

# GUARDING THE FLAME



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THE CHALLENGES FACING THE CHURCH  
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*A Conversation With Cardinal Peter Erdő*

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AND  
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Italian by Christopher Hart-Moynihan*

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*To all who have kept the faith*



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## A NOTE TO READERS

THIS BOOK was prepared on the basis of four days of interviews with Cardinal Erdő in his residence in Budapest in the summer of 2011 and three days of interviews in New York City in January of 2018.



## PREFACE

IN A lecture delivered on January 29, 2018, at Columbia University, a Hungarian cardinal, in a magisterial address, argued that free societies must draw on the wisdom of religious faith to confront the moral and social problems facing the modern world.

Cardinal Peter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, delivered the Bampton Lecture at Columbia University on Monday, January 29, 2018. The Bampton Lectures in America were created in 1948 and feature talks from theologians, scientists, and artists.

Addressing Columbia students and faculty, Erdő warned against the dangers of moral relativism and suggested that the Church has an essential role even in a secular state.

The cardinal said that relativism—the unwillingness to declare anything objectively “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “evil”—is a “grave crisis” for all the modern secular states. Without a foundation in natural law, he argued, societies become unstable and moral evil becomes permissible and may flourish.

Erdő was chosen to deliver the lecture in 2018 because he is eminent for his intelligence, wisdom, and culture. He brought to his talk a lifetime of experience as a researcher in the history and theory of law, both civil and canon, and as a leader of the Church in Hungary and in Europe—as twice president for five years of the Council of European

Bishops' Conference (CCEE), and as one of the heads, on the Catholic side, of a decade-long dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox on social and cultural issues facing the world today, a "globalized" world dominated by a culture that tends to marginalize the very concept of "God."

Some years ago, in the summer of 2011, still during the pontificate of Benedict XVI, I visited Erdő's home in Budapest, Hungary, and spent several days with him. The interview lasted for four entire days. I had planned to publish the content right away, but the weight of other work delayed the conclusion of the project for several years. The book finally appeared in Italian, published by the Vatican Press, in the summer of 2015, and now, in 2019, for the first time, in English.

Erdő, one of the cardinals most respected by the bishops of Europe, was born in Budapest on June 25, 1952. He turned sixty-six in the summer of 2018. He studied theology at the Archbishop's Seminary in Esztergom and at the major seminary of the capital, Budapest, then was ordained on June 18, 1975, when he was still twenty-three.

On November 5, 1999, he was appointed auxiliary bishop of Székesfehérvár. He received his episcopal consecration from Pope John Paul II on January 6, 2000, in Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. With the resignation of Cardinal Laszlo Paskai upon reaching the age limit, on December 7, 2002, Erdő was appointed archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest and, at the same time, Primate of Hungary.

In the consistory of October 21, 2003, he was created and proclaimed cardinal and received the titular church of Santa Balbina. Until November 20, 2010, he was the youngest of all the cardinals, a distinction he then ceded to

Reinhard Marx, fifteen months younger. He was elected president of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference in 2005. From 2006 until 2016, for two five-year terms, he also served as the president of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences.



## INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST ITALIAN EDITION

ON A lovely, sunny day in Budapest, Hungary, the cardinal celebrated morning Mass in the chapel in his residence. We had a spartan breakfast of bread and rolled oat flakes along with his two assistants, Father Zoltán Kovács and Father László Monostori. We then walked down the corridor to the cardinal's study and began our discussion, which continued for four days. During the discussion, Erdő spoke of his faith, of his life, of the challenges facing the Church, of his mission as a priest and bishop, and of his vision for human dignity and freedom in a Europe that is not only "post-Communist" but also "post-Christian." And as he sketched his vision for a renewal of the Christian faith in the twenty-first century, for a "new evangelization" that can effectively reach young people and inspire them to return to the faith and practices of the Catholic Church, it became clear that Erdő is a figure who is not only building bridges between the separated Christians of the Orthodox and Catholic worlds, helping Europe to "breathe with two lungs," in the words of Pope John Paul II, but also between the older and the younger generations. This quiet, learned, holy man, respected by his fellow bishops in Europe, Africa, and around the world, could be a strong voice for the renewal of society following many decades of severe repression, first under the Communists, then under the

relativists, who now dominate Western society and culture. Here are excerpts from our conversation.



