

Hungary: From the Ruling Church to the “Church of the People”

JÁNOS WILDMANN

Secularisation and scientific-technical progress have dislodged the Catholic Church from its ruling position with all its economic, social and political powers. This process, sooner or later, leads everywhere to the separation of church and state. With the lessening of its economic and political influence, the clergy has had to redefine both its political role and its ecclesiastical image. Between the two World Wars new principles of a so-called “new Christianity” (*nouvelle chrétienté*), were formulated and were analysed by J. Maritain. According to this concept, the role of the church is essentially religious and should not interfere in political matters. These were thought to be the preserve of governments and political parties. The church should only endeavour to change unfair social conditions and to build a new society by creating a Christian culture. This concept won unequivocal acceptance by the Second Vatican Council’s rejection of an ecclesiastical image encompassing secular power. Today most church leaders throughout the world come from adherents to this pattern. The ruling church, as a social phenomenon at least, has ceased to exist. Church leaderships that serve and legitimise ruling élites have been able to survive in only a few countries, in particular, those governed by dictatorial regimes. Hungary is one such country.

It has been obvious since the first half of this century that ecclesiastical withdrawal from social and political issues does not necessarily mean neutrality. In many cases it has made it easier for dictatorial governments to acquire great power. Where this has happened in Latin America new initiatives were launched by elements within the church and a so-called “church of the people” (*iglesia popular*) appeared. This is not the same as a people’s (*volk*) church, which may be defined as one to which the majority of people of a country at least nominally belong by virtue of widespread infant baptism. Such churches are often burdened by the weight of centuries-old tradition, that has a tendency to strangle grass-root initiatives aimed at renewal. On the contrary the “church of the people” sways more towards dynamic evangelism than tradition, and it

demands the conscious, personal decision of its members. It is characterised by a network of basis groups. Because of their evangelical values, their aim is the freedom of the whole man, and therefore their activities have not only a spiritual but also social and political dimensions. Bishops, priests and ordinary believers equally belong to the "church of the people". They do not confront the hierarchy, but maintain a critical attitude towards church leaders who serve an oppressive power. It is not the case of a new church, but of a new model for the omnipresent church.¹

The metamorphosis of the Hungarian Church

The Hungarian Catholic Church today does not exhibit the characteristics of the "church of the people". The majority of the hierarchy rejects its endeavours. This has deep historical roots. Through the centuries its institutional, economic and political role has predestined the Hungarian Catholic leadership to enter into a community of interest with the ruling elite of the country. A force guided by the principles of the "new Christianity" and striving for the independence of the church from the state appeared in the 1930s. Within a relatively short time this movement achieved significant results. It encouraged a more lively and deeper spiritual life. In the cultural sphere it produced an independent Christian press. It also contributed to political life by successfully starting workers' and peasants' organisations. In spite of the opposition of the state and the conservative church leadership, these organisations had half a million members by the Second World War.² Their importance in public life may be seen by the fact that soon after the end of the war the communist-dominated government banned them from political life. Following that the authorities dissolved the spiritual centres of the "new Christianity" — the religious orders. With these two blows the basis of the movement was successfully broken.

During the Nazi persecution of the Jews the hierarchy too arrived at a confrontation with the authorities. This led to the arrest of Cardinal Serédi and the then Bishop of Veszprém, József Mindszenty. After becoming primate in the autumn of 1945, Mindszenty continued a policy of strong opposition to the lords of the new state power. He did not accept that the church could be free from politics. Paradoxically, the historical task of breaking the church's ancient loyalty to the state fell to the conservative Mindszenty. Of course, there was no place in his thinking for any kind of progressive "church of the people". His opposition was expressly right-wing. The conditions were not then ripe for a more radical understanding of the church while the integrated state-church was in the process of dissolution. At the same time Mindszenty may not be rightly depicted as no more than a conservative, feudal high priest who fought to regain the confiscated lands of the church and the former privileges of the

bishops. Early on he saw in the policies of the post-war government the first signs of a bloody Bolshevik-style persecution of the church. He hoped to obstruct the further development of this trend by creating an anti-communist church ready for demonstrations and trials of strength. On many occasions he raised his voice against violations of human rights and the arbitrary use of power. He protested strongly against the inhuman deportation that affected the Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia.

