

Document

The Vicissitudes of the Hungarian Catholic Church

This anonymous document was written in Hungary in October 1983 by a supporter or member of Father Bulányi's Basis Communities. For background information on these and their place within Hungarian Catholicism see the article by Steven Polgar, "A Summary of the Situation of the Hungarian Catholic Church", and the document which follows it, in RCL Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 11-41.

I. Cardinal Casaroli's Letter and its Antecedents

1. A Harsh Lesson for a Provincial Congregation

Cardinal Mindszenty refused to deal with the Communist Party leader Matthias Rákosi. He had to pay for this with martyrdom. At the time of his arrest, Pope Pius XII sent this message to Archbishop Grösz (Mindszenty's successor) by the Jesuit Father Mócsy: "You must not deal with Rákosi either!" Mócsy also suffered martyrdom for having been the messenger.

Eighteen months later Rákosi sent thousands of monks and nuns into internment. The abbots and abbesses, in their despair, implored Grösz to negotiate. Rákosi did enter into talks with Grösz and the heads of the orders; the internments continued meanwhile. The Piarist monks of the Tata area were interned at the Franciscan monastery in Ujhatvan. The people of Ujhatvan — fearing the deportation of the Franciscan friars — surrounded the monastery. The military forces of the secret police, the AVO, rushed to the scene; Piarists and Franciscans were beaten up; then the Franciscans were arrested and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Sándor Sik, the highly respected Piarist professor, protested against the trial. Rákosi's retort was: "They incited the people of Ujhatvan to revolt! . . ."

Later, among friends, Fr Sik confessed: "I ought to have said then — Mr Rákosi, you are lying! Alas, I could not and did not . . ."

Grösz and his minions carried on the negotiations with Rákosi, the liar. During the course of the trial, Rákosi set up the movement of the so-called "Peace Priests", on 20 August 1950 (St Stephen's Day . . .) By 31 August, an agreement was reached: the Hungarian episcopate will support the policies of Rákosi; in exchange, the religious orders will be dissolved, but one per cent — eight convents — will remain in the possession of the Church. Pius XII sent word to Grösz: he had violated ecclesiastical law — he had no right to agree.

Half a year later Grösz himself was cast into prison. Archbishop Czaplak carried on the negotiations. The result: an AVO agent moved into every single bishop's palace, got hold of the seal of the bishopric, opened all correspondence and put the seal on all outgoing letters himself.

After 1956, the AVO moved out of the bishops' palaces, but the situation hardly changed for the better. An example: József Szabó, a priest in the Győr area, had been sentenced to 15 years' prison in 1952 for "espionage". Having been a "spy", he was not set free at the 1963 amnesty. His mother was, understandably, in despair. Her priest, a friend of Szabó, penned a petition — signed by the mother — and took it to the Bishop of Győr, asking him to countersign it. The bishop signed the petition and told the priest to have it stamped and sealed by the secretary. The secretary refused to do this; they went back to the bishop, before whom the secretary declared: no such letter, with the bishop's seal, can be issued without the approval of the local official of the Office for Religious Affairs. The old bishop was powerless to act; the inter-

mediary had to leave empty-handed.

These and many similar incidents were the results of "agreements" born in lies and under duress.

Archbishop Grösz was brainwashed in prison. Towards the end of 1956, Rákosi having been swept away, he was appointed Archbishop of Kalocsa (second in rank to the Primate). When Pius XII had suspended all members of the "Peace Priest" movement who had become parliamentary deputies, and had proscribed their journal *Kereszt* (The Cross), Grösz rechristened the movement "*Opus Pacis*". All the bishops were appointed joint presidents of "*Opus Pacis*" — *ex-officio*. In return, a high decoration was conferred on Grösz by the Government.

2. *The Birth of the Basis Communities*

The Basis Communities came into existence towards the end of the 1940s. The church hierarchy, albeit with some anxiety, originally supported them. When in 1951 the AVO took control of the bishoprics, the bishops themselves retreated. "It is better that we do not know of anything", they said amongst themselves.

During these years, the bishops must have had a very bad conscience. Whilst the negotiations were going on, they were still being visited by the AVO and being made to stand against the wall in their nightshirts and suffer a thorough search of their premises. And all the time they must have been aware of the displeasure of Pius XII.

In the 1950s, two bishops were talking in whispers in an alcove of the Central Seminary. "We shall have to suffer penance for our sins in Austrian convents," said one. "I wish we were there already", replied the other. Their current successors talk nowadays in a very different vein; their behaviour has met with higher approval: not from the Vatican but from the atheistic State.

The martyrdom of the Basis Communities began in 1952. Successive waves of arrests and sentences were visited upon them. The accusation: attempts to overthrow the State, incitement, espionage, abuse of the right of assembly. During the following quarter century, hundreds of them had to see the insides of prisons. Those dismissed from their jobs were even more numerous. That was their penalty for not being willing to negotiate, for not asking permission from the atheists to preach the Gospel — following the example of Jesus Christ. He did not ask for permission either.

3. *The Revaluating of Values*

Whilst the members of the Basis Communities were imprisoned wholesale, Khrushchev, Pope John XXIII and the Vatican Synod breached the wall of silence between the Soviet Union and the Vatican. As a first result, a pilot agreement was reached in the case of Hungary in September 1964. Whilst all the "achievements" of the Stalinist period were left untouched as far as the arrangement of religious matters was concerned, permission was granted for the consecration of five new bishops — from the ranks of those who had supported the agreement (condemned by Pius XII) embodying the supervision by the State of all church matters.

