

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

EAST EUROPE

This material was prepared for the use of the editors and policy staff of Radio Free Europe

BUDAPEST/15
7 August 1977

DEATH OF UNICATE BISHOP BRINGS FRESH POLITICAL QUESTIONS

Summary: The recent death of Dr. Niklas Dudas, residential Bishop of Hajdubirog and spiritual director of some 120,000 Uniate (Byzantine rite) Catholics poses a number of delicate questions. First is the question of succession. The government's candidate will undoubtedly be Dr. Imre Tisak, recently elected vicar capitular of the diocese of Hajdubirog and a known "peace priest." If the Holy See were to appoint him to succeed Bishop Dudas it might create a precedent for appointing peace priests to other ecclesiastical vacancies. On the other hand, the Holy See might accept Tisak provided the regime is simultaneously prepared to allow clergymen acceptable to the Vatican in some of the other posts which are currently vacant. Another consideration is that Bishop Dudas issued a pastoral letter a few weeks before his death which contained indications that the diocese was in a state of disarray. The letter did not go into detail, but there are hints of dissatisfaction and restlessness among the Uniate clergy, who evidently desire greater autonomy within the union with Rome. If the problem is not handled promptly, it might endanger the stability of the Uniate Church in Hungary and lay it open to inroads from the Soviet-supported Orthodox Church of Hungary, which is subordinate to the patriarch of Moscow. The fate of the other Uniate Churches in Eastern Europe should be a warning to the Hungarian Uniate Church, which is at present the largest of this denomination in Eastern Europe.

Dr. Niklas Dudas, residential Bishop of Hajdubirog and head of some 120,000 Eastern (Byzantine) rite Catholics, popularly called "Uniates," died at Nyiregyhaza on 13 July 1977, after a "long illness." A solemn funeral mass was celebrated on July 21 at the Uniate Paraffinal Church of Nyiregyhaza, at which the Catholic hierarchy was represented by two residential and two auxiliary bishops (Archbishop Ijjas of Kalocsa was absent because of illness). Bishop Dudas was then buried in the Basilica church in his native

village of Sariapata, where he was born in October 1902. (1) The Hungarian government was represented at the funeral service by Deputy Chairman of the State Office for Church Affairs Istvan Ballo. Ballo's presence was a mark of deference to the ecclesiastical rank of the late bishop rather than to his person, since his relationship with the regime had been extremely cool.

On Bishop Balas

Dr. Balas had been appointed bishop in March 1959, at the surprisingly young age of 57. He had been in office for 33 years, 24 of them under the communist regime. He had never made any secret of his lack of interest in "politics," and took no part in the pro-regime "peace movement" of Catholic priests. In fact his only role in political affairs was his membership in the National Council of the Patriotic People's Front (PPF). He was elected to that body in October 1954 -- the heyday of the late Prime Minister Imre Nagy, who at the time was making a vigorous effort to install new life into the PPF -- and re-elected to it in October 1963. His re-election, however, took place while he was in Switzerland for medical treatment, and it can therefore be assumed that it occurred without his consent. At any rate, he was not re-elected in May 1968.

The regime's displeasure with Bishop Balas was evidenced by the fact that he was permitted to attend only the fourth (and last) session of Vatican II, in November 1965. After relations between the Holy See and the Hungarian government began to improve, however, he was permitted on a number of occasions to visit the Vatican or to sojourn in Italy. For example, he went to Sicily in March 1967 in an effort to restore his health, which had been undermined for nearly 20 years by tuberculosis and diabetes.

With the passing of Bishop Balas the top hierarchy of the Hungarian Catholic Church lost its senior bishop (in terms of length of service), and the Uniate congregation has been deprived of a brilliant and completely dedicated leader who did much to consolidate the position of his Church within the broader structure of the Roman rite Catholic Church in Hungary, of which the Uniates constitute a relatively small but by no means negligible part. (The number of Catholics in the country is estimated at over 7,000,000, of which about 250,000 are Byzantine rite Uniates.) For example, in 1968 Dr. Balas obtained permission from the Holy See to extend his authority to all Uniates living in Hungary. Prior to that time only those living either within the diocese of Hajdusabasz and in the apostolic vicariate of Miskolc -- a remnant on Hungarian soil of the one-time Uniate diocese of Pressa (Eperjes), the bulk of which became attached to Czechoslovakia after World War I -- were under his jurisdiction. (2)

(1) El Habor and Katolikus Szeg, 23 July 1972.

