a “confessor.” But it means that in unexpectedly difficult political situations there were some who managed to remain loyal to the gospel and remained unmoveable when they believed vital principles were at stake. The “compromisers” also tried to remain faithful to the gospel, but they wished to find a rational *modus vivendi*... The

³ See the essay reprinted in this volume on pages §§§§§§§§ In German, “Bekenner und Angepasste. Skizzen zu einem noch nicht geklärten Kapitel der jüngsten lutherischen Kirchengeschichte Ungarns,” in *Glaube in der 2. Welt* (June 2000): 14–21.

collaborator is the one who is only nominally chosen by the church: it is ultimately the state that places him into office. Again, I would not immediately stamp them as traitors, since they might have been convinced that their theology of church government was the only “way” for the church. I considered bishops elected in 1987 and 1990 as “controversial” because their positions depended on their past: they took their offices without letting the cleansing processes, coming from below, prevail within the church.⁴

A similar typology to mine was developed by American Lutheran theologian and ethicist H. David Baer.⁵

Let us begin by considering evangelical or pietist yet “compromising” Bishop Zoltán Túróczy. Túróczy, unlike the confessing Bishop Ordass, was not passionate about defending church-related schools during the aggressive communist nationalization of parochial schools in 1948. He and his followers argued that “martyr blood cannot flood for the schools,” since the church’s main mission is the ministry and the sacraments. While the confessing Bishop Ordass was in prison, Túróczy signed the “Agreement” with communist leaders. His conduct is characterized by Baer with a quote from a Transylvanian poet: *ahogy lehet*, which means “in the way that it is possible.” This type was ready for compromise for the sake of a *modus vivendi*. In an evangelical spirit they found that the time of the “people’s church” and historical Christendom had come to an end. They believed that when old doors closed (like those of church schools) God would open new ones. There would be revivals, evangelizations, and thus hope for the church to become missionary church. For this pietist attitude the church school was *adiaphora*, neutral and indifferent from the point of view of proclaiming the gospel.

4 Ibid.

5 In an excellent study, the American Lutheran theologian and ethicist H. David Baer has also provided a typology not entirely different from the one I proposed seven years ago: *The Struggle of Hungarian Lutherans under Communism* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006). The author calls the genre of his book a “study of moral argument” and his concern is “with the theological arguments developed in Hungary’s Lutheran Church in response to communist dictatorship,” 4.

Túróczy stands in contrast to the “collaborating” or “red” bishops László Dezséry and Lajos Vető, and also the General Inspector Iván Reök. “Collaboration,” comments Baer, “entailed affirming Hungarian socialism as religious truth... Collaboration was *ahogy lehet* gone amok: shrewd compromise without the shrewdness, dogged survival without the purpose, and tragic figures without the noble spirit... Survival, not ministry, became the final good, and compromise was no longer subjected to moral considerations.”⁶ These collaborators taught between 1949 and 1956 that “the church exists for socialism,” which is, as Baer rightly observes, false teaching and therefore the Lutheran church as represented by the leaders in that period “ceased to be a church.”⁷

The “confessing bishop” is associated primarily with the name of the great Hungarian Lutheran saint, Bishop Lajos Ordass (1901–1978) whose name can be found on an oak frieze in the round sanctuary of Vinje Lutheran Church in Willmar, Minnesota among a “great cloud of witnesses.” The last three of the 78 names of these witnesses from the Bible and the church are Bonhoeffer, Berggrav, and Ordass. When he oak frieze was made, Ordass was the only the person still alive. He lived, however, in total isolation from 1958 until his death in 1978.

Here I must add a personal note. I was brought up as a Lutheran pastor’s son. My father became a seminary professor when I was thirteen. Throughout the 1970s I gradually became alienated from my church, as I perceived it to be something false. I chose therefore to have a secular career as a teacher, though I have always had some inner desire for ministry and theology. Several years after Bishop Ordass’s death in the mid 1980s, his autobiography was published in Switzerland. I read it and it blew my mind. It was indeed an epiphany in my life. All of a sudden I understood the real history of the Lutheran church in the twentieth century, a story that was diametrically opposed to what we had been taught by the church establishment, including my own father who was a church historian. I understood that the church was a suffering church or, as I later

6 Ibid., 46, 50.

7 Ibid., 128.

learned from Luther, a hidden church. Since 1988 I have published several articles both in English and Hungarian and even a small book on Bishop Ordass⁸ in the hope of reappropriating his legacy that could, I firmly believe, lead to a renewal or reformation of my home church, which I considered to be in pretty bad shape.

