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THEOLOGY IN THE GHETTO:
THE LIFE, WORK, AND THEOLOGY OF NIKOLAJS PLĀTE (1915–1983),
PASTOR AND THEOLOGIAN OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF THE LATVIAN SSR

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in auditorium XII, on the 20th of May, 2017 at 10:15

ABSTRACT

Nikolajs Plāte (1915–1983) was one of the most prominent and prolific Latvian Lutheran pastors and theologians to carry the mission of the Church through the complicated Soviet period. The aim of this study is to extend a critical understanding of the Church's Soviet totalitarian history through the experience of one man and his "silent heroics" of Christian resilience and steadfastness in a hostile environment. The narrow focus of the study is on Plāte's life, work, and theology. The broader focus, however, is on church life in general, challenging struggles for survival, and the various means of coping with the emerging realities. As one of the pastoral generation serving the Church during these grueling times, the so-called "old guard," Plāte provides a good case study to illustrate the troubled road of a Lutheran clergyman adjusting to a new ghetto-like environment. His intellectual exertions to respond to these challenges are here referred to as "theology in the ghetto," where his theological thinking is better viewed in terms of an existential reaction than an academic discipline.

In the first part of this work (I–III), I offer a step-by-step historical narrative of Plāte's life and work. After his early education in the hopeful years of the first independence, the disastrous impact of the Soviet occupation and World War II transformed the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church and pastoral service into something unrecognizable. The primary focus of the study is on Plāte's ministry, first in the Pope, Rinda, and Selga congregations (1945–1953) and, second, in the parish of Rucava (1953–1983). Living under constant Soviet pressure, some painful adjustments had to be made. The work of the Church was increasingly isolated, degraded, and marginalized. Membership declined. The permanent condition of crisis drove people to live in survival mode, and the stagnation of the Church was difficult to reverse. While suffering abuse from the atheistic authorities, Plāte tried to stay active and faithful, to keep working where possible. However, his approach and mentality changed visibly. During this time, his ministry was increasingly dominated by defensive thinking and reactions. Even some antisocial traits became manifest. Thus, in this study I describe and analyze Plāte's inward-looking, conservative mindset, which resulted from the outer totalitarian environment. Only at the

end of his life in the beginning of the 1980s was Plāte able to observe some hopeful signs of life for the depressed Church and start looking forward to a better future.

In the later part of the work (IV–V), Plāte’s activities at the seminary and his theological production are analyzed. I describe the body of his writings in chronological sequence. Plāte’s texts reveal him as a prolific writer who produced several thousand pages of theological material. I identify and examine his direct and indirect remarks and references concerning the Soviet conditions. At that time, when the Bible, faith, and the Church had come under furious attack by anti-religious propaganda, Plāte’s chief concern with his theology was to serve the loyal remnant of the Church and to respond to these clear challenges by addressing the growing gap between Christianity and society, trying to heal the degraded life of the Church, and restoring compromised biblical authority. Plāte believed that the constraints of Soviet totalitarianism could be overcome only by trusting in the power of God’s Word, by means of which the Lord could help, intervene in, and overcome the temporal bonds of history. His stress on God’s Word thus becomes the key for understanding the underlying feature of his theology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank all those who have helped to develop this monograph. As with any book, there are many who have contributed in one way or another: family, friends, teachers, and colleagues. Above all, I am grateful to God, the provider of every good and perfect gift from above. Furthermore, I owe a huge debt to my mentor and supervisor Prof. Jouko Talonen for his unceasing encouragement. He has inspired me with his diligent research and expertise in Latvian church history. It was thanks to him that I chose to follow in his footsteps and gained the courage to offer my own contribution. With his gracious and friendly disposition, he has assisted and motivated me the entire way to keep digging and writing until it was done. I would like to thank Professor Kari Alenius (University of Oulu) and Professor Emeritus Jouko Martikainen (Georg-August Universität Göttingen), the preliminary examiners of my dissertation, who have given me valuable reviews and helped to improve the manuscript. I am thankful to Prof. Gvido Straube (University of Latvia) for his helpful suggestions. I wish to express my gratitude to my dear friend Dr. Michael K. Smith (USA) for his valuable assistance and advice with the English language of this monograph. The support of Michael and his wife Anita has been a source of constant joy and reassurance, as they have always read my research with a keen interest and given positive feedback. Thank you, Mrs. Maija Jurkāne, for revising the language. And also thank you, Albion M. Butters, for the latest revision of the language. Similarly, I am grateful to my colleague Rev. Ilārs Plūme for his wisdom and friendship, devoting his time, energy, and advice to improve my work. I wish to thank Dr. Voldemārs Lauciņš, Rev. Didzis Meļķis, Rev. Ilmārs Rubenis, Rev. Atis Vaickovskis, and Artis Celmiņš for their friendly and stimulating conversations, which helped me gain a deeper grasp of the historical realities. I am grateful to the University of Helsinki for the stipend at the last stage of this research and also to Academic Affairs Officer Jutta Kajander for the assistance with practical matters. In the same way, my appreciation should be extended to the librarian of LELBA, Iveta Kalme, for her assistance with archive material, and Rev. Juris Ulģis for his help with the layout of the monograph.

Rīga, 12 April 2017

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ABBREVIATIONS

CA	<i>Confessio Augustana</i> , The Augsburg Confession
CARC	Council of Affairs of Religious Cults
KGB	Komitet gosudarstvennyi bezopasnosti (Committee of State Security)
Latvian SSR	The Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia
LELC	Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lithuanian SSR	The Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania
LUTF	The Theological Faculty, University of Latvia
LUTFB	The Library of the Theological Faculty, University of Latvia
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
M. A.	Master of Arts
NT	The New Testament
OT	The Old Testament
RCC	The Roman Catholic Church
UN	United Nations
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
ABBREVIATIONS	7
I INTRODUCTION	11
1.1 SUBJECT OF RESEARCH AND SOURCES	11
1.2 BACKGROUND: EARLY YEARS	15
1.2.1 Origins and childhood.	15
1.2.2 Attending the Gymnasium of the Lutheran Church	17
1.2.3 Theological studies at the University of Latvia	21
1.2.4 Plāte's theological influences	25
1.2.5 Beginnings of ministry and ordination	28
1.3 PLĀTE'S MINISTRY DURING WORLD WAR II.	31
1.3.1 The winds of change.	31
1.3.2 The LELC during the Soviet and German occupations	34
1.3.3 Plāte's ministry in Zalve and Ērberģe	37
1.3.4 Wartime publications	42
1.3.5 Leaving for Courland along with refugees	44
II A PASTOR IN THE SHADOW OF STALINISM (1945–1954)	47
2.1 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE STALINIST ERA	47
2.1.1 Complicated work in the Pope, Rinda, and Selga congregations	52
2.1.2 Confrontation with the local authorities	54
2.1.3 Anti-religious propaganda in the press.	57
2.1.4 Attacks and financial troubles	61
III SERVICE IN RUCAVA (1953–1983).	65
3.1 SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION DURING THE KHRUSHCHEV ERA (1953–1964). 65	
3.1.1 Rucava – a serious parish.	68
3.1.2 A more personal look: Zuļģe's story	76
3.1.3 Archbishop Tūrs and the recognition of Plāte's ministry	80
3.1.4 Work and struggle against all odds	83
3.2 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION DURING THE “SILENT PERIOD”	
(1965–1979).	90
3.2.1 Archbishop Matulis and a new era in the LELC	93
3.2.2 Even more intensive church work	95
3.2.3 “God speaks through sufferings”	100
3.2.4 The tragedy of losing a son	105
3.2.5 Welcome to the women clergy	108

3.3	EMERGENCE OF A NEW MOVEMENT	
	IN THE LATE 1970S AND THE EARLY 1980S	111
3.3.1	Support for the young generation of pastors	117
3.3.2	Pläte's health struggles and the end of his life	122
IV	ACADEMIC THEOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES	126
4.1	DEFENSE OF THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF "SCIENTIFIC ATHEISM"	126
4.1.1	Bridging the gap between the Church and society	132
4.1.2	Expectations versus reality	136
4.2	FROM MONOLOGUE TO DIALOGUE: A CONTROVERSY.	139
4.2.1	Pläte's contribution to the controversy	144
4.2.2	Ideological use of biblical criticism	147
4.2.3	Internal reactions to external criticism.	151
4.2.4	Pläte's approach to the Bible	157
4.3	ACADEMIC THEOLOGICAL COURSES.	162
4.3.1	A journal with Pläte's reading lists.	168
4.3.2	Literary production, the Compendia.	176
4.3.3	Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts (1970).	177
4.3.4	Poimenics (1971, 1973, 1982/1983).	182
4.3.5	Practical Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts: Minor Prophets (1971)	187
4.3.6	Practical Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts: Psalms (1972)	193
4.3.7	Practical Exegesis of Old Testament Texts: Supplement (1973).	198
4.3.8	Practical Issues of Poimenics (1974 and 1982/83)	199
4.3.9	Explanation of the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther (1980)	206
4.3.10	<i>Confessio Augustana</i> : Translation and Exposition (1981).	210
4.3.11	Dogmatics, Parts I and II (1981)	213
4.4	ENDEAVORS WITH POETRY	223
4.4.1	Spiritual Songs: Poetry From the Period of Youth	225
V	CONCLUSIONS	230
	APPENDIX A: STATISTICS OF THE RUCAVA PARISH: 1953–1983.	239
	SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY	240
	Documentary sources	240
	Newspapers and periodicals.	243
	Interviews	243
	Printed sources	244
	Bibliography	245

I INTRODUCTION

1.1 SUBJECT OF RESEARCH AND SOURCES

Within the volatile church history of 20th-century Latvia, the period of Soviet occupation is still a relatively grey area. Regrettably, despite its relative historical proximity and clear significance for present-day church life, this period has not been researched adequately and is thus poorly understood. After the incorporation of Latvia into the USSR and its radically different socio-political, cultural, and ideological milieu, the role of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (LELC) changed dramatically. The Church was forced to face a new set of circumstances. Being reduced in size and deprived of its influence, the Lutheran Church was degraded and marginalized to the outskirts of Soviet society. The whole mentality and theological ethos of the LELC inevitably changed. The Finnish scholar Jouko Talonen described the situation of the Lutheran Church as a kind of “ghetto,” a metaphor for the circumstances in which the Church was transformed into a strictly controlled and tightly isolated minority group inside the totalitarian state.

This research intends to deliver a more personal and specific account of these difficult times. Their complexity will be narrowed by focusing on the biography of one particular man whose service for the LELC covered nearly the entire Soviet period. The complicated story will be told through the prism of the life, work, and theology of the distinguished pastor and theologian Nikolajs Plāte (1915–1983). His ministry for the Lutheran Church under the Soviet regime is not a typical “hero” story describing extraordinary actions. Nevertheless, a serious case could be made that the church history of the Soviet times required a different kind of heroics. It demanded that ecclesiastical servants and personalities fulfill their mission with restraint, loyalty, and steadfastness, remaining faithful regardless of all the unfavorable circumstances.

Essentially, this investigation is a case study in Soviet-era church history, where an individual life reflects a wider pattern of the disempowered Lutheran Church and her struggles. By means of Plāte’s biography, a more complete and comprehensive understanding will emerge of the perplexing developments of the Church in the

Soviet era. Plāte was born in 1915, educated during the idealistic years of the first Latvian independence, ordained in 1938 shortly before the Communist occupation of 1940, and served as pastor during World War II and subsequently under the prolonged Soviet rule over Latvia. He died in 1983. The experience of geopolitical and ideological upheavals turned out to be a major challenge for him, both personally and professionally. It became a perpetual struggle to survive and maintain his integrity. In view of the problematic historical background, this study will focus on the following important questions: How did Plāte face these arduous challenges? How did he react and adapt to the new ghetto-like surroundings where the Church was oppressed and persecuted in various ways? What were the primary strategies for survival? How did the antagonistic environment, attacks, and restrictions influence Plāte's pastoral ministry and teaching, as well as his theological thinking and writing? And finally, how did this environment impact the mindset and mentality of a Lutheran pastor surviving tough times of isolation, marginalization, and disconnectedness?

The first part of this study (Chapters I to III) treats the biographical course of Plāte's life. It has been presented chronologically and set within a greater historical framework, where periods are roughly divided by the socio-political changes and their impact on church life, as well as changes in Plāte's own path. The general and ecclesiastical periods are briefly outlined in overviews, and crucial issues are discussed in greater depth. The research is conducted using a method of history (genetic method), which allows for the construction of a historical narrative of Plāte's life and work. The relationship between history and biography is treated in a mutually illuminating manner: on the one hand, history provides a wider context for the detailed experiences of an individual's life; on the other, biography illustrates how those greater socio-political and historical changes manifest within a narrower, smaller-scale, more personal account.¹ The primary attention of the study is directed at Plāte's pastoral ministry and contributions to the LELC in the Latvian SSR. For a broader perspective, the method of so-called "lived religion"² is also implemented, featuring individual stories and memories that help to recount and interpret Plāte's ministry, as well as provide a closer look at his religious personality, domestic piety,

¹ For a more extensive and theoretical discussion of the relationships between biography and history, see Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2010).

² The concept of lived religion was popularized in the late 20th century by religious study scholars like Robert A. Orsi and David D. Hall, who tried to provide a holistic framework for understanding the beliefs, practices, and everyday experiences of religious and spiritual persons in religious studies. David Hall, *Lived Religion In America: Toward A History Of Practice*, Princeton University Press (1997), p. vii.

and service in his parish. Since Pastor Plāte served in several different congregations, for the sake of a more condensed history, the dominant focus is chiefly directed toward his ministry in the Rucava parish (1953–1983), where most of his work was done.

The second part (Chapter IV) deals with Plāte's theological activities and literary production. His theological views will be explored within the context of the Latvian Lutheran tradition and contrasted with the Soviet atheistic environment. Essentially, this will be a historical examination of ideas, where an effort is made to get a better sense of his theological approach. After a discussion of Plāte as seminary docent and his involvement in theological controversies, particular attention is given to his writings. Produced under the Soviet regime, these texts carry an indubitable imprint of the totalitarian era. His literary production is a unique witness to the mentality of the Soviet Lutheran Church. Plāte's prolific writings (the so-called compendia) are presented in a chronological sequence and analyzed with regard to their contemporary relevance. His individual style of authorship, predominant theological concerns, and proposed solutions for the Church in crisis are identified.

This specific study began as my M.A. thesis at the Theological Faculty at the University of Latvia. No previous scholarly work or critical research on Plāte had been done before that. Thus, this research intends to open up a new vista to provide a fresh look at the life of the Church of this era and one of her preeminent figures. Biographical sources on Plāte have been available in various Latvian archives, libraries, and private collections, yet the most abundant and relevant information comes from the Consistory Archive of the LELC (LELBA)³ and the private archive of Pastor Modris Plāte (MPPA). A few interviews with Plāte's contemporaries, Lutheran pastors, and parishioners have been used as secondary sources. Only some minor publications on Plāte's life are found in print: a short obituary in the Church Calendar⁴ and a couple of articles in smaller newspapers. Quite recently, for the 100th anniversary of Plāte's birth, the Church Calendar (BK 2015) published a biographical article, regrettably not an original but a reprint of my previous work, used without a proper reference.⁵

Plāte's own literary production comprises nine sizable theological manuscripts (some of which he kept on improving over time) and one poetry collection. These

³ Unfortunately, the consistory Archive of the LELC (LELBA) is not very well organized. There is no consistency in catalogue numeration. With regard to the basic files of clergymen and congregations, I hold to the original numeration, as written on the top of every page. Since each document in these files is not numbered, in footnotes I refer only generally to the file.

⁴ BK 1984, 198–199.

⁵ BK 2015, 245–251.

samizdat-style books were transcribed and copied on a typewriter. The manuscripts, limited in number, are presently scattered throughout various libraries and private archives. Two of his books have been published: *Dr. Mārtiņa Lutera "Mazā Katehisma" iztirzājums* (Explanation of the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther, originally published in 1980, reprinted in 1989)⁶ and *Dogmatika: 1. un 2. daļa* (Dogmatics, Parts I and II, originally published in 1981, reprinted in *Pūrs*).⁷ One smaller article by Plāte was reprinted in a book *Teoloģija: teorija un prakse* (Theology: Theory and Praxis).⁸ All of these writings are representations of Lutheran piety produced during this complicated era for the service of the Church. They include texts on the Old Testament, homiletics, poimenics, catechetics, confessions, and dogmatics. A general overview of their content is provided and Plāte's contextual reflections on the Soviet environment are highlighted. An important source of information is *Baznīcas Kalendārs* (BK), the Church Calendar, which, even though censored by the Soviets, was the only regular printed communication medium of the LELC.

Since all such sources exhibit unmistakable marks of the totalitarian impact, they cannot be accepted uncritically. The layers of inner and outer restriction, self-censure, and taboos need to be identified. The totalitarian context itself presupposes all sorts of hindrances to the free expression of the Christian faith. Thus, in order to achieve a more constructive reading and interpretation of the source materials, a wide spectrum of fears and mental barriers must be acknowledged. From the present-day Western point of view, it is truly a challenge to reach a full understanding of the ghetto mentality. With terrorism and totalitarianism rearing their ugly heads in various corners of the world today, getting a better grasp of the system that governed not only the Soviet people's outward conduct, but also their inner thoughts and convictions, is a rather high priority. I seek to contribute toward this understanding.

For a basic overview of the history of the Latvian Church in this era, this study has mostly relied on the research of such scholars as Jouko Talonen, Edgars Ķiploks, Aldis Bergmanis, Zanda Mankusa, Elīza Zikmane, Dzintars Laugalis, Linards Rozentāls,⁹ and a few others. This study has also benefited from historical studies on the impact of totalitarian regimes on people's minds, such as *The Captive Mind* by Czesław Miłosz. For a more complete understanding of the antagonistic environment and opposing viewpoints, an examination of various atheistic and anti-religious

⁶ Plāte 1989.

⁷ Plāte 2009.

⁸ Plāte 2006.

⁹ Talonen 1997, 2016; Ķiploks 1968–1970; Bergmanis 2006; Mankusa 2001; Zikmane 2001; Laugalis 1998; Rozentāls 2016.

resources is necessary as well.

My interest in Soviet-era church history initially started in the late 1980s when I first entered the Church and turned to faith, and it became even deeper in the early 1990s when I began my theological studies. Through contact with elderly pastors, the so-called “old guard” who served the LELC during the Soviet times, I learned my Christianity. Against the background of the post-Soviet “grey and gloomy masses” where most people – shackled by the chains of conformity – seemed more or less the same, these elderly clergymen clearly stood out and looked different. These were remarkable personalities, and even “strange birds,” whose stories seemed worth exploring. Nikolajs Plāte was one of that “old guard.” He left a lasting impression on me by his writings, most notably his *Explanation of the Small Catechism*, which was an assigned textbook at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia.

Henceforth, compelled by my personal experience and a sense of indebtedness, I have felt stimulated to achieve a greater awareness of and appreciation for the service of Soviet-era Lutheran pastors and their legacy. Accordingly, I have wished to get a more profound understanding of Plāte’s bitter struggles and his tenacity to make the best of a difficult situation. In my research, I have attempted to listen to Plāte’s unique voice while making an effort to comprehend his personality on his own terms and in his own context. Although I must admit that in a sense my personal sentiments have been involved, at the same time I am committed to retaining an attitude of deliberate academic detachment and remaining critical of my own presuppositions.

1.2 BACKGROUND: EARLY YEARS

1.2.1 Origins and childhood

Nikolajs Plāte was born on January 7, 1915 in the village of Ļovāni in the parish of Varakļāni in the Latgale region. He was baptized on February 15, 1915, at the local Varakļāni Evangelical Lutheran Church. His father, Jānis Plāte, was a forest guard, and his mother Marija Plāte was a knitter.¹⁰ The only child in the family, Nikolajs was born to his parents when they were already in their middle age. The boy was brought up with a good deal of care; he was greatly cherished and even indulged by his loving parents. With his father fulfilling his duties as a forest guard, Nikolajs was frequently taken along on outdoor journeys, which taught him a deep appreciation

¹⁰ LVVA 1/16942 (Plāte, N. 17277).

for nature and made him a perceptive observer of the natural world.¹¹

Although they lived in Latgale, a predominantly Roman Catholic region of Latvia, the family had a conscious Lutheran identity. There is no detailed account of their family life or the boy's religious upbringing. However, it would be safe to assume that Nikolajs received religious instruction that was in line with the pious mentality of Lutherans in this area. Jānis Plāte was a religious man, and eventually he was elected the president of the Varakļāni parish.¹² Historically speaking, the Varakļāni parish had a well-established and quite active community with proper Lutheran traditions. Since 1879, Varakļāni had its own wooden church building, where regular worship service was practiced. Older reports even maintain that the local Latvian Lutherans had been more active than their German counterparts. Latvians were said to be particularly eager to provide their children with religious instruction, teaching hymns, making long trips to attend church services, and thus being more diligent in their Lutheran piety.¹³

Nikolajs Plāte went through his primary schooling during the first decade of Latvian independence in the 1920s, which certainly opened new possibilities for a Latvian boy of modest origin, as Nikolajs was. It is vital to understand that this period was marked by enormous socio-economic and cultural change. With the establishment of the Republic of Latvia in 1918, the Latvian people had gained self-determination in their own land, laying the foundation for a new Latvian society. Hence, in spite of the enduring hardships and destruction after World War I and the Revolution, it turned out to be an increasingly optimistic environment with a strong national ethos, which empowered native Latvians to take charge of building their own democratic state and causing their society to prosper.¹⁴

In this era of new beginnings, Plāte grew up and received his first formal education. At the start, he attended the Varakļāni 2nd Primary School for six years. It was a school that gathered children from the entire local region. The general conditions at this school were still quite poor and humble – the classes were overcrowded and the ventilation deficient. One of his schoolmates remembered Plāte from this period as the youngest pupil in the class and a somewhat shy fellow. It was as if two contradictory sides were recognized in the boy. On the one hand, Plāte was believed to have been tempered by hard work and there was a sort of robustness about him.

¹¹ Staburags 7.01.1995, 5.

¹² BK 1937.

¹³ Ķiploks 1987, 94–101.

¹⁴ Balodis 1990, 185–245; Šilde 1993; Schwabe 1949, 31–47; Strods 1996, 241–270.

Yet, on the other hand, a more gentle and delicate side to his personality was also evident. He was very interested in books, was perceptive toward nature, and had some sentimental traits in his character. It was remembered that other boys had observed his naïveté and composed a satirical poem, playing some humorous word games in the Latgalian dialect on his last name Plāte, which were meant to ridicule his simplicity and credulity. Likewise, the schoolmates were interested in the sandwiches that he brought to school, since he was generous enough to share them.¹⁵

Subsequently, Plāte proceeded with his schooling at the Varakļāni State Gymnasium for two years. After that, he made a decision to transfer to the Gymnasium of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Rīga.¹⁶ That was a significant turning point, anticipating his future choice of career. Most likely, the idea to pursue a theological and pastoral education had occurred already at the beginning of high school, because as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he immediately followed it. At the age of 15, he left behind his parents' home and rural surroundings, and he began his relatively self-reliant city life in the capital Rīga. With a youthful impatience, he was also ready to leave behind his native Latgalian accent, and he made a rather quick transition to the dominant Latvian language articulation typical for Rīga. Apparently, he had no scruples about shedding his local roots and distinct Latgalian identity.¹⁷

1.2.2 Attending the Gymnasium of the Lutheran Church

It can be argued that at this time, young Plāte was already quite motivated to dedicate his life to the service of the Church. Later, he himself described this move to Rīga as prompted by aspirations “to take up spiritual service.”¹⁸ The move was made in 1930, which was the very first year that the Gymnasium of the LELC was officially recognized by the State. The specific goal of this church school was to promote and inspire a pastoral vocation. Its teaching and educational work were based on Christian, humanist, and nationalist ideals. Special attention was devoted to preparing pupils for a further theological education at the university. Study of Greek and Latin was required. Modern German also had to be learned sufficiently to enable fluent conversation and reading of scientific literature. The task of the Gymnasium

¹⁵ Staburags 7.01.1995, 5.

¹⁶ LVA RKLPA 1419/2 15. Plāte's autobiographical report.

¹⁷ Interview with Modris Plāte on December 12, 2014. According to Nikolajs Plāte's son, the only times later in life when his father's nostalgia for his native places came through were his birthdays. Then he asked to play the recording of the Latgalian folk song “Aiz ezera balti bērzi,” and he cried.

¹⁸ Plāte 1933, 269.

was not only to foster appropriate knowledge and a Christian character, but also to raise well-rounded servants of the Church and State. These goals had to be reached by a soundly organized, tightly monitored, and piously realized life and education, which was achieved under the close supervision of experienced Christian teachers. Since most of the pupils stayed in the boarding house, the school's social life was also arranged in a friendly and homelike atmosphere, so that the youngsters could eat, live, learn, worship, rest, and relax together. Thus, the entire daily routine was very well-ordered and organized, and each day started with a devotion conducted by the schoolboys themselves.¹⁹

Without a doubt, the Gymnasium left an abiding and indelible impression on its pupils. It is rather remarkable that almost all of Plāte's Class of 1932 (12 out of 13 boys) went on to study theology at the University of Latvia.²⁰ Later, at the Theological Faculty, this group of young men were called the "minor prophets" because there were twelve of them.²¹ Plāte himself described them as religiously minded young boys from various parts of Latvia, who were brought together to this school in their formative years.²² For the most part, the influence of the Gymnasium was extended through its teachers, who were prominent churchmen of the LELC. The dynamic environment of the school not only provided an opportunity for fruitful and beneficial education, but also for practical learning, since pupils were introduced to productive church work as well. The school also provided lively social interaction and community life. During these years, Plāte acquired some very good friends, such as Vilis Augstkalns (1914–1987), Jānis Gustiņš (1913–1988), and Kārlis Martinsons (1911–1982), with whom he remained closely associated for the rest of his life.²³

Essentially, the Gymnasium had been created by Bishop Kārlis Irbe (1861–1934)²⁴ and the LELC leadership in order to advance a certain model of Lutheran clergy. Irbe's expressed desire was to implement this school as a means of strengthening the spiritually conservative basis of the LELC, combining a strong Lutheran consciousness with a more or less pietistic devotion. Both dogma and piety were crucial ingredients while guiding the young men to such an ideal of the priesthood. Thus, the Gymnasium was in the strong hands of the LELC leaders, and its teachers were Bishop Irbe's trusted followers. The theologically conservative Kārlis Irbe and Ādams

¹⁹ Rozenieks [1931]; CB 1986, 84–86.

²⁰ Talonen 2016, 125.

²¹ SvZ 5/1989 7.

²² Plāte 1933, 269.

²³ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

²⁴ See Lauciņš 2015.

Mačulāns (1864–1959) for the most part had a dictum when appointing the school’s teachers. During the time of Plāte’s studies, Vilhelms Rozeniēks (1868–1941) was the headmaster. The most active teachers were Dr. Kārlis Freidenfelds (1867–1943), the Baltic German Hans Wenschkewitz (1904–1987), and the multi-faceted theologian Edgars Rumba (1904–1943), who was also the master of the dormitory. An especially significant role was played by the school inspector Edgars Wille (1884–1945), who taught religion and classical languages (Latin and Greek), which played an essential part in the school’s curriculum.²⁵

The Gymnasium was created in the context of a relentless theological confrontation where two different ideals of priesthood clashed with each other. The first was academically liberal, and the second was the ecclesiastically conservative ideal. On the one hand, the LELC had its liberal side, which was influenced by the dominant German theology. Mostly, it included professors of the Theological Faculty and pastors of the younger generation who were trained at the university. Strongly emphasizing the academic education of the priesthood, they were anxious that the Church not lose all connection with the intelligentsia. On the other hand, there were the conservative Bishop Irbe and other older clergy, who had studied at the “Old Tartu” and still lived in their nostalgic memories about the “ecclesiological” theology of the late 19th century. They represented a Pietistic-Orthodox ideal of priesthood and an ecclesiastic view of the education of the clergy. They believed that this older theology had considerably greater value for application to church life than the newer teachings of German liberal theology. In the confrontation between these two theological approaches, the Gymnasium was expected to play a meaningful role and to strengthen the conservative side.²⁶

Plāte was initially introduced to this theological battle at the Gymnasium. Since first impressions often happen to be the most lasting, it can be argued that Plāte’s theological views were first formed during these early gymnasium years. Being instructed by experienced and conservative churchmen, Plāte was deeply influenced by their piety and high esteem for the Bible, which also issued many warnings against biblical higher criticism. The basic theological approach at the Gymnasium was practical and ecclesiastical, not academic or scientific. Its teaching was oriented toward offering some spiritual and practical skills for parish work, not the practice of theological scholarship. Thus, winning the hearts and minds of these boys for the “ecclesiological” ideal was clearly one of the main tasks of this school, as it cultivated

²⁵ Talonen 2016, 99–100.

²⁶ Talonen 2016, 120–125.

in the pupils a certain conservative theological mindset and identity that was meant to protect them from liberal influences.²⁷ There is little doubt that the two years Plāte spent at the Gymnasium had in many ways an enduring effect in shaping his theological approach for the years to come.

In all likelihood, the most important figure at the Gymnasium for Plāte was his teacher Edgars Wille. One of the major areas of competence in Wille's work was Christian youth work. He published *Jaunība un Debesu Valstība* (Youth and the Kingdom of Heaven), stressing evangelical and revivalist methods.²⁸ Wille was influenced in part by C. Skovgaard-Petersen (1866–1955), a Dane who was active in the Christian student movement and who emphasized personal conversion experiences and experience-based Christianity. Another important influence on Wille was the famous British Reformed Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892). According to his theological profile, Wille was a pietistic, evangelical conservative. For him, Christianity was first and foremost a source of principles and ideals, not theories and dogmas. Wille rejected liberal theology and claimed that the image of Jesus of modern exegesis had arisen from subjectivism, and thus it did not describe the Jesus of the Bible. In Old Testament exegesis, he emphasized the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Wille endorsed a salvation-historic view of the Bible and rebutted liberal historical-critical exegesis.²⁹

Wille's pious personality and his theological reasoning greatly influenced young Plāte, and traces of his approach can easily be recognized in Plāte's own subsequent theological writing. It is evident that for young Plāte, Wille had become a type of authority figure. Therefore, when Wille was leaving his teacher's position at the Gymnasium in 1933, Plāte dedicated a truly heartfelt article to him in the youth magazine *Jaunatnes Ceļš*, expressing gratitude for his faithful service. He eulogized his esteemed teacher, writing that Wille's contribution to the school had been so profound and far-reaching that it needed to be penned with indelible letters. In this article, Plāte described his learning experience at the Gymnasium as a genuine education which had opened up young hearts, joined them together, and made them considerably richer and wider, in spite of the fact that the schooling, at the time, was still taking place in the cramped and confined church property at 93 Kalnciema

²⁷ Talonen 2016, 120–125. Already in the beginning of 1920s, the LELC had created the Theological Institute as an alternative path to the priesthood (apart from the Faculty of Theology), but when the Theological Faculty and the LELC reached a compromise in the beginning of 1930s, the institute gradually lost its role. Therefore, seeking other ways to influence the education of the church workers and strengthen the priests' spiritual and theological base, Irbe and his supporters established the Gymnasium of the Church.

²⁸ Wille 1924.

²⁹ Talonen 2016, 109–110.

Street. Plāte wrote:

We (the pupils) were young, as we had broken loose from our fathers and mothers, arriving here from different parts of Latvia. With a strong desire to take up spiritual service, we came to this new educational institution – at the time called the Christian Gymnasium of the Theological Institute. And in Pastor Wille we found ourselves a solid support and spiritual father. With affection for youth and being himself forever young at heart, he knew how to nurture and strengthen our weak faith, offering a perfect foundation for our future dreams, rooting out all weeds that had gained ground in our character, as well as lifting our heads whenever we were downcast.³⁰

He also clearly recognized Wille's greatest merits in helping him to tread his first steps while starting to teach and preach himself. Later, in his notebook from 1938, the year of his ordination, Plāte recalled that it was during his gymnasium years that he had preached the Word for the first time. He could no longer remember the theme or the text of his first sermon, but no doubt he had fulfilled his first duties under the supervision of Pastor Wille. Amid his gymnasium studies, he had already begun teaching Sunday school, given Bible instruction to the younger school boys, and led regular morning and evening devotions. Plāte expressed his thanks directly: "For the whole introduction into the ecclesiastical service, I owe my unforgettable gratitude to Pastor Wille!"³¹

Plāte graduated from the Gymnasium of the Church in the summer of 1932 with grades that were above average. He excelled in such subjects as geography, arithmetic, natural sciences, philosophy, and military education, but was a little less successful in cosmography and music.³² In the final report, a short profile for each graduate was featured, in which Nikolajs Plāte was characterized as "silent, earnest, profound, talented and religious."³³

1.2.3 Theological studies at the University of Latvia

Soon after his graduation from the Gymnasium, at the age of 17 Plāte entered the Theological Faculty of the University of Latvia. On his application form, Plāte wrote that during this period of study, he intended to support himself with the assistance of his parents.³⁴ Nevertheless, as he later reported, the help his parents could afford

³⁰ Plāte 1933, 269.

³¹ MPPA, a handwritten note in the BK 1938.

³² LVVA 6637/6 1144 Copies of diplomas for the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church's Gymnasium 1931–1932.

³³ LVVA 6637/6 1161 Minutes of the final examination for the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church's Gymnasium, May 30–June 15, 1932.

³⁴ LVVA 1/16942 (Plāte, N. 17277)

was far from sufficient, and the reality of his student life turned out to be quite frugal. He had to struggle with a lack of means. Like many other students, he tried very hard to earn some extra money by tutoring and doing odd jobs.³⁵

Plāte lived in a student dormitory at 93 Kalnciema St. Interestingly, it was the same address as that of the Gymnasium from which he had graduated only a couple of months before. Indeed, when the Gymnasium was transferred to a new building at 1 Liepmuižas Street in the summer of 1932, the LELC had decided that the old facilities would be used for the accommodation of theological students, and the former school building was remodeled as a dormitory. In this way, the recent graduates of the Gymnasium who now had become theological students were fortunate enough to stay at this familiar place. Plāte's good friend Vilis Augstkalns became his roommate. Edgars Rumba was appointed the dormitory master, being responsible for its supervision and devotional life. From the dormitory routine of this period, there was an anecdotal story that directly involved Plāte: embarrassingly, he had been caught sleeping by Rumba, thus missing the morning devotion. When the dormitory master entered the room, he discovered Plāte relaxing in his bed and smoking. "My teeth hurt," Plāte confessed, trying to justify his behavior. "I did not know that teeth problems were healed by smoking," responded Rumba in an ironic manner.³⁶

By the time that Plāte underwent his theological studies, the Faculty of Theology was already a well-established and properly developed institution. Founded in 1920, during the first decade of its work the Faculty had already achieved an academic level that was comparable to other European institutions.³⁷ Within a short period of time, it had managed to educate a promising new generation of Latvian scholars and succeeded in creating a branch of Latvian national theology, whose representatives enjoyed very extensive connections with the rest of Europe.³⁸

To some extent, the development of the Faculty was impacted by the theological tradition of the "Old Tartu," because all of its prominent teachers had been educated at this Baltic-German university. However, the most decisive authority figures for the generation of young Latvian theologians were the strong exponents of classical liberal theology, Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), the exegete Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), and the religious historian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). With the exception

³⁵ LVA RKLPA 1419/2 15 Plāte's autobiographical report.

³⁶ Zariņš 2008, 58.

³⁷ Rubenis 1991, 11.

³⁸ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 361.

of practical theology, the rise and development of Latvian theology was evident in all theological disciplines, and Latvian exegetics in particular rose to an international level. The high exegetic profile of the Rīga faculty was also promoted by the work of the distinguished biblical archeologist Immanuel Benzinger (1865–1935) as Professor of Old Testament Exegetics.³⁹

The key figure in the academic life of the Faculty of Theology was Professor Kārlis Kundziņš, Jr. (1883–1967), who had been decisively influenced by Adolf von Harnack. Kundziņš was greatly concerned about the separation of the Church from the national cultural life, and he promulgated the notion that academic theological education was an absolute necessity in Latvia. Being a renowned follower of Bultmann’s form-historical school of thought, the exegete Kundziņš was the most internationally recognized Latvian theologian. Although he specialized in New Testament exegesis, he was, like many of his contemporaries, a theologically multi-talented person. His most important field of research was the Gospel of St. John and the Primitive Church, but he also studied the problem of the historical Jesus.⁴⁰

Professor Kundziņš was also a controversial figure, especially in relation to the theological battle between the Faculty and the leadership of the LELC. While Bishop Irbe and his supporters did not disapprove of academic theology per se, nonetheless they insisted that the liberal opinions of university professors such as Kundziņš were deeply troubling. With the assertion that the majority of LELC’s clergy still represented Lutheran Orthodoxy or the salvation-history view of the Bible taught at the “old Tartu,” the conservative leaders objected to Kundziņš’ views and claimed that the liberal theology in the Faculty was outright dangerous to the LELC. It was feared that such liberalism would shatter the foundations of biblical Christianity.⁴¹

Although the fiercest battles had taken place in the 1920s, strife between the two positions was still felt in the 1930s. It was in this theological context that Plāte arrived at the “liberal” Faculty with his essentially “conservative” bias. Only recently having been instructed by the Gymnasium’s teachers, he had clearly absorbed Bishop Irbe’s conservative line of thought, which was eager to defend biblical authority against any criticism and to affirm practical and ecclesiastical theology. Following these theological presuppositions, it may be assumed that as a student Plāte would have attended Professor Kundziņš’ lectures with a good deal of hesitation and suspicion. It surely must have been a challenge for a conservative-minded young student

³⁹ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 361–362.

⁴⁰ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 362.

⁴¹ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 364–365.

like Plāte to study under such an influential liberal theologian and to listen to his rationally persuasive arguments while maintaining his own convictions.

Without a doubt, Benzinger and Kundziņš were the most acclaimed theological and academic authorities in Latvia at this time. Both of these prominent professors, with their respective works, provided an enduring contribution to academic theology in Latvia, and both Benzinger's *Israēla literatūras vēsture* (Israel's Literary History)⁴² and Kundziņš' *Kristus* (The Christ)⁴³ became standard textbooks, which were continually used in pastoral education even after World War II. It is interesting to observe that Plāte earned some very good grades with both of these professors in their respective classes,⁴⁴ regardless of his critical stance against their theological positions. Nevertheless, as attested by later evidence from the Soviet era, Plāte severely criticized both of them and even objected to the use of their books at the LELC Seminary due to their critical language, which dared to call some of the biblical stories legends, fictions, ancient myths, and folk tales.⁴⁵

Another remarkable theologian at the Faculty was Voldemārs Maldonis (1870–1941), a scholar of philosophy of religion and systematic theology, who was mostly influenced by Rudolf Otto and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Maldonis was a very national-minded theologian. His most important work consisted of his study of the writer Jānis Poruks' religious and ethical world, as well as his various minor essays on the philosophy of religion. In part through his research and in part thanks to his personality, Maldonis created the Latvian School of Philosophy of Religion, whose brightest star was the exceptionally gifted young scholar Alberts Freijs (1903–1968). While Maldonis was similarly influenced by liberal theology, one could find elements of traditional faith in his magnum opus, *Evaņģēliskā Dogmatika* (Evangelical Dogmatics) as well. Systematic theology at the University was almost entirely represented by Maldonis' School with its study of the philosophy of religion and an interest in the history of religion. Classical dogmatics – or, for example, Luther studies – were only marginal.⁴⁶

Plāte held a less critical and more open disposition toward Maldonis than toward the other aforementioned professors. Even if Plāte was not particularly interested in the field of the philosophy of religion as such, Maldonis' wide-ranging expertise and his accessible attitude toward all students definitely made a positive impression on

⁴² Benzinger 1938.

⁴³ Kundziņš 1931.

⁴⁴ LELBA, Minutes of the meeting for the Board of the Theological Faculty from 1930–1937. Results of examinations.

⁴⁵ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (9/15/1969). See the later chapter: Controversy over the authority of the Bible.

⁴⁶ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 362.

him. From Plāte's personal notes it is possible to establish that, together with other theological students, he had paid several private visits to Maldonis in order to learn from the experienced theologian and churchman.⁴⁷ In his later dogmatic work, Plāte would use Maldonis' book as a sort of standard reference, frequently citing him both favorably and critically. He also made use of the basic structure of Maldonis' monograph when he wrote his own Dogmatics at the end of his life.⁴⁸

1.2.4 Plāte's theological influences

Meanwhile, Plāte displayed considerably more interest for his classes in church history. The leading church historian at the Faculty was Ludvigs Adamovičs (1884–1942),⁴⁹ who in many respects was an influential public figure. His particular contribution was the creation of a national interpretation of Latvian church history, formulated through his research and teaching. In the previous period, the field of church history was dominated by Baltic-German writing, which at all times started from a German perspective and viewed Courland and Livonia as regional entities. However, Adamovičs was the first to pay attention to Latvian church history where Latvians themselves became the subjects of history.⁵⁰ Adamovičs made an argument that Pietism – and the Herrnhutian brotherhood⁵¹ specifically – played an important role in the “spiritual rebuilding” and “growing into Christianity” of old Livonia. Simultaneously, he made a distinction between an external ecclesiasticism and “living Christian religiousness.” The effect of a deeper, “living” Christianity, according to Adamovičs, was the result of Pietism.⁵² To Plāte, who himself was a pietistically inclined Christian, such ideas obviously seemed appealing. It appears that Plāte made an extra effort to study Latvian church history, passing this examination with highest marks.⁵³

The best-known student of Adamovičs was Edgars Ķiploks (1907–1999), who started his work with Adamovičs at the Faculty shortly before World War II and

⁴⁷ MPPA, Plāte's notes in BK 1938.

⁴⁸ Dogmatics I and II, 1981/1982.

⁴⁹ On Adamovičs, see Freimane & Talonen 2005; Ceļš no. 65/2015.

⁵⁰ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 363. Adamovičs' most notable study concerning Latvian church history was undoubtedly the massive 659-page monograph *Vidzemes baznīca un latviešu zemnieks* (The Church of Livland and the Latvian peasant 1710–1740), published in 1933. Freimane & Talonen 2005, 17–20.

⁵¹ They are also called the Moravian Church, and in German they are known as the Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine.

⁵² Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 363–364.

⁵³ LELBA, Minutes of the meeting for the Board of the Theological Faculty from 1930–1937. Results of examinations.

continued this tradition of Latvian church history in exile after the war.⁵⁴ During the Soviet period, Plāte exchanged letters with Ķiploks in which he wrote about his previous engagement with Latvian church history. Since Ķiploks had inquired about the Soviet situation of the Church, Plāte responded as follows:

I understand and appreciate your interest in our congregations. After completion of my studies, during the first years of my church service, my hobby was to collect “Personalstatus” on the clergy of our church. It was similar to the well-known Th. Kallmeyer’s “Die evangelische Kirchen und Prediger Kurlands” (1910). ... Yet everything that I had collected was lost during the war. And after that, I have not come back to it.⁵⁵

Of all the personalities of the Faculty, however, most influential for Plāte was likely Edgars Rumba, formerly his teacher at the Gymnasium and now his teacher at the University. Although Rumba was still a relatively young man, the effect he had on the LELC in the 1930s was considerable. There is no doubt that he was a theologian of many talents and linguistic gifts. A Methodist by origin, Rumba’s religious profile was colored by his connection with awakening movements and the Herrnhuters in Rīga. He was the first theologian to study in Sweden at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, gaining a profound knowledge in the theology of Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) and the Church of England. In addition, Rumba became a pioneer of Latvian missionary work and the “father” of Latvian ecumenical activity in the 1930s. He also did an increasing amount of research in systematic and practical theology.⁵⁶

Rumba’s dissertation was about the ecclesiology of Söderblom, *Baznīca un garīgais amats oikumeniski-luteriskā uztverē* (The Ecumenical Lutheran Conception of the Church and its Ministry).⁵⁷ He was a multi-faceted theologian with publications in dogmatics, especially on the concept of the Church (*ecclesia*), but he also wrote about foreign missions and different issues of practical theology. And even though Rumba did not represent Bishop Irbe’s Orthodox-Pietistic view as such or the German tradition of the “old Tartu,” he was generally a conservative theologian, yet with a critical and academic approach in his research. The positive attitude of Irbe toward Rumba was probably due to the fact that in the theological struggle of the day, he fell on Irbe’s side as a talented representative of ecclesiastical theology. According to Talonen, Rumba was not a liberal theologian, but he was so multi-dimensional and such

⁵⁴ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 364.

⁵⁵ ALCH, Pastors (Plāte). A letter of Nikolajs Plāte to Edgars Ķiploks (date unknown). Thanks to Prof. Jouko Talonen for providing a copy of the letter from ALCH (Chicago).

⁵⁶ Talonen & Rohtmets 2014, 363.

⁵⁷ Rumba 1938.

a strong scholar that he was valued above and beyond the established boundaries. Rumba's special theological and ecclesiastical versatility had raised him above the theological confrontation in Latvia in the 1920s. The brilliant young researcher was likewise appreciated by the liberal theologians of the Faculty.⁵⁸

For Plāte, it was a distinct privilege as a student to be so closely associated with such a young and talented theologian, having him as teacher, mentor, and even supervising pastor. Most likely, it was thanks to Rumba being his docent of practical theology that Plāte became engaged in this particular field of study. An expressed enthusiasm for various aspects of practical theology subsequently followed him throughout his life.⁵⁹ Since Rumba read the inner mission courses at the Faculty, its subdivisions of youth mission and diaconia stood out for Plāte and became his two favorites. Already at the time of gymnasium, he had been involved in the Sunday school and youth work. Later on, beginning his own pastoral ministry, Plāte not only became active himself in the youth work, but also tried to raise awareness about its importance for the entire Church, writing on the issue in the magazine of the LELC.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, for his final thesis, Plāte chose the subject of diaconia. His academic paper was called *Diakonijas sākumi Latvijā* (The Beginnings of Diaconia in Latvia), which presumably was supervised by Docent Rumba and eventually received a successful grade.⁶¹ Unfortunately, this writing has been lost.

In like manner, Rumba was an important influence on Plāte when the latter was preparing for his ordination. One of the places where he practiced his preaching was the Jelgava Reformed Church, which was also a home for the Martin Luther congregation, served by Pastor Rumba.⁶² Rumba had a reputation of being not only a skilled theologian, but also an excellent rhetorician and eloquent public speaker with some fervent “fire and glow” in his sermons. He was characterized as a charismatic personality and vigorous pastor who conducted his services with pietistic sincerity, as well as liturgical depth. Being a man of devout prayer and faith, he never came across as too clever or artificial.⁶³ Thus, there was an abundance of both theoretical and practical wisdom to acquire from Rumba. Afterwards, Plāte acknowledged the man as one of the most impressive ecclesiastical personalities, who had provided a wealth of inspiration for the ministry of the Church and evangelization, especially

⁵⁸ Talonen 2016, 150–153; Rubenis 1994.

⁵⁹ See Plāte's compendia on practical theology, chapters 4.3.3 through 4.3.8.

⁶⁰ Plāte 1943a, 126–127.

⁶¹ Adamovičs 1981, 120.

⁶² LELBA 299, Plāte's autobiography in 1962.

⁶³ Rubenis, (Ilmārs) 2007, 65–67.

work among the youth. Plāte included him among such spiritual leaders as Bishop Dr. Kārlis Irbe, Dr. Kārlis Beldavs (1868–1936) and Pastor Ernests Stange. He went as far as calling these men “stars” who shone brightly in the former historic era.⁶⁴

To put it briefly, Plāte received a variety of theological impulses from the full array of his teachers during his early years. On the one hand, he carried on the ideal of practical, church-oriented, revivalist Christianity, assimilating this at the Gymnasium, especially under the stewardship of Wille. On the other hand, through his studies at the Faculty he learned to appreciate the academic approach to theology, and he acquired an interest in theological research that was encouraged by his professors. Yet, Plāte firmly kept his conservative and pietistic views, retaining reservations against the liberalism of the Faculty. Generally speaking, Plāte’s attitude toward scientific theology seemed to be positive, as he disregarded only the most radical expressions of historical critical scholarship (e.g., those of Benzinger, Kundziņš, and Sanders). He most definitely favored the approach of moderate theologians such as Adamovičs and Rumba, and he felt disposed to develop his theological interests in the more convenient field of practical theology.

1.2.5 Beginnings of ministry and ordination

Apart from his theoretical studies at the Faculty, Plāte was also involved in various student activities. He was a member of the Auseklis student society, taking an active part in its pursuits.⁶⁵ Plāte did not forget about practical church work either. He regularly assisted several pastors and students, helping in their congregational services. During his student years, he managed to visit various parishes in a considerable number of locations – altogether 32 different congregations and 38 schools, congregation halls, inner mission halls, culture clubs, and estates, as well as 40 graveyards – wherever the preaching of the Word was needed. But most frequently, Plāte preached at Bethany Hall, a congregation that was involved in the rejuvenation of pietism in the spirit of the Herrnhutian Brethren movement, holding gatherings at the ascetic German Baptist Church at 9 Vīlande Street.⁶⁶ He repeatedly offered his services to his former teacher Pastor Wille at his congregations in Dundaga and Ģipka.⁶⁷ In 1936, he also wrote a small research article about the history of Dundaga

⁶⁴ BZ 32, 8/1/1943, 126–127.

⁶⁵ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

⁶⁶ Priede 2010, 99.

⁶⁷ MPPA, Plāte’s notes in BK 1938.

Church, describing its building and clergy beginning from the 13th century.⁶⁸ With this list of activities, Plāte summarized his practical experience during the university period.⁶⁹

He completed his theological education within six years, from 1932 to 1938. The typical timeframe for such studies, however, was only four and a half years. The reason for Plāte's delayed graduation was an unpleasant incident, namely, a transgression that he committed near the end of his studies. His violation was an illegal entry that he had made in his study book. The transgression was reported in the minutes of the meeting of the Board of the Theological Faculty on November 13, 1936, stating that on the grounds of Plāte's offense the Board of Deans had resolved to suspend the student from his theological studies from January 1 to September 1 of 1937.⁷⁰ No detailed description or explanation of the breach was provided.

On top of everything else, Plāte's suspension from the Faculty subjected him to compulsory military service, which delayed his graduation even more. Plāte did his military service with the 5th Infantry Division Troops in Cēsis over an extended period of seventeen and a half months. When he was finally dismissed from the army in September 1938, he was a private first class.⁷¹ Regardless, Plāte was able to complete the remainder of his theological program and to receive his graduation certificate while serving as a soldier. A graduation photo dated May of 1938 shows Plāte standing out from the entire class of graduates in his army uniform.⁷²

After the completion of his theological studies, he immediately pursued another of his persistent interests: literature. Already before his demobilization on September 24, Plāte managed to apply and be accepted for studies at the Faculty of Baltic Philology at the University of Latvia. His intentions here are not altogether clear, because his studies lasted only one semester. Nevertheless, even with that he was able to acquire the rights of a school teacher from the Ministry of Education. This opportunity was presented by the fact that the necessary pedagogical course had already been absolved at the Faculty of Theology. Thus, Plāte became a qualified teacher not only for the obligatory religious instruction, but also for Latvian

⁶⁸ JC 8/1936.

⁶⁹ MPPA, Plāte's notes in BK 1938. Plāte also reported that he had held services together with both pastors and students: E. Ville, A. Veinbergs, E. Rumba, A. Grinbergs, K. Goldbergs, Fr. Kramiņš, V. Sproģis, P. Gulbis, Dean J. Reinholds, P. Detlavs, M. Eiche, O. Martinsons, V. Blūmentāls, J. Luksis, V. Zēcens, A. Zucāns, V. Augstkalns, E. Spekmanis, J. Pilmanis, and K. Martinsons.

⁷⁰ LELBA, Minutes of the meeting for the Board of the Theological Faculty from 1930–1937.

⁷¹ LVVA 1/16942 (Plāte, N. 17277)

⁷² Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

language and history.⁷³

At the same time, Plāte was actively seeking to become ordained as a clergyman. Almost as soon as he was released from the military, he visited Archbishop Teodors Grīnbergs (1870–1962). The Archbishop accepted him kindly, offered him money, and promised ordination, meanwhile allowing him to settle at the familiar place at 93 Kalnciema Street.⁷⁴ His ordination took place on October 23 at Plāte's beloved Dundaga Church. The archbishop ordained two theological candidates: Nikolajs Plāte, assigned as a vicar at Latgale Deanery, and Jānis Saulītis (born October 5, 1912), assigned as a vicar at Piltene Deanery.⁷⁵ In the notebook, Plāte signed and sealed his oath with a little prayer: "Lord, help me to fulfill that!"⁷⁶

After ordination, Plāte was sent to serve in his native region. As vicar for Latgale Deanery under the supervision of Pastor Fridrihs Kramiņš (1906–1998), he moved to the town of Krustpils, only 65 kilometers or so from his birthplace and childhood home. With youthful energy and enthusiasm, Plāte immediately began visiting various Lutheran churches in the area, preaching and teaching almost every Sunday. At the same time, he became a teacher at the Primary School of the rural municipality of Krustpils, giving instruction in Latvian language, history, and religion. He also continued publishing articles, which he had been doing during his student years, writing mainly on matters of Christian faith and spiritual life. Plāte lived in Krustpils, working as a school teacher and a vicar, for a whole year.⁷⁷ However, beginning on December 1, 1939, he was appointed to be *pastor loci* in the parish of Zalve, being the first Latvian pastor in the history of that place.⁷⁸

Even if Pastor Plāte was called to serve in the Catholic-dominated region of Latgale, in many regards it could be seen as a most favorable time to do ministry there. Already since the 1920s, Latgale had become a high priority for the LELC, where the Church was able to realize the systematic creation of new Lutheran congregations. And with help from the State in the 1930s, there were many new church buildings constructed in Latgale. As the Lutherans were allotted a place of ideological leadership during the short authoritarian rule of Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942), the LELC could use her ideological capital to establish a stronger presence in the region. As a consequence, a new Lutheran deanery was established in Latgale, where national

⁷³ LVA RKLPA 1419/2 15. Plāte's autobiography.

⁷⁴ MPPA, Plāte's notes in BK 1938.

⁷⁵ SR 44, 10/30/1938, 6.

⁷⁶ MPPA, Plāte's notes in BK 1938.

⁷⁷ LVA RKLPA 1419/2 15. Plāte's autobiography.

⁷⁸ SvZ 5/1989 7.

political interests had to be strengthened by weakening the regional monopoly of Catholicism.⁷⁹

Such attempts of the LELC, at least initially, were relatively successful. Lutheran parishioners and their activities in the area gradually increased. Even a special newspaper *Latgales draudžu vēstnesis* (Congregational News of Latgale) was published,⁸⁰ which was devoted to spreading the Lutheran mission. Since 1930, Pastor Fridrihs Kramiņš had been in charge of the publication. He was the pastor of Plāte's native Varakļāni congregation, and he welcomed an article from the recent graduate.⁸¹ Thus, being a young, enthusiastic pastor and feeling optimistic about his future prospects, Plāte had returned to his native region of Latgale and was resolved to make the best of his opportunities.

