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The Lutheran Church in Romania in the Aftermath of Communism*

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In order to conduct a worthwhile discussion about the Lutheran Church in Romania in the aftermath of communism, we have to look at how this church came to exist within the communist bloc and for this it is necessary to look back to the twelfth century when the seeds of the future Lutheran Church were sown.

Historical Background

In 1921 Bishop Friedrich Teutsch entitled the first volume of his history of the Lutheran Church in Transylvania *The History of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Transylvania from 1150 to 1700.* Teutsch had no doubt that the church he led after the First World War was identical with the communities of Catholic believers who migrated to Transylvania during the middle of the twelfth century. The immigrants then came as '*hospites*' – 'invited ones'. They were invited by the Hungarian king, who guaranteed them certain special rights called 'freedoms' or 'privileges', although the meaning of the word was at that time quite different from the meaning it assumed in the eighteenth century.

Medieval Hungary was formed out of many different ethnic groups. Each group had its own special arrangement with the king, such as that made by the Croatians when their country was incorporated into Hungary, and those for the invited western immigrants from Flanders and the Rhine. They agreed to settle in Transylvania under strict conditions. These were the so-called privileges, among which we find conditions concerning church life. The settlers won the right to elect their priests, thus taking this right from the bishop; the right to use their tithe in their parish, instead of paying it to the bishop; and finally the right to resolve many problems of church law within the local congregation. These three privileges clearly constituted remarkable exceptions to general canon law, which was itself developing just at that time. Our late Bishop Müller, himself a remarkable historian, presumed that the *hospites* belonged to a revival movement in their home territory – that is, modern-day Belgium and its surroundings – where Bernard of Clairvaux had preached the Second Crusade in the 1140s. Bishop Müller believed that it was this revivalist experience which prompted the settlers to demand rights of self-government not only for their political but also for their religious communities.

Maintaining self-government was the cornerstone policy of the settlers, who

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during their 850 years of existence were known as Transylvanian Saxons. These Saxons developed a common political self-administration, which was recognised as such by the Hungarian king under the name of *Universitas Saxonum*. After 1526, when Transylvania became a principality in its own right, they formed one of the three political nations which constituted the Diet (and thereby the state) of Transylvania. These three nations were: the nobility, who represented the counties granted by the Hungarian king to faithful noblemen; the Szeklers, a Hungarian-speaking warrior tribe, which occupied its own territory; and the Saxons, who occupied the so-called '*fundus regius*', that is, the region conferred by the king to the settlers of the twelfth century and to their descendants.

Identifying the three political nations of Transylvania, we note that there was no Romanian 'nation'. This fact was to assume great significance in the twentieth century. The Romanians, who were granted no spokesmen within the feudal Transylvanian state, discovered their national identity in the course of the democratic revolutions between 1789 and 1848 and under the influence of romantic nationalism. This fact is of relevance to the situation in our churches under communism and its aftermath.

The Saxon Church in Transylvania continued to struggle for as much self-administration as was possible within the One Holy Catholic Church, and to a large extent it succeeded. However, the degree of self-administration was contested continually by the archbishop of Esztergom (Strigonium) and by the Transylvanian bishop of Alba. So when the Saxon Church joined the Reformation movement in the 1540s, it was in the hope of maintaining self-government. In 1553 they elected a bishop for their autonomous church and in 1557 this bishop signed a document common to all evangelical congregations in Transylvania, in the name of the *Ecclesia Dei Nationis Saxonicae* – God's Church of the Saxon Nation.

The Saxon nation was thus in a peculiar situation. It was a self-administered republican community within a greater state. This nation at the same time claimed to be a church, that is to be a nation before God, living its life under God, interpreting its life as a gift of God. I would claim that this understanding of themselves has been decisive for the Saxons over the past 120 years of their history, before communism, during the communist era and thereafter.

The renowned scholar of the history of canon law Hans Erich Feine of Tübingen treats the Transylvanian Saxon Church as a paradigm of what he calls *Genossenschaftskirche* – that is, a church whose congregations consider themselves responsible as corporate owners of the parishes they have built with their own hands and in which they themselves elect and pay for the priest and his assistants. These congregations consider themselves to constitute *Ecclesiae Dei*, and since they are all members of the *Universitas Saxonum* they can think and speak of themselves as the *Ecclesia Dei Nationis Saxonicae*.