All those who had chosen the way of submitting to the rule of the atheists, and not that of martyrdom, in the preceding two decades were now vindicated. Long before the Synod, they had sensed the right way for ecclesiastical policies. Archbishop Casaroli, in the name of Pope Paul VI, had by then set out the "*Ostpolitik*" of the Vatican, thereby approving the stance of the time-servers.

Those, however, who had chosen the road to martyrdom now had to accept with consternation that they could no longer see themselves as the champions of Jesus Christ and the Holy Father. Pius XII had been praying for them, not once and not twice; for him, they were "The Church of Silence". Now, even in the eyes of the Vatican, "The Church of Silence" became that of the troublemakers. They remained the soldiers of Jesus Christ only . . . He did not ask for a written permit from Pontius Pilate.

4. *The Helsinki Agreement and the Actions of Cardinal Lékaí*

Whilst the consecration of new bishops was going on, proving the splendid cooperation between Church and State in Hungary, the threat of imprisonment did not vanish for the Basis Communities. Nor were any prayers said in the Vatican for "The Church of Silence". Nevertheless, a new turn of events was created by the ratification of the Helsinki Agreement by Hungary (as a condition for economic support from the West). At one stroke, the Basis Communities found that what had been a punishable offence became now perfectly legal.

The imprisonment of Basis Community members by the State did cease. However,

the episcopate — having taken no notice of them for 25 years — now began to show considerable interest in their work. The instigation for this came from Cardinal Lékai himself. In 1976, he demanded from the Piarist order that Father Bulányi (the founder of the Basis Community movement) should be banished from the country. At the bishops' conference in 1976, he passed on a list of names to his fellow bishops: this list (prepared by the Office for Religious Affairs) contained the names of those priests in the various dioceses who were considered "Bulányists". The Primate demanded that these recalcitrants should be disciplined. So it became clear that — as the State had to confer legality on the Basis Communities — they had to become illegal from the ecclesiastical point of view. The State could not proceed against them; let the hierarchy do the dirty work.

However, the initiative by Lékai did not succeed. Bulányi was not banished. Bishop Endrey — although the only one to stand up — openly declared at the conference: "They are my best priests — they are all my bosom friends!"

5. *Divide et Impera*

However, Lékai did not let matters drop. He carried on the campaign against the Basis Communities. Whenever someone pointed out to him that a particular priest he abused had nothing to do with Bulányi, his reply was: "Then he belongs to that other gang, the Regnum!"*

Soon enough he realised that his best ploy would be to divide his opposition. So in 1980 in the Italian Catholic weekly *Il Regno* he carefully discriminated between the good ones — the members of the Regnum movement — and the bad ones — the "Bulányists". This can be best explained by the neutral stand of the Regnum on the question of military service. The Bulányists have been strongly against it; one of their adherents, Dr József Merza, was the first — in September 1979 — to refuse to do military service.

The ploy of dividing the believers did not succeed very well. In May 1981, the Regnum refused to concelebrate mass with Cardinal Lékai, because he wanted to ex-

clude the Bulányists from the concelebration.

However, in 1982 the Regnum did accede to his presence at mass, although he had excluded Fathers Bulányi and Kovács from the concelebration. The Regnum will probably pay very dearly for the abandonment of Bulányi and his followers. It is not too late for them to turn round — they occupy a key position. If they were to maintain the alliance with the members of their brother movement (with whom they had suffered prison together), the Cardinal would have no grounds for condemning the Bulányists, claiming that he was saying Mass together with the "good" Basis Community priests at the concelebration. The Regnum could give living proof that the Basis Communities are working in the spirit of the Gospel.

6. *Military Service and Heresy*

In September 1981 Cardinal Lékai — contradicting the tenets of the Vatican Synod — started a campaign against the principle of "civilian service" (in place of the military kind). He suspended Fr László Kovács for having preached love of one's enemies according to the words of Jesus. He also prevailed on bishop Kisberk to suspend András Grömon for preaching similar sermons. Both public opinion at home (although deprived of any publicity) and Catholic circles abroad expressed their shock at the attitude of the Cardinal who, in a wholly anachronistic manner, was capable of praising armed struggle in the nuclear age. Therefore Lékai had to change his tactics: he tried to pin the mortal sin of heresy on Father Bulányi. For this purpose, he summoned him to a "dialogue", not without threats of canonical discipline.

In effect, Lékai set up a proper Inquisition. Bulányi was denied all protection to which he was entitled in ecclesiastical law. The result of the "dialogue" was the condemnation of Bulányi as a heretic by the whole episcopate and he was commanded to disavow his teachings, these being found to be contrary to the tenets of the Church.

Bulányi denied that his teaching constituted heresy and declared that he had nothing to disavow. To prevent his excommunication (threatened by the episcopate), Archbishop Poggi, on behalf of the Vatican, took the matter out of Lékai's hands. The episcopate had to submit its findings to the Sacred Congregation for the Faith. Nevertheless, pending final judgement,

*"Regnum Marianum" is the name of another group of Basis Communities. See *RCL* Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 31-2 — *Ed.*

Father Bulányi was placed on *suspensio a divinis*, forbidding him to say mass, preach or administer the sacraments.