1.3 PLĀTE'S MINISTRY DURING WORLD WAR II

1.3.1 The winds of change

The subsequent ministry of Plāte in the Church was not meant to proceed in the same optimistic vein. The tide of geopolitical history was already turning. The seismic events of the Soviet occupation and World War II suddenly and violently interrupted the favorable period for the LELC and her comfortable place in the social structure of society. The following period of socio-political instability, deportations, and persecutions, as well as the devastations of war, presented an overwhelming test for all Christian churches. However, the Lutheran Church was hit particularly hard. Apart from being the largest denomination in Latvia and enjoying a privileged status, during the interwar era (1920–1940) the LELC had made some questionable choices. In the period to come, these would return with some negative consequences.⁸² What were these choices?

First of all, the prevailing principles of nationalism had been gladly received and too willingly embraced by the LELC without foresight or prudence. The two previous decades of independence had been clearly flavored by the spirit of nationalism. After the long history of German domination, without proper preparation or transition the governance of the Lutheran Church had suddenly fallen into the

⁷⁹ Priede 2010, 81–109.

⁸⁰ Ķiploks 1980a, 108.

⁸¹ Plāte 1938, *Latgales Draudžu Vēstnesis* no. 6, 4–6. The devotional article is called *Naidis Kristus dēļ* (Hatred because of Christ), in which he interprets the passage from Lk. 12:51–53.

⁸² Sildegs 2013.

hands of the Latvian clergy. As many of the Latvian pastors had replaced German ones, the Church became generally integrated into the rhythm of national holidays and national life. During this period, the Lutheran Church was increasingly Latvianized, and she acquired several new trappings of nationality.⁸³ Although the first bishop, Kārlis Irbe (1861–1934), had sought to protect the Church from the pitfalls of nationalistic tendencies, keeping a more balanced and Christian view regarding the Latvian-German relationships, ultimately he did not succeed in safeguarding the LELC from the extremes of nationalism.⁸⁴

Following the lead of the new state and its growing national pride and self-identity, the Lutherans also sought to adjust to the mentality of the nation and modify their Christianity, bringing it closer to the “national spirit.” Similar to several other European countries in the 1930s, there was a clear tendency to sacralize national differences, thus justifying the historical rights of individual nations. This movement toward a more “Latvian Latvia” became especially strong after the coup executed by Kārlis Ulmanis on May 15, 1934 and after the establishment of an authoritarian regime. Lutheran theologians increasingly turned their attention to the pre-Christian Latvian religion. Correspondingly, various attempts were also made to effect liturgical reforms to help the evangelical cult become “more Latvian.”⁸⁵

Thus, without taking proper heed of the possible hazards, the LELC had succumbed to the predominant *Zeitgeist* of nationalism. Instead of emphasizing the universal character of the Christian faith and confronting dangers of narrow nationalism, the focus of the Church was directed toward all things Latvian, which in the longer run turned out to be misguided and shortsighted. Only a few years later, Latvian nationalism was forcibly replaced by the Soviet internationalism. With the independent Latvian state ceasing to exist, the intensely Latvian orientation of the Lutheran Church also suddenly appeared to be irrelevant and out of place. The “spiritual house” so strongly built on the quicksands of nationalism was about to collapse and suffer substantial damage.⁸⁶

Apart from nationalism, the second self-inflicted problem for the LELC was her overly close political association with the authoritarian regime of President Ulmanis. At the outset, this association seemed like an excellent idea – a mutually productive cooperation based on common interests. By means of this socio-political alliance,

⁸³ Dreifelds 1995, 53; Dreifelds 1996, 52–82.

⁸⁴ Wenschkewitz 1956, 283–234. See also Lauciņš 2015, 230–233.

⁸⁵ Ante 2010, 11. See also Tēraudkalns & Hanovs 2012; Kļiploks 1968–1970.

⁸⁶ Sildegs 2013.

the LELC hoped to play a more dominant religious, cultural, and social role in the country, whereas Ulmanis' regime via the traditional Lutheran religion strove to achieve a more comprehensive ideological control over the nation. Thus, strengthening of the LELC became one of the ideological objectives for the regime. Such an attitude by President Ulmanis was greatly favored by and pleasing to the Church, as the State became a sort of benefactor for it. And even though direct financial assistance was not provided, the State offered extensive opportunities for the LELC to operate in the military, local municipalities, and schools. Religious education was made mandatory in all schools, for example. But to return the favor, the LELC, in effect, had to promote the official ideology and serve as a tool of the government. All of the official holidays had to be celebrated by the Church, even the birthday of the president! Regular prayers had to be said for the State and its leader, so that Ulmanis' name was mentioned in every church service. A clear testimony about the official position of the Lutheran Church under the authoritarian ideology at this time was given by the newspaper *Svētdienas Rīts* (Sunday Morning), which described Ulmanis as a redeemer of the Latvian nation sent by God himself. Consequently, his role was interpreted in a very positive light, without any criticism.⁸⁷

The authoritarian regime of Ulmanis, which lasted only a few years, had nonetheless made a strong impact and enduring mark on the LELC. More specifically, at this time there also took place an unambiguous turn toward the centralization of church power. Already in 1934, a new basic church law had been adopted, by which a transition from a synodical to a synodical-episcopal governance was made; by the same procedure, the rights and powers of the archbishop were greatly expanded. In 1939, a new special project of "State Church" was prepared, which was intended to effect an even tighter management of church affairs under the supervision of the authoritarian ideologues. In many ways it signaled a general tendency of departure from democratic principles in favor of more centralized governance. As a result of this episcopal tendency, the ensuing Soviet regime had a considerably easier time of bringing the Lutheran Church under its control and subjection while straightaway implementing its totalitarian policies. Since the LELC had already been governed by the principles of the centralized and autocratic rule of Ulmanis, the Communists had only one thing to do – seize control of the leadership of the Church.⁸⁸

In this way, the LELC was compelled to face some somber historical lessons. The same dilemma of ill-advised political, economic and ideological affiliation that

⁸⁷ Balode 2010, 21–44. See also Tēraudkalns & Hanovs 2012, 267–296.

⁸⁸ See Rozentāls 2014, 77. The "State Church" project was not realized due to the immanent historical changes.

had hurt the Church during previous centuries now seemed to return again with a vengeance. It was an irksome historical reality that the Lutheran Church in this region had consistently chosen to support the ruling class of the German landlords, always siding with their interests and thereby losing a good deal of evangelical credibility with the local people. And now, when the young Latvian Church experienced a similar temptation and was offered privileged status, she was not able to resist the “will-to-power,” seizing it too readily and foregoing some of her spiritual independence. Sadly, short-term gains quickly turned into devastating losses. With the historical tide reversing, the LELC found itself on the wrong side of the fence, and it was easily blamed by the Soviets as being a representative of “the old ideology.” By actively supporting Ulmanis’ dictatorship and accepting its guardianship, Lutherans had placed themselves in an vulnerable position vis-à-vis subsequent rulers. At this point, the Communists had some very compelling reasons to label the LELC not only as nationalists, but also as “bourgeois oppressors of the working class.”⁸⁹ It was a truly sad irony that the Church had failed to learn from her own bygone history, causing herself additional difficulties and becoming an easy target for political attacks by the Soviets.⁹⁰

1.3.2 The LELC during the Soviet and German occupations

The outbreak of World War II brought a new phase in the history of the Baltic nations. Along with its neighboring countries, Latvia was transferred into the Soviet hemisphere under the terms of the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, with Soviet expansion taking rapid steps.⁹¹ Formal occupation took place between June 16 and 18, 1940, at a time when the German forces were preoccupied with events in Western Europe.⁹² With Latvia accepted into the “family of the Soviet peoples,” the churches were also subject to the Soviet ideology, which involved the Marxist criticism of religion and a battle to emancipate religious communities. Immediately after the occupation, Soviet laws concerning religion were applied to the Latvian situation, resulting in a collapse of the judicial and economic status of the Lutheran Church.⁹³

From the very beginning, the Soviet state was aggressive and applied heavy pressure to the churches. The LELC was driven into economic hardship, and the entire

⁸⁹ See Belevics 1964, 118–159; Snippe 1977.

⁹⁰ Sildegs 2013.

⁹¹ Strods 2004, 25–62. Talonen 1997, 9.

⁹² Vainbergs 1971, 406.

⁹³ Talonen 1997, 10.

property of the Church was confiscated.⁹⁴ While a majority of the church buildings could be leased from the State, the rents were considerably higher than those of other comparable buildings. Pastors were treated badly, as they were made to pay much higher rent and taxes than the rest of the population. The pastors were considered members of the non-working class, which, as such, was enough to weaken their social status.⁹⁵ The secret police began to monitor and control the work of the pastors, who were forced to face ever-tightening circumstances (e.g., being publicly called “reactionaries,” “saboteurs,” and “fascists” by the media, to mention but some of the epithets).⁹⁶

An order was issued to confiscate all religious literature from bookshops, publishers, and libraries. The LELC had to stop publishing periodicals such as *Svētdienas Rīts*, *Jaunatnes Ceļš*, and *Ceļš*. In January of 1941, an order came to destroy 18,000 new hymnals that were ready to be bound at the publisher.⁹⁷ In the aftermath of the occupation, connections with the “free world” were severed. Full-scale anti-religious propaganda was launched in schools and by the media. The opportunities for the mission of the Church were greatly diminished. Youth ministry, as well as evangelization and charity work, faced very grave difficulties. The Gymnasium of the Church, together with the Theological Institute and the Theological Faculty, was closed in August of 1940. The Church was denied any publishing rights and could no longer broadcast religious programs on the national radio network.⁹⁸

During the “Night of Terror” of June 13–14, 1941, over 15,000 Latvians were deported to various destinations in the Soviet Union. Altogether, some 35,000 Latvians were either killed or deported from the country during the first year of the Soviet occupation between 1940 and 1941 (1.8% of the population). Already in the winter of 1941, some twenty Lutheran ministers and assistants of the clergy emigrated to Germany. A dozen or so Lutheran pastors were either killed or deported. The best-known ministers deported were Professor of Church History Ludvigs Adamovičs⁹⁹ and Docent Edgars Rumba,¹⁰⁰ who suffered a harsh fate. In June 1941,

⁹⁴ Talonen 1997, 11. The Church did lose possession of some of the churches, together with 40 chapels, 15 parish houses, 240 vicarages, and 150 cemeteries. The majority of the cemeteries within the city of Riga did, however, remain in the possession of the parishes. It has also been claimed that in the summer of 1941, when leaving Latvia, Russian troops burned down among other buildings the historically valuable St. Peter’s Church in the Old City of Rīga.

⁹⁵ Talonen 1997, 11.

⁹⁶ Talonen 1997, 12–13.

⁹⁷ Masītis 1999, 6.

⁹⁸ Šilde 1985, 31–32. Talonen 1997, 12.

⁹⁹ Kīplokis 1993, 16–22, 34–35.

¹⁰⁰ Kīplokis 1993, 39–53.

only 166 pastors remained working in their parishes, compared to 280 in 1940.¹⁰¹

The rough measures of oppression were aimed at the LELC, as well as the other religious communities of Latvia, with great speed and force. Although the blow was very hard, this offensive was not able to eradicate the LELC as such, for the people gave strong “hidden support” to the Church as injustice befell her. Religious ceremonies continued to be held, even among the workers and supporters of Communism. Nevertheless, these scary experiences of a total terror, which befell many of the Lutheran pastors in 1940 and 1941, undoubtedly formed the foundation of their later attitudes toward Soviet society and politics.¹⁰²

The outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 meant a new phase in Latvian history. With German troops rapidly advancing toward this territory, Soviet rule in Latvia was again interrupted, only to be reestablished by the end of the war.¹⁰³ The Baltic countries were soon made a part of German Ostland. Against the “Year of Terror,” the Germans, the former ruling class of the Baltic countries, were seen as liberators offering freedom from the Communist terror. Germany, however, had no intention of giving Latvia full freedom and independence. Instead it granted for locals only a type of home rule, with the aid of certain national forces eager for cooperation with the Germans.¹⁰⁴

The liberation from Communists was felt as a relief and a breather by the Lutherans as well. In the period between 1941 and 1944, the LELC was able to reestablish a few of her vital activities, since greater religious freedom was allowed by the Nazi authorities. Some of the refugee pastors were able to return from Germany. In 1942–1944, 26 new ministers received ordination. Generally speaking, the LELC had fairly free reign for Gospel ministry, as long as politics were not involved or openly aggressive attitudes were not expressed against the occupation. Thus, such activities as mission work, evangelization, ladies’ committees, and religious music were rekindled. The cemeteries were returned to the possession of the Church. The pastors came back to their vicarages. And the German occupiers even reestablished the teaching of religion in schools, except for the teaching of the Old Testament, which conflicted with Nazi ideology. Only after long and persistent appeals were the activities of the Theological Faculty permitted to recommence in March of 1943. Nevertheless, the former teachers of the Faculty did continue their research work

¹⁰¹ Talonen 1997, 13. Adamovičs was shot to death on June 17, 1942, in Solikamsk in the Urals. Rumba died in the Resjot concentration camp near Irkutsk on October 1, 1943.

¹⁰² Talonen 1997, 13–14.

¹⁰³ Vainbergs 1971, 407.

¹⁰⁴ Talonen 1997, 14–15. See Strods 1994.

throughout the German occupation.¹⁰⁵

To be sure, the LELC was not able to preserve her neutrality and political independence. In many ways, the life of the Lutheran Church under the German occupation required all kinds of collaboration with the Nazi regime. For instance, the German political leaders and the army were frequently mentioned in public prayers of the Church. Similarly, the LELC did not remain passive when the German army recruited Latvian people to fight against the Soviet Union, instead providing some financial support for the Latvian Legion. However, in spite of all that, the attitude of the Lutheran clergy and people toward the German occupiers remained quite ambivalent. Under the surface, there was clear dissatisfaction with the German occupation. For example, the persecution of Jews was met with protests by several pastors and church leaders, such as Archbishop Teodors Grīnbergs and Dean Pauls Rozenbergs. In fact, already since the first period of the Soviet occupation (1940–1941), a resistance front had arisen among the Lutheran clergy, who continued their underground activities within the Church and opposed the German occupation as well.¹⁰⁶

Comparing the situation of the Lutheran Church during these two occupations, it is quite apparent that the Nazis afforded the Church larger freedom than the Stalinists had in 1940–1941. Of course, the relative preference for the Germans was just a choice of the lesser of two evils. Without question, neither of these governments could satisfy the thirst of the Latvian people for genuine freedom, nor did these periods of rule suit the interests of the Lutheran Church. Both of the regimes were aggressive occupying forces that had to be tolerated by Latvians.¹⁰⁷

1.3.3 Plāte's ministry in Zalve and Ērberģe

Pastor Plāte spent this difficult time in the congregations of Zalve and Ērberģe. The years 1940 and 1941 of his ministry are well-documented in his pastoral report, which was printed in the form of a bulletin during the German occupation. This report is quite broad and thorough. It bears witness to a certain breathing room afforded to the Church by the arrival of the Germans, and a sense of relief and liberation is discernible in its pages. At the same time, the period of Soviet occupation

¹⁰⁵ Talonen 1997, 14–15. In December 1943, the Faculty of Theology was changed into a theological college within the University.

¹⁰⁶ Talonen 1997, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Talonen 1997, 16–17.

from mid-1940 until mid-1941 is referred to only in passing, a reminder of the dark and terrifying shadows which had come and then gone away. The main impression is Plāte's revived optimism and resolution to move forward with his pastoral work. Despite the complicated historical circumstances of the ongoing war, occupation, and serious casualties, the spiritual quest seemed as important as ever. In these pages, Plāte comes across as a young and determined pastor hoping to expand activities in line with the agenda of the national Church. Although he ministered in rather small country congregations with limited opportunities and a decreasing population, he aspired to meet his pastoral duties in an optimal way, serving as *pastor loci* and trying to reach all strata of the local society.¹⁰⁸

The focal point of Plāte's ministry was the parish of Zalve, which consisted of the congregations of Lielzalve, Mazzalve, Daudzeve, and Taurkalne, where he held a total of 43 services in 1940. However, the second place of his appointment was the smaller congregation in Ērberģe, where he held only 14 services. Apart from regular Sunday services, Plāte conducted cemetery ceremonies, festive candlelight services, worship services for disabled people, services of evangelization, evening prayers at the Christmas tree, Bible studies, sacred devotions, and other spiritual lectures and routines. He seemed to be very friendly in his interactions with fellow ministers, particularly his former school friends. Quite frequently, Plāte invited them to serve in his congregations, and they in turn invited him to preach in their place. In 1940, he mentioned such guest pastors as Vilis Augstkalns, Ādolfis Zemnieks, Žanis Dambis, and Roberts Feldmanis, while he himself visited various congregations in Rīga, Varakļāni, and Bunka.¹⁰⁹

One of Plāte's main concerns at this time was the predicament of nominal Christianity. The report showed that the Eucharist was attended by less than a half of all the registered members of Zalve parish. For Plāte, the attendance of the Holy Supper was a vital sign of spiritual life. He was deeply worried about the situation, when even in such a stormy and unpredictable period the larger part of population failed to go to church and seek God's help.¹¹⁰ Already earlier, shortly before the occupation, Plāte had pondered the problem and written an article in the very last issue of *Svētdienas Rīts*. Unfortunately, the article remained half-published, because immediately after the Soviet invasion the newspaper was closed down.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ ZED 1942, 1–8.

¹⁰⁹ ZED 1942, 2–3.

¹¹⁰ ZED 1942, 6.

¹¹¹ SvR 33, 8/11/1940, 264.

This article was entitled *Kā pacelt dievgaldnieku skaitu mūsu draudzēs?* (How to increase the Eucharistic attendance in our congregations?). In its introduction, Plāte explained that the motivation for the article had arisen from his work in Zalve parish, where he was able to study some time-worn pages of the ecclesiastical register. While looking through these older statistics, Plāte recognized a remarkable witness of both faithfulness and unfaithfulness. First and foremost, however, he felt anxious about the disturbing trend of the Church becoming increasingly empty, careless, indifferent, lacking faith and hope, and losing her footing in the general society. A downward spiral, gradual yet persistent throughout the 20th century, was obvious. Of course, certain periods as the revolution of 1905 and World War I showed a steeper decline, but even during relatively stable periods the numbers of engagement were consistently falling. Plāte wrote:

If previously (at the beginning of the 20th century) each year we had around 5,000 Eucharistic participants, and now this number has dropped down to 500, then we must conclude that something has gone seriously wrong with our life of faith. I think that this extremely large reduction of participants is not a local phenomenon and doesn't stem from the conditions of Zalve parish. According to my information, the trend is broad and general, with only a few differences here and there.¹¹²

In accord with the available statistics, it was the overall condition of the LELC that Eucharistic attendees only made up around 48 percent of the registered church members. This figure had to be trimmed even more, since this statistic did not account for the fact that many of these participants attended the Eucharist several times a year. It meant that the real number could be estimated by dividing it roughly in two. Plāte wished to establish some deeper reasons for such a deplorable condition. He mentioned three basic reasons for this slump, borrowing them from a book of Pastor Jānis Birģelis: 1) national antagonism, which in its time existed between the German church leadership and the so-called "Latvian cause"; 2) a lack of brotherly love and a general sluggishness in Christian life; and 3) the non-spiritual character of modern life and its mechanization.¹¹³ From Plāte's perspective, the general historical situation with the German pastors had been the most decisive point. To be sure, at the time of German dominance, the population attended the Holy Supper more regularly, but then again, he argued, it was an entirely different era, with a deeper piety and reverence of the Lord. The biggest problem with the Germans was

¹¹² SvR 33, 8/11/1940, 264. This passage from Plāte's article was later mentioned in the propaganda book by V. Snippe, *Luterānisms Latvijā* (Lutheranism in Latvia), 1977, page 164, indicating a deep crisis of Lutheranism and showing the steep decline of religion in general.

¹¹³ Birģelis 1940.

their inability to perceive the true heartbeat of the Latvian people, when too often they had embraced opposing and antagonistic positions. Consequently, Latvians in increasing numbers alienated themselves from the Lutheran Church, because their pastors appeared to be unable to sympathize with their deepest sentiments.¹¹⁴

As mentioned above, the article remained half-published. In the first part, Plāte had offered some considerations about nominal Christianity and the consequential decline in membership and Eucharistic participation, blaming these on the loss of genuine faith. In the second part, which was expected in the next issue, some further clarifications and proposed solutions were anticipated. Unfortunately, this positive part of the article could no longer be printed. Presumably, Plāte's vision for the future perspective by and large should have been youthfully hopeful and optimistic. Surely he would have proposed some promising ideas and encouraging plans for the positive development of the LELC, but grim reality interfered. It is symbolic that the idealistic and constructive part of this article was undercut and interrupted. The *force majeure* of the occupation army rapidly overshadowed the existence of the whole country, placing the LELC and her ministers in an extremely tough situation. As a young pastor, Plāte must have felt profoundly disheartened by dashed hopes and ruined prospects when so many things evolved contrary to expectations.

The offensive of the Soviet occupation and the following deportations¹¹⁵ were certainly a sobering experience. Possibly the most distressing and frightening aspect of this period for Pastor Plāte was the loss of a sizable number of congregation members, who were sent away during the Soviet deportations:

With the deepest sorrow, at this point we are reminded of the people who were deported to the land of misery and hunger. And especially we pray for the council members Alfrēds Dārziņš and Kārlis Pope along with 40 other congregation members.¹¹⁶

The aforementioned report provided a short intercession and heartfelt prayer for those sent to Siberia, pleading that these people would be granted a way back to their homeland.¹¹⁷ Even though this period of Soviet rule has not been elaborated more extensively, it is apparent that this year-long occupation left an enduring imprint and frightening memories. To summarize briefly, Plāte noted that the year 1940 was spent “under a perpetual threat of Bolsheviks.” Nevertheless, his congregations completed the year in strong faith, singing Luther's hymn *Dievs Kungs ir mūsu stiprā*

¹¹⁴ SvR 33, 8/11/1940, 264

¹¹⁵ Targeted were entire families of the so-called “kulaks” (owners of large farms), “bandits” (partisans), “nationalists” and other “enemies of the State.” Masītis 1999, 47.

¹¹⁶ ZED 1942, 6.

¹¹⁷ ZED 1942, 6.

pils (A Mighty Fortress is Our God).¹¹⁸

A certain period of relief and stabilization came with the arrival of the German army in 1941, as the Church was able to recover some lost ground and even expand activities. The report said that in 1941, 38 services were held in Zalve parish and 13 services in Ērberģe. “After the banishing of the Bolsheviks,” the work of the Ladies Committee was renewed, which led to help in practical needs, such as financial assistance for smaller repair projects and support for handicapped people. Plāte also reported that he had started new congregational activities. In Zalve, a Sunday school and youth group for the newly confirmed were organized. The same friendly exchange of visiting pastors was mentioned, as Plāte welcomed Vilis Augstkalns, Pauls Grasmanis, Kārlis Brēķis, and Jānis Dzirnīs, while himself traveling to Rīga, Valdemārpils, Asare, and the Birži Church in nearby Lithuania. Special gratitude was expressed to the choir at Daudzeva and the private orchestra at Mēmele, led by the conductor J. Amtmanis, who assisted Pastor Plāte in various cemetery festivals, as well as during the trip to Lithuania, which strengthened friendly ties with the Lithuanian Latvians.¹¹⁹

“Step by step we become more active,” reported Plāte in the concluding remarks of his article. At the same time, he also listed several specific challenges to be solved in the future. For example, the parsonage repair that required additional resources was still beyond reach. Similarly, the pastor observed that there were too many children in the parish who had not yet been baptized. He suggested that baptism should not be delayed, but performed already at the age of 5–6 weeks: “Trust me, no child will be hurt by this!” In the same way, he issued an admonition to do a better job at home preparing youth for confirmation, because the typical church instruction of ten days was not sufficient to get them ready. Likewise, Plāte encouraged giving some extra thought to other ritual observances: invitations to marry in church so that both partners would get involved; becoming more active in the Eucharistic participation; and being more faithful in paying the church tax, which had been done by only two-thirds of the Zalve membership.¹²⁰ Plāte continued his ministry in Zalve parish until September 1, 1944. Unfortunately, no further records of his ministry can be identified. It can only be presumed that the rest of his ministry was conducted in a more or less similar manner as reported previously. Some additional evidence from these years is provided by a few publications that Plāte made in the

¹¹⁸ ZED 1942, 3.

¹¹⁹ ZED 1942, 4–5.

¹²⁰ ZED 1942, 6–7.

LELC journal *Baznīcas ziņas* (News of the Church), which serve as helpful resources to offer a better understanding as to what sort of young pastor and theologian Plāte was, and what his particular interests were during this difficult era.

1.3.4 Wartime publications

In late 1942, Plāte wrote an article to explain the meaning of the four Sundays of Advent. For Lutherans, unlike Catholics, it was a season not for fasting, but joyful anticipation. Plāte clarified its main spiritual content through the appointed ecclesiastical texts and hymns. The first Advent proclaimed that by means of Christ's incarnation, the Lord had placed his cross in believers' hearts to crucify their old being, as well as his throne to rule over their hearts. The second Advent preached Christ's coming in glory, which served as encouragement to have true faith and watchfulness, and to live a holy and sanctified life. The third Advent taught to prepare the way for the Lord, as described in the text about John the Baptist: *repent and bring forth the good fruits!* And, finally, the fourth Advent Sunday equipped the hearts for the Christmas event, when God was born in Jesus. All of these Sundays helped one to experience the wonder of Christmas in one's soul.¹²¹

In a similar vein, the following year Plāte printed an Advent sermon about Jesus knocking on the door of the heart (Rev. 3:2). In the stormy winds of unpredictable human life, Jesus was the strongest foundation. To become that, the Lord came to remove all sins, cares and even fear of death, in order to replace those with true peace, joy and courage. Plāte lamented the current condition, when the so-called Christian world had fallen into corrupted human darkness and monstrosity. The flames of battle had descended from the sky and devoured houses and people, and other flames were also falling and consuming souls. God's Kingdom was coming close to every human heart. And people ignited by this sacred fire became soldiers in God's army and began fighting for his Kingdom. Thus, Advent brought a different type of battle, the battle that had already been won by Jesus. Growing in the joy of his victory, the Lord's faithful army could advance and anticipate his last eternal and glorious advent.¹²²

Another article by Plāte reveals him as a pastor who was sincerely devoted to the youth ministry. By this piece, he intended to make a few suggestions for the Church

¹²¹ BZ 38, 12/20/1942, 2–3.

¹²² BZ 52, 12/19/1943, 205–206.

at large. With the deepest gratitude, Plāte recalled the courses for youth leaders from the pre-war era, acknowledging their beneficial influence. He called it “a blessed heritage” of Bishop Kārlis Irbe, Dr. Kārlis Beldavs, Prof. Edgars Rumba, and Pastor Ernests Stange, which had served as a source for awakening and guidance for the future. Despite the setback caused by the Bolsheviks, Plāte felt that now was the moment to mobilize the youth mission, because providing spiritual guardianship was especially necessary at this time. Youth needed inspiration from the ideal of Christ more than ever. Being the true “spiritual mother,” the Church had to foster and nurture youth. Moreover, the pulpit preaching for this field was not sufficient, and special arrangements were needed. Plāte discussed the two most common traditions – youth services and youth groups – citing his preference for the latter as being more closely connected with the Church as a whole. It was the pastors’ responsibility to set up this work and get it started, in this way raising future activists for the Church. By means of this article, Plāte wished to promote more activity and also start a discussion among the leaders of the Church.¹²³

Then, there is one final article exhibiting Plāte as an earnest and pietistic pastor, who was greatly concerned with outward manifestations of faith and its various restrictions. This article originated from a paper delivered to the congregational activists, and it was published in 1944. The title was *Ārīgu lietu nozīme garīgā darbā* (The meaning of external things in the spiritual work), and it treated several of the so-called adiaphora – like drinking and smoking – which Plāte assessed as harmful phenomena that did not fit well with the Christian life. According to his observations, almost no time in history had been so full of such vices. Even the occasions of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial were often accompanied by drinking. He lamented the fact that so many souls became defeated by secular and eternal death while being drunk. The situation was so extreme that the Church was obliged to request abstinence, at least from her own workers. Less fiercely, but still urgently, Plāte talked about smoking as not only harmful to the health, but also detrimental for the spiritual life. He also made a confession of his own embarrassing experience with smoking. After that, he narrated a story told by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). The famous writer himself had given up smoking after a humiliating episode of his life when he was reproached and felt terribly ashamed at having been caught holding the Bible in one hand and a burning cigarette in the other. This story had to serve as a lesson for every church activist, wrote Plāte. He admonished that various outward

¹²³ BZ 32, 1/8/1943, 126–127.

ecclesiastical matters ought to take place in an orderly, timely, and godly manner, without giving offense to outsiders. And in the end, he argued that all those attitudes should not become pharisaic, but rather come as true expressions of faith stemming from an honest heart.¹²⁴

1.3.5 Leaving for Courland along with refugees

The summer of 1944 brought yet another furious phase in the history of the country. When the Red Army crossed the border in July of 1944, insecurity among the Latvians increased greatly. The atmosphere of this time is apparent in the editorial by Chief Secretary Voitkus in *Baznīcas Ziņas* on July 23.

We are experiencing particularly critical days. Our well-known enemy is standing at the gateway of our country, wanting to break the gate open. That is why we are worried. The cause is the experience of the recent past, the fate of our compatriots. To be or not to be – this question worries us again. [...] We are in a state of war and battle. Fate is knocking at the doors of other European nations as well as the door of our nation. We cannot and must not avoid it. We must meet it with balance and strength. Let us do as the brave soldiers do, those among whom the best sons of our nation are. In their love for the Fatherland and in their faith in God, they are ready to give the most valuable thing they have – their lives.¹²⁵

From August to September 1944, the LELC experienced great tumult. More and more refugees gathered in Rīga and in Courland (*Kurzeme*), Latvia's westernmost province. While the Red Army continued to conquer an increasing amount of Latvian territory, more and more Lutheran pastors had settled in Courland, where they worked during the winter of 1944–1945. The provinces of Zemgale, Latgale, and Vidzeme were left with an extremely small number of Lutheran clergy. Several of the pastors continued their flight to the West: 129 of them took refuge in Germany, 14 escaped to Sweden, thus totaling 143. All in all, the LELC lost about 55 percent of her clergy as refugees. Some of the pastors who were inclined to leave for the West were unable to do so and had to stay.¹²⁶

Around 150,000 refugees, together with 230,000 remaining inhabitants of Courland, were trapped by the offensive of the Red Army. For seven long months, German and Latvian army divisions held off the advancing Soviet army units in the so-called “Fortress of Courland.” Here, in spite of all threats, restrictions, and shortages, the spiritual life of the Church continued.¹²⁷ The church administration in Courland did

¹²⁴ BZ 7, 2/13/1944, 26.

¹²⁵ BZ 31, 7/23/1944, 121.

¹²⁶ Talonen 2004, 207–212; see also Talonen 1997, 27–42.

¹²⁷ Masītis 1999, 14–16.

its best to organize the work of the LELC under these difficult circumstances, and a relatively active ecclesiastical life continued throughout the winter of 1944–1945. Whenever a pastor escaped to Germany or Sweden, he was replaced by another pastor who had arrived from elsewhere in Latvia. However, in the end, by February of 1945, the Courland consistory decided to make an appeal that instead of leaving Latvia the clergy should choose to stay in their homeland.¹²⁸

The archival sources from this era provide limited information about Pastor Plāte. Nevertheless, it is quite definite that in August of 1944 Plāte had left behind the endangered place of his ministry and, together with other local refugees, made his way to Courland.¹²⁹ First he moved to Nītaure and stayed with the local Pastor Pēteris Nesaule (1907–1996). Due to his father's illness, Plāte had intended to stay in Latvia.¹³⁰ It is not known whether he served (or where he served) during these months. At a later date, though, the sources reveal that Plāte participated in the Kandava and Piltene Deaneries' meeting in Ārlava in early 1945 (February 7–8). On this occasion, a dozen pastors and students of theology had gathered in Ārlava Church.¹³¹ At this meeting, Professor Alberts Freijs had talked about "Faith and Human Thought." This meeting dealt mainly with matters concerning the work in parishes, such as texts for sermons and the conduct of baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc. The relationship with the Lutheran leaders in Rīga gave rise to some discussion, because Courland was, after all, isolated from the capital at this time. In conclusion, the meeting sent greetings to all the pastors remaining in Latvia.¹³²

To be sure, during this time there were certain Lutheran pastors in Courland who in fear of the Soviet occupation were willing to support the Latvian National Committee led by Rūdolfs Bangerskis (1878–1958). In particular, Prof. Freijs played the most active role on the national and political frontlines during these months. However, Plāte's support or sympathies for this movement cannot be established. Due to the ominous historical circumstances, these national activities did not succeed, and the subsequent surrender of Courland meant the complete destruction of all their hopes and dreams for an independent Latvia.¹³³

This transition period of Plāte's biography remains relatively obscure and shadowy. Even the family recollections preserved by his son Modris are few, vague, and

¹²⁸ Talonen 2004, 215.

¹²⁹ Staburags 7.01.1995.

¹³⁰ SvZ 5/1989 8.

¹³¹ It included the participation of such men as Roberts Akmentiņš, Alberts Freijs, Hugo M. Grīvāns, Kārlis Dzenis, Žanis Dambis, Jānis Saulītis, Pēteris Briedis, Edgars Krūmiņš, Valfrīds Sīle, and Nikolajs Plāte.

¹³² Talonen 2004, 215.

¹³³ Talonen 2004, 217–218.

quite ambiguous. In retrospect, it can be said that although Plāte took his elderly parents along to Courland, he never planned to emigrate. Whatever his intentions during such a confusing, complicated era may have been, they were shrouded in secrecy. Later, Plāte chose to keep silent about this difficult time – either due to fear of persecution or due to his quiet and cautious character. There are only some loose and disjointed memories by his wife of a period of a few months that Plāte presumably spent in the forest in order to escape arrest and deportation by the Soviets.¹³⁴ This rather murky comment possibly refers to the extremely chaotic conclusion of World War II, when thousands of residents used the heavily forested countryside for refuge and self-preservation.

¹³⁴ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

II A PASTOR IN THE SHADOW OF STALINISM (1945–1954)

2.1 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE STALINIST ERA

At the end of World War II, Latvia was once more occupied by the Red Army. Soviet troops marched into Rīga on October 13, 1944, and “the Courland Fortress” surrendered in May 1945. A considerable number of Latvians fled to the West. The remaining society was forced to adapt to the Communist infrastructure of the Soviet Union, as had been the case in 1940–1941, and the Sovietization of Latvia was renewed once again. Sovietization manifested itself in subordinating all individuals, endeavors, and social and economic spheres to a single administrative ideological system.¹³⁵ Unmistakably, religion was one of the primary targets of Sovietization.¹³⁶ The main tool for the anti-religious activities was the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), initially headed by Voldemārs Šeškens, which began its work in Soviet Latvia as early as October 1944, while having a direct connection with the authorities in Moscow and the secret police (the Cheka).¹³⁷

The aim of the Communist administration in Soviet Latvia, as well as that of the Soviet Union in general, was a gradual weakening and eventual elimination of the effect that the Church had in general society.¹³⁸ Thus, the LELC was targeted as a dangerous socio-political and ideological enemy. Šeškens started to take action, doing it fairly slowly but consistently. Since some of the pastors expressed openly negative sentiments against Communism, the initial “adjustment” of the LELC was not smooth at all. It became increasingly clear that the Lutheran Church was fighting with totalitarian “windmills” and the road was leading nowhere. The leaders of the LELC were submitted to constant pressure. More and more pastors chose to reformulate their speeches and expressions to fit the new political atmosphere.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ See Jansons 2004. See also Schwabe 1949, 48–53.

¹³⁶ Masītis 1999, 18–19.

¹³⁷ Talonen 1997, 288. In the aftermath, though, Moscow was not completely satisfied with Šeškens. In September 1948, he was replaced by Jūlijs Restbergs.

¹³⁸ After having experienced years of conflict with the Russian Orthodox Church, the official religion of Imperial Russia, Moscow had realized that its goal of eliminating all traces of religion in the USSR would be unattainable. Consequently, in July 1944, the CARC, headed by I.V. Polyansky, was formed. The Council was to be a consultative organ of the government, but no representative of any of the religious bodies ever served on it. Instead, each Soviet Socialist Republic had its own “plenipotentiary” attached to each Soviet Socialist Republic’s Council of Ministers. Masītis 1999, 19. See also Robert Conquest, ed., *Religion in the USSR* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., Publishers, 1968).

¹³⁹ Talonen 1997, 92.

In the beginning of the Soviet era, the LELC leadership and a number of pastors tried to stay independent and refused to obey the new regime. They sought to preserve their spiritual freedom and, while striving for this, many of them suffered persecutions, imprisonment, and even martyrdom. The struggle was fierce. For instance, Šeškens' repeated attempts to convert the acting Archbishop Kārlis Irbe into an instrument of Communist policy failed.¹⁴⁰ Irbe was a strong personality, determined to lead in his own way and to direct the Church according to the "Old System."¹⁴¹ He did not intend to bend his actions to accord with those of the Communists. Irbe's stance was clear: he did not want the LELC of the Latvian SSR to adapt herself to the Communist system in the manner desired by the authorities. Irbe's unrelenting independence annoyed the authorities a great deal.¹⁴² Therefore, when Irbe and other leaders refused to adjust and cooperate, they were ultimately taken to court, sentenced, and deported to Siberia. The "anti-Soviet" leaders of the Church were removed and replaced with ones controlled by the Communists.¹⁴³

Under the new Soviet rule, it was no longer possible for the Lutheran Church to function as a free and independent institution. The totalitarian society could not possibly tolerate an independent religious institution in its midst. Since the former religious freedom was denied, the new church-state relations required a new model and a new attitude. The Church had to learn her lesson from repressions and deportations. After the initial resistance, under continued extreme pressure, the independence of the Church gradually broke down, and the attitude turned increasingly mutable and submissive. In a deeply humiliating and distressing manner, the LELC was forced to adjust to the demands of the atheistic state. Using totalitarian power and all available means, the Communists increasingly gained control over the organization of the Lutheran Church, transforming her into a servile tool.

During 1944–1946, the politics of LELC became completely different from those of Irbe's period. The staunchness of Kārlis Irbe was replaced by the flexibility of Gustavs Tūrs in 1946. It was a major change. Commissar Šeškens chose Tūrs as the next church leader, since he was more suitable for Soviet purposes and Communist policies. Being a diplomatic and an adaptable man, Tūrs was ready to make all kinds of concessions and do whatever it took to survive. In the following years, Tūrs was even nicknamed "the Red Archbishop." This was not just because of his public image

¹⁴⁰ Talonen 1997, 289.

¹⁴¹ Bergmanis 2006, 309; Talonen 1997, 47.

¹⁴² Bergmanis 2006, 312–313; Talonen 1997, 86–88.

¹⁴³ Gintere & Zālīte 1992, 98–99. Talonen 1997, 290–291.

and the red clerical dress he wore; the title chiefly implied the fact that he was actively cooperating with the State. Under Tūrs' leadership, the Church became wholly subservient to Communist policy and started to give support to the Soviet ideology, celebrate Soviet festivals, and even spread Soviet propaganda abroad. Through this change of leadership, the Communist rulers had finally succeeded in forcing the Lutheran Church to follow the path they assigned to her.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Talonen has cautioned against passing too harsh a judgment on Archbishop Tūrs:

In any case, it would seem to be overly simplistic to consider Tūrs merely a tool of the Communist regime, “a real Soviet man” and “the Red Archbishop”. The truth is that in public he was playing a role in a political theater with the Communist regime, whistling their tune in the social and political arena. In many cases, however, his motive was to defend the Church and stave off her ever weakening possibilities for serving Latvians with the Word and the Holy Sacraments.¹⁴⁵ ... Tūrs was neither a Marxist nor a Communist, but basically a pragmatic Latvian nationalist with a realistic view of the situation and with an inclination for making the best out of difficult times ahead.¹⁴⁶

The “policy of concessions” pursued by Tūrs after 1946 was an effort to please the Communists through accommodations in order to win some room for the Church to exist. In return for this collaboration, Archbishop Tūrs anticipated some benefits for the Church: for example, to widen contacts outside the Iron Curtain, to make possible a few publications for the Church, and to defend the rights of pastors when they were facing various situations of conflict. Such were the small gains expected from collaboration with the authorities.¹⁴⁷

The next strategic step for the CARC was to change and reorganize the very structure of the Lutheran Church in accordance with the new times and “the Soviet spirit.” The plan was to make it even more centralized. For Communist purposes, the life of the Church was much easier to oversee and to control from one center, one strong *episcopos*. Following this principle, the LELC constitution was changed as early as in 1948. The basic church law was rewritten in a way that all “democracy” was now focused solely around Tūrs. Power was now centralized in the hands of the consistory and the Archbishop. With Tūrs and other leading figures being on the “leash” of the Communists, the entire Church was placed in their hands.¹⁴⁸ Thus, the synod meeting of 1948 was a clear sign of the capitulation. The synod accepted the new constitution unanimously and without objections. As Commissar Šeškens

¹⁴⁴ Gintere & Zālīte 1992, 100–101; Bergmanis 2006, 315–316; Talonen 1997, 99–108, 207–209.

¹⁴⁵ Talonen 1997, 170.

¹⁴⁶ Talonen 1997, 207.

¹⁴⁷ Talonen 1997, 295.

¹⁴⁸ Talonen 1997, 204–207; Bergmanis 2006, 322–324.

concluded in his report:

The General Synod meeting came to pass completely according to the worked-out plan. The main questions were resolved in a total agreement, and the constitution of the church was accepted unanimously, without any changes or additions. The most complicated question – the position of the Archbishop – has been resolved positively. Thus, the two years of educating Lutheran clergy in the Soviet spirit has yielded some good results.¹⁴⁹

The decision of LELC leaders to cooperate with the Soviet institutions (in the late 1940s and the early 1950s) was largely influenced by the experience of war, terror, deportations, and ongoing persecutions. In that sense, the Communist oppression had put to trial the loyalty of the Church as a whole and every Christian believer, since they had to be continually prepared to suffer severe consequences due to their faith. Sometimes it applied even to regular congregation members, who were closely watched and intimidated in their school, work, and careers. Often believers were directly warned that church attendance was harmful for them. A good amount of courage was needed to confess the faith openly and to keep attending services. Quite naturally, not everyone remained strong in the face of these attacks. For many, it was easier to give up or hide one's Christian faith. Unfortunately, that is what happened to the majority of the LELC members.

Statistics provided by Talonen clearly reveal how in a short period of time the nominally national Lutheran Church was transformed into a small minority. The LELC, which in 1935 possessed the status of a national church (1,075,641 members, or 55% of the inhabitants of Latvia), in 1948 had only around 200,000 members, or just 11% of all the inhabitants residing in Soviet Latvia. The decrease was extremely significant (i.e., approximately 81%).¹⁵⁰ The LELC, which before World War II had employed close to 300 pastors, had lost more than half of them through emigration. Furthermore, many became oppressed, persecuted, deported, and even killed. At the end of the war, 120 pastors were left in Latvia, but by the year 1949 there were only 98. Of the 300 churches active in the pre-war period, only about 60 were still in good working condition after the war. The property of the Church was confiscated by the State, and while most of the buildings could be leased back, the State demanded inordinately high taxes.¹⁵¹

As a result, the Lutheran Church was put in an extremely complicated situation, forced into a tight socio-political corner, and subjected to severe “shock treatment.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Gintere & Zālīte 1992, 100.

¹⁵⁰ Talonen 1997, 222.

¹⁵¹ Gintere & Zālīte 1992, 102. Talonen 1997, 288–295.

¹⁵² Talonen 1997, 287 and 13.

On the one hand, it can be said that the flexible policy of Archbishop Tūrs saved the basic church organization from complete elimination and secured the chance of spreading the Gospel among the Latvian people. On the other hand, an argument can be made that during this process, the LELC lost a good deal of her previous possessions, meaning both spiritual authority¹⁵³ and material property. In fact, it must be noted that by 1950 the national Church was practically destroyed.¹⁵⁴ The young Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church proved to be very vulnerable, and after a short time it experienced a drastic decline in both numbers and influence. Severe attacks of militant atheism and the impact of social and economic change rapidly eroded the strength of the Church to such an extent that it was marginalized and driven into ghetto-like isolation.¹⁵⁵

Particularly difficult was the situation in the rural congregations. The collectivization of the land had created remarkable socio-economic changes throughout Soviet Latvia, and the economic conditions were miserable.¹⁵⁶ For instance, the simple fact that the horses of private farmers in the countryside were confiscated and given to the collectives caused major difficulties. Since distances in the countryside were long, the lack of horses prevented believers from going to church and participating in the services. The increasingly sinister atmosphere and new limitations created ever new difficulties for the pastors in their work.¹⁵⁷

The fulfillment of pastoral and spiritual duties in the Latvian SSR was made even more challenging by new regulations concerning the work of the clergy issued in 1948–1950. Lay members were held back from regular church attendance in growing numbers. It is quite evident that all of these measures and limitations were part of the general policy orchestrated by the CARC. The anti-religious activities against the Church were determined and intentional, and their practical consequences first and foremost hindered pastoral work. Even if a pastor was still allowed to serve his congregation, limitations and pressure increased over time.¹⁵⁸

Members of the clergy faced the most severe ideological attacks, and their duties were made especially complicated. Pastors were publicly branded “parasites on society’s body,” and they were invited to become “honest members of the new Soviet society.” They were discriminated against at every step. The rent of their dwellings,

¹⁵³ Bergmanis 2006, 325.

¹⁵⁴ Talonen 1997, 295.

¹⁵⁵ Talonen 1997, 285–287.

¹⁵⁶ Talonen 1997, 212.

¹⁵⁷ Talonen 1997, 249–250.

¹⁵⁸ Gintere & Zālīte 1992, 102–103. Talonen 1997, 250.

for example, was substantially higher than that of average citizens. Their work was reduced to a closely circumscribed sphere on church premises and scrutinized by the authorities. Pastors had to be very careful in their teaching and preaching, being particularly careful not to talk about things that could undermine the socialist system.¹⁵⁹ Such were the overall circumstances under which Pastor Plāte was called to do his ministry in post-war Soviet Latvia.

2.1.1 Complicated work in the Pope, Rinda, and Selga congregations

The war, emigration, and deportations had created a grave shortage of pastors, and many locations were left without any pastoral service. In this situation, after a period of chaos and uncertainty, Plāte was called to become a pastor of the Pope, Rinda, and Selga congregations, where he was elected on April 15, 1945. At some point shortly before that, his father Jānis Plāte passed away.¹⁶⁰ Apparently, however, he was only able to settle down in the Rinda church parsonage and start serving these congregations in June of 1945.¹⁶¹ The former pastor of the Pope and Rinda congregations was a prominent preacher and Christian writer, Jānis Birģelis (1890–1945), who died at the end of the war on March 30, 1945.¹⁶²

It was a new beginning in Plāte's life in several different ways. Not only was it a new phase of work, but also the beginning of married life and starting a family. During this chaotic and complicated period, he proposed to Modra Augstkalne (born on August 15, 1918), whom he had already gotten to know before the war. Plāte's bride was the sister of his good friend Pastor Vilis Augstkalns. Nikolajs first met Modra and got acquainted with her during the summer holidays of 1937, when as a young student he visited his friend's family farm, Lazdiņi, in the Mālupe municipality of Alūksne. Later on, Modra studied agronomy in Jelgava, and she apparently graduated during wartime. Their friendship continued throughout these historic upheavals, and since after the war her brother served in nearby Voldemārpils, Nikolajs had the possibility to meet her again.¹⁶³ Their wedding took place on June 1, 1946.¹⁶⁴

Soon, however, it became apparent that life in the Rinda parsonage was not satisfactory for the new family. In the summer of 1947, Plāte wrote to the consistory,

¹⁵⁹ Vahter [s.a.], 44. Talonen 1997, 11. Mankusa 2001, 33.

¹⁶⁰ SvZ 5/1989 8.

¹⁶¹ LELBA 299, Plāte's autobiography in 1960.

¹⁶² Bergmanis 2006, 302.

¹⁶³ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

¹⁶⁴ LELBA 299, Plāte's autobiography in 1960.

pleading for permission to move to the regional center, the city of Ventspils. Such a move, according to his request, would be beneficial for both his family and pastoral work. Probably the greatest motivation at this point, however, was the pregnancy of his wife. In the letter to the consistory, Plāte explained that the living conditions in the Rinda parsonage were rather poor and inadequate, especially during the winter season, and that city life would be preferable. He also noted the difficulty of traveling from a small place like Rinda, and since all three of his congregations were spread across the countryside, it would be easier and more convenient to commute by train from the city of Ventspils.¹⁶⁵

An additional reason for Plāte's request to move was that the Rinda congregation was located in the so-called "forbidden zone" on the coastline of the Baltic Sea. It was a major obstacle that considerably hindered his movements, as well as those of the congregation members. Even his own parishioners were often able to reach their pastor only via Ventspils. For all these reasons, Plāte asked for the consistory's help to gain permission from the authorities to move to Ventspils. Such permission was a standard bureaucratic procedure that ensured Soviet control over citizens, their place of living, and their employment. In order to move, Plāte and his family needed a registration, and to obtain this they had to receive a document from the consistory, confirming that such a transfer was necessary for his ecclesiastical work. After this permission and registration was granted in the fall of 1947, Plāte took his family to live in the city of Ventspils.¹⁶⁶

In the same letter to the consistory, there is evidence of other hardships that Plāte had to face at this time. For example, it was a difficult battle for the Church at large to retain at least some parts of the vicarages and parish halls previously owned by the LELC. In the summer of 1946, Archbishop Tūrs had advised the Church to request permission from the local authorities to use the apartments owned by the congregation as accommodation for pastors and the other workers, as offices for the pastor and the congregation, and as a location for services. Congregations were also supposed to request approximately three hectares of land for their pastor. In this regard, Tūrs referred to the practice that was prevalent in the Lithuanian SSR.¹⁶⁷

Because the Rinda congregation did not succeed in this battle of retaining the rights to use its former property, Plāte pleaded for support from the consistory. He requested that the Church issue some kind of "certificate to prove that it is crucial

¹⁶⁵ LELBA 299, Plāte to the consistory (7/18/1947).

¹⁶⁶ LELBA 299, Plāte to the consistory (7/18/1947).

¹⁶⁷ Talonen 1997, 157.

for the Rinda congregation to retain possession of additional rooms for religious and administrative use in the Rinda parsonage. If such a certificate is provided, the Executive Committee has promised to allow it.¹⁶⁸ These additional rooms were necessary for the instruction of confirmands and holding devotions and worship services, especially during the winter season when the church building was too cold for celebrating services.¹⁶⁹ The battle with the local authorities was a desperate one. The congregation kept losing more and more of its previously held possessions. The largest part of the parsonage had already been confiscated. Of the twelve rooms in the parsonage, the congregation could use one room on the first floor and two small rooms in the attic. In addition, the local authorities had also requested that the remaining three rooms be given up. The rigid argumentation of Communist logic claimed that, following the separation of the Church and the State, the rituals of a religious cult could not be tolerated in what was now a secular house.¹⁷⁰

Unfortunately, this battle came to naught. As much as Pastor Pläte tried to save at least some of the rooms – writing protests, appealing to the CARC, gaining support from the consistory and the Archbishop – ultimately he did not succeed and the Rinda parsonage was taken away completely.¹⁷¹ Talonen mentions this particular case and states that “in the end, Pläte was forced to leave the vicarage of Rinda.”¹⁷² Of course, Talonen is right in saying that the entire parsonage was confiscated. Nevertheless, his statement has to be corrected somewhat. As formerly shown, the Pläte family was not “forced” out of the vicarage. It was their own choice to move and to settle in Ventspils.

2.1.2 Confrontation with the local authorities

The confiscation of the Rinda parsonage experienced by Pläte was just the beginning of anti-religious activities by the local authorities. It is important to remember that in the post-war Stalinist era, many of the new local executives worked exceedingly hard to prove their loyalty by implementing atheistic policies. The Communist decrees regarding religion were designed to suppress and to extinguish the Church as

¹⁶⁸ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (7/18/1947).

¹⁶⁹ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (7/18/1947).

¹⁷⁰ Talonen 1997, 157. The question of parsonages and parish halls caused numerous problems for the leaders of the Church during the post-war years. During 1946–1947, Türs and the leaders of the Church had frequent battles over the ownership of vicarages or parish halls. Parishes usually tried to gain at least part of these buildings for the use of the parish and the local pastor.

¹⁷¹ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (7/18/1947).

¹⁷² Talonen 1997, 159.

a living force. Even the few flimsy and hypocritical provisions designed to “protect” the Church in Soviet laws were time and again revoked by arbitrary Party directives. According to the Communists, the Christian Church was just a “relic of the past,” a “prejudice,” and a vice to be done away with as quickly as possible.¹⁷³ Consequently, arbitrary campaigns against the Church and clergy became a normal course of action. Even though religious freedom was formally guaranteed, in practice it was reduced and taken away as much as possible. A range of direct and indirect means were employed to make the believers’ lot unpleasant and intolerable. Of course, some local executives were more aggressive in their anti-religious activities than others. What happened in each case most often depended on the local situation.¹⁷⁴

During this particular period, Pläte faced the greatest challenges from the Executive Committee of the Ance municipality, where the Rinda congregation was located. According to the evidence, the local officials were trying hard to inflict the life of the Rinda pastor and his congregation with vexing circumstances, causing a number of difficulties. In the fall of 1947, for instance, Pläte wrote another complaint against the local authorities, pleading for help from the LELC consistory after the local municipality had demanded that he supply 110 cubic meters of timber by the end of the year, working himself to cut it and bring it out of the woods. He appealed to general regulations that excused members of the clergy from the communal work in the forests. Nevertheless, his protests and objections were not accepted by the authorities. In this case, not even the consistory could help. Pastor Pläte had no choice but to comply with the arbitrary command. As he reported later, he was able to do it with some assistance from members of his congregation.¹⁷⁵

Another example of an excessive hindrance happened around the popular tradition of memorial cemetery festivals (*kapusvêtki*),¹⁷⁶ in relation to which the LELC held a solid position and comprehensive influence among the general population. In July of 1948, the Ance municipality issued a directive to Pläte and the congregations he served, suggesting that it was improper to hold the memorial festivals during the season of Soviet celebrations and the parade of the Soviet Air Force. The purpose was to halt church activities for several weeks, so that people would attend the more important Soviet festivals’ mass gatherings and festive meetings. The letter from the authorities thus suggested that congregations had to consider rearranging

¹⁷³ Vehter [s.a.], 48, 52.

¹⁷⁴ Talonen 1997, 158.

¹⁷⁵ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (7/18/1947).

