# *Review Article*

# Lajos Ordass: Prophet, Patriot or Reactionary?

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*Válogatott írások* (Selected Writings)
by Lajos Ordass, edited by István Szépfalusi.
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Lajos Ordass (1901-1978), Bishop of the Hungarian Lutheran Church, lived under four different political systems and experienced three revolutions and two world wars. However, posterity will undoubtedly remember him primarily for his role in post-Second World War church-state conflicts. Ordass first came to the notice of the western press at the time of his arrest and imprisonment for alleged currency law violations in 1948, again when he was rehabilitated on the eve of the 1956 uprising, and finally in 1958 when he was forced out of office for a second time.

Nonetheless, twenty-five years after his second and final removal from office Ordass remains an enigma to dispassionate observers of Hungarian religious affairs. Discussion of his role as the most dynamic Lutheran leader in post-war Hungary has been carried on largely by parties caught up in the passions of his time. His adversaries, such as the official Hungarian Lutheran historian Ernő Ottlyk, characterised him as "a rigid conservative possessing an attitude opposed to innovation", and as working actively for the "defence of the old system".[1] On the other hand, his partisans have extolled him both as "the chief obstacle to the subjugation of the Church as an instrument of the State",[2] and as "one of Hungary's staunchest anti-Communist religious leaders".[3] Both have associated him with the name of his more widely-known Catholic contemporary, Cardinal Mindszenty.

The publication of the *Selected Writings* has eliminated the problem of making a detached assessment of the motivations and the aims of the bishop, which had been frustrated by the paucity of relevant primary sources. The editor, István Szépfalusi — an Austrian-based Hungarian Lutheran pastor — has presented 79 documents from among Ordass's sermons, press articles, circular letters and official reports, and has prepared a fifty-page epilogue, which includes a brief biographical sketch

and key extracts from additional writings. The chosen documents uniformly cover his public ministry both before and after his elevation to the bishop's seat in 1945. Szépfalusi's avowed intention is to allow Ordass's words to speak for themselves, "certain particulars of which", he reminds the reader, "pragmatic historians and eyewitnesses have been frequently compelled to forget after the lapse of a generation".[4] In this he succeeds. The documents are reproduced with only essential explanatory notes, and he has refrained from allowing the epilogue to become a forum for biographical analysis, preferring to leave that task to a future historian. Nevertheless, despite Szépfalusi's detachment, his editorial skills have enabled him to gather a pool of diverse documents, which, viewed collectively, allow a coherent and plausible picture of Bishop Ordass to emerge.

Bishop Ordass's most striking characteristic appears to have been his strong commitment to serve the Hungarian nation. Belonging to the evangelical tradition within the Lutheran Church, Ordass certainly preached the fundamental importance of the individual's personal encounter with God through Christ, but his preoccupation with working out his Church's obligation to the nation was his most distinctive contribution to its ministry. He subscribed to the widely-held view among the late 19th and 20th century Hungarian Lutherans that the Hungarian Protestant Churches had, since the Reformation, made an invaluable contribution to the development of the modern national consciousness, had identified themselves with the nation's struggles for political independence, had provided moral and spiritual values for the nation, and had stood for progressive social and economic development. Ordass drew special inspiration from the leading role played by certain prominent Lutherans in the 1848-49 revolution for national independence, which he viewed as "one of the most glorious periods of our national past".[5] He therefore assumed the role of a prophet to the Hungarian nation, and undertook to direct it towards a happier, more secure future amidst the many perils that threatened its political survival in the mid-20th century. When in 1932 Ordass declared to his congregation in Cegléd: "We must devote our best to our beautiful, but sorely-tried and impoverished homeland",[6] he was laying down a commission that was to be the driving force in his public ministry.

During his pre-1945 parish ministry, there were two prominent features of Ordass's mission, the first being efforts for the regeneration of Hungarian society. He had a sensitive social conscience, and accordingly drew the attention of his Church to specific problems such as poverty, class divisions, urbanisation, the breakdown of family life, and materialism. Ordass believed the Church had an even greater responsibility than the State had to confront these problems. "Healthy Christianity," he maintained, "is helping Christianity". But he had to conclude:

"our Hungarian Lutheran Christianity is sick".[7] He consistently encouraged his Church to intensify its evangelistic preaching and to support more energetically Christian social relief agencies. He was especially interested in education as a means for the regeneration of Hungarian society and became a zealous advocate of the "Peoples' Schools" based on the doctrines of the 19th century Danish poet, politician and educator M. F. Severin Grundtvig.

