

# Cardinal Mindszenty as a Casualty of Détente

Blahoslav S. Hrubý

*Mindszenty represented the most reactionary wing of the counterrevolutionary forces which had struck against the Hungarian government and the building of Socialism in Hungary in 1956.*

—Nikita Khrushchev

*As long as Cardinal Mindszenty lives in exile, the world cannot forget that Communism is an unyielding foe of religion. We who live in freedom cannot resign ourselves to seeing men and women of any denomination suffering persecution because of their religion.*

—Cardinal Heenan, London

*Castles and fortresses fall, but the Church, despite all her human weaknesses, will never be destroyed. The blood of the martyrs has always been the seed of the Church, out of which she springs afresh toward the Easter Day.*

—Cardinal Mindszenty

**I**t is too early to evaluate the full impact of Cardinal Mindszenty's witness upon his native Hungary, upon other captive nations, and upon millions of harassed and persecuted Christians and other believers in Communist countries, or even upon what we call the free world.

It is not too early, however, to be reminded of the main aspects of Mindszenty's struggle against what he viewed as Communist attempts to destroy religion. The impact of détente on the Vatican's policy toward Communist governments in general and the regime of Hungary in particular is very well illustrated by negotiations between that country and the Vatican over the past ten years. It reveals a growing willingness by the Vatican to accommodate the Hungarian government. The hope is to help the

Church in Hungary. One high and unpopular price was forcing (in cooperation with the United States Government) Cardinal Mindszenty to leave Hungary and deposing him as Archbishop of Esztergom.

**I**n June, 1944, the pro-Nazi Hungarian government ordered that all Jews must be confined in ghettos. The Catholic bishops issued a vigorous protest published in a pastoral letter: "When innate rights, such as the right to life, human dignity, personal freedom, the free exercise of religion, freedom of work, livelihood, property, etc., or rights acquired by legal means, are unjustly prejudiced either by individuals, by associations, or even by the representatives of the government, the Hungarian bishops, as is their duty, raise their protesting voices and point out that these rights are conferred not by individuals, not by associations, not even by representatives of the government, but by God Himself. With the exception of a lawful and legally valid decision by a magistrate, these rights cannot be prejudiced or taken away by any person and any earthly power."

Bishop Mindszenty spoke against anti-Semitism as well as against government leaders who refused to intervene with the Nazis in behalf of persecuted Jews. In October, 1944, he was arrested and walked to the police station in full episcopal robes while a throng knelt by the street side in consternation and asked for his blessings. "Then a statement was issued," Cardinal Mindszenty recalls in his *Memoirs* (recently published by Macmillan); "to the effect that I had been arrested because I offered resistance to the authorities and their decision, and to government officials, and because I tried to organize a protest march in order to incite the populace to violence."

Count János Mikes, a former bishop, visited him in prison and suggested that he save his life by escaping to the East. "A bishop can attach himself

---

BLAHOSLAV S. HRUBÝ is Editor of *RCDA—Religion in Communist Dominated Areas*.

to Communism only at the expense of his own cause," Mindszenty replied. "Thoughts [about the Church's final triumph] strengthened me during the visit from my old bishop, who at this time could only disappoint me precisely because he was a dear, paternal friend who wanted only what he thought would be best for me personally." (A few weeks later Count Mikes was killed by the "liberators.")

Already before the Communist takeover in 1949 severe tension had been developing between State and Church. Mindszenty (he was named cardinal in February, 1946), as the primate of Hungary, was the chief spokesman of the Catholic Church. He saw himself as a fighter calling his people to resistance against the State's attempts to manipulate and domesticate the Church. In his first letter to his diocese on October 18, 1945, he declared:

The building up of our political life can be carried out in the future only on the basis of democracy. We must say openly and frankly that we are noticing many occurrences in public life which are contrary to the ideas of pure democracy. In the laws concerning marriage there is incorporated a superficial and frivolous point of view. Some of the stipulations of the law for land reform are phrased in such a way that it means the complete liquidation of a certain class of our society.

He encouraged Hungarian Catholics to resist any encroachment on their freedoms: "Do not be afraid of threats which the sons of wickedness are uttering against you. It is easier to fight against and to endure threats than to follow the path in which irresponsible elements without conscience want to lead the Hungarian people."