¹⁷⁶ LELBA 299, The Executive Committee of Ance Municipality to the Pastor of Pope, Rinda, Selga (July 1948).

their schedule of cemetery festivals and worship services, holding them instead on workday nights.¹⁷⁷

During this time, the Communists started to realize the important role that the cemetery festivals played for the locals and the necessity to oppose them. This tradition was an important part of Latvia's cultural canon and a truly unique practice among the populace. These festivals had emerged in the first half of the 19th century and grown immensely. By the time of Ulmanis' regime in the second part of the 1930s, it was already a major Latvian tradition and particularly important in the countryside. The ritual involved tidying family graves and holding a worship service in the cemetery, which provided an opportunity for local residents to interact socially. In the post-war period, it had also become a process for "auditing souls." As the Soviet regime condemned the festivals, increasingly they were seen as socially less important. They became rather quiet gatherings and their organizers and participants sought to avoid public notice.¹⁷⁸

Albeit in a more subdued way, however, these festivals continued to play an essential symbolic role in the life of the Latvian people. The commemoration of the ancestors was an important part of the culture. Cemeteries were memorials to the lost state, to national culture, and to the collective memory of the local community. It is where people exchanged news and discussed their future. Rural cemeteries were among the few public sites in Latvia where there was little or no presence of Soviet ideology. People were also interested in cemetery festivals because they occurred outdoors during the summer.¹⁷⁹ Typically they took place on regular Sundays during the summer months of July and August. For the Church and the clergy, conducting their ministry during the Soviet period, these festivals were nearly the only possibility to address people outside the church premises. The meaningful presence of the

¹⁷⁷ LELBA 299, The Executive Committee of Ance Municipality to the Pastor of Pope, Rinda, Selga (July 1948).

¹⁷⁸ Uzule & Zelče 2014, 246–266. "Latvian cemetery festivals first emerged as a composite cultural practice, bringing together various different elements such as pagan and Christian traditions and rituals, local and national identity, and the formation of the public arena through the social cultural activities of modern-age people. These diverse origins increased the capacity of cemetery festivals to survive various eras and socio-political transformations and to react to them by maintaining the essential form while purposes changed. During the Soviet era, by contrast, cemetery festivals changed their form, but maintained their purpose. Perhaps cemetery festivals represent the essential features of the Latvian identity – to maintain order, peace, respect among human beings, Latvian cultures and lifestyles, and the aesthetics of the Latvian land, which is located in a geopolitically unstable and unpredictable space. Life alongside or near death was an everyday matter for Latvians for a very long time. It is no accident that stoicism is a key element in the nation's character, with people making peace with their situation, adapting to it for survival, and exhibiting a fatalism that allows them to accept the insignificance of individuals in confrontation with threatening regimes, various conquerors and general evil, instead of relying on the hope that justice will prevail. The fact that Latvians refurbish their graveyards, respect the dead and want to be together with them may be an answer to the externally imposed life order, as well as defiance of a fate that has imposed on it" (p. 265).

¹⁷⁹ Uzule & Zelče 2014, 253.

clergy in cemeteries was fiercely resented by the Communists. The battle against this church tradition and for the secularization of the cemetery festivals was continued all through the Soviet period.¹⁸⁰

Generally speaking, most of these anti-religious assaults were in no way accidental, but part of a bigger plan carefully executed by the local authorities. Not long after the incident with the cemetery festivals, yet another letter arrived from the Ance Executive Committee demanding an immediate answer, including a list of all congregation members and their official positions (such as readers, perminders, and others), as well as a list of all houses in the Ance municipality where worship services had been held.¹⁸¹

Such an aggressive anti-religious attitude was a clear reflection of the post-war Stalinist policies against the Church. By applying constant pressure, it drove members away from the Church, and not much breathing space or place to maneuver was left for believers. In the late 1940s, the construction of the Soviet Latvian society was intensified, and the forced collectivization of farms was carried out. The large-scale deportations conducted in the winter and spring of 1949 were a hard blow to the inhabitants of Latvia. With the atmosphere of the international Cold War prevailing in Europe, the grip of Stalinism forced the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Latvian SSR into a very tight corner.¹⁸²

2.1.3 Anti-religious propaganda in the press

In the late 1940s, a broad anti-religious propaganda campaign in Marxist-Leninist fashion was launched via the radio, press, literature, theater, and other means. The public celebration of Christmas was prohibited already in 1947.¹⁸³ On July 17–18, 1948, Radio Rīga broadcast an appeal that was directed at the members of the Communist Party and the Communist youth, urging them to destroy the last remnants of religious “prejudices” and to fight against preachers and the defenders of religion. In another broadcast, pastors were called the “servants of the Bourgeois reaction.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Talonen 1997, 229. Uzule & Zelče 2014, 248. The cemeteries were still mostly used by the parishes. Nevertheless, it was only a question of time as to when the care of the cemeteries would be removed from the religious communities. In 1950, the Soviet Latvian government decreed that urban and rural cemeteries would be taken over by local governments, but until that point there had been mounting pressure toward secularization of the cemeteries.

¹⁸¹ LELBA 299, The Executive Committee of Ance Municipality to the Pastor of Pope, Rinda, and Selga (August, 1948).

¹⁸² Talonen 1997, 285.

¹⁸³ Talonen 1997, 288.

¹⁸⁴ Talonen 1997, 212.

The force of the campaign became exceptionally strong in the late summer and autumn of 1949. It was emphasized that although there was freedom of religion in the country, the struggle against religion was necessary. The Communists could not stay neutral in this battle, for the fight was their duty. The anti-religious propaganda had to show the people in Soviet Latvia that religion could not be of any help to them or society. The argument was clear that religion and Communism were irreconcilable. Thus, the fight against religion was a fight for Communism.¹⁸⁵ The people had to believe in science and hope for the victory of Communism, since religion gave an illusionary, false, and unrealistic vision of nature and society, and, as such, represented a wrong, “reactionary,” anti-scientific ideology. Those were the reasons why the fight against religion was so necessary in “the construction of Communism.”¹⁸⁶

The propaganda attacks in the press were often directed at individuals who were named. In the totalitarian society, the mere mention of one’s name was a form of forceful attack against a person. As visible spiritual leaders, pastors became the main target for such attacks. They were branded “enemies of the people” and “parasites on society’s body.” Church ministers were slandered as cheats and oppressors of the working class in public. The Communists qualified clergy as a “non-labor” class, denying the usefulness of the pastoral occupation. A constant stream of radio broadcasts and offensive newspaper articles were targeted against pastors, in this way trying to damage their reputation in the eyes of society. The common strategy employed by the media was to expose any possible weaknesses and “crimes” committed by pastors during wartime, as well as condemning their idle, lazy lifestyle and ridiculing their obscurantist preaching by which they delivered their religious “opiate” to the masses.¹⁸⁷

The same pattern can be recognized in the case of Pastor Plâte. In the newspaper *Padomju Dundaga* (Soviet Dundaga) on May 12 and 14, 1950, there was an article by E. Haberkorns entitled “Religion and its Preachers,” which was devoted to the portrayal of various pastors and their activities in the Rinda congregation. Pastors were depicted in this article as a type of chameleon, always conforming to the dominant form of political rule, the only exception being Soviet rule. At all times, pastors had helped to keep the human race in darkness and in submission to their landlords. Being clerical lords themselves and having vested interests, pastors had always

¹⁸⁵ Bergmanis 2006, 328; Talonen 1997, 213.

¹⁸⁶ Talonen 1997, 215.

¹⁸⁷ Talonen 1997, 213.

instructed people to stay patient, bear sufferings, say prayers, and humble oneself before all kinds of oppressors. At the same time, these pastors held themselves to be “god’s vicars here, on earth.”¹⁸⁸ In the same vein, Haberkorns described different “hypocritical and lordly attitudes of Rinda pastors,” coming at last to the *pastor loci*, Nikolajs Plāte, who had arrived in Rinda immediately after the capitulation of the fascists. He described his clerical activity in the Jēkabpils area, where in his church litany he had “openly interceded for the victory of the German fascist Army – in every way possible, Plāte had sung praises to the fascist government, and had also called for handing over partisans to the German executioners.”¹⁸⁹

After only a couple of days, Plāte wrote to the consistory with a response to these accusations. He argued that these charges were false. In retrospect, he admitted that in obeying the directives of the church leadership, he had mentioned the German government and military in the ecclesiastical litany, although very generally and not every time. Yet Plāte categorically denied ever referring to the German leader Adolf Hitler. “I always felt an inner aversion against this thing,” he wrote.¹⁹⁰

Never and nowhere have I sung praise to the fascist government, nor have I received any specific defense from the Germans or the local security forces (Schutzmannschaften), but together with all the other population I have suffered from their economic and social oppression. Nonetheless, the biggest departure from truth in this article is the author’s claim that I had appealed to people for handing over the partisans to the German executioners. The truth is quite the opposite. Already at the time of the German arrival, as much as it was possible, I tried my best to help the remaining Soviet activists. If I recall correctly, to several people I have provided written warranties of trustworthiness, including the member of the Zalve Executive Committee Treimanis (from Vīgants’ house), and the deputy of the Zalve Militia Beķeris (from Ērberģe), etc. As far as I know, according to the later acknowledgment of those involved, warranties had been helpful in saving their life and livelihood.¹⁹¹

Beyond that, Haberkorns referred to the ingenious statement of Comrade Joseph Stalin: “The Soviet state will not tolerate slobs and idlers.” Then he addressed Plāte’s attempts to avoid general communal duties: “For every Soviet citizen, these duties were a matter of honor, tribute, and heroism, but for Plāte – only shame and disgrace!” The reporter denounced the pastor for the fact that he did not want to take part in logging, but had written letters instead, sent his defenders to the Executive Committee, and even complained from the pulpit. When nothing else worked, he asked his congregation members to assist him. “Plāte held it to be sin – to work for

¹⁸⁸ PD 5/12/1950, 2.

¹⁸⁹ PD 5/12/1950, 2.

¹⁹⁰ LELBA 299, Plāte to the consistory (5/18/1950).

¹⁹¹ PD 5/12/1950, 2.

himself and for the Soviet state, which he disliked and insulted so much. Of course, he could always find some simpletons who provided the required measure of timber for Plâte, and also were ready to work for him in the unloading of trains.”¹⁹²

In response to these accusations, Plâte said that the amount of harvested timber demanded of him was really enormous: not 80 cubic meters, as it was mentioned in the article, but 115 – and on one occasion even 150! Plâte responded that, at one point, he had fulfilled these requirements mostly by working by himself with the helping hand of one or two members of the congregation. He insisted that there had been no “whining” from the pulpit, but perhaps expressions of gratitude to his helpers. Although Plâte’s letter was addressed to the consistory, it looks as if it was written as an apology, meant to be delivered to the CARC.¹⁹³

As Pastor Plâte was also charged with holding worship services in people’s homes without the permission of the Executive Committee, he explained that only in a couple of instances did he hold such services and that they took place in a house located in the most distant corner of the Rinda congregation. He made the excuse that these services were only conducted until he received objections from the local institutions and that home services were forbidden by the Archbishop’s circular letters. Since then, Plâte wrote, he had always followed the directives and had discontinued the services, occasionally communing with only the elderly and the sick, which sometimes happened in the presence of neighbors and family members.¹⁹⁴ Haberkorns concludes with an assertive exclamation: “Look, here you may see – what is the true face of these clerical lords!” Also, to his greatest amazement he confesses:

There are still people around who rely on the church, trust the clergy and believe in their monstrous doctrine, managing to enchant human hearts and minds. Thousands of pastors are not involved in any productive field of work, but continue to make their living off of those bewitched people. For this reason, it is paramount to pay considerably closer attention to the questions of anti-religious work.¹⁹⁵

Demagogical attacks such as the one witnessed in this article were rather typical during this period. Assaults proceeded from positions of power and the sense of ideological superiority, as the Communists were convinced that they stood on the right side of history. Aggressive anti-religious actions, based on power politics, were meant to be overwhelming, allowing no chance of their being resisted or overturned in public. In this conflict, the totalitarian state one-sidedly overpowered all opposing

¹⁹² PD 5/14/1950, 2.

¹⁹³ LELBA 299, Plâte to the consistory (5/18/1950).

¹⁹⁴ LELBA 299, Plâte to the consistory (5/18/1950).

¹⁹⁵ PD 5/14/1950, 2.

opinions. It was simply a given that atheistic propagandists were allowed to speak their mind freely and openly, criticizing the Church and believers without any fear of opposition or refutation.

Members of the clergy initially made some attempts to fight back and defend their positions, rebutting false claims made against them. Relatively soon, however, they realized how pointless these actions were. Time and time again, they were put on the defensive, forced to justify themselves and make all sorts of excuses. Eventually, in view of this disadvantageous position, the consistory decided that it would be wiser to abstain from any public controversy with the Soviet authorities all together. Therefore, eventually in a church circular the deans were advised that all articles about pastors published in the local newspapers had to be collected and delivered to the consistory:

It wouldn't be right to begin any polemic or respond from the pulpit, or be involved in any other kind of argument. But it would be enough, if thorough, true and well-established explanations were provided to the consistory.¹⁹⁶

In a broad sense, the impact of anti-religious propaganda exercised immediately after World War II did not significantly influence the minds of the people. Other societal changes in the Latvian SSR had a more powerful impact. But atheistic propaganda certainly became a factor of growing importance under the powerful and continual grip of the regime. The researcher Zanda Mankusa concludes that these kinds of publications did not influence the church members very much at first. On the contrary, such articles caused indignation and disappointment with the unfair attitude of the newspaper editors. Sometimes believers directed their protests to the CARC, complaining about the offense against their religious sensibilities. However, these objections did not avail much either.¹⁹⁷

2.1.4 Attacks and financial troubles

In the early 1950s, the Rinda congregation and its pastor suffered not only ideological attacks, but also attacks on the church building. In some cases, the malfeasants were known and reported to the militia. Nevertheless, the lack of response and reaction on the part of the local authorities revealed a total unwillingness to protect the rights of believers. Encountering this attitude, Plāte became so discouraged that

¹⁹⁶ Mankusa 2001, 34.

¹⁹⁷ Talonen 1997, 180.

after repeated attacks, he even stopped reporting them.¹⁹⁸ When the consistory and the Archbishop learned about this, however, he was immediately rebuked for his failure to do so. Consequently, Pläte was admonished to take a more active role in defending his congregations and reporting to the militia any criminal behavior against them. This reprimand strongly advised him to keep making reports because the consistory in its dealings with the CARC needed official documentation to ask for support against these attacks.¹⁹⁹

In the aforementioned report, Pläte not only referred to the threefold attacks on the Rinda church building, but also to a break-in at Mazirbe Church (where he served as an adjunct) and its smashed organ. Some damage was done also to Miķel̄tornis Church in the parish of Selga, where a group of six or seven sailors had danced a “*kazachok*” and played the organ, while the altar was trampled on and windows were broken.²⁰⁰ In the next letter, Pläte reported two additional cases of break-ins at the Rinda premises,²⁰¹ and by the end of the year he reported the sixth case of a break-in, when fifteen church windows were smashed, a cloakroom window was broken, and other damage was done.²⁰²

An especially alarming problem for the congregations during this period was their critical financial situation. The local congregations had to pay very large sums of money for the church buildings in the form of taxes and insurance premiums. The LELC had also ordered the congregations to pay approximately fifteen percent of their income to the consistory. The congregations that had suffered the greatest losses in the war were partially exempt from these payments.²⁰³ Financial troubles were clearly present in Pläte’s situation as well. He wrote a letter to Tūrs addressing these “painful questions – about 1 percent tax for the church buildings.” When consulting Pläte on these matters, the Archbishop above all cautioned him to be extremely careful when signing agreements with the local authorities about the use of the church building, so “they don’t make you pay some extra sums, which would include previous years.” At the end of his letter, Tūrs expressed a sincere hope that the congregations led by Pläte would be able to keep their church buildings and not be forced to look for a place of worship somewhere else.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (8/1/1952).

¹⁹⁹ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (6/28/1952).

²⁰⁰ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (8/1/1952).

²⁰¹ LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (8/11/1952).

²⁰² LELBA 299, Pläte to the consistory (11/3/1952).

²⁰³ Talonen 1997, 148.

²⁰⁴ LELBA 299, Tūrs to Pläte (2/21/1949).

The advice from Tūrs was legitimate, as the Soviet authorities at this time were working hard to close down as many churches as possible. Although in 1948–1950 registered congregations were granted use of the previously confiscated church buildings, their financial situation was significantly weakened due to leasing and covering insurances on these properties, as well as other payments demanded by the church consistory.²⁰⁵ The dearth of believers and often virtually empty churches caused the congregations serious financial difficulties. In many cases, pastors were not paid for their work and services. The lack of money and otherwise poor chances for restoring damaged churches frequently caused serious challenges. A few of the LELC congregations were dissolved, and their members joined other congregations.²⁰⁶ In areas where the Evangelical Lutheran Church was weaker, the local authorities made an additional effort to expropriate church premises and use them for secular purposes.²⁰⁷

Financial pressure was one of the chief weapons that the Communists used against the LELC during this difficult period. At a time when congregations were becoming smaller and the tax burden was increasing, the economic situation of the pastors and their families grew especially strained. Given the fact that the Pope, Rinda, and Selga congregations were rather tiny,²⁰⁸ Plāte's income from them was altogether insufficient to support his family. To improve his situation, he started to inquire about other available calls. Plāte wrote a letter to the dean of Kuldīga Deanery, Oskars Blumbergs, in which he explained his financial dire straits.²⁰⁹ In this correspondence, Plāte's future prospects were discussed. One option was the vacancy in the Saldus Second Congregation. After a visit there, Plāte had gained a positive impression, but after considering all of the pros and cons and consulting with his "five person family consilium" – his wife, his two children Modris (born in 1951) and Āris (born in 1952), and his elderly mother Marija – he decided that it would be economically unviable. He anticipated that the transition could make the situation for the family even worse and declined the offer. Clearly financial concerns dwelt heavily on his mind: "Frankly speaking, we are barely surviving from Sunday to Sunday as we live now, and one Sunday without income can leave us starving, or

²⁰⁵ Talonen 1997, 285.

²⁰⁶ Talonen 1997, 222.

²⁰⁷ Talonen 1997, 153. Churches were converted to secular use: a shop (in Indra), a fire station (in Viļāni), a museum (in Ludza), a grain storage (in Daugavpils), etc.

²⁰⁸ LELBA 299. Statistical information on Pope, Rinda, Selga, Irbe un Ēdole congregations in 1952: in Pope about 250 members, in Rinda around 200, in Selga around 60, in Irbe around 100, in Ēdole around 200. In 1952, 11 were baptized in Pope, in Rinda 19, in Selga 4, in Irbe 2, and in Ēdole 13. Married in Pope was one couple, in Rinda 3, in Ēdole 4, in Selga and in Irbe none. Buried in Pope were 5, in Rinda 22, in Selga 2, in Irbe 1, and in Ēdole 17.

²⁰⁹ LELBA 299, Plāte to Blumbergs (5/21/1953).

we should make debts.”²¹⁰

Their situation was dire indeed. In his letter to Blumbergs, Plāte honestly confessed that his decision was guided by pragmatic and even selfish motives, as he had to not only take care of his own interests, but also those of his family. Beyond that, it was hard for him to discontinue the work initiated in the present congregations.²¹¹ The inadequacy of the whole situation was clearly revealed in one of his letters. In words of intense emotion, he explained his agony over the decision:

There is a difference – either I continue to work in the well-known place or in a foreign, unknown environment. According to my nature, any change of congregation for me, in general, is very painful. In the last 15 years of my ministry, I have done it only once, and that was not by my own volition or choosing, but I was pressed by circumstances. And even then, when I think back about it – my first love can't help but start crying!²¹²

For the time being, Plāte decided to stay in the Pope, Rinda, Selga, Irbe, and Ēdole congregations, which comprised a total of 810 registered members.²¹³ However, that was not for long. A call issued by the consistory in the autumn of 1953 seemed compelling enough to change his mind. He was invited to fill a vacancy in the Rucava parish of the Liepāja district, which had been empty already for five years.²¹⁴ His first visit to Rucava – a harvest festival service – was convincing enough for Plāte to agree on moving there on November 1.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ LELBA 299, Plāte to Blumbergs (5/21/1953).

²¹¹ LELBA 299, Plāte to Blumbergs (5/21/1953).

²¹² LELBA 299, Plāte to Blumbergs (5/21/1953).

²¹³ LELBA 299. Statistical information on Pope, Rinda, Selga, Irbe and Ēdole congregations in 1952.

²¹⁴ LELBA 299, the consistory to the Council of Rucava parish and Pastor Plāte (11/17/1953).

²¹⁵ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (11/1/1953). Plāte asked permission to keep the Ēdole congregation under his care. In a reply on November 3, the Archbishop congratulated Plāte on the new assignment and gave his permission.

III SERVICE IN RUCAVA (1953–1983)

3.1 SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION DURING THE KHRUSHCHEV ERA (1953–1964)

The death of Stalin brought about a new *détente* in the state-church relations. Yet no sooner had the new leaders consolidated their power than the war against the Church and religion was taken up again. The only difference was that this time, Communism sought to attain its aims with more sophisticated and refined measures.²¹⁶ After Nikita Khrushchev became the new General Secretary of the Soviet government, he began a new offensive against religion with the aim of “liberating the consciousness of the masses from all religious prejudice.” Being a “revolutionary romantic,” Khrushchev believed that Communism could be built in a short period of time and that religious convictions had no place in it.²¹⁷

Education, ideological work, and propaganda became the most utilized weapons in the renewed war on religion. The creation of a “new Soviet man” by means of education and re-education became the central theme of atheist activities. Atheism was elevated as one of the most important subjects, especially in schools. No school, no age group of students, no subject was exempted from this kind of education. History, literature, biology, astronomy, mathematics – they all had to be utilized for the goal of atheism. The teachers were told to explain all the phenomena of life by means of science in order to show the non-existence of God and the uselessness of religion.²¹⁸ Formally, religious freedom was still guaranteed and believers were “free to retain their religious ritual,” but only “as far as the Soviet legislation was not trespassed, and the civic order and rights of the citizens were not endangered.” Yet, this regulation allowed the local authorities to make their own rather arbitrary interpretations about the activities of the pastors and believers.²¹⁹ At the same time, the Soviet reality was such that laws had only secondary importance. People’s lives were governed to a greater extent by arbitrary Party instructions and policy, which stood above any laws.²²⁰

²¹⁶ See Bergmanis & Zālīte 2004. See also Vahter [s.a.], 49.

²¹⁷ Mankusa 2001, 21–23. Čuiibe 1963.

²¹⁸ Vahter [s.a.], 49–50.

²¹⁹ Mankusa 2001, 23.

²²⁰ Vahter [s.a.], 53.

The Soviet authorities created all sorts of bureaucratic obstacles to make the life of the faithful increasingly hard. The Church was required to navigate labyrinths of legal procedures and to fulfill all kinds of detailed paperwork. Often these requirements demanded a great amount of time and effort from the church workers, who had to suffer through seemingly endless frustration with the absurdity of the system. But always appealing to religious freedom had to be done in order to defend basic rights and retain legal status.

After 1959, the attacks against religion became especially harsh because the Congress of the Communist Party had decided that the fate of the Church had to be resolved “fundamentally.” In the 1960s, the Soviet state made several important regulations to bolster its restrictions on church activities: the involvement of children and young people in church rituals could not be tolerated; the taxes on church buildings were raised substantially, etc.²²¹ Some of these regulations were not even published, but known only by the insiders, so that religious organizations often were not even aware of the crimes they had committed.²²² In 1960, in his report to Moscow on the situation with the LELC, the CARC Commissar wrote that the current conditions were satisfactory: many congregations were closed and the church premises had been surrendered to the local authorities; not many churches were renovated; and the parish members were not too willing to make donations, suspecting that pastors used the money for other purposes. Moreover he wrote,

Türs is not aware of the real situation, being busy with international activities and the fight for peace. ... It means that we should use Archbishop Türs in the international relations even more, in order to distract his attention from the inner matters in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Latvian SSR.²²³

The secret government instruction, “On Increased Control over the Realization of the Legislation for Religious Cults” (1961), was an important tool for empowering the local institutions to undertake more active surveillance of congregations and pastors. In many municipalities, special commissions were formed for this aim. The so-called “individual work” in the midst of believers became increasingly widespread. The Communist Party, the Komsomol, and the trade unions sent out their

²²¹ See *Komunistiskās Partijas un Padomju valdības attieksme pret reliģiju un baznīcu*. 1960.

²²² Mankusa 2001, 23.

²²³ As the Soviet empire strived for ever greater influence around the globe, one of the important tools for spreading Soviet propaganda abroad was the so-called “fight for peace” movement. That was Türs’ way of reading “the signs of the times” and getting involved in international activities. In her article *Over the Iron Curtain*, Zanda Mankusa writes that in the mid-1950s, the authorities changed their policy regarding the involvement of the Church in foreign affairs, and they started to exploit its channels to spread Soviet propaganda in the West. Every year, Soviet church delegates visited several international conferences. About ten leading Latvian Lutheran pastors attended, and it took up a lot of their time and distracted them from internal church matters. This was encouraged by the Soviets, who tried to keep church leaders busy so they would not fulfill their primary duties. (Mankusa 2006a.)

members to make special visits with believers to convince them to give up their religious “prejudices.” When such conversations did not work, the next step was to subject them to the collective approach, where the “religious backwardness” of believers was treated during communal meetings.²²⁴

The most common method of “control” was surveillance. A typical praxis, for example, was for a local official to stand by the church door and register attendees in a notebook. In a similar way, pastors’ sermons were also monitored and transcribed. However, it was not always the local officials who did the work. Sometimes ordinary people were selected for the task, even congregation members. They would sit in the back row and make notes without drawing attention to themselves.²²⁵ These spying activities were bullying and intimidating. With the increased pressure from such surveillance, “individual work,” and propaganda lectures at school and work, many church members were forced to rethink their Christian loyalty. Simply put, the Communists made it clear that church ties would have implications for the quality of people’s life, reducing their possibilities at school and work, for their career, and for their overall success. Accordingly, many people decided that church membership had become too risky and too costly.

In Khrushchev’s time, preventing children and young people from religious activities was a crucial part of the anti-religious plan. Minors and underaged citizens had to be kept away from attending services and other religious ceremonies.²²⁶ In schools, every course had to be taught only from the perspective of a materialistic worldview.²²⁷ All kinds of prohibitions were put on Sunday schools, youth groups, and Bible classes, where only worship services were allowed.²²⁸ If parents themselves did not take the time to educate their children in the faith and failed to bring them to church, it was impossible for pastors and the other workers to reach children with the Christian message. By creating such an adverse and anti-religious environment, the Soviet authorities largely managed to cut off the new generation from contact with the Church.

Special strategies were used to put excessive pressure on the pastors, because the existence and future of the Church to a great extent depended on their work. Hence, the regime put their ministry under considerable stress. Negative attitudes from the atheistic society, restrictions by the Commissar and the local authorities, and

²²⁴ Mankusa 2001, 31.

²²⁵ Mankusa 2001, 32.

²²⁶ Mankusa 2001, 26.

²²⁷ Mankusa 2001, 89.

²²⁸ Mankusa 2001, 90.

even slanderous reports about “every word and step” by fellow clergy and members were only some of the most distressing problems experienced by pastors. The authorities knew well how important their role was, and they tried to diminish their influence by limiting their opportunities to reach people. The tactic of silencing and intimidating clergymen was ultimately based on the hope of convincing them to give up their ministry completely. There were several cases of pastors leaving their ministry, but particularly notable was the case of Pastor Oļģerts Robežnieks, which was widely publicized in Soviet atheistic propaganda. Immediately after he left the ministry, Robežnieks published an article in the popular newspaper *Cīņa* (Fight), in which he described his former “delusional path,” renounced his faith, and promised to become an honorable member of Soviet society in the future.²²⁹

Khrushchev’s era can be briefly summarized as a period of strong pressure, surveillance, and control over the activities of the Church. As a result, membership decreased significantly, a few congregations were closed down, the Church struggled financially, most of the children and youth were alienated from congregations, and the clergy were made a target of persecution, as their work was strictly controlled and closely scrutinized. The anti-religious policy, with its intensive atheist propaganda, ideological indoctrination, and so-called “individual work,” continued to push the Church toward being irrelevant and ineffective in Soviet society.

3.1.1 Rucava – a serious parish²³⁰

The beginning of Khrushchev’s era coincided with Plāte’s transition to Rucava. The initial contact with the parish was a success. The first reports from Rucava serve as evidence of mutual understanding. The congregation was content with their new pastor.²³¹ At first, though, Plāte and his wife were taken aback by the difficult process of entry into the restricted zone where Rucava was located. Plāte regretted that in this corner of western Latvia they were even more separated from his wife’s elderly parents, who lived in the eastern part of the country in the distant town of Alūksne. In a letter to Tūrs, he acknowledged that for the sake of his family he would still

²²⁹ Mankusa 2001, 86.

²³⁰ For a short history of the Rucava parish, see Ķiploks 1980b.

²³¹ A possible explanation for this immediate connection between the parish and the pastor could be also the wide influence of the Courland Brethren Congregation (Kurzemes Brāļu draudze) in the region. Being influenced by pietistic Christianity, Plāte was very favorably inclined toward the Herrnhutian tradition. For more information on the Courland Brethren Congregation, see Talonen 1997, 238–242.

willingly consider moving east “in the direction of Livland.”²³²

On these grounds, his warm reception by the Rucava parish made him at the same time both glad and sad, because he still held out hopes to move to another congregation. The Rucava parish demonstrated a great deal of appreciation and overwhelmed him with its welcome. In order to hasten his arrival, the congregation members had planned to build a special parsonage in the church garden for the new pastor and his family. Given the overall Soviet environment, Plāte was truly impressed, and he articulated his admiration for such rare activity and initiative on their part. He praised their loyalty and harmony and the manner he was received. He had to admit to the Archbishop that his attitude prior to his arrival had been largely passive and reserved, but the congregation’s spontaneous enthusiasm and a genuine willingness to serve would not allow him to stand aside for very long.²³³

In the same letter Plāte stated, “The Rucava parish is a serious parish.” He admitted that the more time he spent in Rucava, the more he felt tied to it. Least of all, Plāte did not want to cause such a congregation pain or disappointment. Recognizing his own character and reflecting on his previous painful pastoral post, he expressed hope for a better experience in the future, which would end up being rather prophetic:

I have not been successful at doing my work as a passerby. If I had been able to serve my last 15 years in a single place, I would feel more fortunate indeed! Yet, I had to scatter myself in many congregations. Due to this trait of character, my feeling is that if I become engaged to Rucava now, it will be an engagement for the rest of my life. In spite of that, it is not what I am hoping for.²³⁴

Toward the very end of his life, he reflected on his move to Rucava in a letter to Archbishop Jānis Matulis:

I cannot forget the words of our old Archbishop Gustavs Tūrs, at one time remarking that I lived in the most Latvian and most distant corner of our dear fatherland, near to the very Prussian borders. I am not convinced if it really is the most Latvian, yet I am fully convinced that it is the most distant. I have increasingly felt the truth of these words during these past 29 years, since I was placed here – without being able to get out.²³⁵

Indeed, Plāte was meant to stay in Rucava for the rest of his life.

²³² LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (4/12/1954).

²³³ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (4/12/1954).

²³⁴ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (4/12/1954). The shortage of pastors was very severe. In this situation, most of the pastors were placed in charge of more than one parish. For example, Jānis Luksis, Arturs Čikste, and Žanis Dambis each had seven congregations under their care. At the end of the 1940s, Vilhelms Migla and Vilhelms Ozols each took care of six congregations. Most of the ministers were in charge of two or three congregations. A minority of ministers and preachers (roughly a third) could concentrate on serving one congregation only; some of them were ministers in Riga congregations. (Talonen 1997, 247.)

²³⁵ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (8/22/1982).

In his response to Plāte, Tūrs wished him the Lord's richest blessing for his ministry "in the most Latvian corner of our dear fatherland" and also every success with the building of the parsonage! As much as Plāte desired to move "in the direction of Livland," Tūrs did not have anything encouraging to say, except for the comforting words of faith that "an industrious work and a diligent worker would always receive God's helping hand and his blessing."²³⁶ In spite of the favorable attitude of the Archbishop and having a very good relationship with him, all efforts of transferring him to another congregation did not succeed. The records of the consistory testify that later Plāte did consider as many as seven calls to different locations in Latvia, but for one reason or another none of them worked out.²³⁷

Subsequently, the Archbishop would write Plāte and share a sincere admission: "You know it well that I have the greatest respect for you and I gratefully acknowledge your ministry for our church. Nevertheless, I have not been able to move you up to a better position."²³⁸ Throughout their whole correspondence, Tūrs' friendly and cordial disposition toward Plāte is clearly evident. It is highly likely that these words of Tūrs not only addressed the difficult circumstances and the shortage of pastors, which made such moves complicated, but also an indirect hint that, in this particular case, the biggest blame was on the Soviet authorities. Due to their excessive control over clergy placement and the registration process,²³⁹ Plāte's move to a larger city could be deliberately hindered.

Although formally a private matter of the LELC, the appointment of pastors was placed under the strict oversight of the Soviet authorities. Every pastor had to visit the Commissar of the CARC, not only to obtain registration papers but also to report on parish work.²⁴⁰ In fact, the registration process was an effective instrument in the hands of the Commissar to achieve the obedience of the clergy. It was up to the Commissar to make the final decision of whether to allow a pastor to do spiritual

²³⁶ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (4/12/1954).

²³⁷ The correspondence between the consistory and the Archbishop attests that various vacancies (to Sloka in February of 1954; to Dzērbene-Vecpiebalga-Velēna in July of 1954; to Daugavgrīva/Bolderāja in August of 1957; to Aizpute in March of 1963; to Smiltene in May of 1963; to Liepāja in June of 1967; to Tukums in April of 1974) where Plāte was a candidate did not work out for him. Either he was not called or he himself refused to go.

²³⁸ LELBA 299, Tūrs to Plāte (9/25/1965).

²³⁹ Mankusa 2001, 26–27.

²⁴⁰ Pastor Osvalds Ābelītis remembers that these conversations usually happened in a friendly atmosphere, a sort of open "dialogue." The Commissar inquired about people whom he knew – sometimes about congregation members and other pastors. Ābelītis admits: "There was no point in pretending that you didn't know somebody and knew nothing, because the Commissar had all the information about friendships and activities, anyway. And, if you didn't tell something or pretended that you didn't know somebody, he made a note that you were not loyal or trustworthy. It was up to the pastors themselves, what and how much to tell. There were pastors, who told the Commissar only those things that were generally known and revealed nothing, thus helping to keep the image of the loyal pastor intact." (Mankusa 2001, 29.)

work and in which congregation he would be registered. In addition, the Commissar always tried to make sure that the most active, accomplished, and energetic pastors ended up in smaller congregations. Mediocre and less accomplished clergymen, on the other hand, were allowed easier registration in congregations in larger cities.²⁴¹

As Plāte arrived in Rucava, he still was pondering a move to some other place. In January of 1954, the Archbishop had invited him to Livland to get acquainted with the three vacant congregations in Dzērbene, Vecpiebalga, and Velēna. Plāte declined the invitation, saying that for the time being, he was not able to get away from his immediate responsibilities in the parish.²⁴² From the correspondence with Tūrs, it becomes relatively evident that Plāte's initial plan to move to another location had changed. He admitted to having "strongly bonded" with the congregation, and the construction project in Rucava was proceeding forward very well.²⁴³

The lack of obstacles in the building of the parsonage had been truly surprising. Perhaps unwittingly, the local authorities had allowed the process to happen smoothly almost until the end. However, problems arose shortly before the planned completion and occupation. In the beginning of October 1953, Plāte was summoned to a visit with the Commissar of the CARC. He was supposed to bring along his personal registration documents as well as all documents pertaining to the construction of the parsonage. The letter sounded truly alarming: it threatened to cancel Plāte's work permit in Rucava (received only a few days prior) and expressed astonishment about the construction of a parsonage.²⁴⁴

The reason for such astonishment was that Commissar Jūlijs Restbergs had not been aware of its construction. According to required procedure, the construction of new churches or other facilities for religious activities was allowed only in certain cases with a special permit from the CARC of the USSR. The construction materials had to be contributed personally by the parishioners or obtained by congregations through the State Planning Committee.²⁴⁵ It was obvious that something at the Rucava parish had been happening without the proper Soviet oversight. Unfortunately, the available sources do not provide any information about Plāte's conversation with Commissar Jūlijs Restbergs. From the subsequent outcome, however, it is possible

²⁴¹ Mankusa 2001, 29

²⁴² LELBA 299, Plāte's autobiography in 1953 (1/25/1954). At this time, he ministered to the Rucava parish (around 500 members), the Ēdole congregation (around 200 members), and the Īvandes congregation (around 160 members).

²⁴³ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (7/4/1954).

²⁴⁴ LELBA 299, Plāte's report to the consistory (10/9/1954) and (10/28/1954). For the service in the Rucava parish, Plāte received registration from the CARC on September 21, 1954.

²⁴⁵ Talonen 1997, 151.

to conclude that Plāte had been in a position to provide the necessary answers and settle the dispute. Eventually the local government issued a certificate that a house called “Parsonage” (*Draudzes māja*) had been built in the Rucava parish garden.²⁴⁶

Yet, that did not end the immediate troubles. Shortly thereafter, the Financial Department of the municipality demanded a detailed accounting. Where did the building materials come from? Who had done the work? What was the extent of the work, and what were the salaries (insisting that volunteer work was not allowed)? In subsequent reports to the Archbishop, Pastor Plāte made it very clear that the congregation members felt profoundly offended by such a negative attitude toward their efforts, for the voluntary work had been performed for the sake of their Christian faith:

The church members who worked on the parsonage were of the strongest conviction that in this case no salary was necessary, for the work was meant to benefit only themselves. Their motives were religious, for they were working for themselves and built the parsonage for themselves. And the whole discussion about the salary was deeply offensive to their religious sensitivities.²⁴⁷

It should be noted that this is one of the rare occasions in the LELC during the Soviet period that something completely new was successfully built, kept, and defended. During the whole era, only two new Lutheran churches were built: one in Vaiņode and another in Jaunjelgava. Such a building process clearly required a persistent and unyielding attitude, without giving way to pressure. But such daring and persistence were rewarded in spite of all opposition. In the autumn of 1954, the building of the Rucava parsonage was completed, and on October 28, Plāte could report to the consistory that he had finally received the registration papers from the militia so that he and his family could settle down in Rucava.²⁴⁸

In the summer of the same year, he experienced another problem with the authorities, which led him to worry that this “accident” might trigger a wider confrontation. It was an unfortunate situation during a baptismal service that he performed in the Rucava Church. On this occasion, he had baptized a child whose mother was a Christian and desired baptism, but whose father was a Communist and had forbade it. Not long before the baptismal service, Plāte was called by a Communist, G. Putāns, the chairman of the local collective farm, who warned and threatened the pastor that by baptizing this child he would have to face the public prosecutor.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (10/17/1954)

²⁴⁷ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (10/17/1954).

²⁴⁸ LELBA 299, Plāte to the consistory (10/28/1954).

²⁴⁹ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (6/6/1954).

Plāte took this warning seriously. He immediately sought out the mother and made clear that, in light of the circumstances, he could not perform the baptism. Plāte admonished her to raise the child in the faith with intercession and God's Word, while hoping and praying that baptism would be possible later. The mother argued that the father had already left the family, even though their marriage was not yet legally dissolved. Even though Plāte had politely refused her, however, it turned out that during a later baptismal service, the child had been carried up to the altar with a group of other children and baptized without the pastor noticing it. It was a truly honest "mistake," as he later explained to the Archbishop, and he asked for "his fatherly support," if such a need would arise.²⁵⁰

Apparently, this problematic case was closed without serious consequences for the pastor. Nevertheless, this was not the only situation when Plāte sought support from the Archbishop. Typically, this kind of "cry for help" was a measure of last resort. It was hoped that in the last instance, the Archbishop could use his leverage with the authorities to negotiate a lessening of sanctions. In similar cases, the normal course of action for Tūrs was to discuss the matter with the Commissar, who was authorized to interfere and use his expertise to resolve such situations. Frequently, it was through the Commissar's own unique perspective that the matter was decided. Because he worked closely with the Secret Police, he was subject only to the central Soviet government and the Latvian government had no control over him. In practical terms, the Commissar thus had the power and means to influence the local authorities.²⁵¹

Plāte had to plead for support from the Archbishop at least two more times, especially concerning state-assigned labor. In August of 1956, Plāte received an order to arrive in person for assigned labor at the Rucava sawmill for timber work.²⁵² In April of 1957, the Financial Department of the Liepāja municipality gave him strict orders to supply 80 kilograms of meat and also 100 eggs, in spite of the fact that Plāte owned neither land, farm, nor farm animals, and that this was established in official documents. It was explained that such tasks were assigned to him as a non-working citizen. Of course, it was a false claim that had to be overturned. According to the CARC ordinances, pastors were employed in a legitimate profession and were not non-working citizens.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (6/6/1954).

²⁵¹ Talonen 1997, 25; Gintere & Zālīte 1992, 98; Trūps-Trops 1992, 40; Zalāns 1995, 13–14; see also Grivāns 1980, 76–77.

²⁵² LELBA 299, Plāte to the consistory (8/8/1956).

²⁵³ LELBA 299, Plāte to the Ministry of Finance in Latvian SSR (4/23/1957).

In 1957, several other rural pastors complained about unjust taxes applied to them. When protests addressed to the financial authorities did not help, the consistory wrote a letter to Commissar Restbergs, saying that the so-called “natural taxes” demanding meat, milk, eggs, and other products from pastors were unreasonable because pastors did not have any land and pastors were not farmers. In May of 1957, Dean A. Vītols reported to the consistory meeting that the Commissar had officially told him that pastors who lived in rural areas and did not have farm animals had been released from these “natural taxes.”²⁵⁴

As previously in the Rinda parish, Plāte was forced to defend himself against accusations of holding home services with family members, guests, and neighbors in the Rucava parish. In his letter to the Commissar, Plāte explained that it was incorrect to call them “worship services” because they were not announced from the pulpit. The “services” were just home visits to elderly and sick parish members in which Communion was celebrated, and sometimes relatives and neighbors joined the ritual.²⁵⁵ Once again, he asked for the Archbishop’s support, insisting that he had not the slightest intent to trespass against the rules. Yet, “the pastoral duties themselves, if approached in serious manner, often unintentionally led to erroneous situations.”²⁵⁶ The local authorities frequently acted randomly “on their own personal whim.” However, their arbitrary legal decisions could be overturned only after serious bureaucratic clarification and tedious communication with the CARC.²⁵⁷ Plāte wrote to Tūrs that the State constantly subjected “the outlawed congregations” to “arbitrary assaults” which “deprived [them] of their basic civil rights.”²⁵⁸ Facing such a misuse of power by the local institutions, Plāte often appealed to the church leadership in hope of some protection.

On a few occasions, he was defended by the members of his church. For instance, the widow of the late Pastor Pēteris Kamols wrote an apologetic letter to the Archbishop, commending Plāte and his ministry. It was written to defend the pastor against charges of permitting the participation of a visiting choir in Rucava church worship services. Another problem addressed by Mrs. Kamola was a series of ongoing attacks against Plāte by a woman who, according to Kamola, was “possessed by an evil spirit.” Accusations and defamations had come not only from this woman, but also from a member of the church council, Juris Alksnis. Kamola pleaded for

²⁵⁴ Mankusa 2001, 39.

²⁵⁵ LELBA 299, Plāte to the Commissar of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in 1958.

²⁵⁶ LELBA 299, Plāte to Tūrs (3/15/1959).

²⁵⁷ LELBA 323, Plāte to the consistory (4/6/1964).

²⁵⁸ LELBA 323, Plāte to Tūrs (1/7/1960).

Türs' help, claiming that she had the support of many congregation members who held the same opinion.²⁵⁹

Plāte's frustration about dealings with the local authorities is evident in his letter to the Archbishop concerning the Bārta congregation, one of the smaller congregations under his care. He asked for a clarification regarding the earliest possible age for youth confirmation. Roman Catholics were allowed to confirm young people who were 10–12 years of age, while the consistory of the Evangelical Lutheran Church allowed confirmation at the age of 15. However, the traditional age for confirmation in this western region of Latvia was 16 or 17. In spite of all that, the Bārta local government had made an arbitrary ruling that forbade the confirmation of anyone younger than 18.²⁶⁰ Plāte felt confused about the constantly changing rules and inquired of Türs about the situation. He asked: Is there any new regulation? Or can the local authorities act arbitrarily? He complained about the never-ending interferences of the local authorities in the reconstruction of the Bārta church building, as they were demanding explanations for every nail and bolt. He could not help but burst out in a sarcastic comment:

If only they could let us work! Even without their disturbance, all this work comes to us with incredible difficulty. We build – and we build for the state! We do not destroy. Perhaps by the time we are done, the building can be transformed into a culture club or a cinema, because our church activities will be finished. Are we truly so totally dependent on the license or mercy of the local institutions? Isn't there some kind of general legislation for us, clearly stating what is allowed and what is forbidden?²⁶¹

These are words of utter frustration, expressing Plāte's rough and untempered emotions, which inevitably arose from a sense of the never-ending humiliations experienced under the Soviet regime. They reflect both resignation and alienation, but also a spirit of resistance desperately fighting for the good of the Church. For a loyal pastor like Plāte, who deeply cared about the Church, it was extremely difficult to put up with the prevailing situation and to accept the failure of the Church as she constantly kept losing ground.

²⁵⁹ LELBA 299, Kamola to Türs (10/30/1958).

²⁶⁰ LELBA 299, Plāte to Türs (2/2/1959).

²⁶¹ LELBA 299, Plāte to Türs (2/2/1959).

3.1.2 A more personal look: Zuļģe's story

Without a doubt, the main dilemma of this period was the set of outside challenges posed by the Soviet reality. Even looking at Plāte's ministry from the perspective of the source materials, official letters, and documents, a conclusion might be drawn that most of his attention was directed toward external battles, predominantly dealing with outside conflicts, struggles, and obstacles imposed by the Soviet anti-religious policies. For the sake of a more balanced view, however, it is necessary to emphasize that Plāte as a Lutheran pastor in his daily routine was predominantly occupied with his ecclesiastical duties: delivering God's Word to his people and caring for their souls.

An interesting perspective on his pastoral activities is provided by a long-time member of the Rucava parish, Natālija Zuļģe. This lady was a witness to most of the period of Plāte's service in this location. What makes Zuļģe's story particularly relevant is the fact that her conversion to the Christian faith took place in the late 1950s. She ventured to join at a time when most people were deciding to abandon the Church. She became not only an active participant in the life of the parish, but also a close friend with the pastor's wife, Modra Plāte, in spite of their age difference of more than 20 years.²⁶² Granted that Zuļģe's memories and assessment of Plāte in many ways are biased by her affection and loyalty to her pastor, even given their subjective nature, these recollections of his everyday practices, beliefs, and experiences can provide valuable and more holistic insight into Plāte's religious personality and his ministry as a clergyman.²⁶³

Zuļģe vividly remembered how, being a young lady, recently married and troubled with all sorts of life struggles, she chose to attend a church service. There she heard Plāte's preaching, and through this experience she received the truly desired help and relief. She felt as if Pastor Plāte preached directly to her heart: "It was just like my soul was ripped apart." Gradually, through regular attendance, she underwent a sort of religious awakening, a change of heart, which, according to her story, made her an active witness of God's goodness and Christ's resurrection. Her experience felt so real and powerful that she could no longer keep silent. She was not bothered by other people saying that she had lost her mind with religion. The treasure of faith was more important. Zuļģe described her conversion in terms characteristic of Christian awakening, arguing that being a part of the Church was a real commit-

²⁶² LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁶³ Concerning the theory of "lived religion," see Hall 1997.

ment, requiring a conscious stance and different life.²⁶⁴ In a way, according to Zuļģe, Christian life did not feel too hard:

It was our path that gave us strength, when we were offering ourselves, so that something good might happen. Actually, I must say that I was able to serve – and I could do it freely. The authorities knew what kind of person I was and that I attended church, but regardless of everything, I was always a good worker and did not give up on my faith. To a great extent, I owe this gratitude to Pastor Plāte. He taught: “It doesn’t matter if others are involved in stealing – even if everybody does it. However, if church people do it, it is something completely different.” There is a different standard, a kind of magnifying glass, applied to church people, which is not applied to ordinary folks. And I truly felt that I had become a different person, and that I could not allow myself things that other people could. I really worked as if I did it before God. For me it was easy to work. And I am grateful for this to Pastor Plāte.²⁶⁵

“That is how Plāte taught and directed us: it was our path – come what may!” The situation with regard to Christian commitment during the Soviet era was much more black and white. “In the congregation, we were only those people who didn’t see any other way. We really wished to preserve our church and sustain our faith. ... Yet I am truly happy that I could live during this era, and we could confess and serve the Lord.” Zuļģe emphasized that people did not come to church for the sake of gatherings, social evenings, or some entertainment, but they came for the sake of Christ. Outward difficulties and possible threats made the faith more discernible. “I came to church with only one intention: to seek God. I found Him, and I keep living with that faith until today,” said Zuļģe. “During this period it was something like this: you took a ruble or three rubles, which you had spared, bringing this money to church. It was apparent that no help could be expected from the outside, since it was up to us – just we ourselves could help and contribute something.”²⁶⁶

Zuļģe remembers, “In the so-called ‘Russian times’²⁶⁷ the situation seemed considerably clearer. It was easy to distinguish who was your friend and who was not. At this time, we all had very friendly believers’ fellowship among us, because we were ‘in the same boat’ – all of us were equally threatened by the governing authorities.”²⁶⁸ The danger was believed to be real, so that not only pastors but also church members were put under close scrutiny. Zuļģe recounts a curious story about an agent of the State who wanted to surveil a small group of singers in the congregation:

²⁶⁴ LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁶⁵ LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁶⁶ LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁶⁷ The expression is rather characteristic, implying the Latvian point of view that the occupation was perceived not only as Soviet, but also as Russian.

²⁶⁸ LL 2007/1, 14.

There were four women in our church who wanted to form a singing quartet – two sopranos and two altos, and often we used to stay a while longer after the choir rehearsals. But an elderly gentleman with gray hair desperately wanted to join us, saying: “I’ll just be humming along.” Although the man was not able to sing properly, he badly needed to become the fifth member in the quartet and monitor what we were singing and talking among ourselves.²⁶⁹

What Zuļģe appreciated most from Plāte’s ministry was his work of laying spiritual foundations: “I understand that he truly was the man who provided many with some strong foundations for life. And he did it also for me.” He helped not so much through friendships and pastoral conversations, but mostly through formal pulpit preaching. His work was restricted to the confines of the church premises, and he did not participate in the Soviet society. His personality was neither outgoing, nor active, nor socially engaged. Yet in Zuļģe’s view these deficiencies were compensated for by his excellent preaching on Sundays and in the midweek services.

Those things remained in the heart and were not lost. It was something like a mighty fortress of faith: once it was built, you had a place of a refuge in every situation of life, for Christ himself had built it. The work of Christ was the most beautiful thing, which none could ruin or destroy. Plāte was very good at illustrating this in his sermons, and that was truly beautiful.²⁷⁰

A prominent point in his preaching was the bearing of the cross and troubles because of one’s Christian conviction. Even the most saintly people could not escape such a destiny. Zuļģe continued: “Troubles and storms of life must come, and not only once. That was the road for Plāte himself, too. He was a servant of God. Yet, I must recognize that things happened to him according to his own words. He used to stress it strongly: if you were destined for the glory of suffering, you had to persist in it. And that was the way he himself was following. The glory of his own suffering was rather heavy.”²⁷¹ From listening to his sermons she learned a certain attitude: “When I started attending church, I was only 20 years old. I was not intimidated by anybody, but even if someone would attempt to intimidate me that could not change anything. I would rather let them shoot me! I would continue attending church, no matter what happened. I didn’t see any other way, because it was the only life I could imagine living well and pleasing.”²⁷² On a personal note, Zuļģe admitted that she was drawn to the Rucava Church especially by Plāte’s proclamation of the Word:

I have to say that I was not too impressed by his personality. Maybe it sounds somewhat foolish. His wife Modra and I, we discussed this issue at great length.

²⁶⁹ LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁷⁰ LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁷¹ LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁷² LL 2007/1, 15.

I know this from our conversations and from my experience that Plāte had a rather difficult character. But his spiritual contribution, on the other hand, was exceptional. Simply exceptional! That's what Modra also affirmed, that he could sit at his desk day in and day out, and his desk was always piled up with books.²⁷³

Yet, in a paradoxical way, there was also a lighter, more lyrical side to his personality and character.

His sermons always had some poetry in them. I loved it very much. I wish I had written these poems down for myself, but unfortunately I didn't. Our Lutheran hymnal still contains a psalm written by Nikolajs Plāte. There were quite many hymns written and translated by him – Christian poems. Where did it all come from, being such a difficult character? Poetry would not work with a rough style and rhyme, but it required a gentler touch and delicate phrasing. And Plāte possessed this aptitude.²⁷⁴

Obviously Plāte was a person who was very fond of reading.²⁷⁵ In his sermons, he often made references to classical literature. Being literary-minded, he read all the newest books available. “Modra had made some friends in the local bookshop, where they reserved for her all the newest books. Even when a book was delivered only in one copy, it was saved ‘for the pastor.’”²⁷⁶ Always trying to be up to date, he read not only theological and philosophical texts, but a range of literature from different fields, following contemporary and scientific ideas, and looking for a Christian response to modern challenges. In Zuļģe's opinion, that is what made his sermons so intelligent and hard to argue against: “Even if anyone wanted to object or find faults with his sermons, his preaching appeared too sophisticated for them. They couldn't refute him in his field of competence. But most importantly, he spoke the pure Word of God.”²⁷⁷

His sermons were appreciated. Zuļģe admitted that they were relatively long, but her personal opinion was that sermons were always too short, especially in the mid-week services. “Whenever he introduced us to the Old Testament stories, he was able to paint such a vivid picture that, by the end of it, it was for me like somebody had interrupted the film in its middle. Israel's history, its battles, the age of kings – how artfully he was able to connect it all! What a truly beautiful experience that was! Better than a film indeed!”²⁷⁸ Despite being a difficult character in private, Plāte gave it his all in his vocation of preaching. When Zuļģe reflected on her experience, she claimed that the pastoral task made his person somewhat different, as if

²⁷³ LL 2007/1, 14.

²⁷⁴ LL 2007/1, 16.

²⁷⁵ See chapter 4.3.1: A journal with Plāte's reading lists.

²⁷⁶ LL 2007/1, 16.

²⁷⁷ LL 2007/1, 16.

²⁷⁸ LL 2007/1, 16.

it was “transformed” by the ministry he fulfilled.²⁷⁹ Furthermore, Zuļģe made an interesting observation that Plāte was capable of adopting his style of preaching and ministry in accordance with the location where he worked:

Besides the Rucava parish, he was also serving the Muitnieki congregation, the Luther congregation in Liepāja, and the Golgatha congregation. The Luther congregation was a large city church, but the Muitnieki congregation was small, and its premises were also small – a wooden building. Plāte was conscious about these different facilities. In the Muitnieki congregation he invited and encouraged more of the people’s participation – with stories about the life of faith, with songs, poems, etc. Like St. Paul said, the Word of God must be proclaimed by all possible means, depending on the situation. That was positively appealing. Of course, a bigger church and congregation required a different approach.²⁸⁰

By means of such and similar reflections, Zuļģe described Plāte’s devotion to his pastoral work, which sometimes came at the expense of other human qualities. And even if her enthusiasm for his sermons at times may seem uncritical, it should be obvious that Plāte’s deep commitment to the preaching of the Christian Gospel was unmistakable.

