

# A Summary of the Situation of the Hungarian Catholic Church

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In the past few years, a controversy has developed between a growing number of Catholics who have joined what are known as “basis groups” or “small communities” and the Hungarian Church hierarchy, headed by Cardinal László Lékai. Essentially, the disagreement has to do with the role of the Church in a country ruled by a totalitarian State. Whereas Cardinal Lékai and the Council of Bishops have decided to attempt to live within the realities presented by the rule of the communists in Hungary and to try to make the best of a bad situation, the basis communities, and especially some of their most able leaders such as Father György Bulányi, the Piarist priest, have argued that it is impossible to make compromises with a totalitarian state and a communist system which has set itself the goal of eradicating all religion from the lives of its citizens.

The leadership of the Church, in accord with the Vatican, noting Kádár’s approach to the political situation in Hungary after 1963 and the end of the period of retribution that followed the 1956 Revolution, decided that in order to gain some advantages for the Church under this “new arrangement”, they would have to be willing to make further compromises with the State. They decided to do this in spite of the fact that the Church had already forfeited her independence once, in an agreement forced upon her in 1950, and had subsequently been weakened by a number of years of Stalinist persecution. The bishops were hoping that through an arduously slow process of *realpolitik* they could re-establish some of their authority within the Church and initiate a process that could revitalise her deteriorating and in some cases even dying institutions.

In sharp contrast, and somewhat unexpectedly as far as the hierarchy was concerned, the basis groups, rooted in the private gatherings, the “underground Church” of the late forties and early fifties, chose another way to renew their faith. They insisted that Catholics could never make a compromise with the representatives of a system that did everything in its power to destroy them after the Second World War. Many of the members and most of the leaders of these groups had been imprisoned in

Rákosi's concentration camps. They had been tortured and threatened with the loss of everything from their jobs to their lives. They lived through or grew up in the era of Cardinal Mindszenty's stewardship of the Church's affairs, marked by open conflict with the State and the eventual arrest, torture, show-trial and imprisonment of the Primate. There could be no way for them to make compromises with the representatives of the party who had done these things and certainly not with Kádár, a high party and government official in the early days of the communist take-over, who in 1956 had betrayed the one group of communists and leftists around Imre Nagy that had had a chance to establish a democratic government in the country.

The basis groups proposed that the way to renew the Church was by the spread of small groups of close-knit communities of faithful patterned on the gatherings of early Christians, which were formed to protect them from the persecutions of the Roman Empire.

In order to understand the situation of the Catholic Church in Hungary today, one must not only understand the nature of the above conflict and the reasons for the various stands taken by its antagonists, but must be able to put these events into some sort of historical context. Since the Church has been in Hungary ever since the establishment of the first Hungarian State at the end of the 10th century its character and behaviour, its whole set of relationships to the society and to the people of the country were and are affected by its historical rôle. Although there is not space to outline more than a thousand years of Hungarian history here and to place the history of the Hungarian Church in that context, at least the main points of the most recent period can be sketched. This should lead to a better understanding not only of the conflict between the hierarchy and the basis groups, but also of the position of the Catholic Church in Hungary today.

For the purpose of this short overview, the most recent period of the Hungarian Church's history can be divided into two major parts: (A) the period after the Second World War, when Cardinal Mindszenty was the Primate of Hungary, and (B) the period of compromise with the State, beginning with the first agreement between the Kádár regime and the Vatican signed in 1964 and culminating, though by no means ending, with the appointment of László Lékai as the Archbishop and then Cardinal of Esztergom and consequently Mindszenty's successor as the Primate of Hungary.

### *Historical Background*

#### *A. Cardinal Mindszenty's Years*

The ravages of the war and the sufferings of 1944 were followed by new abuses and injustices. Whereas the persecutions of the Nazis and their

sympathisers were directed mainly at the Jews, the gypsies and the political Left, those that came after the war were more often aimed at the Catholic Church, and especially her hierarchy and her institutions. The victorious Red Army occupied Hungary and through the tiny communist party, most of whose members it had brought from Moscow, it began to take over total control of the country. Since the population had already had a taste of communism in 1919, it was none too eager to comply with Stalin's design that every East European country should become a part of the communist world. This reluctance made the final take-over even more ruthless.

With the destruction of the war and the unravelling of the traditional social and political institutions of the country, only the Catholic Church remained to defend a moral and philosophical system attacked by nihilistic and materialist political forces. The Protestant Churches were neither large enough nor as well organised and centralised, the Jewish community had been almost completely destroyed and the other religious groups were so much smaller and had so little power that they were no challenge to a highly-disciplined political party like that of the communists. As for the political parties formed after the war, none of them had a chance, since the only higher authority to whom they could appeal about irregularities and breaches in constitutional procedure was the Red Army High Command.

The Catholic Church presented the communists with a unique problem. Even the destruction of the war and the many hardships that it had brought did not destroy her structure. Her centralised hierarchy was hard to penetrate and to bring down from within, as had been done with the Protestant congregations. Most important of all, the Primate of the Hungarian Church, Cardinal József Mindszenty, was an uncompromising anti-communist with no illusions about the ulterior motives and designs of his opponents. As he wrote later in his memoirs:

‡ Especially when dealing with determined communists, a hesitant, irresolute attitude could prove disastrous. And I think to this hour that our position is so seriously weakened by those Christians whose primary concern seems to be worrying about whether the charges brought against the Church may not some time, some place have been justified. The excesses of modern "self-criticism" often serve only the interests of our bitter enemies. It takes people with carefully trained minds to see the "faults and weaknesses" of the Church in the proper proportions and to fit them into the circumstances of the times. Even a good many theologians and intellectuals cannot do that, for they lack the historian's eye.<sup>1</sup>

Such opposition did not deter the Stalinists, with Mátyás Rákosi, an

intelligent, well-educated and ruthless man as their leader. Their strategy against Mindszenty and the Church was one of total frontal attack. They used every means at their disposal, and since by the end of 1948 they had effectively removed all of their weaker opponents from the political scene, the Church was a lonely and defenceless target. Cardinal Mindszenty used the pulpit, the foreign press, his acquaintances in the West and the few remaining public forums still available to him to answer the slanders and the false accusations levelled against him personally and against the Church, but he knew that he was fighting a losing battle.

Whatever historians may write about this period in the life of the Hungarian Church and whatever their judgement may be about the Cardinal's actions, no-one can question his resolve. In his memoirs, he naturally presents himself as firmer than may have been the case, but whatever his doubts and weaknesses were, he was one of the few who understood that the only way to fight the communists was not to betray even the slightest sign of weakness, since the success of their "politics" depended precisely on taking advantage of the least hesitation, the slightest willingness to compromise in the ranks of their opponents.

The destruction of the Church's power after the war began with the secularisation of 3,150 Catholic schools in 1948, extreme limitations placed on the small portion of the Catholic press and publishing which was allowed to stay in existence, the arrest, torture and conviction of Cardinal Mindszenty in 1949 and the eventual dissolution of all Catholic associations and lay organisations. In 1950, all religious orders except the four which were allowed to run eight remaining secondary schools (gymnasias) were dissolved and in the same year, after many thousands of members of these orders were arrested, the Council of Bishops was forced to sign an agreement with the government. That document in effect agreed to the total control of Hungary by the communists and even relinquished the ultimate control of the Church to this totalitarian system.

‡ The two areas of religious influence in which the communists were able to achieve the most damage were in the destruction of religious instruction and in the infiltration of the clergy by priests under their control. The latter came to be known as "peace priests" for their active participation in the various "peace organisations" founded by the communists.

Beside the dissolution of the overwhelming majority of Catholic schools, the communists managed to sabotage the "optional religious instruction" guaranteed in the state schools by the constitution. The most prevalent method of accomplishing this end was the intimidation of parents by a variety of threats communicated to them either directly or indirectly at their places of employment or through their children. School principals and teachers were under pressure to discourage children from attending religious instruction, and the priests and the nuns who were usually the only teachers available for these courses were either arrested

or scared away from their tasks by simple threats which no one could document or trace. As a result, the religious instruction in the schools was a remnant of what it would have been, had it been allowed to function freely. The little that was allowed to remain was left for propaganda purposes so that the regime could always point to "religious freedom under socialism".

The peace-priest movement was basically a form of the much used tactic of infiltration of all competing and opposing organisations and institutions. A few of the "progressive" priests were duped into cooperating with the communists, others were simply blackmailed, while still others were actively trained to infiltrate the priesthood and to "work their way up the ladder", naturally with plenty of help from the State.

Once the peace-priests were strategically placed in positions of influence and power, they could be used both as informers and as "enforcers" of the State's wishes in the ranks of the clergy and as "representatives of the progressive elements within the Church". No one can gauge the exact extent of their activities, especially not in the 1950s, since it was not and still is not in their interest or in the interest of the powers they serve that their identities be known.