The government refused to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican, in addition to curbing Catholic newspapers, schools, and organizations. When the law on secularization of schools was passed on June 14, 1948, the Cardinal ordered the bells to be tolled throughout the country in protest. He excommunicated all members of the government who were responsible for the law and called on every bishop throughout the world to "send telegrams to the Hungarian government and to the Parliament and declare his opposition to the persecution of the Church which is constantly increasing in our country. . . ."

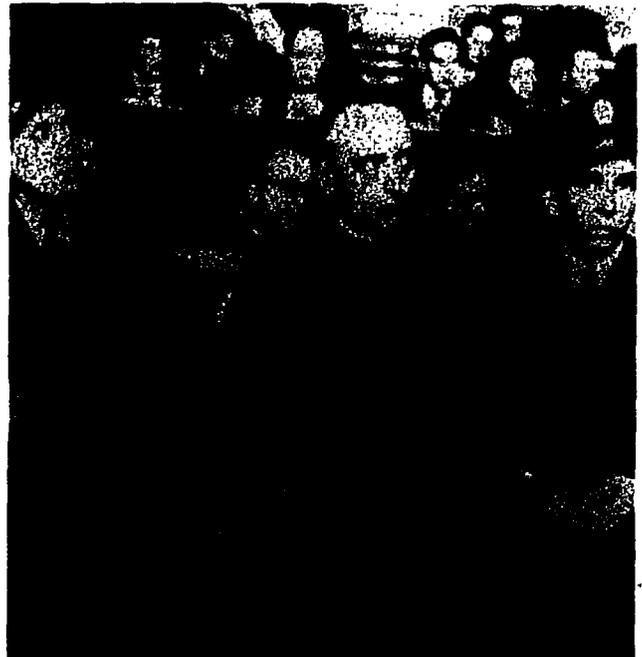
Resistance to the secularization of Catholic schools grew, and the government retaliated with arrests of priests. The Cardinal replied with an order to stop ringing the bells until the Church was free again. He accused the government of fomenting hatred of the Church in all sectors—in the Parliament, in the radio and the press, and in governmental agencies. In a letter to Minister Ortulay the Cardinal declared: "Religious celebrations in honor of the Virgin pro-

voked a wave of persecution reminiscent of persecutions during the Hitler regime. . . . The press is attacking the Church with ever increasing venom. It appears that the Church will be afforded no legal protection against the onslaught of lies and calumnies. . . ."

The government reacted. The prime minister accused the Cardinal of making a mockery of Christianity and of trusting in the outbreak of a new world war. János Kádár, then Minister of the Interior, called Cardinal Mindszenty "the most important confederate of the foreign imperialists" and "the head of all reactionaries." The Communists organized demonstrations and a letter campaign against the Cardinal. Two thousand workers and students demonstrated in front of Mindszenty's palace shouting "Down with Mindszenty, the American agent!" and professing their loyalty to the government. Some Catholics joined in the campaign. The Cardinal retaliated by excommunicating all journalists who attacked him and the Catholic Church in the struggle for religious freedom.

In a statement of November 18, 1948, Cardinal Mindszenty summarized his position:

My people have been abandoned by the rest of the world. As primate it is my duty to stand firm in defense of God, the Church, and my country. My own fate is of minor importance compared with the sufferings of my people. I do not accuse those who accuse me. I admit that I have spoken out publicly on the state of things in today's Hungary. In doing so, I have only been expressing the pain, tears, and outcries of my oppressed people; for their mouths were gagged and they could not speak for themselves. I pray for the coming of a world built on truth and love. I also pray for those



In the prisoners' dock, Budapest People's Court, February 5, 1949 (Deutsche Press Agentur)

who, in Our Master's words, know not what they do. I forgive them from the bottom of my heart (*Memoirs*).

After the arrest of his secretary, Monsignor Zahar, Mindszenty felt that his own days of freedom were numbered. Familiar with the methods used to obtain "confessions" from prisoners, he addressed a letter to all Hungarian bishops warning them that the government might obtain such a "confession." He said: "I have never participated in any conspiracy. I shall not give up my episcopal office. If you should hear later that I have confessed or that I have resigned, even if it should be admitted over my own signature, consider it a consequence of human weakness. I declare such a confession *a priori* null and void."