3.1.3 Archbishop Tūrs and the recognition of Plāte’s ministry

The efficient pastoral work of Plāte was recognized not only by his congregation members but also by the LELC leadership. In 1960, Archbishop Tūrs wrote a special congratulatory letter to Pastor Plāte, stating that his diligent ministry for the Evangelical Lutheran Church and his silent theological activities during the period of more than 20 years since his ordination had been sincerely appreciated by the Church. Therefore, the Archbishop had proposed to grant him the title of Senior Pastor, granting him the right to wear the honorary golden cross, and that this proposal had been accepted by the consistory.²⁸¹

In response, Plāte expressed his joy and gratitude at being found worthy in terms of his pastoral work and ministry. However, in a characteristically self-critical manner, Plāte also mentioned “a few things that made him unhappy, as he was looking back at these years of service: 1) I wish I had been able to work better, because my ministry has not always been successful; and 2) I have not grown together completely with a single congregation, but rather my efforts were scattered in many

²⁷⁹ LL 2007/1, 16.

²⁸⁰ LL 2007/1, 16.

²⁸¹ LELBA 299, Tūrs to Plāte (4/23/1960).

directions.”²⁸² At the same time, Pläte surely acknowledged God’s providence and the fact that “the Lord always knew best what we needed and where our work was most necessary.”²⁸³

A festive service took place on July 24, 1960, under the leadership of Türs. In the name of the consistory, the Archbishop solemnly granted the title of Senior Pastor and bestowed on him the golden clerical cross. The scriptural reading came from Psalm 37:3: “Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.”²⁸⁴ As the basis for this award was mentioned “a blessed service for more than 20 years in the Rucava parish and the surrounding congregations, as well as the earlier ministry to the entrusted congregations in the Piltene district.” Also recognized were Pläte’s successful efforts in the care of souls, attending elderly and sick congregation members, as well as his continuous theological learning.²⁸⁵

Being 45 years old at the time, Pläte felt greatly honored to receive the title of senior pastor. It is interesting to note that he did not particularly mind accepting the title from the hands of the so-called “Red Archbishop.” As evidenced by their correspondence, Pläte and Türs were mutually on very good terms. Pläte had always appreciated the Archbishop’s help and protection in various complicated situations with the local authorities and he gladly accepted his fatherly support. In fact, Pläte started every letter by addressing Türs with the familiar title, “Father Archbishop,” and his messages at all times were written in the tone of a personal conversation.

At the same time, it ought to be remembered that some of the Lutheran clergy expressed openly negative sentiments toward Türs. They had a hard time justifying the reasons why Türs had cooperated with the Soviet officials so closely. He was harshly criticized by both pastors and congregation members. Another reproach was his often “trivial behavior,” as he was accused, for example, of “letting himself dance in his clerical robe.” From the start of his tenure until the end of the 1950s, members had sent anonymous letters and messages to the Archbishop that were full of threats and hurt feelings, expressing frustration about his governance and decisions. Similar letters were sent also to the office of the Commissar.²⁸⁶

²⁸² LELBA 299, Pläte to Türs (5/2/1960).

²⁸³ LELBA 299, Pläte to Türs (5/2/1960).

²⁸⁴ LELBA 299, Attestatum episcopale (7/24/1960).

²⁸⁵ LELBA 299, Attestatum episcopale (7/24/1960).

²⁸⁶ Mankusa 2001, 54.

However, according to Talonen,

It would be overly simplistic to consider Tūrs merely a tool of the Communist regime – “a real Soviet man” and “the Red Archbishop.” The truth is more complicated than that. Of course, in public Tūrs was playing a role in a political theater with the Communist regime, whistling their tune in the social and political arena. In many cases, however, his deepest motivation had been to defend the Lutheran Church and stave off her ever-weakening possibilities for serving Latvians with the Word and the Holy Sacraments. He was trying his best, but he did not have the authority and possibility to do everything he perhaps wanted to do.²⁸⁷

Plāte was no doubt aware of the Archbishop’s compromised position and the ambiguous game he was playing with Soviet officials. Yet, at the same time he knew very well that the church leader had to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis. Tūrs was the middle man between the Church and the State, which was an extremely difficult position to be in. Given the circumstances, it would be safe to conclude that Plāte chose to view Tūrs in the best possible light, believing that the Archbishop had found “his way” of dealing with the Soviets,²⁸⁸ and trusting that Tūrs deeply cared for the Church, in spite of some evidence to the contrary. There is little doubt that the administration of the LELC was held captive under the tight control of the CARC.²⁸⁹ Outwardly, all the Lutheran leadership and pastors were obedient to the Soviet state, but behind this façade the true feelings of the clergy were not as loyal to the Soviet system as appearances would lead one to believe. It was quite obvious that at the “grassroots level,” many believers and pastors continued to express unfavorable opinions about the Soviet regime and its oppressive system.²⁹⁰

Hence, it was an ambiguous subservience. Under such conditions when outward expressions of Christianity were fiercely suppressed, many Christians felt forced to develop a kind of dual identity. In this regard, a distinction must be made between external obedience and inner resistance. On the one hand, believers kept their faith a thoroughly private matter, and on the other hand they adjusted their outward conduct vis-à-vis life and survival in the Soviet society. This “double life” was a relatively widespread phenomenon, finding a myriad of expressions. And clearly there were always some differences among believers as to how far such displays of

²⁸⁷ Talonen 1997, 170.

²⁸⁸ In the words of Pastor Andrejs Kavacis, Tūrs found the “most fitting way” to talk with representatives of this power: “Tūrs both demonstrated resilience, and succeeded to gain respect as some kind of international babbler, who travels abroad to talk about peace and a little eulogizes Soviet democracy. In the end – it was a sort of devilish game back and forth. As for those pastors who condemned him, some of them managed to compromise themselves much deeper, becoming themselves as a guards of architectural monuments (meaning, church premises), receiving their salary and being KGB informers.” (Mankusa 2001, 54.)

²⁸⁹ Talonen 1997, 219.

²⁹⁰ Talonen 1997, 275.

submission and obedience could go. Even among the Lutheran pastors, there were all sorts of attitudes regarding compromises with the Communists. To a large extent, this attitude was largely dependent on the character, personality, experience, and mental and spiritual maturity of the pastor. In conclusion, it could be said that with all this totalitarian sifting and testing, this particular period in church history often brought out the best and the worst in believers.²⁹¹

3.1.4 Work and struggle against all odds

The furious anti-religious attacks of the Khrushchev era had certainly made an impact. The statistics of these years undeniably confirm a decline. Plâte had also made detailed reports on his Rucava ministry, not only offering statistical information but also often giving a short commentary on the general dynamics of the congregation. They revealed, for instance, the effectiveness of the Soviet anti-religious policy regarding youth. Plâte characterized the situation in short but telling sentences: “The number of confirmands has sharply gone down” (1961). “Young people don’t come to church any more. [...] Due to the rapid decrease of confirmands, in the confirmation service there were fewer people” (1962). “There are barely any youth left in the church” (1964). The general direction was easy to detect. The statistics told their own story: in 1961, there were 21 confirmands; in 1962, 19 confirmands; in 1963, 17 confirmands; in 1964, 5 confirmands; and in 1965, 7 confirmands.²⁹²

A similar tendency was found in the attendance at Sunday services, as Plâte explained: “During this year, the number of believers attending church services has steadily decreased, on average about 100 people a Sunday, sometimes even less, 50–60” (1961). “Since many elderly are not able to come and youth simply aren’t around any more, our numbers are reduced” (1962). “Attendance on a regular Sunday was around 70” (1964). “There has been decreased attendance, 50–70 believers on average” (1965). “The church attendance is not big in Rucava, on regular Sundays about 50” (1968).²⁹³ According to these reports, the total membership during this

²⁹¹ Mankusa 2001, 85. There were many cases when the Archbishop did not succeed in getting registration permits for pastors. Those pastors coming back from deportation hoped to return to their previous places of service, but often it was not possible. Some pastors were not satisfied with the parishes they were assigned by the consistory. Generally, pastors were relatively understanding about the complicated situation. But sometimes they protested and rebelled, refusing to serve congregations where they were called to, and did not go. In some cases, pastors even claimed “their rights.” For example, Pastor Jūlijs Gailis demanded “his rights to work in his profession, guaranteed by the Soviet legislation,” even though he was defrocked from pastoral work by the consistory due to drinking. (Mankusa 2001, 71.)

²⁹² LELBA 323, Plâte’s reports to the consistory from 1961 to 1968. See Appendix A on the Rucava parish statistics.

²⁹³ LELBA 323, Plâte’s reports to the consistory from 1961 to 1968.

period (1961–1968) went down from 700 to 500 people. The Lord’s Supper was taken only by 20 to 25% of the total membership.²⁹⁴

These reports also showed how fiercely the Soviet anti-religious campaign undermined the economic foundation of the LELC.²⁹⁵ Most severely, these sanctions were felt when the local authorities sent a new evaluation of the Rucava church building in 1962, making it eight times bigger and meaning that its taxes and insurance increased eightfold. The congregation pleaded time and time again for a different evaluation, but there was no response. All the requests were in vain. In 1968, the evaluation was increased for the parsonage and even the small sauna located in the church garden. The insurance had now become four and a half times bigger. In addition, payment had to be made not only for the next year but also the previous year. Plâte addressed the consistory, making a sarcastic remark on the situation: “It’s no longer an ordinary sauna we have in our possession, but – a truly ecclesiastical sauna!”²⁹⁶ The purpose of these actions was not only to pressure the budgets of congregations, but also the budgets of clergymen. According to the evidence, financial sanctions were one of the most effective tools employed against the pastors. In fact, clergy giving up their pastoral ministry most commonly cited this as the cause: the taxes were too high and economic difficulties were too extreme to be able to survive as a pastor.²⁹⁷

In the early 1960s, the government introduced new regulations concerning fixed monthly salaries for pastors. Previously, a considerable part of a pastor’s salary consisted of the so-called *akcidenzen*, namely, earnings from occasional services such as baptisms, weddings, and burials. But now, according to the new system, the payments for all the occasional services had to be registered and put in the congregational cashbox. It meant that pastors could no longer receive any money directly from church members, but congregations had to pay them a fixed sum of money so that pastors could not evade taxes. As a result, pastors’ income in most cases was reduced.²⁹⁸ In the case of Rucava, the dilemma was resolved by increasing the fixed salary. As soon as the instructions were issued in April of 1964, the Rucava church council made an immediate decision to raise Plâte’s monthly salary from 50 rubles to 70 rubles.²⁹⁹ Not long thereafter, in January of 1969, he asked for another raise.

²⁹⁴ LELBA 323, Plâte’s reports to the consistory from 1961 to 1968.

²⁹⁵ Mankusa 2001, 26.

²⁹⁶ LELBA 323, Plâte’s reports to the consistory from 1962 to 1968.

²⁹⁷ Mankusa 2001, 90.

²⁹⁸ Mankusa 2001, 84.

²⁹⁹ LELBA 323, Plâte’s report to the consistory in 1964, protocol no. 22.

Until this point, Plāte had also served full-time in the Muitnieki congregation, but now he intended to focus solely on Rucava. He reported to the consistory that the church council in Rucava had agreed to this arrangement and the congregation was ready to step up financially, paying the pastor an extra 30 rubles per month.³⁰⁰

As, financial difficulties became a major issue for many Lutheran pastors. A pastor's salary, as a rule, was directly related to the congregational budget. In many cases, congregations were scarcely able to cover the large taxes for the buildings and land, and pastors were often paid from the money that was left over. The income of the clergy in numerous congregations had become so tiny that already by the late 1960s, many pastors had to earn their living doing other work in addition to their pastoral duties.³⁰¹ In 1969, for instance, as many as 22 pastors had a secular job besides their pastoral ministry.³⁰² Plāte was not among them. The financial conditions of his congregation were comparatively healthy. Despite a steady decline in membership, donations made by the Rucava faithful continued to come in, and a few annual reports even indicated an increase. Plāte's salary was about a fifth or sixth of the budget. Considerably smaller salaries were paid to the organist, the choir conductor, the bell-ringer, the bookkeeper, and the cleaning person.³⁰³

Besides those expenses, the congregation was involved in systematic repair and reconstruction jobs. In 1961, the Rucava parish built a small wooden sauna (5.5m x 3.1m) in the church garden; major repair work was done on the organ (built in 1936); and the sacristy was repaired for the use of evening services for 40–50 people. During the next year, part of the fence was rebuilt with new cement poles, and some of the plaster on the church tower was fixed. In 1964, the upper room of the parsonage was built and prepared as living quarters. In 1965, the renovation of the church's electrical system was completed, and some congregation members had volunteered to help rebuild the fences and gates of the Paurupe cemetery. In 1966, the façade of the church was repainted by hand, and the congregation was able to mend the plastering, repaint the tower, and fix the gutters, too. Most of the tasks were accomplished by members themselves. In the same year, the Rucava Church was visited by a special control commission consisting of local officials. After a very careful inspection, these officials did not find any problems and expressed their approval regarding the management of the church building (which, according to law,

³⁰⁰ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory in 1969, protocol no. 11.

³⁰¹ Zikmane 2001, 146–147.

³⁰² Zikmane 2001, 147. For example, when V. Ozoliņš informed the visiting foreign guests about the material conditions of the Lutheran pastors in 1972, he said that five pastors had their own car. (LVA 1419/3/286, 68.)

³⁰³ LELBA 323, Plāte's reports to the consistory from 1961 to 1968.

was the property of the State, of course).³⁰⁴

The congregation faced unexpected financial responsibilities in 1967. On October 17, the Rucava area was hit by a violent thunderstorm. Damage was done not only to the homes of many church members, but also to the Rucava church building. Some of the trees around the church fell down, many windows were smashed, and the south part of the roof was seriously damaged. Urgent repairs on the roof were immediately carried out by some active parishioners, so that rain and snow could not cause additional harm to the organ and the interior of the building. In his report, Plāte expressed his warmest admiration and gratitude to everyone who had lent a helping hand during this emergency.³⁰⁵

Reports, protocols, letters, and other descriptions of Rucava parish life give the impression that the relationship between the pastor and members were generally respectful, gracious, and even affectionate. Almost in every annual report, there were statements of gratitude addressed to the pastor (for his diligent spiritual work), to the president and the other officials (for their faithful service), to the choir conductor (for serving without salary), to volunteers (for devoting time, skills, energy, and money), and so forth.³⁰⁶ Some special occasions were mentioned: for instance, the 30th anniversary of Plāte's ordination and the 15th anniversary of his ministry in Rucava were recognized by members with flowers and presents.³⁰⁷ The amount of work that Plāte performed in Rucava and the surrounding congregations was fairly extensive. Nearly every Sunday, Plāte conducted at least two – but, at times, three – services. Frequently, even the Rucava parish had two worship services on a single Sunday: the first at 11:00 a.m. and the second at 6:00 p.m., when Plāte would preach two different sermons. Plāte also occasionally mentioned in his reports a shorter confessional sermon delivered before the absolution, and there were often extra services, such as baptisms, confirmations, and burials.³⁰⁸

Due to his assignments in the other congregation, however, Plāte was sometimes unable to conduct services in Rucava every Sunday. In 1966, Plāte wrote to the consistory that the Rucava parish had expressed a desire for more regular services. On this occasion, the local Baptist church was considered a rival and competitor, conducting worship services every week. Plāte was troubled by the fact that on those Sundays when the Rucava Lutherans did not hold their service, some members were

³⁰⁴ LELBA 323, Plāte's reports to the consistory from 1961 to 1966.

³⁰⁵ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory in 1967, protocol no. 7.

³⁰⁶ LELBA 323, Plāte's reports to the consistory from 1961 to 1968.

³⁰⁷ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory in 1968, protocol no. 10.

³⁰⁸ LELBA 299, Plāte to Kleperis (7/9/1960). See Appendix A.

attending the Baptist service. Plāte discussed the situation with the Archbishop, explaining that regular Sunday services were much needed “so that the parish members – the lovers of the God’s Word – wouldn’t be visiting Baptists.” A change was arranged from 1966 onwards.³⁰⁹

When activities in many places were reduced because of decreasing attendance and membership, Plāte was willing to increase his workload in an attempt to resist the negative dynamics. The total number of annual services held by Plāte in Rucava and the nearby congregations went up from 118 services in 1961 to 162 services in 1967. In the Rucava parish, he also held midweek services, which were attended by 15–20 people on a regular basis. During the important festivals like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, his responsibilities became particularly heavy.³¹⁰ On top of that, during the summer months of July and August, cemetery festivals were organized and held. Every Sunday the pastor visited one of the many cemeteries in the area.³¹¹ According to reports, he organized 7 to 14 festivals annually. But even the arrangement of these events was hard. Plāte faced obstacles every time he tried to obtain permission. He addressed these problems in a letter to the consistory, complaining that even with the most perfect efforts, he would not be able to organize festivals in all of the nearby burial sites:

If a pastor has to arrange services in 53 cemeteries, it means that it will take almost half of the summer to go through all the bureaucratic steps to obtain these permissions. Frankly speaking, it’s quite impossible! Regardless of the repeated reminders from the consistory that the cemetery festivals are legally allowed, in our case they are forbidden most of the time!³¹²

Thus, pastoral duties were a constant uphill battle to retain at least the possibility of outreach. In the face of various obstacles, pastors had to persevere and move forward resolutely, preparing sermons, organizing parish life, and giving spiritual guidance to believers. The role of the clergy in church life was very critical indeed. As a rule, active and hard-working pastors enjoyed stronger support among their parishioners. Crucial also was the mutual encouragement between pastors and believers. A good and positive example of pastors overcoming obstacles provided

³⁰⁹ LELBA 299, Plāte to the consistory (12/2/1966).

³¹⁰ LELBA 323, Plāte’s reports to the consistory from 1961 to 1968.

³¹¹ In the Rucava parish alone, there were altogether 23 cemeteries: Paurupe old cemetery (next to the Rucava church garden); Vecais Baznīckalns cemetery; Paurupe new cemetery; Nidasciems cemetery; Papes Ķoņi cemetery; Papes Pliķi cemetery; Embrekši cemetery; Brušviti cemetery; Peši cemetery; Ķērvji cemetery; Buku Miemji cemetery; Apšute cemetery; Prilāpu-Zemturi or Birželī cemetery; Sviļu-Pemperi cemetery; Vecie Vizūļi or Miltiņi cemetery; Paipas-Pirkuļi or Šperbergs cemetery; Vidussils cemetery; Mikņi cemetery; Dreizi cemetery; Rucavas Miemji cemetery; Jaunie Vizūļi cemetery; Gigi cemetery; and Mangaļi cemetery. (LELBA 299.) See also Appendix A.

³¹² LELBA 299, Plāte to Kleperis (7/9/1960). In all congregations that were under his care, there were altogether 53 cemeteries at this point.

direct evidence to parishioners that godly service was a true calling for which a believer was ready to suffer consequences. The members' support, on the other hand, gave positive feedback and affirmation to pastors that their work was not in vain, but that their ministry was yielding some good fruits and that it was worth moving forward.³¹³

Of course, the pastors' role was also recognized by the Soviet anti-religious activists, who frequently proceeded according to the principle of "strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." The totalitarian environment forced the pastors, including Plâte, to learn flexibility in dealing with the authorities. Considering the situation, the ministers had no option but to change and adapt to the reigning conditions of the oppressive legislation. Often there was no dignified way around the obstacles. Conformism was the order of the day. To retain legal status as a pastor, at least a modicum of outward loyalty to the State was required. In many instances, Plâte showed that he would not allow himself to be pushed around, and he defended his rights and those of his congregations against the arbitrary actions of the Communists. He strove to make use of the remaining possibilities for church work as much as he could.

However, in spite of such diligent work, the outlook for the future appeared far from hopeful. The all-embracing totalitarian grip gradually and unavoidably reduced the congregations' numbers. Even the most committed, hard-working, and efficient clergymen, like Plâte, had to cope with the pessimistic prospect of ever-diminishing membership. Their best efforts, well-prepared sermons, and successful pastoral activities were not sufficient to stem the downward spiral. The statistics of this period bleakly reveal a steadily decreasing number of baptisms, confirmations, communions, services, and so forth.³¹⁴ What could possibly stop and reverse this downward turn? The faithfulness and perseverance of the pastors could not achieve it, because they were so reliant on the dedication and commitment of lay members.

One could argue that the attacks of the regime had exposed one of the major weaknesses of the Lutheran Church: her excessive dependence on the clergy. As the LELC was forced to suffer through this period of prolonged repressions, serious difficulties were caused by the lack of balance between the clergy and the laity. This problem had its roots and reasons in the history of the Lutheran Church. According to Alexander Veinbergs, it had been a particular feature of the Lutheran history in this territory, where the importance of a pastor's personality had been stressed at

³¹³ Mankusa 2001, 92.

³¹⁴ See Appendix A.

the expense of the laypeople. The imbalance developed even up to the point of a pastor having a personality cult. Consequently, the importance of the pastor's role was exaggerated in various ways.

In the church matters, faithful members have not been so clever spirits as to discern the important from the unimportant. Generally speaking, already in the previous generations, weaknesses of the pastors in our church (be they true or imagined) have been stressed more than it was necessary. For too long, we have exaggerated and too much identified the church with her spiritual workers, the pastors.³¹⁵

The problem of ignoring Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers led to the majority of nominal members being left without active participation in the life of faith and responsibilities for the Church. Too much weight had been put on the shoulders of pastors, both in good and bad times. As a result, the harsh Soviet experience painfully exposed this imbalance.

An overall perspective of the Rucava parish statistics during this era allows the identification of two diverse trends: reduction and consolidation. On the one hand, there was a sharp reduction in congregations. Many abandoned the Church due to the pressure. The membership declined: fewer baptisms, confirmations, communicants, weddings, etc.³¹⁶ The Church became a small and despised minority, thus making nominal Christianity untenable. As hardships intensified, overcoming other motives than faith to belong to a congregation, people were compelled to make a decision. On the other hand, the growing pressure from anti-religious policies led others to resist it and confess their Christian loyalty. In this way, the vitality of the Rucava parish was affirmed, as the members built the parsonage, stood firm against the attacks of the local authorities, and supported their pastor with a steady flow of donations despite the decreased membership. Those were some signs that the core of the congregation was becoming more consolidated, and it showed remarkable resilience in the face of difficulties. The hardships paradoxically also had a purifying effect. Thus, the volatile nature of the totalitarian era often strengthened the faith of the remaining believers and made them even more motivated.

³¹⁵ Veinbergs 1966, 218.

³¹⁶ See also Appendix A.

3.2 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION DURING THE “SILENT PERIOD” (1965–1979)

Soon after the end of the Khrushchev era, the Soviet leaders began to reevaluate the results of the religious persecution of the early 1960s. The overall conclusion was that the heavy-handed approach had not justified itself: persecutions were done in a hurry and recklessly, destroying the civic and political loyalty of many believers; furthermore, when some congregations were closed down, believers started to organize themselves underground. Such a secretive church life, avoiding state control, appeared even more dangerous to the Communists than a legal church (which was easier to monitor and control). Moreover, the persecutions of the Khrushchev era had created some “unhealthy” sympathies toward the believers – even in those who otherwise would have held a neutral attitude toward the Church.³¹⁷ Thus, the Commissar of the CARC, Prolets Liepa, suggested in his 1965 report that a new approach ought to be introduced:

It is necessary to strengthen the fight against the religious ideology, but not against believers themselves – as it often has happened in recent times. It is necessary to research the work of the clergymen and their methods treating believers, so that their sermons could be overturned by scientifically based arguments, by some simple and clear explanations about the delusions of religious believers and their mistaken views on reality. A fundamental improvement of the educational work in schools is necessary in order to cut off the young generation from the church, by all available means, eliminating the church in its very basis. Clichés and formalism must be avoided. The anti-religious work has to be grounded in the information popular and known to the local citizens. A major instruction is indispensable, for the ideas of Communism and religious dogmas are incompatible.³¹⁸

During the Brezhnev era (1966–1982), the approach to the fight against religion gradually changed. In the second part of the 1960s, no more direct campaigns against the church were employed, open attacks on pastors and believers came to an end, and economic pressure was not so severe any more. To an extent, the more tolerant disposition appeared in connection with the new face of international politics. An important issue in the global arena at this time was human rights. In 1966, the UN General Assembly adopted two important covenants, reinforcing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which also guaranteed the freedom of conscience and religion. As a participant country, the USSR had to make sure that

³¹⁷ Mankusa 2001, 41.

³¹⁸ Mankusa 2001, 42.

these rights were observed – or at least give an impression of their observance. Thus, the Soviet policy had to be adjusted. A stronger emphasis was put on Communist propaganda abroad, and churches had to be involved in this work more intensively, in order to make a show of these freedoms.³¹⁹

The Brezhnev era often is called the “silent period.” Although the political and economic pressure on the Church weakened, religious activities were continually subjected to various restrictions. The LELC still did not hold the status of a public organization or a fully juridical entity. Due to the limitations of pastoral education, the shortage of pastors became extremely strained. Work outside church premises remained forbidden, with no possibility of printing religious literature, and other restrictions were continued. Thus, the general course of anti-religious policies did not change. Difficulties of describing the persecutions of the “silent period” are related to the fact that the pressures applied on the Church became more hidden.³²⁰

Even though the State abstained from direct repressive attacks, the anti-religious activities during this era continued in a more subtle and civilized way. More emphasis was placed on ideological work and information control. The long years of isolation and economic struggles had already left their mark – the Church and her impact on society had been weakened.³²¹ Now the CARC in Latvia defined a more specific task: a deeper exploration of the dynamics taking place in the religious organizations. The task had to be achieved by collecting and analyzing information that would allow the government to manage the timely prevention and elimination of “negative phenomena.”³²² The general situation of the LELC, as described by the 1968 report of the Commissar, was one of perpetual decline. He assessed that the outward impression of the Church as a broad and influential organization was rather deceptive.

In our days, the LELC irreclaimably loses its authority. The membership has been reduced, services decreased, many congregations closed, and various activities diminished. Religious services are usually attended by elderly people, mostly women. The main reasons for the Lutheran Church to lose its authority are the following: believers of the LELC, like other Protestants, are accustomed to think

³¹⁹ Zikmane 2001, 190.

³²⁰ Gavriļins 2001, 9.

³²¹ Zikmane 2001, 126.

³²² Zikmane 2001, 121–122. In 1966, The CARC was renamed the Council for Religious Affairs. The special task of the Commissar was now to get religious organizations and their leaders involved in the Soviet propaganda work abroad. In 1976, there was another reform which turned the Council from a mediator between the State and the Church into a control institution over the Church. The new regulations had shifted the functions of control from the local authorities to the Council. It made the struggle for the basic rights of believers even harder, because all complaints went through this bureaucratic institution. An additional duty of the Commissar was to consult on and coordinate the work on atheistic propaganda in the Latvian SSR.

about religious questions more independently, and that makes them more accessible to the arguments of the scientific worldview. The education in the spirit of scientific atheism has been happening most widely and systematically in those regions, where the majority of believers are Lutherans.³²³

The LELC (compared to the other religious denominations) already at this point had the least intensive religious activity: on average, just 31 or 32 services for one congregation annually. Services had been taking place every week or more often in only 75 congregations. Commissar Liepa explained that the Lutheran believers themselves were inactive, and apart from that, there were too few pastors serving too many congregations. The commissar wrote that

barely any young people attend church, if only for the Christmas and Easter services, and, even then, they behave more like spectators than participants. According to observations, believers attending church are not well acquainted with the theoretical foundations of their faith – they know very little of the Catechism and the Gospel, and therefore their participation in services is rather passive.³²⁴

Moreover, due to the general trend of urbanization, when many rural citizens moved to the regional centers, the city churches were more active than those in the countryside. Due to the larger population, it was easier to remain undetected and unexposed in the cities, while the country parishes (where people knew each other) were more visible. Many people, for instance, desired to baptize their children, but for fear of repercussions wanted to do it in secret. Hence, it was a common practice to go to bigger cities, such as Rīga, Liepāja, or Jelgava, where the local authorities did not exercise strict control over every ritual. Typically, private arrangements were made with the pastors, and occasional services were performed not on festivals or Sundays, but on a weekday afternoon, exclusively in the presence of church workers and one's closest relatives. The same was true in the countryside, where religious ceremonies such as baptisms were often performed in private settings, usually the houses of church members.³²⁵

During this period, other methods were increasingly employed by the State to combat religion and to separate believers from the Church. Religious ceremonies were replaced with Communist ones. Confirmation, a ritual symbolizing maturity, was replaced with Communist “summer days” for youngsters of confirmation age. The christening of a baby in a church was frowned upon, and it was replaced with a solemn name-giving ceremony in a state office. Similarly, obligatory civil marriages

³²³ Zikmane 2001, 165.

³²⁴ Zikmane 2001, 166.

³²⁵ Zikmane 2001, 167.

took the place of church weddings. Curiously, according to some Soviet newspapers, most of the difficulties encountered by the authorities involved trying to replace church burials with “socialist” ceremonies. The popularity of church burials was usually explained by the vitality of traditional mysticism in matters of death.³²⁶

The Communist ideology encompassed its citizens from all angles. No free movement or plurality of ideas could be tolerated. A decent and orderly Soviet citizen should not be spotted attending services, or else the “confused individual” was immediately called in for a visit, either with the school principal, the manager of the workplace, or an official belonging to the local authorities, in order to have a serious conversation. This person could be treated in several ways: shamed for imprudence or threatened with some unpleasant consequences, such as possibly losing the right to study, missing an opportunity to advance in one’s job, or failing to receive bonuses and premiums. In this way, believers were stigmatized, and typically socially active people withdrew from the Church so that they would not be excluded from the life of the society. It surely made a negative impact on the composition of the congregations. As a consequence, the church councils now predominantly consisted of those who had nothing much to lose: mainly retired people and those who were doing simple jobs.³²⁷

3.2.1 Archbishop Matulis and a new era in the LELC

Despite the general stagnation of the Church, some changes were taking place in her leadership in the 1960s. The “Red Archbishop” Tūrs, having served since 1946 and loyal to the State at first, gradually changed his attitude during Khrushchev’s anti-religious offensive. Complaints came in regarding Tūrs’ misbehavior, alleged deafness, tendency to be annoyed, and generally impolite conduct. He had started to ignore the directions of the Commissar and no longer consulted the consistory. He caused much discontent by his domineering actions, thus failing to retain his former authority among the clergy. It was difficult to say whether it was his old age, a reaction against repressions, his strong character, or all of these things combined. Tūrs sought to excuse himself due to old age and forgetfulness, yet, according to the words of Commissar P. Liepa, his excuses could not be taken at face value. Therefore, even though Tūrs had been elected to his office for life, he eventually had to step

³²⁶ Vehter [s.a.] 50; Zikmane 2001, 122.

³²⁷ Zikmane 2001, 188–189.

down due to heavy pressure from the state authorities and discouraged clergy.³²⁸

After a short period of uncertainty in the leadership, the next archbishop to serve a longer period³²⁹ was Jānis Matulis (1969–1985).³³⁰ In comparison with the “Red Archbishop,” Matulis was better educated, more democratic, and a considerably smarter diplomat. However, in church-state relationships Matulis continued the same pragmatic road of accommodation. The Deputy of the Commissar A. Saharov described him as a loyal and intelligent man, having a real grasp of the situation. Matulis was fluent in English, German, Russian, and Latvian, and he complied with the Soviet legislation on religious cults. Matulis also had a reasonably decent reputation among the Lutheran clergy. Other pastors praised his high moral standards and theological capabilities, as well as his ecclesiastical eloquence.³³¹

The introduction of Matulis into office became a special event, particularly because of the presence of the Swedish Bishop Sven Danell. Ever since Bishop Nathan Söderblom had consecrated the first LELC bishop, Kārlis Irbe, the leaders of the Latvian Church were interested in reestablishing historical relationships with the Church of Sweden, with Tūrs calling her their “mother church.” With the new archbishop and the reestablishment of closer relationships with her former partner churches, the leaders of the LELC now hoped to begin a new and better stage in her history.³³² Strengthening foreign contacts was one of the ways to overcome the LELC’s political and spiritual isolation.

Matulis had also other reform ideas for the improvement of the LELC’s situation.

³²⁸ Zikmane 2001, 133; 188–189.

³²⁹ Two church leaders were candidates for the office before Jānis Matulis. The first was a member of the consistory, Pēteris Kleperis, who, according to A. Saharov, the Deputy of the Commissar, was loyal to the Soviet authorities and did not allow himself any ambiguous expressions or actions. Saharov reported: “We are preparing to make P. Kleperis the next bishop, instead of the old, G. Tūrs. *Our friends* are interested in his (Kleperis’) appointment to this office of the Lutheran Church and in his use for the church work abroad.” Kleperis was elected to the office but served only a short time in 1968, because he died after a month. The second candidate was a member of the consistory, Dr. Alberts Freijs. But due to his past (being deported from 1948 to 1954), he did not have the support of the Soviet authorities. Nevertheless, for six months, he fulfilled the duties of the acting archbishop, being already very sick. On November 20, 1968, he died. (Zikmane 2001, 135.)

³³⁰ See Sējējs un Pļauja 1999; Mankusa 2011.

³³¹ Zikmane 2001, 136; Mankusa 2011.

³³² On relationships with the Church of Sweden, see Mankusa 2006a; 2006b; 2008. In 1969, a member of the consistory, Viktors Ozoliņš, wrote to Swedish Pastor Hennrik Svenungsson: “From a historical perspective, the Latvian and Swedish Churches are connected by old traditions, which allows us to hope that the right moment has come to re-affirm and renew these Christian and fraternal bonds between our churches.” (Ozoliņš, *Letter*.) At that time, Latvian pastors saw it as an important, perhaps even symbolic action (Mesters 2005, 178–179). The recently elected Latvian Archbishop Jānis Matulis wrote to Bishop Sven Danell: “I would like to draw your attention to the crook that you will hand over to me at last. The crook has a historical meaning in the life of the Latvian Evangelic Lutheran Church. This crook was brought by the blessed Archbishop DD N. Söderblom in 1922 as a consecration gift to the first Latvian Bishop D.K. Irbe. After the tenure of Bishop Irbe, the crook was not handed over to the next bishops (Dr. T. Grinbergs (†), G. Tūrs, emer.), and only now after almost forty years I ask you to entrust me with this crook on September 14, in order to confirm the cordial and historical traditions between our churches.” (Matulis.)

The Archbishop was eager to have closer relationships with pastors and church workers, while trying to lead in a more democratic fashion. Special attention was devoted to the burning issues of pastoral education and financial support for retired pastors. The situation for the retired clergy was particularly hard. Since the Church was separated from the State, elderly pastors did not receive any pension from the Soviet government. Charity was forbidden, which meant that pastors having difficulties could not directly be supported by donations. To help the retired pastors (and their widows) living in poverty, the Mutual Aid Fund was set up in 1956. The consistory urged pastors and congregations to contribute to this fund so that later they would be helped themselves. The Mutual Aid Fund was replaced by the Pension Fund, the statutes of which were adopted by the Synod of 1969, requiring every pastor and congregation to make contributions to the Pension Fund.³³³

The other major project was the reorganization of pastoral education in the LELC. From 1954, pastors had been trained in a small, low-profile, and insufficient seminary called the Theological Courses. In the Synod of 1969, the transformation of the Theological Courses into a higher institution, the Academic Theological Courses, was accepted.³³⁴ The educational reform became a positive stimulus for the renewal of theological life. Teachers, pastors, and students became increasingly involved in theological reading and writing and more serious church discussions. The renewal of the educational process was also a significant turning point in the life of Senior Pastor Plāte. Considering that Plāte had maintained a lively interest in theological studies throughout the complicated Soviet period, the leadership of the LELC valued his efforts and invited him to become a lecturer at the Academic Theological Courses already in 1968, a position he held until the very end of his life in 1983.

3.2.2 Even more intensive church work

As the Soviet state experienced stagnation, a period of stabilization was possible in church life.³³⁵ Certainly for Plāte it was a period of increased activity. He continued to work in Rucava and several other congregations. However, his visits to Rīga became more frequent, as did his engagement with general church life – his meetings with the LELC leadership, other pastors, church workers, and theological students.

³³³ Mankusa 2011, 339–376.

³³⁴ Mesters 2005, 220–221. The Academic Theological Courses were renamed the Theological Seminary in 1976.

³³⁵ This period extended from the second part of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s.

In 1968, for example, Plāte attended two funerals in Rīga, saying farewell to the two candidates for the office of the Archbishop, Pēteris Kleperis and Dr. Alberts Freijs. His lecturing activities became more intensive as he made regular trips to the Academic Theological Courses in Rīga, holding 10 two-hour lectures. The same year he also preached two times at the New Gertrude Church in Rīga.³³⁶ With the mounting workload, Plāte was assisted by Deacon-Pastor J. Jaunciems and Evangelist K. Ozoliņš, who preached for him several times a year. Being a docent at the Courses, he was able to get help from theological students, too. For instance, in the early 1970s, several stud. theol. – I. Krieviņš, S. Sproģis, S. Augstkalns, A. Lapiņš, and K. Ozoliņš – were mentioned in the reports as preachers in the Rucava parish, all delivering sermons under the supervision of the Senior Pastor.³³⁷

Besides his full-time ministry in Rucava, from 1963 Plāte conducted regular Sunday services for the Muitnieki congregation. In the late 1960s, the total number of services held annually was around 150. Combined with all of his other duties, such as writing compendia and delivering lectures at the Courses, his manifold responsibilities were taking a toll and wearing him out. No wonder that in 1969 Plāte asked to be released from his duties in Muitnieki, citing several reasons: health problems, serious issues with transportation, and a few others. At this time, he expressed his wish to devote himself chiefly to the Rucava parish and his responsibilities as docent. However, since the consistory was unable to find a replacement for him, he had no choice but to also continue the regular services in Muitnieki.³³⁸

The shortage of pastors was a difficult and persistent problem. Despite the fact that some dedicated deacon-pastors and evangelists assisted and theological students began serving congregations, the generational gap was a constant burden and remained so throughout the Soviet era. With the prohibition of religious education, the younger generation was cut off, and thus the natural generational transmission was prevented. As the Church had been struggling to survive for three decades already, the aging of the clergy and membership became an increasingly ominous issue. Many devoted church workers had passed away or could no longer be active. The prospects looked ever bleaker as the older generation was on the way out, and there were too few young people to replace them.³³⁹

Similar evidence can be seen from the Rucava reports, too. Most predominant

³³⁶ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory in 1968.

³³⁷ LELBA 323, Plāte's reports to the consistory from 1967–1973.

³³⁸ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory in 1969, protocol no. 11.

³³⁹ Zikmane 2001, 194.

were concerns for seniors: there were abounding intercessions for the sick and elderly workers of the congregation; requests for the churchwardens to give timely information about the sick and elderly in need of help to attend the Lord's Supper; and calls to replace churchwardens after old ones died, became ill, or drifted away from the Church. Nearly every annual report announced significant losses for the Rucava membership.³⁴⁰ The core of the congregation was growing older. That said, the role of the elderly members should not be underestimated. Their merits ought to be recognized and given proper due. The task of saving and safeguarding the Church was taken up by them consciously and deliberately. Most of them did what they could to render false the prevailing Communist predictions about the rapid extinction of the faith. In practical terms, it was due to them that the succession of the Church was preserved throughout the Soviet era, and to a large extent, it was thanks to their sturdy persistence and toughness that most of the congregations were able to survive, keep their buildings intact, and continue the gospel ministry.

An essential guarantee of the continued existence of the congregations was the so-called *dvatsatka*, or 20 people who gave their signatures assuming responsibility for the preservation of the congregation. For instance, when the Rucava local authorities made it a requirement to provide a list of 20 guarantors in 1973, Plâte was able to send a list of 31 (even if that many were not required), adding that there were also nine more people from the previous list. Thus, the total number was 40.³⁴¹ The implied message of this statement – proudly addressed to the Soviet officials – would be that the Rucava parish, in spite of everything, was still in good shape and that there was no need to close it down.

An unexpected event happened in the late summer of 1971. On an August night, the tower of Rucava Church was struck by severe lightning (despite the building's lightning rod). It was believed that the lightning bolt entered the church tower by way of the electric wires, and the very powerful force of the discharge had spread in two directions: the first had shot through the thick outer wall of the church; the second had completely ruined the power meter and destroyed the electrical outlets in the building, while also damaging the ceiling of the pastor's sacristy.³⁴² The pious commentary that Plâte provided to the consistory about the accident is interesting:

It was a reminder of God's mighty power to make us cautious, so that we wouldn't become self-complacent, overwise and reckless, but would trust in the Lord more than in all human security and guarantees. The Lord has been merciful to us, so

³⁴⁰ LELBA 323, Plâte's reports to the consistory from 1971–1979.

³⁴¹ LELBA 323, Plâte's reports to the consistory in 1973.

³⁴² LELBA 323, Plâte's report to the consistory for 1971.

that no fire broke out in the building. It is remarkable that during the last summer the Rucava area has experienced several thunder and lightning-strikes occurring in places, which, according to electricians, were supposed to be safe because of lightning rods. Various opinions have been expressed. Are these problems caused by the low subsoil water, dry summers, melioration, or maybe the lightning rods have become ineffective, possibly becoming a danger themselves? By all means, we have to do everything possible to undertake the most reasonable action for the security of the building, at the same time keeping in mind that God rules over all things.³⁴³

The same year, the damaged building was completely repaired: the cracks in the wall and the sacristy ceiling were fixed, the electricity was replaced, and the necessary repainting was done. Also, the partition between the old and the new sacristies was taken out, affording a bigger room to be used for services during the winter period (when the unheated main hall of the building became too cold for services). A new altar was set up according to the project of a professional artist, Helmūts Puto (1924–1977). The ceiling, floors, and walls were painted, and five new benches were added. The new hall was now able to contain up to 80 people. When services were not held there, a curtain was slid in the place of the former wall, dividing the hall into two separate rooms, one for the pastor and another for churchwardens.³⁴⁴

Since the church was the property of the State, various Soviet institutions closely monitored the upkeep of the building and its surroundings. For instance, in 1973 the Rucava Church was visited by several representatives from the Rundāle Palace Museum and the Ministry of Culture (there had also been visitors from the Open-Air Museum in the previous year), taking pictures and writing descriptions of the baptismal basin, one chandelier, two candlesticks on the altar, one offering bag, the altar vessels, and the paintings of Indriķis Zeberīņš (1882–1969): *Jēzus pie krusta* (Jesus on the Cross) and *Jēzus svētī bērņus* (Jesus Blesses the Children). The idea was to safeguard the objects of cultural history for posterity so that they would not be lost.³⁴⁵

With regard to the preservation of historically valuable religious items, the interests of the Church and the State coincided. An encouragement also came from the LELC leader Jānis Matulis, who urged that everything possible be done to ensure that buildings and all other property were kept in good order. The Archbishop's attention was especially directed toward those few churches that were on the verge of closing down and being taken over by the State. The issues were discussed at

³⁴³ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory for 1971.

³⁴⁴ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory for 1971.

³⁴⁵ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory for 1973.

consistory meetings and addressed in the Archbishop's circulars. The congregations and the clergymen were reminded of their duty to take diligent care of their church buildings, stock, and documentation, and to make all payments on time and safeguard valuable pieces of art and history. Such reminders were often necessary and not as self-evident as they seemed. There were times when even pastors and deans, being short-sighted and lacking positive perspective for the future, had failed to take proper care of their buildings.³⁴⁶

Since the 100th anniversary of the Rucava church (built in 1874) was approaching, particular attention was devoted to preparations. Already in 1972, a schedule for repair work was planned, which included fixing the whole outside façade of the building. Over the years, one special cause for concern had been the plastering of the church tower. Even the local authorities had requested its repair. For the job of replastering and repainting of the tower, professional workers were hired from the city of Liepāja. It is reported that Plāte himself, during June and July of 1972, had spent every free day painting the façade and the windows of the building.³⁴⁷ The same thing was reported the next year as well: Plāte worked 39 full days, painting various parts of the church interior and fixing and painting the outside façade.³⁴⁸

It appears that the 100th anniversary was celebrated with the Rucava church building in good shape and with the members in good spirits. According to the report of BK 1975, a memorable service was conducted by Archbishop Jānis Matulis and Assistant Vilis Augstkalns, and the church was richly decorated with autumn flowers and garlands. A festive sermon was preached by the Archbishop to a crowded Rucava parish, while a prayer was delivered by Augstkalns. After the service, the whole congregation made a visit to the local cemetery and held a devotion by the grave of the former pastor of Rucava, Pēteris Kamols.³⁴⁹ It must have been a gratifying moment for Senior Pastor Plāte and the whole Rucava parish, who despite all the hard times and adverse circumstances had been able to survive and could celebrate this anniversary with a newly renovated church and sizable crowd of parishioners.

³⁴⁶ Zikmane 2001, 141.

³⁴⁷ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory for 1972.

³⁴⁸ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory for 1973.

³⁴⁹ BK 1975, 147–148.

3.2.3 “God speaks through sufferings”³⁵⁰

In the mid-1970s, Plāte’s family experienced an unexpectedly difficult period. On March 21, 1974, his wife Modra suffered an accident during a trip from Rīga to Liepāja. A bus on which she was riding suddenly hit the brakes, and Modra fell and broke her backbone. In a letter to Matulis, Plāte called it “a fortune in the misfortune,” because the break had occurred in “a good place” and thankfully the worst had not happened. Nonetheless, the recovery was protracted and their daily rhythm became complicated, as Nikolajs had to tend to his wife and take care of the practical side of life, which he found very bothersome.³⁵¹

When Modra was still recovering, Plāte began teaching a congregational Bible study on the Book of Job, which lasted from late 1974 until April of 1975. The topic of theodicy had weighed heavily on his mind. Having dealt with constant troubles of life under Soviet rule, Plāte must have pondered the issue of sufferings more or less continually. Nevertheless, at this point in time, afflictions had hit his own family. Inevitably, these troublesome experiences made him examine the purpose and meaning of such calamities even more deliberately. Whether it had been premeditated or not, at this moment Plāte began interpreting the Book of Job and the problem of pious sufferings. His small commentary on this Old Testament book has become a very valuable resource, shedding some light on this difficult topic while also revealing Plāte’s approach to theodicy, not only from a theoretical perspective but a pastoral, personal perspective as well.³⁵²

For Plāte, Job was the finest and most relevant book on various manifestations of evil in the life of believers, treating such complicated questions as: What is God’s role in pious sufferings? And, how are these calamities to be reconciled with faith? In Plāte’s view, Job provided a wealth of theological and apologetical perspectives. First and foremost, Job suspended the seemingly inescapable chain of causality, where sufferings always seemed to be caused by sin and God’s punishment. In that way, the Book of Job established a more dignified purpose for pious sufferings. Furthermore, Plāte insisted that in the “school of the cross,” some hidden blessings were imparted: godly wisdom, trustful reliance, and safeguarding God’s mercy in the face of the most appalling sufferings. As a result, faith was allowed to prevail and be victorious,

³⁵⁰ A handwritten note found in the archive of Modris Plāte.

³⁵¹ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (4/23/1974).

³⁵² MPPA, Plāte 1974/1975. As a source and inspiration for this Bible study, Plāte mentions a book by F. Herbst, *Warum leide ich? Betrachtungen über die Geschichte Hiobs*, 1898, Barmen Verlag der Wupperthaler Traktat-Gesellschaft.

so that nothing could separate believers from the grace of the Lord or deprive them of salvation.³⁵³

Since the horrifying attacks on Job were orchestrated by the evil power, the treatment of Satan and his workings became an essential part of Plâte's study. From the outset, he dismissed the interpretation of liberal theology, which misread the devil as a personified metaphor for evil. For Plâte, the reality of the devil was undeniable and scary. The story of Job had to be taken literally, and the consolation of the book applied unreservedly.³⁵⁴ He argued that those people who ridiculed diabolical phenomena were foolish and took the evil power lightly. Believers were destined to discover in their own life how awful diabolical attacks could be, at all times targeting God's children, attacking them both from the outside by assaulting their family and bodily health and from the inside, causing afflictions to their soul. These bitter encounters were capable of wearing believers out, bringing them to despair and leading them astray, if they did not have the protection of the mightier one.³⁵⁵

The aim of Satan's attacks was to slander Job's faith as hypocritical and steadfast only in good times, because he enjoyed perfect health, prosperity, and all the other blessings. The charge against Job was that he practiced his piety only due to benefits and blessings. Yet, if those blessings suddenly vanished, then a hypocritical faith would falter. In this way, Satan denounced the divine truth and undermined the very essence of faith. In Plâte's view, true faith was able to rise above all circumstances and trust in the benevolence of God despite the loss of possessions and one's own family. On this basis, the Lord's justice had to be defended against the malicious attacks of the evil one.³⁵⁶

Plâte was convinced that to gain a proper perspective, this conflict had to be contemplated more broadly, because the diabolical struggle took place on a cosmic battlefield where human sufferings were mere side effects. Only from such a perspective could the true position of God's children be discerned and reinforced, so that they would put their trust in the Lord and be empowered in faith in order to survive every terrifying experience. When pious Job and other believers display their willingness to withstand the test and sacrifice themselves, diabolical lies are refuted and God's truthfulness is reinforced. Such devout actions provide the best testimony that their faith is well-based and rock-solid, and that the Lord continues to rule in justice and

³⁵³ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 40–42.

³⁵⁴ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 50.

³⁵⁵ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 52–53.

³⁵⁶ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 55.

love in spite of supposedly unjust life experiences. In this manner, Job stands out as a faithful witness and a role model, showing believers how to fight, prevail, and overcome every adversity in true faith, surviving the most disastrous tribulations.³⁵⁷

The mystery of evil, according to Pläte's commentary, could not be resolved by some kind of theoretical speculation, but exclusively in the salutary actions of God. The most essential message that he found in the book was summarized in the words of Job: "I know that my redeemer is alive and afterward he will rise upon the dust" (19:25).³⁵⁸ To Pläte, the Redeemer and his work of salvation were the key to the whole mystery. This Bible study made frequent references to the New Testament and proclaimed Christ's work, thus assuming a theological harmony between both testaments. Pläte argued that even Job himself was looking forward to the ultimate solution: Christ's eschatological coming at the end of days for the consummation. Consequently, all sufferings of God's people could be best considered in view of the vicarious sufferings of the only-begotten Son. Therein, by his *via crucis* – his sufferings, death, and resurrection – God opened the way through it all.³⁵⁹

At the same time, the fact that the Lord still tolerated evil and failed to destroy it instantly remained beyond human comprehension. An immediate solution was not offered even by the Book of Job. Instead, its teachings on theodicy were conveyed in a restrained, gradual, and concealed manner. On account of that, Pläte advised that this mystery would not be approached with a hasty and superficial mind, but rather with a pious heart.³⁶⁰ Access to God's purposes could be granted only to devoted believers who were prepared to accept their own sufferings for the purpose of sanctification.³⁶¹ As a rule, Christians were subjected to a perpetual bearing of the cross, by which they were led to the Kingdom. Whenever these souls, regardless of pain and affliction, were ready to take this road, to withstand the tests and to adhere to the Lord, it became the strongest proof that they really loved the Lord.³⁶² These believers did not interpret their sufferings as God's animosity, wrath, or damnation, but, on the contrary, as a gracious election and beneficial course that equipped and prepared them for heavenly glory. God's people accepted such tests as a process of refinement by means of which sin and impurity were removed from the faithful.³⁶³

Pläte acknowledged that there was unquestionably something profoundly

³⁵⁷ MPPA, Pläte 1974/1975, 56–58.

³⁵⁸ MPPA, Pläte 1974/1975, 107.

³⁵⁹ MPPA, Pläte 1974/1975, 62.

³⁶⁰ MPPA, Pläte 1974/1975, 60.

³⁶¹ MPPA, Pläte 1974/1975, 57.

³⁶² MPPA, Pläte 1974/1975, 69.

³⁶³ MPPA, Pläte 1974/1975, 91.

upsetting and offensive about God's rule in the present world. From a human perspective, even pious Job became offended, and he erupted with words of protest, cursing the day that he was born! Hence, the biblical narrative provided a truly realistic portrayal of Job's agony and the complexity of human nature, speaking without hypocrisy or pretense of holiness, and releasing an honest outburst before the Lord.³⁶⁴ It was against this background that Job received a response from the Lord, such that the divine book of nature was opened and his works of majesty displayed. These were astounding arguments, proving that God alone was all-wise and did not make mistakes. Overwhelmed by God's creation, Job realized his cluelessness and confessed that he had spoken without understanding. This perplexing experience subjected Job to a true change of heart, as he repented in dust and ashes.³⁶⁵

Plâte pointed out that Job was thus acquitted, but his friends were proven guilty. With their vain and wrongheaded friendship, "these comforters" only provoked God's anger and did more harm than good. Instead of comforting God's servant Job, they acted as accusers. They failed to distinguish grace from justice, and they did not realize the difference between the law and gospel. Being preoccupied with punishments and rewards, they pressed charges against Job saying, "Guilty, guilty, guilty!" To Plâte, the crux of their problem was a deficiency of love and an inability to offer true help and consolation.³⁶⁶

The story of Job demonstrated that God's governance should never be simplified.³⁶⁷ From Job's experience, Plâte drew a paradoxical conclusion, namely, that even the most intense sufferings can be turned into a lesson of God's love and wisdom. Most strikingly, this conclusion was revealed in Job's final speech, where he testified that, by this purifying fire, his faith had been tested, strengthened, and improved. Previously, only "my ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you (God)" (42:5). By way of this experience, the Lord disclosed himself not as a monster, but as a merciful Father. In the aftermath, Job was confirmed in his piety and his life vindicated, while Satan stood humiliated and his lies were revealed. The decisive point was proven and the divine truth reinforced: in their quest for the invisible, God's people were ready to accept even earthly loss and sufferings.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁴ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 108.

³⁶⁵ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 140–152.

³⁶⁶ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 92–94.

³⁶⁷ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 144.

³⁶⁸ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 165.

From this, Plâte drew a direct pastoral application for Christians living under an oppressive regime. Afflictions were an integral part of believers' existence and this lesson had to be learned the hard way. Similarly, present-day sufferings had to be accepted as a test to progress in faith, carrying the promise of glory expected in the end. A pattern emerged from the story of Job that remained relevant even in the current adversities. For just as Job had experienced a change of heart, so also the contemporary believers had to endure refinement, sanctification, and development of character. Plâte argued that in the process of his sufferings, Job became an active intercessor for his own accusers. Taught by harsh experiences, Job learned the art of loving his enemies and praying for them.³⁶⁹ Accordingly, Plâte argued that genuine empathy and compassion for the afflicted were found only among those people who had endured evil themselves. That had to be the genuine reason why so many pastors and believers during recent years were repeatedly subjected to unexplainable trials. The Lord thus molded his own people by transforming them into merciful servants and comforters. Indeed, the Lord had constantly been in search of such people who were capable of comforting others!³⁷⁰

In sum, Plâte interpreted pious sufferings from the viewpoint of God's benevolent governance over his people, maintaining that all things worked for the good of those who loved him. In a strict sense, it meant that every aspect of a believer's life was ruled by God's sovereign will, overarching righteousness, eternal wisdom, and love, so that even the worst sufferings could be accepted from the hand of God with faith, patience, and endurance. Thanks to God's providence and capability of turning evil into good, believers could always trust the Lord to unveil his higher purpose in all of their mysterious calamities.

In his study on Job, Plâte undoubtedly outlined truly high standards and expectations for faithful cross-bearing. Plâte himself was firmly committed to this kind of doctrine, teaching such fidelity to his congregation members. Yet it would not be long before it would be tested once more in his personal life. By a fateful turn of events, his own words about pious suffering came back to haunt him in an entirely unexpected way. In a matter of mere months after this Bible study, his family suffered yet another torturous trial. As if foreshadowing his future, Plâte had written the following words when commenting on the death and loss of Job's children:

For such deceased children, indeed, are truly gained and handed down in safety, because in eternity they no longer can be lost. ... Therefore, you should never

³⁶⁹ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 110.

