

Z. Elisha Bán

A Religious Order on Trial

Cistercians in Socialism



Summary

In this historical retrospection, as a member of the order concerned, I recall the disgraceful harassment our convent underwent as I myself experienced or heard as a contemporary. Although others have also described these events with historical impartiality, personal evidence is perhaps not futile at a point when the last “witnesses of great times” are passing away. With my comments and evaluations I do not intend to pass infallible judgements on people, rather I would like to give graphically render all the likeable and annoying people I met in my life. In order to present unity, continuity and interrelationships in the historical period and in the interest of maintaining the accuracy of certain dates, I rely strongly on the doctoral thesis written by Eszter Cúth Gyóni in 2014 (The history of the Cistercian order in Hungary after 1945), who based her research to a major extent on the minutes of the security organisations of the single-party state. I feel obliged to follow the “sine ira et studio” principle, i.e. to remain unbiased, and instead of summary generalisations I make efforts at understanding the considerations of the organisation that persecuted us.

Keywords: Cistercian order, socialism, communist regime, nationalisation of schools, peace movement

PREFACE

The past political system provided an excellent example for setting the events that happened in an ideological perspective in order to present completely falsified history as it was truth. This was the way of miseducation, and perhaps also the method of

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making completely innocent people and institutions object of hatred. As an example I mention that in the prison where I was incarcerated there were a few young secret police members. One of them, S. Cs., was naive enough to enthusiastically endorse the party's ideas, and as a sergeant with his zeal he managed to become the party secretary of the unit. However, when his own rural parents were put through the wringer to surrender their crops and animals, his conviction was shaken. And when in the name of "communist ethics", at a party meeting he mentioned his superiors' drunkenness, he was taught by a long imprisonment that theory and practice are two different things. Other's eyes were opened when they realised that they were not trusted by the regime and they were demanded to write reports about their own companions and fellow members. Thinking differently made someone an enemy.

WHAT WAS THE CISTERCIAN ORDER AND WHY WAS IT CONSIDERED CRIMINAL BY THE REGIME?

The Soviets saw it as a mass organisation considered hostile by virtue of belonging to Christian religion, based on a counter-revolutionary basis, and its hazard derived especially in its international character, as its centre was in Rome. It was a strong pillar of the hated Vatican in Hungary, which controlled the education of youth. As additional reasons, the order had landed property on more than 40,000 Hungarian acres and 5 excellent secondary grammar schools, which were easily used to make the order seen as a company of extortioners among the feasting landlords of feudal Hungary.

But what was the reality? This order of monks was established in the 12th century by the example of the lives of saints who withdrew from the world to serve the peace, spiritual, mental and financial development of their fellow human beings. Its high popularity is demonstrated by the fact that in the Middle Ages there were 718 Cistercian abbeys. (In Hungary there were 18 prosperous abbeys.) In accordance with Jesus's teachings, the monks gave up earthly pleasures and lived simply, in abstinence, but they created prosperous farms and used their proceeds to contribute cultural values to medieval society. The question why today's monks do not live this way could be raised. In addition to the fact that every community has unworthy members, as a general rule, as soon as the fresh idea becomes commonplace and the enthusiastic life becomes everyday practice and institutionalises, the community members lose their zeal and live their lives increasingly automatically, following rules to the letter. This is why reforms are required over and over again, and they frequently change the very ideas as well. Over the course of history, our order also changed a lot, as it made efforts at meeting the new challenges of the surrounding world. At a later stage, Cistercians had to participate in pastoral activity and in the early 19th century, the order had to adopt teaching. However, whatever the order did, it strove for an excellent performance. The large estate system that evolved during the Middle Ages helped them achieve this goal, as they could afford building and maintaining churches and then building and improving schools and training teachers at a high level. Several teachers also became university professors. Monkhood and the monastic spirit prevented

teachers from seeking happiness in financial welfare, although they lived a relatively comfortable life and belonged to the educated middle class, called “the high society”, they never lost touch with simple folk, the poor people. Our schools also admitted lowborn students, and with sufficiently hard work they could earn free tuition. Teachers donated considerable amounts from their salaries as charity to poor students. The majority of the teaching monks also came from humble families. So did our abbot, the excellent mathematician, Vendel Endrédi, born into a family of Croatian farmers living in Hungary. His knowledge and humanity raised him to high priesthood and to membership among the peers, on par with aristocrats. Accordingly, in the appropriate company he behaved like a nobleman, however, he always remained a very simple person, kind to everyone.

THE ATTACK BY THE COMMUNIST REGIME WAS DIRECTED
PRIMARILY AGAINST THE RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW

In Hungary everybody was well aware of the bloody persecution made in the Soviet Union when they destroyed the churches of the orthodox faith on their own territories and executed their bishops and priests. All this was based on the principle borrowed from the writers of the French enlightenment, and claiming that religion was the opium of the people, a tool for demagoguery, the oppressor’s lie to deceive the poor with the promise of compensation in the otherworld to prevent them from arising to protect their rights. If this was true, the condemnation of the representatives of the various religions and the efforts made at the elimination of misconceptions would be understandable and justified. However, judging whether this is so cannot be assigned to artificially infuriated masses who lack sufficient historical knowledge.

In the history of the Catholic Church, there were unworthy persons and seriously inhumane practices performed with reference to God, in the name of true religion, which contorted the teachings of Jesus Christ and caused scandals, and we must distance ourselves from them. Such included the persecution of heretics and witches, forcible proselytizing, crusaders’ cruelties, the tortures of the Inquisition, the extermination of the Indians, the dragging of Africans to slavery, etc., which are all beyond excuse and we must be ashamed of on behalf of the perpetrators. All these were not the official teachings of the church, but trespasses of certain leaders, and often of secular lords, and the contemporaries of higher morality did speak out against them. It is unjust and historically absurd to reproach the current, purified generation of Christians several centuries later for those scandals, so much the more as it was unilateral, as the church did have its heroes and martyrs even in the darkest ages.