After the loss of the church's privileges, the nationalisation of its lands and schools, and the banning of its associations, it appeared as if events had shaken up the Hungarian Catholic Church and initiated a rethinking of its social role. The arrest of Mindszenty broke the power of the church leaders to oppose. The Peace Priest movement, which was under communist direction, forced the bishops to capitulate unconditionally to the state. In the church-state agreement of 30 August 1950, which was preceded by taking monks as hostages, the bishops promised that they would act against church personnel who violated the new social and political order, and would condemn all activity directed against it. They also called on believers to work with all their strength on behalf of the "great work". Furthermore, they assured the government of their support for its peace programme. The communist leaders promised complete freedom of religion. However, the dissolution of the religious orders only a few days after the signing of this agreement left no doubt about the spirit in which they would interpret it. They did, however, honour their pledge to return eight Catholic secondary schools and to provide financial support for the church.³ With these events the church's struggle for independence, at least on the part of the hierarchy, came to an end. The hierarchy returned to the customary policy of strict loyalty to the state. According to one observer:

After the war the regenerating Hungarian Church gradually became an institution "living peacefully together" with the state, then one "finding its place" in a society building socialism, and finally one "working together" in that building, after having become an "institutional opponent".⁴

Parallel with these events a new kind of church appeared at the level of its foundations. It may be regarded as the spiritual heir to the progressive "new Christianity" movements of the 1930s. Its aim was the realisation of evangelical values in small groups that were free from state influence and from the supervision of the state-controlled official church. The political police brutally persecuted the members of these groups, and the church leaders distanced themselves from them. Under these circumstances the groups tended to make sure that social and political questions did not arise in their circles.

The partial agreement of 1964 between the Vatican and the Hungarian government enabled the Hungarian Church to emerge from "the ghetto" to become the "negotiating church". The state had success in placing the question of personnel appointments instead of pastoral problems at the head of the agenda. To the present day this tendency not to confront the most serious internal problems obstructs reform and inner renewal and is no small contributing factor in the steady drift away from the church. It is estimated that only about ten per cent of the Catholic population regularly goes to church, yet there are more bishops now than before the war. Following the partial agreement the autonomous sphere of church life became determined by the principles of the Patriotic People's Front, which provided the framework within which the church was obliged to operate. It was required that the church should regard the building of socialism and the fulfilment of a political programme determined by the party as its mission. The state secured for itself unrestricted possibilities for interfering in the most internal matters of church life. It also limited the scope of church reform to easily controlled "small steps" that lead nowhere.

After Vatican II, and especially in the 1970s, voices urging necessary reforms were strengthened. They cautioned and warned against making the old excuses — "objective factors" and "the will of God" — for continued inactivity.⁵ The appointment of Lászlo Lékai as Archbishop of Esztergom and his elevation to the rank of Cardinal in 1976 meant that the hierarchy was now complete. Thus personnel matters touched on by the partial agreement were solved. The regulation of the internal problems of the church therefore came to the fore. The head of the Hungarian Church promised a solution of pastoral problems. However, his "small steps" were not of much use to the Hungarian Church beyond mending of church-state relations and achieving the appointment of a few new bishops. In the second half of the 1970s, when the state transferred the supervision of them to the bishops, the small groups that came to life in the 1940s grew and multiplied. During the years of direct persecution these groups did not care much about the commands of the communist power or of the hierarchy. Afterwards it was not easy for them to tailor their activities to the wishes of the "negotiating" church leaders, who by then had lost their respect. Under Lékai's leadership the hierarchy became the extended hand of the state, and tried to dissolve them. As this was unsuccessful it tried to divide the ever-growing movement and to isolate the more radical groups from the rest.