³⁷⁰ MPPA, Plâte 1974/1975, 110.

complain that you have lost your child, since by this pain your heavenly Father has taken the child to himself. Hence, be glad, for your child has now been lifted into safety! ... That's how the Lord wants us to think about our departed children – they still remain our children, and they abide in safety, from now on becoming like hands which pull us upward to heaven.³⁷¹

3.2.4 The tragedy of losing a son

Plāte's words took on immediate personal significance through a tragedy which followed later that same year. Plāte's family suffered the loss of their youngest son Āris,³⁷² who died in an accident on September 27, 1975. On a late Saturday night, the 23-year-old man had gone for a swim in the Lielupe River and drowned. The fateful message reached the family only two days later. Without knowledge of the tragic news, on Sunday the Plātes had participated in a festive celebration of the 101st anniversary of the Rucava Church, but already the next day a telegram arrived, informing them that their son was gone. In general terms, Plāte's reaction to the somber news can be derived from an entry in his notebook.³⁷³

The entry for the tragic day recorded a prayer from Psalm 86:1,3: "Hear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I call to you all day long," and the German quotation from Ps. 16:6: "*Das Los ist mir befallen auf das Lieblishe.*" The entry for the next day stated, "Nevertheless, I remain yours, O God!" In addition, he noted a few words from his own recent sermon in the cemetery: "When our dear ones pass away from this world, we who are confident about heaven should never despair!" Thereupon, he expressed a strong commitment: "This I must confirm and prove in my own life, according to your will, O Lord."³⁷⁴

Āris' body was found by fishermen only 13 days later. The burial service was arranged after five more days, on October 15. Āris Plāte was laid to rest in the Forest Cemetery in Rīga (*Meža kapi*). The burial ceremony was conducted by his uncle, Senior Pastor Vilis Augstkalns, who delivered a funeral homily on the text from Micah 7:9: "He will bring me out to the light, and I will see his justice." A quiet and subdued reception took place afterwards at Augstkalns' house on Indriķa Street,

³⁷¹ MPPA, Plāte 1974/1975, 165.

³⁷² At this time, Āris Plāte had been a fifth-year chemistry student at the Rīga Polytechnical Institute. Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

³⁷³ MPPA, Plāte 1975. Plāte's personal notebook was in the form of a church calendar, mostly consisting of short quotes from theologians, Bible texts, hymn verses, or other matter-of-fact data on services or ecclesiastical events. These also provide some small bits and pieces of his emotional response to the tragedy.

³⁷⁴ MPPA, Plāte 1975, September.

together with the closest circle of family friends and relatives.³⁷⁵

The notebook vividly reveals Plāte's intensely emotional state of mind, which expressed itself mostly through his own poetry. The entries for these heartbreaking days were filled with verses full of pain, grief, suffering, and craving for meaning and assurance, while asking soul-searching questions and yearning for answers. The most frequent biblical quotes during this period came from the Psalms (10:14; 16:2; 73:26; 119:50,58,75; 37:7), as well as some other places (Jn. 14:27; Jude 1:20; Micah 7:9). However, in spite of all his dark and depressed emotions, Plāte relentlessly kept pursuing the Lord and his promises, thus anticipating the defiance of death, vindication, and victory achieved by the Man of Sorrows.³⁷⁶

A cherished treasure for the distressed father was the last piece of poetry (by the poet Imants Ziedonis) discovered on Āris' desk, which Plāte affectionately transcribed in his notebook. The main image of this composition is a dimming, dying candle. In a twist of artistic imagination, human destiny is identified with a candle that is extinguished by a gust of wind. This poem expresses a profound longing to mirror some of the eternal light in this transient existence. In this world of vanity, where everything appears so fleetingly, there is a yearning to reflect such otherworldly light. In the final verses, as the candle is almost extinguished, the storyline is reversed, and the candle, remarkably, is rekindled. The fire becomes reignited and burns once again. Underneath this poem, the grieving father wrote a short prayer pleading for his son: "O Lord, you would not allow such a noble and profound soul to perish!"³⁷⁷

Plāte obtained consolation and spiritual support not only from the Scriptures, but also from his fellow believers. He gratefully acknowledged several congregations that had prayed for his family. In his notebook, he quoted various passages from the letters of sympathy that arrived from his fellow pastors.

There is nothing more to be done than to confide everything to God, whenever he reveals his deepest being as *Deus absconditus*... (Archbishop J. Matulis)

The most somber experiences always visit us unexpectedly, albeit they are not without God's providence. (Senior Pastor J. Kovals)

The sovereign regiment of God has led you along his unfathomable road. Please, travel on, because every road leads to peace if one is walking with a conviction: nearer, my God, to Thee! (Senior Dean E. Liepa)

³⁷⁵ MPPA, Plāte 1975, October.

³⁷⁶ MPPA, Plāte 1975, October.

³⁷⁷ MPPA, Plāte 1975, October.

Even if presently we endure the time of hardships, yet, in one way or the other, we will eventually rejoice when God's ultimate thoughts become revealed. O Lord, we know that all of your ways are holy! (Dean J. Bērziņš)

It could also happen to us that we easily break down and become bewildered. However, that would happen only if we did not have the One who provided a rest for the crushed and devastated – if we did not have our Savior. He brings us peace. (Dean J. Gustiņš)³⁷⁸

It is also important to recognize yet another noticeable feature revealed by Plāte's notebook written during these sorrowful weeks. A whole section was devoted to poems dealing with loss and death written by popular Soviet Latvian poets (such as Mirdza Ķempe, Ārija Elksne, Ziedonis Purvs, Arvīds Grigulis, Rūdolfs Liedags, etc.), of which Plāte had gathered a sizable collection. Generally speaking, these were fatalistic and defeatist-sounding poems, without the slightest sentiment of eternal hope or Christian faith. For the most part, it was completely secular poetry. It is rather surprising to observe that Plāte, at such a somber period, consoled himself with literary works that stemmed from a divergent worldview and perceived death as a final annihilation. These compositions filled up a substantial share of his notebook and seemed to have some salutary effect on Plāte. Apparently, they helped articulate some of the human anguish and melancholy that he felt in his loss. It is only reasonable to assume that Plāte found this poetry heartening and that he was captivated by its affected and heartfelt language as he struggled to cope with his grief and tragic emotions.³⁷⁹

Plāte's notebook indicates that he dwelled on the theme of death for months to come. Pondering his son's fate, Plāte engaged in some exploration of scriptural teachings on human mortality and the passage from this life to the next. He broadly examined such topics as purgatory and the state of the departed soul, the hope of seeing the dead again, the case of David losing the child (2 Sam. 12:22–23), and eternal life beyond the grave. Recognizing the lack of reliable information on human existence after death, Plāte felt compelled to investigate not only scriptural doctrines, but also some extra-biblical ideas. He argued for a feasibility of intercessions for the dead and endorsed the idea of continuous purification and development in grace, which started in this life and advanced beyond it as well.³⁸⁰ Most certainly, such speculative thoughts were directly brought about by his son's premature death. Plāte likewise seemed to draw some solace from the belief that Christians would

³⁷⁸ MPPA, Plāte 1975, October.

³⁷⁹ MPPA, Plāte 1975, the auxiliary pages of the notebook.

³⁸⁰ MPPA, Plāte 1975, the auxiliary pages of the notebook.

retain their personalities after the resurrection. It was a promise that those loving relationships that had originated in this life would be resumed in the next. It meant that God's Kingdom would not deprive believers of former family relationships developed under the blessing of faith. Thus, eternal life would not bring an end to human relationships and activities, but rather allow them to continue in a new, purified, and dignified way.³⁸¹

“Non amisi, sed demissi. – I have not lost him, but I have sent him in front of myself, as Pastor Rudolf Kögel wrote about his prematurely departed son.” With these words, Plāte concluded his notebook for that year.³⁸²

3.2.5 Welcome to the women clergy

Subsequently, in 1975, Plāte reported that the Bible festival day on October 26 was

the very first time when a woman preached from the Rucava pulpit and served in the altar. Vicar Pastor Helēna Valpētere was sent to Rucava by the consistory to have a practical pastoral training. ... Services with the participation of the Vicar Pastor were well attended, because there was a great desire among congregation members to hear the newly ordained spiritual worker speak.³⁸³

The language of this report affirmed that Senior Pastor Plāte had no objections to the introduction of female clergy. Plāte and the Rucava parish accepted the service of Vicar Pastor Valpētere almost immediately after the historical decision was made by the Archbishop and consistory. Plāte welcomed the decision, being among the first to extend a helping hand. Although many Lutheran pastors and congregations remained skeptical and hesitant about women priests, exhibiting conservative resistance, Plāte quickly embraced the new order. That said, it must be noted that his theoretical argumentation about female pastors remained unclear. Regrettably, no theological discussion can be found on this controversial issue in the corpus of his writings. Quite frankly, this liberal attitude for a conservative-minded theologian like Plāte is relatively surprising in many respects. One can speculate why his support was so firm, drawing a deduction from indirect evidence. Because the question of women's ordination was not a novelty, Plāte had more than enough opportunities during his lifetime to consider and make up his mind about it. Moreover, since the issue had been repeatedly raised since the days of his studies, Plāte must have been a witness – and possibly an active participant – in these discussions.

³⁸¹ MPPA, Plāte 1975, the auxiliary pages of the notebook.

³⁸² MPPA, Plāte 1975, October-December.

³⁸³ LELBA 323, Plāte's report to the consistory for 1975.

The history of women's public service in Latvia started already in the 19th century with the institution of caregivers to the sick, the "deaconesses." After World War I, due to the democratization of society, Lutheran women's activities increased. It was a time of several "firsts," including the first woman congregation president and the first university-educated female theologian. A vital role in the emancipation was played by the Society of Women Theologians, which through its internal and external activities sought to develop a common strategy for the work of women theologians in the congregations and in wider society. During this era, women were not ordained but allowed to preach, albeit not from the pulpit but the chancel. After World War II, emigration and deportations caused a grave shortage of pastors, repeatedly giving rise to the question of women's ministry in the Church. During the Soviet era, several women worked as deaconesses. The road to women's ordination was undeniably influenced by world events and changes in socio-political thinking about the roles and equality of men and women. Thus, in Latvia, the two most important factors were the First Independent Republic's law to guarantee women the right to vote and later the Soviet regime's policy to include women's emancipation within the scheme of Marxist utopia.³⁸⁴

Hence, the shortage of clergy and social advancement were the main motives behind the willingness by the LELC to accept female ordination. Even the acting Archbishop Kārlis Irbe, in principle against women's ordination, was ready to make a concession in view of the desperate situation of the postwar period and need to ordain some women in the office.³⁸⁵ In 1945, Irbe discussed the issue with his co-worker Pastor Arturs Siļķe, and he decided to ordain Johana Ose, who served admirably as a deaconess at St. Paul's Church in Rīga. When Ose was informed about Irbe's decision, she asked for a few days to consider it. Upon her return, her answer was quite astonishing. She said:

If I accepted the full rights of pastoral office as the first woman in the world, I could become proud and arrogant. In order to safeguard myself from such a fall in sin, I refuse to accept this honor.³⁸⁶

At this point, the question of women's ordination was postponed for quite some time. The issue was raised anew by Archbishop Tūrs in an invitation letter for a synod meeting on March 23, 1968, which proposed to discuss women's ordination (due to the acute shortage of clergy) based on the church experiences in Sweden,

³⁸⁴ Tēraudkalns 2006, 43–44.

³⁸⁵ Mesters 1996, 30.

³⁸⁶ Mesters 1996, 30–31; Talonen 1997, 63–64.

Finland, and Germany. Likewise, the question maintained its topicality with the newly elected Archbishop Matulis. In the early 1970s, the rights of serving female deacons were gradually extended.³⁸⁷ Subsequently, women's ordination was taken up and approved at the consistory meeting of 1975. A vital argument was the fact that the exiled Latvian Church had already started ordaining women. At this meeting, various opinions were expressed by the consistory members, but discussions were settled by the firm persistence of the Archbishop:

If you vote against, I will have to declare an urgent general synod meeting, and then this meeting will grant the permission to ordain women ... because it is our necessity to involve women in the pastoral ministry.³⁸⁸

These words of Matulis revealed his determination to settle the question once and for all. Since nobody wanted to deal with Moscow (which had to be done, if a general synod meeting was organized), the pressure applied by Matulis was successful, and the historical decision on women's ordination was made. Furthermore, the consistory also resolved that the theological students Vaira Bitēna, Berta Stroža, and Helēna Valpētere were to be ordained pastors for the office of vicar.³⁸⁹

For Plāte, who bore witness to this historic development, the question of women clergy apparently did not cause a theological problem. One of the possible explanations could be the fact that he himself represented the low-church tradition and was in close contact with Baptist congregations, where women preachers were already accepted.³⁹⁰ Being quite far from the Catholic hierarchical view of the pastoral office,³⁹¹ Plāte held a more or less functional approach where there was no strict distinction between altar and pulpit,³⁹² which meant that the office of ministry for him was more related to the preaching of the Word and could be performed equally well by both men and women. Furthermore, as a seminary docent Plāte was acquainted with all the female students there, who for the most part were pietistically inclined Christians³⁹³ and had clearly made a good impression on him. Plāte's willingness to accept female pastors was presumably motivated by the requirements of the modern era, the constant shortage of pastors, and his own positive experience with female theologians. Nevertheless, his biblical argumentation remains unknown.

³⁸⁷ Zikmane 2001, 143–144.

³⁸⁸ See Priede 2007.

³⁸⁹ LELBA, protocol of the consistory meeting no. 21, July 28, 1975.

³⁹⁰ Tēraudkalns 2006, 35.

³⁹¹ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

³⁹² Tēraudkalns 2006, 30.

³⁹³ Tēraudkalns 2006, 31.

3.3 EMERGENCE OF A NEW MOVEMENT

IN THE LATE 1970S AND THE EARLY 1980S

The state of perpetual crisis in the LELC, which had begun from the time of the Soviet occupation and World War II and had lasted already for several decades and grown only deeper as a condition of a prolonged social isolation and ideological and economic depression, had taken its toll as the Lutheran membership aged and the activities of the Church decreased. The Soviet policies of control and intimidation had been successful in weakening the organization, subjecting it to a slow disintegration and withering away. The LELC had come dangerously close to a dark hour where the high steeples of churches would have remained merely as strange monuments of bygone days.³⁹⁴

The spirit of resistance, independence, and self-determination was almost completely extinguished. During the lengthy and tiresome quest for survival, the Church had adopted a highly defensive mentality. With their somber memories of persecutions and deportations, most of the pastors and members had become timid, fearing a repeated onslaught of religious persecutions. The only viable option for self-preservation seemed to be avoidance of any confrontation with the Soviet authorities. As a result, the deeply humiliating status quo continued to strip the Church of her dignity and self-respect. Traumatized by past experiences, the Church gave up her positions too quickly and surrendered to dictates too easily. Even if such accommodations helped her to survive, in the long run these church-state relations and cultivating a secluded, passive existence could have turned out to be catastrophic – even fatal – for the Church.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, however, a few positive signs began to appear, reigniting hope for the future. During this era, the Soviet system itself underwent an ideological crisis and period of stagnation, when a considerable number of people became increasingly critical of the regime.³⁹⁵ At this time, church-state relationships were relatively stable and predictable, while state control over the Church had gradually weakened. With the USSR signing various international agreements on human rights, including religious rights, the Communist regime was forced to maneuver between aggressive anti-religious policies to marginalize the Church and the necessity to put on a show for the outside world, demonstrating that believers in

³⁹⁴ See also Vehter [s.a.], 56. See also Rozentāls 2014, 228–229.

³⁹⁵ Zikmane 2001, 193.

the Soviet Union were not oppressed.³⁹⁶

A growing number of people sensed the diminishing morale of the Communist Party and perceived its stagnation. Many started searching for other, more constructive ideas. To fill the void and quench their thirst, some turned to religion and Christianity. Evidence for this was a minor increase in the number of baptisms.³⁹⁷ The yearning for change was felt among the youth, many of whom sought an alternative to the Soviet uniformity and monotony. A few of the young people were attracted to the Church and chose to devote themselves to church work. A generational shift started to also take place among the clergy. Moreover, the seminary had succeeded in educating a promising new generation of pastors, who very soon began to play a significant role in the life of the LELC. A group of younger pastors emerged with new energy and the aim to rejuvenate the stagnating church life and change the conditions by which the atheist State could exercise arbitrary control over the Church.³⁹⁸

Initially, these reform ideas originated at the LELC seminary, where Plāte served as one of the docents. The seminary became the birthplace and focal point for a reform and renewal movement, where the young theologians found a place to meet, study, discuss, and form their identity. At the time when church gatherings were still tightly regulated by the authorities, the seminary provided a place for regular fellowship where critical ideas about the ecclesiastical situation could be exchanged and developed. The process was promoted by the new rector of the seminary, Roberts Akmentiņš, who was appointed on the 1st of September, 1980, and succeeded the previous rector, the late Roberts Priede. Rector Akmentiņš was manifestly less loyal to the Soviet authorities than his predecessor, being a dynamic personality and showing more openness toward new ideas and reforms in the Church.³⁹⁹

Many of the progressive students were ordained and started their pastoral ministry in the early 1980s. The group of eight theological students and pastors began to meet in private as early as 1981.⁴⁰⁰ A few others joined the group afterwards. Apart from theological and biblical topics, the group discussed church politics and the contemporary ecclesiastical conditions.⁴⁰¹ These young men openly demonstrated their resentment and discontent with the ongoing collaboration with the Commu-

³⁹⁶ SvR 2014/11.

³⁹⁷ Zikmane 2001, 193.

³⁹⁸ Zikmane 2001, 193. See Mankusa 2007; Rozentāls 2014, 232–235.

³⁹⁹ Laugalis 1998, 30.

⁴⁰⁰ Rubenis, Juris 2007, 390. Those eight people were Modris Plāte, Aivars Beimanis, Erberts Bikše, Jēkabs Dzeguze, Andrejs Kavacis, Juris Rubenis, and Atis Vaickovskis.

⁴⁰¹ Mankusa 2007.

nist regime. The group had made a promise among themselves never to make any commitments to the KGB, and they refused to celebrate any church services on the Soviet anniversaries. By their example, they wanted to convince the LELC leaders to follow the same path. They pleaded with Archbishop Matulis and the consistory for increased freedom in church life, as well as wider opportunities for pastors to meet and discuss theological and practical issues. At first, the reform movement focused primarily on internal ecclesiastical and theological matters.⁴⁰²

One of the leaders in this reform group was the son of Nikolajs Plāte, Pastor Modris Plāte.⁴⁰³ Modris had been studying at the seminary since 1978 and was a successful student, working in parallel as secretary for Archbishop Matulis.⁴⁰⁴ In the summer of 1981, Modris was appointed to be a lecturer at the seminary, teaching religious systematics.⁴⁰⁵ While serving as the Archbishop's secretary, he was well aware of the everyday dealings with the authorities, in which he recognized the deeply humiliating control exercised by the Commissar. He observed how the Archbishop, consistory members, and the Commissar and his co-workers gathered for state and private anniversaries, celebrating church services on state holidays, such as Victory Day, the Anniversary of the October Revolution, etc. Although Modris Plāte knew that Matulis did not sympathize with the regime but was simply following an opportunistic strategy, Modris opposed that strategy as dangerous and unnecessary. As a young and intense person, he was irritated by this policy of compromise. He tried to draw the Archbishop's attention to the deteriorating situation, and he pleaded to change it in order "to avoid great spiritual losses."⁴⁰⁶ Even later, in retrospect, he judged the situation similarly:

The church leaders thought we would be smarter – we would give the devil a little finger, and would get something useful in return for the whole church. Yet, that giving of the little finger led to much greater losses – losses that nobody noticed.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰² Mankusa 2007. Later, after the mid-1980s, the political and national mood in the country started to change more rapidly. By then, materialistic ideology had lost its credibility, and many people turned to the Church and started attending services. Some of those young Lutheran pastors became a kind of protest symbol for hopes of a change in the society. In the late 1980s, they formed the movement "Rebirth and Renewal," which was founded at the right time as an answer to the hopes and longings of a great part of the society in Latvia.

⁴⁰³ Before his theological studies, Modris Plāte had graduated from the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics at the University of Latvia in 1975 and was an expert in theoretical nuclear physics. Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

⁴⁰⁴ Asne 2004, 118.

⁴⁰⁵ Laugalis 1998, 30.

⁴⁰⁶ Mankusa 2007. During a private meeting in the apartment of Pastor Juris Rubenis in 1983, militia arrested and during the night interrogated Pastors Plāte, Rubenis, and Vaickovskis. Plāte protested against the arrest and told the militia officer that it was unjust to arrest them, since people of any other profession were allowed to meet their friends and pastors should not be an exception. The officer replied: "There is and will be no justice for you. This is how our class approach works, and in the course of time we will destroy you completely!"

⁴⁰⁷ Mankusa 2007.

No doubt, Nikolajs Plāte was gratified to see his son excelling in theological studies and becoming a faithful, courageous church worker. Meanwhile, Modris recalled that his father, also being a cautious person, was worried that the audacity of the young man would get him into trouble.⁴⁰⁸ A special day of celebration was September 23, 1979, when Modris received a preliminary ordination in order to start serving the Church as a vicar. On May 16, 1982, Modris and some other graduates were given full ordination, receiving the cross from the hands of Archbishop Matulis at St. John's Church in Rīga. It was an especially memorable event, not only for the newly ordained pastors, their friends and relatives, but also for the entire Latvian Lutheran Church. Along with the local leaders, the ordination service was conducted by the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, Dr. K. Mau, and the Secretary (Emeritus) of European Affairs, Dr. P. Hansen.⁴⁰⁹

The next stage for the reform movement came when these young pastors were appointed to their places of ministry. All of the key members in the group received calls to serve in Courland, and thus the principal area of their activity became this western region of Latvia. Pastor Modris Plāte was appointed to serve in Kuldīga and Ēdole; Pastor Aivars Beimanis in Nīgrande, Vaiņode, Krūte, Gramzda, and Priekule; Pastor Juris Rubenis in the Grobiņa area and Liepāja; and Pastor Atis Vaickovskis in Dobele. The geographical proximity allowed them to remain in close contact and to coordinate their reform efforts. Their plan was to intensify congregational life, to conduct more frequent worship services, to be more flexible with regard to the liturgy and vestments, and, most importantly, to improve preaching to make it more topical and relevant for contemporary conditions.⁴¹⁰

The most radical reforms were carried out by Modris Plāte in Kuldīga, starting in 1982. In the reports of 1983 and 1984, the Commissar interpreted these as liturgical quests and cult accommodations to the needs of modern individuals.⁴¹¹ Modris wanted to make services more attractive, and he attempted some new, innovative, effective forms. His intention was to preach more directly to the current situation, using Soviet newspapers and topical news from society. The attention of the state authorities was drawn immediately. They deemed his sermons an anti-Soviet application of Christian doctrine. Commissar E. Kokars-Trops wrote to Moscow that this

⁴⁰⁸ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

⁴⁰⁹ Laugalis 1998, 31. In the same service were also ordained Jēkabs Dzeguze, Elmārs Kide, Atis Vaickovskis and Andrejs Kavacis. On May 29 of the same year, another ordination took place, in which four theological students received the first-level ordination and rights to serve as vicar pastors. Those were Jānis Ozols, Kārlis Bušs, Juris Rubenis, and Aivars Bobinskis.

⁴¹⁰ Laugalis 1998, 43–44.

⁴¹¹ Laugalis 1998, 44.

young man preached in an outright dangerous manner and that such free-thinking could not be tolerated. Hence, a demand was issued that pastors had to return to traditional Lutheran preaching.⁴¹²

Similarly, like-minded colleagues of Modris Plāte – Juris Rubenis, Atis Vaickovskis, and Roberts Akmentiņš – made explorations in the area of ritual (such as services with a particular emphasis on the Lord’s Supper, antiphonal chanting, psalmody, morning and evening worship, processions during the Easter period, etc.). Experiments were made even with the form of proclamation: for instance, a sermon could resemble a dialogue between two preachers. Such an unprecedented method appeared more democratic and definitely attracted attention.⁴¹³ These novelties were meant to counteract stagnation and to begin theological discussion and reevaluation within the Church. One thing was clear: something had to be done to rejuvenate the existing situation.⁴¹⁴

Henceforth, in the early 1980s, after these young pastors started to serve in Courland, the center for their activities was transferred to the regional deanery meetings. The most active deaneries to promote such reform and to change their mentality were the Grobiņa deanery (to which belonged Rubenis, Beimanis, and N. Plāte) and the Kuldīga-Dobele deanery (to which belonged M. Plāte and Vaickovskis). Several official proposals and initiatives were produced by these deaneries and sent to the consistory.⁴¹⁵ Even if from today’s perspective the proposals were neither revolutionary nor extreme, the public confession of such views was an act of courage and daring to go against the general flow. Indeed, these activities were noticed, and they raised considerable suspicion, coming under closer scrutiny of the CARC.⁴¹⁶

The reform movement was unquestionably on the rise and gaining momentum. The demands of its public statements to the consistory and the Archbishop grew more urgent. Yet, simultaneously, their boldness was often taken as insubordination and defiance of authority. Their statements were perceived by many older pastors as

⁴¹² Laugalis 1998, 32. Commissar E. Kokars-Trops reported to Moscow in 1982: “The graduate of the Theological Seminary and young servant of the cult Modris Plāte in some of his sermons has criticized some articles from the local newspaper *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art), and articles from other magazines. Archbishop Matulis and the Rector of the Evangelical Lutheran Seminary, in view of our recommendation, have pointed out to M. Plāte that his actions were inadmissible. After this, Plāte has used the traditional approach to the sermon, as is appropriate for a servant of the Lutheran Church.”

⁴¹³ Laugalis 1998, 32.

⁴¹⁴ Laugalis 1998, 44.

⁴¹⁵ Laugalis 1998, 33. For instance, on April 14, a letter by seven reform pastors was addressed to all the Lutheran clergy, demanding to defrock the woman pastor Vaira Bitēna from the roster due to her recent divorce. Since the letter was sent out without consulting the LELC leadership, it was perceived as trouble-making. Yet another “Petition” was addressed to 14 deans, one senior pastor and two pastors, expressing disappointment about the inactivity of the consistory and the Archbishop. It was sent on June 10, 1983.

⁴¹⁶ Laugalis 1998, 33.

mere provocations, which ignored the legitimate ecclesiastical order and caused unrest among the Lutheran clergy.⁴¹⁷ Thus, quite a few of the older generation of clergy voiced criticism against their younger colleagues who had not learned to respect the nature of subordination and the church hierarchy.⁴¹⁸

The whole encounter was not only a clash of the two generations – the younger and the older – but a confrontation of two different visions for church life under the regime. The “old path” meant being passive, accommodating, and surrendering to state control, which implied a relatively peaceful existence within the narrow bounds set by the authorities. Archbishop Matulis led the LELC along this old path. He was generally respected for his leadership, and even the Communists praised him as a good spokesman for the Soviet Church in international politics. However, the bigger picture was more treacherous and dangerous, because the old path was specifically designed by the Communists and devised for the purpose of the destruction of the Church. As long as the LELC continued to follow this path, the Church was slowly but surely doomed to extinction. In the long run, this policy was detrimental and worked against the basic interests of the Church. The CARC Commissar explicitly stated in his reports that the continued subservience and loyalty of the LELC would inevitably lead to a reduction in church membership and a decreasing number of congregations.⁴¹⁹

The analysis shows that during the previous 10 years (1973–1983) the total number of believers in the LELC has been reduced by more than 13,000 people, or 29 percent.⁴²⁰

The younger generation of pastors was obviously frustrated with the old path of accommodation and demanded immediate reforms. They made their protests heard. They insisted that if inner freedom, spiritual strength, and greater integrity were not regained, the future of the Church looked tragic and hopeless. Through their adamant struggle and resistance, the reform movement emerged as a new and potent force. Its objectives were formulated in the biblical phrase, “rebirth and renewal.” Its idealistic attitude was expressed in the words of Pastor Beimani:

The younger pastors were not afraid. When the older pastors warned them that it

⁴¹⁷ Laugalis 1998, 44.

⁴¹⁸ Laugalis 1998, 42. Rozentāls 2014, 236–242.

⁴¹⁹ In 1975, Commissar P. Liepa wrote in his report: “The head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church J. Matulis is loyal, fulfilling his ecclesiastical duties according to the legislation on cults and demanding the same from the Lutheran clergy. To a certain extent, it has promoted the situation where there were no records of any offenses against the law by the servants of the cult during this year.” And, “Observations on the Lutheran Church show that there are a certain amount of congregations, of small numbers, minimum activity, and in the following years they will dissolve. The Archbishop doesn’t take any action in order to activate these congregations.”

⁴²⁰ Zikmane 200, 265, 121. See also Appendix A.

was useless to run with your head against the wall, the younger pastors replied: the head would be fine, but the wall eventually would tumble down.⁴²¹

Another activist, Pastor Rubenis, said in his recollections:

Looking from today's point of view ... we were hotheaded young people, maximalists, who did not want to step back even by one inch. Truthfully, we were quite radical, perhaps even too radical. But maybe, at this point, it was necessary to proceed like that.⁴²²

3.3.1 Support for the young generation of pastors

In the context of the emerging changes, it is important to elucidate the position of Senior Pastor Nikolajs Plāte with regard to the new movement. Which path did he prefer: the old or the new? How did he envision the future of the Church? What was Plāte's perspective on the road forward? His disposition is especially interesting due to the important role that his son played in the movement. To clearly understand Plāte's approach on the issue, his personal affections should also be taken into account.

If one compares the position of the father and the son, there are definitely more similarities than differences. Both shared the assessment of the ecclesiastical situation that the crisis was serious and something had to be done. Both of them were equally discouraged about the subservience and obedience of the LELC to the Soviet authorities. Unquestionably, both wanted a change and worked toward it. However, there were also some obvious differences, which stemmed from the generational gap and divergent perspectives. At this point, Modris Plāte was a youthful, enthusiastic, and passionate new pastor, striving for immediate change and having little tolerance for compromise. Nikolajs Plāte, on the other hand, was already a well-seasoned if fatigued churchman who wanted to proceed in a much more cautious and guarded manner. Thus, even though the objectives were more or less the same for both of them, the means and methods of accomplishing them differed visibly.

Nikolajs Plāte rapidly understood the potential threat. He realized that any substantial church reforms would entail immediate social and political consequences. Breaking with the established church-state order could mean some painful repercussions. If the Church were to make a decisive move to break free from conditions of dependence, it would inevitably be interpreted as an act of resistance against

⁴²¹ Laugalis 1998, 42.

⁴²² Laugalis 1998, 34.

the Soviet system. Nikolajs doubtless became very nervous, sensing the eagerness of his son and the other young pastors to engage in such an excessive degree of risk. Their courage could put their lives in instant danger. Thus, the elder Plāte feared for the young men and warned them not to proceed too hastily and impulsively, for overly radical attempts at liberation could provoke political ramifications. In the early 1980s, during long conversations with his son, Nikolajs cautioned against rashness. Modris, on the other hand, attempted to convince his father that radical reforms were absolutely indispensable and that there was no time to waste.⁴²³

Through his work as a seminary docent, Nikolajs became well-acquainted with the active members of the movement, where his son Modris was one of the leaders. He held each of these men in very high regard. In particular, he greatly valued and appreciated Pastor Beimanis, who had served in the Grobiņa Deanery already since the 1970s. He was also closely acquainted with Rubenis, who became his adjunct in the early 1980s. Appreciating his service, he hoped to see Rubenis as the future successor for his congregations. As he wrote to the Archbishop:

In view of the fact that my powers get weaker and my workload in the three congregations becomes too hard, I believe that it would be best if Rubenis could be registered as an adjunct pastor at the Lutheran Church in Liepāja, adding a separate stipulation which would allow that occasionally he had the right to replace me also in Rucava and Muitnieki.⁴²⁴

In that way, Plāte had first-hand knowledge of all these men and was personally linked with the chief activists of the group. Considering their hopes and aspirations, he believed that the future of the Church was in good hands. At a time when many elderly pastors resisted change, Plāte became increasingly convinced that reforms were urgently needed, and he agreed that revitalization of the declining Church was of the highest priority. Thus, despite some caution and hesitation on his part, he not only observed and recognized the activities of these men, but also supported, defended, and encouraged them, seeing in the movement a better path for the future.

As a matter of fact, his support for the reform movement could be considered the very last spiritual contribution that Nikolajs Plāte made. With his health deteriorating and ability to serve diminishing, he increasingly began to contemplate posterity and impending prospects. When his condition significantly worsened in the early 1980s, Plāte struggled to keep up with his ministry, relying more and more on younger colleagues to replace him. Plāte's most severe health crises, incidentally,

⁴²³ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

⁴²⁴ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (7/30/1982). In this letter Plāte asked to release him from duties at the Luther congregation in Liepāja starting from October 1, 1982.

occurred simultaneously with some important reform attempts in 1983, at the age of 68 and during what would be the last year of his life. But even in the closing months of his life, in spite of his physical infirmity, Plāte was still eager to take an active part in two essential events supporting church reforms.

The first was a Grobiņa Deanery meeting on September 23, 1983. After the death of Dean Kārlis Martinsons, a new dean had to be elected for the district. Nevertheless, the election turned out to be a struggle. The interim dean, Osvalds Ābelītis, who was directly appointed by the consistory, seemed to be impatient and also keen to stay in the office without legal grounds. Already earlier, he had begun to pretend that he was legitimately the holder of the office, improperly signing papers as a dean. Furthermore, he intended to avoid the democratic process. He did not schedule an election at the meeting and simply sought to continue in office. However, as the meeting began, Senior Pastor Plāte immediately objected to the proposed schedule. Other pastors supported him and, by a general vote, a decision was made to proceed with elections at once.⁴²⁵

The church law of 1968 ruled that a dean was supposed to be elected democratically, not appointed. In accordance with the procedure, Plāte nominated a second candidate, Pastor Beimanis, explaining that during the previous meeting, which was still conducted by Martinsons, Pastor Beimanis had already been recommended. Yet, this particular protocol of the minutes, while sent to the consistory, had been mysteriously lost.⁴²⁶ On the occasion of nominating Beimanis, Plāte delivered a significant speech in which he discussed the current ecclesiastical situation as well as issues that pertained to the future:

I want to share my personal view on the matter: I hold nothing against Pastor Ābelītis. Yet my conviction is that preference must be given to the younger brothers in ministry. This tendency has spread throughout the world and also in our church. Leading personalities must become younger. I beg you, look! I am standing here before you, supporting myself on a stick, trembling in my infirmity – we are those, who ought to leave the stage. We have to be at peace with it. I will die, Ābelītis will die – but our work will be continued by the younger generation. The leader of the Soviet state, Comrade Yuri Andropov, while speaking at a meeting, said: “...all roads are open to the youth, the future belongs to the youth...” Those are golden words also in the life of our church. We – the elderly ones – cannot understand contemporary problems in a way that the younger generation can. In our church, we have been accustomed to emphasize the principle of maturation and subordination; however, we have to understand that the older pastors have other ideas and interests. They don’t have the same kind of energy any more. Some of them think: it will be good enough for my lifetime. However, many just don’t

⁴²⁵ Laugalis 1998, 34.

⁴²⁶ Laugalis 1998, 34. (Protocol of the meeting for the Grobiņa deanery 1983: 3.)

realize how critical the situation of our church is! Those advancing the work will be the pastors of the younger generation. If they have chosen this line of vocation, which in our days is no longer regarded a vocation of honor, their unselfish motivation and conviction of faith must be recognized. I can assure you that some of them could be employed in some more advanced secular jobs and positions; however, for the sake of the church work, they have given up those possibilities. I hold the firm belief that the younger generation pastors should be introduced in the governance of our church!⁴²⁷

It was the last speech that Senior Pastor Plāte gave to his fellow pastors. Dzintars Laugalis, commenting on Plāte's role at this meeting, has concluded that this speech revealed him as a strong personality, having a good sense of stewardship and a burning heart, who cared more for the well-being of the Church than for his own fate.⁴²⁸ The minutes of the meeting show that Plāte's speech was followed by an intensely emotional dispute and even scornful remarks. Ābelītis responded:

I don't feel old. Does it mean that elderly people, being burdened by years, are no longer worth anything? Do old folks have to be cast out? I don't agree with Senior Pastor Plāte. Because the right kind of wisdom comes only with age. Do you think that you will never get old? You certainly will! After all, we have to give up these divisions between the young and the old. It was already bad enough that the Archbishop was going to resign from his office because of the insults he had to listen to. In the last meeting of the consistory, we all pleaded the Archbishop to change his mind and not to resign. Without Matulis our church would perish, for he is the only one who can lead the church [under the current circumstances]. The young pastors would not know what to do. If you really want to split the church, then, please, go ahead – vote for Beimanis!⁴²⁹

In spite of all the heated discussions, an open vote took place for the two candidates, Ābelītis and Beimanis: 22 votes were cast “for” and only 4 “against” Beimanis, and he was elected the new dean of Grobiņa. The same year, a very similar course of events occurred also in the Kuldīga Deanery. When the former Dean R. Akmentiņš willingly resigned from office due to an overload of his duties as the Rector of the Theological Seminary, he was replaced by a considerably younger man. By a clear majority, Pastor Modris Plāte was elected the new dean of the Kuldīga Deanery.⁴³⁰

The trend progressively became obvious. The younger pastors had already gained some positions of leadership in the LELC, a new and promising change that allowed them to play a stronger role in the governance and decision-making of the Church. Hence, by 1983, when the Church celebrated the 500th anniversary of Luther's birthday, the emerging movement succeeded in gaining the support of a significant num-

⁴²⁷ Laugalis 1998, 34. (Minutes of the Grobiņa deanery meeting 1983: 3.)

⁴²⁸ Laugalis 1998, 34.

⁴²⁹ Laugalis 1998, 35.

⁴³⁰ Laugalis, 1998, 35–36.

ber of pastors. And even though many of the elderly clergy vehemently disagreed with and openly opposed the movement, calling these reforms “un-Lutheran” and even a “Catholic novelty,” there were many representatives of the senior clergy, such as Nikolajs Plāte, Roberts Akmentiņš, Augusts Ālers, and Roberts Feldmanis, who sincerely helped and strove for change at this time.

The second important event in the autumn of 1983 was an audacious attempt by the reform group to reform the basic church law of the LELC. To achieve a more radical change, the group proposed a revised version of church law that could offer greater autonomy from the State and provide increased self-determination. A fairly bold petition was addressed to the consistory and the Archbishop, signed by 30 Lutheran pastors, saying:

We, the Lutheran clergy, who have signed below, by sending this letter to the consistory, are pleading the following: it is very urgent to create a competent commission in order to work out and elaborate the attached new constitution project for the LELC and to prepare its inclusion for a discussion in the agenda of the general synod on February 23, 1984.⁴³¹

The most significant reform in the project was the proposed creation of the so-called Bishops’ Council, consisting of five bishops, which would be the executive organ of the general synod, replacing the consistory and an archbishop.⁴³² The main idea was that the Bishops’ Council could provide a more reliable guarantee for administrative independence, making it more difficult for the State to exploit and manipulate these bishops. As one of the authors, Pastor Juris Rubenis, explained:

The argument was as follows – it was really easy to influence and manipulate one person. The LELC, at that time, had one leader – one archbishop. But, if he was put under an extreme pressure, all could be lost. ... It seemed credible to us, that it would be considerably better to have some sort of collegial system of the church governance, because five or six persons could not be controlled at the same time. ... One person could easily be intimidated and driven into the corner. While, if everything had to depend on one person only, then in the case of one nail breaking – everything gets broken! Yet, this should not happen to six persons.⁴³³

The proposal was signed by a considerable number of Lutheran pastors. The weight of these 30 signatures was quite significant, since it was backed not only by the younger pastors, but also by well-known and recognized ecclesiastical personalities. For instance, it was signed by Rector Dr. Roberts Akmentiņš and prominent

⁴³¹ Laugalis 1998, 38. Petition to the consistory and the Archbishop 1983. Signed by the following pastors: R. Akmentiņš, N. Plāte, V. Augstkalns, Z. Brača, A. Beimanis, A. Kaminskis, E. Bikše, T. Valters, P. Žibeiks, A. Vaickovskis, A. Kavacis, A. Rolavs, P. Birzulis, J. Rubenis, Ī. Krieviņš, S. Sproģis, M. Plāte, J. Gustiņš, Ā. Viksna, A. Bobinskis, J. Janelis, J. Bergis, E. Mačs, K. Rubenis, L. Sildrevics, E. Balodis, A. Brālis, E. Jundzis, R. Kalderovskis, and J. Dreiblats.

⁴³² Laugalis 1998, 39. See also Rozentāls 2014, 242–278.

⁴³³ Laugalis 1998, 39.

docents of the seminary – Dr. Edgars Jundzis, Pauls Žibeiks, and Vilis Augstkalns – as well as several deans. Even though the whole project was eventually halted by the leadership and failed to be realized, the initiative affirmed a desired direction. The time had not yet come for a more fundamental change, but these ambitions were important seeds for the future and a sign of better things to come.

The project for the new church law was scheduled for November 2, 1983. It was only a week before Nikolajs Plāte passed away. His signature on this proposal was a definite statement that he was in favor of taking more radical steps to regain the independence of the Church. Senior Pastor Plāte clearly sided with the emerging movement, claiming that a bolder stance had to be taken against the Soviet regime. Looking back retrospectively, it is rather symbolic that his very last actions used the opportunity to witness, endorse and support the formation of the renewal movement, which in a few years time would play a significant role in the process of national awakening and the Latvian fight for freedom in the second part of the 1980s.

3.3.2 Plāte's health struggles and the end of his life

By the time the new movement emerged and gained strength, Plāte was in the last years of his life. Although he was only in his late 60s, he began to wear out and his health declined. As his son Modris related, part of the reason why his condition started to deteriorate was his unwillingness to visit doctors and get checkups; it was also partially due to his inherited genetic makeup. The only medical doctor he ever visited was an acquaintance from nearby Nica, who was a dentist. It meant that Plāte was accustomed to enduring illness and coping with pain while waiting until his body itself recovered from infirmities. Furthermore, it was rather typical for him to say that the Lord was powerful and would heal all maladies, so there was no reason to worry. For a long time, this kind of attitude had worked out well for him.⁴³⁴

His health broke down for the first time in late 1980 and early 1981, as groin pains increased immensely and became unbearable. In fact, Plāte had complained about his troubles and lamented for a while, but even his wife did not realize how debilitating his condition was. Since Modra had to bear her husband's lamenting more or less constantly during their married life, she sometimes did not pay close

⁴³⁴ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

attention to them. On this occasion, the situation quickly got out of control and reached the point where Nikolajs was no longer able to urinate. An ambulance took him to the hospital, and eventually he ended up in Rīga and was cared for by Doctor Mirjama Andrejsone, a daughter of Lutheran Pastor Kārlis Freimanis. A diagnosis of prostate cancer was established. During Plāte's stay in the hospital, an operation was performed. The recovery took one and a half months, after which he was able to return home. The hospital stay was a challenging experience for such a solitary man. In the summer of 1981, Plāte was pleased to finally return to Rucava, although still physically handicapped.⁴³⁵

Despite his difficult condition, he was soon able to move about and once again get back to his pastoral and seminary work. Modris remembered visiting his father in 1982, when he brought his 7-month-old son to Rucava. At this point, Nikolajs was already fully involved again in his ministry. Modris did not often have time to visit his father, not only due to caring for his own growing family, but also his manifold activities for the reform movement and a thriving revival in Kuldīga. Modris had distinct memories from his next visit to his parents. He remembered how the proud grandfather had cherished and entertained his little grandson (who was already able to walk), driving him around in a wheelbarrow.⁴³⁶

In the summer of 1983, Modris received an alarming phone call from his mother Modra. Nikolajs' condition had started to rapidly deteriorate. Once again, he was taken to Rīga, where he mostly stayed in the house of Vilis Augstkalns, his brother-in-law, fellow pastor and good friend. He tried to fight off the weakness and traveled back to Rucava, and he even took an active part in the Grobiņa meeting in September (discussed above). Nevertheless, he grew increasingly weaker and had to go back to Rīga again. Nikolajs had to face the truth that the cancer had returned and advanced aggressively. According to the doctors, nothing could be done to reverse it. His wife still tried to get help from alternative medicine, such as acupuncture and a type of healer, but nothing worked.⁴³⁷

It became obvious both for Plāte and for everyone around him that his life was at its conclusion. The last, private communion service was held for him by Dean Beimanis.

⁴³⁵ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

⁴³⁶ Interview with Modris Plāte on December 12, 2014.

⁴³⁷ Interview with Modris Plāte on December 12, 2014.

With growing weakness and losing strength, his most significant spiritual practice was to whisper in prayer the words of the well-known hymn:

For me to live is Jesus;
To die is gain for me.
So, when my Savior pleases,
I meet death willingly.
For Christ, my Lord and brother,
I leave the world so dim
And gladly seek another,
Where I shall be with him.
My woes are nearly over
Though long and dark the road;
My sin his merits cover,
And I have peace with God.
In my last hour, oh, grant me
A slumber soft and still,
No doubts to vex or haunt me,
Safe anchored in your will.⁴³⁸

He spent the last days of his life in the Department of Urology at Pauls Stradiņš Hospital. His wife made daily visits and his son also visited him several times. Modris recalled that in their meeting four days before his death, in his final conscious and sensible conversation, his father had expressed some regrets. With pain in his voice, he mentioned with heartache that he had not been able to provide lasting financial security for his wife. In this way, he apologized and asked forgiveness. During these final moments, he felt sorry for Modra, who was left without savings or a material inheritance to survive on her own. Since it was clear that she could no longer stay in the Rucava parsonage, her situation looked gloomy. This regret was the last thing that the son heard from his father. During the last visit, there were only the unintelligible muttering of a dying person.⁴³⁹

The funeral of Senior Pastor and seminary teacher Nikolajs Plāte was organized in Rīga. A warm commemoration and appreciation by the Rucava parish for the beloved and respected minister was expressed in concise but cordial words in the minutes of its annual report:

Senior Pastor of our congregation Nikolajs Plāte was called by God to eternal life on November 9, 1983, and was buried on November 16 at Meža Kapi (the Forest Cemetery) in Rīga. With grief and sorrow, the Rucava parish parted from her truly beloved shepherd Senior Pastor Nikolajs Plāte, remaining deeply grateful

⁴³⁸ Latvian Hymnal (1926), no. 633. The original German title: *Christus, der ist mein leben*.

⁴³⁹ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014.

for his service of more than 30 years, for his diligent, generous, selfless work for our congregation. We are forever thankful to our dearest God that he had sent us such a good, skillful, industrious shepherd, at the same time calling him home in the very maturation of his capabilities, when there was still so much work to do and when he had so much desire to proceed.⁴⁴⁰

The LELC Calendar of 1984 published a short obituary in honor of the departed. The heading was a Bible quote: “Don’t delay me! The LORD has made my mission successful; now send me back so I can return to my master” (Gen. 24:56). The article said that Plāte had been a faithful church servant, a prolific hymn-writer and theologian, a long-time pastor of the Rucava parish, a docent of dogmatics at the seminary, and a man who was much loved and revered by all, having spent his life honorably. A special tribute was made to celebrate the lifelong favorite activity of Plāte, who, similar to gatherers of Latvian folklore, collected spiritual poetry from various sources and hymns by Latvian poets. In this way, he left behind a rich share of devotional treasures. Being an author of sacred songs himself, he was praised for his very latest contribution, a new translation of the famous *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, which was published in the leaflet for the celebration of 500th anniversary of Martin Luther. He was highly acknowledged and lauded for providing the seminary students with his extensive *Dogmatics* compendium.⁴⁴¹

Plāte was buried at the Rīga Forest cemetery next to his tragically deceased son. The ceremony was performed by Dean Beimanis, and the burial place was blessed by the head of the LELC, Dr. J. Matulis. Following Plāte’s express wishes, there were no farewell speeches, except for some selected Scripture passages read by his fellow pastors. The grave was covered with many wreaths and an abundance of flowers. In the conclusion of the obituary there was a poetic verse written by N. Plāte himself. It said that a believer wanted to be released from the shadows of this world, leaving them behind and receiving something better, since the heart now wished to blossom like a lily and blissfully listen to the sacred sounds of God’s own harp.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴⁰ LELBA 323, Rucava’s report for 1983, protocol no. 5 (1/22/1984).

⁴⁴¹ BK 1984, 198–199.

⁴⁴² BK 1984, 198–199.

IV ACADEMIC THEOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES

4.1 DEFENSE OF THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF “SCIENTIFIC ATHEISM”

An important and continual struggle during this period in Latvia for all theologians, including Plāte, was to define the place and role of theology in the new socio-political and ideological context. In a society that officially advocated atheism, theology itself was called into question. How should its existence be justified? How could one make sense of the Christian faith in the hostile Soviet environment, where the Church was looked down on as an ideologically foreign body and her beliefs viewed as detrimental to the construction of Communism? With unfriendly forces allied against the Church, it was not an easy task for a theologian to navigate the way forward.

The difficulties of defending theology were obvious. By its very definition, Soviet society endorsed a secular, atheistic, and materialistic culture that was adverse to Christianity. The problem was not only its dialectical materialistic philosophy and social science, but also its totalitarian power. Communists wished to have control over every aspect of human life, and they intruded even into private spheres. It was the synthesis of political power and ideological authority that made the Soviet state an ideological dictatorship. The Soviet Union was a sort of monoculture without any division between political power and *weltanschaulich* authority. It was a modern, secular version of the old “theocratic” governance, where the State exercised a strict grip on all areas of life, art, education, music, science, and religion. In this kind of ideological dictatorship, citizens were deprived not only of their political rights, but also intellectual autonomy. No pluralism was tolerated. The monopoly of the ideology claimed the totality of life.⁴⁴³

Accordingly, Communism’s aim was to liberate citizens from outdated religious beliefs and to replace them with the “orthodoxy” of Marxism-Leninism. Thus, a battle against the religious view of life was an intrinsic necessity of Soviet ideology. Even if churches and religious communities declared themselves to be loyal to the Soviet system, their beliefs were consistently opposed by atheistic propaganda and

⁴⁴³ Bercken 1988, 269–271.

the practice of their religion hindered. Soviet ideology quite consciously strove for the removal of religion from the thoughts of the people. The elimination of religion was included in the long-term program of the party.⁴⁴⁴

Hence, atheism was a straightforward political program, realized with the aid of state politics. Atheism in the Soviet Union had also been given a theoretical extension in “scientific atheism,” the intellectual sublimation of a political necessity. At the same time, scientific atheism was more than just a philosophical negation of God, but also a universal rejection of all religions, meaning that it was a categorical and radical atheism. On these grounds, it did not recognize religion as a private matter: the individual’s belief in God, or a church that withdrew from society in pietism as a liturgical cult, did not fit in with the ideological monoculture. Total loyalty to the state ideology was demanded.⁴⁴⁵

Without reservation, Soviet atheism claimed to be the only true atheism – the true unbelief. It dismissed all other forms of atheism as inconsistent because they rejected religion only in theory, rather than combatting it with practical politics. (Other forms were viewed as unscientific because they were not based on the dialectical materialistic ontology.) As the true atheism, it was not a private opinion, a result of skepticism or existential doubts, but a well-organized and ideological system of unbelief, somewhat similar to a religious confession. This true atheism had to be propagated and defended with zeal, devotion, and commitment. It had to be a seriously and consistently realized policy. Thus, the extension of atheism in the USSR was no natural process of secularization as happened in the West, but a process of systematic atheization that was directed and orchestrated by the government as part of the creation of an ideological monoculture.⁴⁴⁶

The propagation of so-called scientific atheism took place on a massive scale and by all means available to a powerful modern government: radio, television, cinema, school, the office, factories, farms, and the army. Such propagation depicted atheism as the most advanced of worldviews, being scientifically verifiable and humane. Religious faith, in contrast, was at best primitive and unreasoning, at worst fanatical and dogmatic. To promote a contrary view in any public forum other than the registered religious sanctuaries was a violation of the Law and Constitution.⁴⁴⁷ Under such circumstances, the very legitimacy of the question of God was rejected. There was

⁴⁴⁴ Bercken 1988, 273.

⁴⁴⁵ Bercken 1988, 273–274.

⁴⁴⁶ Bercken 1988, 274, 278.

⁴⁴⁷ Beeson 1975, 48–49.

no sense in speaking about God, either philosophically or theologically. Instead of an agnostic attitude of not knowing, this atheism was an explicit doctrine of God's non-existence. The intensely categorical conviction of Soviet ideology was not only politically motivated, but scientifically argued. The orthodoxy of so-called "scientific atheism" was protected by the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Academy of Social Sciences under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.⁴⁴⁸

Unquestionably, it was a manifestly biased and principled position against every religion. The Soviet ideologists of atheism did not deny their partisanship. Nevertheless, this "party spirit" (*partiinosť*) was not considered an impediment to the objective scholarly study of religion. The Soviet concept of scholarship as such was entirely based on the party spirit, which took precedence over all scientific criteria and norms of objectivity. The methods of scientific atheism clearly were ideologically determined. Hence, such elements of a normal scholarly approach as self-critical distance, originality, internal differences of opinion, or a serious approach to the arguments of opponents were missing in scientific atheism. The most obvious and common method of scholarship – namely, discussions with opponents – was never used. In essence, the Soviet science of atheism was a monologue, being monolithic in its argumentation and immune to self-doubt and criticism. It worked with a selective representation of historical facts, political accusations, and moral disqualifications of believers.⁴⁴⁹ Within the context of this ideological monopoly, the power of anti-religious arguments not only came from their presumed "scientific" nature, but also from an environment where the totalitarian state aggressively dictated and controlled the application of science. So-called "scientific atheism" had an elevated status in Soviet society, as it was taught in schools and promoted in all spheres of public life.⁴⁵⁰

Thus, the Church was placed in an extremely difficult situation. Religion and science were strictly separated, and the Christian faith was labeled unscientific. Henceforth, the Church faced a difficult choice: attempt to fight a theological battle on scientific grounds or withdraw to the so-called "irrational and disconnected sphere." Now it became the task of theologians to answer perplexing questions about the place and role of theology. In light of unfavorable and even directly hostile conditions, this theological undertaking had become a big challenge.

⁴⁴⁸ Bercken 1988, 279–280.

⁴⁴⁹ Bercken 1988, 280.

⁴⁵⁰ Puisāns 2000, 341–345.