The other feature of Ordass's pre-1945 service to the nation was his dedication to the principles of national unity and independence. This was first seen in his identification with anti-Trianon Treaty* sentiment during the 1920s and 1930s. 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".[8] 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 action of the Hungarian Government in an article supporting the just war doctrine. By September 1942, he apparently realised that the prospects for Hungarian unity and independence were threatened rather than enhanced by German policy, and strove to counter the extension of German influence in the country. He openly supported the resistance of the Norwegian Church against the German-backed Quisling Government, and combatted the fifth-column activities of the German *Volksbund* in Hungary. As a sign of personal protest against the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, he "magyarised" his surname from the German Wolf to the Hungarian form Ordass.

In return for the Church's service to the nation, Ordass believed the State had an obligation to defend its established rights — i.e. the right to autonomous self-management, the right to practise public worship, to undertake social work, and to establish church schools, the right to legal equality with the Catholic Church, and the right to receive state financial support — which had been won at great cost through centuries of struggle. Before the Second World War, he had no cause for worry concerning the State's respect of the Lutheran Church's rights, since it, along with the other established Churches, was regarded as an important bulwark of the State, and accordingly received favourable treatment. However, by 1942 Ordass perceived that Nazi Germany represented not only a threat to the political integrity of the country, but also to the established freedom of the Church. He therefore worked to prepare the Church for resistance to

*The post-First World War Treaty of Trianon provided international sanction for the reduction of the Hungarian Crown Lands by over seventy per cent and left large Hungarian minorities in Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. In Hungary the Treaty was regarded with virtual unanimity as a national tragedy, and its reversal became the prime object of the country's foreign policy during the Horthy era (1919-45).

encroachments upon its historic rights. As well as supporting the Norwegian Church, he publicised statements of Churches and ecumenical bodies in Western Europe and North America, including the "Confessing Church" in Germany, which declared the vital importance of the Christian Church maintaining an independent voice against state pressure. Ordass also sought to stifle the efforts of some German congregations under Nazi influence to form their own Lutheran Church organisation in connection with the Foreign Office of the German Church.

The Hungarian nation and its Lutheran Church survived the German occupation and the war against the Soviet Union, although enduring physical desolation and Soviet occupation. Ordass was elected to succeed the retiring Bishop of the Bányai Diocese, Sándor Raffay, on 15 August 1945.

This coincided with the spirit of *bűnbánat* (contrition) prevalent among the Hungarian Protestant Churches: a time of deep reflection on the failures of the Churches during the post-First World War era, and on their future role in the life of the nation. Ordass shared in this. Unlike some of his prominent clerical colleagues of the evangelical tradition, such as the Reformed theologian, later Bishop, Albert Bereczky, he did not abandon the historic tradition of his Church for having failed to meet the demands of a new age but concluded that the Church's greatest error was its failure fo live up to that tradition. He made this clear when he and his fellow bishops released an Advent letter stating: "We adhere tenaciously to our Christian faith and to everything that flows from it. We shall not allow anything to be deleted from our Hungarian past that God has given with his manifest blessing, and thus judged worthy of life."[9]

True to his Advent pledge, Ordass redoubled his efforts to place the Church in the forefront of endeavours for social regeneration. He continued to encourage greater zeal in providing social services and in the dynamic proclamation of the Word. In this he met with some success, for the evangelical movement did become the dominant feature of Lutheran Church life in the years immediately following the war. Ordass also renewed his commitment to support of the nation's fundamental political interests. He pledged his allegiance to the principles of democracy on which the new, post-war Hungarian State was to be built, and promised that the Lutheran Church would "positively and sincerely serve . . . the free, democratic system of government".[10] Reaffirming the Church's role as "the conscience of the State",[11] however, Ordass spoke out strongly against several policies of the governing authorities which he regarded as immoral and contrary to the national interests, namely the Hungarian-Czechoslovak repatriation agreement of 1946, irregularities connected with the 1947 general election, and the arbitrary mass deportation of members of Hungary's German community. Ordass's view of the Church as "the conscience of the State" brought about inevitable tensions, but he

still believed that the Church's service to the nation ought to be acknowledged by state recognition of its established rights. He defined the most important of them as the right to enjoy autonomy, to preach the Gospel in public, to administer the sacraments, to provide Christian education both inside and outside schools, and to undertake social work. He also believed that the State should continue to cover the bulk of the expenses of the Church and its schools. However, he realised that the dominant forces in Hungarian political life — the political parties represented in the coalition government and the Soviet occupying power — would not be inclined to preserve all the Church's former rights in their entirety. The first sign of this was the land reform of March 1945 when all tracts of over approximately 150 acres were expropriated. Ordass pointed out that this would make some of the Church's traditional social and educational services to the nation impossible due to the reduction of land-derived income. He also spoke out against the interference of denazification tribunals in church personnel appointments, the interference of the Ministry of Religion and Public Education in the administration of church schools, and the interference of state censors in radio broadcasts of worship services.