PART I

# LIFE

Out of the Crucible: The Life and  
Vocation of a Man of Faith



## CHAPTER 1

# FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD

*“Unfortunately, his beautiful library was destroyed in ’56  
when the Soviet tanks destroyed also our own house.”*

**LET’S START with your family. Tell me something about your childhood and upbringing.**

Our family was a Catholic family. The faith was woven into the fabric of our life. Each evening, my parents prayed together and, little by little, invited us also to pray with them. I particularly remember the season of Advent. Every Saturday night turned into a little celebration, reading a passage of the Bible, then singing with a candle. During that season, my mother prepared baked apples, which did not cost much, but they were something special, and so we had something interesting to eat. In this way, we waited for the baby Jesus. We also prepared the way for the baby Jesus: we made little rugs out of paper, to make the stable where he would be born more beautiful. She told us that each yellow or red strip that we wove into the fabric stood for some good deed that we had done, and so we knew that we had to do some good things in order to bring those strands into the weaving—pray or help in the kitchen or do something else, maybe go willingly to the store, or help

mother around the house and so on. Later we made small shirts for the baby Jesus, and she told us we could draw little crosses on the shirt when we did something good. And in this way, we prepared for Christmas Day.

Also, for Easter, there were some family traditions that my parents, who were intellectuals, wanted to stay at home. They belonged to a group of large Catholic families in Budapest, something which then was totally secret, of course, led by a good priest who had previously been a professor in Vienna, Imre Mihalik, who was later, as a refugee in America, a professor at a seminary. He died some time ago. I believe he lived in New Orleans.

**Your parents, what were their names?**

Sándor Erdő was my father; my mother was Mária Kiss.

**What memories do you have of your father?**

He died at the age of sixty-one, suddenly. He had an illness that affected his heart. We immediately said that he was a very good man because God had in this way shown his love for him, not asking him to suffer very much. My father was very gentle; he had a big heart. He had a remarkable memory, and he knew how to calculate sums very well, without paper, without a computer, which didn't yet exist: very well, almost like a professional. Then he was an excellent bridge player, which also requires a certain logic. In his youth, he had even won some bridge tournaments.

He was deeply Catholic but not at all a religious conservative. He was someone who loved French Catholicism,

especially that of the 1950s. He knew the best authors of the period before the Second World War. He attended the high school of the Budapest Benedictines, then studied law, but he could never work as a lawyer because he was too Catholic. He never became involved in politics, and if he could have chosen, maybe he would have been a Catholic more of the left than of the right. But life never offered him the possibility of working in the field of the law because the simple fact that he went to church discredited him. So he worked first as a laborer, then as an assistant of accounting at various firms, and so went his life.

But at home, he told us many things. Unfortunately, his beautiful library, which he had gathered, burned in 1956 when the Soviet tanks destroyed our house. So we were for a certain time homeless; then, in a workers' hospice, we found a room and there we spent the most difficult weeks, eating very delicious things, previously unknown to us, that arrived in cardboard boxes with the words "Gift of the American people" written on the outside. After the defeat of the revolution of '56, these parcels came, and we ate from those parcels for many months. And then we also received clothes because everything we owned was burned. Only the clothes we had had on our backs when we fled were left.

And slowly, bit by bit, life returned to normal in about a year, because even after the revolution, it was a troubled period, then the streets of Budapest were repaired, with the help of the Soviet Union—it was probably too negative as propaganda to leave the city center completely destroyed. In the last months, we were separated. At the time, there were three of us, three brothers—my sisters were born later. We

were divided among three peasant families, in a village near Budapest, which was something organized by the Catholic Church. A parish priest found the families for us. At that time, farmers still owned their lands. The Communists had not yet managed to introduce the *kolkhoz*, or collective farm-system, which was introduced in the early '60s. Thus the peasants had food to eat that the city people did not have. So these families could accommodate an additional child, but not three, and we were placed in three different families, and so we were able to survive for another three or four months.

After that, we were able to return to Budapest and to be together again with our parents.

