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CARDINAL MIROSLAV SEPEK AS PRIMATE OF HUNGARY

Summary: On 5 February 1974 Pope Paul VI declared the archdiocese of Esztergom vacant and -- in agreement with the Hungarian government -- ordered a limited reshuffle in the top hierarchy of the Hungarian Catholic Church. This move entailed the dismissal of Cardinal Miroslav Sepek as archbishop of Esztergom and primate of Hungary. After leaving Hungary in September 1971 the cardinal was allowed by the Holy See to remain the de jure head of the archdiocese, and was listed in the Annuario Pontificio as vacari sede (absent from his see). The government of the archdiocese of Esztergom has been entrusted to Bishop Laszlo Lohai, a titular bishop and apostolic administrator of the diocese of Veszprem.

On 5 February 1974, in its 1200 hours newscast, Radio Budapest reported that Archbishop Casaroli, "a leading Vatican diplomat," had arrived in Warsaw on the previous day to discuss relations between Poland and the Vatican and between the Polish state and the Catholic Church in that country. The same news item was repeated on the 1200 hours "Midday Chronicle," and it was followed in a casual manner by a second news item which began:

And here is another item of news from the Vatican, but this refers to Hungary: Pope Paul VI has appointed Roman Catholic prelates to new posts. The Presidential Council had previously given consent to these appointments. Dr. Jozsef Bock [former residential bishop of Yae] has been appointed archbishop of Eger; Iuro Elisbark, titular bishop [of Szekesfehervar], has become residential bishop of Szekesfehervar; Dr. Laszlo Lohai, titular bishop and apostolic administrator of Veszprem, has been named apostolic administrator of the Esztergom diocese; Laszlo Kadar, titular bishop of Veszprem, has been appointed apostolic administrator of the same diocese.

The broadcaster then proceeded to announce that the appointments had been made after Pope Paul had declared vacant "even under canon law" the see

of Esztergom, which had until then been filled "formally" by Josef Cardinal Mindszenty, who left the see in September 1971.

The removal of Cardinal Mindszenty is obviously the most noteworthy of the Vatican's recent moves. It has been rumored for some time that the Hungarian government has complained to the Holy See about the cardinal's activity both in Europe and overseas. According to Western reports, he was received by large and enthusiastic crowds on his frequent trips, and he did not hesitate to criticize the Hungarian regime in some of his sermons. (1) The Hungarian government would undoubtedly have liked to see Cardinal Mindszenty relegated by the Holy See to a place of complete retirement, and it is possible that it made this a precondition for further normalization of relations with the Holy See and with the Hungarian Catholic Church. The formal pretext for such a request may have been the fact that even though Mindszenty left Hungary for good in September 1971, he remained the *de iure* head of the archdiocese of Esztergom. The 1934 Annuario Pontificio (2) lists him in this capacity, adding, however, that he is *intra muros* (absent from his see). On top of that Mindszenty is residing in the Panzerhaus ecclesiastical institute in Vienna, which is under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Esztergom.

Whatever demands may have been made on the Vatican by the Hungarian government, the steps announced on 5 February 1974 have probably given the Hungarians something considerable satisfaction. (3) The Vatican has issued two documents. One of them says that "in consideration of the pastoral problems of the archdiocese of Esztergom and after having had an arduous exchange of correspondence with Josef Cardinal Mindszenty, archbishop of the metropolis since 1961, the Holy Father has decided to declare the above-mentioned archdiocese vacant and to appoint as its apostolic administrator . . . Titular Bishop László Izbai, hitherto apostolic administrator of the vacant see of Vasprec."⁴

The second document is the text of a letter addressed by Pope Paul VI to Cardinal Mindszenty on 30 January 1974, but published, as mentioned above, only on February 5. The letter begins by saying that the recent nominations — described by the pope as "important measures" — were made "after a prolonged study of the circumstances, exclusively with the pastoral interest of certain dioceses in Hungary in mind, among which the cathedral of Esztergom ranks first. . . ."

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Both documents state that the see of Esztergom was declared vacant in consideration of pastoral problems. It should be noted that the declaration of vacancy refers only to the pastoral problems of the archdiocese of Esztergom, while Pope Paul's letter mentions the pastoral interests of other dioceses as well. This inconsistency seems to lend support to the thesis that

(1) See, for example, the AFP release from Vatican City, 5 February 1974.

(2) P. 174.