The identities of members and officers of the peace-priest movement, especially those in leadership positions and the ones who have been regularly writing and working for the newspaper of the movement, have been known to the Hungarian hierarchy. A number of them, such as the canon Miklós Beresztócy, were excommunicated for collaboration with the Church's enemies.<sup>2</sup>

A period of total repression followed the 1950 "agreement" between the Church and the State. Many priests and unfrocked nuns, together with large numbers of the faithful, were imprisoned. The number who died is not definitely known, but it is certain that most if not all were cruelly tortured and mistreated and the physical and mental health of all was affected for the rest of their lives. Catholics, just like the members of other religious groups, were persecuted for their religious beliefs. They were denied positions in the jobs for which they were trained, refused union and other social benefits and were subject to special punishment if they betrayed the least sign of religious activity. The practice by priests of their religious duties anywhere except in churches, even their contact with the faithful, was considered an "act of treason" against the State.

In spite of, or maybe because of this persecution, many Catholics continued to attend church ceremonies and practised their religion. Some even made an effort to keep alive their religious beliefs through active study of the Bible and the catechism and they sent their children for private religious instruction to the homes of former priests and nuns, despite the danger. These practices contributed significantly to the survival of Catholicism through this period of persecution and ironically

they also prepared the way for the conflicts between the hierarchy and the basis groups to be discussed later.

## 2. *The Fall of Stalinism and the Revolution*

With the demise of many Stalinists and the eventual dismissal of Rákosi, there began a period of relative easing of the repression in all areas of the country's life. The thaw culminated in the revolution of 1956, which was the most desperate attempt by any country up to that time to extricate itself from the Soviet empire and to reject the communist dictatorship imposed upon her. Following Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev's famous speech to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, and the subsequent appointment of Imre Nagy as Hungary's premier in 1954, Catholic priests, nuns and laymen, along with many thousands of others, were released from prison. This did not mean freedom to practise religion as they had done right after the war, and certainly not as they had between the wars, but at least there was hope again that some semblance of religious freedom might one day be re-established.

As far as the Church was concerned, the process of reform and revolution culminated in the release from prison, by now modified to house arrest, of Cardinal Mindszenty on 1 November 1956.

The Cardinal made an impassioned speech to the nation over Radio Budapest on 3 November. In it he called for a continuation of the "beautiful days of unity" that had brought about the downfall of the Stalinist dictatorship and the elimination from power of most of its representatives. He also pleaded with the Soviet Union to avoid further bloodshed and to continue the withdrawal of its troops from Hungarian territory. At the time of his speech, there were many reports arriving from the north-eastern section of the country about increases in Soviet military strength there. Prime Minister Imre Nagy and some of his closest associates probably already feared the worst, which was only hours away.

‡ Mindszenty's speech was conciliatory and lacked any criticism of Imre Nagy's government or even any harsh statements about the Stalinist persecutions of the recent past. It ended on a note which in subsequent years was misinterpreted and distorted to give the impression that he called for the re-establishment of Church property and thereby for the restoration of lands and wealth to their pre-Second World War owners. The crucial sentence of the speech was:

We justly expect the immediate granting of freedom of Christian religious instruction and the restoration of the institutions and societies of the Catholic Church — among other things her press.<sup>3</sup>

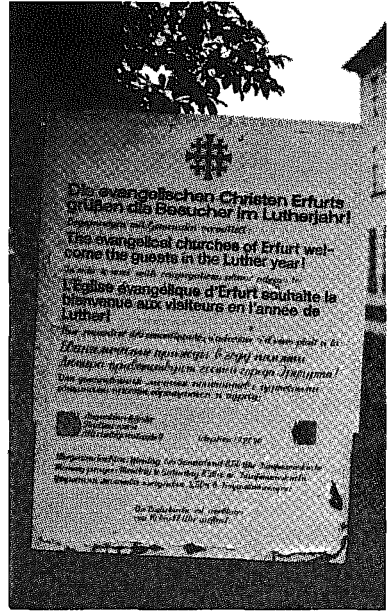
Whatever interpretation one may want to attach to these words, it is hard to find in them anything about the restoration of church estates or



One of the larger provincial congregations of the Free Christians in Hungary (*below and left*). See article on pp. 4-10.



A young Hungarian Catholic girl celebrates her First Communion, May 1983. Despite official discouragement, childrens' attendance at religious instruction classes remains very high in traditionally Catholic rural areas. (*All photos courtesy of Keston College.*)



Father György Bulányi (*above left*), the Hungarian Catholic priest whose pacifist ideals and leadership of the basis communities have led to conflict with his Church's hierarchy. See article on pp. 11-41. (*Photo courtesy of Keston College.*)

One of the posters on public display to invite guests from all over the world to the Luther Year celebrations in the GDR (*above right*): see article on pp. 77-85. *Below* a statue of Martin Luther, framed by the ruins of the Frauenkirche in the centre of Dresden. The church has intentionally been left unrepaired as a reminder of the wartime bombing which devastated the city. (*Photos courtesy of John Sills.*)





other sources of revenue. The return of institutions and societies in a democratic country leaves the question of financial support and subsidy open. Only those who want to distort the meaning of these words could interpret them as the propagandists of the Kádár regime have done for the past 27 years. However, since the re-establishment of Soviet domination in Hungary, only the above interpretation and distortions were made available to the Hungarian population through the monopolised official press and the state-controlled publications.

The Cardinal sought asylum in the US embassy and another chapter began in the history of the Catholic Church in Hungary.

### 3. *The Years After 1956*

The defeat of Hungary's attempt to be free of totalitarian communism was followed by another period of terror. The most obvious candidates for punishment were the leaders of the revolution, already labelled a "counter-revolution" by the new "government" installed in power by the same Red Army that had paved the way for the "road to Socialism" after 1945.

Since the Catholic Church was merely a bystander at the events of the revolution, only those of her leaders who actively resisted the Kádár regime's moves to regain control of the Church's activities were involved in the retributions. Mindszenty was safe in the US embassy, and the bishops under the leadership of Archbishop József Grösz of Kalocsa were much more cautious and more willing to compromise with the regime than he had been. As a result, "good relations" developed between the Church and State, meaning just as in the fifties that the totalitarian system had succeeded in achieving a degree of control over the episcopate that it found sufficient for its purposes.

The victims of this new wave of terror were again the small, unknown representatives of Catholicism. Along with men and women of other faiths, those who had any role in organising groups and leading the resistance against the Soviet troops, or had played the least significant roles in positions of responsibility, were now singled out for punishment. Many were jailed, especially those clergy who had had some influence over groups of the faithful and who were not in positions of prominence. Those who had been imprisoned under Rákosi were automatically suspect and the least cause they may have given the newly reorganised police for suspicion was enough to return them to prison. Others not considered dangerous were simply relegated to the periphery of society where they had lived under the previous regime.

Since the Church continued to be without its leader, the new regime soon went to work on the Council of Bishops to try to get them to come to some sort of an "agreement". The "peace-priest" movement was revived and used much as it had been before to discredit the Church from within

and to weaken her unity.

Although the methods of the Kádár regime in the first years of its power were as brutal as those of Rákosi, once the population, and especially the leaders of any resistance were cowed, Kádár set about to gain the "trust of the people" in a more subtle and in many ways a more insidious way than his Stalinist predecessors.

In 1963, a general amnesty was declared and most of the regime's political opponents who had been arrested and imprisoned after the revolution were set free. Kádár gambled that enough people had been worn down by six years of repression, and that without forums or institutions, and above all without the will to express their organised disapproval, they could not threaten the hegemony of the Party. Now the task was actually to convince the population that through a process of compromise, a relatively good life could be provided for the country even under Soviet domination. In order to sell this idea, the regime had to provide some genuine opportunities which had not existed previously. Therefore a set of economic theories was devised under the name of the New Economic Mechanism, a certain measure of free enterprise was introduced into the economy and the wide-ranging system of illegal work and business, known as the "second economy" was tolerated. Since people were allowed to use their resourcefulness, those who were industrious and adroit at handling the complex system of laws, corruption and personal influence did well. The majority of working men and women, although living better than in the fifties, expended enormous amounts of energy but barely managed to make a decent living.

In this situation, the Church also decided in favour of some form of accommodation with the regime. Since the international atmosphere had also changed and the confrontations of the Cold War were being replaced by efforts at co-existence and détente even the Vatican was pressurising the Church to make compromises with the State. Many church leaders, having seen the disastrous effects of Stalinist repression on their influence, and witnessing the decline in religious interest among an ever-growing segment of society, especially the young, sought to save as much as possible by reaching an agreement with the State. But there remained an adamant group within the Church, especially the Cardinal in the American embassy, which opposed any such moves. He had no influence over the events in the life of the Hungarian Church, and those who shared his views in the upper hierarchy had either been already removed by the State or were now quietly shunted aside by the members of the episcopate favouring compromise. Since the latter group enjoyed the increasing support of the Vatican, the staunch opponents of communism in all its forms found themselves in conflict with their superiors, whom they were bound to obey according to their priestly oaths. The choice between open conflict with the Holy See and acquiescence resulted in withdrawal into

quiet personal opposition and only in rare instances in open or even veiled challenge to the authority of both the State and the Vatican.