Mindszenty was arrested on charges of treason, espionage, and blackmarketing after his private files had been discovered in his residence, allegedly concealed by him. At the same time, twelve other Catholic personalities were arrested. The Cardinal was accused of trying to restore the Habsburg monarchy, of requesting the Western powers to interfere in internal affairs of Hungary, of spying for the USA, of illegal currency transactions, and of other crimes against the State. The Cardinal writes:

[I]t took about five weeks before I resigned myself to my fate and accepted punishment and humiliation as the task I must perform. At the time of my arrest I was entirely aware of the trials that awaited me; but later on everything became blurred. I was ultimately so shattered by the "systematic treatment" that I was scarcely able to realize what was happening to me. Therefore I could not always take a position promptly and accurately.

"There was nothing I could do," he continues. "Worn out, exhausted, I went on fighting and arguing alone. Again and again I forcefully refused when they tried to persuade me to sign their prepared confession."

And again and again the major took over, dragged me back to the cell where I was stripped, thrown down, and beaten. Just as regularly the guards afterwards tried to intensify the effect of this torture by preventing me from sinking into a sleep of exhaustion.

The tormentor . . . held the truncheon in one hand, a long sharp knife in the other. And then he drove me like a horse in training, forcing me to trot and gallop. The truncheon lashed down on my back repeatedly—for some time without a pause. Then we stood still and he brutally threatened: "I'll kill you; by morning I'll tear you to pieces and throw the remains of your corpse to the dogs or into the canal. We are the masters here now." Then he forced me to begin running

again. Although I was gasping for breath and the splinters of the wooden floor stabbed painfully into my bare feet, I ran as fast as I could to escape his blows.

When the trial of Cardinal Mindszenty and his codefendants began on February 3, 1949, a broken man faced the court. The judges, practicing "socialist justice" and using the tortures learned from their Soviet and Nazi teachers, extracted a confession in the form they wanted. They also obtained from him a statement that his pretrial letter to the bishops, declaring any confession made by him "*a priori* null void," was "invalid."

The Cardinal was visited in his cell every day before the beginning of the session. The presiding judge would rehearse with him his part in the forthcoming hearing. On February 8, 1949, Cardinal Mindszenty was sentenced to life imprisonment, confiscation of his property, and loss of civil rights, although the Government had asked for the death penalty.

During the Cardinal's imprisonment the film *The Prisoner* was produced. Mindszenty recalls that the picture was given a friendly reception throughout the world, but he comments: "I am sorry to say that the well-meaning scriptwriter did not know Hungary's Communist prisons, and so the movie failed to give any picture of reality. The only thing it had in common with events in Hungary is the presence of a cardinal."

During the Hungarian uprising that was soon to be crushed by Soviet tanks Cardinal Mindszenty was brought by the new government to Budapest. His return became a triumphant procession. The Cardinal addressed the Hungarian nation on radio while the resistance of the freedom fighters against the Soviet invaders was already breaking down. He declared that the entire Hungarian nation opposed the old regime and that the Church would respect any progress already achieved and would not resist any healthy development:

Nowadays all nations are moving toward the same goal. Nationalism has become an outmoded concept. It must be transformed. We can no longer permit national pride to lead to conflicts between nations; rather our patriotism must become the guarantee of peaceful coexistence on the basis of justice; throughout the world national pride ought to give rise to cultural creativity, which will form the common treasure of all nations. In this way the progress of one nation will stimulate progress of all.

. . . Our entire situation is now dependent on the answer to one question: What are the intentions of the Russians? What does this nation of 200 million mean to do with the military power

she has within our borders? . . . Hungary is a neutral nation; we have given Russia no pretext for bloodshed. Has it not yet occurred to the Russian leaders that we would respect the Russian nation far more if it did not subjugate us? . . . We have not attacked Russia, and therefore have every reason to hope that the Russian forces will soon be withdrawn from our country.

On November 4, 1956, Mindszenty took refuge in the U.S. Embassy in Budapest, where he was given two rooms wired with a special alarm system. His contacts with the outside world were severely limited, but with the permission of the Communist authorities his mother visited him during the period of asylum before she died in 1960.

