

The Hungarian Vincentian Province under Communism and Today

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On 10 June 1950 the Communist regime in Hungary began the liquidation of religious orders. The State ordered the confiscation and nationalization of religious houses, and a large number of members of religious orders, men and women, were regrouped and interned. On 7 September 1950, following an agreement with the Hungarian bishops, religious orders were officially dissolved by the government. That is also what happened to the Hungarian Province of the Congregation of the Mission.

At the time of the dissolution the statistics of our Province were as follows: 43 priests, 7 theology students and 28 brothers. At that time there were six confreres working outside the country. The Province, therefore, had 84 confreres living in six houses.

During the persecution, when religious orders were forbidden, four confreres were thrown into prison. Of the others, some were able to get involved in diocesan pastoral work or were employed as cantors, organists or sacristans in various parishes. Still others worked in factories or got some sort of jobs as manual labourers in order to earn their daily bread. They were badly paid and badly housed, as well as being exposed to various annoyances. This situation lasted almost forty years.

During all that time the State kept up constant surveillance of the lives of all members of religious orders, often determining where they lived, where they worked, and even where they could go, checking whether they might be engaging in subversive activity against the State.

Each one had a "contact", a political police officer, who "took him in charge", kept an eye on his life and activities, called him in at times for a "friendly" chat, during which he tried to force him to obey, either by a trick or a threat. All modern historians are in agreement in emphasising that of all the satellite countries of the former USSR religious orders in Hungary had the most difficult and most troublesome time, because of the strictest surveillance by the political police, and the most vigilant control by the sinister Bureau of Ecclesiastical Affairs. The nerves of both men and women were subjected to hard trials every day.

In spite of all the nit-picking surveillance the confreres did not sever their brotherly contacts, and on the occasion of each feast day of the Congregation they met for a common liturgy, followed by a simple brotherly meal. The Sisters were always associated with these get-togethers. This allowed mutual affirmation and strengthening of vocation in the purest spirit of perseverance. Obviously it was not possible in such conditions to think of promoting new vocations in any way whatsoever. The State's security services were always watching.

As a result of what happened on the international political scene, and under pressure from public opinion, a certain thaw set in in 1989, and the State authorities finally allowed members of religious orders take up certain activities once more. However, the right of being a "juridical person" was granted only to those religious communities who could prove that they really possessed at least one house.

We were therefore obliged to purchase quickly a small house in Budapest, the capital, for our Province in order to be able to be legally registered. It was only after that that we were in a position legally to re-claim our former houses, previously confiscated by the State.

All this seems clear and well-ordered on paper, in theory, but the reality was always quite different. For the moment, all we can re-claim is our Provincial House of former times. For the other houses there must be a justifying reason, a religious, cultural or charitable use. Even in such a case the process of handing back our property could be spread over ten years.

In 1989, therefore, we submitted our official request for our former Provincial House, Ménesi ut 26, Budapest. The first part of the building was returned to us on the express condition that we gave \$125,000 to the Cooperative which at present owns the property, in the name of, and instead of, the State. Obviously we cannot pay such a sum without help from our foreign confreres. We firmly hope that this sum will be repaid to us, without interest, later this year, by the State, following promises and the legislative arrangements.

In March 1994 we were able to start the renovation of the building, which was in very bad condition. We began the restoration work with the church, used by the former owner, the Cooperative, as a garage. This work is still going on today.

We hope that by June 1995 the restoration of the church and the repair of the first building of our Provincial House will be complete. The roofs, heating, gutters and downpipes have swallowed a huge amount of money, because the State, which used the buildings for forty years, did not spend a single *forint* either on maintenance or repair, and we have been able to count only on our own resources.

Meanwhile, that is in 1993, we opened our secondary school in Szob. Why did we do so? For an obvious reason, defined in the laws regarding the return of ecclesiastical property. We can reclaim and re-possess a religious house only if it is justified by a definite function or purpose. In former times this is where we had our house for formation and theology. It was our most valued house, on the banks of the Danube. The State set up in it an Institute for the re-education of girls. With the help of the mayor of the town we have been able to open, in one of the side buildings, two classes of secondary education, employing lay teaching staff. This was the only way we could get rid of the State Institute for the re-education of girls. We have, in this way, got back all our former house. The State has officially handed it back, and we have at present 112 pupils there, 82 of them boarders. These pupils are divided into four classes.

To sum up: Our Province at present has the following houses:

- Budapest, Ménesi ut 26, the Provincial House, seminaire, and college;
- Budapest, Szolt fejedelem utja: two confreres with ministry to the Sisters;
- Szob, secondary boarding and day school;
- Oradea, Romania, parish.

The personnel of our province at present is: 16 priests, 2 brothers, 3 theology students and 4 novices.

With God's help we hope that our Hungarian Province will bloom again in the spirit of our father St Vincent.

(Thomas Davitt CM, translator)