There were a series of smaller compromises between the hierarchy and the State, the first of which established in 1957 the Catholic National Peace Commission, an organisation which not only gave prominent roles to the “peace-priests”, but which was now supported by the Council of Bishops, who hoped that in this way they could protect the right of the faithful to religious instruction in the schools. Other compromises included the acquiescence of the church hierarchy in the removal and internment of bishops who adamantly opposed the regime and the appointment to positions of authority of members of the clergy known for their willingness to cooperate with the government. Soon, the “peace-priests” had re-established enough of their power for the government to feel less threatened by the hierarchy. In return for these concessions, the Church received little of what it had hoped for.

The old regulations concerning optional religious instruction in the schools were revived. It was just as hard, if not harder, for parents to register their children as before and every administrative measure was taken to discourage them from doing so. Private religious instruction was again made illegal, while the bishops were allowed to appoint religious teachers only with the consent of the government, which could rescind the certification of these teachers at any time. They were allowed to stay in the school building only for the duration of the lesson and were forbidden to have any contact with the students after school hours. All religious books, especially those used in the schools, had to be approved by the government.<sup>4</sup>

## B. *Cardinal Lékai's Years*

### 4. *The Period of Compromise*

When the regime was in total control, it showed a willingness to compromise with the Church. The first major agreement between the Vatican and the Hungarian government was signed on 15 October 1964. At the time, Monsignor Casaroli, who represented the Holy See, characterised the agreement as “neither a *modus vivendi* nor an accord”. It had simply achieved “practical solutions in some matters”, without providing any “legal clarifications” of the existing difficulties.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the agreement was extremely limited and amounted to not much more than a recognition of one another by the Vatican and the Hungarian government. After almost twenty years without contact, a period in which “agreements” of the type forced on the Hungarian Church in 1950 were considered null and void by the Holy See, when Vatican appointments existed only on paper but could not be implemented because of the Hungarian State’s refusal to consent, there had

now been some real negotiations and the following points were agreed upon:

- (1) Certain episcopal appointments were accepted by both sides;
- (2) The oath of allegiance to the constitution and the laws of the Hungarian People's Republic, which had to be taken by certain persons holding church office, was to be considered binding by the Church, but only in so far as these laws did not contradict the principles of the Christian faith;
- (3) The Hungarian Papal Institute in Rome was to be administered by priests acceptable to the Hungarian government. In return, the government guaranteed that the Institute's activities would not be disrupted, and that every year, each Hungarian diocese would be allowed to send a young priest there.<sup>6</sup>

A protocol was also signed in which unresolved questions and the standpoint of the two sides on these were included.

From the point of view of the Church, the filling of the episcopal vacancies with at least a few individuals acceptable to the Vatican was of major importance. Before the agreement only seven of Hungary's bishops were allowed to exercise the duties of their offices and six of the country's dioceses no longer had bishops. But this step in the direction of solving the problems of leadership in the Hungarian Church was only a small beginning, looked at from the point of view of the situation of the Church in the country. According to a set of statistics provided to the then First Secretary of the United Nations, U Thant, in 1963 and published in 1965, the numbers alone provide a sad picture of the Church if they are compared with the corresponding ones for 1945.

*The Situation of the Church in Terms of Figures for 1945 and 1965<sup>7</sup>*

	1945	1965
Diocesan and Religious Order Priests	ca. 6,900	4,500
Orders — Men	18	3
Women	39	1
Religious Houses — Men	187	6
Women	456	2
Religious Men	2,459	
Women	7,525	1,400*
Seminaries	30	6
Theology Students (annually)	994	ca. 300
Church Schools	3,163	—
Church High Schools (Gymnasias)	49	8
Catholic Legal Academies	1	—
Catholic Pedagogical Institutions,	32	—
Catholic Boarding Schools	167	8
Catholic Hospitals	9	—
Catholic Association Buildings	200	—
Catholic Newspapers and Journals	68	4
Catholic Publishing Companies	50	2
Catholic Printing Companies	20	—
Catholic Lay Organisations and Associations	ca. 4,000	1

\*Not all of whom live in religious houses

Besides the above facts and the effective crippling of the church leadership, there were a number of other facts showing to what extent the communists had succeeded in weakening the Church.

Contacts with the Vatican had been cut to a minimum, with only two bishops allowed to attend Council meetings in 1962, five in 1963 and nine in 1964. In each case, the bishops were kept under surveillance by state agents, usually peace-priests or representatives of the state Office for Church Affairs. This agency controls all the activities of the Church and the clergy, including the right of the latter to say Mass and to preach. In 1962 and 1963, for example, permission to perform priestly duties was revoked from a total of 225 priests. The total number excluded from pastoral activities, including those from religious orders, in 1965 stood at one thousand, almost one fifth of the priests in the country at the time.

Another source provides some later estimates about the numbers of Catholics in Hungary.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the war, in 1945, there were 7,200,000; by 1980 this number had dropped to five million. Both were roughly out of a total population of around ten million. Those who "somehow considered themselves as belonging to the Church" in 1980 numbered around three million, while only twenty per cent of the faithful, that is, roughly one million people, actually went to church and could be considered as "practising Catholics in some form".

In other areas as well, the Church's activities were hindered or extremely limited. The most important example of these was religious instruction, which, although guaranteed by the constitution and the "agreement" of 1950, was hindered at every turn by the State. For example, the registration for such instruction had to be done on one particular day, at a certain time. If the number of registrants did not reach one tenth of all the students in the school, the classes could not be held. But even more sinister and obviously much harder to monitor were the unofficial, informal methods of intimidation. Parents whose children attended religious instruction might have problems at their place of employment. The children themselves were often reprimanded and ridiculed for attending such classes, and the principal of the school made every effort to discourage the parents even before they registered their children. Since the "materialist philosophy" was the basis of all instruction, even the most well-intentioned teachers were forced to teach their subjects in a spirit totally antagonistic to all forms of religious belief.

In other areas of life, such as marriage, divorce, child-bearing, contraception and abortion, the State nurtured attitudes directly opposed to the teachings of the Church. Ironically, many of these policies resulted in drastic changes in the behaviour of the population, leading to eventual revisions of government policies out of sheer social and political expediency. One glaring example was the sudden drop in the birth rate in the early sixties, which caused a national outcry, with many intellectuals

warning about the eventual dying out of the population.

The next important event in the life of the Hungarian Church was the departure of Cardinal Mindszenty from the US Embassy and his exile from the country. With his departure, a critical era in the life of the Catholic Church came to an end. He was not only the unbending, uncompromising leader of his flock who was willing to suffer torture and imprisonment for his faith, but had become a symbol throughout the world of the struggle against totalitarian systems in all their forms. His removal from the scene was a more important change than any other wrought by decades of persecution. Though it would be hard to establish causal relationships between this event and the spread of the basis groups and small communities to be discussed in more detail further on, the essence of the Cardinal's attitude toward communism, his unswerving opposition to all compromise with the representatives of the totalitarian State, and his insistence on the ideals and the spiritual values of Christianity above all political and temporal expediency are too similar to the attitudes and the ideals of these groups to be considered merely chance correspondences.

The fact that the State viewed the Cardinal's departure as an immense victory is significant. Though his presence may have been forgotten by many Hungarians, it could never be forgotten by world public opinion or political leaders. As long as he was in the US Embassy in Budapest, the "easing of tensions" between the US and the USSR could not proceed unhampered. Certainly, Kádár's role in the suppression of the revolution of 1956 could never be as lightly dismissed with the Cardinal confined to the embassy only a few miles away from the Hungarian Socialist Workers' (Communist) Party headquarters, as when he was across the border in Vienna, or better still, visiting Hungarian émigrés in North or South America. Just as important to the Kádár regime as the removal of this living reminder of the revolution was the acceptance by the Vatican of the principle of compromise with the communist state. Now that compromise and "mutual cooperation in the resolution of problems" between the Church and the State replaced open confrontation and mistrust, the goals of the State were much closer to being realised.

As a continuation of the dialogue between the Vatican and the Hungarian government which began with the 1964 agreement, and as a result of the negotiations which included those preceding Cardinal Mindszenty's departure from Hungary, after his death in May 1975, László Lékai was appointed Archbishop of Esztergom on 12 February 1976. He took the oath of allegiance to the Hungarian Constitution three days later.

The appointment of a new primate came just over a year after changes made by the Holy See in the Hungarian Episcopate. These included the appointment of five new bishops and other changes in nine of the

country's eleven dioceses. Thus, certainly from the point of view of the Vatican and the Hungarian Council of Bishops, the leadership of the Church had been clarified and the filling of many vacant posts had opened the way to improvements in the administration of the Church's affairs. As for the attitudes and ideas of this new leadership, much could be learned from statements Archbishop Lékai made in an interview with the Hungarian News Agency (MTI) on the day that he swore allegiance to the Hungarian Constitution.<sup>9</sup>

The new Primate tried to be as even-handed as possible in his comments about the State, without giving up his advocacy of the Church's claims. He adhered to the positions taken by the Holy See, especially in the field of international affairs. The following quotes characterise the new archbishop's views on the relations between Church and State:

The realities of the situation are that in our present socialist society believers and non-believers must live together. We believers keep watch over our religious outlook on the world as a precious and holy value, our greatest treasure. This gives us the strength to carry out our everyday work. Although the people of Hungary are not united as far as their fundamental beliefs are concerned, fresh evidence accumulates every day that harmony can be achieved on matters that concern the interests of our country if we concentrate on what binds us together and not on what separates us.