How did Plāte confront this challenge? He tackled these questions in the prolegomena of his *Dogmatics*.⁴⁵¹ In his basic approach, Plāte made an attempt to break away from the narrow and limited atheistic worldview, ignoring the “Soviet bubble” and providing a more comprehensive outlook. From the very outset, he made it explicit that he rejected the radical separation of science and religion. He claimed that the Christian faith grasped and explained reality with an all-inclusive conception. He insisted on a historical perspective, claiming that theology had always belonged to the general field of sciences. However, the current secular science had pursued an interpretation of reality that was too narrow. Plāte contended that by its very definition, Christianity was a far greater and more embracing phenomenon, transcending not only science but also religion. For just as the heavens were higher than the earth, so the paths of the Lord were higher than all human paths. Despite the fact that the “paths of God” could be comprehended only partially (*teologia viatorum*) by human beings, they were still made accessible for research and exploration. Even a limited knowledge of God was a remarkable gift, reaching beyond the empirical world. This concept of revelation, coming from above, surpassed every attempt of rationalization and remained paradoxical at all times.⁴⁵² When giving his theoretical reasoning in *Dogmatics*, Plāte was influenced by Karl Barth, whose transcendent God stood highly exalted above all. Within Barth’s theological framework, divine revelation was the highest possible classification and carried truth within itself, without any need of proof from the outside.⁴⁵³

According to Barth’s position, God and man stood against each other like two completely distinct worlds. God was an unknown God. Thus, Barth had rejected the rational conception of God, acquired in the way of theoretical cognition.⁴⁵⁴

Plāte quoted the Latvian theologian *Haralds Biezais*:

Barth didn’t intend to create and, indeed, hadn’t created a rationally justifiable theological system, but he wanted to confess his faith. However, this faith was able to connect with the rationally impossible. As theoretically indefensible as his theology might be, nonetheless it became appealing and attractive, realizing how difficult was the battle, as he defended his faith. It was a mighty rebellion of faith against the hegemony of reason.⁴⁵⁵

The practical implication of this approach was that Christianity did not need to be rationally disputed or proved in any particular way, but rather the Christian faith had to be confessed, thus “allowing it to accomplish its work on an individual

⁴⁵¹ Plāte 1981b.

⁴⁵² Plāte 1981b, 19.

⁴⁵³ Plāte 1981b, 32.

⁴⁵⁴ Plāte 1981b, 43.

⁴⁵⁵ Plāte 1981b, 45.

directly.⁴⁵⁶ Simultaneously, when the unique position of divine revelation was defined, Pläte nonetheless connected the field of theology to other disciplines, especially the humanities:

In the newer historical period (since the turn of the century), theological studies have been joined together with various philosophical subjects (history of ethics, introduction in philosophy, philosophy of religion and psychology of religion), as well as history of religion, and, recently, also sociology of religion. All of these disciplines have been closely associated with theology, and all of them are necessary, so that subsequently the historical uniqueness of Christianity can be realized more clearly and also its contemporary position justified more accurately.⁴⁵⁷

Pläte was well aware that a complete reconciliation between theology and contemporary thought was impossible. The Church had to uphold her dogmatic truths despite all contrary opinions. The existence of God had to be believed and confessed even in the Soviet atheistic environment. The faith which stood beyond all rationalization did not cause any problems for a believing individual, because total knowledge of God was beyond the theoretical capacity of human reason anyway. Thus, the existence of God could neither be proved nor denied. The so-called “proofs for God’s existence” could not function as some kind of rational guarantee, but rather as beneficial witnesses that originated from deeper reflection. Furthermore, the general logic and argumentation of these “proofs” always had to be grounded on a scriptural foundation. Pläte was convinced that the popular use of these arguments in pastoral work was helpful, leading godless people to ponder them. Cosmic order and consistency provided witness to the Great Ruler and Lawgiver. The purposefulness of nature pointed to the purpose of the Giver and providential Provider. For believers, all of these served as evidence in favor of God.⁴⁵⁸

In this way, Pläte critiqued the purely materialistic understanding of reality. He argued that the greatest part of the unseen and unfathomable world cannot be grasped by outward observation, investigation, and scientific method. Therefore, the limitations of the scientific worldview had to be remembered. Not everything can be revealed by human reason. The deepest mysteries, including life itself, remain unreachable and unexplainable by science.

Only beyond this frontier, the deepest and ultimate knowledge about the world and human race have to be sought. It is the main reason why humanity can never access these issues by means of observation and research, but only by faith.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁶ Pläte 1981b, 13.

⁴⁵⁷ Pläte 1981b, 11.

⁴⁵⁸ Pläte 1981b, 76–82.

⁴⁵⁹ Pläte 1981b, 94–95.

Faith, by its essence, was axiomatic. Simultaneously, the Christian faith was not blind, but acquired inner resonance in a human being.

Faith is not without its own foundations. When referring to faith, we do not mean to renounce the responsibility to provide foundations. But here again we have to say that those are not exactly foundations of scientific cognition. Rather, they are foundations of an inner security, which are given by the Spirit of God.⁴⁶⁰

For instance, discussing the creation story, Pläte granted that it was told within the framework of an ancient geocentric worldview. According to the general principle, the Word of God, at a given time, had spoken in terms of common and popular notions about the current world and its existence. The Bible did not use any universal scientific language that subsequently could be understood by every nation and cultural development. Such language, undoubtedly, did not exist. Most importantly, the Bible directed human attention beyond the visible and identifiable world to the invisible, unidentifiable Lord. That was the most indispensable purpose and objective of the Scriptures.

Isn't it true that, in a spiritual sense, our earth can be considered as the center of the whole universe for the sake of the magnificent works of God that have taken place on our planet?! It doesn't matter that it is depicted according to the worldview of an ancient civilization. Thus, the message which the Bible reveals about the creation of the world forever remains true, and it is not disturbed by any shifts in the field of scientific knowledge!⁴⁶¹

Following this line of argumentation, Pläte insisted on the divine priority of revealed knowledge, which opened the view onto God's all-encompassing panorama of the world. The Bible, being divinely inspired revelation, was presumed and believed to present the highest truth. The authority of science was contrasted against the authority of the Bible, which provided knowledge for the spiritual world. Hence, the Christian faith had its own deeper proofs and foundations beyond scientific inquiry, and these did not allow human reason to claim hegemony.⁴⁶²

In principle, the issue of harmonizing the realm of science and the realm of faith appeared too complex. Contemporary science and the Bible were like two different languages, and building a comprehensive dialogue between them seemed hardly possible.⁴⁶³ In practical terms, dialogue was made impossible also due to the organization of the Soviet society, which sought to deny any possibility of free exchange

⁴⁶⁰ Pläte 1981b, 95–96.

⁴⁶¹ Pläte 1981b, 97–98.

⁴⁶² Pläte 1981b, 45.

⁴⁶³ Pannenberg 1993, 4. The problem has been later described as the *two-language rule*. "According to the two-language theory, scientists and theologians work in separate domains of knowledge, speak separate languages, and, when true to their respective disciplines, avoid interfering in each other's work.. The two language theory has eliminated the competition."

of ideas, especially between religion and science. In fact, there was no location or forum where such a conversation could happen. The public voice of the LELC in the Latvian SSR was almost completely silenced. Christianity was publicly exposed, criticized, ridiculed, and treated with hostility. Theologians had barely any chance to utter their arguments, except perhaps inside their congregations or in some private settings. The Soviet ideology declared religion to be a harmful pseudo-knowledge that had to be eliminated. Therefore, the Church and believers were constantly put on the defensive and subjected to harsh pressure. Under such conditions, with atheists one-sidedly dictating the rules, mutual dialogue was quite unrealistic.

Thus, there persisted a deep gap between the Church and society, which grew only wider with the passage of time. The deliberate anti-religious policies of the Soviet state ensured that the differences between the theological worldview and the “scientific-atheistic” worldview became ever greater. As expressed by the Soviet Latvian propagandist Veronika Snippe, the advancement of contemporary science and the development of societal conditions had “accelerated the logical process where opportunities for the Church to interpret the reality in a mystified, twisted and illusionary manner were objectively diminished.”⁴⁶⁴ In the Communists’ view, it was an inevitable course of history by which religious delusions would eventually be replaced with scientific convictions. This process in the Soviet society had to be accelerated by a marginalization of the Church and suppression of religious views as much as possible.

4.1.1 Bridging the gap between the Church and society

Troubled by the growing gap and the increasing impact of atheism, as pastor and theologian Plāte tried to address these problems, engaging in a conscientious and systematic study of the anti-religious propaganda and the theoretical literature of Marxism-Leninism, searching some kind of credible response to it.⁴⁶⁵ As the major tides of unbelief closed in, submerging the masses of the Soviet Latvian people, plausible theological answers were required to help withstand the mounting offensive of atheism. In the overall context, Plāte’s activity can be seen as a rather isolated island. Plāte was fully aware that his teaching was destined to reach only a small minority of believers on the outskirts of Soviet society, yet he remained determined to build

⁴⁶⁴ Snippe 1977, 172.

⁴⁶⁵ See chapter 4.3.1 for a journal with Plāte’s reading lists.

theological bridges and establish apologetic counter-arguments. It was his way of exhibiting a quixotic Christian confidence in the underlying purpose of the Church while simultaneously trusting in the Lord, who would not let it perish under the hostile regime.

One of Pläte's objectives was to give a biblical interpretation of the current situation. In doing this, he did not employ Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, but rather Barth's dialectical approach. Characteristically, these were paradoxical statements, directly or indirectly dealing with prevailing conditions: statements of God's sovereign rule over powerful rulers, statements of his judgment to bring salvation, and statements of his love, even for unbelievers. The fact that Soviet people claimed to be atheists, secular and non-spiritual, did not mean in reality that they could escape their Creator. How they perceived themselves was one thing, but how God perceived them was something different. Thus, these people could not be accepted on the basis of their own claims. In spite of their denial, they were still God's creatures, living in his world, and they needed Christ and his salvation just like anyone else.⁴⁶⁶

Barth's dialectical approach taught Pläte that all social, national, political and ideological prejudices were only temporal and transient "masks." A believer did not have to fear or be intimidated. The surrounding society did not have to be treated with aversion as containing unholy and hopeless people. These people also belonged to God, and as such they should be prayed for and they could be converted.⁴⁶⁷ Even though atheism had taken so many people into its grip, it was a spiritually exhausting system of beliefs which gave people stones instead of bread,⁴⁶⁸ leaving them thirsty and hungry. For this reason, Pläte reasoned, secular people should not be despised or ignored, and even abusers should be treated with a friendly and generous attitude, and with kindness, attention, and patience.⁴⁶⁹

Nevertheless, reaching out and doing missionary work was an extremely complicated task under these circumstances. The greatest obstacle was not so much the intellectual challenge, but the aggressive political and ideological program of the Soviet government. People were taught by the totalitarian state to be passive and submissive, without showing any personal convictions or dissenting ideas. Due to the purposely instilled fear in people's minds, free and unrestrained communication

⁴⁶⁶ Pläte 1982/1983, 12. See also Barth & Hamel 1959, 57.

⁴⁶⁷ Pläte 1970a, 164.

⁴⁶⁸ Pläte 1974, 133.

⁴⁶⁹ Pläte 1974, 136.

was made extremely difficult. Soviet citizens were more or less shackled by the chains of conformity, constantly afraid to say something wrong or suspicious. They survived by learning the official discourse, internalizing the basic values of the Soviet system, and behaving accordingly. In public they spoke “Soviet-speak,” while they whispered their most secret thoughts in private. In a society where people were arrested for loose tongues, individuals survived by keeping quiet and to themselves. As a consequence, people learned to live double lives, concealing their private views, their religion, and modes of private existence that clashed with Soviet public norms.⁴⁷⁰

Conducting missionary work and evangelization among such people was a risky undertaking. Sometimes even initiating an conversation was difficult enough, not to mention a spiritual conversation. The Soviet officials made it quite clear that all spiritual quests and explorations could lead only to trouble, and for those following that road it could mean costly consequences. The dominant atheistic environment, enforced by propaganda, had by and large succeeded in discrediting the value of religious ideas and activities in the eyes of the broader society. As a result, few people were willing to get involved in open and sincere spiritual discussions. The mentality of Soviet people, marked by a lack of trust and ubiquitous suspicion, became a major obstacle for the Church, hindering missions. Courage was needed even to endorse an opinion that differed from the official one, but even more so when attempts were made to convert others to Christianity.

Without question, Plâte recognized all of the unfavorable conditions. He was concerned not only about the evasive and submissive secular mentality of the Soviet population, but even more about the passive, apathetic, self-absorbed mentality of the Church. In the face of external attacks and internal hardships, it was easier to withdraw from the antagonistic society, forget missions, and live a secluded existence in the mode of a subculture. Thus, Plâte repeatedly suggested in his texts to retain an active attitude toward life and to care for one’s neighbors (of course, without proposing any political involvement). To leave this secular world behind and to live a purely spiritual life was not an option. A believer had to remain in community, together with atheists, and uphold a continual conversation with unbelievers. Yet there was always a possibility of engaging in communication on a deeper level, revealing a spiritual dimension of life and introducing a Christian message.⁴⁷¹

The position of the Christian community in this context was described by Plâte

⁴⁷⁰ Figs 2007, xxx–xxxvii.

⁴⁷¹ Plâte, 1974, 136.

through a series of paradoxical statements that implied the idea of being in the world but not of the world (John 15:19): the Church was a pilgrim traveling through a strange land while having no abiding place under the present circumstances.⁴⁷² On the one hand, believers were born of a different “seed” and had a separate identity from worldly people,⁴⁷³ but on the other hand they were sent into the world and assigned to complete faithful service there. The Church was similar to the patriarch Abraham, free and independent from all surrounding forces and strange ideologies, while at the same time actively engaged in prayer and intercession for unbelievers.⁴⁷⁴ Believers in the current world were both independent and dependent, different and similar, separated from others by their distinct call and drawn closer to others by their Christian love. The believers of Christ had to be at the same time Soviet citizens and citizens of God’s Kingdom, and their spiritual identity was at all times more essential than the secular one.⁴⁷⁵

By means of such dialectical statements, Pläte tried to help make sense of the situation. He deemed the contemporary rise of atheism, the growing secularization, and its devastating effects on spiritual life as an inevitable judgment of God and his call to repentance. The Church had to be subjected to the atheistic environment in a process of creative destruction, purification, and fiery refining in order to build something new and better.⁴⁷⁶ By this method, the Church was meant to become more humble, mindful, and attentive to the Word of God, walking through the “desert” of hard sufferings under oppressive rule.⁴⁷⁷ Thus, it was absolutely necessary to get rid of the excessive baggage of former traditions and the prejudices of nominal Christianity in order to adjust to the contemporary world. He insisted that even the Soviet epoch and society could provide some new and constructive lessons for the Church, such as community spirit, solidarity, comradeship, and so forth.⁴⁷⁸

The situation of the Church was not hopeless. Even if it outwardly looked desperate and gloomy, the fate of the Church ultimately did not depend on socio-political conditions or temporal godless governments, but rather on God’s own plan, which was realized and unfolded over long periods of time. In his treatment of the minor prophets, Pläte described how the mills of God grind slowly but surely.⁴⁷⁹ The Lord

⁴⁷² Pläte 1970a, 130–131.

⁴⁷³ Pläte 1970a, 131–132.

⁴⁷⁴ Pläte 1970a, 164.

⁴⁷⁵ Pläte 1972a, 117.

⁴⁷⁶ Pläte 1974, 133.

⁴⁷⁷ Pläte 1971, 30.

⁴⁷⁸ Pläte, 1971, 136–137. See also Beeson 1975, 21.

⁴⁷⁹ Pläte 1971, 119–126.

had often dealt with his people by harsh means of humiliation and the discipline of pagan rulers in order to chastise and save them.⁴⁸⁰ God's own judgment started at the house of God.⁴⁸¹ Yet, the rod of discipline was not employed to hurt or destroy, but to reform.⁴⁸² These peculiar historical periods of the Church under God's judgment were especially hard to interpret, for they were perpetually veiled and concealed beneath never-ending transformations of the historical process. Only with the help of God's Word as a guiding light could the real intentions of the Lord be perceived. These intentions, revealed by means of his promises and prophecies, always provided constant assurance, even in the midst of hardships and persecutions. The Word of God at all times gave continual affirmation and confidence that everything was under God's control and all things worked together for the good of those who loved God.⁴⁸³

4.1.2 Expectations versus reality

Facing the stark realism of the Soviet situation, in which the Church was increasingly isolated and believers were pushed aside from public surroundings, Pläte still strove to speak in hopeful, confident, and reassuring terms, trying to overcome the growing gap. In his writings, he encouraged believers to have a strong sense of Christian identity, while also maintaining an active position in life and participating in society. Communication with the outside world of unbelievers was an important part of the Christian mission. The ideological obstacles had to be overcome and God's rule recognized in the temporary political settings. Hence, the Gospel still had to be preached, even to adamant atheists, for God's Word was the ultimate power by means of which people could be confronted with their Creator. In this way, Pläte described how believers had to react, establishing Christian ideals and expectations of firmness, character, fearlessness, and helping to go against the general tide.

To meet those expectations was extremely difficult, however. In the process of all the attacks, sufferings, and persecutions, the very identity and dignity of the Church was damaged. Past traumatic experiences left indelible marks, and the struggles resulted in a range of negative connotations in the mindset of believers. Too often, they were forced to think about personal safety first. The whole community lived in

⁴⁸⁰ Pläte 1971, 82.

⁴⁸¹ Pläte 1971, 135.

⁴⁸² Pläte 1971, 79.

⁴⁸³ Pläte 1971, 166–168.

a mode of survival, a feeling of being surrounded by a hostile world. Quite inevitably, believers drew demarcating lines and fostered an attitude of counter-culture over against the Soviet society. To cope with the threat, defense mechanisms were developed, and a peculiar type of defensive thinking and reacting was cultivated. To change this defensive mentality, which was so deeply embedded in the vulnerable faithful minority during the Soviet era, became very difficult.

In a similar manner, even Plāte himself – his character, attitudes, and service for the Church – was strongly influenced by this mentality. It is most clearly manifested in the sharp contrast between his ministry before and after the Soviet occupation. As discussed earlier, in the beginning of his pastoral service Plāte was an active and energetic young pastor who did not shy away from social engagement and human interaction. Yet, a different picture emerged after the occupation. The regime forced him to rethink his approach to the ministry. In the performance of his duties, Plāte unmistakably pulled back from public life in Soviet Latvia. The change was so radical that even antisocial traits appeared in Plāte's behavior, as he started to avoid any public events and outside contacts in general. Instead of trying to reach out to attract new members, all attention was now redirected to the survival of the existing community.

As his son Modris remembered, his father lived a socially detached and disengaged life. He spent most of his time in his study, reading, writing, and preparing for services. For the most part, he communicated only with his congregation members and was involved almost exclusively in church-related events. Going out in society and making social contacts did not feel comfortable. For example, Plāte never went to the local school to see his boys, nor did he attend parental gatherings, festive meetings, or graduations. The excuse was that he, being a pastor and an unwelcome person in the Soviet society, did not want to cause any extra problems for his sons. In fact, even going shopping caused him displeasure!⁴⁸⁴

Part of the problem, in his son's opinion, was his calm and solitary character; he typically preferred to be alone rather than in public. The other part, however, arose from his deep aversion to the repressive system that had maltreated him for such a long time. This trauma made him overly sensitive and even anxious, such that he developed a distaste and reluctance for going out, and he resolved to have as little business with the outside world as possible. This caused some problems for his family, especially his wife, since the majority of the practical responsibilities and all

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with Modris Plāte on December 12, 2014.

of the dealings with Soviet life fell on the shoulders of Modra Plāte alone.⁴⁸⁵

To be fair, Plāte's writings were comparatively honest about this contradictory situation. He admitted the problem of the defensive mentality that had overshadowed both himself and the Church overall. Yet, the passivity of Christians could not be accepted as a norm. The perpetual defensiveness had to be recognized as problematic and abnormal. For that reason, Plāte in his writings often urged having an active and engaged attitude toward life. To encourage such an outgoing attitude was one thing, but to accomplish it in reality was something much more complicated, as confirmed by Plāte's personal story. As a result, a rather significant disparity in this regard continually persisted between the Christian expectations and the degraded, humble reality of life.

Such apparent disconnectedness from the society could thus be identified as one of the features in Soviet church history. The outside pressure from the atheistic monoculture had transformed the Church into a rather remote, secluded, and ghetto-like community. The persistent atheistic attacks created a distinctly isolated mentality, both in the clergy and laity, which, instead of being missionary in spirit, had turned inside and tended to avoid any contact with the ideologically disagreeable society. The Church became restrained, overcautious, and timid. Since inner spiritual convictions had to be guarded against external attacks, the Church inevitably became more conservative and less open, cultivating an inward-looking mindset.

This shift also caused a major problem for theology. Just as the Church was pushed out of sight and marginalized, in the same way theological endeavors became peripheral. The environment of ubiquitous suspicion, rampant fear, and lack of trust made it hard for a pastor and theologian to speak one's mind and deliver the "word of truth." Pastors were constantly urged to remain on guard, always assuming that it was better to say too little than too much. As a consequence, the Christian message was limited not only by outward censure, but also by inner fear and caution.

Unmistakable taboos and restrictions led the Church to refrain from any critical scrutiny of the Soviet system. It was treacherous for pastors and theologians to denounce any specific idols of "homo sovieticus," since such statements could immediately be interpreted as "anti-soviet" actions and result in persecution. Even if such idols as scientism, the "canonical scriptures" of the Communist fathers Marx and Lenin, the obvious "cult" of its leaders, etc., were clearly repugnant to Christians, they could not be condemned or described accordingly. Denouncing

⁴⁸⁵ Interview with Modris Plāte on December 12, 2014.

these idols seemed inconceivable. Any comments on the socio-political situation appeared dangerous. As a consequence, theological efforts were choked by various objective and subjective restrictions, and thus the direct, critical, prophetic aspect of biblical preaching became largely silenced.

The disconnectedness of Lutheran preaching from the Soviet life was best formulated by the propagandist Snippe: “Since the Church was separated from the State, the LELC presently has turned to the proclamation of the ‘pure gospel.’”⁴⁸⁶ In its tone, the statement was deeply ironic. The implied message was that the Church was currently relegated to a place of socio-political and ideological irrelevance. The “pure Gospel” in the language of the propagandist signified that sermons had been cleansed and purified from all topicality for the contemporary people. The Christian Gospel had become insignificant, rapidly losing its influence over the culture and the lives of individuals. As a result, the faith had been downgraded to a deeply private and subjective human sphere with no further implications for the public sphere and the life of society. Unavoidably, the dualism of the inner life of faith and the outward actuality grew only deeper.

4.2 FROM MONOLOGUE TO DIALOGUE: A CONTROVERSY

As mentioned previously, one of the basic characteristics of the Soviet era was a lack of open discussions in which people could freely speak their mind. Although in a way the Church existed like a semi-alternative island within totalitarian surroundings, at the same time the Soviet authorities worked hard to make the believers, especially pastors, feel like isolated outsiders. By means of various constraints and restrictions, they were kept out of touch not only with the outside world and their brothers and sisters in foreign lands, but often even with those inside the LELC. All pastoral activities were allowed only within set limits: an exchange of pastors was strictly regulated, pastoral conferences were rare, official church meetings were tightly controlled, and there were almost no opportunities to do anything apart from the church routine.⁴⁸⁷

Inevitably, isolation became a painful problem. The Lutheran pastors were assigned to live, more or less, in their own “secluded bubbles.” In various ways, they

⁴⁸⁶ Snippe 1977, 171.

⁴⁸⁷ See Čuibe 1963; Talonen 1997; Masitis 1999, etc. According to Mankusa, ten pastors were allowed to travel abroad, but Pläte clearly did not belong to this group. See Ohff-Mankusa 2011.

were repeatedly warned by the authorities to refrain from causing needless troubles. In view of these restrictive circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine why there were so few activities (theological exchanges, disputations, controversies) to report from this era. The typical mindset invariably remained: staying out of trouble and making as little noise as possible. Consequently, even those pastors who continued their scholarly work and kept producing theological literature on the whole gave the impression of lonely voices echoing in the void. Instead of holding theological dialogues, generally only monologues were allowed.

Against the background of this dearth of communication, it is particularly interesting to draw attention to the few instances of theological action that can be identified and described. Positive changes and renewed activities in this regard can be detected after the shift of theological education in the LELC. A more open discussion started with the regular lectures at the Academic Theological Courses in the late 1960s. Even though it still remained a limited forum, consisting of participating students and teachers, it grew to have much more lively interaction. The improved situation even led to small-scale controversies, the first of which took place in 1969. This incident is important, because, as a recently appointed docent, Plāte was thereby given a chance to get involved and express his convictions.

As a matter of fact, this specific controversy was nothing new, but a continuation of the older theological battle concerning the place of historical-critical scholarship in pastoral education. Prolonged discussions had already taken place since the beginning of the century, when the Baltic Church provinces first encountered the theological influence of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). The controversy between the “new” and “old” approach, and later between the liberal Theological Faculty and the older conservative clergy of the LELC, continued throughout the period of Latvian independence until the occupation.⁴⁸⁸ More or less the same tension, although on a somewhat smaller scale, was present in the LELC during the Soviet era.

An altogether new feature of this controversy was added by the peculiar context of the atheistic environment. Surrounded by furious anti-religious attacks, the Lutheran Church experienced some extremely intense assaults on her biblical foundations. It was within this specific historic context of atheistic campaigns that the so-called liberal theology, once again, became suspected of being something like an “inside enemy.” Various theologians argued that liberal scholarship, with its heavy-handed scientific rigor, had done more harm than good for the Church.

⁴⁸⁸ Talonen 2016, 14–18; 34–36; 61–65.

It was accused of subverting the biblical foundations of the Church and thus, albeit unwillingly, supporting the atheistic cause. Nonetheless, many LELC pastors kept defending theology as an academic discipline that had to be retained within the framework of scholarly disciplines and thus validated from a wider scientific perspective. Since the majority of the LELC pastors had graduated from the Theological Faculty of the University of Latvia during the interwar period, they were mostly steeped in the liberal and academic spirit with its independent stance of resistance against any preconceived dogmatism.⁴⁸⁹

The initiator of this specific controversy was Pastor Roberts Jirgensons (b. 1907), who raised persistent objections against liberal influences in the Lutheran Church. Jirgensons was one of the first men to acquire his theological education in the post-war period.⁴⁹⁰ He had participated already in the first sessions of the Theological Courses, which ended on February 4, 1955.⁴⁹¹ In preparation for his examination, Jirgensons was assigned to read and gain a thorough knowledge of various books, including two works by well-known professors of the Theological Faculty: Immanuel Benzinger's *Israēļa literatūras vēsture* (Israel's Literary History) and Kārlis Kundziņš, Jr.'s *Kristus* (Christ). Already in 1955, Jirgensons wrote a letter to Archbishop Tūrs, expressing strong negative sentiments about these books, which had bewildered him with their theological position and terminology that stood in sharp contrast to his faith.⁴⁹²

Jirgensons was truly irritated that Benzinger did not call the Pentateuch the Word of God, but only "a historical work with a historical content." He called the approach defective, because for Benzinger the biblical creation was only *a fiction*, not the true story; the great flood was only *a folk tale* adopted from Babylon, not the demonstration of God's wrath and punishment against human sin; the anointment of David was only *a legend*, not the real event; the placement of Jonah in the belly of the fish was *an ancient myth*, not a true story affirmed by Christ, etc.⁴⁹³ Jirgensons wrote that Benzinger's book had caused him many upsetting and disheartening thoughts. He set Benzinger's views over against conservative Old Testament interpretation, asking: Which of these views was correct? Eventually, he inquired rhetorically:

What would happen if the entire Christian Church on earth had accepted Prof. Benzinger's stance and viewed the Old Testament through his eyes?⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁸⁹ Gills 1989, 212–213; Talonen 2016, 4–46.

⁴⁹⁰ Mesters 1996, 31.

⁴⁹¹ Mesters 1996, 33.

⁴⁹² LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Tūrs (10/25/1955). On Benzinger and Kundziņš, see Talonen 2016, 18–31.

⁴⁹³ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Tūrs (10/25/1955).

⁴⁹⁴ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Tūrs (10/25/1955).

In a similar manner, Jirgensons wrote about his experience of reading Kundziņš' book, *Kristus*, which had been assigned to him.⁴⁹⁵ He found the same types of objectionable statements there, for example, when Kundziņš wrote about the *legends* of Christmas, the *legends* of Jesus' childhood events in the Gospel of Mathew, and the *legends* about the feeding of the 4000 people. With regard to these books, Jirgensons came to an anguished conclusion that – precisely due to the influence of such theology – the Bible was losing its status of holiness:

Our own theological professors and doctors have transformed almost the entire Bible into a collection of folk tales and legends. ... They have sown the seeds of poisonous doubt that during the recent decades have richly grown, and today we are able to observe these fruits rather abundantly.⁴⁹⁶

By “fruits,” Jirgensons here meant empty churches. He was concerned not so much about the unbelief in the world, but the lack of belief within the Church. In his opinion, the education of future pastors with this kind of literature would only increase feelings of uncertainty at a time when the exhausted rural people desperately needed the profession of a more vigorous faith and conviction for the spiritual upbuilding of the congregations. In his conclusion, Jirgensons repeatedly affirmed his Lutheran identity and heartfelt concern for the Church.⁴⁹⁷

Left without a proper response and further theological discussion, fourteen years later Jirgensons wrote another letter, similar in content, to the newly reformed Courses, addressing Rector Priede and Archbishop Matulis. This time, his letter managed to incite considerable theological turmoil at the Courses.⁴⁹⁸ Jirgensons began by stating that many elderly pastors and the leaders of the LELC recognized Professor Benzinger as an impressive authority in matters of the Old Testament. Even so, the fact that Benzinger's book was used for pastoral education made Jirgensons seriously question this “approach to the science of theology,” suggesting that “some theological scholars lacked the necessary pious reverence before the Lord and the highest esteem for the Bible.”⁴⁹⁹

After repeating his previous objections against Benzinger's book, Jirgensons made a categorical appeal to resolve these deplorable issues and to do so conclusively. Even if it were true that such scientific theories were taught at the time of the Theological Faculty, according to Jirgensons it was “a symptomatic period” when the life of the Lutheran Church was full of various “whims of fashion.” At the present moment,

⁴⁹⁵ Kundziņš 1931.

⁴⁹⁶ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Tūrs (10/25/1955).

⁴⁹⁷ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Tūrs (10/25/1955).

⁴⁹⁸ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Matulis and Priede (8/15/1969)

⁴⁹⁹ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Matulis and Priede (8/15/1969).

however, he argued that this approach at the Courses would sound like an “oddly remarkable wonder.” Seeing empty churches and miserable conditions, theologians should have learned to regard Christianity with an inherently changed vision because the “wisdom” of folk tales and legends was no longer viable. It was necessary to defend biblical authority against the critical approach of Benzinger. For that, he urged the LELC to formulate a proper and unified perspective on the true purpose of theology.⁵⁰⁰

Unfortunately, Jirgensons did not offer any positive program, but only warned against the scientific spirit of doubt which so often had worked against the faith. He encouraged the Church to avoid the kind of science that contributed to the degradation of trust in the Bible. Under the current circumstances, when the so-called “scientific atheism” attempted to damage biblical authority,

it was not the task for theological science to deprive atheistic science of its bread and work ... assisting the Communists to profane and erode, to degrade and destroy, the authority of the Bible.⁵⁰¹

The Archbishop responded to Jirgensons and expressed gratitude for starting this discussion and sharing his ideas, concerns, and suggestions.⁵⁰² Apparently, theological discussions were a rarity in the LELC. Although Matulis himself held a different theological viewpoint, he undoubtedly welcomed a further exchange of opinions. The Archbishop began his response by excusing himself for being too busy to address the issue more thoroughly, yet in five essential points he offered his thoughts on the matter.

First of all, Matulis argued that this theological problem was not a devotional issue, but a scientific investigation to evaluate the OT according to the history of its literary tradition. The Archbishop did not have any doubt that Professor Benzinger regarded the OT rather highly. Moreover, Matulis argued that the scientific overview provided by Benzinger’s book did indeed have a rightful place in the curriculum of theological education. His scientific language and terminology were a necessary part of the subject matter and thus stood above simplistic criticism. Secondly, Matulis referred to the words of Christ admonishing people to search the Scriptures, and he recommended that every possibility be considered and every viewpoint compared in order that the necessary things could eventually be separated from the unnecessary. Thirdly, the Archbishop made an assertion that even conservative theologians,

⁵⁰⁰ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Matulis and Priede (8/15/1969).

⁵⁰¹ LELBA 482, Jirgensons to Matulis and Priede (8/15/1969).

⁵⁰² LELBA 482, Matulis to Jirgensons (1969).

who could not be blamed for any modernism and irreverence against the OT, were engaged in a serious investigation of literary history. Fourthly, he cautioned against any uncritical exposition and enthusiastic interpretation that “fixed up” the OT in an arbitrary manner, since he was convinced that this kind of misguided preaching also made churches increasingly empty. Fifthly, Matulis asserted as the greatest mistake the fact that

both the so-called atheistic advocates and also the proponents of faith shield themselves with the contemporary worldview, trying to explain the world with the knowledge at their disposal. The content of faith is not an apology for the current worldview of natural science (which is yet another reason for the empty churches). The true content of faith is the preaching of Christ’s message, the salvation of souls and the proclamation of God’s Kingdom. Theories of natural science come and go. ... There is no need to rack one’s brains over it, because the most important thing for us is Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever!⁵⁰³

In sum, Matulis’ basic intention was to defend an academic approach to theology. At the same time, he pointed out the relative nature of scientific knowledge, which was constantly transformed according to never-ending changes in worldviews. As a representative of the office, Matulis’ tone was calm and conciliatory. The Archbishop did not intend to take sides and resolve the issue, but he left an opening for further discussion. In view of the contentious opinions, he sought to broaden the interpretation, seeking to bring both sides closer and to heal the current divisions.

4.2.1 Pläte’s contribution to the controversy

As a recently appointed docent at the Courses, Pläte had also received a copy of Jirgensons’ letter and thus was well-informed about the controversy. As attested by his immediate reaction, the issue had struck a chord. Without hesitation, Pläte wrote a letter to Matulis to articulate his own views. In fact, he shared quite a few of Jirgensons’ concerns and did not intend to dismiss them as ungrounded anxieties. Therefore, Pläte felt compelled to explain his perspective and to describe his outlook on theological education and its future development.⁵⁰⁴

Admitting that he did not know the official attitude of the leadership, Pläte confessed that he was stimulated by Jirgensons’ devout attitude. Although he had heard some respectable clergymen using derogatory terms and calling this letter “a layman’s wisdom” raised against well-recognized theological authority, nonetheless

⁵⁰³ LELBA 482, Matulis to Jirgensons (1969).

⁵⁰⁴ LELBA 299, Pläte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

Plâte called it a voice from the midst of a faithful congregation that should not be ignored. Indeed, he noted, the current conditions of the church were truly alarming. The LELC was threatened not only by atheistic propaganda, but also “by the liberalism of our own theology.” As a pastor and theologian pondering the future of the Church, Plâte felt troubled by the biblical criticism he heard from pulpits and in seminary classrooms. According to his own observations, the main reason why so many people alienated themselves from the Church was serious skepticism about the Bible and the loss of its authority.⁵⁰⁵

This problem loomed large in Plâte’s mind. He believed it vital to speak up and reinforce this argument, even at the risk of sounding unscientific and unacademic. Plâte was convinced that this issue was more than just trivial bickering. The condition of the Church was critical, while the historical circumstances were symptomatic. The Church no longer enjoyed the former freedom of liberal democracy with a free marketplace of ideas and unrestrained preaching, when the faith could cope with historical relativity and the negation of certain biblical data. Now, in the Soviet public sphere, the LELC faced a different set of circumstances, with a totalitarian ideology targeting the biblical faith and employing a wide range of tools to discredit the Scriptures in the eyes of Soviet citizens. The Bible was being stripped of its unique status and dignity, and labeled a “figment of religious imagination.” Even many believers, overwhelmed by hostile atheism, suffered a frightening loss of confidence. On these grounds, this question could no longer be ignored, and it had to be asked and examined in all seriousness: is the Bible true and can it be trusted? Thus, Plâte thought it necessary to rethink the problem of biblical criticism. With the greatest urgency, he advised the Church to take the challenge to heart, making a conscious effort in defense of the Bible against all ideological attacks. Plâte fully agreed with Jirgensons on the subject, repeating his concerns that such highly critical literature (as mentioned in the letter) was clearly inept and unsuited for pastoral training at this time.⁵⁰⁶

With this in mind, Plâte stressed that certainty and confidence in the Bible were quite crucial. This consideration was particularly important in the matter of pastoral education. Students of theology were supposed to be inspired to rely on the Bible. The obligation of the Courses was to build their faith up, not to tear it down. The teachers had to be careful not to replicate an ill-suited heritage from the previous periods. Thus, when Plâte realized that the pastoral education of the LELC perpetuated

⁵⁰⁵ LELBA 299, Plâte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

⁵⁰⁶ LELBA 299, Plâte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

the same old, overly critical assessments of the Bible, he felt dismayed. He issued a stark warning against the mindset of his former professors, Kundziņš and Benzinger, and insisted that under the current circumstances their attitude toward the Bible, especially the OT, had to be fundamentally revised. Such “liberal theories,” in his view, could only confuse and disturb the biblical faith of young students, since such liberal criticism too closely resonated with the contemporary atheistic reading of the Scriptures. In this way, the LELC ran the risk of generating “anti-religious lecturers,”⁵⁰⁷ not the desired theological “successors to cultivate the field of God.” To make his critique even sharper, Plāte employed a dramatic metaphor:

And when the church lies in ruins – what kind of assistance can be expected from a theology which has worked like a leaf-cutter beetle to destroy the green tree!?⁵⁰⁸

Plāte urged a reassessment of the theological approach at the Courses. Since the vitality of the Church depended on theology, he argued that the LELC should appreciate every voice calling to strengthen her theological position and cautioned against all destructive trends: “In a day and age, when unbelief has been so successful and victorious,” the LELC had to avoid the spirit of skepticism so that “the younger generation which is called into God’s service would not lose the fire of faith.”⁵⁰⁹

In light of the previous comments, Plāte might appear as a blatant despiser of academic theology. It is more accurate to call his position undecided and ambiguous. Since he was preoccupied with the practical survival of the Church, Plāte wavered between the pros and cons of scholarly theology. He searched for some middle ground that could harmonize both scientific and ecclesiastical interests without strictly separating the two. He hoped to find a method of biblical scholarship that could “combine true piety with a genuine open-mindedness – seeing eyes and listening ears toward the present age, which would persevere with a pious heart and the biblical faith.”⁵¹⁰ With such an attitude, Plāte sought to introduce theologically conservative books in the place of liberal and highly critical literature. For educational purposes, he recommended such texts as Rabast’s *Die Genesis* and Möller’s

⁵⁰⁷ It is highly likely that Plāte referred here directly to Alfrēds Indriksons (1903–1996), a disillusioned Lutheran clergyman, who had exchanged theological criticism for atheistic criticism. In an autobiographical book at the end of his life he described how, slowly but surely, he advanced from his childhood faith to traditional, then to modernistic faith, as he acquired a more objective, scientific mind-set from liberal theology. Indriksons’ presumption was that he had walked the scientific road to the very end and reached its ultimate consequence by renouncing his faith and becoming an atheistic propagandist. In this way, the person of Indriksons became a suitable weapon for Communist propaganda. Of course, Indriksons’ case was widely known and discussed by the LELC pastors. See Indriksons 1985.

⁵⁰⁸ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (9/15/1969). See Bishop Kārlis Irbe’s (1861–1931) view on liberal theology in Talonen 2016; Lauciņš 2015.

⁵⁰⁹ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

⁵¹⁰ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

Schaden und Schuld der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft,⁵¹¹ which approached the biblical material according to its inspired and trustworthy unity. He suggested that it was often better to utilize older, more conservative literature, if necessary, for the simple reason that “the truth of the Holy Spirit would never get old.”⁵¹²

These concerns, as expressed to Matulis, help to identify the focus of Plâte’s theological pursuits. At this time, he was manifestly engaged with topics relating to the Scriptures – namely, their trustworthiness, authority, and faithful application in the Church. The nature of his concerns was apologetic and devoted to strengthening a biblical foundation. Pondering the sluggish condition of the Church, Plâte’s attention was primarily focused on the Lutheran principle of *sola Scriptura* as the traditional source from which the Church derived her strength and authority. For him, the prevailing reason for the weakness of the LELC was the debasement of the Bible, which occurred from both the inside and outside. Initially, it was the fierce historical-critical investigation inside the Church whereby theologians themselves had done the damage, failing to stand their ground against secular and scientific claims against the Bible. Subsequently, there also came outside attacks whereby Soviet ideological campaigns targeted the Bible with increased aggression. Plâte was most upset and agitated by the situation of atheistic propagandists widely exploiting the historical-critical research of theologians. In his eyes, this was the greatest threat to the theological scholarship. Moreover, Plâte placed both of these attacks on the same level, regarding them as comparable and finding a direct correlation between the criticism of liberal theologians and that of atheistic ideologues. As a matter of fact, Plâte saw no substantial difference between the two. If there were a difference, it was perhaps only a minor one. At least for Plâte’s intents and purposes, both caused the same damage to the teachings of the Bible.⁵¹³

4.2.2 Ideological use of biblical criticism

How did Plâte arrive at such a drastic conclusion? Presumably, it was not his own idea but an insight he acquired from atheistic propaganda books. Since Plâte was a highly prolific reader who had skimmed through a vast amount of anti-religious literature, he had observed that a major portion of the atheistic criticism was borrowed

⁵¹¹ Karlheinz Rabast, *Die Genesis*, Berlin: Evangelische Veranstaht, 1951; Wilhelm Möller, *Schaden und Schuld der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft*, Zwickau: Hermann, 1936. The information about the publishing date and place of these books has been taken from the internet.

⁵¹² LELBA 299, Plâte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

⁵¹³ LELBA 299, Plâte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

directly from the work of theologians. Without any difficulty, this propaganda literature invoked centuries of historical-critical scholarship, calling it true progress of scientific knowledge by means of which views on the Bible were transformed and its “immunity” eliminated. As the scriptural material was investigated through various methods of historic, linguistic, and literary research, being subjected to lower and higher criticism, the miraculous events of the Bible were demonstrated to be only natural and ordinary phenomena. As a consequence, the theological scholars themselves had made supernatural faith unnecessary and repudiated the Bible as a “holy” revelation, declaring it to be just a human creation – a collection of Jewish myths, legends, and folk tales.⁵¹⁴

In particular, Plāte referred to such atheistic propagandists as Jemeljan Jaroslavsky (1878–1943) and Alfrēds Bušenieks (1908–1986).⁵¹⁵ For instance, the old standard work of Jaroslavsky, *The Bible for Believers and Nonbelievers* (1937), depicted the Bible as essentially fictional material, containing only a few verifiable historical facts. According to Jaroslavsky, there was nothing supernatural in the Bible since it was only a by-product of societal evolution, a childhood stage in human evolutionary development, which had to be overcome as a superstition. From his perspective, to advocate blind trust in the Holy Bible indicated a mental backwardness that only continued to darken the human mind, prevented progress, and hindered the class struggle for a brighter Communist future. Consequently, Jaroslavsky advised recognizing and following as inevitable the historical necessity through which a new classless society would abolish and wipe out all deities from heaven, meanwhile initiating a brand new existence governed by a progressive and scientific worldview.⁵¹⁶

For atheistic propaganda, the word “scientific” (as defined in Marxist-Leninist terms) became a sort of catchword. The word was used to impress on people an unmistakable confidence that everything would now be scientifically intelligible. All human life, being determined by social and materialistic causes, could be explained. Generally speaking, the so-called “scientific atheism” proclaimed the brave new world of things to come. It was a thrilling, optimistic narrative of the splendid Communist future promised to the Soviet people. This victorious road was paved by relentless advancements of science and discovery. This progress could no longer be stopped. There was no looking back. And science was not allowed to pause before the

⁵¹⁴ Косидовский 1963, 455.

⁵¹⁵ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (9/15/1969).

⁵¹⁶ Jaroslavsky in Latvian translation: Jaroslavskis Bibeles ticīgajiem un neticīgajiem. Trans. J. Mednis, Rīga, 1960.

“sanctity” of any religion. It was a highly ambitious quest that ventured to explore the highest heavens and the most secret corners of the human soul. On this road of unstoppable progress, religion was considered a reactionary force and a stumbling block. The Bible was denounced as completely unscientific from beginning to end. The Church was accused of resisting not only isolated scientific truths (which were contrary to the Bible), but also the very principles of scientific thinking and research methods.⁵¹⁷

Against such a framework, the fate of academic theology and theologians seemed to be utterly doomed, since any defense of the “unscientific” Bible was destined to fail. This kind of message of “scientific atheism” was targeted at theologians. One of the well-known Latvian propagandists, Alfrēds Indriksons (1903–1996), formerly a Lutheran pastor himself, insisted that academic theologians, sooner or later, were bound to fall into an ugly and ominous trap because they had to face an impossible dilemma. On the one hand, these theologians desperately tried to adhere to science, since they did not want to resemble unenlightened defenders of obscurantism. On the other hand, they were unwilling to proceed with a full acceptance of science because an unlimited use of scientific methods could wind up destroying their Christian and biblical faith. Consequently, Indriksons explicitly stated that a comprehensive application of the historical-critical method, if practiced by theologians honestly and consistently, would bring them to a realization that the Bible was not the holy book declared by the Church, but merely the literary product of a certain historical era.⁵¹⁸

A similar prediction about the collapse of theology was made by another expert of atheistic propaganda, Alfrēds Bušenieks, an author of various books on the subject.⁵¹⁹ Analyzing the situation of Latvian Lutheranism, he identified a deep and far-reaching crisis. In the Lutheran Church, Bušenieks observed a battle between two opposite theological streams, a conflict between theological liberals and fundamentalists, progressives and reactionaries. He wrote that the ancient dogmas of the Bible were confessed only by the so-called “fundamentalists,” who still believed in the biblical legends and teachings as confessed in the classical Augustinian-Lutheran doctrine.⁵²⁰ The so-called liberal theology had become more flexible with regard to dogmas such as original sin, etc. Bušenieks referred to various Latvian

⁵¹⁷ Indriksons 1985, 12–15; 43; 157–159.

⁵¹⁸ Indriksons 1985, 11–15; 41–43; 156–160.

⁵¹⁹ See more on this in chapter 4.3.1 with a journal with Plāte’s reading lists.

⁵²⁰ Bušenieks 1976, 28. See Altnurme 2001.

liberal theologians, such as Jānis Sanders, Voldemārs Maldonis, and Alfrēds Indriķsons, who had already blatantly questioned many biblical statements, in this way contradicting the Bible and reinterpreting its texts symbolically.⁵²¹ Nevertheless, Bušenieks argued, neither of the two theological approaches were able to rescue the biblical foundations:

Believers are simply habitual and accustomed to the words of the creed, thinking that their substance is deep, without really questioning them. Nonetheless, our life doesn't stand still – it advances, makes progress, wakes up believers from religious sleep, and many of them begin to feel uncertain about dogmas and ideological foundations of their faith. In the minds of many believers, dogmas are no longer fixed so firmly and profoundly, as doubts and critical attitudes against these teachings start to crumble their foundations. Nowadays, religion is subjected to a crisis that calls for attempts at religious rescue and renewal. Various modern pseudo-religious theories of “rational,” “cosmic,” “human,” and even “socialist” religion are being invented. Contemporary theologians don't deny that a different approach to believers is needed today. Religious dogmas must be reinterpreted to match the psychological perception of modern people and their socio-economic conditions.⁵²²

However, Bušenieks judged all such attempts as useless and futile because the Christian faith was beyond rescue. At the end of the day, the obsolete religious worldviews were destined to be eliminated through scientific discovery and historical-critical scholarship, and theologians and all believers would be compelled to give up their faith and follow the true scientific path.⁵²³

This type of anti-religious literature became an essential element in the education of the “new Soviet man.” It was distributed broadly as part of a comprehensive atheistic indoctrination. Disguised under the name of true science and enjoying the full support of the totalitarian government, “scientific atheism” was spread everywhere; it was taught in schools, workplaces and community centers, distributed by the media, and propagandized in books. Devised to reach the whole population, the Communist propaganda machine in many ways became an unavoidable reality for every Soviet citizen, even Christians. It was almost impossible to remain unscathed by propaganda that sought to govern all sectors of society. Therefore, it was not at all surprising that, given all the extremely ideologized and absurd propositions of “scientific atheism,” nearly every citizen was influenced by these efforts in one way or another. There was virtually no escape from the ideological power and impact of the totalitarian dictatorship. In many ways, even theologians were forced to embrace

⁵²¹ Bušenieks 1976, 35.

⁵²² Bušenieks 1976, 37.

⁵²³ Bušenieks 1976, 37–39.

the Soviet reality. No matter how senseless, absurd, or preposterous the environment appeared to them, it was about the only possible frame of reference in which to exist.⁵²⁴

4.2.3 Internal reactions to external criticism

How were theologians supposed to defend the faith against the perpetual flood of atheistic criticism at a time when the Church lacked the ability to speak in the public sphere? In a situation where, figuratively speaking, the hands of theologians were essentially tied, what could be a reasonable response to these assaults? As could be expected, having been overpowered by the Communist monopoly, the LELC was allowed to give just a limited, low-key response. A few quixotic attempts to resist the propaganda attacks were made in the beginning by some pastors, but quite quickly they realized how futile and counterproductive these efforts were.⁵²⁵

In the absence of public discussion, the only option was internal theological debate. Occasional conversations persisted solely within the context of the Church. For safety reasons, however, these often had to remain only oral and unrecorded, shared among the most trusted of friends. Considering the written sources on hand, it is almost impossible to detect or reconstruct any immediate theological reaction to the attacks of scientific atheism. Thus, it still remains a somewhat vague topic. The LELC was basically denied any right to defend or respond to these attacks, and she was forced to lay low and suffer them in submission. Without a doubt, when the Church had no choice but to avoid direct confrontation, it was an unfair, one-sided, and discriminatory situation. Hence, whenever the theologians wanted to boost the confidence of believers and mitigate some of the influence of the propaganda, they could not state their opposition directly but had to find roundabout ways to do so. One of the most typical ways was to employ an indirect and veiled manner of teaching. Sometimes clergymen resorted to metaphoric communication: a type of Aesop's language with multiple meanings used to convey the intended message. A more careful investigation of this language would be a highly fascinating subject for a future study.

Presently, only a few general remarks and observations can be made regarding the theological reaction of the LELC to the Soviet circumstances. Initially, every theologian had to ask a basic question: was the Communist challenge radical and

⁵²⁴ See Vahre 2011, 146–182.

⁵²⁵ See chapter 2.1.3 on anti-religious propaganda in the press.

serious enough to revise one's former theological approach, or was it satisfactory to survive through the Soviet regime? The answer was quite ambiguous. The majority of the Lutheran theologians seemed to prefer the tactic of passivity, for the most part choosing to remain uninvolved with the new Soviet reality. It was a submissive side-by-side existence without significant theological integration. As seen from the writings of theologians at this time, their scholarly interests seemed to be generally far removed from the topical and existential issues of the day. On the one hand, that could be explained by their unwillingness to play with the "fire" of the dominant Soviet realities, as it certainly felt safer to continue with theological truths learned before the Soviet era.⁵²⁶ On the other hand, many of them could argue that self-evident foolishness did not need an extensive theological response, since confronting such an absurd ideology with its nonsensical ideas of Communism and scientific atheism would only appear unwise and fruitless, according to the old-time saying, "Don't waste your breath on fools, for they will despise the wisest advice" (Proverbs 23:9). Thus, the lack of response was a de facto response, by which theologians deemed the whole thing a bizarre nightmare, which would hopefully one day pass.

Not everyone agreed with such detachment, however. Some theologians, such as Plāte and a few others, insisted that this attitude of dismissal was not the best option. Something had to be said and done in defense of the Church against the phenomena of atheistic propaganda and ideologized surroundings. These realities were urgent enough to deserve theological attention. Since the Bible and Christianity had come under attack, resistance was necessary. These clergymen believed that in spite of the highly antagonistic external circumstances, the Church and theologians were obligated to make an effort and take up the fight, albeit a desperate one. Even if straightforward debate was not allowed, the task of the theologian was to break out from one's own narrow personal piety and to remain in touch with the real-life problems of the believers living under the Soviet ideology.

These perspectives could best be illustrated by another controversy that occurred in 1980. It was connected with the dissertation of Pastor Edgars Jundzis (1907–1986), titled *Jēzus dzīve uz sinoptiskās un johaneiskās tradīcijas pamata* (The Life of Jesus Based on the Foundation of the Synoptic and Johannine Traditions). The passionate process of its disputation revealed the diverging mindsets of the Latvian clergymen.⁵²⁷ During the debate, it became increasingly evident that there were markedly different attitudes concerning the role of academic theology. Some claimed complete

⁵²⁶ See chapter 4.3.2 on literary production and compendia.

⁵²⁷ Rubenis 1991, 12–13.

academic freedom, while others insisted on full and faithful loyalty to the confessional views of the LELC.⁵²⁸ It was mostly because of these respective differences that conclusions about the value and meaning of Jundzis' dissertation were so diverse and contradictory.

Jundzis himself was an undeniably liberal theologian, who continued to work with the same scholarly methods he mastered at the Theological Faculty during the interwar period. Jundzis' application of the historical-critical method was rather radical, as he pressed on with his search for the "historical Jesus," ostensibly trying to come closer to the historical truth about the life and teachings of Jesus. In his research, Jundzis explored his own original thesis that the public ministry of Jesus had taken place in two distinct stages. During the first stage, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and an ardent defender of the Law; during the second, he was the bearer of a new revelation of God and a fervent opponent of the Law.⁵²⁹ In its style and arrangement, the work of Jundzis resembled an enigmatic and fascinating "detective story." He highlighted Jesus as a freethinker and revolutionary zealot who traveled outside Judea, was influenced by pagan ideas, and established a new religion.⁵³⁰ Moreover, Jundzis argued that Jesus was not crucified at the age of 33, but being Bar-Aba, a "son of the Father," he was spared crucifixion.⁵³¹

Such an interpretation of Jesus' life was clearly a bold and uncompromising statement of academic freedom. Pastor Jundzis unmistakably represented the camp that the current atheistic environment should not prevent scientific theology's continued development, as it made use of historical-critical methodology. The atheistic assaults on the Bible supposedly did not disturb him. It also became quite evident that Jundzis was not alone in his drive for academic freedom. He was supported by other like-minded theologians, such as Alfons Vecmanis, Roberts Pureniņš, and Jānis Liepiņš, who greeted his dissertation with sincere approval, calling him a "seeker" and "original thinker."⁵³² Presumably, these theologians had shared Jundzis' position that scientific theology should proceed, regardless of the antagonistic atheistic context and ideological attacks against the Bible.

At the same time, the discussions about Jundzis' dissertation revealed that his supporters were in the minority. The majority displayed a more critical stance and expressed doubts against such unrestrained scientific freedom. Most of their

⁵²⁸ BK 1982, 119. There was a manifest tension between staying academic and confessional.

⁵²⁹ Jundzis 2014, 267–270.

⁵³⁰ BK 1987, 121.

⁵³¹ Jundzis 2014, 147–159.

⁵³² Jundzis 2014, 235.

objections did not relate to the academic quality of Jundzis' dissertation, but were aimed at its possible negative effects on the Church and her doctrine. A couple of the pastors even declared that Jundzis had gone astray and come dangerously close to heresy because he abandoned the framework of biblical history. Pastor Roberts Feldmanis, for example, claimed that due to Jundzis' unorthodox explorations, this dissertation "did not deserve the name of a fully scientific work."⁵³³ Similarly, Pastor Haralds Kalniņš chose to distance himself from such science.⁵³⁴ Both these men most likely opposed its radical treatment because of their own conservative position and positive views toward biblical inspiration. It should also be noted that some liberal theologians agreed and expressed their anxieties that such indiscriminate scholarship could injure the Church at the present time.