But religion and faith, belonging to the Church, always played a role in our lives. I've spoken about some of my earliest memories. Then I attended a church, the parish church where I was also baptized, in Józsefváros (a Budapest district), which also had a very intense parish life. There were groups of altar boys. The assistant parish priest prepared us to serve Mass. Every week there was a meeting, which was quite interesting, with a bit of catechesis.

In school, during the first two years, there was still at that time a weekly religion class, but the priests who taught the class were arrested, one after another, and in the end, there was no longer any religious instruction.

There was religious education in some distant parishes, though not in the schools, and that's when my father said, "This is unacceptable, I will have to teach you myself." And so he did, every Sunday: in the morning, we went to Mass, then after Mass, before lunch, he taught us catechism.

There were books, small catechisms, the only ones that could be printed legally in the country.

### Because?

Because the author was the president at the time of the bishops' conference, Msgr. Endre Hamvas, of whom later it was said that perhaps he was too complacent with the Communist regime, though no trace of anything compromising has ever been discovered against him. Indeed, before the war, he was very esteemed as a catechist, and also for his scholarly research. He focused on catechesis and was vicar general of Cardinal Serédi, the predecessor of Cardinal Mindszenty. And this old bishop was the only one who could risk publishing a catechism. I can show the book to you. They were very simple, but the substance was there.

And so my father taught us, using these catechisms, for many years. So when I started high school with my twin brother at the Piarists' school, which was the only Catholic school still open in the city, there was an initial examination, where they tried to see the extent of our knowledge about religion. And we were among the best, meaning that my father had taught us well. And I say this because he taught us not only what was in these simple catechisms but also gave us many compulsory readings.

For example, in the sixth and seventh grade, we had to read the entire New Testament, and in the eighth grade, the *Jewish War* of Flavius Josephus, *De bello Judaico*, and this made a very deep impression on me, to read this also together in the family. My father was oriented in this way,

and with great responsibility, he offered us also these texts to read and learn from.

So, I think it was good preparation. And we not only heard, but we saw that our parents paid personally for their faith. My mother was a teacher but could not teach because she was too Catholic.

Then, of course, there was always the economic scarcity in the family. Certainly, a good judge or lawyer earns more, right?

### **Do you have a specific memory of your father?**

Of course. He had a calm mind, serene. He knew how to enjoy life. He made for us, for example, some color-coded cards on the history of art, of literature, philosophy, various European nations, and playing with these cards we could learn the names of the “greats,” and learn about Leonardo da Vinci, Lev Tolstoj, or Bramante. And this was also a beautiful thing that he did with pleasure.

### **A moment of sadness?**

There were moments of sadness, partly due to our economic conditions, partly due to the uncertainty of his work, although under socialism, inevitably at least one in the family was required to have a job. But to work in a bad place or a distant place, this could be a cause of sadness. Or when we heard that he had been humiliated at his workplace. There is a moment that I must tell you about, and after I will explain.

My father was, in the mid-seventies, section chief in his



office, working for a company in the construction sector. They were building roads. And once he came home saying, "Ah, I'm no longer the section chief, I'm just an advisor now."

"What happened? They weren't happy with your work?"

"No, actually, I'm doing the work of three men."

"So, what happened?"

"I went to the editor and asked him why. And he said: 'What do you think? Your son was ordained a priest last week. You can't be section chief any longer.'"

I was that son. This was a moment of sadness or joy, or, I don't know, perhaps a mixture of the two.

**So, thank you for those memories. And your mother? Do you remember anything about your mother?**

My mother was a very dynamic person, who could organize the affairs not only of a family but of the entire community.

My mother, in her youth, in the '40s, was a leader of the Marian Congregation, and she organized small groups who went out to villages that had been practically abandoned to take care of children, girls, and people in those areas who had been very neglected. She also had many intellectual pursuits, learned about government, *et cetera*, and when she became a teacher, it was evident that she had a special gift for art. She knew how to draw very well. There were others among her relatives, in her extended family, who were artists. There was also a sculptor. And then my mother wanted to study art, but even at the academy of art there was an entrance examination, and there they said, "If you enter the Communist youth organization, and accept a high posting,

at the national level, as you had in the Marian Congregation, you will be admitted.”