(2) Katolikus Szeg, 1 July 1969, and El Habor, 2 July 1972.

The Problem of Succession

The death of Dr. Szalas, which was by no means unexpected, gives his precarious health, poses a number of delicate questions connected with the succession to his office. It is generally known that the Holy See and the Hungarian government have been trying for years to reach an agreement with regard to the filling of the highest ecclesiastical posts in Hungary. The negotiations, which are reportedly still going on, (1) have been slow to produce tangible results, and no progress at all has been reported since February 1974, when agreement was reached on the appointment of a number of apostolic administrators and auxiliary bishops. With Dr. Szalas gone, only one archdiocese out of three and two dioceses out of eight are now administered by residential bishops — an extremely low proportion. (2)

Dr. László Tisza: The Leading Candidate

Bishop Szalas had three vicary general: Ferenc Korte for the diocese of Munkacs, Bénes Juhász for the apostolic vicariate of Miskolc, and Dr. László Tisza for the "episcopal" Episcopate committees outside these two areas. Korte and Juhász are relatively obscure clergymen, though the latter has a poor priest record.

Tisza, on the other hand, is a prelate well known both in Hungary and abroad. Born in 1920, in the early 1950s he established a reputation both as an outstanding student of Church history and as a prominent peace priest, to all appearances ranking high in the eyes of the government. There is evidence that Dr. Tisza (who is fluent in many languages, including Russian) has become one of the regime's "trusted men" in the hierarchy of the Hungarian Catholic Church. For example, in 1962 and 1963 he was a "special agent" of the Bench of Bishops, and went frequently to Rome to make arrangements for Hungarian bishops who were to attend Vatican II and to "assist" them during their stay in Rome. (3) In recent years he has become more deeply involved in the activities of both the Bench of Bishops and the peace movement. Since the fall of 1966 he has been a member of the Bench of Bishops' External Committee and deputy director of Opus Pacis, the organization of the Bench which supervises the peace movement. Although he is a professor of theology at the Catholic Theological Academy of Budapest (of which he was dean during the 1971/1972 school year), he has had plenty of time to travel extensively in the West to attend not only church meetings with strong peace priest courtiers but political meetings as well. For example, between 4 and 6 July 1972 he participated in a Hungary-Italian round-table conference in Rome at which European security and co-operation were discussed in terms favorable to the political objectives of the Soviet Union.

(1) According to the Hungarian Television foreign affairs program "Forum," 21 June 1972.

(2) See EK/Hungarian Unit, "New Vatican Appointments in Hungary," Hungarian Background Report/3, Radio Free Europe Research (RFR), 20 March 1972.

(3) El Helye, 16 August 1964.

Shortly after the death of Bishop Balazs the chapter of the diocese of Hajdubirog unanimously and by secret ballot elected Dr. Tisza to the post of capitular vicar, and in compliance with the canon law notified the Holy See of his election. (6) At the same time he was entrusted with the leadership of the diocesan apostolic vicariate formerly headed by Imre Juhász. Thus the government of the United Church in Hungary has been concentrated in Dr. Tisza's hands.

It is now up to the Holy See to appoint either an apostolic administrator or -- and this seems even more important -- a residential bishop for the diocese of Hajdubirog. The diocese can be provisionally administered by a capitular vicar or an apostolic administrator, but sacramental functions such as the ordaining of priests can only be performed by a bishop. In the case of the Uniteds the problem is of particular importance because their liturgy differs from that of the Latin rite, and a "Latin" Catholic bishop can officiate only in cooperation. There were good reasons, therefore, for the Holy See to fill the vacancy without delay.