(3) Up to February 11, however, the Hungarian government had not given voice to any satisfaction it may have felt. The domestic information media (see, e.g., Nepszabadsag, February 6) published only the text of the Radio Budapest broadcast cited above, and the same is true of the Catholic weekly Uj Eszter (February 12).

the Hungarian government consented to a very limited normalization of Church administration in Hungary only on condition that Cardinal Mindszenty be removed as *de jure* head of the archdiocese of Esztergom. The reference to "an ample exchange of correspondence" with the cardinal and a "prolonged study of the circumstances" indicate that the Holy See made vigorous efforts to persuade Mindszenty to retire voluntarily, but without success. (4) As a result the pope had to remove Mindszenty by unilateral action, which, of course, he is fully entitled to do by virtue of his office. He deposed Mindszenty and opened the way to normalization of the Church government in the archdiocese of Esztergom by declaring the see vacant -- a clear gesture of good will.

Cardinal Mindszenty, however, was not prepared to let his removal pass without comment. On February 7 his secretariat in Vienna issued a statement in which he explained, "in the interest of truth," why he could not abdicate either from his office as archbishop of Esztergom or as primate of Hungary. The decision to remove him, he said, was taken "by the Holy See alone." The statement sets forth six points that motivated his decision, reached after "long and conscientious deliberation." The burden of these points is that "Hungary and the Catholic Church of Hungary are not free," and in view of the existing "eighty circumstances" he was in no position to abdicate. (5)

The Holy See was quick to react, in respectful but firm fashion. On February 8 Professor Federico Alessandrini, head of the Vatican Press Office, read a declaration to the press which reiterated that Pope Paul's decision to dismiss Mindszenty as archbishop of Esztergom was taken only in the interest of the diocese -- that is, in order to promote the spiritual well-being of both priests and faithful in Hungary. The Vatican spokesman agreed that the cardinal had not abdicated, saying that the pope, "after having confidentially opened his thoughts to the venerable archbishop by means of a repeated exchange of personal letters, did not want to weigh down [Mindszenty's] heart with a decision that the archbishop himself did not feel he could make, and that his holiness after mature, prolonged, and grave thought believed in all conscience that he could and must take it upon himself." Alessandrini went on to say that "the pastoral need that inspired the measure certainly cannot mean that there was no serious and full assessment of the particular, well-known circumstances in which ecclesiastical life is lived." On the contrary, Alessandrini said, the measure "aims to reply to the primary requirement of every Church community, that it be able to enjoy the guidance and active, encouraging, fortifying presence of a shepherd of its own in a normal regime of canonical administration." In other words, the Holy See claims to be fully alive to the difficulties of the Hungarian Catholic Church -- described by Mindszenty as lack of freedom on various counts -- but believes the best way to remedying the situation is to place the leadership of Church provinces in Hungary, and primarily that of Esztergom, in the hands of prelates on the spot.

(4) Under the rules adopted at Vatican Council II Church dignitaries who reach the age of 75 may ask the pope to permit them to retire. According to available information Mindszenty, who is 82, did not avail himself of this possibility.

(5) For a translation of the complete statement, see the Appendix to this paper.

With regard to the pastoral needs of the archdiocese of Esztergom, it can be argued that for the time being no significant improvement has resulted from the dismissal of Mindszenty. As before, the archdiocese will be governed by an apostolic administrator. (6) It is possible that the Hungarian government desired Mindszenty's dismissal to be coupled with the appointment of a new archbishop of Esztergom, who would automatically also have become primate of Hungary. The Holy See, however, seems reluctant to go that far, at least at present. If this is so, appointing Bishop Lohal as apostolic administrator can be regarded as a compromise, and full normalization of ecclesiastical administration in Esztergom (and in the other dioceses) will probably be the subject of further negotiation. The only "improvement" of which one can speak is that until now the apostolic administrator of Esztergom, Bishop Kisberk, was also in charge of the diocese of Szekesfehervar — that is, he had to carry a double burden. From now on, as residential bishop of Szekesfehervar, he will be able to concentrate on that diocese alone. He is four years older than Bishop Lohal (they were born in 1906 and 1910, respectively), and reportedly in poor health. Bishop Lohal's appointment as apostolic administrator of Esztergom can be considered a real gain for the archdiocese. He is an excellent clergyman who studied for some time in Rome. (7) The "pastoral needs" of the Esztergom archdiocese should also have been served by the appointment of an auxiliary bishop to replace the late Bishop Gyorgy Desplan, who filled that office between January 1968 and March 1973. No such appointment has yet been made, however.