One only needs to examine the language and manner in which these remarks against Jundzis' dissertation were phrased and articulated to see their concerns. For example, Jānis Bērziņš stated, "The author has treated the facts of the Gospel and the image of Jesus without piety. The figure of Jesus has been discarded..." Roberts Feldmanis commented, "Doesn't this dissertation manifest the originality of one day's prophet?" Haralds Kalniņš said, "In the absence of historical foundation [in this research], there remains only a 'hypothetical foundation' which cannot support the faith." Finally, Roberts Akmentiņš asked, "Even if it manifests some search for truth, still [the question has to be asked] – isn't it an enormous disfavor (*lāča pakalpojums*) to our Church? Isn't it possible that the Church will become injured by that?"⁵³⁵ With statements like these, it becomes increasingly clear that the thought processes of these theologians were not guided, first and foremost, by purely scientific principles, but primarily determined by the well-being of the LELC.

In a similar spirit, Archbishop Matulis explained his doubts about Jundzis' interpretations. From his perspective, most problematic was the fact that by this research "the person of Jesus has been losing his numinous significance, which certainly was very essential."⁵³⁶ When Matulis, the chairman of the disputation, delivered the final statement granting Jundzis a doctoral degree, all of the essential criticisms against the work were maintained. In the concluding remarks, the basic premise of Jundzis'

⁵³³ See on Feldmanis also Ilmārs Rubenis 2007.

⁵³⁴ Jundzis 2014, 235. LELC Pastor Haralds Kalniņš was also the organizer and leader of the German Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union. He did significant work assisting and networking German congregations in a very complicated situation. Many were not even registered, and they lacked organization, pastors, and prayer houses. Several pastors from Latvia visited these congregations and took care of the German congregations. In June of 1976, German congregations in Russia became officially affiliated to the Latvian Church, which could represent their interests in LWF. See Mankusa 2006b.

⁵³⁵ Jundzis 2014, 234–236.

⁵³⁶ Jundzis 2014, 236.

dissertation about the two periods was declared to be scientifically problematic and theoretically dubious. But the most important objection against this work was its contradiction and disagreement with the confessional teachings of the Lutheran Church. Furthermore, these ideas were declared to be irrelevant and immaterial for the education of young theologians.⁵³⁷ From this review, it could plainly be seen that the dissertation was measured more by the standards of LELC doctrine than those of the academic, scientific tradition.

As described in the words of well-known Latvian scholar Haralds Biezais, in various ways Jundzis' dissertation provides interesting documentation of the limited scientific possibilities of a certain historic era.⁵³⁸ At the same time, it ought to be added that this controversy also uncovered the complicated dilemma of scholarly theology. Theological work was restricted both in thought and in action. Being excluded from a wider academic environment and pressured by pseudo-scientific ideology, it was presented within a largely distorted frame of reference. Furthermore, the whole situation of the LELC, being in survival mode, and the scholarly-trained pastors being overburdened by their church work (typically serving more than one congregation) were decidedly unfavorable for the discipline. The very idea of having free and unrestrained academic theologians was something inconceivable. Since the life of the Church was dominated by routine concerns, the mentality of the theologians inevitably turned more pragmatic, as they were preoccupied with practical issues. The top priority for clergymen was to do whatever it took to keep the Church going. They adopted a defensive mindset, which was committed to remaining on guard and vigilant vis-à-vis the mission of the Church. The down-to-earth realities discernibly overshadowed all scholarly objectives. This implied that even during such a theoretical discussion as an academic disputation, various apologetical implications were constantly kept in mind. The question of consequential significance was always: How would our theological message resonate in the context of the atheistic environment?

Against this background, it is easier to understand why Jundzis' dissertation triggered such a nervous and emotional reaction among LELC theologians. Surrounded by atheistic biblical criticism and external attacks, they grew intolerant and unwilling to support the same dynamics internally. Many felt compelled to rebuke Jundzis for doing a disservice to the Church. In their eyes, his research resembled the radical distortion of biblical history featured by atheistic propaganda.

⁵³⁷ Jundzis 2014, 236.

⁵³⁸ Jundzis 2014, 238.

That specific background formed a highly antagonistic external framework for the internal theological discussions, with the message of scientific atheism being a proverbial “elephant in the room.” To be sure, this “elephant” could not be addressed explicitly, but neither could it be ignored or discounted. This framework shaped the theological sensibilities of LELC pastors. Therefore, it was difficult for many of them to welcome Jundzis’ ideas with a detached and relaxed academic distance, and they chose to pronounce them as risky and dangerous. It is evident that the overwhelming totalitarian context made them prioritize the mission of the Church. Pressed by the choice between *ecclesia* and *academia*, church interests and scientific interests, most of them chose to be fideists rather than scientists.

Although Docent Plāte was not present at this specific event due to a severe illness, it could be conjectured that he would have had a negative reaction to Jundzis’ dissertation. It could be argued that Plāte’s critique of this work would have been comparable to that of Docent Jānis Bērziņš, Jundzis’ main opponent. On the issue of biblical criticism, the perspective of both Bērziņš and Plāte was demonstrably similar. Both of them, following the theological influence of Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), had already previously come forth with some critical judgments against liberal theology, saying that the age of criticism of the Bible had exhausted itself without providing inspiring and satisfying answers. Similar to Barth, both of them agreed that a purely historical-critical analysis of the biblical text did not allow a grasp of the true subject matter, “the strange new world of the Bible.” True biblical content could emerge only from seeing through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible. When Bērziņš criticized Jundzis’ dissertation, he characterized it as typical “flowers” of decadent thinking and religious primitivism in contemporary Latvian Lutheran theology. He expressed discontent with the fact that Jundzis’ work was endorsed and led to the degree of doctor, indicating that it did not reflect the historical truth of Jesus’ person and life. Docent Bērziņš called it a “miserable” dissertation, “an unscientific, fantastic, heretical jumble of ideas.”⁵³⁹ From his viewpoint, such an extreme theological position could not possibly be reconciled with an orderly, serious, well-based scientific and theological perspective. Correspondingly, Bērziņš had proposed a search for some reasonable way out of this theological dead-end, which undeniably caused damage to the earnestness and authority of Christianity.⁵⁴⁰

In the same way, it could be argued that Bērziņš and Plāte also shared a similar opinion regarding the current crisis of the LELC. Both men placed the responsibility

⁵³⁹ BK 1987, 121–122.

⁵⁴⁰ BK 1987, 121–122.

for her deplorable conditions not so much on the outward historical circumstances as on the inner deficiencies of liberal Christianity. Thus, the weakness of the Church was caused by misguided theology. Both clergymen criticized theological liberalism and its focus on rationalistic science for playing too exaggerated of a role in the life of the LELC. Instead of serving the Church and theology, critical scholarship had been self-defeating, supplying the ammunition for atheistic ideologues in the battle against Christianity. By radical scrutiny of the Bible, which dissected and deconstructed it, the liberal critics had undercut confidence in the Scriptures, depleted the strength of the Church, and made it vulnerable.⁵⁴¹

4.2.4 Plāte's approach to the Bible

In our congregations we have heard different voices of biblical criticism. Nevertheless, in the meantime we intend to remain faithful, in order to continue clinging to the Word of God, and, for that reason, we should provide an answer to the question: In what way is the Bible the Word of God?⁵⁴²

Over the years, the challenge of biblical criticism remained an abiding concern for Plāte. He constantly repeated that in order to hope for a rejuvenation and revitalization of the Church, the Bible had to be trusted. It was an urgent and pressing task of theology to reinforce the reliability of the Bible and to strengthen believers' conviction at this time when the LELC was facing a continued crisis and relentless ideological attacks. Similar thoughts were reiterated by Plāte in his various writings. Initially, these were mostly sporadic negative comments and sentiments against liberalism without offering any positive alternative. However, near the end of Plāte's life, in 1981, he completed his compendium *Dogmatics*,⁵⁴³ in which he provided a more comprehensive look at this question. Considering the significance of this problem for Plāte, it is important to examine his views on the Bible more closely.

"In what way is the Bible God's Word?" Plāte treated this topic as more than merely a theoretical issue. Due to the protracted crisis, finding a way back to the authoritative Word was a matter of survival and vitality for the LELC. Healing and restoring the injured authority of the Bible was an apologetic – even existential – obligation. At the same time, it was not possible to accomplish such a restoration by returning to the old ways of purely historical-critical scholarship. It had to be done through a devoted and faithful use of the Bible, confidently holding that the

⁵⁴¹ Plāte 1973, 125. Bērziņš 1979, 113.

⁵⁴² Plāte 1981a, 51.

⁵⁴³ See also chapter 4.3.11 on dogmatics, parts I and II (1981).

Scriptures asserted power as the trustworthy witness of divine revelation. To achieve this goal, Plāte urged study of Barth, who, in his view, was undeniably more successful in maintaining the inspiration and authority of the Bible than any other contemporary theologian.⁵⁴⁴

Barth's influence among the Latvian theologians in the interwar era, generally speaking, had been rather insignificant.⁵⁴⁵ There was also no evidence that Plāte had been swayed in the direction of Barth's theology during his studies. Nevertheless, in his writings at the end of his life, he praised Barth highly and borrowed from him extensively, especially on the issue of biblical authority. In all likelihood, it was primarily Barth's critique of liberalism and so-called Christian civilization that made the biggest impression on Plāte. Since the problems of nominal spirituality, rapid secularization, and widespread crisis had been a high priority for Plāte from earlier on,⁵⁴⁶ he surely felt drawn to Barth's line of reasoning: namely, the argument that the worn-out cultural accommodation pursued by liberal theologians was no longer credible. Furthermore, the new historical situation, with its atheistic and secularizing turn, was something else to consider. As the Church became increasingly estranged and marginalized, and was forced to break all public and cultural associations, the gap between the Church and society grew steadily wider. Plāte contended that the new environment indubitably required a fresh perspective by means of which the paradox of the believer's life in secular culture could be understood. In his view, every theologian was strongly compelled to learn from the current conditions, in order to realize that the Lord did not send his revelation directly and immediately through the contemporary social order, but delivered it in a hidden and paradoxical way, which often appeared detrimental.⁵⁴⁷

It is fairly understandable why Barth's ideas were appealing to Plāte. The so-called "theology of crisis" definitely seemed a more realistic interpretation of the status quo. It was only reasonable that the Church, experiencing the Soviet environment, was pushed to turn away from the liberal emphasis on the immanence of God and immediacy of revelation in order to stress the crisis of faith and absurdity of belief.⁵⁴⁸ It made sense to emphasize that biblical revelation manifested in a strange and paradoxical way, especially during a period when Scripture could no longer be

⁵⁴⁴ Plāte 1981, 47.

⁵⁴⁵ Gills 1989, 212–216. Theologian Kārlis Bilzēns was an exception, being influenced Karl Barth (Bilzēns 1940), and somewhat also Ādams Mačulāns (Talonen 2016, 103–104).

⁵⁴⁶ See Plāte's articles in SvR 33, 8/11/1940, 264, and BZ 52, 12/19/1943, 205–206.

⁵⁴⁷ Plāte 1981a, 20; 41–51.

⁵⁴⁸ See also Livingston 1971, 324.

smoothly brought into harmony with the historical process or scientific knowledge. Hence, revelation had to come from above, breaking into history and human affairs as a “crisis.” Such a crisis was eschatological in nature, and it occurred whenever the living Word of God was proclaimed and brought about a transformation in human affairs.⁵⁴⁹

Especially engaging to Pläte was Barth’s “theology of the Word,” because it had been developed from the needs of practical church life and pastoral preaching. “The task of theology is the Word of God.” “The Word of God stands in the Bible.” “*Dominus dixit.*”⁵⁵⁰ Pläte quoted those statements from Barth to demonstrate that the Bible spoke with definitive, divine authority, being the source and starting point of the entirety of Christian theology. In this way, Pläte confessed that the Bible was not only a witness to human religiosity, but also a witness to God himself speaking. Its divine authority was derived from the statement that Scripture was the most conclusive witness to and documentation of the fullness of Christ’s revelation in the Old and New Testaments. As Pläte observed, “God spoke only once, which happened in Jesus Christ” and the Bible has given the crucial testimony about it.⁵⁵¹

To be sure, Pläte admitted that there were no rational arguments, definitive statements, or outward proofs to validate the accuracy of the Bible. Instead, confidence in the truth of Scripture originated through individual conversion by means of which God provided inner testimony and self-authentication of his revelation. Pläte asserted that the Bible has always managed to make a distinct impression on a perceptive reader. Based on this specific impression and influence of the Scriptures, which had been exerted on a multiplicity of people over the centuries of Christian history, Pläte established an argument for divine inspiration.⁵⁵²

At the same time, it became evident that with regard to his doctrine of the Bible, Pläte did not remain loyal to the older confessional doctrine of the Lutheran Church that taught the ever-efficient Word of God and inseparable unity between the Word and the Spirit. Instead, he accepted Barth’s ideas, which distinguished between the words of the Bible and the Words of God, thus denying any direct inspiration or inherent power in the words themselves. “The words of Scripture as such are unable to give any knowledge of God, for they have to be inspired by the Spirit.”⁵⁵³ Similar to Barth, Pläte spoke about *a possibility* of revelation that might take place through

⁵⁴⁹ Pläte 1981a, 20–21; 29.

⁵⁵⁰ Pläte 1981a, 41; 47.

⁵⁵¹ Pläte 1981a, 42.

⁵⁵² Pläte 1981a, 51–53.

⁵⁵³ Pläte 1981a, 30.

the words of Scripture in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible had *to become* the Word of God. Accordingly, Scripture became like “a focus through which the beams of God’s Word could come through.”⁵⁵⁴ The same threefold form of the Word was borrowed from Barth: the *revealed*, *written*, and *preached* Word of God. All three were equally important and interdependent. By virtue of this approach, Pläte claimed that Barth had been successful in opening up the content of the biblical text and overcoming the distance between a biblical author and an exegete. Through this process, the divine message could become a present, relevant experience, since the Word of God was being lifted out of its historical setting and actualized in the present moment.⁵⁵⁵

With regard to inspiration, Pläte tried to strike a balance between the positions of the older orthodoxy and historical criticism. On the one hand, he did not favor the idea of verbal inspiration, calling it an “absolutization” of the Bible. On the other hand, he did not fully agree with the purely historical-critical approach either, because it ignored inspiration and treated the Bible like any other form of literature. Thus, Pläte preferred a middle approach.⁵⁵⁶ Without giving his own definition, he chose to speak in general terms about the “inspirational flow” remaining a “mystery,” which was “impossible to investigate or explain.”⁵⁵⁷ Pläte wrote that each revelation had to come by inspiration, quoting Barth that the criterion of revelation was nothing else than “the eternal dynamic of God’s Word.”⁵⁵⁸ In conclusion, he asserted that “the Bible did not fall from heaven directly as some ready-made thing,” but the writings had a historical path of formation.⁵⁵⁹

Pläte also employed the Christological analogy to explain the origins of the Bible, which emerged according to the pattern of God’s incarnation into human flesh. The coming of Christ in the form of a servant was thus replicated in the giving of Scripture, as the Spirit of God breathed upon certain people, providing them with the right kind of inspiration for writing these books.⁵⁶⁰ Pläte assumed this combination of the divine and the human in the Bible without further explanation of the phenomenon:

Everything human in the Scriptures is not difficult to prove. The Scriptures are

⁵⁵⁴ Pläte 1981a, 33.

⁵⁵⁵ Pläte 1981a, 45–46.

⁵⁵⁶ Pläte 1981a, 32–40. He felt sympathies for “mediating” theologians, such as R. Rothe (1799–1867) and I. A. Dorner (1809–1884), for their attempts to harmonize biblical theology with the modern scientific spirit.

⁵⁵⁷ Pläte 1981a, 34–40; 47.

⁵⁵⁸ Pläte 1981a, 48.

⁵⁵⁹ Pläte 1981a, 53–56.

⁵⁶⁰ Pläte 1981a, 52–53.

very similar to various other writings, only without sin. And that fact is exclusively due to divine inspiration. However, it is rather futile and pointless to argue about this or that kind of inspiration. Those who do not want to believe in it will not be helped by any kind of paper pope.⁵⁶¹

Consequently, Plâte's preeminent emphasis was placed on the fact that God's Word, as well as his witness and revelation, was something immense, coming from above, from the realm of God, and was located beyond all human control. His intention was to show that the divine content of the Bible was highly elevated above scientific and historical critical questions, making those secondary and pushing their considerations into the background. According to Plâte's opinion, Barth's greatest contribution was that he helped theology to rise above the dominant ideologies, philosophies, sciences, and cultural trends in order to hear God's Word afresh. By making a sharp distinction between scientific and religious truth, God's transcendence was once again heard without being subjected to the criticism of human analysis. By embracing this distinction, Plâte dismissed the ongoing conflict between science and religion as irrelevant. Since these two disciplines belonged to inherently different realms, the biblical and supernatural content of faith stood outside the province of scientific investigation and thus could not be destroyed by historical criticism.⁵⁶²

Despite all attacks against the inspiration of the Scriptures by historical-critical theologians, the faithful congregation still continues to persevere with an attitude [of piety toward the Bible]. And that is the great contribution of Karl Barth, when faith can lift itself over all critical judgments of rationality and humbly stand under: *Sic Deus dixit!*⁵⁶³

In conclusion, it must be affirmed that Plâte's preoccupation with the problems of biblical trustworthiness and authority eventually led him to the Barthian position. In attempt to defend the Scriptures against atheistic attacks and critical scholarship, Plâte seemed to find support in the dualistic distinction between the human and divine in revelation, in which the Word of God was sharply separated from the words of the Bible. While this type of solution also created additional problems, which made it more difficult to fit theology with other scientific disciplines and reconcile it with the methods of scholarly research, Plâte did not seem to be concerned about these problems.

Moreover, a few other questions could be raised with regard to Plâte's use of Barth's theology. Indeed, additional research would be necessary to answer the

⁵⁶¹ Plâte 1981a, 55.

⁵⁶² Plâte 1981a, 56–57.

⁵⁶³ Plâte 1981a, 47.

question: How accurately did Plâte understand the prolific and multifaceted material that Barth produced on the doctrine of the Bible? A suspicion could be expressed at this point that in his passionate and polemical endeavors to defend the authority of the Scriptures, Plâte may have somewhat exaggerated Barth's negative sentiments against the historical-critical method and thus misrepresented his views.⁵⁶⁴

Finally, it must be stressed that, beyond question, Plâte's predominant concerns were not theoretical but practical. At all times, the congregations of believers and the faith of the individual were the focus of his immediate attention. It was the living faith that needed protection and nourishment in faithfulness to God's Word. Thus, he was not concerned so much with this or that theory of the Bible, but more with an application of its salvific power. His main objective was down-to-earth piety toward Scripture, so that believers would humbly live under the Word of God. Thus, he sought to equip them with the power of faith and the ability to overcome the prevalent forces of unbelief. Consequently, according to Plâte, the best defense of the Scriptures was

the habit and attitude of every living Christian toward the Bible, when apart from all the historical and text-critical considerations a believer always asked and inquired: What did the Word tell me about the Lord, myself and my attitude toward my neighbor?⁵⁶⁵

4.3 ACADEMIC THEOLOGICAL COURSES

The shortage of Lutheran pastors had been a constant problem since the devastating events of emigration during World War II, the Soviet occupation, and deportations. The basic core of the clergy consisted of those pastors who were educated at the Faculty of Theology during the interwar period. In view of that, in his 1968 report the Commissar admitted that the majority of the Lutheran clergy were well-educated and had decent life experience.⁵⁶⁶ Nevertheless, as the Soviet era extended over several decades, these men grew older. As some passed away, the number of pastors decreased year by year. The need for new pastors was substantial. The consistory tried to address this need, yet without noticeable success. Most of the clergy remained overburdened due to serving several congregations. In cases when a pastor could not get along with his congregation or church council, replacing him with another

⁵⁶⁴ See Runia 1962.

⁵⁶⁵ Plâte 1981a, 46.

⁵⁶⁶ LVA 1419/3/19, 37.

pastor was extremely difficult. The shortage of candidates and lack of options to maneuver created a situation where the LELC was hardly able to fill her vacancies.⁵⁶⁷

Arrangements for the pastoral education of new candidates were undertaken already by Archbishop Tūrs. However, all attempts to start a full-time seminary were blocked by the Soviet government. The only progress in this regard was made the establishment of the Board of Theological Examination in the end of the 1940s to test potential pastoral candidates who had not succeeded in completing their theological degree before World War II. Altogether eight men were accepted as pastors through such an examination. In 1951, the board was transformed into a small theological institution that functioned throughout the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁶⁸ This institution, the Theological Courses, was part-time and low-profile, providing a basic pastoral education (mostly Old Testament and New Testament History, Theology, and Homiletics). The main purpose of the Courses was not to produce academic theologians, but rather practical pastors who were ready to fill parish vacancies. It is apparent that under the prevailing circumstances, the theological requirements and academic standards were considerably lower.⁵⁶⁹

The Courses produced relatively few graduates, and they could hardly fill the needs of the Church. Pastors leaving the office for different reasons outnumbered those replacing them. Sadly, the educational level of the newly ordained pastors and adjunct pastors (*mācītāja palīgi*) too often was unsatisfactory. Some of them began to serve even without completing the minimum of theological studies. Students attending the Courses usually had to earn their own living and many also had to provide for their families. The lack of books, study materials, and resources on Christian theology and faith made their instruction difficult. Hence, the growing tendency was for traditional Lutheran views and praxis to be mixed and fused with those of other Christian denominations, and sometimes even other religions. Such syncretism became increasingly widespread within the LELC.⁵⁷⁰

Several attempts were made to send young men abroad for theological studies, but the Soviet government did not give permission for such trips. An exception was the case of Jānis Vējš, a person only loosely associated with the Lutheran Church, who received permission to travel for theological studies to Oxford in 1959. Unfortunately, when Vējš returned to Soviet Latvia, he was not interested in serving the

⁵⁶⁷ Zikmane 2001, 143.

⁵⁶⁸ Mesters 2005, 206. In practice, the Courses began in 1954.

⁵⁶⁹ Mankusa 2001, 56–66. See also Mesters 2005, 206–216.

⁵⁷⁰ Zikmane 2001, 144.

LELC.⁵⁷¹

It was obvious that the education offered by the Theological Courses was quite insufficient and reform was needed. Nevertheless, educational reform was made possible only in the late 1960s, when Archbishop Tūrs retired and the LELC already had new leadership. Reform was initiated in 1968 by Prof. Alberts Freijs, who gathered together the best minds of the Lutheran clergy who still had sufficient theological qualifications. Freijs declared that the chief goal was to establish a new institution of theological education in order to provide the same high standards of theological aptitude as existed at the time of the Faculty of Theology during the interwar period.⁵⁷²

In 1968, a synod meeting of the LELC approved the plan to transform the Theological Courses into a higher-level theological institution: the Academic Theological Courses. Pastor Roberts Priede was elected Rector and assigned to organize the preparatory work.⁵⁷³ The plan was to recreate six theological departments (according to the model of the Faculty of Theology) and one department in general education. Each department was to have a professor, assisted by docents and lecturers. One docent would also teach on the history and constitution of the USSR.⁵⁷⁴

When reporting on the project, Rector Priede stated that the work of the Courses was a matter of great urgency and survival for the LELC, because otherwise the congregations would be left without pastors. Although the theological program was still in the making and certain questions were being discussed (like the salaries of the lecturers, etc.), Priede presented a list of 20 people who would need to get ready for teaching at the Courses. Among them was Senior Pastor Plāte, who was called to teach Practical Homiletics. All of the lecturers were assigned to write their own textbooks in Latvian, the so-called “compendia.” They had to be written and copied by typewriter. The purpose of these compendia was to compensate for the lack of books, study materials, and a proper library. The ultimate objective of these courses was to offer an education that would correspond to a scientific degree in theology (which officially, of course, could not be recognized under the Soviet system).⁵⁷⁵

In 1969, 23 students entered the program of the Academic Theological Courses.

⁵⁷¹ Mankusa 2001, 62–63.

⁵⁷² Rubenis 1991, 11. Mesters 2005, 218–220.

⁵⁷³ Mesters 2005, 218. The General Synod gathering had made an assignment to the new Rector, first of all, to get detailed information about the program and structure of the Theological Institute of the Soviet Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and then to create the program for the Academic Theological Courses in Latvia.

⁵⁷⁴ Mesters 2005, 219. Those seven departments were: Old Testament (led by Pauls Žibeiks), New Testament (led by Edgars Jundzis), Church History (led by Roberts Feldmanis), Systematic Theology (led by Vilis Augstkalns), Practical Theology (led by Roberts Priede), History of Religion (led by Jānis Matulis), and General Education (led by Roberts Akmentiņš).

⁵⁷⁵ Mesters 2005, 220.

The lectures took place on the premises of St. John's Church in Riga. Rooms were modest, the students felt cramped, and the ventilation was poor; nevertheless, the general atmosphere was rather pleasant. Theological studies were spread throughout the year in monthly three-day sessions. The educational eligibility of the students was not very high. Most of the students had graduated from secondary school, and a few had an uncompleted university degree, but some of the students had not even finished secondary school. Since the poor economic conditions did not allow for any grants or stipends, all of the students had to work in addition to their studies.⁵⁷⁶

The length of the studies was not strictly determined. This meant that students could continue for more than five years, provided that all examinations were taken according to the program. The degree of theological candidate was awarded to a person who had successfully taken all tests and examinations, including the final defense of a thesis. Thus, for the first time in the Soviet era, the LELC had reestablished a systematic theological education for future pastors. Such an educational process became a strong motivator for theological advancement in the Lutheran Church as well. Teachers were assigned to provide reviews of theological literature that had been produced in the previous decades. However, as the teachers prepared lectures and wrote textbooks, they made their own conclusions and theological interpretations.⁵⁷⁷

The necessity to have compendia was realized already in the late 1950s. In the situation where libraries were destroyed, theological books were unattainable, and printing was impossible, the consistory decided to start working on production of *samizdat*-style books. They were urgently needed for theological students who did not have enough reading materials and often had to study from their lecture notes.⁵⁷⁸ These compendia were transcribed and copied on a typewriter because the publishing of books was not an option yet. The complicated process of copying and distributing meant that these writings were accessible only to a select few. These compendia were produced primarily for the theological students, but also for individual pastors, who were eager to obtain them. Compendia were reproduced and spread on a grassroots level, passed from hand to hand.

Already by 1976, 26 compendia had been produced in different theological fields and were circulating among the students. By the end of the Soviet era, around 50 textbooks were available, which represented a decent foundation for theological

⁵⁷⁶ Mesters 2005, 221.

⁵⁷⁷ Rubenis 1991, 12.

⁵⁷⁸ Mesters 2005, 212.

education under these circumstances. A few of the compendia were translations (for example, books by Nathan Söderblom, Karoly Karner, and K. Heusi), but mostly they were written by Latvian theologians themselves. Many textbooks were collections and compilations from different contemporary theologians and consisted of extensive quotations, but some were more original treatises.⁵⁷⁹

One of the most original and pioneering works was written by Edgars Jundzis (1907–1987), a fairly sensational and controversial personality. An expert in the New Testament, Jundzis wrote various compendia: *Pirmkristīgās literatūras vēsture* (The History of Early Christian Literature 1969), *Mateja evaņģēlijs* (Gospel of Matthew 1971), *Vēstule romiešiem* (Epistle to the Romans 1972), *Jāņa evaņģēlijs* (Gospel of John 1978) and *Pirmā vēstule korintiešiem* (First Epistle to the Corinthians 1985).⁵⁸⁰ Prof. Jundzis was probably the most distinct follower of a classical liberal approach among the Soviet Latvian theologians to make an effort to apply solely scientific methods to biblical research. His dissertation, *Jēzus dzīve uz sinoptiskās un johanneiskās tradīcijas pamata*, has been republished quite recently in a new edition and presented for the wider Latvian public as a theological achievement of a Latvian theologian working under isolated Soviet conditions.⁵⁸¹

An important contribution in Old Testament studies was provided by Prof. Pauls Žibeiks (1910–2006), who likewise was a liberal theologian, although a more moderate one. Žibeiks wrote textbooks dealing with *Israēla tautas vēsture* (History of the Israeli People 1976), *Israēla reliģijas vēsture* (The History of Israel's Religion 1977), *Israēla literatūras vēsture* (The History of Israel's Literature 1978), *Protojesajas un Deuterojesajas eksegēze* (Exegesis of Proto-Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah 1974), and *Exegesis of Psalms* (1975). Another active and important theologian at the seminary was Vilis Augstkalns (1914–1987), who produced two compendia: *Reliģijas filozofijas un ētikas vēsture* (A History of Religious Philosophy and Ethics 1974), and *Lūkas ev. praktiska eksegēze* (Practical Exegesis for the Gospel of Luke 1973).⁵⁸² Vilis Augstkalns is remembered as one of the most popular and accomplished preachers in Soviet Latvia, who in his sermons was able to combine a profound biblical knowledge and realistic application of it to people's lives. His particular style was laconic and concise, but in its content it was deeply Lutheran. It was described as

⁵⁷⁹ Rubenis 1991, 12.

⁵⁸⁰ Rubenis 1991, 12–13. The list of Compendia is also based on my own observations at the library of the Theological Faculty, University of Latvia.

⁵⁸¹ Jundzis 2013, 9. The Latvian Academy of Science first published the dissertation in 1993/1994. For Jundzis' 100th anniversary, there was a summary of the dissertation published in Latvian and English by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia in 2007.

⁵⁸² This compendium was later published in a book: Augstkalns 1991.

biblical, conservative, actively creative, ecclesiologically motivated, and individually responsible, as he preached on the evangelical faith and Christian life.⁵⁸³

The second doctoral dissertation of the Soviet period, written and defended by Professor Roberts Akmentiņš, was a work in religious philosophy titled *Rakstnieka Augusta Saulieša pasaules uzskata pamatproblēmu aktualitāte* (The Relevance of the Basic Dilemmas in the Worldview of the Author Augusts Saulietis 1980). Prof. Akmentiņš also wrote several other compendia: *Psiholoģija* (Psychology 1970), *Reliģijas psiholoģija* (Psychology of Religion 1973), and *Ievads filozofijā* (Introduction to Philosophy 1974). Stimulating theological work was also done by Professor Roberts Priede in the field of homiletics, Professor Jānis Bērziņš in the New Testament, Professor Roberts Feldmanis in Latvian Church History,⁵⁸⁴ and Professor Jānis Matulis in the History of Religion.⁵⁸⁵

Considering the seminary professors and their theological contributions, a variety of theological approaches and a range of interests can be identified. It is obvious that the theological trends and orientations initiated at the Faculty of Theology before World War II continued also during the Soviet era. The interest in biblical exegesis, religious history, and religious philosophy were continually upheld and developed by the docents. Certainly, the majority of docents represented the so-called “liberal school” of theology with its scholarly methods, which these theologians had studied and learned in the 1920s and 1930s and now transmitted to their students. The conservative theologians always rebuked the “liberals” for their excessive criticism of the Holy Scriptures and the phenomenon of faith. These kind of theological differences were well-known, both from theological life in interwar Latvia and during the restricted post-war Soviet conditions.⁵⁸⁶

A few comments are necessary to explain some of the general difficulties of writing and communicating theological ideas during the period when freedoms were limited by totalitarian censorship. Since the Church was tightly controlled and intimidated, the type of material produced by the Lutheran theologians was heavily overshadowed by the various taboos, prohibitions, restrictions, sanctions, and censorship of the repressive state. In order to protect themselves, people frequently had to conceal their genuine convictions and refrain from discussing a certain range of topics. An honest critique of the Soviet state, society, ideology, morals, and

⁵⁸³ Grīslis 2010, 232. For more on Augstkalns' life and theological work, see Skuja 1995.

⁵⁸⁴ His lectures on Latvian church history, which Feldmanis developed until the beginning of the 1990s, have been published in a book: Feldmanis 2011.

⁵⁸⁵ Rubenis 1991, 12.

⁵⁸⁶ Rubenis 1991, 12; Talonen 2016.

so forth was unthinkable. Every text had to be written keeping in mind the strict Communist surveillance and possible negative ramifications.⁵⁸⁷ As a consequence of this overcautious attitude, all sorts of internal and external restrictions were put on a writer. Self-censure and fear of possible offense became a prerequisite for a submissive social and political quietism and an acceptance of things as they were, not marked by attempts to resist.⁵⁸⁸

Theological texts of this era have to be read and interpreted in the light of this self-censure. These texts were written under Communist constraints and with a great amount of circumspection. The overall style could be characterized as being more indirect and metaphoric than direct and explicit.⁵⁸⁹ From the perspective of the present day, this kind of theological literature appears timid and introspective, subdued and defensive. Any polemics or contentions, if occurring at all in these texts, were never directed against the (totalitarian) outside, but always against the (ecclesiastical) inside.⁵⁹⁰ Typically, all blame and faults for the deepening crisis in Christianity were sought almost exclusively within the Church. These general observations are also applicable to the theological writings of Docent Nikolajs Plāte.

4.3.1 A journal with Plāte's reading lists

Before discussing Plāte's writings, it would be useful to also consider his reading. An informative subject of study is Plāte's journal, containing his reading lists, which is preserved in the private library of his son Modris Plāte.⁵⁹¹ All in all, these lists consist of 1928 titles that were read by Plāte during the period between 1950 and 1982. The sheer quantity, variety, and content of the titles is rather telling. On average, Plāte read around 60 titles a year, which amounts to at least one book every five days. These lists are very helpful for the purpose of revealing the range and depth of Plāte's interests, showing him to be a fervent and committed reader. Each book he read was carefully registered in the journal, yet unfortunately without further comments or reflections. Copies of these lists, along with other reports on the annual ministry, were likewise sent to the consistory of the LELC.⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁷ A typical saying from this era goes like this: "If you think, don't speak; if you speak, don't write; if you write, don't sign; if you sign, then don't be surprised!"

⁵⁸⁸ For more analysis of this mentality, see Milosz 1990.

⁵⁸⁹ See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* 1988.

⁵⁹⁰ See also Barth & Hamel 1959, 114.

⁵⁹¹ MPPA, A journal titled "The literature read from 1950 until 1982."

⁵⁹² See LELBA 299.

This journal gives a glimpse into his most dominant interests, themes, and tendencies, as well as his reading habits and overall intellectual life. As shown by these long lists, Plāte's mental life appears to have been orderly and disciplined, since over the years he read continuously, without significant breaks or interruptions. He was a very bookish person, who spent countless hours in his study. This chapter affords a short summary of the long lists, featuring only the most preferred authors and prevalent topics. Statistical frequency (most recurrent use) has been assumed here to be the best indicator of his favorite writers.

The lists were classified by Plāte into four sections: theological, scientific-contemporary, classical, and periodical literature. These records appear to be accurate and trustworthy. Regrettably, they do not include data on his Bible reading. It could also be presumed that he did not include books that could be deemed anti-Soviet. By the end of his life, Plāte owned a relatively sizable personal library, which he had collected at the Rucava parsonage. His books were predominantly in Latvian and German, but there were also a few in Russian. Most of the theological books had been purchased or picked up from the libraries of deceased clergymen, as was the custom in the Church.⁵⁹³ A considerable number of those volumes were from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Non-theological books, however, were mostly from the Soviet period; these were acquired through friendly connections of Plāte's wife at the local bookshop.⁵⁹⁴ Hence, Plāte's library was a combination of both old and new literature.

(1) The most prominent place in his reading lists was given to theological literature. Christian books were used not only for his pastoral work, but also for spiritual edification and personal upbringing, as attested by the wealth of devotional materials. Being well-versed in German, Plāte was largely oriented toward German theologians. However, English theologians were also represented and read in German translations. Plāte's library gives a clear indication that he was deeply influenced by the older generation of Latvian clergymen and the "Old Tartu" tradition which they represented. Plāte had profound respect for the "fathers" and "teachers" from the Old Tartu, reading them extensively. He was captured especially by the conservative heritage prevalent at the Old Tartu from the 1830s onwards as "ecclesiastic-positive theology." His favorite exegetes were Carl Friedrich Keil (1807–1888) and Johann

⁵⁹³ Interview with Atis Vaickovskis on January 5, 2016. After Plāte's death, his library was split up: some of it was divided among young pastors, such as his son Modris Plāte, Juris Rubenis, Atis Vaickovskis, et al., but some of the books were also destroyed.

⁵⁹⁴ LL 2007/01 (218), 16.

Heinrich Kurtz (1809–1890), who favored the concept of the inspiration of the Word in their theology.⁵⁹⁵ In his work, Plāte used their biblical commentaries and other theological treatments broadly.

From the early 19th-century literature, Plāte read the voluminous biblical commentaries of Friedrich Gustav Lisco (1791–1866), Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890), August Dächsel (1818–1901), and Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938), as well as lesser-known German theologians. Regarding 20th-century theology, Plāte preferred representatives from the Erlangen school, such as Reinhold Seeberg (1859–1935), Paul Althaus (1888–1966), and Werner Elert (1885–1954). Since Plāte strove to read everything available, there were numerous German titles which were often difficult to classify. There was a mixture of everything, even theologians he did not favor, such as Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he had an opportunity to obtain a number of contemporary German publications, including homiletical materials like newsletters: *Sonne und Schield*, *Göttlinger Predigt-Meditationen*, *Halt uns bei festem Glauben*, *Der Sonntag*, *Homiletische Monatshefte*, etc. These materials were most likely obtained through the foreign contacts of Archbishop Tūrs, who brought literature back from his travels and shared it with Pastor Plāte.⁵⁹⁶

From the time he lectured at the LELC Seminary, Plāte increasingly turned his attention to dialectical theology. The writings of Karl Barth were read extensively. However, next to Barth, he followed such theologians as Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974) and Friedrich Gogarten (1887–1967). Of the Latvian theologians influenced by dialectical theology, Plāte read Kārlis Bilzēns (1912–1993), who emigrated and lived in the USA. Likewise, his close friend and colleague, Pastor Vilis Augstkalns, in many ways was influenced by Barthian theology. As discussed above, Plāte had found that dialectical theology was particularly helpful in addressing the crisis of the Church and other contemporary issues, especially considering the widening gap between Christianity and secular society.⁵⁹⁷

Plāte attempted to read all the Latvian theology that was available. The most frequent names on his lists are such theologians as Edgars Rumba, Alberts Freijs, Voldemārs Maldonis, Haralds Biezais, and Aleksandrs Veinbergs. He read the writings of his colleagues Jānis Luksis, Roberts Priede, Vilis Augstkalns, and Arvīds

⁵⁹⁵ See Talonen & Rohmets 2014, 347.

⁵⁹⁶ On the availability of theological literature, see Mankusa 2001, 64–65; Zikmane 2001, 148–156.

⁵⁹⁷ See chapters 4.1.1, Bridging the gap between church and society; 4.3.8, Practical Issues of Poimenics (1974 and 1982/83); and 4.3.11, Dogmatics, Parts I and II (1981).

Vasks, who published their lectures in *samizdat* form. Throughout the entire period, he continued rereading various pre-war publications of the church newspaper *Svētdienas Rīts* (Sunday Morning), the youth magazine *Jaunatnes Ceļš* (The Way of Youth), the theological journal *Ceļš* (The Way), etc.

Another significant subcategory in these lists was literature of a revivalistic nature. Motivated by concerns for church renewal, Plāte hoped to counteract the moral and spiritual decline in society by means of evangelistic preaching. Already as a young man he was interested in revivalistic theology, even though it was not Lutheran. The most important author in this regard was Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892), the famous Baptist preacher, who opposed the liberal and pragmatic tendencies of his day. Spurgeon's sermons, commentaries, prayer books, and devotionals were not only studied, but also widely employed in Plāte's preaching. Another important theological influence were the devotional works of Andrew Murray (1828–1917), an influential and prolific Dutch Reformed writer from South Africa, who promoted religious revival and the Holiness movement. The writings of the Baptist pastor and evangelist Frederick Brotherton Meyer (1847–1929) and the contemporary American evangelist Billy Graham (1918–) were likewise repeatedly read in Latvian and German translations.

Plāte appears to have also been impressed by the German pietistic and revivalistic Pastor Ernst Modersohn (1870–1948). He embraced Modersohn, called *der deutsche Moody*, and his popular evangelical style; in various ways, he attempted to imitate and to learn from him. Modersohn's manifold books and weekly magazine *Heilig dem Herrn*, which had been published since the beginning of the century, were a perpetual source of inspiration during the three decades under consideration. The persistent influence of Modersohn is even more manifest in Plāte's writings in his compendium on pastoral theology.⁵⁹⁸ Particularly striking is his affection for Modersohn's book *Im Banne des Teufels* (1975), particularly its warnings against superstitions and magical and demonic phenomena in the ordinary life of people, as these were clearly a major concern in Plāte's ministry.

(2) The next section, also large, included popular scientific books and contemporary literature which covered different fields and endeavors. It was Plāte's seriously held conviction that a decent pastor had to achieve as good a grasp of secular sciences as possible. Hence, he read books on history, philosophy, pedagogy, and psychology. He strove to become better acquainted with the scientific realms of medicine,

⁵⁹⁸ See chapter 4.3.8, Practical Issues of Poimenics (1974 and 1982/83).

biology, physics, astronomy, and other natural sciences, at least on a popular level.⁵⁹⁹ He felt a particular passion for philology and literary scholarship. In that way, he tried to remain intellectually connected with the newer trends of contemporary society. It may be presumed that Plāte retained a good amount of skepticism when dealing with Soviet science, which was highly ideologized and strongly followed the official party line. At the same time, this skepticism apparently did not keep him from exploring even the most explicit doctrinal writings of Communists. For instance, in the 1950s Plāte studied Stalin's writings extensively; later he immersed himself in Lenin's classical works. It is quite remarkable that in 1969, he registered 11 volumes by Lenin in his lists, and in 1970 he added another eight. Unfortunately, Plāte's reactions to these texts are inaccessible, but the very fact that he read them is rather telling, as it confirms his familiarity with the ideological foundations of the regime.

Anti-religious literature is unmistakably the largest portion of this section. A great number of atheistic texts denying God and criticizing believers, pastors, and churches are listed. Plāte was clearly bothered by these books, and he investigated them with a sense of urgency. In a methodical way, he examined the whole spectrum of anti-religious propaganda written in Latvian and Russian. These "weapons of unbelief," in his view, had to be understood thoroughly in their various types and forms. A dominant theme in many of these texts was the confrontation between science and religion. Darwin's theory of evolution was a critical feature in the majority of these attacks, and the biblical dogma of creation was "proved" an old-fashioned superstition. Religion was denounced as a backward force hindering the advances of science and progress. To put it simply, Soviet propagandists used these publications to expose the Church as a bourgeois, tyrannical, oppressive, and harmful institution obstructing the way to a better, brighter future.

Some of the propaganda books were aimed directly at individual denominations: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, and others. Other books attempted to employ populist and anecdotal narratives in order to present the churches in a negative light: for example, stories on clergymen renouncing their faith or former believers sharing smear accounts about their pastors and church life. Irony, jokes, and sarcasm were often used to discredit religion and vilify clerics. The cross and other religious symbols, art, and rituals were discussed as bringing the sacred content of faith into disrepute. All such books are found in Plāte's reading lists. However,

⁵⁹⁹ See also chapter 4.3.4, Poimenics (1971, 1973, 1982/1983), where Plāte wrote about requirements for pastoral qualification.

his most ardent attention was devoted to the atheistic criticism of the Bible. He was deeply troubled by atheistic attacks that sought to expose the mythical character of the New and Old Testaments on the basis of historical-critical scholarship and tried to convince readers that the gospel of Jesus Christ was nothing more than a legend. It is interesting that in the later stages of the Soviet era, ideological propaganda became increasingly sophisticated and better adjusted to the local situation, targeting specific theological issues and particular forms of piety.⁶⁰⁰

Altogether Plāte's lists contained more than 100 anti-religious propaganda books. One of the most representative publications was *Спутник атеиста* (The Atheist's Handbook), published by the Soviet Academy of Science in Moscow (1959) in conjunction with Khrushchev's campaign to eliminate the remaining traces of religion in the USSR. As soon as the book was translated into Latvian (1962), Plāte acquired it and examined its contents and approach. Similarly, Plāte studied other programmatic writings of atheism with arguments against the immortality of the soul, heaven and hell, God, and faith.

Local propagandists, likewise, produced numerous texts for the local audience. From Latvian authors, Plāte most widely studied Zigmunds Balevics (1934–1987), who wrote, co-wrote, and edited over 30 anti-religious books; and Alfrēds Bušenieks (1908–1986), who authored 8 propaganda books and specialized on the Lutheran Church. Plāte also carefully examined the books by Joels Veinbergs (1922–2011) who researched oriental history and the Old Testament by means of highly sophisticated critical instruments (quantitative linguistics, semantic method, conceptual contextual approach) and tried to separate history from mythology in the Old Testament writings. Another intriguing book to highlight from the list is one by Veronika Snippe: *Luterānisms Latvijā* (Lutheranism in Latvia). It is a book about the Latvian Lutheran Church undergoing a profound and uncontrollable crisis which was destined to end with a fatal outcome. Interestingly, in this book Snippe mentioned also Plāte by name and quoted his pre-war article on the rapid decline of church membership during the first part of the 20th century.⁶⁰¹

(3) Another essential area of Plāte's reading was classical literature. Already from his early life, he was enthusiastic about the world of poetry, novels, and literature in general. Even later in life, this interest did not diminish but grew only stronger as his reading became more extensive and wide-ranging. The Soviet regime in many ways offered a surprisingly broad spectrum of art and literature to its citizens. According

⁶⁰⁰ See chapter 4.2.2, Ideological use of biblical criticism.

⁶⁰¹ Snippe 1977, 164.

to a deliberate Communist policy, artistic means were used as crucial tools in forming the vision of the new world and creating the new man, *homo sovieticus*. Books were printed in large numbers and disseminated widely. Translations were abundant and of good quality. Even the older classics, although at first censured in the USSR, were later treated with respect and spared from crude criticism. Undoubtedly, the sphere of literature was heavily censored. The official ideological orthodoxy was imposed by the Writers' Union, which bent artistic activities to Communist ends. At the same time, however, artists enjoyed remarkable financial stability, receiving state support as long as they were loyal to the established idea of political correctness. It is another remarkable phenomenon of this period that Soviet citizens were highly receptive to art and all kinds of artistic production. Indeed, people exhibited a palpable enthusiasm for books and the arts. Hence, the regime also tried to satisfy their insatiable appetite with the proper kind of proletarian art, mostly in the form of the so-called *socialist realism*. The popular demand was supplied with artistic forms typically kept within the prescribed ideological frontiers and voicing "anti-bourgeois" attitudes.⁶⁰²

From all the literature available at that time, it is rather safe to argue that Plāte preferred the older classics and manifold translations of newer masterpieces. First, he was fond of the 19th-century Russian classics. Plāte was captured by the imaginative power of such Russian authors as Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841), Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883), and Anton Chekhov (1860–1904). Nevertheless, his two favorites were Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), who treated diverse religious themes, and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), who offered some highly complex treatments of human nature in light of Christianity. Plāte not only read volumes of Dostoevsky, but also delved deeper into a philosophical analysis of this writing. For example, he read several times the monumental body of research on Dostoevsky by the famous Latvian literary critic Zenta Mauriņa (1897–1978).⁶⁰³

Secondly, Plāte enjoyed various classics of world literature in Latvian translation that had escaped political censure. He loved the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and Charles Dickens (1812–1870), as well as the world-famous pieces created by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and Wilhelm Goethe (1749–1832). Also close to Plāte's heart was French literature, especially novels from such well-known writers as Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), Victor Marie Hugo (1802–1885), Jules Ga-

⁶⁰² See Berlin 1945. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/10/19/the-arts-in-russia-under-stalin/>.

⁶⁰³ Mauriņa, Zenta. *Dostojevskis. Viņa personība, mūžs un pasaules uzskats*. Rīga, 1934.

briel Verne (1828–1905), Émile François Zola (1840–1902), and René Albert Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893). Plāte frequently referred in his lists to the Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940), the Scottish novelist Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), the Norwegian playwright Henrik Johan Ibsen (1828–1906), the English science fiction writer Herbert George Wells (1866–1946), the American author Mark Twain (1835–1910), and the German novelist Erich Maria Remark (1898–1970).

Thirdly, Plāte remained a loyal and consistent student of his native language and literature, reading numerous Latvian novelists and poets. He read the classical works of such older authors as Jānis Pliekšāns (called Rainis; 1865–1929), Arveds Mihailsons (called Rutku Tēvs; 1886–1961), Augusts Deglavs (1862–1922), Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908), Anna Brigadere (1861–1933), Jānis Poruks (1871–1911), Jānis Akurāters (1876–1937), and Aleksandrs Čaks (1901–1950). But he also read some newer Soviet literary talents: Anna Sakse (1922–1981), Vilis Lācis (1904–1966), Andrejs Upīts (1877–1970), Ojārs Vācietis (1933–1983), Arvīds Grigulis (1906–1989), Regīna Ezera (1930–2002), Miervaldis Birze (1921–2000), Ilze Indrāne (1927–), Zigmunds Skujiņš (1926–), Imants Ziedonis (1933–2013), Alberts Bels (1938–), and many others. Plāte's specific fascination and love for poetry is discussed in another chapter.⁶⁰⁴

Fourthly, Plāte was a habitual reader of different newspapers, journals, and magazines in spite of their heavily Soviet-colored worldview. He regularly read the daily newspaper *Cīņa* (Fight), the leading popular ideological medium of the Soviet regime in Latvia. His account of newspapers also included *Padomju Jaunatne* (Soviet Youth), *Komunisti* (Communists), *Ļeņina Ceļš* (Lenin's Way), *Pionieris* (Pioneer), and *Neue Zeit*,⁶⁰⁵ as well as the magazines *Zvaigzne* (Star), *Liesma* (Flame), *Padomju Latvijas sievietē* (Woman of Soviet Latvia), *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art), *Jaunās grāmatas* (New Books), *Jautājumi un atbildes* (Questions and Answers), *Bērnība* (Childhood), *Veselība* (Health), *Dārzs un druva* (Garden and Field), *Lauku dzīve* (Country Life), *Zinātne un tehnika* (Science and Technology), and *Horizonts* (Horizon). He also read the literary journal *Karogs* (Flag) and the humoristic journal *Dadzis* (Thistle).

Plāte should be recognized as a widely read and enthusiastic bibliophile. At the same time, however, his predominant interests consistently remained in the field of theology. The biggest portion of literature he read was related to the Christian faith and theology. Therefore, in this light, it is interesting to note not only the books

⁶⁰⁴ See also chapter 4.4.1, Spiritual songs: Poetry from the period of youth.

⁶⁰⁵ The newspaper *Neue Zeit* was the official organ of the Christian Democratic Union of the German Democratic Republic, issued in Berlin.

that Plāte read, but also those he did not. For example, his reading lists contain no classical theological works of the ancient church fathers, nor those of Luther and the Reformation (except for the Catechism and the CA), nor writings from the period of Orthodoxy. Furthermore, as the availability of newer theological works was extremely inadequate, it prompts one to conclude that Plāte was rather bound to follow the limited selection he had received during his time at the Gymnasium and the Faculty, as the only immediate theological development was the discovery of Barthian theology and its application to the Soviet setting.

Thus, Plāte's readings and theological journal show that, on the one hand, he read broadly and strove constantly to broaden his intellectual horizons, yet on the other hand he remained somewhat bound within the constraints of his inherited tradition and the Soviet situation. In a way, this could be described as a paradox of ghetto mentality: the totalitarian environment with its severe restrictions had created great intellectual thirst and hunger, but these could only be satisfied in a narrow and limited way. In Plāte's case, this is shown in the lack of diversity of theological books, contacts, discussions, and exchange of ideas, both locally and internationally. Thus, despite his range of reading across the board, he still suffered from one-sidedness and the limits imposed by the contemporary conditions. In that sense, his situation could be compared to a garden pond without a proper influx of fresh water, lacking a healthy ecosystem and in constant danger of stagnation.

4.3.2 Literary production, the *Compendia*

Plāte's theological production comprised several thousand pages of theological material, making him one of the most prolific theologians of the Soviet period in Latvia. However, there were serious difficulties in the dissemination of these unpublished texts. Since the compendia were student textbooks and typewritten manuscripts, they were distributed predominantly among theological students and pastors, circulating only in a limited number of copies. Thus, the circulation was not very wide or substantial. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this research, these compendia are a valuable resource, providing an extensive testimony on Plāte's theological thought. In the following sections, each compendium will be treated separately and described briefly. This is not so much a systematic investigation as a historical overview that offers insight into Plāte's basic theological approach and thinking. For the purpose of this study, the primary attention is on research questions concerning the so-

called theology in the ghetto, featuring Plāte's reactions to the historical context and attitudes toward the Soviet environment.

4.3.3 *Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts (1970)*

Immediately after being appointed docent at the Courses, Plāte started working on his first compendium in Practical Homiletics: *Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts*. It became a work of considerable length (450 pages). While Plāte was conducting preaching seminars for future pastors, he used this compendium to provide some practical context that would exemplify the Old Testament texts and their homiletic application. According to Ēriks Mesters, these classes of practical theology played a very significant role, since the chief objective for pastoral education was to prepare students, first and foremost, for the task of practical preaching and ministry.⁶⁰⁶

In this compendium, Plāte dealt with theoretical and practical aspects of Old Testament exegesis, discussing both methods and content. Being a vigorous churchman himself and regularly preaching on the Old Testament (especially in his mid-week services),⁶⁰⁷ in this material he tried to provide the best support, instruction, and also inspiration for the students. From the outset, Plāte introduced a primary leitmotif with the exposition of Psalm 119, and he taught right disposition toward the Word of God. In four points, he stressed that: 1) God spoke through the Bible; 2) it was eternal truth; 3) it was the necessary truth for the present and for eternal life; and 4) God's Word had to be received in prayer from the Lord. Consequently, biblical authority was identified as a guiding light for the whole process of preaching. Plāte emphasized the paradoxical nature of God's Word. It was paradoxical because eternal truth was communicated through human beings, who were fused and merged with their own day and age. Since this communication was based on human language, it was possible to subject it to theological investigation. This investigation, however, had to be carried out in humility, under the leadership of God's Spirit.⁶⁰⁸

Exposition of each text was structured in three parts: 1) Exposition; 2) Ideas for sermons; 3) Homiletical applications and disposition examples. After an initial thematic presentation of the biblical text, Plāte first gave an exegetical exposition and featured a few distinctive thoughts and words from the text, underlining that the primary foundation of a sermon was exegetical work because preaching

⁶⁰⁶ Mesters 2005, 212.

⁶⁰⁷ Plāte 1970a, 204.