It was a pleasant surprise for us to hear the invading soviet power call for democracy and ensure the country a multi-party government. The general elections resulted in the victory of the Independent Smallholders’ Party. There was no word whatsoever about religious persecution. However, the war had not ended yet, when on 18 March, the Temporary National Government seated in Debrecen issued decree no. 600/1945 on the land reform, depriving church institutions, including our order, of the ma-

jority of its landed properties, promising subsequent government support for their operation. Church leaders did not protest against this decree, and endeavoured to allocate their landed properties in accordance with the decree. Our order was highly regarded for its exemplary agricultural activity, and ministers used to take their remarks into consideration. Nevertheless, several points of impact had already evolved in this stage. The party resented that Abbot Vendel and the bursar and head of our order's holdings, Gyula Hagyó Kovács pointed out certain unprofessional actions and adverse impacts of the land distribution, exactly for the smallholders who received the properties. In the general poverty that followed the war, in the absence of machines and animals, these smallholders were incapable of cultivating their plots. Gyula Hagyó Kovács was among the first priests arrested on accusations that he did not perform land distribution in accordance with the decree. Before long, Abbot Vendel became the target of the party's hatred, as he was the person charged with negotiating with the government on behalf of the episcopate and Prince Primate Mindszenty. Thus the land reform was only the first strike on the church and the various orders, as the landed property served to maintain these institutions. Seizing these properties caused a major trouble in the operation of the orders, and left them at the mercy of the government, which promised them support as a compensation.

Based on soviet experiences, the party wily had the democratic parties actually build up its dictatorship step by step, using democratic slogans. Large landowners' estate were seized, and at that time it was easy to present this as a fair action, but it was not made in the interest of the poor who received the properties, as the very first step was the formation of cooperatives: as smallholders were unable to make a living from the properties, they had no choice but accepting their organisation into farming collectives called kolkhoz. Thus they became vulnerable to party leaders' intents. "Organised workers", whether employed by a state-owned farm or an agricultural cooperative, were then easily mobilised according to the party's interests. Similarly, having been deprived of their fundamental assets, teaching orders also became helpless and dependent on the state: if they did not teach in conformity with the government's official ideology, they were not granted support or had to give up their schools. Prince Primate Mindszenty foresaw the danger and knew that there was no way to reach agreement with the party leaders because they do not keep their word, and so he firmly resisted all violent initiatives against religion. For this reason he could be presented as an enemy of democracy, and even bishops and priests disagreed with him. Before long the government dissolved Catholic associations because no organisation was tolerated. "Divide et impera!" Weapons were hidden at schools, then they were "found" and used as legal grounds. Using "freedom" as a pretext, the termination of mandatory religious education was proposed. The archbishop also anticipated that if children's religious education was decided by the parents, parents, especially "organised workers", were easily intimidated, and so he launched a huge movement to defend mandatory religious education. For a short time, the question was indeed removed from the agenda.

In August 1947, during the infamous "blue slip elections", the left wing of the government coalition forged ahead, and using a violent "salami slice tactics", smallhold-

ers were ousted, in the summer of 1948, the social democrats were named Hungarian Labour Party and merged into the communist party, and other administrative actions were taken to dominate the landscape and seize total power. During the demonstrations against the nationalisation of schools, in the village Pócspetri, a policeman's gun accidentally went off and killed the policeman, and the government presented it as the murder of a policeman. The local vicar was sentenced first to death and then to life imprisonment for instigation. This accident was also used as a gimmick to press for the nationalisation of schools. In the same summer, Gyula Ortutay of the Smallholders' Party and Minister of Religion and Public Education nationalised monastic schools, and at the end of December, Prince Primate Mindszenty was arrested. The pupils of nationalised schools were required to attend general meetings and demand an exemplary punishment for the "treason Mindszenty". During demonstrations people had to chant: "Job and food! Rope for Mindszenty!" The episcopate was also expected to condemn Mindszenty's policy and swear loyalty to the government.

CISTERCIANS COME TO THE FOREFRONT

Cistercian canon lawyer Justin Baranyai, professor of ecclesiastic law at the Pázmány Péter University, was included in the show trial planned against the primate. For his royalist sentiments he was held liable as if he wanted to overthrow the republic, although from the moment the republic was proclaimed, both he and Mindszenty had been well aware of the fact that there was no realistic chance for the restoration of a monarchy had no realistic chance. During the hearing he did not appear to be broken, and with his final words he kept defending his opinion. He was sentenced to 15 years in penitentiary. (Previously, nine Cistercians had been detained.) When he was granted amnesty and released in early 1956, for a short time he was housed in a priests' home in Székesfehérvár, where I worked as a secular employee, a factotum. It was poignant to see the former great scholar who had lost his once sharp memory to the extent that during conversation he suddenly forgot who he was talking to. He manifested interest (or merely gentle politeness) while he listened to whatever I told him about the current situation of the order, but he instantly forgot everything. Once he was talking to an elderly brother, an old acquaintance of his, and when the conversation stopped for a moment and he felt that he should go on, he politely inquired: "And how is your charming lady?" He obviously did not know who he was talking to. I tried to ask him if he had any disease but he did not know of any. Subsequently I read in the memoirs of one of his fellow inmates that sergeant major B, also well-known to me for his cruelty, once punched Father Justin in the face with his fist that the Father dropped to the ground. (It was well-known among the inmates that sergeant major B had been an illiterate swineherd. He climbed the ladder with his cruelty. He immensely hated the lords of the old world.)