Not only by dismissing Mindszenty but also in another way does Pope Paul seem to have attempted to satisfy the Hungarian government. In his letter to Cardinal Mindszenty he recalled "the time, precisely 15 years ago," when (Mindszenty was) subjected to a "trial and condemnation which marked the apex of the attack" on his person, and "which attracted the attention of the entire world, causing astonished surprise in everyone." Such grave sufferings, Pope Paul said "were the crown of thorns that was placed on your head, no less precious than your fidelity to the Church of Christ. We bow down with profound respect in front of you, expressing our gratitude from the bottom of our heart. . . ."

It is common knowledge that on 5 February 1949 Cardinal Mindszenty was sentenced to life imprisonment on entirely trumped-up charges in a show trial that can be regarded as a dress rehearsal for another that took place in the same year — that of Laszlo Rajk and his "accomplices," who were sentenced on equally trumped-up charges. Pope Paul's failure to make any reference to the fact that Cardinal Mindszenty was put on trial by the communist regime because he was a political opponent and a faithful son of the Catholic Church, rather

(6) The same point was made by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 7 February 1974.

(7) St. Egher, 3 March 1972. Bishop Lohal was at one time secretary to Cardinal Mindszenty, as noted by The Times (London) and the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (both of 9 February 1974). He was named to that post after Mindszenty became Bishop of Veszprem in the spring of 1944. In November of that year he was arrested by the Hungarian Gists and imprisoned in Sopron Szabads until February 1945. (During the same period Mindszenty suffered the same fate.)

than a criminal, between a determination to let bygones be bygones in the interest of advancing the Vatican's Geopolitik. Moreover, the Holy See in general and Pope Paul in particular seem eager to make a contribution to efforts, to which Cardinal Mindszenty is considered an obstacle not only by the peace priests of his own country (who now feel vindicated in their criticism), but also by some officials in the top hierarchy of the Holy See itself.

It remains to be seen whether the Hungarian government will reciprocate the willingness to promote normalization of relations shown by the Vatican. Nothing would be more disappointing to the Holy See than a mere statement from the Hungarian government to the effect that by reserving Mindszenty and keeping silent about the injustices to which he was subjected Pope Paul gave evidence only of a "realistic approach" to the present state of affairs. The Church can only hope that this will not be the case, and that the Hungarian regime will make some concession in return.

Also worth noting is the fact that the Vatican announcement was made at a time when delicate talks are being conducted between the Polish government and Archbishop Casaroli. And it seems clear that the Polish authorities themselves applied the same and see a connection with their own negotiations. According to the Warsaw daily Trybuna Narzany of February 6, Mindszenty "constituted an obstacle to the full normalization of relations between Hungary and the Vatican." The latter's decision, said the paper, thus "demonstrates [the Holy See's] realism and desire to remove formal and political causes of friction in relations with the socialist countries. [His] diplomatic activity vis-a-vis the socialist world is of a comprehensive character and is not restricted to one country or another, but approached in a global way."

None of the new appointments announced by the Vatican can be considered as important as those made on three earlier occasions: following the "partial" agreement of September 1964, in January 1969, and in February 1971. (3) In fact, four prelates previously approved by the regime have merely been moved from one position to another; no new names have been agreed upon between the Holy See and the Hungarian government.

This represents extremely little progress in providing the government of the 11 dioceses and archdioceses in Hungary with permanent residential bishops. Before the recent appointments the picture was as follows: only one of the three archdioceses, Eszterom, had a residential archbishop (Archbishop Elias); the archdiocese of Eger was governed by an apostolic administrator, Sere Kisberek, who held the same post in the diocese of Szekesfehervar, while in the archdiocese of Eger not even an apostolic administrator was nominated

(3) See EE/Hungarian Unit, "The Hungarian-Vatican Accord," Hungarian Background Report, Radio Free Europe Research (RFRS), 28 September 1964; EE, "Hungarian Catholics and the Kadar Regime: Do New Bishops Mean New Hope?" Hungarian NS/21, NYSE (NYRA), 5 May 1969; and EE, "New Vatican Appointments in Hungary," Hungarian NS/31, NYSE (NYRA), 10 March 1972.