In my understanding, Bishop Ordass's life, witness, and ministry were "cruciform." They display for us the Pauline and Lutheran paradoxes of the theology of the cross. Shakespeare, not unlike Luther, also teaches us that in a world turned upside down, dictators, fake usurpers, careerists and pseudo-bishops send the chosen ones into exile. No wonder that Ordass could write a series of meditations, *At the Foot of the Cross*, which was published here in the United States as "by an imprisoned pastor behind the iron curtain."⁹ Ordass became so influential even in this country that he is the only Hungarian to have been selected among the texts of the Lutheran breviary *For All the Saints*.

Ordass was bishop from 1945 until his death in 1978, though he was active for less than five years: first between 1945 and 1948, at the end of which time he was imprisoned for protecting church schools, and then again between 1956 and 1958. He got back to his office during the 1956 revolution and remained there long after the Russians crushed the revolution, since the state wanted to win him for their purposes. But unlike many others, he did not let himself be demoralized and fought with perseverance for the integrity of his

8 "Bishop Lajos Ordass and the Hungarian Lutheran Church," in *Hungarian Studies* 10/1 (1995): 65–98. "The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass during Communism in Hungary," *Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (2004): 435–454. "The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and Its Aftermath in the Lutheran Church. The Case of Bishop Ordass," in *Im Räderwerk des 'real existierenden Sozialismus.'* *Kirchen in Ostmittel- und Osteuropa von Stalin bis Gorbatschow*, eds. Hartmut Lehmann and Jens Holger Schjorring (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 31–40. "The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass During Communism in Hungary," in *Zwischen den Mühlsteinen. Protestantische Kirchen in der Errichtung der kommunistischen Herrschaft im östlichen Europa*, eds. Peter Maser and Jean Holger Schjorring (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 2002), 303–320. *A megállás szimbóluma: Előadások Ordass Lajosról* [Symbol of Steadfast Belief: Lectures on Bishop Lajos Ordass] (Budapest: Privately published by the author, 2001), 303–320.

9 Lajos Ordass, *At the Foot of the Cross. Lenten Meditations by an Imprisoned Pastor Behind the Iron Curtain*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1958.

church. He was twice elected to be the vice president of the Lutheran World Federation. Ordass, unlike the Roman Catholic Cardinal Mindszenty, was not a resister. He knew that his mandate was for the defense of his church and the people in his church. He remained a good Lutheran by not trying to convert his faith into political action and thereby risking the loss of his identity. But by remaining faithful to his principles, he became a formidable adversary to the communists. Baer recognized in Ordass an attitude (which I find very similar to Luther and Jonathan Edwards) that ethicists label as “non-consequential” or “deontologist.”

Deontology means a commitment to duty that excludes from moral consideration the effects, even the most negative ones, that result from adhering to duty. For a deontologist, duty has order of privilege over consequence. Often, and certainly in the case of Bishop Ordass, deontology depends on a sense of hidden providence. For a deontologist of this sort, disregarding consequences makes sense because one believes that God controls history even when his providential care cannot be seen and, therefore, that God is responsible for the consequences both good and bad, that result from adhering to duty. Without faith in hidden providence, keeping duty at great cost can appear foolhardy or irresponsible.¹⁰

In the show trial of 1948, before the verdict Ordass said the following words to the judges. “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.”¹¹

10 Ibid., 77.

11 “The Testimony of Bishop Lajos Ordass,” 453. See also Eric W. Gritsch, “Der Schleier Gottes. Ein theologischer Rückblick auf Lajos Ordass,” in *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt, Jahrbuch der Martin-Luther Bundes, Folge 49* (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 2002), 264–76.