7. The Birth of Cardinal Casaroli's Letter

Cardinal Lékai and his supporters among the bishops did everything in their power to induce the Vatican to condemn Father Bulányi and his supporters, "in order to protect the unity of the Hungarian Church". The most recent action in this campaign was the visit to the Vatican by Cardinal Lékai, four of his fellow bishops and Imre Miklós, the Head of the State Office for Religious Affairs, in April 1983. The initiative for the trip had come from Lékai, not the Vatican. The five Church notables were the ones who were not satisfied with simply publicising the punishment of Father Bulányi (on 9 June 1982) in their diocesan broadsheets. Over and above this, they issued a circular to all their parish priests warning them not to give any scope for activity to "Bulányi-priests" in their parishes. The Casaroli letter is quite right in calling them the "zealous" ones (*tu ipse alique studiosi praesules*). The delegation handed a letter to the Holy Father on 12 April; its contents are unknown, except that it was an indictment of the "Bulányists".

The Casaroli letter was the outcome of all these comings and goings. About two years earlier, a highly-placed monsignor in the Vatican commented thus to a Hungarian priest: "The Vatican has nothing against Bulányi and his friends — but the Catholics in Hungary cannot expect the wholesale replacement of the episcopate!" The "*Ostpolitik*" of the Vatican needed the bishops. And these were the bishops whose appointment was approved by the regime in advance. The Vatican cannot gainsay its own appointments. Imre Miklós, on the other hand, refuses any further concessions, unless the bishops curb Bulányi and his followers.

The Vatican saved Bulányi on several occasions in the past: his banishment was not accepted; the seven volumes of his theological writings were semi-officially approved; the procedure for his punishment as a "heretic" was taken out of the hands of the bishops. Now the Vatican could not avoid doing something against Bulányi.

Nevertheless the bishops returned from the Vatican with long faces. They had achieved much less than desired. What they

did get was the Casaroli letter, and this did not condemn Bulányi and the Bulányists outright.

II. Commentary on the Letter of State Secretary Casaroli

1. No Condemnation of Bulányi

The letter does not deal at all with the resolutions of the Hungarian episcopate carried on 9 June 1982. Thus it does not comment on the "erroneous" theological views of Bulányi, nor on the temporary punishment meted out to him (*viz.* the suspension of his pastoral duties). The letter only refers to the first part of the resolutions, by saying that it does not want to deal with "doctrinal matters at this stage". It does not touch on the second part of the resolutions even to this extent. Significantly, the resolutions had not quoted the appropriate paragraph of the Ecclesiastical Statutes which would instruct a priest to say mass only in private. The reason for this omission was the simple fact that there is no such ruling in the Statutes. It exists only in the law of the atheist State. The secular power *can* withdraw these rights from whomever it wants to.

In fact, the Government did put this embargo on Bulányi — on 30 November 1951. This is still in force. The resolution only proclaimed "*urbi et orbi*" that the episcopate identified itself with this act of the state — which has no foundation whatever in ecclesiastical law.

In the light of these circumstances, it is quite understandable why the letter avoids any comment on this act of the episcopate and passes over it in silence.

2. But it Accepts the Accusation of Indiscipline

What then is the essence of this letter? It deals with three items of information supplied by Lékai and his fellow bishops. One of these was dated October 1982, the other two April 1983. The letter states that according to these submissions, Bulányi and his followers had been denying the authority of the bishops, and had therefore been guilty of disobedience. They had thereby been disrupting the unity of the Church.

The letter reaffirms the supreme value of Authority, of Obedience and of Unity for the Church, and for this reason, the Pope approves, with all His authority, the decisions of the episcopate concerning the Basis Communities.

3. *What is the Nature of their Disobedience?*

There are two problems which arise from this part of the letter. One of these is: when and what had the Hungarian episcopate decided about the Basis Communities? The resolution of 9 June 1982 dealt only with the theological views of Father Bulányi. The further resolution of 9-10 March 1983 stated the same thing, adding "György Bulányi must submit himself to the pastoral views shared by the whole episcopate". There was no word about the Basis Communities. Neither before that nor at any time since has the episcopate carried any resolution about the Basis Communities.

So the question arises: what were actually the decisions of our bishops, approved by the authority of His Holiness?

The second problem concerns the three items of information. It appears from these only that the Basis Communities do not obey the bishops and thus disrupt the unity and jeopardise the authority of the Church. But neither the letter nor the resolutions quoted above state in so many words *what* the acts of disobedience were. Of the three, only the October 1982 submission has been published. It alleges only that the accused are guilty of disobedience — but in *what way* they have been disobedient has not been disclosed by Lékai.

4. *New-fangled Forms of Disobedience?*

We can only understand the accusations of "disobedience" if we analyse the events of the recent past. There are three aspects here which can be pinned down.

a. They are Disobedient because they Exist
Cardinal Lékai had demanded from the Piarist order the banishment of Bulányi long before he attempted to deal with him and his followers. Imre Miklós demanded his banishment from the General of the Piarist order six times over a number of years. It is clear, therefore, that the existence of these Basis Communities is primarily (or exclusively?) contrary to the interests of the atheistic State. Secondly, they are a thorn in the flesh for Cardinal Lékai and his fellow bishops, who wish to rely exclusively on the prescriptions of the State in building up their pastoral work.

b. Meetings of the Faithful

The Basis Communities have regularly been holding retreats for their members at the presbyteries of priests belonging to the Communities. The bishops usually learn

about these from the police. It has been quite common for officials from the bishopric to have appeared on the scene and — not without obvious embarrassment — to have requested the local priest to forbid the holding of such retreats at his presbytery. The priests have then usually replied that their consciences compel them to refuse the request — they could not but allow the presence of those who simply would like to pray for three or four days.