As to the allegiance of the faithful to their country and to their religious principles, the primate said:

I can hardly thank and appreciate highly enough the realistic policies of the Holy See. The grinding pressure of earlier times has ceased, and the souls of the bishops and the faithful have received a sense of reassurance and calm, thanks to which we can now serve both our faith and our country in a harmonious way.<sup>10</sup>

Based on these and on subsequent statements, the new Archbishop of Esztergom certainly met the requirements of both the State and the Vatican. He would be a man of compromise and "realism", whose chief goal was to be the preservation of the Church and the achievement of some progress even at the expense of formally relinquishing a degree of control. There were many in the hierarchy and the Church who approved of these policies, but what neither the archbishop nor the Vatican estimated correctly was that there was also a strong opposition to this path of compromise and agreement within the Hungarian Church. The members of this opposition had not achieved much recognition at the time of Lékai's appointment, but not long afterwards their activities and their positions received publicity.

The problem of the basis groups or small communities was raised as early as the 1976 winter session of the Council of Bishops. The official report of the meeting expressed the bishops' concern that these groups might become divorced from their local churches and the community of the worldwide Church and turn into religious sects. Although that legitimate concern was certainly shared by the Vatican, what the bishops did not, and could not, say was how much of their concern stemmed from the fear that the State would not tolerate the existence of these groups and would hold the hierarchy responsible for curbing any signs of independence within the Church, lest "the spirit of compromise" between the Church and the State be jeopardised. Ironically, whether they in fact were acting in fear of the State or even under the direct orders of the state Office for Religious Affairs, or were issuing these admonitions strictly on their own initiative, everyone not privy to their consultations, which certainly included all the members of the basis groups, tended to believe the former.

### *The Conflict Between The Basis Groups and the Church Hierarchy*

In order to understand the nature of the conflict between the basis groups or small communities and the church hierarchy in Hungary, it is necessary to investigate the positions of 1) the hierarchy; 2) the basis groups; and 3) the Holy See. After an analysis of these, one particular proposal for a resolution of the conflict will be described.

#### 1. *The Position of the Hierarchy*

As has been indicated above, with the appointment of Archbishop, subsequently Cardinal Lékai, the Vatican's policy of pursuing a path of compromise with the Hungarian State was affirmed. He was chosen precisely because he was willing to carry out such a policy and his choice was already a part of the process of compromise. One of the most articulate and shrewd formulators of this policy of compromise with the State over the years and especially since 1976, the year of Lékai's appointment, has been József Cserháti, the bishop of the southern city of Pécs. In a series of articles in *Vigilia*, the monthly of the Hungarian Catholic Action Organisation, he has presented some of his ideas about compromise.<sup>11</sup>

In one of these, he analyses the effects of secularisation on the Church in general and the Hungarian Church in particular. He argues that either she adapts to this secularisation process, or she risks losing an even greater number of her followers. In a more abstract sense, but still in this connection, he writes that rather than striving for an impossible ideal of freedom, religious and otherwise, the Church and her members should



live with the relatively greater freedoms of the post-1964 era and expand the limits of these whenever and wherever possible. He writes that this relative freedom is “guaranteed by the State and within this freedom is contained everything that belongs to the apostolic and the spiritual leadership responsibilities that are derived from the essence of the gospels”. The framework in which the Church must practise its duties “is the possibility provided by the new socialist lifestyle and the behavioural forms within which the activity of the Church and the acts of faith of the faithful are *a priori* forced to reach certain accommodations.”

Another member of the clergy, András Szennay, who is well-versed in theology and holds the important position of abbot of the Benedictine teaching monastery at Pannonhalma, as well as many other posts as an editor and administrator of church organisations, wrote an article describing the significance of the basis communities and attempting to define their role in the Church.<sup>12</sup> He begins by presenting some historical background about the precedents for such communities in the early life of the Church and the theological basis for their encouragement, especially after the Second Vatican Council. Then he proceeds to outline some practical consequences in the life of the modern Church. In this section, he alludes to the danger of the small communities breaking away from the main body of the Church and mentions what he calls the “benign tension” that exists between the church leadership and these communities. He defines them as the “peculiar utopia” of the Church, since a “constant but unrealisable goal of the Church is the creation of community life”. He ends his general and theoretical comments with a discussion of the dangers involved in the formation of these communities, especially the one that “they begin to ‘organise’ or they group around one leader or another and begin to obey him blindly” and thereby lose their “identity as a community”. If they follow this path then sooner or later they themselves become institutionalised and form a “church within a church, that is they enter on the road toward becoming sects”. He warns against a movement in which the weaker are swept along by the more independent and powerful. “In the case of such groups, we can hardly speak of a community suffused by the spirit of Christ.” He warns that “no small community can expropriate the gospels of Jesus. No community and no faithful Catholic can do anything but pray daily for the coming of the ‘kingdom’ and be a signal towards this future kingdom.” The irony in this last sentence is that in this context the Hungarian word for “kingdom” and “country” are interchangeable, so that the biblical words can be interpreted in a secular sense. The coming of the “kingdom” could also mean the coming of a truly free and independent country.

Aside from these more general and theoretical standpoints of the Church, especially in the last few years, there have been specific points of disagreement with at least some of the basis groups. In particular, the

pacifism of the groups under the leadership of the Piarist priest György Bulányi have placed the church leadership in an awkward position.

This is an area where religion and politics overlap and the State's policies have to be taken into consideration. As far as the Hungarian State is concerned, because of its fealty to Moscow, it cannot tolerate any "independent peace movement" and certainly no pacifists. The intense communist propaganda for peace and disarmament has always been directed at the West. Disarmament in the East cannot even be mentioned while the West has weapons and while it can defend itself. Therefore the appearance of any group that objects to active military service and that asks to be allowed to perform civilian duties instead poses a threat to the State's domestic anti-pacifist policies. Ironically, there is a small group of Nazarene Christians in Hungary with whom the State has come to a quiet agreement about substitute military service, but their example was certainly not meant to be followed by Catholics. If even a small group of the largest religious community is given the right of alternative military service, the spectre of mass requests for it arises in a country where few believe that the military serves to protect the interests of Hungarians.

So it is not hard to imagine the pressure that must have been exerted on the church leadership by the government through its state Office for Religious Affairs ever since the followers of Father Bulányi began to refuse active military service and chose imprisonment and punishment instead. There were enough indications in the press of the pressure being applied. These often came from Imre Miklós, the head of the state Office for Religious Affairs.<sup>13</sup>

It is hard to imagine under present political circumstances what the hierarchy could have done besides come out in "support of the country's laws", especially since they are bound to do so by oath. Objections have been voiced more against the form and the style in which the Cardinal chose to make a personal stand in the matter.

¶ In a speech on 6 September 1981, at the 125th anniversary of the consecration of the Cathedral of Esztergom, after a lengthy listing of historical precedents in which Hungarians were forced to defend their country, their kingdom and themselves, he said:

As primate of this country, I see with concern that some priests and believers who are inclined to exaggerate urge our sons of conscription age to refuse military service. They do so by referring to the gospel and the teachings of the Church in order to persuade our youth to say "no" to military service, as if such an attitude followed directly from their Catholic faith. We hear with consternation that there are some who obey this prodding.

In a general warning to the basis groups, the Cardinal said that although there was peace in the Church,

there are some people, both priests and believers, who think that they have received special instructions and gifts from the Holy Ghost, in contrast to the ancient teachings and the existing discipline of the Church. Such people cause uneasiness in the lives of the faithful [ . . . ] Those who would like to turn you against your bishops and undermine the added spiritual authority of ordained priests, destroy the gospel of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Here it is necessary to interject some detail about the steps which the hierarchy has taken against the basis groups in the last few years. Some priests active with these groups have been suspended from performing their duties. One of these was a follower of Bulányi from Budapest by the name of László Kovács. The reasons for the action taken against him were officially announced in the communiqué released at the end of the autumn session of the Council of Bishops, held on 6-7 October 1981:<sup>14</sup> 1) For years he has been making statements in his sermons that were contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church; 2) he voiced “unjust” criticism of the church hierarchy at a youth rally held in the village of Hajós in Bács-Kiskun county; 3) his sermons were often directed against compulsory military service. These points were officially announced in the communiqué released at the end of the autumn session of the Council of Bishops, held on 6 October 1981.<sup>15</sup>

Another priest, András Gromon from Székesfehérvár, was suspended at the end of October of the same year, “in order to avoid a scandal”, as the bishop of the diocese, Imre Kisberk, put it.