Governmental disregard of the traditional interests of the Church left no doubt that a major confrontation was looming. This began with the nationalisation of church schools. Ordass was prepared to stand up to the State on this issue. He was mindful that Lutheran schools had been established in the country since the early days of the Reformation, and that their autonomy had been steadfastly guarded through the centuries. There were four hundred schools throughout the country. As early as 1946, when public discussion of the future of church schools began in earnest, Ordass reminded his fellow churchmen that the Church's work of education was "a task ordained by God" and that "we must do everything in the interest of their maintenance".[12]

By spring of 1948 the government had produced its proposals for the nationalisation of schools. These called for the expropriation of all Lutheran educational establishments with the exception of several grammar schools. In return for the Church's agreement to nationalisation, the government let it be known that it would be prepared to sign a concordat guaranteeing its freedom to preach the Gospel and to undertake social work, the continuation of state financial aid until 1969, the payment of state pensions to retired clergymen, and the payment of costs arising from religious instruction in schools. However, the government made it clear that if the Church refused to agree, nationalisation would still go ahead but other established rights, financial assistance in particular, would be in jeopardy. It was generally acknowledged that the Church would be unable properly to fulfil its traditional obligations to its adherents and to the nation as a whole without state financial aid.

The Lutheran Church was deeply divided. A minority believed that accepting the sacrifice of the schools would guarantee the Church's survival in the emerging socialist system. A majority, led by Ordass, were convinced that to sanction nationalisation would be irreparably to compromise the historic mission of the Church, without receiving in return any trustworthy guarantees from a government increasingly engaged in arbitrary action and manifestly hostile to the Churches. Nationalisation took place in mid-June 1948 without the approval of the Lutheran Church. Negotiations on future church-state relations continued. According to Ottlyk, Bishops Kapi and Szabó were inclined to come to terms with the State, while "Bishop Ordass was the one who threw obstacles in the path of the establishment of normal relations".[13] Ordass was briefly detained without charge on 24 August 1948 in order to soften his opposition. However, no breakthrough was achieved in the negotiations. On 8 September 1948, Ordass was rearrested and charged with violating the country's currency laws in connection with a gift sent through him to the Hungarian Lutheran Church by American Lutherans.

This move against Ordass followed by four months the resignation of the Reformed Bishop László Ravasz, who found his position untenable in the face of mounting state influence in the affairs of his Church, and it foreshadowed the arrest of Cardinal Mindszenty in November of the same year.

At the trial, Ordass's defence denied any intentional wrongdoing and stated: "I have endeavoured to work for the reconstruction of the desolate homeland and the Church according to my humble means and capacity".[14] Unmoved, the panel of judges meted out a sentence of two years' imprisonment, suspension from office and loss of civil liberties for five years, and a fine of three thousand forints. The only work of Ordass dating from his years of imprisonment that Szépfalusi has been able to provide is a Christmas Eve sermon revealing great faith and fortitude and delivered at the request of his cellmates — fifteen Catholic priests — at the Star Prison in Szeged. On 1 April 1950, just before his release from prison, the Special Disciplinary Tribunal of the Hungarian Lutheran Church formally stripped Ordass of his office. Szépfalusi reports that this action was taken because of a warning received by Bishop Turóczy from the Office of the Communist Party Chairman Mátyás Rákosi to the effect that "if the decision of the tribunal in the case against Ordass is not damning, they [the State] will raise a charge of treason against him, and the sentence will without any doubt be death".[15] On 30 May, four months before the end of his sentence, the deposed Ordass was released from prison and returned to Budapest, where he lived in seclusion and earned his living, it is said, by knitting.