Even if a political regime worries for its achievements, in this case, the republic, and understandably endeavours to isolate its opponents, in his case a criminal case was fabricated out of loyalty to the king just to increase the list of crimes for Mindszenty.

nty they wanted to keep out of the way. In addition to the prosecutor's request of a death penalty Father Justin, once he had been sentenced, he got brutalised. His fate traumatised the members of the order, as this was the very first such a severe judgment against a Cistercian. Presumably it was meant as intimidation.

THE CASE OF ABBOT VENDEL ENDRÉDY

Once the Prince Primate was arrested, Abbot Vendel expected to follow suit very soon. However, he still had a lot to do. He was elected as head of the Hungarian Cistercians in 1939. The war, and the Arrow Cross regime and the period when the Hungary was the frontline posed a host of problems for him. He provided refuge for the population of Zirc in the abbey. He got into a closer contact with Mindszenty when he was appointed bishop of Veszprém County in 1944, and reported directly to him. Although he was familiarised with the communist terror back in 1919 and then the prison of the Arrow Cross, he steadfastly defended Christian moral values. Pope Pius XII appointed him Archbishop of Esztergom in August 1945 and then cardinal. With total reverence, Abbot Vendel joined forces with the primate under the leadership of the latter, who in turn valued his carefully considered opinion and advice. One of the witnesses in the lawsuit against Mindszenty, Miklós Beresztóczy, who had previously been dragged through the mud and crushed, claimed in his evidence that Mindszenty and Endrédy were good friends and that Endrédy was the primate's adviser and one of his contacts to the West. Undoubtedly, Abbot Vendel visited the primate on several occasions and even brought a letter to him from Rome, after he had participated in the events of the Mary Days, where Catholic masses protested against the nationalisation of schools and against making religious education optional. In 1948, events accelerated. After the nationalisation of schools, teaching monks remained unemployed, as the primate forbade them to undertake teaching in nationalised schools. The reason was that he knew that in schools with a Marxist education they would either come up against their conscience, or they would be dismissed very soon. For a time, monks willingly undertook jobs as pastors, and bishops were pleased to employ them, however, the government did not approve it. It was mentioned that similarly to the Benedictines, the Cistercian order may be organised as an independent diocese, and thus at least a few members of the order would find a job as pastors, but the government refused this solution too.

Even after the nationalisation of schools in 1948, a lot of young people still applied for admission to religious orders. This was the period when I also became a novice with 17 others. The church elders were both pleased and worried. During the war, Vendel Endrédy tried to rescue the order by sending a few members to the United States to gain a footing there. After a lot of hardships and challenging times, this initiative worked: Hungarian Cistercians undertook teaching at secondary schools and universities and established a new abbey in Dallas. Meanwhile, in Hungary planned the return of a few schools, probably to prove that there is no religious persecution in Hungary but people's democracy was evolving in a healthy way. Hopes were raised

in our order for the return of our two secondary schools. The party left the decision on the religious orders. In the course of the negotiations, the decisive statement was made by Mátyás Rákosi, who cut all hopes:

“As for the religious orders that may be maintained, all orders are the same to me, just like churches, however, the condition that one supports us while the other does not should not be indifferent for the state. But we did not experience that one order would support us more than the other. Still there is one thing that deserves mentioning: aristocratic orders, like the Sisters of Loreto and the Sacré Coeur, where a poor person has not been allowed to step foot in, should not be offended if we do not want to maintain them. In the summer of 1945, Endrédy, the head of the Cistercians requested us to immediately return their forests and 4000 acres of arable land, as they were engaged in Mangalitza pigs and they have agreed with their serfs, and he brought a list to prove this. Later on he was one of Mindszenty’s bad spirits. Up to most recently he has been the most actively anti-peace. Of the 70 orders, I am unable to support his order, the order led by such a person. Allow the state have a veto in this issue, we liberally said that they could pick the schools, but after all the state should have some kind of a right of veto. I would certainly exercise veto power against the Cistercians and the Sisters of Loreto.”

The abbot was personally attacked within the order, saying that his unyielding policy insisting on Mindszenty’s views was the reason for our inability to come to terms with the government. One of our teachers in the Buda secondary school openly stood up for the communist regime, and left the order, he claimed this was done to save his abbot: his name was Richárd Horváth, subsequent leader of the Clerical Peace Movement and then a member of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People’s Republic. At a general meeting of the order the Abbot offered his resignation if the order suffers disadvantage on account of his person, but the council members stood up for him. At this moment he named the person to govern the order in case he is arrested. He informed his superiors both in Hungary and in Rome to consider any statement he may make if he is arrested. This is because during the Mindszenty lawsuit he learnt that the State Protection Authority, the secret police of Hungary, had certain chemicals for influencing detainees during giving evidences: they simply said whatever had been dictated to them.

In 1950 the government’s endeavour was to persuade the episcopate to sign the agreement that would legitimize all the anti-church actions of the single-party state and could be used as a reference for the arrest of all those clerical persons who “violate” the agreement. Already at the time when Mindszenty was in control, the episcopate rejected the government’s wish claiming that they were not authorised to sign such a comprehensive agreement, as this was the competence of the Holy See. Under the leadership of József Grósz, Archbishop of Kalocsa, they put up a common resistance to the agreement, while Gyula Czapik, the Archbishop of Eger was inclined to agree. The reason was that during the previous regime, he stood up for the *levente* movement, a paramilitary youth organisation, and he was frowned upon for it. Now he had to make the government forget it. The government broke the bishops’ resistance by two violent actions.