Bishop Zoltán Káldy (1918–1987) took over when the state removed Bishop Ordass in 1958. He was seen both by western European and North American Lutherans as somebody unlawfully usurping Ordass’s seat for several decades. However, by 1984, when the Lutheran World Federation held its seventh assembly in Budapest (its first time behind the Iron Curtain), Káldy had managed to create such a positive image for himself among world Lutherans that he was elected president of the LWF. For him, this was a great moment of triumph, as Ordass’s figure haunted the Lutheran church in Hungary and Káldy personally the whole time he was in office. But now he could boast that, while Ordass was “only” vice president, world Lutheranism justified him by electing him as president. However, his triumph was his failure, just as in a good Shakespearean history play or tragedy. During the assembly there came an unexpected public criticism from one of his pastors who criticized Káldy’s false “theology of diakonia” and dictatorial style of conduct. Káldy had created a “theology” which he wanted to impose on all his pastors. Its essence was that a good Christian is meant to faithfully serve the communist state.

Baer does his best to be fair to Káldy by recognizing that Káldy’s space of maneuver (*mozgástér*) was very limited, and within these limits he tried to serve his church, in particular through the improvement of its infrastructure. But Baer also rightly observes that the church is more than infrastructure. It is a spiritual body upon which Káldy inflicted serious wounds. Baer’s perceptive insight is that Káldy’s idea of the serving church was sliding into sycophancy. He himself “degenerated into a clerical tyrant and communist lackey.”¹²

Baer concludes that Túróczy, Dezséry and Vető, and Káldy were all versions of the *ahogy lehet*. Ordass stood alone, according to Baer, but only as an individual case. The potential suffering church in Hungary, he claims (dubiously, in my opinion), never became a historical reality. However, Baer sees Ordass as “a permanent thorn in the flesh of Hungary’s Lutheran Church” and

12 Baer, 100.

concludes that “only a great church could produce such a great man.”¹³

Epilogue – A Divided Church Re-united

On August 17, 2008, a special and symbolically significant event took place at the shrine of Bishop Ordass in the Farkasréti Cemetery of Budapest.

Presiding Bishop János Ittzés (one of the founders of the Ordass Lajos Society in 1988) as well as Gergely Pröhle (1965-), the General Inspector of the Lutheran Church in Hungary (since 2006) officially commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Bishop Lajos Ordass.

The event was extraordinary as after the political changes the internally divided Lutheran Church of Hungary was now visibly and manifestly re-united.

Seven years earlier, at the centenary celebrations of Bishop Ordass' birth, there were two commemorations: one by the official church with Presiding Bishop Imre Szebik and former Presiding Bishop Béla Harmati and one organized by the Ordass Lajos Society with its founding member: the recently elected Bishop János Ittzés.

With the episcopal activity of Bishop János Ittzés (1944-) (elected as Bishop in 2000 and Presiding Bishop in 2006) a radically new chapter has begun in the history of the Hungarian Lutherans. He was the only student to graduate at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in 1967 but Bishop Zoltán Káldy refused to ordain him as he was not willing to praise the Communist state in his farewell-speech at the Seminary. Therefore, in the late 60s he was employed as a physical worker and had to complete a two-year military service. Eventually, Bishop Ernő Ottlyk ordained him in Bishop Káldy's absence in 1970. Then he served as a pastor at

¹³ Ibid., 132.

various congregations in Western Hungary. It was a great surprise, when a member of the opposition became the first elected Bishop of old/new Western (Transdanubian) Diocese Bishop Béla Harmati refused to participate at the installation of János Ittzés in September 2000. In 2005 it was mainly at the initiative of Bishop Ittzés that the Fact-finding Committee was set up by the Synod.

There were many obstacles to the purification and renewal of the church which were mainly rooted in its leaders – frequently hidden - commitment to the previous regime. „Veritas Filia Temporis”. „Truth is the Daughter of Time” – runs the old Latin proverb. „Time unfolds what plighted cunning hides” – writes Shakespeare.

Renewal has been a controversial and painful process even in the life of a small minority church.

In August 2008 – thirty years after the death of Bishop Lajos Ordass and twenty years after the political changes in Hungary and former Eastern Europe, the rich theological heritage of Bishop Ordass was eventually reappropriated by the Lutheran Church in Hungary that once denied and disavowed him.