Ordass's imprisonment broke the spirit of resistance of the Lutheran Church, and on 16 December 1948, Bishop Turóczy and the lay

Supervisor-General Zoltán Mády signed the concordat sought by the government which he had opposed. The State guaranteed the rights it had offered to protect during negotiations regarding the nationalisation of schools. In return the Lutheran Church was required to acknowledge the supremacy of the State, give its blessing to the new social order, witness to the enjoyment of complete religious liberty, accept the nationalisation of schools, and to include in its order of service prayers for the well-being of the State and its leading officials. 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 without provoking a crisis in church-state relations. Within a few years, the activities of the Hungarian Lutheran Church were considerably further restricted — especially evangelisation, social work, and religious education — and it increasingly seemed to be an organ of the State.

Hungarian history is replete with men in public life who have suffered imprisonment or exile but who have lived to occupy high office again, and in 1956 Ordass joined their illustrious company.* His star rose again on account of the decay of the Communist Party's authority during the months immediately preceding the 1956 uprising. In the absence of clear directives and strong backing from the Communist Party, the Lutheran leadership and the State Bureau for Church Affairs were obliged to respond positively to unrest from within the Church, as well as pressure from the international Protestant community. As a result, in the summer of 1956, when the Party and the national government were on the verge of collapse, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation were able to make arrangements with the Bureau for Ordass's return to office. The first step in his rehabilitation came on 5 October 1956 when the Hungarian Supreme Court overturned his conviction on the grounds that no crime had been committed. Three days later the General Court of the Lutheran Church declared the 1950 deposition illegal according to church law, and confirmed his position as a retired bishop with a view to an eventual return to office.

The outbreak of the 1956 uprising meant that Ordass could reassume leadership sooner than expected. On 31 October, eight days after the demonstrations that marked the beginning of the revolt, he assumed leadership of the Southern Diocese and the national organisation of the Luthe-

*To name but a few: Lajos Kossuth — the country's "Governor" during the 1849 War of Independence; Gyula Andrássy — Minister-President in 1867-71 and Habsburg Foreign Minister in 1871-79; Máté Haubner — the mid-19th century Lutheran Bishop of the Trans-Danubia diocese; Béla Kun — the leading figure in the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919; and from among Ordass's contemporaries Cardinal Mindszenty and the present First Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party, János Kádár.

ran Church following the resignations of Bishops Dezséri and Vető, who were closely identified with the rejected Stalinist regime. According to an eyewitness, Ordass was greeted at Budapest's Déak Tér Church on the day of his return to power by "eyes glistening with tears of joy".[16] In his sermon that day,[17] he expressed sober optimism. He spoke of the present as a period oppressed by "blood, mourning, tears and doubt", but detected "flourishing hopes for the future". The nation, he maintained, was at an "historic crossroads" similar to that encountered by Hungarians at the time of the Reformation, when opportunities for progressive political advancement coincided with possibilities of spiritual renewal. Ordass urged his Church to seize this opportunity. He called on Lutherans to follow the example of the Reformers and energetically preach the liberating Gospel message to regenerate society. On the political front, he publicly identified himself with the aims of "our people's fight for freedom".[18] On 2 November, when it became evident that Soviet troops were poised to crush the uprising, Ordass made a radio appeal in four languages for western financial aid, medical supplies and recognition of Prime Minister Nagy's declaration of neutrality.[19] Ordass's "flourishing hopes" of 31 October received a fatal blow on 4 November, when the Soviet army attacked Budapest, and a Soviet-backed government headed by Kádár was established in the central Hungarian town of Szolnok. Large-scale arrests, executions and deportations characterised the restoration of Communist authority, but despite his open association with the revolution Ordass was allowed to continue at his post. He was even permitted to travel to the Third Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Minneapolis where he was elected First Vice-President. What was the reason for Ordass's survival in public life at a time of severe retribution? The answer lies in his new-found flexibility in treating with the communist authorities. The crushing defeat of the revolution left no doubt in Ordass's mind that Hungary was irrevocably bound to the Soviet bloc for the foreseeable future. He therefore felt obliged to state publicly that "the Church fulfills its mission in Hungary by following the course of socialism",[20] and made concessions that would have been unimaginable in 1948. For example, he embraced the 1948 concordat in its entirety, declaring that "it is beyond dispute and there can be no deviation from it".[21] 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. He even went beyond acceptance of the 1948 agreement by consenting to the participation of the Lutheran Church in the work of the government-sponsored National Peace Council, and by becoming a member of the National Presidium of the Patriotic People's Front.