The state's religious policy

At the beginning, the communist authorities' ecclesiastical policy was characterised by severe curtailment. The church was seen as the "corner-

stone of the feudal-capitalist regime” and had to be eliminated by administrative means that were often brutal. This policy however did not succeed in eliminating religion. With the establishment of the Kádár regime in 1956 the communist authorities regained their ascendant position again using brutal means — i.e. executions, imprisonment and deportation. Once this had been accomplished, they gradually reverted to milder measures. In order to execute its religious policy, the government re-created two institutions: the State Office for Church Affairs, and a unit of the Ministry of Interior’s political police dealing with religious affairs. As a result of the work of these two bodies, the control of the state over the church is almost total. It has established a good relationship with church leaders, and is able to interfere in internal affairs of the church. There is no doubt that this religious policy has been largely successful from the point of view of the state. According to official government sources the relationship between the state and the churches is “sound”; and a “new type of relationship” has been formed. This means, at least in theory, that the state guarantees freedom of conscience, and allows the churches to function while expecting a practical contribution to the building of socialism. The chairman of the State Office for Church Affairs made the church’s obligation clear when he stated in 1982: “It is paramount that our religious policy should help the complete fulfilment of the party’s policy of alliances.” One aim of the “policy of alliances” is “to assert gradually the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint, and make it dominant in our entire public thinking,” according to the senior Hungarian statesman Gyula Kállai. (See *RCL* Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 41.) In the area of internal affairs, the churches must work for the realisation of the programme laid down by the party. The laity is expected to do so through good citizenship in their daily lives while the leaders do so by offering support for the government in parliament, in the Patriotic People’s Front and in other public forums. In the area of foreign affairs the churches have a duty to support “the peace policies of the countries of the socialist community”, and to strengthen the “united anti-imperialist front”.⁶

The drafting of the churches into the service of the communist party has been the by-product of its “policy of alliances” which aims at “national unity”. Some believe the so-called “Christian-Marxist dialogue” of the 1980s reflects the mutual tolerance of “national unity”. But this is not so. The “dialogue” is carried on with a church occupying a subordinate and subservient position. It is misguided to speak of a “dialogue” when the partnership is unequal and when the church must offer unconditional support to the party’s political programme. The Marxists select their “dialogue” partners from among bishops and priests appointed to their posts with state approval. Those who are not already largely in agreement with the Marxists regarding any subject under

discussion are excluded from dialogue. Thus the Marxists, for all practical purposes, conduct dialogue with themselves. The “policy of alliances” is also portrayed by the state as guaranteeing religious freedom and church autonomy. But Imre Miklos suggests that the Hungarian state’s interpretation of these concepts is not that which is generally held in the West:

We cannot take the concept of autonomy in the traditional sense, because we can never apply the capitalist system’s platitudes in relation to ourselves In a socialist society we try with a strong will to apply religious policies to our own circumstances.⁷

In other words the communist state has decided for itself the meaning of church autonomy. The same applies to the religious liberty of the faithful. The state expands and contracts the freedom and independence of the church according to the dictates of political expediency.

Freedom for the establishment of religious groupings such as basis groups and residential communities is a notion foreign to the communist state. It believes it is qualified to judge when religion “should not be limited by administrative means”⁸ and when “the religious discussion is merely a pretext to disguise political endeavours”.⁹ On the basis of such a criterion those in power “aspire with strong will” not for the freedom and well-being of the church but to promote the interests of the atheistic state.

The negotiating church

The present Hungarian Catholic leadership thinks of itself as the church ready for negotiations and dialogue. The leadership praises the measures of the communist government without any deviation in its public policy statements. It rejoices in the realisation of an ideal model of socialism, which places “the whole of society in an ever more perfect humanitarian and democratic state of well-being and general health”.¹⁰ It does not speak about social problems, human rights violations and restrictions on religious freedom. Instead it speaks about “our relative freedom” on the basis of “the given realities” and “among the possibilities fixed by the new social framework”.¹¹ Though the official organs of the state have long spoken openly about mistakes of the Stalinist era, and the blind obedience of the personality cult, some church leaders, unmindful of the lessons of history, are willing to make optimistic appraisals that do not correspond to the truth. According to Bishop Cserháti, at the time of the church-state agreement of 1950 the “social aims of the practitioners of the people’s power were identical in ethical content to men of the Gospel being called to the fraternal brotherhood”. He continues: “This ideal picture of man has only rarely in the history of the church received a

clearer calling coming from outside and from the world than that which happened thirty years ago.”¹² The Mindszenty trial, the internment of thousands of monks, the raging terror and the persecution of the church has apparently not influenced this appraisal.