The Gospel also teaches us that whatever is hidden will be one day disclosed (Mt 10,26). Our secretly hidden lives will become like open books that final day and the names of the faithful ones will be recognized in the Book of Life (Rev 20,12). Time will come when history will „unveil” itself and the veil of God will be forever and finally removed.

Theological reflections on the veil of God and the cross of Christ in a chapter of a tiny, minority church’s faithful and faithless history in the 20th century can help us to turn our gaze towards that future day when, as St.Paul reminds us, our own veils will also be removed. (2Cor 3,16).

A Short Chronology of Hungarian History

	Finno-Ugrian Tribes between the Volga and the Urals
896	Magyar tribes occupy the Carpathian Basin
1000	Hungarian's Conversion to Christianity During King Stephen
1242-3	Invasion of the Tatars
1526	Hungarian Army Defeated by the Turks under Mohács
1541-1686	Hungary Split into Three Parts Hapsburgs (North-West) Turks (Middle) Transylvania (South-East)
1703-1711	Rákóczi's War for Independence Against Hapsburgs
1848-1849	Kossuth's War for Independence Against Hapsburgs
1867	Compromise
1867-1918	Austro-Hungarian Monarchy
1921	Trianon treatise: Hungary Loses Two Third of Territory
1919-1944	Horthy's Regency
1944	Nazi Occupation
1945	Russian Invasion ("Liberation")
1945-1948	Parliamentary Democracy
1949-1956	Stalinism: Rákosi
1956	Revolution: Imre Nagy
1956-1989	Kádár-Regime
1989	Hungary Becomes again Republic
1990	First Free Elections: Hungarian Democratic Forum
1994	Hungarian Socialist Party, Liberal Democrats
1998	Young Democrats
2002	Hungarian Socialist Party and Liberal Democtars
2006	Hungarian Socialist Party Reelected

Chronology of Hungarian Lutheran Church History (1945–1999)

1945

April 4, War ends, Russian "liberate" the country
May 31, Zoltán Túróczy, Bishop of Eastern Diocese arrested
June 25, Bishop Túróczy sentenced to 10 years in prison
September 27, Lajos Ordass Installed as Bishop of Central Diocese
December 29, Law passed on the Removal of German population from Hungary

1946

February 1, Hungary declared to be Republic (Monarchy abolished)
February 27, Slovak-Hungarian Repartition Agreement
March 1, Bishop Túróczy freed from prison

1947

February-July, Bishop Lajos Ordass lecture-tour in Switzerland, Scandinavia and the United States
June 26-July 6 First Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Ordass Elected as Vice President of the Executive Committee
August 31 Parliamentary elections: Communists' relative majority (22%)

1948

March 18, József Szabó Installed as Bishop of the Middle Diocese
March 20, Imre Veöreös, Vice President of Pastor's league urges "reactionary" lay leaders to resign
June 14, Bishop Zoltán Túróczy receives amnesty
June 16, Parliament passes law on the nationalization of church-schools

September 6, Hungarian "KGB" formed
September 8, Bishop Lajos Ordass arrested
October 1, Bishop Ordass indicted for "currency frauds" and sentenced to two years' prison
October 7, The Hungarian Reformed Church Signs Agreement with the state
October, László Dezséry publishes *Open Letter*
December 8, Synod of the Lutheran Church accepts the Agreement with the state
December 14, Agreement signed with the state
December 16, Zoltán Túróczy installed as Bishop of the Western Diocese
December 22, Lajos Vető installed as Bishop of the Eastern Diocese
December 26, Cardinal Mindszenty arrested

1949

March 12, Iván Reök becomes General Inspector of the Lutheran Church
April 26, Pastor András Keken is suspended from office
August 18, New Constitution passed by parliament, Hungary declared to be "People's Republic", church and state separated
September 5, Religion becomes facultative subject at schools
October 15, László Rajk communist leader executed after show-trial

1950

January 13, Leaders of church take oath on the Constitution in Parliament
February 21, József Darvas (Communist Party Member) becomes Inspector of the Central Diocese
February 25, József Darvas becomes Minister of Education
March 3, General Assembly of the church, Ordass' Church Trial decided