A question arises, however: To whom should the post be given? While there is no doubt that the Hungarian government's candidate is Imre Tisza, it is legitimate to ask whether the Holy See will accept him, in view of his peace-priest record. In nominating him the Holy See might set a dangerous precedent and weaken its ability to resist regime pressure to appoint other equally committed peace priests to the large number of vacant positions in the Hungarian Catholic hierarchy. Historically the Vatican has withstood such pressure quite successfully, but as a result a considerable number of posts have remained unfilled. Since the partial agreement of September 1964, the Holy See and the Hungarian government have tried to work out compromises in order to reach a settlement, and in many instances priests acceptable to both sides have been appointed. That in some of these earlier cases the Holy See gave so far as to accept a peace priest.

On the basis of present knowledge, however, it can also be argued that there is no other member of the United clergy in Hungary who is scholastically qualified to fill the post of bishop of the diocese of Hajdubirog. From this viewpoint Imre Tisza would of course be an excellent candidate. In accepting him the Holy See would undoubtedly have to waive a good many reservations, but on the other hand this might make it easier for the Vatican to have other vacant bishoprics filled by men without peace priest records. However, the Holy See might try hard to push through these other candidates at the same time that Tisza is nominated, for if his elevation to bishop of Hajdubirog is an isolated move, the Holy See will later have less opportunity to pursue its objectives. After all, the Hungarian government is in a very strong position to resist such claims, and might easily "forget" the Vatican's willingness to be accommodating.

Tension in the Hajdubirog Diocese

The reorganization of the leadership of the diocese of Hajdubirog appears all the more urgent because there is some evidence of disarray in

(6) El Híradó, 30 July 1972.

its affairs. Corroboration of this can be found in a pastoral letter dated 21 June 1972 addressed by Bishop Dedas to the priests and faithful of the diocese. The letter went back to the beginning of 1972. Bishop Dedas informed the people of his diocese that at that time, "when I was again overtaken by illness, a number of unusual, and almost inexplicable difficulties began to trouble the life of the diocese, and I felt it would be in the best interests of all if I asked the Holy Father to be relieved of my present duties. I did so, but His Holiness informed me, through a special envoy, that he did not wish to relieve me and that I should continue to run the diocese with an assistant to be appointed by him." Subsequently the pastoral letter referred to a communication signed by Cardinal Villot and dated 10 June 1972, informing Bishop Dedas that he had been appointed a member of the papal commission on the revision of Eastern canon law. . . . Dr. Dedas went on to say that since his health had continued to worsen he had asked for the apostolic benediction of the Holy Father, and that this had been granted to him by telegram on 21 June 1972. The pastoral letter wound up with a dramatic message to the priests and faithful of the diocese in which Bishop Dedas thanked them for their prayers and bade them farewell.

This letter, which was published in the 1 July 1972 issue of Hungary, the semi-official paper of the Hungarian Catholic Church, is an unprecedented document in that it mentions the existence of internal troubles in the diocese, even though it fails to go into detail. Hungary has a very limited circulation, and since the Catholic papers Uj Ezer and Magyarok Szava have so far passed over Dedas's pastoral letter in silence, it is logical to assume that its contents are addressed to the general public. At any rate it is unlikely that the difficulties mentioned in Bishop Dedas's letter — because of which he offered his resignation, as if his person constituted a hindrance to their removal — were due to friction between the late bishop and the Hungarian government; if that were the case Hungary could hardly have been allowed to publish the letter. Hence, it must be presumed that he was referring to internal difficulties of an ecclesiastical nature — most likely a growing tension between himself and the younger members of his clergy over the issue of greater Uniate autonomy within the union with Rome. The existence of such tension was strongly implied by Dr. Finko in a speech to church dignitaries at Nyiregyhaza after Bishop Dedas's funeral. Said Finko: "We look upon his [Dedas's] memory as on that of a father to whom his son owes respect, even though the former's opinions and approach differed from those of the new generation." (7)