The church leaders exhibit precisely the same servile attitude towards international questions as they do to domestic affairs. They do not come forward with independent proposals regarding military preparations, peace or disarmament. The Helsinki Agreements gave the church in Hungary a little room to oversee the respect of human rights.¹³ But the church leaders did not accept this responsibility. Instead they automatically accepted the state's interpretation and understanding of the Helsinki Agreements. Cardinal Lékai's recent attack on conscientious objectors to military service, in which he tried to alter the teaching of the church to meet the expectations of the state, was the high point of this exceedingly dubious political loyalty. He called those who want to perform peaceful, social service instead of armed service in line with the decisions of Vatican II “destroyers of the church” and “misleaders”.¹⁴ One observer has thus summed up the political position of the church:

The Hungarian Catholic Church, as a social institution — which the conference of bishops and to a certain degree the Catholic Committee of the National Peace Council represents — has powerfully and in expressly political language expressed itself without end. This appears as a certain variation of the classical political theology, which lends an extra measure of legality to the state power.¹⁵

The openness of the church toward the state is not one-sided. That is to say, the bishops not only guarantee their support, but they allow the state to interfere in the internal affairs of the church. They bring sanctions against priests, they appoint, transfer and dismiss priests at the prompting of the State Office for Church Affairs. Decisions regarding the place, time and employable resources of religious education are also taken by the state authorities. It would be a great simplification of the problem if one were to think that the control of internal church activities by the state condemns the hierarchy to utter incapacity. Instead the state seeks to develop a system reminiscent of Joseph II, the “enlightened” Habsburg Emperor of the late 18th century, a system that provided considerable latitude for religious activity, but demands the harmonisation of those activities with the interests of the absolute state. This policy finds favour with an innately conservative hierarchy seeking to defend traditional church structures. The conservatism of the bishops acts as a brake on the renewal of spiritual life in the diocese. They find it difficult to help or inspire modernisation or the development of greater dynamism in

religious life. Instead they warn their priests against detrimental tendencies filtering in from here or there. Priests are left largely on their own with pastoral problems steadily increasing due to the rapidly declining numbers of priests and strict limits on lay leadership. It is a disturbing feature of Hungarian church life that the leadership tries to make the situation seem more attractive than it really is. The church leaders travel abroad beating a great drum for small results. They celebrate countless anniversaries and jubilees with western guests in attendance. They show them a few examples of youth groups working in co-operation with the hierarchy. They receive and treat western journalists as honoured guests. It would seem that the church leadership has little interest in bringing to light all the facts of Hungarian church life. Moreover, they call those who try to disseminate correct information “troublemakers” and use their powers to discredit them.

The “small steps policy” of the hierarchy has undoubtedly brought certain results. Cardinal Lékai rightly publicises them. All Catholics must be pleased that a few Jesuits receive permission to work in the country, that a retreat centre has been built, that the state allows religious education, that a correspondence course for the laity has been started, that an old folks’ home has been finished. All regard the work among blind and crippled children as praiseworthy. Regrettably, however, these achievements affect only the periphery of church life, and barely begin to make up for the damage done during the years of great persecution. Today discussion is about six Jesuits, whereas in 1950 there were more than 10,000 monks in the country. Today there is much talk about one official retreat centre that is supervised by the state, while each year there are over a hundred, even perhaps a thousand, unofficial retreats with which the state cannot interfere. The bishops do not speak about the restrictions on religious education, the high number of qualified people not taking the correspondence course for the laity, or the difficulties of finding a job for those who have qualified for or should have finished the course. Talk of a “miraculous beginning” can arise only from propaganda.¹⁶

The church being built from below

There are two groups that are critical of the political attitude and pastoral role of the Hungarian bishops. One is a conservative element that adheres to the principles of Maritain’s “new Christianity”. The other is made up of basis communities or “the church being built from below”. The former does not generally align itself with the church being built from below. Instead it plays a leading role in the world church.

In the first place the adherents of “new Christianity” censure the church leaders for their servile attitude towards the state. They would like

the hierarchy to renounce its damaging political role, and to concentrate its attention on renewal within the church. To this extent their thinking coincides with that of the basis communities. A fundamental difference does exist in that they dream of a renewal exclusively within the traditional framework of the parish without any kind of political confrontation with the state.