It is clear that it would be in the interest of the atheists to make these gatherings impossible. Had they not abolished the houses of retreat? But it would also be in the interest of those bishops who only wish to be on the right side of the state power.

c. The Utterances of Cardinal Lékai

The Cardinal has expressed his views on many occasions; most importantly, in his sermon of 6 September 1981 delivered at the Cathedral in Esztergom. In this sermon he expressly declared that it is the duty of every Hungarian Catholic to do his military service. This declaration was prompted by the refusal of several Basis Community members to answer the call to arms. They have been willing to suffer imprisonment rather than deny the command of Jesus Christ to "love your enemies". It is, of course, obvious again that this disobedience is contrary to the interests of the atheistic State.

Thus in three different ways the Basis Communities have been obeying the Lord, whilst disobeying Man.

This is all there is to it. It is understandable therefore that neither Lékai nor the Casaroli letter can spell out how and why the Basis Communities have been disobeying their bishops. The episcopate is disturbed and embarrassed by this "disobedience" but they are incapable of blurting out the truth, whether to the Holy Father or to Catholic and non-Catholic public opinion at home and abroad: Bulányi and his friends are disobeying the wishes of the State. The regime would dearly like to apply the well-known "salami-slicing" policy to the Church, by urging the bishops to cut off the most effective slice from the body of the Church, to be followed then by the slicing of the rest at leisure.

Setting his face against "salami tactics", Bulányi refused to go abroad; the Basis Communities have been refusing to abandon their retreats at the presbyteries; and the Community members called up for

military service would rather go to prison than obey the atheists — they are obeying Jesus Christ who said: “Love your enemies”.

Being unable to pin down the nature of the Communities’ disobedience, Lékai tried to shift the matter on to doctrinal grounds: “. . . not only are they disobeying the hierarchy, they are also denying that the hierarchy originated in Christ’s teaching . . .” he wrote to the Holy Father in October 1982. The Congregation for the Faith has not so far made any decision in respect of the Cardinal’s doctrinal accusations. Should it ever accept this charge, Bulányi and his followers would have an easy answer: they have never stated anything of the sort. Anyway, the Cardinal has always done his level best to prevent their theological thinking ever gaining publication. Neither have they ever been able to protest against the groundless charges raised against them.

5. *The Immediate Antecedents of the Letter*

In a further passage, the letter “warns” the bishops — *not* “encourages”, as it is given in the Hungarian translation — to perform their duties properly in helping the good Basis Communities, and to foster religious teaching, and, finally, states that “. . . in their paternal care, they should try to convince Father Bulányi and his followers of their duty of obedience . . .”

The Cardinal and his fellow bishops must have learnt in Rome in April 1983 that the Holy Father expected some kind of agreement or compromise from them, not the expulsion of the communities from the communion of the Church. He only repeated his desire for a “solution” which he had already expressed in October 1982 at the time of the *ad limina* visit by the Hungarian church hierarchy. In fact, he had asked the dignitaries to strengthen the adherence of the communities to the communion. However, the bishops attempted to use a previous letter from the Pope (delivered by Archbishop Poggi) to accelerate the final reckoning with the Bulányists — no matter that the Pope’s letter admonished them to “paternal love”.

Could the Vatican have had any further illusions about the consequences of this letter? In any case, the Casaroli letter had to be issued, otherwise the “*Ostpolitik*” of the Vatican would have been threatened with collapse, not only in respect of Hungary but also in relation to the other countries of Eastern Europe. Imre Miklós made it clear: unless the Vatican pronounced in favour of

the bishops and in condemnation of the Basis Communities, there would be no further concessions. According to Cardinal Lékai, the “*Ostpolitik*” of the Holy See should be one of “small steps”: little by little, the life of the Church expands, in line with the rules and limits prescribed by the State.

6. *The Communion of Bishops and Communities*

The Cardinal and his fellow bishops have made great efforts in the course of many years to destroy this communion. Not through any ill will; only because the regime does not grant concessions free of charge, in terms of expansion of church activities. The price is the throttling of the Basis Communities — a continuing thorn in the side of the atheists. What it demands from the bishops — and the bishops do it willy-nilly — is the gradual and purposeful destruction of the communion between the hierarchy and the Basis Communities.

In recent years, we have witnessed this trend on many occasions. Father Bulányi was released from prison in 1960. (In 1952, he had been sentenced to life imprisonment for setting up Basis Communities.) Ever since, he has persistently requested his appointment to a diocesan living, from every single bishop. Not only has he met with blank refusal on every occasion; but the rumour has been spread about him that it is he who is unwilling to accept service in the Church. Young people from the communities have been consistently refused admission to seminaries. Seminarists who may have joined the community movement during their training have been warned that they will not be consecrated unless they break their links with the Bulányists. A few years ago, a theological college was opened for lay people. The Office for Religious Affairs has been refusing admission to it to those who belong to Basis Communities. Many priests and chaplains have been suspended for periods of six months, pensioned off at an early age, or relegated to posts far away from Budapest — because of their work with Basis Communities, or for allowing retreats at their presbyteries. To cap it all, early in 1982 the resolutions of the episcopate condemned the “false teachings” of Bulányi — without ever giving him the opportunity to publish a single line before, during or after the investigation. He was condemned on the basis of his writings

passed from hand to hand in typewritten form.