INTERVENTION: THE HAULING OF MONKS

On 9 June 1950, at night, the inhabitants of the houses of our order in Baja, Pécs and Szentgotthárd were woke up by the secret police knocking at the door. They were given half an hour to pack up maximum 5 kg and carried in vans to the Carmelite cloister as a place of forced stay. As they were not told where they were carried, several of them thought that they would be taken to Siberia or killed somewhere along the way. The kind hospitality of the small Carmelite community who received them and meeting the other Cistercians carried from the other two places brought them great relief. Under strict orders of the secret police, they were not allowed to leave the nunnery, and their headcount was checked on several occasions. Overcrowding was quite a burden for the host community, but the forcible guests made their utmost to confine themselves to the simplest possible situation, contribute to every housework and make the exigency tolerable for all. As my teachers from Pécs, who experienced these things, related to me later on, very soon they organised cultural groups among them and held high-standard lectures to increase one another's knowledge. Those who had a good practical sense, undertook all kinds of servicing and repairs to reduce the financial burden. The villagers generously helped to feed them.

The government justified this action by declaring that due to the tension that had been evolving with Yugoslavia, "unreliable elements" had to be removed from the border zone. The real reason, however, was the showing off of the "people's fist", in other words, intimidation. Accordingly, many of the people of the secret police behaved cruelly, but there were also humane ones.

At that time I was a novice at Zirc. I learnt from my mother that the monks had been taken away from Pécs. This news was confirmed by others from several directions. There was a mother who took her son home, but most of us stuck to our profession. Then we heard that the night abductions were repeated on 18 of June and then on 11 July. Every night we went to sleep wondering if we were the next that night. This was no little stress but we persevered. Seeing this, the abbot obtained permission from Rome for us to profess a temporary vows (for three years) before the end of the full year on probation. On 22 June, 15 novices committed to the order in the midst of this complete uncertainty. Then, to our great surprise, at dawn on 1 August we awakened to see lorries drive to our monastery with about 500 nuns, collected and carried there from various cloisters. The abbot had to take action to make room for everybody, feed all of us, and he had to undertake responsibility that nobody would flee. All of a sudden we emptied every room and hall that could be vacated, and scattered straw on the floor to make berths for them, and at the moment they received their places, they reported for work. They pulled out everything edible from the garden for lunch and started to process them, while praying the rosary aloud. They were also happy to enjoy the hospitality of Zirc instead of Siberia. Abbot Vendel also gave up his own apartment to them and very kindly provided for their physical and spiritual needs. The young monks drove around the neighbouring villages and brought foodstuffs offered by the kind-hearted folk to feed this mass. The secret police encouraged the displaced

monks to leave their orders and promised them to immediately release them and moreover, to get them jobs, but none of them broke their professed vows.

The other violent action taken by the government to break the episcopate's resistance was the so-called peace movement. Defending peace became a slogan continuously voiced in the international conditions of the Cold War, and it was also used as a means of organising Catholic priests and putting pressure on the "stubborn" bishops. A clerical general meeting was convened for 1 August 1950 in Budapest, where about 300 "priests" showed up. Subsequently it turned out that some of them did not even know where they were carried, others were Franciscan fathers deployed on command. The attendance list also contained the names of priests who were actually languishing in internment camps at that time, and even undercover secular persons. Richárd Horváth "exposed" the "slandorous campaign" of the reactionaries, and emphasized that we can be good Catholics and good citizens at the same time. It was frequently voiced at that time that in terms of faith and morals we are faithful to Rome but we disapprove Vatican politics. Following the Soviet example, the government would clearly have welcomed the creation of a national church that is dependent on and serves the interests of the communist party. These two pressures forced the episcopate to request agreement from the government.

Essentially, in the agreement the episcopate had to acknowledge the new democratic regime, condemn all actions taken against it, and the state undertook to financially support pastoral work for 18 years. After the agreement, 6 secondary schools were returned to 3 orders and 2 girls' secondary schools to the Schools Sisters of Notre Dame. On 19 August it was decided that the Cistercians would not be returned any secondary school, and thus they would lose their operating licence. On that day the abbot had not yet received the novices in the order and clothed them in the Cistercian habit.

On 7 September Law-decree 34/1950 of the Presidential Council was published in the Hungarian Gazette, withdrawing the operating licence from the monks. Thus 2300 men and 800 women were compelled to leave their homes. We were given 3 months.

As the monks did not consider the government's dictatorial action legitimate, and they also knew that the hostile and incompetent mob would destroy their valuables, they made efforts at hiding or depositing them with reliable people. Naturally, this caused them trouble later on. The abbot also wanted to rescue the novices by sending them abroad, but the law did not allow this, and so illegal border crossing was the only way left. He commissioned his nephew, Father Paszkál, to organise an escape, as he was born in the border region, and novices were allowed to volunteer for the perilous adventure. And subsequently this was indeed considered as an offence.

ABBOT VENDEL ENDRÉDY'S ORDEAL

The abbot was highly regarded among the bishops and monastic superiors, and he often negotiated with them as he did with the government. He also corresponded in a kind of cryptic language with the foreign members of our order, not being aware that

each single step he made was reported by agents. After the dissolution of the order, he only cared about helping whoever he could. He expected his arrest as his home had been searched on several occasions during the summer and several people from the Zirc were interrogated about him. At the end of October he handed over the monastery to the person appointed by the government, and then with Father Timót Losonczi, his secretary, he travelled to Budapest, where he was given temporary accommodation in the Central Seminary. On the 29th, he drove to visit one of his relatives for a few personal belongings he needed, but on the road he was intercepted and detained by the secret police together with Father Timót. He was carried to the basement of the infamous 60 Andrassy Street, in Budapest, the headquarters of the secret police, where interrogations started right away. As he described subsequently, with utterly humiliating and painful tortures he was extorted to plead guilty in heading an organisation that had organised sabotage actions to overthrow the socialist order, acted as a spy for Vatican, made money in the black market with foreign currency and made several novices of the order defect to the West. He admitted the latter two but refused to sign the previous two. After five weeks of torture, they could not break him. Finally he was told that if he still refused to sign, his fellow members from the order, and moreover certain lady friends would be brought there and he would be tortured in the same way in front of them. This was already beyond what he could undertake, so he signed the mendacious charges.