The basis communities, especially during the years of direct persecution, were well beyond the bounds of state toleration, and they sought a religious life independent of the traditional parish framework. However, because of intimidation, these communities took care not to give cause to the police powers to take action against them. Because of that they did not deal with political and social questions. They also feared to err theologically, so they closely followed the traditional teaching of the church. Thus, in spite of their progressive structure, the basis communities fixed certain political and theological bounds for themselves. Until the present time this self-control remains the most important of their inner contradictions. They have already stepped beyond the narrow bounds of the "new Christianity", but they have not yet arrived at "the church of the people". In any case this reticence eases the co-operation of the two groups. Among the basis communities the "Bulányists", though small in number compared to the largest, "Regnum Marianum",* are the most bold in their independence; but even they do not go so far as to approach completely the "church of the people". Rome accepts much more radical groups in Latin America.

The state well understands the balance of forces within the church, and skilfully tries to divide them. It tries to separate completely the representatives of the "new Christianity" from the basis groups. Only adherents of the latter can hope for high church office. The state has tried to neutralise "Regnum Marianum". Members of this group have been placed under surveillance and attempts have been made to force an integration of the organisation with the parish system. This has had considerable success, thus leaving the Bulyánists as the only autonomous adherents to "the church being built from below". It is the hope of the state and the hierarchy that the Bulyánists can be isolated from the mainstream of church life and eventually dissolve. The basis groups, in my view, are the power that is the hope and security for the renewal of the church. Despite its self-control and moderation the basis community movement has pointed to the kind of changes that are necessary in the life of the church. Moreover, it has taken the first steps in this direction. It has redefined the mission of the church by diminishing personal and institutional interests. It has emphasised the proclamation of the Gospel and has placed concrete evangelical values to the forefront. Instead of looking for a *modus vivendi*, or any kind of negotiations or concessions, it

*For a description of this group, see *RCL* Vol. 12, No. 1, 1984, pp. 31-32 — *Ed.*

has simply brought life inside the old walls of the church. It regards the practice of "Sundays only" Christianity as insufficient. It proclaims *metanoia* (repentance, or change of direction), it encourages social service as a witness to the love of Christ. These renewing efforts have their cost in terms of suffering and persecution but this brings the movement credit. Self-control has limited the basis communities from acting more boldly in the spirit of Vatican II. For some years they did not think and look much beyond "the walls of the church". They spoke about the complete man, but dealt only with the religious dimension and avoided cultural, social and political questions. It was encouraging that some members of the basis groups have formed a committee called *Dignitatis Humanae*. Its statement on Poland¹⁷ and the peace movement marked the first time that the "church being built from below" expressed independent political views. The rise of the "church being built from below" marks a new chapter in church history, and offers hope for a renewed world and church.

The way of the future: the "church of the people"

We have witnessed a division of the basis community movement. They have come to a critical moment. Should they follow the Regnumist line and enter into negotiations with bishops and consequently with the "religious policy", or should they carry on steadily on the path of radical church-renewal while avoiding an irreparable rift with the hierarchy? By taking the first option they would undoubtedly achieve the adoption of some moderate, long-awaited reforms. By taking the second option, a positive step towards the establishment of a "church of the people" would be taken.

The main features of the "church of the people" cannot be transplanted automatically into the Hungarian Catholic Church. The basis community movement must find a way that is practicable and suitable to Hungarian circumstances and conditions. The basis communities must help the church to cease legitimising the political authorities. In my view, the role of the church should be solely the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the creation of the community of Christ. But this does not mean neutrality in social or political matters.

The "church of the people" should not expect to be recognised by the government. It does not seek its goodwill and it does not adjust its actions to governmental expectations. It alone and not the state should define its own mission. At the same time the "church of the people" should assure the state that it does not carry on any anti-government activities. The good news of Christ promises perfect liberation; it includes the whole man and therefore it also has a social dimension in addition to the