The seriousness of the conflict was indicated by Dedas's remarks about his "new illness," which he mentioned in the opening passage of his letter. He was struck by the affliction in the early spring of 1972, and it prevented him from spending Easter in his diocese. Since he was in extremely poor health — a fact well known to the Vatican — the diocesan problem must have been serious indeed, for the Pope refused to relieve him of his office. The "special envoy" who conveyed the Pope's refusal and his promise to send an assistant may have been Mgr. Giovanni Chelli, who was in Hungary in March 1972 to attend the consecration of the four new auxiliary bishops who had

(7) Uj Ezer, 30 July 1972.

been appointed in February 1972. (8) The "assistant" promised by the Pope has not yet been nominated. Since Budak had three vicars general to help him administer the Hungarian Uniate Church, this assistant should have been an auxiliary bishop who could perform certain duties incumbent upon bishops (confirmation, ordaining priests) which Bishop Budak was unable to undertake. Incidentally, had an auxiliary bishop been appointed during Budak's lifetime, the diocese of Hajdubodog would have been in better shape after his death.

Uniate Discontent: An Interview with Fr. Hölles

It is difficult to say whether the exact nature and extent of the difficulties referred to by Fr. Budak will ever be revealed. In an attempt not to solve this riddle but to give some idea of the discontent that exists in some quarters of the Uniate Church, reference should be made here to an interview granted recently to El Habor (9) by James Hölles, professor of canon law at the Uniate Theological Academy in Nyiregyháza. The "peg" on which this interview was hung was the 60th anniversary of the creation of the diocese of Hajdubodog (it was founded by Pope Pius X in June 1912). Professor Hölles first noted that the Hungarian Uniate is at present the largest Byzantine-rite Catholic community in Eastern Europe which is in union with Rome (hence the name Uniate). Since the Hungarian state was created some thousand years ago there have always been Hungarian Christians who wished to worship in the Byzantine fashion. They had no Church of their own, however, but practiced their religion in the various Uniate Churches to which the national minorities living in Hungary belonged. This, Hölles pointed out, cast a shadow on the Hungarian character of Eastern Christianity.

[Note: The campaign for a Hungarian Uniate Church gathered momentum in 1868, but, though the census of 1900 recorded some 300,000 Greek Catholics in Hungary, the Holy See relented only in 1912, and the diocese of Hajdubodog was not established until then. (10)]

The Uniate Churches accept the supremacy of the pope and the tenets of the Roman Catholic faith, but retain the Byzantine rite and hold services in the national language, and within their union with Rome strive for a certain degree of internal autonomy. The Uniate Church of Romania (established in 1698-1700) was abolished by law in 1948, and that of Slovakia (founded in 1648) in 1950, and both were once again forced to merge with the Russian Orthodox Church, from which they had originally come. During the Prague Spring the Slovak Uniate Church was reinstated, but it is at present in a precarious situation. The only Uniate Church to survive in Eastern Europe has been that in Hungary.]

Professor Hölles then expressed the belief that some Hungarian Uniates are not at all happy in the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore

(8) Ibid., 2 July 1972

(9) Ibid.

(10) Archdiocesan Bulletin (Budapest, 1912), p. 666.

he advocated a "redefinition of the concept of union with Rome and accordingly a reordering of the legal position of the Hungarian Uniate Church." He complained that relations between the Roman Catholic (Latin rite) Church and the Uniate Church had not been settled "in a satisfactory manner," and said that there is a tendency to "Latinize" the Uniate Churches, which is supported by Rome. He hailed the fact that by recognizing the rights of individual Churches within the Framework of Catholicism Vatican II had furthered the efforts of Hungarian Uniates to assert their individuality. He considered this to be the unfolding of the conciliar spirit which motivated the council, and suggested that the following objectives be pursued: Besides stressing a greater role for the independent rite, with its peculiar Eastern customs, steps should be taken to clarify the legal foundation of the autonomy of the Uniate Church. This implies the settling of hierarchical questions, and should eventually lead to the establishment of a Uniate Church province headed by an archbishop or patriarch, according to the traditions of Church administration in the Eastern rites. Professor Hollas objected to the fact that the Hungarian Uniate Church is still subject to a "Latin" archbishop (the archbishop of Esztergom) and that the bishop of Hajdubozog is not a member of the Vatican Synod of Bishops.