However, the secret police was not content with having dealt with him. They fabricated an extensive conspiracy with József Grósz, Bishop of Kalocsa and head of the episcopate assigned the key role. If he was brought down, the entire church would be made a mockery of, and their man, Gyula Czapik would be seated at its head. In this huge farce, Endrédy was made sixth defendant, and the financial manager of our order, the above-mentioned Gyula Hagzó Kovács, who was a few years older, was added as the seventh defendant. Twenty-four subsidiary litigations were linked to the main lawsuit, including the case of novices who were helped to escape abroad but were captured, the case of the Paulines, the Kecskemét railwaymen's organisation, various foreign currency cases, etc. The harsh sentences were adopted in the summer of 1951.

Abbot Endrédy was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment. He was a hero when he held the ground during the tortures, but at the hearing he already made statements as the secret police wished. Using his opportunity to make a last statement, Archbishop Grósz was also "sorry for his sins he had done against his people", and in addition to God's forgiveness, he hoped that his judges would be understanding when delivering the sentence. In prison the abbot was solitars confinement and for a long time he was not even given paper and pencil. He made conscious efforts at remaining mentally fit in idleness: he continuously stretched his mind and his memory, and did arithmetic in his head and solved complex mathematical tasks. When after 6 years, he was freed during the 1956 revolution, he was feeble in body (his heart condition was poor and he had vitamin deficiency, etc.), but mentally he was completely healthy. When after the reversal he was incarcerated again, due to his health problems, he could only be returned to the prison hospital, and so the government itself took the initiative for the

episcopate to plead mercy for him. So the remaining 8 years were forgiven, but he was required to spend the rest of his life in the old people's home at the Benedictine Abbey of Pannonhalma. Thanks to the good care he received, he recovered pretty well, and lived in a fairly good physical condition and relative freedom up to the age of 86. I got to know him closer in this period of his life, since at that time I was employed by the said institution, and I had my meals together with him every day. His miserable judges and guards, for whom he prayed every day, had no idea what an intellectual giant and a warm-hearted person they had had in their hands and used for satisfying their primitive animal instincts.

In the Abbey of Pannonhalma he did his best to take mental and financial care of this brothers, and the monks had a very high regard of him. In the old people's home, cultural presentations were held every Sunday morning and he also held several highly successful lectures. He reviewed numerous interesting discoveries of contemporary science he had learnt from foreign journals. A lot of renowned church and secular dignitaries visited him, including his former student who had become famous. They admired his memory, as he could recall tiny details of events that happened to them in the secondary school. It was still his pleasure to help Benedictine pupils in mathematics if they did not understand their assignments. In addition, he was a cheerful person who liked jokes. He had a genuinely lovely personality.

NOVICES' ADVENTURE

At the end of August in 1950, every novice was required to write an application to one of the bishops and request them to allow us become ordinands in their bishopric. I had to write to the Bishop of Székesfehérvár. Meanwhile, the abbot was informed that an accurate plan of illegal escape towards Austria had been developed, and one of my mates also asked me if I was ready to undertake such a risky adventure. I was a shy boy, abhorred any irregularity, but as I assumed that my superiors would be glad to hear me agree, I undertook the journey. On 5 September 1950, I had to travel to the village Bósárkány with Brother Vazul, where we joined the others. On the site it turned out that there were twenty two of us, and we had to approach the "iron curtain" on foot, in the darkness of the night, led by three armed men. At the end of a thrilling journey, we did manage to cross the border at dawn (Brother Vazul dropped behind, so only twenty one of us) but for lack of sufficient information and knowledge of German, 8 bothers, including me, got into the hands of Austrian gendarmes, who accompanied us to Eisenstadt and handed us over to the town's soviet commander. The remaining 13 brothers successfully arrived in Rome and then to Dallas. After five weeks of waiting, a soviet lorry transported us back to Sopron and handed us over to the Hungarian secret police. Although we were not beaten, with uninterrupted yelling we were intimidated and during one night, were transported by a patrol wagon (nicknamed "dreamboat") to Budapest, to the secret police's headquarters in Mosonyi Street. It was 11 October. We were accommodated in private cells in the basement, where we were scared on numerous occasions during the daytime to prepare for the night inter-

rogations. In the lock-ups with concrete floor there was only a metal wire bed, without a mattress and with three rugs, but we were not allowed to lie down before the lights-out. At night we had to sleep opposite a light that was on, and we were not allowed to have our hands under the blanket. If asleep we unconsciously pull our hands under the blanket or turned away from the light, we were immediately awakened.

For the interrogations we were awakened from our first slumber. We always had to run, as we were continuously yelled at: "Move!" The interrogation rooms were, however, comfortably warm. Usually it started at a civil tone, but if someone tried to have a gainsay, even the presenting officers beat him badly. In our case there was no such a problem: we admitted that we defected and they believed that we did not know if our superiors knew about it. They finished with us within ten days, we signed our statements and on 20 October we were transferred to a joint lock-up on the third floor of the Markó Street prison. This was already paradise in comparison to the previous one: we were together, we could talk to one another, nobody disturbed us, and we could lie down even during the daytime, the room was pleasantly warm and the secret police staff was relatively nice. However, we were under heavy guard, separated from all the others. We did not know when we would be heard and what the sentence would be.