In order to characterise the contemporary problems of the Lutheran Church in Romania we need to take account of some more historical peculiarities. Even before the Reformation the Transylvanian Saxons had a highly developed educational system which was under ecclesiastical control. Documentary evidence indicates that there has been a primary school in every small village since the fourteenth century, and there were secondary schools in the cities. After the Reformation, which among the Saxons had a strongly humanistic character, the church's concern for education grew even stronger. When the Nazis and then the communists took schools away from the church it was running some 250 primary schools, 200 vocational and further education schools and ten high schools with approximately 1,000 professional teach-

ers, even though the Transylvanian Saxon Church had fewer than 250,000 members in about 250 congregations. In order to sustain this extended school system, church members were liable for extremely high financial contributions which during the 1930s were often more than double the taxes payable to the state.

The Social Context

These figures serve as an introduction to a description of how the Lutheran Church in Romania developed within a social context. When the Catholic Saxons immigrated during the twelfth century, Transylvania was a multiethnic country subject to the king of Hungary. From the beginning of the fifteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century all aspects of Transylvanian life were dominated by the threat of Turkish attacks. During that period every Saxon village church came to be surrounded by strong fortifications and was transformed into a castle in which the community could defend itself while worship and school life continued. Those fortified Saxon churches still stand as landmarks in the Transylvanian countryside, and are at the same time symbols of that Lutheran Church.

As a result of this confrontation with the Turks the political forces of the country organised themselves into a pluralistic principality. No law could be passed in the Diet without the seal of each of the so-called three nations we have already mentioned. It is noteworthy that under these pluralistic conditions Transylvania became the state with the greatest measure of religious freedom in Europe, recognising in the 1550s and 1560s not only Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists and Orthodox as official churches but also the Antitrinitarians. In the spring of 1993 an ecumenical service in the Catholic church of Turda celebrated the 425th anniversary of the full recognition of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania. As a matter of fact, the Romanian Orthodox Church did not have the same status as the other four denominations but was only tolerated. This tolerance did not mean less religious freedom for Orthodoxy but it did mean that Orthodox believers had fewer rights politically and in their self-administration, as mentioned above.

In 1691 Transylvania came under Austrian rule and religious freedom suffered. The tolerant regime of the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II was the era of the French Revolution, but Joseph's tolerance was not as great as that already traditional in Transylvania and it promoted a rationalist and enlightened uniformity which sat ill with the proud national feelings and traditions of the Hungarian nation. As a result Transylvania entered the nineteenth century experiencing tensions between nationalist movements which threatened to destroy the pluralistic balance on which its very existence was based.

When in 1867 Transylvania again became part of Hungary, its pluralist nature suffered under the pressure of Hungarian national ideals. The Romanian majority resisted this pressure and began to discover its own national identity. This process led to the unification of Transylvania with the Romanian Principalities on the other side of the Carpathian mountains after the First World War. Instead of a western-dominated Catholic–Protestant tradition, Transylvania now found itself adapting to a Balkan tradition shaped by almost half a millennium of Turkish dominion, with Orthodoxy as its religion and a government which claimed to be modelled on that of France – a model which in no way fitted the historical and sociological realities of Transylvania. This has remained the situation to the present day.

The problems confronting the Transylvanian Lutheran Church at that time were closely connected with the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. In the centuries after the

Reformation the two kingdoms were represented by the so-called Two Universities: politically by the already mentioned *Universitas Saxonum* (or *Universitas Nationis*); and spiritually by a 'university' comprising the synod of the clergy and called the 'Spiritual University'. The universities acted both separately and jointly until in 1876 the nationalist Hungarian state abolished the 700-year-old system of Saxon self-administration. The abolition could be interpreted as a necessary part of the modernisation process, but it was brought about under the banner of heady nationalism, and so was interpreted as an attack on Saxon identity and on both 'universities'. Transylvanian Saxons felt that their very existence was endangered and resolved to struggle with all their might to save their identity.

Now that the political 'university' had been abolished, the church took over the task of defending the community's identity. The Lutheran bishop became the integrating figure for the nation. The spiritual and political identities of the Saxon nation were thus merged, and this development, which erased the boundary between the 'Two Kingdoms', arguably represented a graver danger for the Lutheran Church in Transylvania than the external onslaught that now began on the Saxon community.