March 16, Petition of Pastors against the decision of the Assembly
(as a result many of these pastors removed from office)
March 29, Pastor Keken András arrested
March 30, Pastor György Kendeh arrested
April 1, Special court of the church deposes Bishop Ordass
May 30, Bishop Ordass released from prison
June 27, Bishop László Dezséry installed as Bishop of the Central
Diocese
June 30, Faculties of Theologies removed from universities
October, Pastors András Keken and György Kendeh freed

1951

March 11, Journal of evangelization is banned
March 24, Decree concerning the prior state approval of church
offices
May 19, State office for Church Affairs set up
November 8, Theological Faculty moves to Budapest
November 30, Deaconess Organization Dissolved

1952

February 5, Opening of the church's Synod
February 18, Bishop József Szabó resigns
February 19, Bishop Túróczy resigns
April 17, Imre Mihályfi becomes General Inspector
May 20, Law passed about the two dioceses instead of four
June, Bishop Dezséry offers the remaining two secondary schools
voluntarily to the state
July 10, Bishop Lajos Vető, Bishop of the Northern Diocese
July 18, Bishop László Dezséry, Bishop of the Southern Diocese
August 14, Mátyás Rákosi becomes Prime Minister

1953

March 5, Stalin dies
June-July Missionary and Conference Centers Closed

July 4, Imre Nagy becomes Prime Minister

1954

July Pastor Ferenc Sréter with great many members of his Budavár congregation leaves the Lutheran church and forms a free church congregation

1955

December 3, Imre Nagy excluded from the Communist Party
December 16, church-court suspends Pastor Béla Csepregi, leader of the evangelization

1956

June 1-15, Pastor Béla Csepregi and Bishop Dezséry in Finland

July 18-21 Rákosi suspended as first secretary of the party

July 28-August 4, Central Committee of WCC meet in Galyatető, Hungary, negotiations concerning Bishop Ordass' rehabilitation

August 28-30, Pastors associated with evangelization propose a petition

September-October Pastors' conferences urging reforms

October 5, State rehabilitates Bishop Ordass

October 6, László Rajk Communist martyr reburied

October 8, Church rehabilitates Bishop Ordass

October 14, Ordass first preaches in Budahegyvidék Congregation

October 23-November 4 Revolution

October 24, Imre Nagy becomes Prime Minister

October 30, Bishop Dezséry resigns

October 31, Bishop Ordass preaches on Reformation Day

November 1, Bishop Vető resigns
November 2, Radio Address of Bishop Ordass with church leaders
Cardinal Mindszenty and Bishop Ravasz
November 4, János Kádár's puppet government formed
December 11, General Assembly discusses personal changes and
rehabilitations

1957

February 6, Bishop Zoltán Túróczy Installed as Bishop of the
Northern Diocese
March 24, Decree 22 about the prior state approval of church leaders
August 14-25, Third World Assembly of the Lutheran World
Federation, Bishop Ordass reelected as Vice President of the
Executive Committee
November 12-26, Negotiations between the church and the State
Office for Church Affairs
November 26, As church-state negotiations fail, government
commissar is to control church internal affairs
December 4, As state did not guarantee prior approval of Bishop
Túróczy, Bishop Lajos Vető is restored in the Northern
Diocese

1958

June, Professors Károly Karner, Jenő Sólyom and Dezső Wiczián
fired from the Theological Academy
June 16, Imre Nagy, leader of the 1956 revolution executed
June 19, Bishop Ordass deposed as prior state approval not granted
June 24, Bishop Dezséry returns in order to resign
November 4, Bishop Zoltán Káldy Installed as Bishop of the
Southern Diocese

1959

April 27, Church leaders take oath on the Constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic
June, Church delegation in China and the Soviet Union

1962

July 23, Zoltán Túróczy Bishop receives honorary doctorate from Helsinki University – not allowed to travel to Finland to accept it.

1966

December 8-9, New Laws passed by the Synod: the new Church Laws affirm that the prior approval of the state is required for the nomination of church-leaders.