And she immediately said, “No thank you, I cannot.” And they responded, “Why not? Your social background meets our criteria.” And her father was now retired, but he was still a railway employee and drove these suburban trains which linked the suburbs with the city center, and because of this, they said, “Okay. She isn’t a class enemy.” However, she was too religious, so she could not be admitted. And, then, later, during the era of political transition, in ’89, when my father had already died, my mom immediately joined the Smallholders Party, which was the party that had won the first elections after the Second World War. She remembered that and thought she could do something again for the public good, for the people. Then naturally she was disappointed because the revival was not like her memories from a few decades before.

**Is she still alive?**

No, she died in ’92.

**Do you have a brother?**

I have two brothers. A twin brother (died in 2014), a younger brother, and three sisters.

**So you are the oldest?**

Yes.

**And older than your brother by how many minutes?**

Ten minutes.

**And that was important?**

Maybe yes, because I was a bit bigger. Then it was important because the tradition in the family was that the eldest son was always Sándor (Alexander) for many generations; even my dad was Sándor. But because we were twins and we were born near the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, we became Peter and Paul. And then the third son was Sándor.

**And what is the first memory you have? Your first memories of life . . .**

They are just images.

**At what age?**

About two, three years old. Surely at four and a half years old, what happened in '56, as far as I could understand it as a child, this is present. I remember completely because things were so unusual. It's not every day that one's family's home is destroyed.

**Were you near the house at the time?**

I was at home.

**At home? Just in the house?**

And then we had to take refuge in another place, then in the basement, then when there was a bit of silence we left the house.

**But you remember that day?**

Yes, of course. Not the date, but all of the events.

**What do you remember?**

We were eating at the table. It was breakfast, and a bullet went through the room above. So my grandfather—because at that time we were together with my grandparents—immediately said, “We should leave the room.” We left the room, and we went back into the kitchen, which was furthest from the window. Then the shooting continued, and finally, a shot shook the house, and then we ran out of the apartment because what was happening was so much worse than what we had expected. My grandparents were used to it because during the war the whole town had been living in cellars—the cellars were large because, first of all, people wanted a lot of space for wood and coal, in order to have heat through the winter, and then also for safety. Some houses had been built using this type of thinking. Our house was one of the houses of the late nineteenth century.

**But it was an apartment?**

Where we lived was just an apartment. But the house was big. A house with five floors. Made of brick, one of these traditional houses. Not out of wood like in America, eh!

**Do you remember anything from your life in the Church, such as baptism?**

Not baptism, because of course I was baptized at three days old. Then it was still one of the first things to be done when one was born, no? The baptism.

**But was it not already a political act to be baptized?**

No, not so much. To have one's children baptized was inconvenient for party officials, army officers, police. But for ordinary people this was not a great sin, to baptize their children. Giving them special education, or if they attended religious instruction, this was already another matter . . .

**Then . . . the language. You learned the Hungarian language.**

Yes.

**How did this language seem to you?**

Well, I really had no way to compare it with any other because at home my parents spoke Hungarian. It was some years later when I began to understand that my grandparents sometimes spoke some other language. It was always before Christmas when they were talking about presents. We wrote a letter when we were six or seven years old to the baby Jesus, writing down what we wanted as a present. And as we wrote, there was a discussion between our parents and grandparents that we did not understand. And that was in

German. Then we realized later that when it came to gifts for our parents, our grandparents used another language, a very secret language, which was Romanian, because they had come from present-day Romania, my paternal grandparents, and so they knew three languages. Certainly, we spoke Hungarian at home, but we knew a bit of the others as well.

**And there was the liturgy in the church . . .**

It was beautiful, mystical, but also the priests celebrated Mass with respect, and some of them also had a reputation for being very brave, very holy, or even in danger of being arrested, so my parents would whisper, "This priest is a very good person, pray for him because maybe he will be taken away." Things like that.

**Were you an altar boy?**

Yes, of course.