The life of this community was experienced by all its members as an integrated combination of social and spiritual elements bound up with an ethnic and political identity which had to be defended. In this way, the church's involvement in the political field became, so to speak, a spiritual substitute for the Saxon church fortresses. The church was seen as a mighty fortress defending the community's identity. Nevertheless, I think it was perhaps inevitable that at that time the church should take on this role and it cannot be said that it was at fault for confusing important distinctions. The path of failure on which our church then set out proceeded from other shortcomings. Firstly, the church was at that time unable to define its responsibility in terms other than those of the nationalism which surrounded it. Our forefathers cannot be blamed for this failure: they could hardly have been expected to understand the problems more clearly than all the famous theologians who praised them for the impressive image of their church and its self-defence. The second shortcoming was, in my opinion, the naive equation of the Saxon community's interests with their assumed 'German' identity. Our forefathers cannot be blamed completely for this second shortcoming either, for at that time the notion of German was not exclusively connected with the German state, but was applied to all German-speaking communities. Since the Hungarian-speaking Transylvanians tended to be embraced by the Hungarian and the Romanian-speaking Transylvanians by the Romanian 'motherlands', the Saxons too looked to find an elder brother to champion their cause; but while Romanians and Hungarians were playing their game with clear territorial aims, the Saxons were doing so in terms of a culture. The events of the Second World War, however, proved that this distinction between territorial and cultural was untenable: the concept of a 'cultural' German brotherhood was politically misused.

The Nazi and Communist Periods

Bishop Friedrich Teutsch died in 1933. He had symbolised the traditional unity of the Lutheran Church and the Saxon nation. Teutsch's successor was not a born Saxon. Neither was he a historian, as all his predecessors had been. He was a remarkable systematic theologian, and it would be his fate to face the rise of a Nazi movement within this mixed ethnic and church community. To cut a long story short, in 1940 Berlin and Bucharest concluded an agreement by which the Romanian state agreed to the founding of an ethnic German political organisation under Nazi party leadership

and the orders of the SS central office.

In an abuse of the community's religious-national identity, the Nazi party leadership succeeded in 1941 in forcing the bishop to resign and in imposing another bishop, who was prepared to cooperate with the Nazi leaders. In this way their well-financed organisation was able to snatch the schools away from the church, supported by some theologians – who referred to the doctrine of the 'Two Kingdoms'. Among them was Karl Barth, who certainly did not know that he was helping the wrong party.

At the same time the traditional 'brotherhoods' and 'sisterhoods' of confirmed young people in each congregation were dissolved and their members enrolled in Nazi-style youth organisations, with the result that in 1943 about 40,000 young men were transfered to the German SS army – again as part of an explicitly negotiated agreement between the German and the Romanian governments.

The consequences of this short Nazi period were disastrous. In January 1945 all male members of the Lutheran Church between 17 and 45 and all female members between 18 and 35 were deported to forced labour in the Soviet mines on the grounds that they were Germans (as they themselves had all the time claimed to be). Altogether they numbered about 35,000. A great many of them died of starvation or disease. Another group consisting of sick prisoners was later transported to Germany, and the remainder were sent back to their homes in December 1949 and 1950. The survivors of this generation represent a real challenge for pastoral, social and political action in today's Romania.

The younger generation was thus lost through military service in 1943 and deportation in 1945. The older people and the children remaining, who lived on farms in the countryside, were dispossessed in 1945 as a result of ethnic discrimination and had to leave their houses and fields, surrendering them to newly appointed 'owners' of their estates.

In 1946 agrarian reform deprived the church of all its estates except church buildings and parsonages. The expropriated church fortresses included many rooms for social activities, as well as primary schools, and premises essential for social interaction were thus lost.

In 1952 Saxon families in the cities had to leave their houses within a few hours and were exiled to alien districts. In 1958 farmhouses were returned to a great many of their Saxon owners but not, however, the fields. The former church schools were taken back by the church in 1947, but newly expropriated by the communist state in 1948. All these losses and acts of collective discrimination produced a feeling of estrangement and despair which led to the beginning of a gradually increasing emigration movement. This movement was strongly encouraged by the government of the Federal Republic of Germany, which extorted from the Ceaușescu administration higher and higher annual quotas for emigration. These quotas, which were paid for handsomely, produced enormous corruption in Romania and excluded the possibility of constructive alternatives. When the so-called revolution of 1989 took place, more than 50 per cent of the Lutheran Saxon population had been registered for emigration.