With the Casaroli letter in their hands, the bishops have now accelerated their efforts to destroy the communion. The State can be mightily pleased that the "salami tactics" are now being performed by the Cardinal and the bishops in his train — quite willingly, off their own bat, without having pressure put on them.

III. The Events Following the Letter

1. *Pensioning off through "Paternal Care"*

The Casaroli letter became widely known in the country towards the middle of May 1983. The Bush — the common name of those communities inspired by Bulányi and his companions — organised a six-hour vigil on Whit Sunday in the village of Pécel, invited there by the local priest, Endre Halász. About 500 people were present. (It had been the custom of the faithful for many years to spend the night of Maundy Thursday and the afternoon of Whit Sunday in prayer and meditation in this church.) A week before Whitsun the diocesan bishop, Monsignor Bánk, sent his vicar to Halász with the verbal request not to allow the faithful into his church. Halász replied in writing that he could not accede to the request. He was obeying the Lord and not Man — he said — as he had done for many years. He refused to obey the wishes of the atheist State, although they were conveyed to him through his religious superior.

On Whit Monday, 23 May, swift retribution struck the "disobedient" priest. The bishop pensioned him off from 1 July, "for pastoral and health reasons". Halász is 69 years old but can still put to shame many a younger man.

The Office for Religious Affairs still dissatisfied. Halász ought to have been suspended! The parish of Pécel has not been the first (and, we fear, not the last) to be left without a priest — "for pastoral reasons . . ."

This was the first instance of "paternal care". With this move the hierarchy was simply following its original policy, regardless of the letter. Of course the letter itself was tied up with their policy. Authority, Obedience, Unity — and, above all, haste to satisfy the rulings of the Office for Religious Affairs — demand the victimisation of one humble priest after another. It is to be feared that the other bishops will follow this example and get rid of those parish priests who do not listen to the admonitions

of "paternal care" and cannot be persuaded to mend their ways. Sooner or later, the congregations will have no priests to lead them. Once the hierarchy succeeds in this job of eradication, they will be in a position to declare the dissolution of these communities. And thereby the atheistic State will succeed in slicing off the tastiest bit from the salami — to the greater glory of Authority, Obedience and Unity so dear to the Church.

2. *Slander — without Recourse*

A series of further actions followed with no let-up. On 26 May, Cardinal Lékai's Vicar General carpeted Father Bulányi, handed him a copy of the Casaroli letter and recorded — in writing — his "gross disobedience".

On 30 May, Cardinal Lékai delivered a sermon in the Cathedral of St Stephen — the largest church in Budapest — admonishing all followers of Christ to put their trust in the sacred Right Hand of King St Stephen. This Right Hand wielded the sword against the heathen Magyars, against the Germans . . . "and it is the duty of every people to defend itself". He did not refer to the Gospel, only to the Hungarian Constitution: "The defence of the fatherland is the sacred duty of all". He did refer to the Holy Father who in the course of the *ad limina* visit "did not object to military service". Whilst Cardinal Lékai is preaching in this manner, the flower of Hungarian youth is rotting in prison, because they put their trust in the Gospel: "Thou shalt not kill!"

On 3 June, the press reported at length the summer conference of the episcopate. In the course of this, a frontal attack was made against the Bush, before it could take a stand in respect of the Casaroli letter. According to the papers,

. . . at the invitation of Vatican Secretary of State Casaroli, on 11-15 April an episcopal delegation visited Rome, led by the Cardinal. The subject of their discussions was the range of problems confronting the Hungarian Church, in particular the matter of the Basis Communities directed by the Piarist father, György Bulányi. This movement has created no small disturbance in the internal life of the Church. The delegation was also received by the Holy Father himself. He expressed his anxiety to them about this move.

ment and condemned its resistance to the Episcopate, as it is gravely threatening the unity of the Church . . .

At the current conference, the members of the Episcopate have taken note, with heavy heart, of the fact that these recalcitrants have not listened to the words of the Holy Father — conveyed to them through the State Secretariat of the Vatican — admonishing them for their disruptive behaviour. Indeed, it looks as if Bulányi and his accomplices would like to stir up a new storm. They have been doing their utmost to misconstrue and distort, in their own favour, the words of admonition, although these are applicable only to them . . . The bishops have been warning the faithful, especially the loyal priesthood, not to listen to the falsehoods of these people and not to allow disruption of the unity of the Church.

The imputation of “stirring up a new storm” discloses the true reason for this attack in the press. But so far no explanation has been offered as to what this allegation should mean, and why Father Bulányi has again been branded with the charge of “disruption”.

This notable expression of “paternal care” has been followed by a new campaign: that of the “protocols of obedience”. Before we come to this, however, we must clarify its antecedents.

3. *Strategy and Tactics*

In the autumn of 1976, 30 or 40 members of the Bush called on Cardinal Lékai in order to protest against the proposed banishment of Father Bulányi. In the course of this discussion, the Cardinal confronted the visitors with their greatest crime: the retreats held at the parishes. According to the terms of the concordat with the State, such retreats can only be held in the churches.