Finally, Father Bulányi was also placed on *suspensio a divinis*, one of the strictest forms of punishment for a priest under canon law. The suspension followed a meeting between Bulányi and Lékai attended by four professors of theology who had prepared written summaries of the objections against the views of the basis communities in question. Bulányi also wrote a written summary of his position and sent it to the Cardinal. These answers were examined by the four professors and he was called to another meeting with them, where they pointed out the contradictions that they saw between his writings and the tenets of the Church’s “teaching office”.

The disagreements between the hierarchy and Bulányi’s followers were exacerbated when one of the mimeographed publications of the basis groups appeared, containing views on subordination that contradicted the teachings of the Church. Bulányi was mentioned as the author of the article but he denied this allegation. Speculations by members of his groups and their sympathisers as to the identity of the author have not apparently been fruitful.

After the 9-10 March 1982 conference of the Council of Bishops, an ominous warning was issued to Father Bulányi and his followers, accusing

them of “spreading mistaken teachings about the faith” and of wanting to introduce a new church discipline among their groups. Father Bulányi was called upon to recant his erroneous theological views and to report on the ways in which he wished to bring his teachings into line with those of the Church.

According to an article in the Catholic weekly *Új Ember* of 4 April 1982, the Church’s objections to his teachings can be summed up as follows:

1. His identification of the inner voice that he hears “as one of God’s souls” as revelations of the Holy Spirit;
2. His statements about the Epistles of St Paul, which he considers to be “secondary writings”, especially as these relate to the power of the Church, obedience and excommunication;
3. His insistence that in the Church of Christ, the *believers* “grant office and priesthood”. Leadership does not follow from ordination, but from the close adherence of the Church’s leaders to the teachings of Christ. Ordination is only a consequence and requires that the ordained safeguard what Christ taught his own small community;
4. Bulányi’s train of thought on “obedience and disobedience” is completely arbitrary. “He asserts that obedience is a sin, while disobedience is a virtue.” He supports his standpoint by quoting Christ’s sayings out of context, and thereby attempting to refute St Paul.

According to one well-informed analyst of the situation of the Hungarian Catholic Church,<sup>16</sup> the event which probably triggered Bulányi’s suspension may have been the Cardinal’s unwillingness to allow him to concelebrate Holy Mass with him at a traditional gathering of young Christians at the Danube village resort of Nagymaros. In protest against the Cardinal’s action, a large but disputed number of people left the church and went to pray in its garden under Bulányi’s leadership. This open split could not be tolerated, lest further demonstrations and large-scale challenges to the authority of the Church were to follow. And as the above-mentioned analyst hints, no-one can accurately measure the degree of state participation in the affair. However, it is a safe guess that the hierarchy has been under some pressure for the past years, and especially since 1979, to do something about disciplining Bulányi’s pacifist followers. The year is significant, because, according to a letter by Bulányi himself, eight Hungarian Catholics had refused active military service since then, four of whom were still imprisoned at the time of writing.<sup>17</sup> The State, whose leaders must themselves answer to a higher

though still temporal authority, much prefers to let the episcopate stifle its unruly faithful itself, rather than having to punish them with stiff prison sentences and thereby invite criticism.

## 2. *The Position of the Basis Groups*

### A. General Comments

Whereas the hierarchy has chosen a path of accommodation, their critics within the Church, the basis groups, have rejected the authority of the State in religious matters and have insisted on a strict interpretation of the teachings of Christ. Such an uncompromising stand has been extremely hard to adhere to in Hungary, since the Kádár regime has played a sophisticated political game with society and with the Church, making it difficult for any group to reject the unwritten compromises between the State and a majority of the population. To do so not only leads to losing material advantages, but gains little support or sympathy from the rest of society.

On the other hand, the need for some sort of group structure and community is so great in Hungary that its absence is felt in all areas of society. In a recent essay, a sociologist wrote a detailed analysis of the fate of communities and their organisations under the communist totalitarian State. He pointed out, without any particular effort to hide the object of his reproach, that since the imposition of communist rule and the dissolution of all but Communist Party-controlled organisations, clubs and societies, there has been a breakdown in the sense of community in the country. So much so, that an every-man-for-himself attitude has led to a disregard for the needs of others and a consuming desire for materialistic advantages and personal gain.<sup>18</sup>

The rise and the influence of the basis groups, numbering approximately 100,<sup>19</sup> in the Hungarian Catholic Church today can be traced back to this destruction of independent communities. In some ways the need for this type of community organisation existed even before the war, but the situation was intensified when the communists gained total control of society.

### B. Summary of Recent History and Sources

The recent history and the sources of the basis groups are best summarised on the basis of a dissertation by János Wildmann.<sup>20</sup>

One of the principal sources for the membership of the small communities was the extensive organisation and the wide influence among the young of KALOT, an acronym for the Hungarian equivalent of "The National Association of Young Agrarian Men's Unions". Its membership numbered half a million before the war and its leader, Father Kerkai, ran into problems with the Hungarian hierarchy because of a plan he drew up for general agrarian reform. Although at first Pope Pius XII sup-

ported Father Kerkai in his work, later he aligned the Holy See's policies more with those of the Hungarian bishops.

The communist-led People's Front dissolved the organisation soon after 1945, thereby indicating the influence that it still enjoyed and the political threat that it posed after the war. Many of the priests and the laymen active in KALOT continued to work with small groups of people after its dissolution. Although they gave up a large part of their cultural, political and organisational goals during the years of the Church's open persecution, they continued their "efforts towards religious renewal. Furthermore, they managed to preserve the means and methods of the movement in secret, for example by conducting readings of the Bible, using religious exercises and other instructional techniques."<sup>21</sup>

The second major source in modern times of the development of the basis groups can be traced back to the dissolution and the persecution of the various orders of priests and nuns and the general mistreatment of the Catholic faithful. At the time of the dissolution of the orders and the mass arrests of these and other clergy and after the signing of the church-state "agreement" in 1950, those members of the clergy and faithful who were not in prison were forced to rely on their friends and their families for support and in a certain sense for protection. As a result, many small "family churches" sprang up. Religious teaching and group prayer along with more secular activities developed naturally in such "families". Especially when they included teaching priests or nuns, it was possible for these small groups to receive both religious instruction and other types of education based on a religious outlook. Since even the sham of "optional religious instruction" in the regular schools was not adhered to, many parents who insisted on providing their children with some religious training eventually found their way to these clerics living within the confines of their "family churches".

The period of persecution and harassment brought with it a break between the hierarchy and the more active predecessors of what came to be known as basis groups or small communities. The imprisoned and the persecuted felt betrayed and abandoned by the hierarchy, especially after Mindszenty's show trial and imprisonment and the 1950 "agreement". Those who persevered through the period of religious persecution resented the hierarchy's ineffectiveness in protecting them. They saw the breaking of the power of the Church and her eventual submission to government control as a return to the alliance between the Church and State of the pre-war years, made worse by the fact that this time the State was far more repressive and avowedly anti-religious.

After the brief period of hope in 1956, the totalitarian State was re-established and these firmly religious groups faced the hostility of officials bent on eradicating the last vestiges of their view of life and the world. The hierarchy again succumbed to superior power and thus new seeds for

the conflict within the Church were sown.

Following 1963 and the general amnesty for those who had been imprisoned in 1956 and 1957, Kádár began his tactics of "compromise". Now the released prisoners and those who had to practise their faith surreptitiously went through another long and arduous process of achieving some degree of religious freedom. The speed of the "gains" did not keep up with "liberalisation" in the economy and to a smaller extent in social life.

Many of the opportunities that these groups gained were a result of the agreements between the Church and State signed in 1965 and afterwards. But as with most persecuted people, there were those for whom these improvements did not suffice. A period of six years in prison, torture, humiliation and continued ostracism seldom leaves a person ready to make compromises with those who were directly responsible for this treatment. Thus many of the basis groups, following a theologically "purer" path, at least in their view, defied the government and the hierarchy either in the hope of achieving more of their religious goals now, or of laying the groundwork for the future.

### C. Types of Basis Groups

The basis groups can be divided into four main types.<sup>22</sup> The "Regnumists" are named after a movement of priests and laymen called "Regnum Marianum" which was active in the pre-war years and which consisted of a religious organisation that emphasised community life. Their main tasks and goals are the religious education of young people, the renewal and the spread of the faith and the establishment of an "active group of God's people". Their programme consists of the teaching of the catechism, in particular reinforced by the use of a successful book written by a group of their priests called *Hitünk és életünk* (Our Faith and Our Life), which won a competition for catechism books and has been published by one of the two church publishing houses in Hungary. It is important to point out that they are careful to nurture good relations with the hierarchy and have purposely never written anything critical of them even in the informal publications circulating among Hungarian Catholics.

As far as the structure of the "Regnumists" is concerned, according to Wildmann, they are led mainly by priests, and only in some cases by laymen: "a large number of the better trained and activist priests belong to this group." They form a "democratised Church from above" that nevertheless has a pyramidal structure.

Some of the characteristics of these groups include: an adherence to the model of the "nouvelle chrétienne" conservative theology; a certain kind of clericalism based more on knowledge and training rather than control of the priests; a balance between knowledge and life; emphasis on the

importance of relations with the official Church, both in a tactical and an ecclesiastical sense; the inclusion of "charismata", that is, the extraordinary powers of healing and insight bestowed by the Holy Spirit, under the authority and within the order of the Church; and finally, a general openness to the world and active support for ecumenism.