1967

June 20, Bishop Ernő Ottlyk Installed as Bishop of Northern Diocese After Bishop Vető resigns

1968

January 1, "New Economical Mechanism"
August 20-21, Kádár's Hungary assists in the invasion of Czechoslovakia

1971

Summer, Bishop Ordass granted honorary doctorate from the University of Iceland
November 22, Zoltán Túróczy dies

1977

November 8, László Dezséry dies

1978

August 14, Lajos Ordass dies

1980

June, After many decades the first youth conference held

1982

May, Bishop Ernő Ottlyk retires

September 25, Bishop Gyula Nagy Installed as Bishop of the Northern Diocese

1983

February, New Church Hymn Book introduced

November, Church Celebrates with state the 500th anniversary of Luther's Birth

1984

July 10, Pastor Zoltán Dóka write an *Open Letter to the LWF Leaders*

July 22-August 5, Lutheran World Federation's 7th Assembly in Budapest

July 31, Bishop Zoltán Káldy becomes President of the Lutheran World Federation

August 29, Pastor Zoltán Dóka suspended from office

October 25, Due to pressures from the West, Dóka's suspension is annulled

1986

March, *Brotherly Word* 19 pastors and laymen sign petition for the renewal of the church

1987

May 17, Zoltán Káldy dies

October 24, Bishop Béla Harmati Installed as Bishop of the Southern Diocese

1988

December 8, General Assembly of the church decides rehabilitation of pastors

December 17, The Hungarian Lutheran Youth Association is formed

1989

March 18, "Ordass Lajos Society" is formed

June 30, State Office for Church Affairs ceases to exist

June, Quarterly of Ordass Lajos Friendly Society: *Keresztyén Igazság* (Christian Truth) is launched

July 24-25, Renewal Movement published document *Crying Word*

September 22, Lajos Vető dies

October 23, Hungary Declared to be Republic

1990

January 24, Parliament passes law on the freedom of conscience and religion and the churches

March 17, Bishop Imre Szebik Installed as Bishop of the Northern Diocese after Bishop Gyula Nagy retires

March 19, Agreement Between church and state annulled

April 28, Pastor Zoltán Dóka receives honorary doctorate from Zürich University

June 12, Southern Diocese apologizes for Ordass' illegal removal in 1958

1991

February 2, The Opening of the Synod of the Lutheran Church

1995

May 15, Ernő Ottlyk dies

October 5, Ordass officially rehabilitated by the Lutheran Church in Hungary

1997

June, Synod of the church decides three dioceses

1999

Autumn, two nominee for Bishop in the Western Diocese

2000

September, Bishop János Itzész (so far in the opposition) installed as Bishop of the restored old/nes Western (Transdanubian) Diocese

October, Pastor Zoltán Dóka dies.

2001

February, Two Commemorations of the Centenary of Bishop Ordass' Birth: by the Church Leadership (Bishop Imre Szebik and Bishop Béla Harmati) and by the Ordass Lajos' Friendly Society (with Bishop János Ittzés)

2002

January 8, „The Captivity of our Church Today.” An Open Letter to the Church Leadership about the Theological and Moral Crisis of the Lutheran Church in Hungary. The English translation of the letter and its background is published in *Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol.XVIII/Number 3, Autumn 2004, pp.325-32.

2003

August, Bishop Péter Gáncs Installed as Bishop of the Southern Diocese (as Bishop Béla Harmati retires)

2005

February-March. After an an unofficial internet source identifies church-leaders as former Communist agents including two retired Bishops, the leaders of the Lutheran Church in Hungary issue a statement in which they apologized for those who had been harmed by the agents' activity. Moreover, the setting up of a „Fact-finding committee” to research the archives and identify those who were involved, is also announced.

2006

March, Bishop Tamás Fabiny Installed as Bishop of the Northern Diocese (as Bishop Imre Szebik retires).

May, *Truth and Reconciliation* book published.

September-October: Tamás Majsai's series of article on „Agents for Five Decades in the Leadership of the Lutheran Church” in the weekly literary journal *Élet és irodalom*.

October, Gergely Pröhle installed as general Inspector of the Lutheran Church in Hungary (Professor Róbert Frenkl as General Inspector retires.)

2008

May, The third report of the Fact-Finding Committee to the Synod.

August 17, Presiding Bishop János Ittész and General Secretary Gergely Pröhle commemorate the 30th anniversary of Ordass' death in Farkasrét Cemetery, Budapest.