after the death of Archbishop Pal Nezeassy in February 1972. In the eight bishoprics, residential bishops were in charge only in Pecs (Bishop Csorbati) and Vas, and the diocese of Győr, Güssend, Szekesfehervar, Szabolcsaly, and Vasopcar were governed by apostolic administrators. The situation was particularly unfavorable in the Uniate diocese of Hajdu-Szeged, whose residential bishop, Miklos Dedas, died in July 1972; an auxiliary bishop or apostolic administrator was nominated, but the diocese was entrusted to a capitular vicar, Iare Tinko, a well-known peace priest. (9) It is a measure of the unsettled state of the Hajdu-Szeged diocese that in September 1972 it had to "import" a Uniate bishop from Yugoslavia to ordain new priests. (10)

Since the summer of 1972 negotiations on the normalization of relations between the Holy See and the Hungarian government have been taking place alternately in Rome and in Hungary (although an official information about them has been forthcoming). Not nothing of substance has yet resulted, and even in personal matters involving the government of the Church progress has been modest. The recent appointments bring the number of residential archbishops up to two; that of residential bishops remains two (Bishop Csorbati in Pecs and Bishop Kisbik in Szekesfehervar). One archdiocese (Esztergom) and six dioceses are still governed by apostolic administrators, and no change has taken place in the situation of the Uniate diocese of Hajdu-Szeged. It is interesting that no residential bishop has been appointed in the Diocese of Vas; its administration remains in the hands of Archbishop Bark, despite his appointment as archbishop of Eger. (11) His promotion and the fact that he has been given control of two church provinces -- one of which, Vas, is the largest in Hungary -- unquestionably reinforces the position of this eminent churchman, who has earned an international reputation as an expert on canon law.

The fact that despite the negotiations in Rome and Budapest no agreement has yet been reached regarding the appointment of a complete slate of residential bishops (either by promoting the apostolic administrators now in charge or by finding other mutually acceptable theologians) indicates the nature of the problems that must be resolved before normalization of relations can be achieved. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the appointment of residential bishops represents only a nucleus of normalization. There still remain such other issues as greater freedom for the exercise of priestly duties and the teaching of the catechism, which are known to be very close to the heart of the Holy See -- and of the Church in Hungary.

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(Hungarian Unit)

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- (9) See EE, "Death of Uniate Bishop Dedas Poses Delicate Questions," Hungarian 28/15, ETEE (KORNA), 7 August 1972.
- (10) See Vj. Eszter, 24 September 1972, and Hungarian 28/26, ETEE (KORNA), 3 October 1972, item 2.
- (11) The appointment of Bishop Bark as apostolic administrator of Vas was not mentioned in Radio Budapest's official announcement, but became known from Western sources -- e.g., the Suedfranska Tidning, 6 February 1974.

APPENDIX

THE STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE SECRETARIAT OF JOSEF CARDINAL WINDENSCY

Some news agencies have reported on the decision of Pope Paul VI in such a way as to give the impression that Josef Cardinal Windenscy has abdicated. They have pointed out that prior to the decision the pope and Josef Cardinal Windenscy, archbishop of Esztergom and the primate of Hungary, who is living in Vienna, were in intensive correspondence. Hence some people concluded that an agreement was reached between the pope and the Hungarian cardinal concerning the decision. In the interest of truth Josef Cardinal Windenscy has deemed it necessary to issue the following statement:

Cardinal Windenscy did not resign as archbishop of Esztergom and primate of Hungary. The decision was made by the Holy See alone.

The cardinal justified his attitude in this respect, after a long and conscientious consideration, as follows:

- 1) Hungary and the Catholic Church in Hungary are not free.
- 2) The government of its dioceses lies in the hands of a Church administration constrained and controlled by the communist regime.
- 3) No single archbishop, bishop, or apostolic administrator is in a position to change anything at all in the composition or functions of the above-mentioned Church administration.
- 4) The regime decides who will fill ecclesiastical positions and how long they will continue to occupy them. The regime also decides whom the bishops can ordain as priests. Freedom of conscience and religion, laid down in the Constitution, is expressed in practice by the regime. Religious instruction in the schools is prohibited in the cities and the larger communities. The religious instruction that is still given in the village schools is in the process of termination. Youth is educated exclusively in the spirit of atheism, against the will of its parents. There is discrimination against people holding religious beliefs. Just recently the teachers who hold such beliefs have been called upon to choose between their faith and their profession.
- 5) Appointing bishops or apostolic administrators without correcting the above-mentioned abuses does not solve the problems of the Hungarian Church. Placing peace priests in department Church offices shakes the confidence placed by private and legal believers in the express direction of the Church.

Under these weighty circumstances, Josef Cardinal Windenscy was not able to resign.