The largest group among the small communities, the "Regnumists" have safeguarded themselves from the machinations of the State by their strict adherence to the official Church and its rules and decisions, and by their diplomatic stance even in matters of compromise with the State. Most of the leadership and many of the members of the Regnumist groups have at one time or another been arrested or otherwise intimidated by the authorities, mainly before 1965. Since then, as long as they have adhered to the principle of no open conflict with the church leadership, they have not suffered from such measures.

Probably the best known groups are those who follow the Piarist<sup>23</sup> priest, Father György Bulányi. After the nationalisation of the Catholic schools in 1948, he worked as a religious instructor for students and was called upon by Rome to organise exercises for small groups of people along with other priests and the members of other dissolved orders. In 1952 he was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. Although released at the time of the revolution in 1956, he did not flee to the West. Rearrested after the defeat of the revolution, he was released under an amnesty in 1960. Since the bishops were prevented by the State from assigning him to the care of the faithful, he became an unskilled labourer and worked with small groups of Catholics in his free time.

Bulányi's followers are well organised and serve the sick and the poor. They are radical followers of Jesus whose goal is to live and study together according to a set of common principles. Their programme consists of the "concretisation of evangelical questions". Under the strong central leadership of Father Bulányi, they are firmly integrated but democratic within their groups. They choose to live by the standard of "an intensive life" both in the service of Christ and of their fellow men.

Their other characteristics include: orthodox Christian practices; a belief in the principle of non-violence; a critical relationship to the official Church, but only on ecclesiastical grounds; the inclusion of "charismata" in the order of the groups; and isolation from the world.

Since these groups believe in and practise non-violence, and a number of their members have refused active military service since 1979, they have run into the most open conflict with the State and with the church leadership, whom the former has used to carry out its wishes in the last decade and a half. Thus, Bulányi's followers have little chance for the type of quiet activity that characterises the Regnumists, precisely because they have chosen this path of confrontation with the State and with the Church. Their type of "insubordination" is exactly what a totalitarian



State cannot tolerate.

The Church, on the other hand, having already applied one of its strictest forms of disciplinary punishment, *suspensio a divinis*, to Bulányi, is now awaiting the decision of the Holy See as to how to treat a priest who will not submit to her authority in a matter which he considers more of a state than an ecclesiastical or theological affair. The State, on the other hand, will have fewer misgivings about using its power, and if it feels that its political power is sufficiently threatened may again resort to imprisoning Fr Bulányi on a charge of refusing to carry out the laws of the land.

An important aspect of Bulányi's programme is its emphasis on matters of such grave national concern as the population decline, abortion, divorce and alcoholism.<sup>24</sup> Besides their pacifism, which they identify as one part of their "service of life", they reject the national pre-occupation with improving the standard of living, to the extent that they urge their followers to let the father earn each family's livelihood, while the mother stays at home with the children, and to have as many children as possible. It must be understood in this connection that in Hungary today, even a small family living on the relatively good income of the father would be relegated to financial conditions unacceptable to the majority of working men and women in the West.

The importance of these parts of Bulányi's programme is that by concerning themselves with such social matters, his followers may attract the attention of segments of the population who are not interested only in religious problems, and even the smallest stirrings of the social conscience could provide the government with a pretext to move against them for "political incitement".

The other two groups of basis communities are smaller and their influence is more limited. They consist of the charismatics and the independent groups, both of whom adhere to the leadership of their local pastors, though they live somewhat unorthodox religious lives in small communities. The charismatics share many of the characteristics of their brethren in other parts of the world, with their emphasis on charismatic renewal and the bestowal of the various gifts of the spirit. They are communities structured around the idea of the "charismata", the extraordinary powers bestowed by the Holy Spirit, and their most important principle is the search for each individual's own charisma. Some further characteristics of this group include: readiness for sacrifice: *diakonia*, i.e. service (from the Greek, *diakonos*, literally, servant); and acceptance of the larger Church and the hierarchy.

The independent groups live intensely religious lives and their programme consists of religious answers to existential questions. They are led by priests and laymen and their structure consists of groupings of friends under one leader. They are well integrated and they take part in the activities of the group at least passively. They have few conflicts with

the hierarchy and accept the organisation of the Church as it exists, with the hierarchy at its head.

### 3. *The Position of the Holy See*

The Vatican, because it is after all responsible for the Church as a whole, cannot make the type of unequivocal decisions that the two sides to the dispute in the Hungarian Church may wish for. Rather, it is forced, as it was after the 1982 *ad limina* visit of the Hungarian bishops to Rome, to make statements that satisfy neither side completely and ultimately leave it up to them either to interpret the words of the Pope and the stand of the Vatican in a spirit of understanding or to use these merely to fuel their conflicts even further.

During his address to the Hungarian bishops on their visit to Rome between 1 to 11 October 1982, the Pope said only a few words about the problem of the basis groups. He urged that they should work "above all in firm unity with their local churches and through them with the Church as a whole, always in union with their bishops and acting under their direction."<sup>25</sup> In order not to make his statement too one-sided in the support of the hierarchy, he also urged the bishops to support and encourage those groups that met the above requirements.

In the matter of Bulányi's suspension, the Vatican's decision has been again as even-handed as possible. In May 1983, the Holy See published a report about this case. It contained no condemnation of Father Bulányi or his writings, but it did criticise his followers for being "disobedient".<sup>26</sup> Thus the Vatican has continued along its path of compromise, attempting to mollify both the basis groups and the hierarchy, not to mention the Kádár regime, which has recently given signs that it might be willing to relent in the matter of religious education in the schools.

Unfortunately, this decision, just as other actions before it, has done little to improve the situation within the Catholic Church in Hungary. Unless the Holy See finds some way to effect a reconciliation behind the scenes, the problems promise to multiply. The fact that John Paul II comes from Poland allows one to assume both that he is more familiar with the problems of the Church in Eastern Europe than his predecessors and to hope that, if anyone can, he will find some way to reconcile the Church and the basis groups in Hungary.

### 4. *Possibilities for Resolving the Differences between the Church and the Basis Groups*

Last year, in the third issue of a Hungarian *samizdat* publication,<sup>27</sup> some ways in which the conflict between the hierarchy and Bulányi and his followers may be resolved were proposed. The author, Csaba Kelemen, was presumably a priest or possibly even a member of one of the basis

groups. He writes that both sides in the dispute believe that their stance is theologically sound. The pacifist groups say that opposition to military service should be carried out to the extent of “accepting even the legal consequences”, in other words, going to gaol. The hierarchy, on the other hand, says that such a refusal conflicts with the teachings of the Church. The author points out that since there is no specific reference to the matter in the Bible, none that could be used as the basis for a dogma, the answer to the theological question of whether or not the Gospels support the refusal of military service has to be sought in the “spirit” of Jesus’s teachings, “in the light of the teachings of the Gospels as a whole”.

Kelemen summarises the “basic principles” of the two sides as follows:

A. The Hungarian hierarchy

1. We must accept reality and satisfy the State’s demands;
2. We will not be able to achieve more than we already have in exchange for our acquiescence;
3. Under the present circumstances, the Church can at least function on an “operational” level.

B. The Basis Groups (under Bulányi)

1. Our relationship to reality is not a part of reality. Therefore, it is possible to approach our circumstances critically;
2. The Church has made concessions to the State that it should not have made. Consequently, having lost its prestige, the hierarchy’s influence has decreased;
3. The concessions that the State has made are mere formalities which did not substantially alter the situation of the Church in Hungary.

Kelemen argues that it is the totalitarian State which creates the situation in which the two sides take such irreconcilable stands. He writes: “The totalitarian State forces its will on everyone who wants to exist under its rule.”

Attempting to come up with some sort of a compromise acceptable to both sides, he mentions two important prerequisites. One is that the Church has to accept the fact that it cannot always find suitable answers to all questions. Thus, if a problem has no solution that could be included in the catechism it is in the interest of the Church to accept this fact. The other fact, which the basis groups should accept, is that pluralism can have only a temporary and relative role in the Church’s teachings since the “objective facts are always the same”. In order to achieve a definite theological solution, “we must accept the pluralism of views temporarily, along with all the inconveniences that that implies.”

Finally, Kelemen suggests that both sides specify those concrete steps that could be taken to improve their ever-worsening relationship. He says that the position taken in the 79th article of the Papal Encyclical *Gaudium*

*et Spes* should be taken as a point of departure: "It seems only fair that the law should be tolerant toward those who do not want to carry weapons for reasons of conscience, but who are willing to serve the human community in peaceful ways."

According to Kelemen, the hierarchy could maintain its position that the Gospels do not prohibit service in the armed forces, but at the same time could accept the fact that there are Catholics who do not interpret the teachings of the Gospels in this way, and make an effort to allow them to perform useful non-military work. The irony, as he points out, is that there are only a few dozen young people who would be affected by such a decision at the moment, but the small number does not decrease the importance of the principle, especially if one takes into consideration the above mentioned fear of the State that such a decision could lead to mass requests for alternative service.