**Do you have any memories of pronouncing the words in Latin?**

Sure. I still know them. *Introibo ad altare Dei. Ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meam. Iudica me, Deus, et discerne causam meam de gente non sancta: ab homine iniquo et doloso erue me. Quia tu es, Deus, fortitudo mea: quare me repulisti, et quare tristis incedo, dum affligit me inimicus?* (I will go up to the altar of God. To God who gives joy to my youth. Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that

is not holy: deliver me from the unjust and deceitful man. Because you are my strength, why hast thou rejected me and why am I downcast, while the enemy afflicts me?)

**Do you have any memories of mystical moments or moments in which you questioned human existence or the existence of God?**

At that age, no. Later. In that age, I think we had a faith that grew naturally. At the age of six, we went to the first Communion with great devotion, and immediately after, we received Confirmation because it was rumored that perhaps the last bishops would be arrested. So everyone now was asking to be confirmed, because later there would perhaps be no more bishops able to do it. People knew that the pope may also appoint a priest to administer the sacrament of Confirmation. However, the general feeling was that the real Confirmation is administered by the bishop.

At that time, the diocese was governed by Msgr. Endrei. Sometime after '56, a former auxiliary bishop of another diocese governed our diocese *ad interim*, as a delegate. But they made him depart shortly thereafter, and then came Msgr. Artur Schwartz-Eggenhofer, who was first appointed as vicar-capitular, then apostolic administrator. He was a canon of Esztergom, but not a bishop, so the fears were also somewhat justified.

**Do you remember any moment from your confirmation?  
The ceremony?**

Yes, of course. It was in Saint Stephen's Basilica. There were many people and for us it was a long ceremony, but beautiful, and outside the basilica were the street vendors who offered us these small prayer cards with the Heart of Jesus, perhaps as a "reminder of your Confirmation," with the date, and so on.

**Did you take a name?**

Yes, Ladislaus.

**Ladislaus. Why?**

Because my godfather took the name Ladislaus at his confirmation; he was a friend of my father. There was no great theological choice. It was a traditional thing, of course.

**Were there any saints whom you studied in those years who were your favorites?**

At such a young age I listened a little to the stories of my parents, and there even was a big book in our home with the lives of the saints with pictures, very well done. Today I would say that the authors were learned men, serious scholars.

**Do you remember the book?**

Yes, because it was a very popular book, a large volume. Sure.



**Do you remember the professor?**

Polykárp Radó, who published, for example, two large volumes, *Enchiridion liturgicum*, at Herder in Rome, just at the dawn of the Second Vatican Council—so a bit too late, but he was a very profound scholar, Benedictine, whom my father knew well. His book in Hungarian about the saints was in our home and my parents, sometimes, would read the life of some saint.

**Do you remember any saints in particular?**

Yes . . . Saints Peter and Paul.

**What was striking in Peter and Paul?**

The princes of the apostles, it called them, the two leaders, the most important ones. The two pillars of the Church of Rome. Then their martyrdom; then later in the book, what Saint Clement of Rome wrote in his letter to the Corinthians. Saint Clement writes that it was the contrast, the conflict between brothers, which had caused the death of the princes of the apostles. And therefore, he admonished the faithful in Corinth to be united.

Saint Peter, of course, as my patron saint. He was a man who did not think about himself a great deal; that is, he was humble. However, he had certainty in the substantive things. And he took on a very special mission that was received from Jesus. He had a special clarity that grew out of his special love for Jesus Christ, and above all out of

God's grace, out of the free choice of the Lord. Then, Saint Philip Neri, and Saint Francis de Sales.

### **Why Saint Francis de Sales?**

The patron saint of bishops! I have read his works several times . . . his life, I visited Thonon, I visited the sites of his life.

### **But what was his most profound advice for pastors?**

His gentleness, his prudence in speaking with people who thought differently. His strength in arguing in a patient way, in a respectful manner. And his love for the Church and the Catholic faith.

Then later, when I was already thirteen years old, I started, following the advice of my confessor, to read more serious books, immediately throwing myself into the sea, Saint Teresa of Avila, then the *Philothea* of Saint Francis de Sales, the *Theotimus* of Francis de Sales, also certainly *Imitatio Christi*, attributed to Thomas a Kempis, these things.

### **And this at thirteen, fourteen . . . What impact did it have?**

A great impact. That was the moment when I thought for the first time that perhaps I had to become a priest.