We spent 9 months in the Markó Street prison, and this actually was intensive monastic life. Initially we made efforts at regaining our strength after starvation in Austria, and then by regular physical exercise, also our strength. Then the daily routine evolved, and the approximately 15 hours between the wake-up call and the lights-out. We had to wake up earlier to be able to privately perform the morning prayers, with reading replaced by meditation. For the remaining parts of the liturgy of the hours, we all joined in prayer and soft singing. Most of the day was spent in learning: everybody contributed what he could in Latin, Greek, German, English, French, Italian and Croatian, and we also learnt shorthand and the rules and theory of driving cars. Physical exercise was never omitted. After supper we even told bedtime stories. On 16 July we were finally taken to a hearing behind closed doors. All our court appointed public defender, a retired judge known from the Mindszenty litigation, Kálmán Kiczó could say in our defence was that due to our young age theology still had an impact on us. (I wonder if he knew at all what theology was.) Judge Béla Jónás admitted that there was no evidence that we had spoken against people's democracy while we were in the west, but it was presumable, and therefore we were sentenced for 4 years imprisonment, except for the eldest two of us, who were sentenced to 7 and 4.5 years. Naturally, we were devastated, but when we were transferred to the non-compliant detention centre and saw how many people had been sentenced to 10 or even 15 years, we realised that these far outweighed our sentences.

The commanding officer of the detention centre was captain Bánkuti (a steel worker from Ózd), who gave us a formal speech, saying in essence, that irrespective of sentence we could be released earlier if we worked honestly. The prison consisted of two three-pointed stars, but at that time only three sections were occupied in the left-hand star – crowded: three or four persons in a small cell. I lived with two mates in Left 2, and we worked in a chair polishing workshop, two of us lived in Left 1 and

worked in a button-making plant, and three lived in Left 3 and worked in a bakelite plant. Unfortunately, the production quotas was set too high, it was impossible to comply with them. Anyone who failed could expect either being put in irons, which meant he was chained at the wrists and ankles from 6 in the evening until midnight, sitting in a painfully strained muscles, exposed to the cruel amusements of the guards on night shift, or being withdrawn from work and bored in the cell alone.

In the early 1950's prison population was composed of war criminals, in other words, high-ranking army officers (most of them sentenced to life imprisonment), priests sentenced for incitement (for 3 to 5 years) and young conspirators (sentenced for 10 to 15 years). It was an elite company. We could learn a lot from them. For monks, prison life did not present a major difficulty, as it was similar to the life of voluntary denial, only without the rite of mass. However, the special annoyance caused by bedbugs and guards made things more difficult. And yet, there were a lot of pleasure, including the friendship of valuable persons, interesting events etc.

In the autumn of 1952, we were relocated to the town of Vác, where we were assigned to a comfortable schist quarrying job. Then in the summer of 1953, we were transported to Tatabánya and we became miners. Although work was hard, the conditions were so good that this was considered as a dream lifestyle. At this place I earned so much that I could pay for the costs of my 4 years in prison, and when I was released in July 1954, I could even take some money home. However, the most important thing was that secretly, in that year I could already participate in masses every day. (This is because using grape and white bread brought to us by non-prisoner miners, inmate priests could celebrate the mass unnoticed while walking the yard. In retrospect, I consider the entire prison experience as a high school of life, where I learnt a lot, and give thanks to God for it as one of the most beautiful periods in my life. I have no grudge against anyone, and I rather feel sorry for the secret police staff and would like them to recognise the extent to which they were manipulated and misled by Marxist ideology.

UNTIL 1956

While I was living in the prison in a kind of blissful ignorance, I did not know anything about the threats to the order. Although gone underground, the management wanted to live: they appointed people in charge of holding together the scattered members of the order. However, they were not aware of the fact that they were surrounded by numerous penetration agents, who reported everything about them and so it was only a matter of time when they were hit. In this period solidarity was the worst sin of all: a gathering of two or three people was already seen as the felony of "organisation directed at overthrowing the prevailing order" and entailed arrest. Another crime was the concealment of values from the abbey, as the state claimed ownership of all valuables of the nationalised abbey. The third offence was selling the foreign currency received from abroad without involving the National Bank of Hungary. Several members of the order were arrested on this charge and were prodded to cooperate

as penetrating agents. Some tried to escape denunciation by leaving the order and marrying.

This period was also hallmarked by two poignant murders against Cistercians. In Eger, on 21 February, 1954, at the age of 37, Cistercian parson Sixtus Debreczeni was hit and crushed to death by a military passenger car, allegedly driven by a drunken driver. The claim that it was a sheer traffic accident is disproved by the fact that the zealous pastor had been threatened and there had already been two attempts at hitting him by car, unsuccessfully, and this time the person who committed the vehicular manslaughter was acquitted. Seven years earlier, when he was still serving as a parson in the village Nagykarácsony, Father Sixtus had already been beaten half to death by communists. In Eger he was not political at all, he only conducted his work as a priest beloved by all. As there was no matter that could be charged against him, he was finished promptly.

The other murder removed János Anasztáz Brenner, a young chaplain at Szentgotthárd, out of the way. János was one of the last novices clothed in the Cistercian habit at Zirc in August 1950. Anasztáz was his name adopted on his admission to the order. I saw him in the seminary in Győr after I was released from prison. He was already in his last year while I only began my first year as an ordinand. When he was killed, Anasztáz had been a priest for only two years, liked by everybody for his zeal and kindness. The main charge against him was that he had a profound impact on youth. When on demand from the government the competent bishop refused to relocate him to another place, the commissioner for church affairs held out the prospect that no good will come of this. At around midnight on 17 December, 1957, he was called to see a dying person, and on the go in the pitch-black night several persons attacked him and killed him by stabbing and trampling on his body. The authority failed to identify the assassins. The church considers him as a martyr.

