

1961

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CONFIDENTIAL - SEE QUOTE FROM OF BISHOP'S STATEMENT (p. 40, M14)

March, par 24. (Hungarian Evaluation and Analysis Note - (Urban) -- Early in March Archbishop Gross, head of the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church, was reliably reported to have written to the Prime Minister, Mr. Huszotich offering to go back to prison if the priests recently arrested were not released and the Government's campaign against the Church halted. "Archbishop Gross Responds to Arrests" Evaluation and Analysis News Background, March 10F.

Some of the Archbishop's letter, given as it has been international publicity, must have caused the Government acute embarrassment.

Since the 1956 Revolution the Catholic Church has been forced to put a good face on what in fact amounted to a slow erosion of its position, leading or appearing to lead support to Communist policies thus compromising itself in the eyes of the faithful. Since the Moscow conference the Hungarian Communist Party has intensified its campaign on the ideological front, warring especially militant in its relations with the Catholic Church. The arrest of the eight priests and clerical persons reported on 7 February 1961 has been followed by a wave of detentions, questionings and police searches, involving several hundred priests and members of the dissolved religious orders. From the kind of evidence the police were trying to produce it was not difficult to surmise that they were out to construct a conspiracy case of some magnitude, widening the net to include large sections of the lower clergy. They were looking for proof that a subversive "church, led and financed by the Vatican, is active underground, making it possible for seminarians, expelled from their schools for their refusal to cooperate with the renegade "peace priests", to continue their studies and even to be secretly ordained by bishops appointed by the Holy See behind the backs of the official hierarchy.

The regime's purpose is to apply a sophisticated version of Khrushchev's sacred tactics, cutting off from the "peace priests", then chopping off further allies from the truncated body of the Church. The move was a shrewd one: if the hierarchy resisted, as it obviously did, it would lay itself open to accusations of violating the Church-State agreement of 1950 and would suffer financially and jeopardize its remaining teaching rights. If, on the other hand -- and this would appear to be the case now -- the hierarchy could be pushed into dissociating itself from the arrested clergymen, the Bishops would unwittingly come along to sharing a platform with the excommunicated "peace priests", leading prestige support to the Government and alienating themselves from the Vatican.

Having gone as far in cooperating with the Communists as a Christian Church can possibly go (and some would say further), Archbishop Gross must have come to the conclusion when he wrote his letter to Mr. Huszotich that a point has been reached in Church-State relations where the Episcopate could make no further concessions without betraying its trust.

The present announcement ought to be treated with utmost caution. It was published simultaneously in the Episcopate's semi-official "Magyar Kurir" and by MTI, the Hungarian Telegraph Agency. The arrested persons have so far not been officially charged and no date has been set for their trial. It would be unprecedented for a college of the prelates of the Church to condemn people whose case is sub iudice and who may, for all we know, be completely innocent. The announcement betrays the Communist hand: it prejudges the issue by assuming that the accused are "irresponsible elements of the Catholic Church", that they have plotted against "the security of the State" and committed "crimes against the Hungarian people" ("Magyar Kurir") -- in short, that they are guilty.

It would appear quite likely that the Bench of Bishops has not made the statement which is now attributed to them, or possibly made it in effigy innocuous as were some of their pronouncements on peace and collectivization. The hierarchy has no means of refuting statements printed in their name short of disowning them from the pulpit. This may yet happen.

Nor would such tactics be without precedent. On 1 January 1960 Archbishop Gross was reported by the Communist press to have given Church support to the collectivization of agriculture. Later an unofficial Church publication, although unable to issue a denial, printed the full text of what the Archbishop had actually said. There was nothing in it that could have possibly been misinterpreted as support given to the "collectivization drive".

What is abundantly clear from the present announcement is that the Church has come under critical pressure and that breaking point may soon be reached. The Bishops' response may be decisive for the whole course of Church-State relations in Hungary.

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