The drift of Lékai's arguments was clear: in a church, it is possible to listen to one sermon, maybe two; but the practice of the Bush had been very different. This consisted of a togetherness over three or four days, from dawn to midnight — which, of course, involved eating, sleeping, washing and so on, all obviously impossible in a church. Besides, the parishes are usually quite spacious, whilst very few lay members of the Bush would have a house

large enough for more than a handful of people. All these facts were explained to the Cardinal, but his reply was: “This will have to be stopped”. A lay member then asked him: “My Lord Cardinal, do you mean to forbid us to hold retreats in our private houses?” “No, I do not forbid that”, replied Lékai.

As far as the priests belonging to the Bush are concerned, it would be unthinkable to let laymen expose themselves to risks while they themselves would “obey”. With such an attitude, they would be unable to bear witness to Jesus Christ before their lay sisters and brothers.

This, of course, is not a problem for the Cardinal. His problem is, in the first stage of the campaign, to put a stop to the holding of retreats in parishes. Disciplining the lay membership could then follow in the next stage. After all, the “concordat” simply means that the Church should only be allowed to do what fits the idea of “religious freedom” as construed by the atheist State. And only “innocent” things fit this idea — a renewal of the Church, inspired by the Gospel, certainly does not.

In the shadows of the pomp and circumstance of spectacular public ceremonies performed by our high dignitaries in the Church, our numbers are steadily diminishing. This is permitted. To plant vigorous seedlings of the faith — this is not permitted. Who can blame the atheist State for this?

Of course, this is not the point in question. The point in question is whether the Cardinal and the whole Church (including the Bush) should obey the rules of this atheist “religious freedom”.

The publication of the Casaroli letter has now created the opportunity for the Cardinal to put into practice the words he uttered in 1976: “This will have to be stopped”. His tactics will be the following: a) the priests belonging to the Bush will have to sign an undertaking to obey their bishops (if they refuse, sanctions will follow); b) the priests of the Bush will be instructed not to allow the holding of retreats in their parishes: if they obey, the Cardinal will have succeeded in splitting asunder obedient priests from risk-taking lay members, and the communion will thus be broken; c) if the priests disobey the ruling, they will contravene their signed undertaking, exposing themselves to sanctions: disciplinary transfers, the reserve list, or even suspension. The last

of these looks unlikely for the time being, considering that the Holy Father admonished the "zealous" bishops to strengthen communion, not to destroy it.

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The purpose of the broader strategy consists in preventing the near 3,000 presbyteries (more and more of them without a priest) from becoming homes for retreats. The first tactical steps in the framework of the grand strategy are the written undertakings demanded from the priests.

4. *Extracts from some Undertakings*

About thirty priests, all friends of Fr Bulányi, have been summoned recently before their bishops in order to sign these undertakings.

Some of them have signed without any comment, but have complained verbally about this humiliation demanded from them after decades of faithful service. In one case, the episcopal official spent some time shaking the hand of his fellow priest to show his gratitude for his signature. Several others added to the record that they would obey "according to their conscience". Others again have asked for a period of grace, amongst them Father Bulányi, who wrote:

As a professing Catholic living in the diocese of Esztergom, and as a member of the Piarist Order, I have to obey Cardinal Lékai, according to the rules of my religious order and the rules of canon law — as long as I do not contravene the teaching of the Gospel and my own conscience deriving from it. I have always obeyed the Cardinal in these terms and I shall always do so in future. I shall do so according to the letter of Cardinal Casaroli. I shall do so in the spirit of the numerous letters I have addressed to Cardinal Lékai, the contents of which I still consider valid. Finally, I shall do so according to the words of Jesus Christ: "... the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers" (John 10:4-5).

A retired chaplain, Barna Barcza, wrote the following:

My trust in my Cardinal Father has

been severely shaken in recent years. I have seen with dismay the series of regulations he has issued attempting to obstruct the building of the Kingdom of the Lord. These regulations could not have come from God, but from someone else. I have been deeply shocked that the Cardinal issued instructions for the abolition and prevention of retreats. He forbade the faithful — who had long prepared their souls for prayer — to come together for the adoration of the Holy Spirit in the church of Pécel. And when the local priest refused to close the doors of his church to the multitude assembled for prayer, or otherwise to prevent their communion, the Cardinal forcibly pensioned off the priest, against his will. Being myself a pensioner, I assume that Archbishop Bánk has no more use for my services and I shall receive no further instructions from him. If, however, any such instructions should be issued to me, I shall have to scrutinise them according to the commands of my conscience and compare them with the true teachings and intentions of Jesus Christ — and only then shall I be able to decide what to do.

Ferenc Dombi, another provincial priest, has also replied in writing:

I have never been prepared, nor am I now nor will I in the future be prepared, to turn my face against Jesus Christ who built his Church on St Peter. Therefore I am willing to sign an undertaking requested by my bishop only if it fully conforms to canon law approved by Rome and applicable to every single priest in the diocese.

László Kovács, the parish priest of Annavölgy (who had been suspended by the Cardinal for six months in 1981), relates the following dialogue:

Kovács: I should like to know under which appropriate paragraph of the Code for Ecclesiastical Law this summons has been issued to me, and what its legal character is.

The Cardinal: It is of an official character.

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ment and condemned its resistance to the Episcopate, as it is gravely threatening the unity of the Church . . .