Whilst prepared to compromise with the government concerning issues hitherto regarded non-negotiable, Ordass was not willing to follow the

policy of ex-Bishops Dezséri and Vető by completely identifying the interests of the Church with those of the communist State. He placed conditions on the Church's cooperation. For instance, 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 the law, the cultivation of patriotic virtue, the creation of a healthy and just social order, and the promotion of flourishing economic activity. When agreeing to the Church's participation in the National Peace Council, he made clear his conviction that "service to the cause of peace that lacks theological considerations and an orientation appropriate to the Church is foreign to the Church".[22] Regarding the Patriotic People's Front, he made his involvement dependent upon being able to speak freely at its proceedings. He elicited the Government's agreement to the principle that the church press should serve primarily the Church. In short, Ordass expected that the State would serve the true interests of the nation, and grant the Church some scope for the exercise of an independent prophetic voice in recompense for its acceptance of the concordat.

By October 1957 Ordass could see that the government was not living up to his understanding of its commitments to the Lutheran Church. After repeated discussions with the leading officials of the State Bureau for Church Affairs, he wrote a courteous, diplomatic letter to its head, János Horváth, defining the areas in which he believed the government was not acting consistently with the spirit or the letter of its undertakings.[23]Ordass's first concern was what he regarded as excessive interference in the management of the Church. In particular, he complained of the government's insistence on the reinstatement of the former national Supervisor-General, Ernő Mihályfi, and the former Supervisor of the Southern Diocese, József Darvas,[24] its failure to allow free elections for deanery offices, the ban on filling key positions without the approval of the government, and its interference in the relations of the Lutheran Church with foreign church organisations. He also expressed concern regarding the general political direction of the country, and drew Horváth's attention to the use of the Patriotic People's Front as a propaganda organ which gave patently false impressions of the political state of the country, and to the continued policy of political arrests and detentions.

The government regarded Ordass's views as incompatible with the Church's role in a socialist society, so discussions between him and the Bureau reached an impasse soon after the letter was issued. According to Ottlyk, the main irreconcilable issue was the reinstatement of Mihályfi and Darvas.[25] The government threatened to withhold twenty-five per cent of the state financial aid due to Ordass's diocese unless he relented. Early in 1958 it withdrew recognition of Ordass as Chairman of the Council of Lutheran Bishops and bestowed the position on Lajos Vető, who had recently been reinstated as Bishop of the Northern Diocese without

Ordass's sanction. The still unrepentant and, by now, isolated Ordass was formally relieved of his office in June 1958 by the Council of the Southern Diocese. Deprived of his episcopal rank for the second time, he lived out of the public eye in Budapest and Nagybőrzsöny till his death from a heart attack on 14 April 1978. But as long as the memory of Ordass lives, the Hungarian Lutheran Church will be compelled to consider the character of its service to the nation, both social and political, in the light of its historic tradition.

[1]Ernő Ottlyk, *Az evangélikus egyház útja a szocializmusban,* Budapest, 1976, pp. 126, 48.
[2]*The Christian Century,* 16 July 1958, p. 820.
[3]*The New York Times,* 6 November 1958, p. 15.
[4]Lajos Ordass, *Válogatott írások,* ed. István Szépfalusi, Bern, 1982, p. 361.
[5]Ordass, p. 373.
[6]Ordass, p. 389.
[7]Ordass, p. 247.
[8]Ordass, p. 32.
[9]Ordass, p. 91.
[10]Ordass, p. 112.
[11]Ordass, pp. 117, 372.
[12]Ordass, pp. 119, 120.
[13]Ottlyk, p. 55.
[14]Ordass, p. 185.
[15]This testimony, according to Szépfalusi, emerged during the deathbed confession of a member of the Special Disciplinary Tribunal. The editor provides neither the name of the confessor, nor that of his source.
[16]*Evanglikus Élet,* xxi évfolyam, 44 szam, 4 November 1956.
[17]Ordass, pp. 297-300.
[18]Ordass, p. 188.
[19]Ordass, pp. 189-90.
[20]Ordass, p. 194.
[21]Ordass, p. 204.
[22]Ordass, p. 193.
[23]Ordass, pp. 203-14.
[24]Mihálfyi and Darvas were closely associated with the subjugation of the Lutheran Church to the interests of the State, and were pressured to abandon their respective offices during the 1956 Revolution. According to *Discretion and Valour,* 1982, p. 275, neither were churchgoers, and Darvas was a self-professed atheist.
[25]Ottlyk, p. 123.