On June 25, 1971, Cardinal Mindszenty received a visit from Monsignor József Zágon, who came as the personal envoy of the Pope, accompanied by Monsignor Giovanni Cheli. Zágon informed the Cardinal that the Holy Father would like to see Cardinal Mindszenty leave the Embassy and go to the West. From this conversation Mindszenty "received the impression that the United States government, in view of the changed situation and in consideration of my age, regarded my leaving the Embassy as desirable." The Cardinal objected, because he wished to spend his remaining years in his native land and because he feared that the Communists would exploit his departure for their propaganda. Monsignor Zágon assured him that the Holy See would insure that the Communists would not be able to use Cardinal Mindszenty's exit from Hungary for their own purposes. They discussed various aspects of Mindszenty's departure from the U.S. Embassy and possibly from Hungary as well. Zágon summed up their conversation in four main points:

1. Cardinal Mindszenty's titles of archbishop and primate would not be affected, but the rights and duties associated with the exercise of that office in Hungary would be abrogated. The Cardinal requested that in the Papal Yearbook the notation *impeditus* (hindered) continue to be placed beside his name.

2. The Cardinal would be permitted to publish statements or pastoral letters but would be required to leave Hungary "altogether quietly." Cardinal Mindszenty accepted this condition in the expectation that the Vatican would issue a statement explaining "the true causes and circumstances" of his departure from Hungary.

3. Cardinal Mindszenty was particularly concerned about the third condition, which asked him to make no statements, once abroad, that "might disturb the relations between the Holy See and the Hungarian government or the People's Republic." The Cardinal declared very explicitly—and his statement was placed in the record of the discussion—that he could not accept the judgment of the government that was destroying the Hungarian Church and na-

tion about what he should say. The Cardinal rejected this condition *a priori*.

4. The Cardinal was asked to keep his memoirs secret and finally to will them to the Holy See, "which would then see to their publication at an appropriate time." The Cardinal expressed his great surprise at this request.

During the discussion, which lasted three days, the Cardinal, at Monsignor Zágon's suggestion, wrote a letter to Pope Paul VI. In it he offered his opinion about the charge that he was the "greatest obstacle to a normal relationship between the Church and the State" in Hungary. Announcing his decision to leave the U.S. Embassy and expressing his desire to spend the rest of his life in the midst of his beloved Hungarian people, he concluded: "But if the passions that have been nurtured against me, or grave considerations from the Church's point of view, should make this impossible, I shall take the heaviest cross in my life upon me: I am prepared to leave my country and make the atonement of exile for the Church and my nation. In humility I lay this sacrifice at Your Holiness' feet. I am convinced that even the greatest personal sacrifice shrinks to insignificance when the cause of God and the Church is at stake."

Monsignor Zágon prepared minutes of these discussions and asked Cardinal Mindszenty to sign the record. The Cardinal refused because he objected to the concluding sentence, which indicated that Cardinal Mindszenty and Monsignor Zágon had agreed that the Cardinal would be able to go abroad as a free man under no restrictions "except for the conditions noted in Points 1-4," as mentioned above.

In spite of Zágon's urgings, Mindszenty did not sign, saying he needed more time for reflection. In this context the Cardinal reveals an interesting insight into the U.S. practice of *détente*. After Monsignor Zágon's departure Mindszenty addressed a letter to President Nixon. In it he described his situation and asked whether he could continue staying in the American Embassy. "His reply arrived with unexpected speediness. He recommended that I bow to my fate," writes the Cardinal. "Despite the courtesy of the tone I realized from the President's letter that from now on I would actually be an unwanted guest in the Embassy. . . . I knew quite well that I had become an undesirable guest in the Embassy not only because of my illness but also because I stood in the way of the policy of *détente*." During this period of groping for the right decision, to stay or not to stay in Hungary, Cardinal Mindszenty received a warning from Cardinal Stepinac of Yugoslavia ("mercifully" interned by Tito in Stepinac's native village) cautioning him against staying in Hungary under the present regime.