In 1944 about 250,000 Lutheran Saxons were living in Transylvania. In the same year some 40,000 were evacuated by the retreating German troops to Austria and Germany. About 40,000 served in the German army, many of them killed in action. About 35,000 were deported to the Soviet Union. Counting both those who returned to Romania and those who left Romania as emigrants between 1969 and 1989, the Lutheran Church in Romania in 1989 numbered about 105,000 members. When the

frontiers opened after December 1989, all those who had applied for emigration left the country in haste, producing a panic among the many who remained undecided, so that in the years 1990–1 an avalanche of emigration deprived Romania of almost 80 per cent of its Lutherans. At the end of 1992, our church numbered about 30,000 people.

The Nazi-appointed bishop of 1941 had to resign in August 1944. His predecessor was not allowed by the government to take up his former position, because he had published some anticommunist statements in the 1930s. Instead, his rival candidate in the 1993 elections, Friedrich Müller, was appointed. He was 60 years old, had often been attacked by the Nazi leaders and had had friendly relations with the circle which had tried to remove Hitler on 20 July 1944. He proved to be a pious, courageous, tough and clever leader not only of the church as an institution but also of the people it (and he) represented. Recent studies have confirmed that in 1947 the Saxons were about to be deported completely to the eastern districts of Romania or even further, but that Müller, almost the only Saxon to know of the plan, opposed it by a dramatic appearance in Bucharest, where he offered himself and others for execution instead.

Müller and his friends maintained the old-fashioned view that it was the church's task to be responsible for the community as a whole, even to the extent of interfering again and again in political initiatives. At the same time, the church as an organisation was legally limited by what the authorities called the practice of the cult: liturgy and worship within the walls of the church, and nothing more. Nevertheless, Müller and his colleagues were able to organise social help for the families of the deported and, after the schools had been taken away, to achieve permission at least to teach the catechism on Saturdays and Sundays. On this basis, church life gradually recovered more and more and it was possible to reintroduce a good deal of social responsibility within the framework of the parishes.

The communist system never took hold of the Lutheran Church structure, and the bishop remained the true spokesman of the people. He was not uncontested, it has to be said; but challenges were directed more against the general situation, which he could not change, than against his particular actions. From 1955 onwards the Lutheran Church developed contacts with various ecumenical bodies. In 1961 it became a member of the World Council of Churches and since 1964 it has been a member of the Lutheran World Federation. In 1967 I had the pleasure of welcoming Franklin C. Fry, the President of the LWF, to act as editor of a *Müller-Festschrift* which I was publishing. Müller died in 1969 aged 84.

It is important to add that the Lutheran Church's relations with the state between 1945 and 1969 developed under the shadow of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The communist state established a 'Department of Cults' to deal with church affairs. Although the Orthodox Church was no longer named the National Church, in reality it acted as the flagship among the churches, not only on account of its size, but also on account of its readiness to act as a promoter of patriotic sentiments. This role became ever more important as Romanian communism under Ceausescu became more and more nationalistic. It was in this climate of nationalist sentiment that the Romanian Uniate Church was dissolved in 1948 and merged with the Orthodox Church; and it was this patriotic expectation which made it more and more difficult for Lutherans to follow the line required by the Department of Cults.

The next Lutheran bishop, Albert Klein, took over a difficult heritage. He no longer had the power of his predecessor over the political fate of his communities. During his time as bishop, therefore, the integrative responsibility of the church and

its clergy for both the religious and the political life of its members became less effective. It was under Müller's leadership that in 1949 the Lutheran Church had become involved in formerly Reformed and now common Protestant theological education at university level. Since 1955 the Lutheran wing of the Theological Institute has been in Sibiu, where it teaches in the German language. Well qualified professors guaranteed a solid theological education which could compare with western standards; but they did not succeed in giving future pastors the necessary motivation to withstand the overwhelming temptation to emigrate, and this failure in itself contributed to the growing trend towards emigration. The arguments for remaining in Romania were unconvincing; the nationalist Romanian state neglected and disliked minorities; the argument for German identity, used by our grandfathers, had lost its credit and rather encouraged emigration, all the more so since the German government was encouraging the Saxons to come to Germany; and the specific values of the Transylvanian heritage (including the very remarkable traditions in particular) were not presented in a contemporary and persuasive manner.