What he is asking for here is an autonomous Uniate province in Hungary which would be on an equal footing with the rest of the Hungarian Catholic Church. Such autonomy should entitle the future Uniate archbishop or patriarch to a seat in the Synod of Bishops. At present, only the president of the Catholic Bishops (the archbishop of Budapest) is entitled to such a seat. The Uniate bishop of Hajdubozog is on the same footing as his fellow Latin-rite bishops.

These ideas, which are based on legitimate claims, have certainly been discussed for some time in the circles that surrounded the late Bishop Döbös. It is unlikely that he would have objected to thoughtful efforts to achieve greater autonomy for the Uniates, provided it did not weaken the union with Rome. He might, however, have been fearful lest the striving for more autonomy imperil the independent position of the Uniate Church vis-a-vis the Orthodox Church from which the Uniates were carved out. It would be only natural for the Orthodox Church to try to retrieve its "lost" brethren. This happened in the Soviet Union, in Rumania, and between 1950 and 1958 in Czechoslovakia, and it is quite understandable that the fate of their non-religionists is a bitter memory for Hungarian Uniates.

Although there is only an embryonic Orthodox Church in Hungary it is subject to the Soviet Orthodox Church. While this massless Orthodox community cannot at the present time be regarded as potentially dangerous to Hungarian Uniates, it is conceivable that sharp discussions within the Uniate Church might lead to a certain loss of internal stability. This, in turn, might unintentionally weaken the Uniate Church, thereby giving the Soviet-backed Hungarian Orthodox Church a good opportunity to "fish in troubled waters" -- certainly with the tacit approval, if not outright support, of the Hungarian government. Such an apprehension may have loomed large in the mind of the late Bishop Döbös when he saw his clergy campaigning for more autonomy within union with Rome.

It is of interest that Professor Hollos disagreed with an opinion expressed (11) by Ferenc Surki, head of the Hungarian Orthodox Church to the effect that the present form of union with Rome is unanimously condemned by the whole Orthodox world because it has proved to be the major obstacle to the restoration of Christian unity. Even though he himself advocates a re-definition of the concept of union, Professor Hollos believes this is going too far. Nevertheless, he wound up his interview by calling for a "dialogue" with the Orthodox Church in Hungary, in accord with the concessional spirit of Vatican II. One might add that it is one thing to cultivate common theological and spiritual traditions with the Orthodox Church, to which the Uniate churches belonged for centuries, but quite another to do so in such a way as to become vulnerable to the efforts of the latter to "retrovert" the former. For the time being, however, the danger is more academic than real. On the other hand, the possibility of its happening should not be altogether ruled out.

While all the above has had to be put on record, it must also be said that Dr. Tinko, who, as capitular vicar, is now running the Uniate Church in Hungary, has apparently pledged himself to support both union with Rome and a greater assertion of Uniate individuality. At the reception in Nyiregyhaza after Bishop Budar's funeral he outlined the "intentions and hopes" of Hungarian Uniates in the formulation adopted at Vatican II: "Unity in Diversity." (12) . . .

It remains to be seen how this slogan will be translated into practice without weakening the position of the Uniate Church in Hungary vis-a-vis the non-Catholic world. If there is charge proceed not only with determination but also with prudence, a solution may be found which harmonizes the ties of union with Rome with greater self-expression for the Hungarian Uniate Church. This is a matter to be settled between the Holy See and the Hungarian Uniates, at least in theory. But in actual practice it must be assumed that the Hungarian government will want to have a say in the matter, since it concerns the reorganization of institutions over which it exerts control by virtue of the sovereignty of the state. The stand of the government is the unknown factor in the whole issue.

XX
(Hungarian Unit)

(11) In Vatican, June 1963 (p. 379).

(12) Uj Szabot, 30 July 1963.