At the current conference, the members of the Episcopate have taken note, with heavy heart, of the fact that these recalcitrants have not listened to the words of the Holy Father — conveyed to them through the State Secretariat of the Vatican — admonishing them for their disruptive behaviour. Indeed, it looks as if Bulányi and his accomplices would like to stir up a new storm. They have been doing their utmost to misconstrue and distort, in their own favour, the words of admonition, although these are applicable only to them . . . The bishops have been warning the faithful, especially the loyal priesthood, not to listen to the falsehoods of these people and not to allow disruption of the unity of the Church.

The imputation of “stirring up a new storm” discloses the true reason for this attack in the press. But so far no explanation has been offered as to what this allegation should mean, and why Father Bulányi has again been branded with the charge of “disruption”.

This notable expression of “paternal care” has been followed by a new campaign: that of the “protocols of obedience”. Before we come to this, however, we must clarify its antecedents.

3. *Strategy and Tactics*

In the autumn of 1976, 30 or 40 members of the Bush called on Cardinal Lékai in order to protest against the proposed banishment of Father Bulányi. In the course of this discussion, the Cardinal confronted the visitors with their greatest crime: the retreats held at the presbyteries. According to the terms of the concordat with the State, such retreats can only be held in the churches.

The drift of Lékai's arguments was clear: in a church, it is possible to listen to one sermon, maybe two; but the practice of the Bush had been very different. This consisted of a togetherness over three or four days, from dawn to midnight — which, of course, involved eating, sleeping, washing and so on, all obviously impossible in a church. Besides, the presbyteries are usually quite spacious, whilst very few lay members of the Bush would have a house

large enough for more than a handful of people. All these facts were explained to the Cardinal, but his reply was: “This will have to be stopped”. A lay member then asked him: “My Lord Cardinal, do you mean to forbid us to hold retreats in our private houses?” “No, I do not forbid that”, replied Lékai.

As far as the priests belonging to the Bush are concerned, it would be unthinkable to let laymen expose themselves to risks while they themselves would “obey”. With such an attitude, they would be unable to bear witness to Jesus Christ before their lay sisters and brothers.

This, of course, is not a problem for the Cardinal. His problem is, in the first stage of the campaign, to put a stop to the holding of retreats in presbyteries. Disciplining the lay membership could then follow in the next stage. After all, the “concordat” simply means that the Church should only be allowed to do what fits the idea of “religious freedom” as construed by the atheist State. And only “innocent” things fit this idea — a renewal of the Church, inspired by the Gospel, certainly does not.

In the shadows of the pomp and circumstance of spectacular public ceremonies performed by our high dignitaries in the Church, our numbers are steadily diminishing. This is permitted. To plant vigorous seedlings of the faith — this is not permitted. Who can blame the atheist State for this?

Of course, this is not the point in question. The point in question is whether the Cardinal and the whole Church (including the Bush) should obey the rules of this atheist “religious freedom”.

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The Cardinal: It is of an official character.

Kovács: I request a written statement setting out the precise nature of my alleged disobedience. As for the future, I request an itemised list of what exactly I shall have to obey.

The Cardinal: Your requests are refused.

Kovács then asked for time for reflection; this was granted to him. When this time was up, he replied as follows:

The letter of the Holy See, as well as the written undertaking demanded from me by the Cardinal, contain the instruction that I should obey "the counsels and commands given to me by my sovereign archbishop". However, my archbishop has *not* given me any explicit counsel or command. Therefore, I am unable to obey something about which I am in ignorance. I humbly request His instructions in *factual detail and in writing*.

As far as the general tenor of my undertaking is concerned, I am *always willing to obey* the words of the Good Shepherd, who is the successor of the Apostles. But if he were to convey to me counsel or command that might contradict Jesus Christ, that is, ask me to commit a sin against Him, then *I refuse obedience* (see Acts of the Apostles, 5:29).

5. *Disciplinary Transfers*

Nearly half of those priests who belong to the Bush have been transferred to date, for "pastoral reasons". Three such transfers were the results of similar stories. The Cardinal advised three of his priests that it had come to his knowledge that they were preparing retreats at their parishes during the summer. He threatened them with disciplinary transfer if they would not desist. He even indicated the places of their banishment: many miles away from the Budapest area. Carrying on the care of their Basis Communities and attending the retreats from that distance would be more than difficult.

Nevertheless the three priests did hold retreats. The Cardinal then carried out his threat and issued the documents ordering their transfer. In reply, the three priests requested that the true reason for their transfer — given to them only verbally — should be incorporated in the documents. The Cardinal rejected this request. The three priests then appealed to the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy in the Vatican, referring to the appropriate paragraph of the legal code. Until the judgement of this body has been passed, they will remain at their posts. To counter this move, the Cardinal imposed

reserve status on one of them — the László Kovács mentioned before. Kovács refused to accept this ruling, contending that it is contrary to church law.

Gyula Havasi, the parish priest of the village of Nagysáp, has suffered punishment on at least three occasions in the last few years. His crime: holding retreats. His punishment: one transfer after another. To tighten the screw, the Cardinal instructed Havasi in writing that episcopal permission will be required in advance for every single visitor at his presbytery who intends to spend the night there. The 64-year-old priest refused this affront to his basic human rights.

And what can the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy do? Can it countermand the Cardinal's ruling? The mills of the hierarchy may grind slowly, but they grind extremely small. The Bush is accused of distancing itself from the work of the parish priests. This, of course, is quite untrue. At least fifty priests belong to the Bush. It is the hierarchy that does its best (or worst) to destroy the communion. Alas, not without success.