On the other hand, Kelemen points out that the basis groups could contribute to a compromise by publicly accepting the hierarchical structure of the Church and thereby her implied authority. They should also make efforts to prevent the appearance of sects.

Kelemen believes that there is a possibility for compromise, despite the apparently intransigent positions. He writes that if the Church has had to "fight hard" to achieve its "allegedly good relations with the State" and also in its efforts toward ecumenism, then it could certainly make some equally strenuous efforts on behalf of a compromise between its own members.

### *Conclusion*

It is difficult to make any concluding statement about the situation of the Hungarian Church today, because the conflicts and the uncertainties do not seem any closer to being resolved than they were a year ago. This situation does not promise to improve for one important reason: the environment in which the parties to the argument live is not conducive to compromise and agreement.

Whereas many well-meaning churchmen argue in favour of a compromise, among them the above-quoted András Szennay and József Cserhádi, as well as those like Csaba Kelemen writing in uncensored publications, the fact remains that compromises arrived at under totalitarian systems are always suspect. Since everyone knows that the State seeks total control over society, the conscious or unconscious fear always remains that sooner or later the compromise will be broken by the State whenever it thinks that the time has come for it to establish such control.

It is exactly this experience with compromises that has led groups like the Bulányists to reject the whole idea of them and to suffer the consequences of outright persecution, in order to be able to adhere to an idea consistently. In a democratic society that kind of stand sounds immature,

since it is usually taken by political or ideological extremists.

In a totalitarian State, even the terms have different meanings. Since even such words as "compromise", "understanding", and "discussion" let alone broader concepts such as "democracy", "freedom of choice", "truth" and "justice" mean their opposite, or are given meanings inconsistent with those associated with them in countries where tolerance and understanding of various points of view are the norm, those that reject these words in a totalitarian system do not reject the ideas they stand for. On the contrary, they seek a change in the system that has created this confusion of meanings, goals and ideals. Ironically, those who reject compromise with a totalitarian State are defending the right to make real compromises adhered to by both sides without reservations.

Thus the Hungarian Church faces its present crisis, since the real gains that it has made in the past decade and a half, be they ever so modest, are being challenged by some of her members exactly because they were based on such unreliable compromises.

<sup>1</sup>József Cardinal Mindszenty, *Memoirs*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup>For specific details, see "The Church Which Was Left Alive", pp. 53-55; "Hungary's Church in 1966", pp. 74-77 in Emeric András and Julius Morel, eds., *Church in Transition, Hungary's Catholic Church from 1945 to 1982*. Vienna: Hungarian Institute for the Sociology of Religion (Ungarisches Kirchensoziologisches Institut), 1983.

<sup>3</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 333.

<sup>4</sup>See "Religious Instruction and Evangelisation (1977)" in *Church in Transition, op. cit.*, (footnote 2).

<sup>5</sup>"The Language of the Facts (1965)", *ibid.*, pp. 38-49.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 38 and 39.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 40 and 41.

<sup>8</sup>Cserháti, József, "Tovább a nyitott utakon", *Vigilia*, Budapest, October 1980, p. 653.

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed discussion of the interview and for an analysis of Lékai's appointment, see Hungarian Unit/KK: "László Lékai Named Archbishop of Esztergom", *Radio Free Europe Research*, Background Report 47, 19 February 1976.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 8.

<sup>11</sup>*Vigilia*, April and November, 1975; see partial translation with comments in "Situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary: Chances of a Dialogue", *Radio Free Europe Research, Background Report 25* (Hungary), 23 January 1976. Also *Vigilia*, October 1980.

<sup>12</sup>András Szennay, "Az egyház újraéled a közönségekben", *Vigilia*, June 1981.

<sup>13</sup>For an interview with Miklós, in which some of these warnings are voiced, see *Népszabadság*, 20 February 1982. For an analysis of the interview, see Hungarian Situation Report 3, *Radio Free Europe Research*, 4 March 1982, Item 6; also *RCL* Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 96.

<sup>14</sup>*Új Ember*, 20 September 1981.

<sup>15</sup>For a full text of the communiqué, see *Új Ember*, 18 October 1981. For a detailed discussion of Kovács's and Gromon's suspension, see Hungarian Situation Report 16, *Radio Free Europe Research*, 29 October 1981, Item 4.

<sup>16</sup>Carlo Kovács, "Further Restrictions on Suspended Priests", Hungarian Situation Report 10, *Radio Free Europe Research*, 23 June 1982, Item 5.

<sup>17</sup>See accompanying documents in this issue for Bulányi's letter to Lékai, pp. 38-41.

<sup>18</sup>Elemér Hankiss, "Közösségek: Válság és hiány" in *Valóság*, Budapest, September 1980.

<sup>19</sup>See Miklós Haraszti, "Not Striking, Nor Striking Back", in *Beszélő II*, Budapest, January 1982. For a brief summary in English of the contents of this article, see Steven Polgar, "Second Issue of Hungarian Samizdat *Beszélő* Appears", in *Radio Free Europe Research*, Background Report 151 (Hungary), 26 July 1982.

<sup>20</sup>See in manuscript, János Wildmann, "Das Kirchenverständnis der Katholischen Basisgruppen in Ungarn", Dissertation for the Theological Faculty of Luzern, adviser: Professor Josef Bommer, August 1983, Luzern, Switzerland. (To be published with some changes by *Kirche in Not*.) This essay provides the most extensive and the best summary available in the West at the moment of the activities and the religious views of the basis groups. Mr Wildmann makes an effort to be objective and has access to much information about the groups that may not even be available to members of the Hungarian church leadership. The information about the goals, the nature of the programme, as well as the miscellaneous characteristics of these groups is culled largely from this manuscript made available for purposes of the present essay by Mr Wildmann.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>The Piarist order, founded in Italy by St Joseph Calasanz in 1621 and recognised in 1648, became one of the most important teaching orders in Hungary. They still retain two of the eight Catholic Secondary schools (gymnasias), in Budapest and Kecskemét.

<sup>24</sup>For details about Bulányi's religious principles and the guidelines of the groups under his leadership, see his letter to Cardinal Lékai below.

<sup>25</sup>For the text of the Pope's speech to the Hungarian bishops, see *Új Ember*, 24 October 1982.

<sup>26</sup>See János Wildmann, "Hungarian Conflict" in *Index on Censorship*, May 1983, p. 37. and also "Zwei Gesichter der katholischen Kirche im Ungarn", *Schweizerische Kirchenzeitung* No. 40, 6 October 1983, p. 570.

<sup>27</sup>*Beszélő III*, Budapest, May 1982. For a brief summary in English, see Steven Polgar, "The Third Issue of 'Beszélő' Appears in Hungary", in *Radio Free Europe Research* Background Report 239 (Hungary), 16 November 1982, pp. 7-9.

## Appendix

### Fr Bulányi writes to Cardinal Lékai

*We have already published extensive documentation in RCL on the controversy between the Hungarian Catholic hierarchy, headed by Cardinal László Lékai, and the "Basis" groups led by Fr György Bulányi, a member of the Piarist order now in his seventies (Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 95-108). The document which follows is a letter from Fr Bulányi addressed to Cardinal Lékai. It throws further light on the philosophy of the "Basis" groups and the reasons for the controversy which has arisen. The introduction to the documents previously published in RCL outlines developments during 1982 up to June, when Fr Bulányi was suspended a divinis (p. 95). The letter below was written on 7 March 1982, after Fr Bulányi had had two meetings with Cardinal Lékai and others, but before his suspension.*

Your Eminence,

I have received from you two invitations to a meeting. Your telegram arrived on the afternoon of 2 March, asking me to see you on 3 March. Your vicar's letter arrived on 5 March in the afternoon, inviting me for the same day or on 6 March. Unfortunately, the dates fixed by you at such short notice were inconvenient for me, not only because as my engagement diary is full for at least a month I would have been obliged to cancel some of my engagements, but also for other reasons. At our last meeting I received the rudest possible comments on my "Answers" [to questions about his views posed by the hierarchy — Ed.], which I had prepared with great care. Even now I have not after two weeks received the minutes of that meeting, and cannot verify whether or

not they contain the insults. It would be unwise on my part to expose myself and my flock for a third time to being insulted for hours. I am not prepared to make statements contrary to the teachings of the Church. I have taken part in two meetings and have on both occasions fulfilled the words of Archbishop Poggi\*: "... they trust the authority of the Church; the Church will have the strength to conduct the enquiry in truth and justice." This is why I have chosen to write. I apologise for the delay of five days, but the importance of the subject-matter requires it to be thoroughly thought out.

I respectfully request Your Eminence to consider our aims as summarised below. These aims are our motivation, in spite of our weakness and our modest achievements.

1. Mindful of God and the Church, we consider it our constant duty, given to us by Jesus, that our little communities should become more and more acquainted with God, who wants to communicate with us, and bear witness in words and deeds to what we know of Him. We cannot be deterred from fulfilling our obligations, even if we are threatened with the harshest punishments, even if our lives are in peril, and with God's help we want to stand fast in the future, too.