religious. The “church of the people” must also declare itself in these matters. According to the Puebla document,* if church leaders “preach the Gospel without its economic, social, cultural and political implications”, then they “mutilate it and give explicit support to the existing system”. The Hungarian “church of the people’s” most important objectives in these areas are: to draw up an independent peace policy; to keep distant from the ambitions of materialism; to represent a Christian understanding of human rights; to formulate terms for a genuine dialogue between the state and the church. The “church of the people” must clearly show that it does not stand against the hierarchy because the bishops, the priests and ordinary believers all equally belong to it. A dividing line should not be drawn between the hierarchy and the lower stratum. Tomorrow’s church must allow a certain amount of theological pluralism. It must learn new directions and see new results. But theological openness must be coupled with orthodoxy so as not to destroy the faith. The “church of the people” must assess the performance of ecclesiastical office-holders according to their sacramental and dogmatic functioning. Clericalism should be systematically reduced throughout the church. The new church must spell out that beyond the concrete questions of sacrament and dogma, the standard within the church at every level should not be holy orders but aptitude, individual charisma, responsibility, honour and integrity. In other words the bishop, the priest and the general believer all have individual roles to play but in accordance with the same standards. In the “church of the people” the laity and the lower clergy must accept and approve of the hierarchy and vice versa. Hitherto it was only the laity and the clergy that had to adjust to the wishes of the church leaders. But just as the latter cannot keep their identity if they break off with the former, the former cannot demand authority if it violates the interests of the latter. Just as the hierarchy can instruct the laity and lower clergy, so they, in turn, can motivate the church leadership from the ground up to make democratic changes. Not only bishops should represent the churches abroad but also the Christian people. This kind of democracy would mean that the faithful themselves would enter into contact with Rome, with other churches, and with international church organisations. In Rome, the basis communities must try to bring about a better understanding of the Pope’s teaching regarding Hungary. It should be made known that the relationship of the basis communities with the hierarchy in Hungary is almost identical to their relationship with the state, and also that integration with the parishes is not now possible because of government supervision and the appointment of “peace priests” to the most important parishes. The grass-roots should not see

*This was a document issued by a conference of Latin American bishops who met in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979 to review the findings of the Second Vatican Council — *Ed.*

themselves as some kind of vanguard party. The vanguard theory, both at the political and ecclesiastical levels, has failed in the past. This is because the “vanguard”, be it the party or priests, always acts within its own narrow interests, while claiming to act on behalf of the general public. Though the basis communities should be the leading power they should not think that they must act in the interests of the Christian people in the place of all the Christian people. This would lead directly to religious intolerance and sectarianism. The characteristics of the basis groups can only be tolerance and pluralism. Their role and task are best defined by the images of Jesus: let them be light, salt, and yeast under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The realisation of the “church of the people” in Hungary is, today, a vision rather than a reality, though the new era of church history that “brings hope of a new world and of a new church” has undoubtedly already started. The words of Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Poland in 1979, give direction and encouragement:

We need courage to follow the path where none has been before. Simon, too, in his day, needed great courage to reach from the sea of Galilee in Nazareth to the completely unknown Rome.

¹Leonardo Boff, *Aus dem Tal der Tränen ins Gelobte Land*. Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1982.

²Imre András and Gyula Morel, *Bilanz des ungarischen Katholizismus*. Munich: Heimatwerk — Verlag, 1969, pp. 136.

³András and Morel, pp. 83-85.

⁴*UKI-Pressedienst*, Nr.22, “Konfliktus a két magyar pásztoracios felfogás körül”, Vienna, January 1982.

⁵*UKI-Pressedienst*, Nr. 16, “A magyar egyházpolitika alapelvei”.

⁶*Népszabadság*, 20 February 1982.

⁷*UKI-Pressedienst*, Nr. 16.

⁸*UKI-Pressedienst*, Nr. 16.

⁹*Népszabadság*, 20 February 1982.

¹⁰József Cserháti: “Tovább a nyitott utakon”, *Vigilia*, October 1980, p. 652.

¹¹Cserháti, pp. 654-55.

¹²Cserháti, p. 651.

¹³*Új Ember*, 29 February 1976.

¹⁴*Új Ember*, 20 September 1981; *KIPA*, 21 September 1981.

¹⁵Hans-H. Hücking, “Die politische Rolle der Amtskirche in Ungarn”. *Concilium*, August-September 1982, p. 507.

¹⁶*KIPA*, 18 October 1982.

¹⁷*Beszélő*, Nr. 3, pp. 36-39.