Shortly after President Nixon's reply, the Cardinal

received a letter from Pope Paul asking him to come to Rome for the opening of the synod of bishops in September, 1971. On September 29, 1971, Cardinal Mindszenty left his asylum at the Embassy in Budapest and went into exile. At the opening of the episcopal synod Pope Paul dealt with Hungarian Catholicism and spoke highly of Cardinal Mindszenty: "He is a symbol of unshakable strength rooted in faith and in selfless devotion to the Church. He has proved this first of all by his tireless activity and alert love, then by prayer and long suffering. Let us praise the Lord and together say a reverent, cordial *Ave* to this exiled and highly honored archbishop!"

In his memoirs Cardinal Mindszenty notes that the world press treated the plight of the Catholic Church in Hungary, as well as his own case, in a generally well-disposed and objective way. But there were exceptions. The *Osservatore Romano* of September 28, 1971, for example, interpreted his departure from the Embassy in Budapest as a removal of obstacles to the establishment of better relations between the Church and State in Hungary. The Cardinal says that this was his first bitter experience, making him aware that "the Vatican was paying scarcely any attention to the terms . . . formulated in Budapest" during the discussion with Monsignor Zágón. The second disappointment, the Cardinal says, was the Holy See's lifting of the ban on the excommunicated "peace priests" only two weeks after his departure from Hungary.

The Cardinal did not stay in Rome very long, moving to Vienna to live closer to his native land. On the day of his departure, October 23, 1971, he celebrated Mass with Pope Paul VI, who assured him: "You are and remain archbishop of Esztergom and primate of Hungary. Continue working, and if you have difficulties, always turn trustfully to us!" Monsignor Zágón was requested to assure the Cardinal in the Holy Father's name that his "destiny would in no way be subordinated to other aims. . . . The Cardinal will always remain archbishop of Esztergom and primate of Hungary."

In Vienna Cardinal Mindszenty intended to establish an organization which would take care of the spiritual needs of Hungarian Catholics in various countries. He also wanted to appoint suffragan bishops for the 1.5 million Hungarian Catholics living abroad. His requests were refused. The Cardinal believes that the Hungarian Communist regime has not changed its tactics in trying to "persuade people—and now the Vatican—that I am 'playing politics' in the guise of religion." Shortly, the Hungarian government launched a campaign against the Cardinal, focusing on a sentence in his pastoral letter for Advent. The Cardinal had written: "With faith and hope in God, we crossed the threshold of prison and the temporary, death-dealing frontier." Mindszenty explains that he meant the

iron curtain frontier and not the Austro-Hungarian frontier. He complains that not a single ecclesiastic official came to his aid. On the contrary, he was informed from Rome that he must submit every statement, even his sermons, to a Roman advisor for approval. The Cardinal rejected this reprimand and declared himself willing to submit his statements to the Holy Father in person, but to him alone and only when the Pope explicitly requested him to do so.

During his visits to Catholic churches in various countries Mindszenty discussed, in speeches and on radio and television, the plight of the Church and people in Hungary. The Hungarian regime protested his activities to the Vatican and insisted that he be silenced.

On October 10, 1972, the Cardinal was informed by the papal nuncio in Vienna "that the Holy See in the summer of 1971 had given the Hungarian Communist government a pledge that while I was abroad I would not do or say anything that could possibly displease that government." The Cardinal replied that in the negotiations of 1971 between the Holy Father's personal emissary and himself there was no mention of such a pledge. "I asked the nuncio," the Cardinal states, "to inform the appropriate Vatican authorities that a sinister silence already prevailed within Hungary and that I shrank from the thought of having to keep silent in the free world as well."

Despite the Pope's assurance that it was not necessary for the Cardinal to show him the address he had prepared for a celebration in Fatima, Portugal, the nuncio's office censored it at the last minute in the printshop. A paragraph was deleted, including the following: "The East proclaims that there even the worst apostates have become gentle lambs. Do not believe it! You shall know the tree by its fruits. It is possible that in the East there are more churchgoers than in many a Western country, but that is not to the credit of the regime there, but of those Christians who manage to walk bowed down by the weight of the cross."



At work on the *Memoirs*, Vienna.  
(Deutsche Press Agentur)

During the Cardinal's visit in England Cardinal Heenan welcomed him with words of high praise for his heroism. He was also greeted by 130 members of Parliament, who published a statement declaring that "Great Britain cordially welcomes Cardinal Mindszenty as the most prominent freedom-fighter in Europe, who fearlessly opposed Nazi and Communist repression and for that opposition suffered prison and persecution."