Allow me to note here that the bishop of Pécs and his well-intentioned office director, who was a “peace priest” kept my past secret, registered me as an ordinand and sent me to study in Győr in the autumn of 1954. However, by the end of the schoolyear it became obvious that I was a monk, and so with two of my fellow-members I was expelled from the seminary. Previously, numerous other novices had had the same fate.

After the abbot was arrested, the master of novices Lóránt Sigmund became the secret governor of the order. He did his best to hold the members of the order together and help them financially, and he also worked for the future: covertly he educated new recruits for the order and collected financial means for a restart in the order’s life. During the 1956 revolution, he sent his covert novices to Dallas. The secret police had been watching him since 1952, but he was arrested only in late May 1961.

LAWSUITS AGAINST CISTERCIANS IN 1961

This last series of suits eradicated the illegal Cistercians. The government was primarily interested in the education of the youth. Several members of the order were arrested for this reason. Instead of religious considerations, efforts were made at dem-

onstrating immorality and stigmatise the detained monks to destroy their authenticity and discredit them in front of people. As I personally knew Father Bernardin Palos, the elderly bishop Shvoy and Father Lóránt, the charge that they lived in a homosexual relationship was completely out of the question. But the investigating authority could force them plead guilty. In the first instance, Father Lóránt was sentenced to 10 years of incarceration, but in the second instance treason and two counts of sexual perversions were dropped and the sentence was reduced to 7 years. In the prison he was diagnosed with kidney cancer, he was operated on and released on 1 April 1963. He lived for a year in the old priests' home at Pannonhalma. I had the privilege to be present at his death. I witness that he lived, suffered and died a saint.

It was startling that even the most soldierly personality, Bernardin Palos, could be broken. Previously, he was a director general of the Pécs school district and a devout scout. After the nationalisation of schools, he was appointed director of the abbey office. He was not an emotional kind, he could be respected rather than loved. He was discipline incarnate. After the dissolution, he lived in Székesfehérvár and he was a popular public speaker. His highly concise, suggestive and short addresses attracted masses. He was released in 1963, after two years of incarceration, burdened with the stigma of sexual perversions and organised to act as a mole. Although he never harmed anyone with his 315 reports, for 12 years he had to live divided against himself.

As I had no closer relationship with the participants of the lawsuits conducted in 1961, I do not speak about them. At this point, however, I think I should contribute to the question of agents in an annex.

AGENTS

Many years after the fall of socialism, many still consider our order as continued defendants, as several honourable members of the order turned out to be agents, in other words, moles in that ruthless communist world. I related to this matter in a way that after I was sentenced, in the detention centre the so-called D officer (defensive, more or less meaning a counterespionage officer) summoned me for investigation and tried to assess how useful I was. I probably disappointed him, as on hearing my naive responses he flew into a red-hot range and threatening with chains, he dismissed me. He said I was a liar, because I did not admit that I only wanted to become a priest to have the church finance my studies, as he thought. From one of my fellow inmates I learnt that the D officer tried to organise one or two moles from every company of inmates, and this was what he tried with me too. Instead of me, he managed to recruit one of the brethren, blackmailing him by some messy issue his father had had. He, however, discussed everything with me, as he did not want to be a genuine traitor. It was really difficult to play this double game, as he had to write monthly reports to make the D officer content while not harming anyone. The dissatisfied D officer beat him badly on several occasions. Moles figured out their colleagues pretty soon and knew who was a really dangerous, dirty dog, and made efforts at rendering them harmless through their reports. It was an ugly world of liars.

At a later date one of the older brethren from my order confessed to me that after many attempts he finally could no longer sidestep the demand, and he had to meet his organising officer in a confectioner's shop. In that shop everybody was employed by the secret police. There was a person at every table who struggled with a haggard face under the organising officer's pressure.

The managers of the old priests' home at the Abbey of Pannonhalma was visited on a monthly basis by a young officer to check the activities of the "dangerous elements" who lived in the home, like Endrédi, 'Sigmond, Csávossy, Kerkai, etc. In the absence of the manager, I had to receive him. Fortunately, this officer was not a fanatic: he chatted for an hour just to be able to reconcile with his duty and left. He allowed the home manager to let the elderly monks leave the home for the nearby parishes to help with the pastors' work in the absence of licences. This was already in the mid-1960s.

During socialism, fear was general and it prevailed everywhere. In addition to the population, who could never know when the secret police broke the door on them at night, the secret police staff were also afraid: of one another and or the "reactionaries". The reason why they wanted to know everything was for the sake of their own security. They smelled danger and wanted to defend themselves everywhere. This is why they were aggressive. As a matter of fact, they were deplorable. Undoubtedly, some of them were really evil, capable of interrogating and reporting their mates to get some kind of an advantage. In the prison it also happened sometimes that somebody related some of the things he had done, and the mole in the group hurried to report them. The consequence was retrial, and the person was executed. Naturally, such agents deserve to be called to account. But most of them were not like that.