The Cardinal's long-term plan is to induce the priests — exhausted by continuous vexation — either to abandon the Bush or to abandon the priesthood. He knows that it depends on the parish priests to what extent laymen may contribute to the work of the parish.

These are the consequences — so far — of the Casaroli letter. What next? All sorts of things, except the strengthening of the communion, so fervently desired by the Holy Father. The Cardinal does not aim at a common denominator but at total surrender — and that would mean the death of the Bush. At best it would be allowed to linger on, emasculated, having lost all the strength needed for the renewal of the Hungarian Catholic Church.

6. *The Interpretation of the Letter*

For all its moderation, the letter does satisfy certain wishes of the Hungarian episcopate. Why? No doubt the Vatican is also in possession of all the data we have been using in the present article. This being the case, we must ask again: Why?

The reason must be the souring of relations between the hierarchy and the State. Imre Miklós refused any further concessions unless this letter were to be issued and made public. Had this letter not been issued, he could for instance have forbidden

children coming for religious instruction to enter the heated presbytery. They would have had to sit with chattering teeth in the beastly cold church. Imre Miklós and the bishops convinced the Vatican to deliver the goods, or face the consequences. Has the Holy See chosen the lesser evil?

This letter is proof that the Vatican intends to stick to its "*Ostpolitik*", to ensure some possibility for church life by making concessions to the State. The letter is as circumspect as it can be. Nevertheless, everyone in the hierarchy, or in public life in Hungary who has an axe to grind, can now declare that the Vatican, indeed the Holy Father himself, has condemned Father Bulányi and his communities. This letter will cap the constant one-sided campaign of vituperation carried on in the Hungarian press against Bulányi. The Cardinal commented once in private conversation: "Bulányi will only be allowed to publish when he withdraws his heretical teachings". The letter will, unfortunately, reinforce the effects of this campaign. There are already signs of this in certain congregations and in Catholic schools. Until now only pupils in state schools have been exposed to insults; now even in church schools the pressure is on. Schoolchildren belonging to Basis Communities are exposed to constant harassment. The ranks of those who spring to the defence of the Church with drawn swords against the Bulányists are swelling apace.

Those who think otherwise dare only to encourage the victims in secret. The columns of the press are closed to them. Should they dare to raise their voice in public, they would also become "marked men".

7. *Uncertain Prospects*

If it happens that the other Basis Communities will not stand up in defence of the Bulányists, the situation will go from bad to worse — first of all for the Bush, but then for the other communities too, whether they stand aside or not. The Bush will stand up to the pressure: no fear can conquer them, as long as their conviction, inspired by Jesus Christ, can stand firm. If the hierarchy rejects and condemns them, they are not responsible for this scandal. If the enemies of the Church are rubbing their hands — "Look, they have been successfully divided!" — again, they are not responsible for this.

The greatest scandal of the Hungarian Catholic Church is the refusal of its high dig-

nitaries to enter into a dialogue with their priests and lay folk. The walls of their rooms have ears, it is true; but they also avoid discussion with community members when no one can listen in.

The life of the Basis Communities — indeed, the renewal of our Church — depends on people who refuse to lie; who refuse to accept pretence in place of truth.

The Vatican is not located in Hungary. The only thing it is capable of doing in Rome is to negotiate, to try to ward off greater evils. The Vatican cannot take upon itself martyrdom on behalf of the Hungarian Church. But it is crystal clear that any success in negotiations depends on the steadfastness of Hungarian priests and laymen. It depends on their willingness to suffer for their faith in Christ. The words "*Semen est sanguis Christianorum*" are still fully valid.

If the Vatican were to ask the priests and laymen working in the Basis Communities directly, they would reply that the Holy See can trust them, that they will never disobey their superiors, that they will gladly suffer the burden of punishment, even if contrary to ecclesiastical law, but that they will never lie, they will never give up their fidelity to Jesus Christ. The bishops' charge of disobedience does not stand up before the teaching of Christ. On the contrary, it is the community members who desire most strongly the maintenance of church unity. It is their desire to obey willingly every pastoral counsel or command — as long as these do not contradict Christ's teaching on the only way the faithful can reach the Kingdom of Heaven.

8. *Nevertheless . . .*

. . . the Bush is still alive and working. It is also growing. Perhaps less than one per cent of its membership has deserted it under the conflicting pressures of recent years. The communities are flourishing — indeed, new ones are emerging. The good wine of the Gospels needs no bush — it will be drunk, no matter the slander against the Bush.

The members of the Bush have no illusions. Their Master told them a long time ago "You will be persecuted . . .". Having built His Church on the rock of Peter, the Master, however, omitted to foresee that it will be the local leaders of His Church who will persecute those who put their faith in the Sermon on the Mount. All the faithful can do is to pray for their enemies . . .

What consequences will ensue from all this for the fate of the Hungarian Catholic Church should give food for thought to all followers of Jesus Christ, inside our frontiers and beyond them. The Vatican may consider that by means of the Casaroli letter it may have saved the Bush again — as so many times in recent years. The measured tone of the letter could be looked on as proof of this consideration. Unfortunately,

owing to the distorting interpretations given to the letter by our hierarchy and our press, the appearances are very different. It is to be feared that after a few more efforts like this at rescue, the patient might die.

The mills do grind slowly but they do grind nevertheless. And the only consolation for those ground between the upper and nether millstones is what Jesus said: "Rejoice, I have conquered the world! . . ."

Translated by Julian Schopflin