

# Editorial

In this issue of *RCL* we are devoting nearly a third of our space to one country — Hungary. While we do not intend this to be a pattern for all, or even most, of our future issues, we are glad to be able to give extensive coverage to a country often overlooked in the West.

Hungary is by no means cut off from the West — much less so than some of its neighbours. It claims to have fourteen million tourists a year, in a country whose total population numbers a little over ten and a half million. However, the inaccessibility of Hungarian, a non-Indo-European language, means that few people in the West (or, for that matter, Hungary's Slavonic and Romance language-speaking East European neighbours) are qualified to comment authoritatively on it.

In recent years, Hungary has acquired a reputation for relative political and economic freedom. Hungary's economic system, the freest and most prosperous within the Warsaw Pact countries, and recently improved by reforms containing many of the elements of a free market economy, has contributed to the image of relative liberalism which the country has in the West.

An analysis of the post-war life of the Hungarian Catholic Church by Steven Polgar (pp. 11-38), followed by a letter from Fr György Bulányi to Cardinal Lékai (pp. 38-41) forms something of a corrective to this image. We also publish a description of a small Protestant group, the Free Christians (pp. 4-10).

Steven Polgar's article puts into context the basis communities, led by Fr Bulányi, which have been a source of concern to the Hungarian bishops since at least 1976 (see *RCL* Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 95-108). The bishops fear that the independent life of the communities may cause them to fall away from Catholic leadership and teaching, possibly into sectarianism. They are also doubtless concerned about some of the challenges — spiritual rather than political — which the basis communities have issued to the *status quo* of the Hungarian Catholic Church. However, the pacifist stance of the basis communities has indeed led them into the political arena, since military service is

compulsory in Hungary (except for members of the tiny Nazarene Church).

Thus far, it may seem that the controversy between the basis communities and the hierarchy could have been duplicated in almost any Church in the world. The phenomenon of a group within an established Church seeking for and experiencing spiritual renewal and the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, and setting these above the cautious and pragmatic counsels of its leadership, is, after all, by no means unfamiliar. In this case, however, it is not clear how far the church leadership is forming an independent view of the situation and how far it is under pressure from the State. Mr Polgar tends to the view that the hierarchy is not acting freely, and the evidence for this is persuasive. Independent reports from Hungary (see for example the documents in *RCL* Vol. 11 No. 1 pp. 95-108) suggest that the hierarchy does not enjoy the confidence of many of the clergy, and there are many instances of gifted, dedicated but independently-minded priests being sent to remote country parishes instead of receiving the preferment to which their abilities should entitle them. The Hungarian government's policy in recent years has been, not to take direct action against church "dissidents" itself, but to oblige the church leadership to do so, thus enabling it to build up a reputation for a *laissez-faire* stance on religious matters. Having said that, one must of course allow for the fact that the Catholic hierarchy in Hungary genuinely believe that they are acting in the best interests of their Church. To this the members of the basis communities would no doubt reply that they would never have become bishops in the first place without state support, and that if the faithful could freely choose their bishops, other men would be in their places. While Hungarians are certainly not facing the persecution endured by their fellow-believers in neighbouring Czechoslovakia and Romania, that is no reason to suppose that Hungary's reputation for relative political liberalism is substantiated in every aspect of domestic life.

In this issue we are for the first time including in *RCL* an article on a country not generally recognised to be part of the Communist bloc — Nicaragua (pp. 42-54). This does not represent a change in policy, but a feeling that our readers may wish to be informed about the present situation in a country where an avowedly Marxist government has recently come to power, and where the Churches have had to work out their response to a new political situation.