Here I mention the names of two of my excellent brethren, who became bishops and subsequently turned out to be organised agents. One of them was a popular professor of ethics, György Zemplén, who also taught me at the Academy of Theology, and later on became rector of the Hungarian Papal Institute in Rome and then rector of the Academy of Theology as an Assistant Bishop of Esztergom. I cannot imagine what made this learned monk back into a corner, as neither career nor intimidation seem to be likely. Similarly incomprehensible was the organisation of my former fellow novice, Gábor Kádár, who became Bishop of Veszprém and then Archbishop of Eger. From his youth he was the Eger congregation's pride and joy. As far as I know, he was respected and loved in his later years too. He had to die at a relatively young age, of cancer.

"PEACE PRIESTS"

It is sad that a member of our order became so immersed with the socialist order that despite ban from Rome, he served the persecutors of the church and collaborated with them, undertook to act as their representative, led the "peace priest movement" dividing the clergy and putting pressure on bishops, and even received a seat in the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic. Richárd Horváth was a good teacher in Budapest, a socially sensitive person and a good monk. It is incomprehensible how he could turn his back on his former life. His fellowman, Miklós Beresztóczy, had been tor-

tured before his will was broken, but we know of nothing of the kind in his case. Perhaps inordinate ambition was an option. He was respectful with his abbot when he applied for his release from the order. Even if initially thought that this order may bring the ideal social order into success, he must have seen that a dictatorship built on lies had been set up and maintained by violence, causing immense damages and sending several of its own leaders to the gallows or to prison. How could he hold on to it for decades?

“Peace priests” caused a lot of troubles for bishops, as through their governmental friends they demanded influential places, “grave train” parishes, titles and ranks for themselves. With their secular attitudes they did not represent the teachings of the Gospel and misled believers. If a pastor did not participate in peace conferences, he risked being disbarred from religious education or deprived of the government’s financial support. Many priests, mainly the elderly, were compelled to join the movement for such reasons. There was an infamous event in 1959, when the seminarists of the Central Seminary of Budapest (including me) did not attend the peace conference and in response the government removed the disobedient students (about 80 per cent of all ordinands) from the seminary.

The legal grounds voiced by peace priests was that they wanted to ensure survival for the church by this collaboration. However, the ordinands were of the opinion that saving the church is not our task, the Lord Jesus Christ is in charge of it. What we must do is to submit to Rome and to our bishops loyal to Rome, but not the anti-church leaders appointed by the government. However, there were peace priests who used their authority to protect the pastoral work done by their young chaplains, even in particularly sensitive areas, like the education of the youth. They deserve respect. As apart from Richárd Horváth, active participation in the “peace movement” was not characteristic of our order, I do not need to write more about it.

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

As seen from this short compilation, the Cistercian order suffered quite a blow during socialism financially, in terms of persons and reputation. We cannot say we were all innocent and that we are entitled to the ornate pedestal of martyrdom. We lost our landed properties of 100,000 acres. We handed it over relatively easily, and our conscience does not tell us we had been bad managers, we had obtained them dishonestly or had used them to other people’s detriment. In 1990 I was a parson in the village called Apátság, once established by Gyula Kovács Hagyó on our order’s former property. It was a joy to hear how the descendants of the former domestic workers still blessed the memory of the strict governor, sentenced as an “extortioner” of servants, who had homes built for these families and provided social benefits for them, for the young couples who wanted to marry, for the elderly and for the ill, in a period when such things were novelties on large estates. We lost 5 model secondary schools, but in the knowledge that all of them were in good conditions, and moreover, in Pécs with the pupils’ contribution to work, we had just built a competition swimming pool that served to boost water sports. Perhaps we do not need to grieve about being too proud

of our schools. We lost many hundreds of pupils who continued their studies in naturalised schools, but as it became clear after the change of regime, they still carried on in the spirit received from us, did not become disloyal and has not disgraced us.

In 1950 the number of members in the order was about 240. And in 1990 no more than 40. In addition to natural attrition, unfortunately, there was a high ratio of dropouts, especially among the young priests, even among those who successfully made it to Dallas. It is particularly sad that about 10 priests left their profession due to being organised as agents. I am convinced that we can certainly refuse moral charges as slander, but we must admit feebleness, as many have undertaken to act as moles.

Approximately 40 of us suffered longer or shorter imprisonment. As shown above, not innocently. After the change of regime, the courts declared all these sentences null and void, but it was a fact that we, prisoners did violate the socialists laws. As for me, for example, I and my mates left the country without authorisation. Others hid their valuables the socialist regime seized as public assets. Again others caused damage to the people's economy by not allowing the National Bank of Hungary to tap the support sent us from abroad. We refused to acknowledge that the laws of the old, bourgeois world had changed in Hungary. In such a case we may say we appeal to the justice of history against the judgment of the changing laws of the political regimes taking turns. However, such a theoretical forum also depends on the assessment of flawed humans.

In the case of a fundamentally religious institution like a religious order, it is legitimate to name God as the ultimate forum to judge. In the order the question was raised whether the events might have taken this direction because the institution of monks, including our order, has gradually become disloyal to the original concept, the service of God. Similarly to the disasters in the history of the chosen people, which afflicted them because reverence and the honour of God had become mere formalities, and they worshipped idols and false gods instead of the one true God, the life lived by the monks of our age has also gone blank, secularised and become devoid of content during the centuries, and monks are seeking secular emergence instead of God's favour. This is not to say we have deviated from the way of life established and followed by our forefathers and saints (as this issue was also raised), as under the changed circumstances this was necessary. The problem is that since the 19th century our relationship with God has withered away. True, in the 20th century it was revived, but God saw the time ripe for implementing his judgment on us. He was the one who seated us in the dock at court to suffer the punishment, learn and purify. God always judges out of love, and his judgments serve improvement, repentance and perfection in life.

In addition to the numerous losses, however, our order certainly increased, was purified and strengthened in the wake of the tests and trials that we have passed, in order to prepare for a new prosperity.

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