Following these statements the regime in Budapest became yet more irritated and pressed the Vatican to depose and reprimand Mindszenty. Another aggravation for the Communists was the forthcoming publication of the Cardinal's *Memoirs*. Paul VI did not object to the text of the memoirs but expressed fears that the Hungarian Communists might revive slander of Cardinal Mindszenty and punish the entire Church in Hungary.

In his reply to the Pope, Mindszenty said that he was accustomed to slanders and that in his memoirs he was interested in facts rather than polemics. The Cardinal believes "that the Pope could no longer resist the bombardment of the Budapest regime," which demanded fulfillment of the Vatican guarantee. On November 1, 1973, the Pope asked Cardinal Mindszenty to resign his archiepiscopal office. Pope Paul did so with "bitter reluctance," but he had to consider "the pastoral necessities" of the archdiocese of Esztergom, orphaned for twenty-five years. Cardinal Mindszenty informed the Pope that in view of the present condition of the Catholic Church in Hungary he could not abdicate his archiepiscopal office. In a long memorandum on the Church situation in Hungary the Cardinal noted "all the negative consequences of the Vatican negotiations which had been going on with the Communists for the past ten years."

On December 18, 1973, Pope Paul notified Cardinal Mindszenty "with expression of great appreciation and gratitude that he was declaring the archiepiscopal see of Esztergom vacant." In his reply to the Pope, Cardinal Mindszenty expressed his profound grief. "But I also informed the Pope," he writes, "that neither personal sorrow nor clinging to the office were the reason for my being unable to accept the decision. I cannot accept it, I wrote, because such measures only add to the already difficult predicament of the Hungarian Church." Mindszenty asked the Pope to rescind this decision, but on February 5, 1974 (the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Cardinal's show trial), the announcement of the Cardinal's removal from the see of Esztergom was published.

"Next day, to my profound sorrow," the Cardinal confesses, "I found myself forced to issue a correction through my office." Because several news agencies were implying in their press releases that Cardi-

nal Mindszenty had voluntarily retired, the Cardinal authorized his office to issue the following statement: "Cardinal Mindszenty has not abdicated his office as archbishop nor his dignity as primate of Hungary. The decision was taken by the Holy See alone." He justified his attitude in six points, including the facts that the Catholic Church and the people of Hungary are not free; that the Church is being manipulated and infiltrated by the Communist regime; that religion in schools was replaced by atheism, and so forth. "In these grave circumstances Cardinal Mindszenty cannot abdicate." Cardinal Mindszenty concludes the *Memoirs* with these words: "This is what I said on February 6, 1974—there is nothing more to say—and this is how I found, waiting to greet me at the end of the road, complete and absolute exile."

Only the future will tell whether it was right for the Vatican to sacrifice such prominent churchmen as Cardinal Mindszenty, Cardinal Slipyi, and others in order to begin a dialogue with Communist governments. The Vatican's hope is that this will protect the churches from further harassment and persecution.

It is difficult to assess the attitudes of people in Communist countries toward détente as it is presently promoted by various Western governments and churches (the Vatican, World Council of Churches, and other international and national religious organizations). Many churchmen in Communist-dominated countries are apprehensive. They foresee considerable advantages for Communist regimes and few, if any, for the churches or for nations struggling for freedom. In most cases détente has strengthened the grip of Communist parties on churches, especially through the appointment of so-called "peace clergymen." Churchmen defending the independence of the Church are subject to increased pressures. Such churchmen are deeply disturbed by the selectivity of protests by Western Christians who are justly concerned about violation of religious freedom and human rights in non-Communist countries but seldom, if ever, raise their voices in support of those in Communist countries who are in prisons, concentration camps, and mental institutions because of their religious faith, political conviction, nationality, or race.

There is a sobering fear among many in the Communist-dominated world that the present détente is degenerating into another spirit of Munich, the very spirit of appeasement and surrender against which Solzhenitsyn has repeatedly warned us. So far the results of détente in the realm of religious freedom and human rights are disappointing. Détente seems to be a one-way street, as witness the growing number of exiles. It is not fashionable today to speak of such things too persistently. With tedious predictability one is suspected of being a "cold warrior." The defense of human rights is seldom fashionable.