2. We stick unflinchingly to our duties as human beings and as God's children. We try to see clearly, as the Second Vatican Council requires of us, by observing the signs of the times (Matt. 16, 4), what the Kingdom of God means here and now. In order to serve the Kingdom of God, we will continue committing our thoughts on the subject to paper, so that by reading, criticising and adding to each others' manuscripts, and by mutual encouragement, we shall do what we are able in this respect. If our Church has — thanks be to God — unequivocally supported freedom of thought in the Second Vatican Council, then it is our sacred duty to make this freedom an unquestionable reality within the Church. We are prepared for a "dialogue" with any readers of our manuscripts, a summary of the conceptual contents of which I handed

over at our last meeting for the minutes.

3. On the strength of what we have seen so far, we try to serve life, so that it should become more abundant (John 10, 10).

a) In the service of life, we face the death of our nation. Last year the population declined by two thousand, and according to forecasts it will decline further in the near future by hundreds of thousands. In our communities we consider it quite normal for families to have four, five, six or even more children; we think a mother should stay at home to rear the children; and we think a family should be able to manage on one person's income. Since the Second World War the nation has condemned five million lives to death by abortion. The losses in the tragic battles of Mohács [1526] and of the Don [1943] were negligible compared with those due to abortion. Atheists have already raised their voices courageously. The families of our small communities protest with their lives against this gross immorality of our society, which eats up its own children in the interest of raising material living standards.

b) In the service of life, we reject all other forms of killing people. We do not learn war any more, as Isaiah dreamt of the times following the birth of Jesus. We do not promise the destruction of our enemies, because everybody is our neighbour. We are not prepared to become patriotic mass murderers, war criminals. Other people's consciences may speak differently, but we see it as an intrinsic element of our faithfulness to Jesus that we cannot ignore the Fifth Commandment, any more than we can the other nine. For us the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is a hundredfold sacred — it is a divine commandment that knows no exception. We believe and openly declare that without the Fifth Commandment the Kingdom of Heaven and the classless society are unattainable, violence will not cease, and the State will not wither away. Fighting will stop only when there are no more fighters. Whatever punishments or suffering we have to face, we are not going to give up our faith. We pray that Your Eminence's Catholic heart, formed like that of Jesus, should be filled with pride and joy at the knowledge that since September 1979 eight Hungarian Catholics have made a heroic confession of faith, and that at present there are still four imprisoned for their witness. [This is a reference to refusing military conscription — *Ed.*]

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\*Pontifical representative of the Council for Public Affairs of the Church and Apostolic Nuncio with special interests; frequently sent to Eastern Europe by the Vatican as a negotiator — *Ed.*

c) In the service of life, we endeavour to direct our consciences in such a way as not to increase our standard of living. We want not to increase it from two to three but to reduce it from three to two, so far as purchasable goods are concerned. We do this so that the superfluity can be given to the hungry rather than turned into superfluous goods for us to save, because this is "pure religion and undefiled" (James 1, 27), and because without feeding Jesus who hungers in billions of people, we cannot expect to be gathered among the blessed (Matt. 25, 31-46).

d) In the service of life we exclude from our little communities all governing, commanding and subordination of others to ourselves, all forms of compelling obedience, remembering the words of Jesus: "All ye are brethren" (Matt. 23, 8). We place our hopes in revelation and in human conscience. We hope we all listen to Jesus and to the Spirit. We obey Jesus' commandments and we obey the Spirit, which reminds us of His words, for this is what the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — the Holy Trinity — requires from the Church, and from each member of the Church. It is required in imitation of Jesus, who was willing to hearken to His Father, and was consequently condemned to death for disobedience by his nation's high priest; in imitation of the apostles and the martyr Stephen, who were incarcerated, beaten or stoned to death by order of the same high priest, and who knew that they had to disobey man in order to obey God, even if it meant laying down their own lives. In the Church we all have to obey God (Acts 5, 29).

4. This is how we want to serve Jesus, who has taught us the Word of Life in His Church:

*in humble*, not lordly, positions, serving and not ruling, watching and drawing attention to the Spirit, without commanding others or compelling obedience;

*as poor*, not rich people, as ordinary men producing and delivering rather than exercising power as privileged people, feeding the hungry rather than pushing our standard of living up and up;

*as meek lambs*, not ravening wolves, not throwing our children in the canal, not trusting murderous weapons, not defending our rights by violence, state authority or lawsuits, but forgiving all; not repaying evil with evil but striving for peace.

[. . .] We are trying to emulate the poor persecuted Jesus in our lives, in the service of love that is ready to give, to sacrifice and to make peace.

We are not trying to change the dogmas of the Church, which are mysteries described more than once by the apostle Paul in the words: "for now we see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13, 12). What we are basically interested in is to understand and to imitate a Jesus-like way of life. We are trying to serve the historical development of the dogmas (orthodoxy) through emulating Jesus (orthopraxis). Within the Church and in society as a whole we are striving for unity brought about by loving service. By this means we hope also for the revival of unity in faith, because Jesus-like faithfulness and our clinging belief have no more sublime, more basic or more universal object than the love we have learned from Jesus. We are sure that no dogma can originate from Jesus which would make us hate or kill an enemy or be indifferent towards the hungry.

We all stand before Christ's judgement seat. The whole Church stands there, too, because Christ's message is love. Our aim is to fulfil this commandment and to let everybody recognise that we are His disciples. Our small communities are motivated by this alone.

5. The number of our priests is diminishing alarmingly. Our churches, deprived of priests, are empty, yet we trust in the authority of Jesus (Mark 1, 22). We trust implicitly in the power of the Word and its teaching to bring society, irrespective of religion or non-religion, to the realisation that the unadulterated (Matt. 10, 16) words of Jesus speak for the life of society as a whole. It will understand that He is the only way, and everything else is a cul-de-sac. For this very reason we would think it natural if the chief Hungarian shepherd of Jesus' poor, meek, unprotected Catholic Church, which defies the powerful of this world, were to embrace us with all the love of his heart, moved by our Jesus-like ideals, our optimistic efforts to reverse the population decline and our pastoral conceptions based on small communities — since, as Pope Paul VI said, the small communities are "the hope of the Church".

6. We consider it natural and claim, as always, that our chief Shepherd should extend his love, his attention and his care to us. With this in mind, I have the honour to



inform Your Eminence of the following:

a) It must be evident to you from my consistent statements at the two meetings and my "Answers" that we adhere to the unerring teachings of our Church. This we declare again.

b) If in any words of ours, spoken or written, you should find anything that you judge contrary to the teachings of our Church, we shall respectfully and conscientiously think over your corrections, stemming as they do from your high office, your understanding, your responsibility and your love. The reason why I submitted my "Answers" to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is because for us it is extremely important to teach what the Church has learned from Jesus, as the Spirit reminds the Church. We are always prepared to learn from those who have received a special charisma from the Spirit.

c) I am ready and willing to take part in further dialogues, if I receive a guarantee that at the meetings not a single participant will revile us or our aims. Such behaviour is not necessary for achieving justice, and is totally inadequate for expressing the truth of the love of Jesus. Vilification nullifies argument. Since I want to preserve the Church's teachings concerning human dignity, I do not wish my presence at a meeting to give anybody the opportunity of offending human dignity. I say this in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council: "It is the disciple's obligation to his Master, Christ, to come to know as fully as possible the truth received from Him, and to propagate and effectively protect this truth, excluding all means contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. At the same time Christ's love urges you to treat your erring and ignorant fellow men with understanding, tolerance and love" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 14). It is very sad for me to think that in 1952 under the Rákosi regime, the atheist major who interrogated

me at the secret police headquarters under the direction of Gábor Péter [secret police chief — *Ed.*] for sixty days showed more respect for my person and my activities than was my lot at the two above-mentioned meetings, which can in no way be called dialogues. Again and again I protested against the proceedings and the tone of voice. I wanted my protest to be entered in the minutes, but unfortunately this was not done.

As early as the dialogue of 5 December, I asked that the unacceptably rude criticisms of our writings by Professors Gál and Ványó be attached to the minute book. Your Eminence rejected my request. The minutes contain neither my request nor the refusal. Now I ask again that they should be attached, together with my brethren's replies to criticisms, in order to dispel any doubts as to our own conscientious respect and love in the face of whatever style of behaviour. I have to ask for this most particularly because the minutes of the meeting of 5 December do not reflect the behaviour to which we were subjected.

It may seem superfluous, but to avoid any misunderstanding I must mention that my frequent use in this letter of the first person plural means unequivocally that I do not state these things alone, but together with all my brethren of the same persuasion.

In an effort to promote reconciliation within the Hungarian Church, I am sending copies of this letter, as I did with my "Answers", to all Hungarian bishops. Of course, I have informed my superiors in Rome, too. I am always ready to serve the Church of Jesus, and my continuing aim is that you should treat me as your brother in Jesus Christ and not as an enemy to be put aside. I greet you with respect and love.

BULÁNYI, GYÖRGY Sch.P.  
Budapest, 7 March 1982