Bishop Klein, a learned scientist and disciple of liturgical renewal, tried to invigorate the spiritual life of the church by adapting the liturgy, editing a new hymnbook and enriching parish life, for instance by the introduction of the Ecumenical Prayer Week, which was extremely well received in the Lutheran parishes. (It may well be worth noting that the Reformed Church followed this example, although somewhat hesitatingly; but while the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches accepted the invitation to come and join us, they completely ignored this Ecumenical Prayer Week in their own parishes.) Bishop Klein was also a valued ambassador for his church at ecumenical gatherings, and he won many ecumenical friends and even gained admirers for the work of the Lutheran Church in Romania in strengthening parish life. However, he avoided the political intervention which would have been necessary to stop the clearance sale of the Saxons by Ceaușescu.

The 'local ecumenism' practised in theological seminaries and among the higher clergy followed the expected pattern established by the dominant Orthodox Church and its good relations with the state. The series of telegrams of praise sent to Ceausescu became a matter of pure routine and the texts were not worth reading. It was therefore astonishing to us that the last telegram from the Bishops' Assembly on 1 August 1989 was commented on so critically in the western media. It was no more dreadful than dozens sent before, and considering the position of the minority churches it is hardly astonishing that they let it pass without protest. However, it is noteworthy that on 1 August 1989 Klein was the only bishop who avoided pronouncing the name of Ceaușescu in his speech. While gunfire rattled over the bishop's house in the December revolution, Klein signed his last pulpit proclamation, in which he stated that we had not done enough to expose and pillory the lie of the system. One month later Klein was dead. His burial was the last great manifestation of the traditional Saxon Lutheran Church.

The new bishop – another Klein, this time Christoph – highlights how we have changed from a national church with a very distinctive tradition to a diaspora church of love. The heritage of the past is an immense burden for those 30,000 church members, the majority of whom are now old. We are building retirement homes for them with substantial aid from abroad. The unbelievably valuable treasures in our old archives – still kept in local parishes – have to be saved. Precious old churches, the unique church fortresses, the valuable sacred vessels and outstandingly beautiful altars must be preserved.

But these tasks of preservation are only one aspect of the current challenge. There

are other tasks which now, thank God, can be addressed. Religious education is again possible in Romania, and much needed. Our remaining 55 pastors cannot be everywhere they are needed, so we are preparing school teachers in religious education. In the German-language state schools between 60 and 90 per cent of the pupils are ethnic Romanians of the Orthodox faith, but even among them the demand for religious instruction in Evangelical Lutheranism is high. Pastors and teachers from abroad come to help us to satisfy this desire. We do not aim to prosyletise, however.

Since the overthrow of Ceaușescu, there has been greater openness to dialogue. A former leader of the Evangelical Academy in Berlin, a native Transylvanian, has returned and has set up an Evangelical Academy, with good results. An urgent need here is equipment for simultaneous interpretation, because all linguistic groups attend. Since 1991 we have established a new *Diakonisches Werk* (Social Service Programme) with four functioning senior rural homes and two city homes under construction. Social assistants for senior citizens are being instructed. We have organised meals on wheels and in several cities we have initiatives for diabetics. A visiting service is provided in all our church districts.

We have begun holding *Kirchentage* (Church Convocations), again to a very good response. Political representation is possible once more, and very much required. We have a quite effective Democratic Forum with more than 60,000 members, including ethnic Germans who are Roman Catholics from other Romanian provinces. The division of labour between the two 'universities' (or should I say between the 'Two Kingdoms'?) is becoming possible anew – but is also still a problem. We struggle for rehabilitation and for the restoration of rights where this seems reasonable and likely. Two of the chairmen of the Democratic Forum are professors of Lutheran theology (and a third one is a Catholic priest). The Forum is trying to encourage the church to regain possession of at least some of its former schools and possibly orphanages, although not its hospitals.

The Lutheran branch of the Common Protestant Theological Institute has lost many of its students, but others are coming from abroad, giving us 35 students in 1993. There were years during the Ceaușescu era when attendance was smaller. We are struggling to continue teaching at this seminary. Success is not guaranteed. Some dozen preachers from the Lutheran Church of Russia have twice visited Sibiu, however; in this way we have outreach into the wider Eastern European arena.

Although the future of our Theological Institute is uncertain, as is the future of our Lutheran Church in Romania, we envisage the possibility of unpredictable new developments which will change the image of our church, without at the same time extinguishing it. We are trying faithfully to do our duty in obedience to Matthew 6:34: 'Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.' And why should we not apply verse 33, too? 'But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness – and these things shall be yours as well.'