⁶⁰⁸ Plāte 1970a, 7.

effectiveness greatly depended on proper understanding of the text and its meaning.⁶⁰⁹ Secondly, “Ideas for sermons” were homiletical themes drawn from a careful exegetical reading of the text. The themes were typically placed in the context of dogmatic considerations and applied to a congregation situation. To illustrate the sermon, Plāte encouraged the use of biblical themes, because “all human examples and comparisons frequently failed.” Secular illustrations also had their place in preaching, but “there was a hidden danger to deviate from the main core of the text and be sidetracked into some superfluous ideas.”⁶¹⁰ Thirdly, in “Homiletical applications and disposition examples,” Plāte gave practical advice on the text at hand. He provided sermon plans which were more or less thematic and consisted of a few points. Some of those were his own creations, while others were borrowed from various theologians. He frequently repeated that “the main objective of a good sermon is always to deliver a certain doctrinal substance of God’s Word and give a true understanding of the biblical text to the audience.”⁶¹¹

What were the selected texts? The biggest portion came from Genesis and Exodus, starting from creation and the patriarch stories and continuing through the Sinai covenant, which Plāte called the most central and significant event in the Old Testament.⁶¹² Amongst other things, he also treated the Tabernacle, priests and Levites, offerings, and the festivals of the Old Testament. What was Plāte’s theological approach to the Old Testament texts? In the 1930s, when he studied theology, the Old Testament scholarship in Latvia was largely influenced by three leading and influential university theologians. The tone for future research was set by an internationally renowned scholar, Immanuel Benzinger (1865–1935), a loyal disciple of the historical-critical approach to the Old Testament. Despite the fact that many European (mainly, German) theologians after World War I made a critical assessment of the historical-critical approach, Benzinger had managed to educate his followers, Eduards Zicāns (1884–1946) and Fēliks Treijs (1903–1958), in the same spirit, implementing the critical approach.⁶¹³ Docent Plāte stood in fundamental disagreement with them, being critical of so-called liberal theology.⁶¹⁴ Indeed, for educational reasons, in his compendium Plāte gave an introduction to the documentary hypothesis on the origins of the Pentateuch by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), but for ecclesias-

⁶⁰⁹ Plāte 1970a, 64.

⁶¹⁰ Plāte 1970a, 186.

⁶¹¹ Plāte 1970a, 46.

⁶¹² Plāte 1970a, 330.

⁶¹³ Rudzītis 2010, 149.

⁶¹⁴ In the 1930s in Latvia, there was a major battle focused on the OT. In the center of this battle was Jānis Sanders. It happened right at the time of Plāte’s study period. See Talonen & Rohmets 2014, 363.

tical purposes he rebutted it “as an unacceptable and useless tearing of the Bible into many pieces, while searching for original sources.”⁶¹⁵ Instead, a work by Karlheinz Rabast, *Die Genesis* (1951), was offered as a counter-argument, viewing Genesis as a united book.⁶¹⁶ Pläte argued that the documentary hypothesis revealed only an imaginary disharmony, because these contradictions were “artificially imposed, in reality being nonexistent.”⁶¹⁷

It is interesting to note the style of Pläte’s polemics. Trying to avoid *ad hominem* attacks, he almost never mentioned his opponents by name. Finding himself in an argument against his teachers and predecessors, he typically aimed to undermine their basic position, employing indirect and discursive argumentation. In this manner, Pläte targeted the reductionist approach of these liberal theologians, who mostly focused on the literary form of the text while forgetting the true content and spirit of the biblical revelation. As mentioned earlier, in the context of atheistic attacks against the biblical authority, Pläte chose to maintain a more conservative position in order to defend the Bible. He felt that such a critical approach to exegesis failed to penetrate the depths of divine revelation and left the “sacred history” behind. Pläte repeatedly emphasized the importance of accepting the totality of the Old Testament narrative and the existing harmony between the Testaments. Both Testaments were the same revelation of God’s eternal truth, being an everlasting source for the creation and sustenance of faith. Pläte pointed to the theologians of the Early Church and Reformation who had read the Old Testament in a prophetic way, going beyond the literal, historical meaning and perceiving spiritual, typological, symbolic, and prophetic implications, reaching beyond the superficial sense to find a more profound sense suggested to an open-minded reader by the Holy Spirit. Such a reader was able to find the mysteriously divine purpose, being fulfilled in Jesus Christ and his Church.⁶¹⁸

Instead of the critical and modernistic approach, Pläte proposed the so-called “prophetic hermeneutic,” which did not deny historical content but offered a good start for proper textual interpretation. The key to unlocking the prophetic Old Testament narrative was its fulfillment in Jesus and his Church. This primary motive was given by the Scriptures themselves. Christ (*Christus explicatus*, according to

⁶¹⁵ Pläte 1970a, 33.

⁶¹⁶ Pläte 1970a, 34.

⁶¹⁷ Pläte 1970a, 95.

⁶¹⁸ Pläte 1970a, 204–205. Pläte suggested reading Luther’s sizable commentary on Genesis as being full of inspiration and a way to strengthen faith and encouragement. This commentary incorporates a lot of useful material from Jerome, Augustine and other church fathers.

Tertullian) was the main object of all divine revelations and messianic expectations. Simultaneously, Pläte warned against “artificial allegorization or searching for mystical meanings” in Old Testament exegesis. He also referred to the so-called “positive theologians” of the 19th century: E. W. Hengstenberg (1802–1869), Michael Baumgarten (1812–1889), J. C. Konrad von Hofmann (1810–1877), Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890), and H. W. J. Thiersch (1817–1885). The prophetic hermeneutic, according to Pläte, had proven to be a breath of new life after the period of rationalism, and it had helped to reveal a true understanding of Old Testament typology and the most profound interconnection between history and prophecy.⁶¹⁹ The history of the chosen nation was a God-given mirror for future events, because already in Israel’s early history the Lord pointed out the day of his Son. This comprehensive interconnectedness between the Old and New Testaments was a major factor in the creation and sustenance of faith. Therefore, Pläte insisted, this prophetic outlook was crucial for preaching.⁶²⁰

Another essential point for him was the evangelical, Gospel-centered character of the Old Testament, which meant that the whole of the Old Testament was “pre-history for the incarnation of the Son of Man.”⁶²¹ The Christological line was “the red thread (of the Old Testament) of God’s mercy from Adam to Christ.” Pläte continued: “We have to acknowledge that both the Old and the New Testaments have harmoniously expanded and revealed the same magnificent intentions of God’s grace.”⁶²² Pläte had also received a certain degree of inspiration from repristination theology and the Erlangen school, which had tried to restore the Old Testament to its rightful place in the life of the Church. For example, Pläte’s writing reflected J. C. K. von Hofmann’s idea that all Scripture had to be read and interpreted as a uniform salvation history in which the Old Testament pointed toward Christ and the New Testament pointed to the consummation of the whole creation. It meant that biblical prophecy included not only a foretelling or a presentiment of things to come, but also a profound interpretation of the contemporary situation based on the fact that history always pointed beyond itself to that which one day would be fulfilled.⁶²³

It is significant that while proceeding through the interpretation of the Old Testament accounts, Pläte implicitly also shed some light on the contemporary situation

⁶¹⁹ Pläte 1970a, 206.

⁶²⁰ Pläte 1970a, 206.

⁶²¹ Pläte 1970a, 57.

⁶²² Pläte 1970a, 292.

⁶²³ Häggglund 1968, 363–369.

of the Church under the Soviet regime. Even though the ugly realities of the oppressive society were not exactly identified by name, Plâte's listeners and readers did not require any further explanations to understand the implied spiritual message. By means of biblical examples and situations, using suggestive and metaphorical language, Plâte tried to unfold and interpret the complicated conditions of the believers and congregations under Communism. For instance, Plâte compared the situation of the faithful Church with the journey of Abraham in the Old Testament:

Isn't it so that the current Christian Church was forced to leave behind the comfortable existence of the past generations with its nominal Christianity, which didn't satisfy God, and now she has to travel into the unknown future, being led only by Lord's guiding light? Isn't it so that the Christian Church in its current environment is like a traveler with no homeland, like a stranger, barely tolerated by the ruling powers of life? When we identify our own situation and the powers around us, don't we sometimes fall into depression and consider ourselves to be the lost flock, which lives only with pious memories?⁶²⁴

Plâte suggested that Christians were different from the rest of the world and society. Christians had always been privileged to keep their unique and separate identity. God's call and promise of salvation endowed believers with special experiences that made them radically distinguished from all other people of the world. Christians were born of a different "seed" and they trusted in a different "leader."⁶²⁵

Therefore, our abiding place is not in a vanity fair or in the city of corruption, but on the narrow road and at the altar of our Lord. This road is blessed and worth all the scorn and indifference that Christians have to face in this world.⁶²⁶

Plâte used several biblical illustrations to show that the troublesome and complicated fate of believers in this world was nothing new. Sufferings and life under the cross had always been a common pattern, both in the New and the Old Testaments. In his compendium, Plâte extensively used the example of Isaac, which taught that the strength of faith was revealed sometimes in "silent suffering, patience and endurance."⁶²⁷ These types of admonitions undoubtedly had a subtext of instruction that taught a specific demeanor: how believers should accept their lot under Soviet repression. Similarly, Plâte protested against the idea of church life that it should resemble some kind of disassociated subculture, marked off and separated from the surrounding environment. Even if the Church was to be apolitical, believers in their mission work had to reach out and fight spiritually for those outside the flock. In connection with the story of Abraham's plea for the citizens of Sodom, Plâte wrote:

⁶²⁴ Plâte 1970a, 130.

⁶²⁵ Plâte 1970a, 131–132.

⁶²⁶ Plâte 1970a, 131.

⁶²⁷ Plâte 1970a, 197.

There are no hopeless cases which would make us stop praying. If we just hold on to such prayers, then we will overcome in ourselves the threat of a spiritually narrow pharisaical society and injured aversion against unholy people. The Christian Church is compelled to be free and independent like Abraham, free from political involvement and transcending all ideological fronts, so that she would be able to fulfill her special service of praying and interceding for unbelievers in a grateful recognition that our Lord has died even for us, unbelieving individuals.⁶²⁸

But the ultimate comfort proclaimed by Plāte was eschatological. Just as Jacob had to suffer at the hand of Laban, in the same way also believers and the whole Church also had to suffer all kinds of malicious transgressions and mockery. However, there was a certain confidence that all of the sufferings of believers would be turned into a blessing, drawing them closer to heaven; thus, Plāte advised, “here, living in this strange country, we can do our decent service for the glory of God, while our hearts belong in the heavenly homeland.”⁶²⁹

4.3.4 *Poimenics* (1971, 1973, 1982/1983)

The docent in the field of practical theology before Plāte was Senior Pastor Arturs Siļķe (1908–1965), who taught Homiletics, Poimenics, and Exegesis of the Psalms.⁶³⁰ In 1969, as soon as he was appointed to teach Poimenics, Plāte immediately started working on a compendium for the class and discussed the plan in his correspondence with Archbishop Matulis. A major obstacle in his preparations was the shortage of qualified literature. Plāte lamented that the books available to him were rather “old – even very old,” being mostly from the 19th century. He asked the Archbishop for newer literature, especially in the field of psychotherapy.⁶³¹

Next he sent Matulis his plans for the compendium, including a description of its contents and structure, as well as a list of books at his disposal, while asking for the Archbishop’s comments and suggestions. Matulis agreed that his books were really “antique,” but simultaneously indicated that these older authors were still decent and respectable.⁶³² Nevertheless, he argued that the works of these older authors needed a certain amount of revision and updating because the poimenical particularities of the current century were undeniable. In spite of that, Matulis approved of Plāte’s general plan as being sensibly arranged, and he made only a few rather minor

⁶²⁸ Plāte 1970a, 164.

⁶²⁹ Plāte 1970a, 234.

⁶³⁰ Mesters 2005, 211.

⁶³¹ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (6/10/1969).

⁶³² LELBA 299, Matulis to Plāte (5/5/1969).

suggestions.⁶³³ Plāte expressed his appreciation for the Archbishop's assistance and the books sent by him and Dean Schroeder (from Leipzig).⁶³⁴

This compendium was printed and distributed to students for the first time in 1971. Some newer versions of *Lectures in Poimenics* were produced in 1973 and in 1982–1983. The revised versions did not change the lectures much, but only provided some additional texts and materials. Plāte introduced this compendium by describing it as a collection of various books of many thoughtful teachers of God's Word. The list of sources consists of 52 titles which are extensively used, with long quotations and ideas derived from a diverse spectrum of theologians.⁶³⁵ The style is manifestly eclectic, as Plāte attempted to compile wide-ranging sources in order to cover as much material as possible.

Poimenics was defined here as teaching on the care of souls, and it was regarded as one of the most important disciplines in practical theology. The main objective was "the salvation of the soul," where the chief emphasis was on every single individual.⁶³⁶ Although Plāte enlisted different definitions of various theologians, ultimately he concluded that, all things considered, most theologians agreed that it was a discipline to apply God's Word to a particular situation in the care of an individual.⁶³⁷ The task of poimenics was to bring a believer from the knowledge of sin, through awakening to faith, to preparation for everlasting life and salvation in Christ. That being accomplished, the task was fulfilled.⁶³⁸ The greatest attainable goal, in Plāte's view, was to make the believer a spiritually self-supporting and self-contained person, a *Seelsorger* for one's own soul, capable of thinking and acting with solid faith, as well as able to render service to others.⁶³⁹

According to Plāte, poimenical work required expertise that went far beyond the narrow theological field. Of benefit were the scientific domains of psychology, pedagogics, history, and the social and natural sciences (which had to be studied, at least on a popular level). A person caring for souls had to also be acquainted with relevant topics of general culture, art, and literature. The whole spectrum of social life offered helpful assistance for poimenical endeavors.⁶⁴⁰ After describing the biblical foundation and church history background of poimenics, Plāte focused his

⁶³³ LELBA 299, Matulis to Plāte (5/5/1969).

⁶³⁴ LELBA 299, Plāte to Matulis (6/10/1969).

⁶³⁵ Plāte 1971a, 2.

⁶³⁶ Plāte 1971a, 1–3.

⁶³⁷ Plāte 1971a, 6.

⁶³⁸ Plāte 1971a, 8–13.

⁶³⁹ Plāte 1971a, 14.

⁶⁴⁰ Plāte 1971a, 4.

attention on what it meant to be a *Seelsorger*: one's preparation for this ministry, the required self-discipline and self-education, and many necessary personality traits. Then he described its place in congregational ministry, as well as the contemporary tendencies in poimenics provided by the advancement of psychotherapy.⁶⁴¹

For the purposes of this study, the most relevant part of this compendium was the section called "The Contemporary Tasks of a Seelsorger" (added in the version of 1973), in which he turned his attention to the distinctive challenges of contemporary society. Undoubtedly, Pläte recognized the increasing influence of atheistic ideology that had been spreading far and wide. Nonetheless, he did not intend to call Communism a demonic regime. In spite of its atheistic and anti-religious nature, Pläte made a clear-cut distinction between politics and theology. Communism was indisputably a godless, materialistic, and non-religious ideology, but in a biblical sense it was not demonic or anti-Christian, because it did not make spiritual claims. He argued that the problems with atheism and secularization existed not only in the USSR. Secularization was equally devastating both in the East and the West. For that reason, he provided a more general analysis of modern society which was shaped and ruled by science, technology, urbanization, fragmentation, etc., and which caused all sorts of hindrances for spiritual life. The basic problem was that secular people were so completely absorbed by the all-embracing life of society that they no longer had time to ponder what was beyond their earthly life. Hence, atheism was just one of many damaging phenomena of modern life, which stemmed from a pseudo-scientific worldview. From a theological angle, Pläte agreed with the Czech theologian Josef Hromadka,⁶⁴² who advised looking at atheism as a call to repentance for the Church, which gave stones instead of bread to hungry people.⁶⁴³ "In our biblical faith, we as Christians should recognize that God himself destroys church buildings and altars to lay a new foundation for a new building."⁶⁴⁴

Therefore, Pläte insisted, it was completely useless to complain about the loss of the old traditions, lamenting that the former way of life was destroyed. Rather, he encouraged the Church to move forward and to accept the new brand of society without any national and political prejudices. Even the Soviet era was able to provide new virtues and advantages, such as, for example, solidarity, comradeship, group spirit, reliance on each other, etc., and it would be wrong for Christians to exclude

⁶⁴¹ Pläte 1982/1983, 44–50.

⁶⁴² For more on Josef Lukl Hromadka (1889–1969), see Moree 2012.

⁶⁴³ See also Barth & Hamel 1959, 115.

⁶⁴⁴ Pläte 1971a, 133.

themselves from the life of society. Christians would do better, said Plâte, if they avoided fighting the wrong battles, where politics and ideologies clashed with each other. The life of solidarity, dwelling side by side and staying in dialogue with unbelievers, would work out much better for Christians. Living in this epoch, believers had to learn the art of turning a secular conversation into spiritual one. Christians should be able to “step down into the abyss of human existence” in order to help unbelieving people on a deeper spiritual level. Their Christian duty was to confess the Gospel as “the power for true life, without which even people of the new society would feel poor and thirsty.”⁶⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the growing force of atheism, the irreligious community, and the total grip of modern secular life over the population was something to reflect on. Plâte wrote about the confusion and bewilderment of the current society, the moral crisis and widespread alienation of the people, and the impact of industrialization on the urban and rural population.⁶⁴⁶ He advised examining the transformation in the structure of society and the gradual change in gender roles, difficult issues of family life, and the education of children, as these were issues into which modern life had introduced new complexities and which required new solutions.⁶⁴⁷ The new global currents, on the whole, were transforming the life of the rural people, leading to an estrangement of people from the Church. Being a pastor of rural congregations, Plâte knew the shift firsthand. Over the years, he had experienced a constant testing and sifting caused by the new conditions. On the one hand, the Church still had “a loyal group of true believers,” but on the other hand, the greater majority had left the Church, with some only attending “greater festivals” or “occasional services.” A great separation had taken place and, essentially, nothing in between was left. Plâte warned against despising secular people. Sometimes their hearts turned out to be more honest than those of disconnected and self-contained “devotees.” He often repeated the following thought: Christian people should not isolate themselves in a kind of pharisaical or eschatological ghetto, as if they could leave this irreligious world behind. The Church had a certain mission in this world that had to be fulfilled (even in the Communist society), regardless of all difficulties, since every modern person needed Christ. However, the ever-increasing demonic corruption of daily life could not be fought against by ecclesiastical “wide-range weapon gunshots” from

⁶⁴⁵ Plâte 1971a, 136. See also Barth & Hamel 1959, 119–120.

⁶⁴⁶ Plâte 1971a, 133.

⁶⁴⁷ Plâte 1971a, 134.

the pulpits only.⁶⁴⁸ Consequently, it was important that believers continued to dwell closely together with their contemporaries, still holding conversations with them.⁶⁴⁹

Similarly, Plāte directed some critical remarks against the clergy, who, unfortunately, had not been very successful “fishers of men” in the Soviet society. The outward situation, when the Church had lost its social status and no longer stood at the center of public life, was a rather poor excuse for the failure to do mission work. He challenged pastors to evaluate their own preaching and teaching. Most of all, they had to strive to be faithful to God’s Word and be accessible to all people. He made a special exhortation to pastors not to isolate themselves into a ghetto because they felt the temptation to distance themselves from the atheistic society. Pastors could fulfill their mission only if they remained in close proximity to the people, spoke their language, and understood their problems. Pastors were encouraged to give up their clerical and dogmatic language to be able to connect with people in their actual environment. Plāte urged pastors to maintain a friendly and generous attitude, not only toward believers but also to those outside the Church, who often treated them in a provocative and rude manner. Abusers had to be answered with kindness, attention, and patience.⁶⁵⁰ Being a pastor and teacher himself, Plāte spoke from his own experience of the complicated nature of ecclesiastical work, hoping to strengthen the Christian identity of his students and fellow pastors who were obliged to cope with the demanding and frustrating circumstances of the Soviet regime.

As seen previously, there were all sorts of obstacles to open and candid communication among people. Indeed, the social mood in the totalitarian society had created a particular hunger and yearning for genuine conversation. A major part of the problem was a use of language that was too formal and insincere. The same fault could also be found with pastors, who frequently behaved in a very ceremonial way and were thus out of touch. For that reason, Plāte argued that Lutheran pastors had to become better and more sensible communicators. Instead of holding solemn monologues, pastors had to venture to make closer, more personal addresses, striving to speak heart to heart in their sermons.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁸ Plāte 1971a, 135.

⁶⁴⁹ Plāte 1982/1983, 36–39.

⁶⁵⁰ Plāte 1971a, 136–138.

⁶⁵¹ Plāte 1982/1983, 34–45.

4.3.5 Practical Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts: Minor Prophets (1971)

The next class assigned to Docent Plāte was lectures on the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. It was rather remarkable that another sizable compendium could be prepared and distributed already in the same year (1971). According to his former student, Pastor Atis Vaickovskis, the method of Plāte's lecturing made him prepare these texts very precisely and thoroughly, because he always read them aloud to the audience of students without diverging from the written text.⁶⁵²

Plāte began this compendium by explaining the concept of prophecy as applied to Israel's history and history in general. The unfolding Old Testament prophecies were instrumental for making sense of the believers' destiny in the ever-changing historical process. In Plāte's opinion, this prophecy was the highest and most unique phenomenon (apart from the incarnation), even in comparison with all other world religions. The parallel phenomena in various religions (such as predicting, fortune-telling, chiromancy, and magic) did not diminish the value of Scripture's revelation, but rather affirmed the superiority and uniqueness of biblical prophecy. In an extraordinary way, prophets stood in the counsel of the Lord; they were God's spokesmen, and they were sent to impart the true knowledge of the Lord to the people. Even though every prophet was different and each had a distinct appearance, in a certain way these prophets spoke with one voice and revealed the true character of God. This was true of the prophetic tradition as a whole, starting from Abraham and ending with the prophecy of Malachi.⁶⁵³

With regard to prophetic proclamation, Plāte made a distinction between a direct message regarding an immediate historical situation and a general message of God's rule over the totality of history, because the nearer and the more distant predictions were fulfilled in different stages. Like mountain tops, prophecies revealed a panorama of immeasurable distances and timespans, reaching all the way until the ultimate, when salvation would be completely consummated. The fulfillment was viewed in a twofold manner. Some predictions had already come to fruition in the secular order of cities, lands, nations, and personalities. They testified to the power and truthfulness of God's Word, which did what it said. At the same time, other predictions still unfolded in a gradual, evolving, and ever-progressing manner. These

⁶⁵² Atis Vaickovskis interview on January 5, 2015.

⁶⁵³ Plāte 1971b, 1–2.

prophecies were preparations for the eventual end.⁶⁵⁴

The end times, the Day of the Lord, and the Kingdom of God had already arrived since the coming of Christ and establishment of the Church, which was the true spiritual Israel. Yet it was possible for the full light of each prophecy to be grasped only after its fulfillment, according to the apostle Peter,⁶⁵⁵ and that inferred that the Old Testament prophecies could be fully understood or properly interpreted only from the viewpoint of the fulfillment of the New Testament. It also meant that some prophecies were still moving toward their realization, and it was not wise to try to uncover the veil of the future prematurely. The fulfillment had already started, but was not fully realized yet. The future of Christ's Church was mysteriously wrapped up in the promises and prophecies, creating and sustaining the life of the Lord's people throughout history.⁶⁵⁶

What was the message that the Old Testament prophecies conveyed to the Church while it was living under oppressive atheistic rule? Once again, the answer given by Plâte was primarily a general, implicit, metaphorical application of God's Word to the specific conditions. He started with an expression of the paradoxical truth that even the dry, sad, miserable Soviet conditions could serve and benefit the overall good of the Church. In his treatment of the prophet Hosea on God's persistent love in a nation's history, Plâte suggested that the sacred history supported the assurance of God's trustworthiness. It was God himself who led his people through the desert and various difficult paths – from pain to joy, from the cross to glory. The underlying purpose was perpetually God's eternal salvation. Even sufferings coming from the hand of God were instrumental in the search for the lost. Those people who wandered in the "desert" of solitary silence and lonely reflection often became better listeners of God's Word. The best thing to do during the "dry and empty" periods was to count one's blessings of past experiences, because history lessons could give a great deal of instruction and consolation, both for the present and the future.⁶⁵⁷

Plâte reflected on the puzzling nature of the historical process, whose twists and turns had led believers to alarm and distress. In his treatment of the book of Habakkuk, he pondered the prophet's complaints and petitions to the Lord. Habakkuk became dismayed about God's governance of history, tolerating injustice and allowing evil empires to triumph. The consolation that Plâte found in the book was

⁶⁵⁴ Plâte 1971b, 6.

⁶⁵⁵ 2. Pt. 1:19

⁶⁵⁶ Plâte 1971b, 8.

⁶⁵⁷ Plâte 1971b, 26; 30.

the notion that God's plan was carried out over long periods of time. The promise of the ultimate and perfect triumph of justice, of course, would be fulfilled in "his appointed time." For the time being, the righteous ought to "live by faith" (Hab. 2:4).

That is how the Lord still treats man and this world – we are set up by him for waiting. Mills of God grind slow but sure. ... Therefore, Holy Scripture teaches us waiting and patience, as well as long-suffering and silent dedication.⁶⁵⁸

The history of our world and the history of God's people, at all times, was the revelation of his judgment and his mercy, unfolding in a gradual, hidden manner. Nevertheless, the duty of the faithful was to wait patiently until the Lord vindicated them and judged their enemies.⁶⁵⁹

Frequently, prophecies came as an awakening call and sign of contradiction. Prophetic visions spoke against religious complacency and stagnation. During relatively peaceful times, the Word of the Lord often called people to repent from falsehood and profanation of God's holy name. For instance, Amos was neither a prophet (by profession) nor a prophet's son (7:14), but a sheep herder and a sycamore fig farmer. Nevertheless, God called him to deliver the prophetic message to shake sinners out of their complacency. Amos preached in the northern kingdom, whence he was subsequently driven out. Pläte wrote that after the proclamation of the divine Word,

Amos calmly submitted to the political power, because his mission was accomplished. In a few days, he was already greeted by his native mountains, herds and sycamore trees. With his arrival home, the prophet wrote his speeches down (or somebody did it for him), so that future generations would also know that God's justice was victorious at all times.⁶⁶⁰

The prophecy of God's Word, being the most powerful thing, had to have an impact. The whole surrounding land had to be influenced by the force of its proclamation. For many, it was difficult to listen to the fiery prophetic sermon, which backfired, causing reactions of rage and hate. At the same time, Pläte hoped that the prophetic message would first be accepted inside the Church, even if it made believers

feel angry and hurt, which was better than staying apathetic. Woe to us if our congregation services became like a fortress or refuge against the Word of God attacking us, where we would feel safe against everything that uncovered our faults, revealed our responsibilities, called us to task, and made us leave our safe places! Woe to us if we only assured ourselves in our worship: how good, pious, polite people we were! Our service would be so much better, if God's arrows

⁶⁵⁸ Pläte 1971b,

⁶⁵⁹ Pläte 1971b, 119–126.

⁶⁶⁰ Pläte 1971b, 54–56.

would reach us and hit us, while God's justice and judgment like a mighty stream would destroy all the walls of our self-righteousness.⁶⁶¹

Plâte insisted that the prophetic message had to be heeded, because it came from a higher order and authority. The prophecy was sovereign and independent. "How could we not preach, if God commanded!? There was a higher power, making one independent from people and even worldly superpowers."⁶⁶² Governing with his sovereign power, the Lord always had the first and last word in human history. It was God's Word that secretly governed all of history and assigned people their place in history. But the prophet's message was meant to reveal the true meaning behind events. For instance, when God's people suffered at the hands of the Edomites, Obadiah proclaimed the impending judgment on Edom. It was promised that the evil deeds of the Edomites would be punished and God would bring deliverance to his people on the day of the Lord. Plâte identified here a scriptural pattern: God permitted his unfaithful people to be punished, handing them over to their enemies and subjecting them to humiliation and the painful discipline of the pagan rulers; at the same time, however, the final vindication was still coming. In spite of their rough experiences, God thus remained faithful to his unfaithful people. After the evil rulers had fulfilled their task, God broke the rod of discipline, because the government of all history belonged to the Lord.⁶⁶³

In Plâte's view, the Old Testament history of God's people was also a typological foretelling of the rest of universal history. The sacred history was the divine golden standard, according to which the whole process of the development of Christianity within world history had to be measured. Just as God's loving care was focused on the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, so the Church was a particular object of God's attention in the New Testament.⁶⁶⁴

In his exposition of the book of Zephaniah, Plâte discussed how the Lord employed some rather fierce measures for purging and cleansing his people. World history was a continuing lesson of God's governance for Christians to study. The undertones of God's voice could be heard even when reading newspapers or listening to the radio, since he spoke through occurrences of history and nature. Accordingly, observation of God's actions in the world and history could not be made from a safe distance or secure location. No one could say about others: "It served them right!" because everyone was involved. When some people were hurt, a warning was issued

⁶⁶¹ Plâte 1971b, 65–66.

⁶⁶² Plâte 1971b, 67–68.

⁶⁶³ Plâte 1971b, 79–80.

⁶⁶⁴ Plâte 1971b, 82.

to everybody (Lk. 13:2–5). God always spoke to people in a personal way, approaching and addressing “you.” Thus, God commanded, reminded, warned, condemned, and punished in various ways, revealing the road of sin and destruction, and how people and nations were destroyed, and in this way he brought up his own people.⁶⁶⁵ The whole world was an arena for the unfolding judgment. First of all, the judgment came upon God’s people when he poured out his heated anger for the sake of purification. It had to begin with the house of God (1 Pt. 4:17). The Lord worked on the change and reformation of his own people.

Some have tried to give a prediction about the whole of the church history, but they have failed. In order to escape confusion with regard to the future of the Church, her historical position, future formation and influence in the world, first of all one ought to ask a different question: how does one understand ecclesia, the Church, the Bride of Christ, being without any stain or wrinkle, or other failures of beauty?⁶⁶⁶

In the book of Zephaniah, the Church was treated as “a holy remnant,” a little flock raised again by the Lord after a devastating judgment. “It sounds very true also for us today,” wrote Pläte. No doubt, the Church had to recognize that God’s own opposition and judgment had come upon it both “from the side of the throne and from the side of the altar.”⁶⁶⁷ Viewed in any different light, the prevailing reduction of the Church had to be interpreted only as a sign of extinction and destruction. But the little flock, dwelling under the tyrannical regime, was able to receive consolation from this message. Small numbers were not yet a sign of diminished hopes for the survival of the Church. The most important thing was to recognize how obscure and enigmatic the appearance of God’s Kingdom was, because the Lord would eventually raise again his “holy remnant.” “Don’t be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12:32). It was a general pattern: a tiny congregation of believers, which seemed like nothing in the eyes of the world, had carried the powerful Gospel to the world. And vice versa, the vast and broad ecclesiastical bodies in their missionary achievements had been unsatisfactory for centuries. “Thus, the power of the church always had been her closeness to God.”⁶⁶⁸

In his exposition of the book of Haggai, Pläte retold the story of the Jews returning from exile and rebuilding the house of the Lord. Since the works were delayed, the biblical narrative was full of disappointment, apathy, and frustration on the part of the believing remnant. In their discouragement, the people turned their hearts

⁶⁶⁵ Pläte 1971b, 136.

⁶⁶⁶ Pläte 1971b, 135.

⁶⁶⁷ Pläte 1971b, 136–137.

⁶⁶⁸ Pläte 1971b, 136–137.

to the futility of a self-seeking, materialistic life. But the prophetic message became a call of repentance to the people who felt discouraged in the walk of faith and had forgotten the Lord. They had to rearrange their priorities of life once again. God's people had to repent and trust in him to finish the temple reconstruction, and thereby they received blessings of the covenant. Plâte applied the message to the contemporary situation, reinforcing the priority of spiritual blessings over the dominance of materialistic culture. He emphasized that, ultimately, everything depended on one's relationship with the Lord. "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Mt. 6:33). Therefore, the straightening of one's spiritual priorities and rebuilding of church life always stood at the heart of all blessings.⁶⁶⁹

Why then houses of God have to be built? In order to build a house of God within a human soul – in order that people might come into the fellowship with the most High, the Creator of heaven and earth!⁶⁷⁰

In connection with the book of Zechariah, Plâte continued his reflections on history and providence, at the same time acknowledging the difficulties of explaining the unusual prophetic visions of Zechariah.

Not everything in this life and historical process can be understood by human reason. We cannot comprehend God's actions, since his thoughts are beyond our grasp. But the main thing is made known to us: beyond all occurrences of this life stands God, guiding everything according to the purpose of his intentions.⁶⁷¹

The same truth could be attributed to difficult periods of persecution, disasters, and suffering.

The chosen nation remained precious and beloved by the Lord. The valley or lowland with the myrtle trees (Zech. 1:8) was a picture of deepest humiliation, in which God's people had to dwell. God didn't give up on them. His people, even while being humiliated, remained of great value in his eyes. God always carried out his intentions and by this humbling he wanted to purge them.⁶⁷²

Plâte indicated that his people could take solace while suffering and "standing among the myrtle trees" from the fact that God's providential rule and the prophetic message promised them the Lord's gracious presence. Zechariah's vision contemplated the whole future of God's Kingdom, and at the same time it also provided relief for the present moment. Since the driving forces of one's whole existence were in the hands of God, all things worked together for the good of those who loved God.

⁶⁶⁹ Plâte 1971b, 145–146.

⁶⁷⁰ Plâte 1971b, 146.

⁶⁷¹ Plâte 1971b, 166.

⁶⁷² Plâte 1971b, 166.

Zechariah recognized this in his prophetic vision already 500 years before the birth of Christ. But the complete victory of God's people, in more distinct clarity, was seen by John on the island of Patmos 600 years later. This prophetic vision was given to all who, in spite of life's imperfections and the dominion of Satan in this world, with spiritually open eyes were able to see him who held all power and carried out his plans in spite of the evil one, who served his purposes without knowing and willingness. If we had spiritual vision to perceive the almighty and loving hand of God in all that happened in the world and our own life, then we would have visionary sight.⁶⁷³

Plāte treated Zechariah the most extensively. If the other minor prophets in this compendium were given only a general introduction and fragmentary exposition, the book of Zechariah was explored comprehensively. As a matter of fact, Plāte provided a completely new translation of the biblical text and supplied it with exegetical commentary, calling it a separate work. Apparently, none of the available translations fully satisfied him, including the most recent edition of 1965, which had been completed only a few years earlier by the Latvian exile pastors and published in London. Plāte's translation could be described as a concise and literary rendition, being somewhat closer to the original style of the text, as some attempts were made to correct and specify the meaning of the text. It is interesting that he also provided translations for the various names of God (for example, Sabaoth as "Lord of hosts" etc.), which previously had not been done in any Latvian Bible translation.

4.3.6 Practical Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts: Psalms (1972)

This work was a continuation of Plāte's *Exegesis of Selected Old Testament Texts*.⁶⁷⁴ Compared to the former work, the compendium on Psalms did not include "Ideas for the Sermon," which meant a more compressed homiletical treatment. An exposition of 22 selected psalms or their fragments was offered. The treatment of the psalms included a brief introduction, general features, the main theme, a discussion of its authorship, and the context of its creation. Then followed a verse-for-verse exegesis and application, concluded by some dispositions.⁶⁷⁵

Plāte called psalms "the incomparable hymnal of the Old Testament," "religious lyrics inspired by the Holy Spirit," and "spiritual songs" that expressed thought and emotion, sorrow and pain, fear and hope, joy and gratitude, and the trust and

⁶⁷³ Plāte 1971b, 168–169.

⁶⁷⁴ Along with these two versions, there is also an additional supplement Consultation about Exegeses of Psalms, which provides a wider perspective on the collection of psalms as such. Plāte 1972b.

⁶⁷⁵ Ps. 4:1–9; Ps. 8:1–7; Ps. 16:1–11; Ps. 18:1–7; Ps. 23:1–6; Ps. 31:1–6,14–18; Ps. 42:1–6; Ps. 46; Ps. 51; Ps. 62; Ps. 72; Ps. 73:23–28; Ps. 84; Ps. 90; Ps. 100; Ps. 104:23–34; Ps. 118:19–29; Ps. 121; Ps. 126; Ps. 127; Ps. 128; Ps. 130; Ps. 137:1–6; Ps. 139:1–12,23,24; Ps. 149.

commitment of the holy poets who were deeply rooted in the Lord. Psalms were expressions of both the individual and collective experience of God's chosen people of Israel. In the sphere of nature, these poets perceived the reflection of God's almighty glory, power, and goodness; in the fate of nations, they observed the divine providence uncovered in the revelation of promise and blessing; in their beautifully unfolding visions, they contemplated the future of God's Kingdom, which strongly stirred their hearts and minds.⁶⁷⁶

Together with J. G. Herder (1744–1803), Pläte held the psalms to be excellent examples of Hebrew poetry, containing its unique rhythm and being rich in linguistic pictures and epithets. But the most amazing was the wealth of their theological thoughts, since the psalms could draw hearts to the incomprehensible God, the Creator and eternal Refuge. All help, salvation, strength, and guidance came from him whose justice and holiness was harmonized with mercy and goodness. It was the believers' privilege, happiness, and duty to study the law of God. The honest words of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and cleansing in Psalms reinforced ethical integrity.⁶⁷⁷ However, in the introduction to this compendium, Pläte made clear that "the main content of Israel's religion was the hope for the promised Messiah." The promise of the future king reigning over Israel and over pagan nations was manifestly reflected also in the Psalms. The truly messianic psalms, according to Pläte, were Psalms 2, 45, 72, and 110. The messianic kingdom was the theme of Psalms 47, 67, 68, 75, 96, 97, and 98. In a hidden and symbolic way, the Messiah was proclaimed also in Psalms 16, 22, 23, and 40, as well as several others.⁶⁷⁸

Likewise, Pläte offered practical recommendations on how to study the Psalms and make best use of them. Since for many seminary students the ancient biblical languages and original texts were beyond reach, he advised them to work with translations in different languages and make comparisons. Because "every translation was a sort of exegesis," this usually helped the student to come closer to the original meaning of the text.⁶⁷⁹ Pläte suggested a few commentaries on Psalms which were useful for exegesis and practical application: K. J. Kraus' *Psalmen* (2nd vol., 1966) was mentioned as a scientific commentary; as more practical commentaries, he cited A. Weiser's *Psalmen* (2 volumes, 1963); H. Lamparter's *Das Buch der Psalmen* (2 volumes, 1964); D. Bonhoeffer's *Das Gebetbuch der Bibel. Eine Einführung in die*

⁶⁷⁶ Pläte 1972a, 2.

⁶⁷⁷ Pläte 1972a, 4.

⁶⁷⁸ Pläte 1972a, 5.

⁶⁷⁹ Pläte 1972a, 6.

Psalmen (1966); and Th. Jänicke's *Ich will den Herrn loben. Ein Psalmbuch* (1963). Additionally suggested was the work of C. H. Spurgeon, *Aus der Schatzkammer Davids* (1962 and 1966).⁶⁸⁰ From the newer literature available, Plāte mentioned Eberhard Jungel's *Predigten. Mit einem Anhang: Was hat die Predigt mit dem Text zu Tun?* (München, 1968).⁶⁸¹

But the most important thing when reading the Bible was “to listen to God himself speaking, because the Holy Spirit was the true Author and the best Interpreter of Scriptures.” This was a reminder of Luther's hermeneutical principle: *Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*. Psalms were not only sacred songs, but prayers as well. Therefore, Plāte encouraged students to sing, pray, and learn these songs by heart, as he noted that, regrettably, Psalms had not been used frequently enough.⁶⁸² Psalms had had an enormous influence on hymns and chorales with a sizable amount of renderings, free translations, and simple references. One of the most productive translators of Latvian hymns and chorales from the Psalms was the well-known pastor and poet Ludis Bērziņš (1870–1965).⁶⁸³ Unfortunately, the pericope of the Lutheran agenda did not offer many opportunities for preaching on the Psalms. Therefore, Plāte recommended students to pay closer attention to the liturgical introits, the first part of which always had some portion from the Psalms that could be employed and illustrated in general preaching. Sermons on Psalm texts could also be delivered during church festivals, occasional services, and especially in confessional sermons.⁶⁸⁴

In his compendium, Plāte made a special attempt to emphasize the universal character of these songs. Psalms tried to reach the totality of the human being: God sought to touch every human faculty – reason, consciousness, emotion, and volition. Plāte thus argued that the Bible was not only an ecclesiastical book, but an essential and integral part of the world's literature, and he stressed its cultural and historical significance. He urged Christians to read and be well versed in their Bible.

If we don't learn and recognize it by ourselves, then let us pick it up from our Marxist contemporaries who affirm this (cultural significance) to us.⁶⁸⁵

Plāte highlighted the universal character of biblical teachings by using some sweeping evidence from different fields and various contexts. Curiously enough, he made some occasional references to rather unexpected authors, who were well

⁶⁸⁰ Plāte 1972a, 11.

⁶⁸¹ Plāte 1972a, 12.

⁶⁸² Plāte 1972a, 9.

⁶⁸³ Plāte 1972a, 5. His better known translations treated Ps. 19, 23, 46, 73, 121, 124, 129, 126, 127, 128, 130, 133.

⁶⁸⁴ Plāte 1972a, 11.

⁶⁸⁵ Plāte 1972a, 6.

known for their contrary, even anti-Christian, views. The underlying idea was to demonstrate that the biblical worldview was substantially more comprehensive than the views of certain ideological systems and influential authors. The truth was often revealed in unexpected places, and Plāte made use of these authors as unwitting and unconscious witnesses to this biblical truth.⁶⁸⁶

Commenting on Psalm 8, regarding the magnificent creation of nature and human beings, Plāte quoted some great personalities of science approved also by the Communists. For example, he cited Immanuel Kant (1724–1804): “Two things fill the mind with increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me”; Isaac Newton (1642–1727): “The extraordinary order of the universe filled with suns, planets and comets could only come from the hand of the almighty and all-wise Being”; even more surprisingly, Charles Darwin (1809–1882): “No human being, standing in the daunting silence of nature, is able to escape the sensation that there breezes yet another kind of breath which is above natural”; and the famous Latvian left-wing socialist writer and poet Jānis Pliekšāns (or Rainis; 1865–1929), who extolled human beings: “Nature doesn’t know how great it is. Sun doesn’t know how hot it is. Heaven doesn’t know how boundless it is. But the human soul knows how impressive nature is....”⁶⁸⁷ Nevertheless, all the power and magnificence of nature would not be enough to create true faith. Natural light, empirical perceptions, and physical sensations had definite limitations. The essential greatness of God and his wonders were not perceivable by means of logical deductions or mathematical proofs. As a result, Plāte asserted that true faith had to come by the supernatural “enlightenment” from God’s Word, and he quoted Luther on the third article of the Small Catechism:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him, but the Holy Ghost has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me by his gifts, etc. Thus, for true faith the enlightenment of the Spirit was necessary.⁶⁸⁸

Even though God’s rule was universal and the economy of his truth was found everywhere, a clear distinction had to be made between godliness and godlessness, a blessing and curse, the Church and the world. These were different spheres ruled by opposing forces. In his exposition of Psalm 137:1–6, the difficulty of singing the Lord’s songs while living in a foreign land was discussed. It was an enduring battle

⁶⁸⁶ It was similar to the biblical pattern, in which even the high priest Caiaphas could prophesy that it was better for one man to die on behalf of the people. (John 18:14.)

⁶⁸⁷ Plāte 1972a, 14–15.

⁶⁸⁸ Plāte 1972a, 92.

to maintain the right loyalty. Believers' hearts were meant to belong to the spiritual fatherland, which could never be forgotten. The challenge, in Pläte's view, was that "too easily we forgot our songs of Zion, and, being put under certain constraints, we began singing along with the world." The divine "call to leave Babylon taught us to untangle and disengage ourselves from everything distasteful and appalling to God, so that we wouldn't be carried away to perdition."⁶⁸⁹ The call to loyalty and recognition of one's Christian identity while living in the foreign (Communist) "land" was a constant theme in this specific writing. In connection with Psalm 90, the prayer of Moses, "the man of God," Pläte asked particularly soul-searching questions: Are we truly pious? Are we like the man of God, whose identity was grounded in his unchanging will?

How important it is that we in our faith recognize ourselves in these Eternal Hands, which rule over the whole earth! Neither circumstances, nor blind fate, nor the will of mighty men of this world, but only his Eternal Hands will settle our lives. Let us learn from the man of God, Moses, to trust these Eternal Hands and always find our dwelling place in him. Remember that through Jesus those are gracious Fatherly Hands, from which none will snatch us out (John 10:29).⁶⁹⁰

In his exposition of Psalm 72, Pläte discussed the preliminary nature of all secular orders and governments, as well as some eschatological perspectives. He claimed that this psalm went far beyond the reign of Solomon and proclaimed the messianic kingdom to come. No secular kingdom has ever had a completely just and righteous ruler. There have been plentiful utopian fantasies of golden ages and a great number of dreamlands promising peace, harmony, stability, and prosperity. But none of them have delivered on those promises. The Communist utopia, even if not mentioned directly, was clearly implied. He believed that these promises went far beyond any secular order. Accordingly, this psalm must have been a distant prophetic vision, reaching as far as Christ's eternal Kingdom of justice and peace, to which Solomon's kingdom was only a witness. Only Christ the Lord would be able to bring to fruition the golden age of prosperity, when the afflicted would be defended, the oppressors crushed, and the needy saved from death.⁶⁹¹

But what about quotidian existence and down-to-earth duties? How should a Christian live one's life under these deficient conditions? Writing about Psalm 127, Pläte eulogized God-given blessings of secular existence, such as fruitful work, security of life, peace in one's family, contentment at home, and so forth. At the

⁶⁸⁹ Pläte 1972a, 117–118.

⁶⁹⁰ Pläte 1972a, 79.

⁶⁹¹ Pläte 1972a, 62–63. See DeKoster 1962, 63–81.

same time, he issued a serious warning: “No man in his earthly life, in his home or family, should ever forget that he was only a traveler here, a pilgrim to his eternal homeland.”⁶⁹² Accordingly, secular life should not be filled with sinful cares and fearful anxieties, but received with cheerful faith as a gift of God. All human cares had to be cast upon the Lord. At all times, believers had to abide under the gracious rule of their heavenly Father, because he was the only genuine peace, repose, and refuge. Only in the Lord was a believer kept completely safe, both in life and death.⁶⁹³

In this regard, it is notable that Plāte did not distinguish the Soviet regime as some kind of unique phenomenon. One had to learn from church history, “a wonderful book for instruction in faith,” which taught how various generations in their time had struggled with their temptations and tribulations, and that the life of the Christian Church had at all times been hidden under the cross of Christ. Ultimately, it was beyond human reason to grasp the method by which God kept building his kingdom of eternal peace in this world of constant battlefields. But his revelation brought words of the grand promise, which delivered cheerful hope for all children of God.⁶⁹⁴

4.3.7 Practical Exegesis of Old Testament Texts: Supplement (1973)

In 1973, to Plāte’s work on Practical Exegesis was added a supplement that dealt with seven selected Old Testament texts.⁶⁹⁵ With the first text, the so-called proto-evangelium (Gen. 3:15), Plāte intended to emphasize again the leitmotif that the Old Testament was Christ’s book and that it should be taken as such for every biblically minded theologian.⁶⁹⁶ He expressed dismay over the failure of many theologians to recognize the divine inspiration of the Old Testament and its unity with the New Testament, and here he mentioned the Latvian scholar Jānis Sanders.⁶⁹⁷ “It was a devilish cunning that cast doubts about the trustworthiness of the Word of God, similar to the snake in the paradise garden.”⁶⁹⁸ He referred to previous discussions on the place of the Old Testament in the Bible, rebutting voices that spoke against

⁶⁹² Plāte 1972a, 106.

⁶⁹³ Plāte 1972a, 106.

⁶⁹⁴ Plāte 1972a, 47.

⁶⁹⁵ Plāte 1973b, 118. These selected texts and their titles are as follows: 1) The Old Testament as the Book of Christ (Genesis 3:15); 2) On the Road away from Sinai (Numeri Chapters 1, 10, 11, 12); 3) Installment of Joshua into the Office (Joshua 1); 4) Worship without Deceit (Amos 5:4–6, 21–24); 5) Heavy Burdens (Habakkuk 1:1–4); 6) A Prayer Song of Habakkuk (Hab. Chapters 3 and 4) and; 7) It Pays to Serve God (Malachi 3:13–18).

⁶⁹⁶ Plāte 1973b, 118.

⁶⁹⁷ On Jānis Sanders, see Talonen 2016, 19–20; 30.

⁶⁹⁸ Plāte 1973b, 122.

it as if it were a specifically Jewish religious book in which Jews were addressed by their national deity, while in the New Testament one could hear the voice of the true God. He claimed that

the Bible stood and fell as a whole, uniform, undivided book. Its teachings from the beginning to the end were so tightly interwoven together, as the text at hand confirmed, that there was no doubt about its trustworthiness, or otherwise the whole Bible had to be given up.⁶⁹⁹

Pläte agreed that the Bible had its historical setting, sequence, and progression of revelation, yet he could not accept the separation of the Old Testament God and New Testament God because there was only one true, eternal God who did not change. He used a variety of ways and methods to introduce and reveal himself to mankind, though. Those ways and methods could change, adapting to the day and age. At the same time, the organic unity of the Old and New Testaments had always been preserved, and this truth was essential for the life and existence of the Church. Once again, Pläte repeated his worries that extreme versions of theological liberalism had “poured water on the windmills of infidels”:⁷⁰⁰ “If theology hadn’t been cutting the branch on which it was sitting, our situation would be much better than it is now.”⁷⁰¹ In his view, such scientific-rationalistic theology had treated the Scriptures without reverence, “mocked wonders, and treated those as myths and legends.”⁷⁰² Its greatest sin was irreverence and mistrust, which had been causing the most damage.

If only one percent of the whole energy this theology has wasted on criticizing the Bible (especially the Old Testament) and striving for cheap popularity would be used for defense of the biblical truth, then our house would be standing strong against all attacks.⁷⁰³

4.3.8 Practical Issues of Poimenics (1974 and 1982/83)

Addressing several practical aspects of pastoral care, this compendium was created as a supplement for the *Poimenics* compendium. The first edition was written in 1974, but the second version was enlarged and improved in 1982/1983 with some additional thoughts and quotations from newer books.⁷⁰⁴ In this overview, both of these editions are used. Already the title page indicated that the basis for this com-

⁶⁹⁹ Pläte 1973b, 122.

⁷⁰⁰ Pläte 1973b, 123–124.

⁷⁰¹ Pläte 1973b, 125.

⁷⁰² Pläte 1973b, 125.

⁷⁰³ Pläte 1973b, 125

⁷⁰⁴ Hans-Joachim Thilo, *Beratende Seelsorge. Tiefenpsychologische Methodik dargestellt am Kasualgespräch*. Göttingen, 1971; Jānis Luksis *Dvēseļu kopšana* (Care of Souls). Rīga, 1979.

pendium was a book by another author, dialectical theologian Dr. E. Thurneysen's *Seelsorge im Vollzug* (Zürich 1968).⁷⁰⁵ Pläte relied on this book extensively and added his own commentary. In this compendium, he also employed other books of pastoral theology, which were not available at the time of writing the first *Poimenics* compendium. Most of the attention was directed toward issues of marriage counseling and the care of the souls of the sick and dying. The appendix provided two additional articles by Prof. Dr. Alberts Freijs taken from the Church Calendar (BK 1942 and 1944): "Inner obstacles of matrimony" and "Outer obstacles of matrimony." Docent Pläte recommended that these articles had to be studied thoroughly by every pastor seeking to care for the soul.⁷⁰⁶

The goal of these lectures was to define and explain the basic principles of poimenics and, likewise, to provide an analysis of specific cases. He mentioned three poimenical presuppositions: 1) the highest value of every human soul; 2) the threat of being left on one's own; and 3) a certain higher aim (heavenly bliss), to which the human soul was called and sought to reach.⁷⁰⁷ Pläte accepted Thurneysen's definition that pastoral care, in its very essence, meant an individual preaching of the Christian message, which was rooted in the Word and was always responsible before the Word. Care of souls was a distinct spiritual conversation, a preaching from person to person. This preaching had to be clear and comprehensible, without speaking "over one's head." But every true conversation started by listening. "Listen, listen!" The art of listening was crucial for care of the soul.⁷⁰⁸

Since poimenical conversations led to a confrontation with the Word of God, two things were important: 1) that the content of preaching affirmed the reality of God and his Word, and 2) familiarity with the spiritual world of the people addressed.⁷⁰⁹ Thus, the one caring for the soul had to be firmly grounded in biblical truth. Excellent knowledge of the Bible was required. Following Thurneysen, Pläte almost ex-

⁷⁰⁵ Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974) "was a Barthian who brought Barthian theology of proclamation directly into the sphere of pastoral care. Pastoral care, for Thurneysen, primarily was a matter of deepening a troubled Christian's sense of justification. For Thurneysen, behind all human problems was the sin of self-justification. The source of all human spiritual difficulties was the drive to earn one's salvation, one's own justification – either before other humans, before oneself, or before God. Care and counseling was a relentless process of pronouncing, yes, proclaiming in the intimacy of a caring relationship, that all justification comes from God and must be received in faith. In Thurneysen's formulation, the dichotomy between inner and outer, immanence and transcendence, became more of a dialectic. God's justifying grace came totally from the outside. Rather than hurled like bolts of lightning from some elevated pulpit, however, it was now gently and persistently communicated within confines of an intimate conversation." "The Treasure of Earthen Vessels," ed. Brian H. Childs & David W. Waanders, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, p. 126.

⁷⁰⁶ Pläte 1974, 37.

⁷⁰⁷ Pläte 1974, 1.

⁷⁰⁸ Pläte 1974, 3.

⁷⁰⁹ Pläte 1974, 4.

clusively identified poimencal work with proclamation and the preaching of God's Word. Correct care of souls, as well as a correct sermon, could be accomplished only if based on a legitimate theological foundation.⁷¹⁰ At the same time, proper theology always became transformed by thinking and talking about God in a conversation with the Lord. Hence, prayer was also an important and indispensable part of the poimencal process.⁷¹¹ However, the very basic principle of poimencal preaching was that its main content had to be God's Kingdom, which sought to bring the rule of Christ into every human soul, as summed up by his teaching.⁷¹²

For the purposes of this study, the most relevant section of this compendium is "My personal poimencal experience," in which Plâte directly expressed his own thoughts and ideas. This part was written in response to a request by the Rector of the seminary, Roberts Priede, who was in charge of the Department of Practical Theology. He asked for a description of specific poimencal "situations" from Plâte's own pastoral work and experience. Responding to the request, Plâte started by referring to a comment he had heard from a pastor who confessed that during the 30 years of his ministry, he had had only one poimencal conversation. Plâte pointed to the absurdity of the situation, as "there was something obviously wrong with the life and preaching of this pastor." Even though this minister might possess some great oratorical and philosophical skills, his sermons clearly "hadn't proclaimed the biblical message about human sin and God's grace."⁷¹³

Plâte was convinced that biblically correct preaching would inevitably create occasions for poimencal conversations. If the theological message was not delivered properly, the fault was not so much with the listeners as with the pastor. Plâte honestly admitted that he himself could not boast of having vast experience in this regard, yet nevertheless he had had a good number of such conversations, which had most often taken place after his sermons had properly featured the indispensable biblical statements on sin and grace. Most frequently, people responded when they heard admonitions about "the great importance and necessity of private confession."⁷¹⁴

Furthermore, Senior Pastor Plâte related several stories that stood out in his own pastoral praxis. Frequently, these were situations when people became involved in spiritually confused behaviors or addictions, with the pastor trying to help the person in need. In his congregations, Plâte had discovered various sorts of magic, su-

⁷¹⁰ Plâte 1974, 5.

⁷¹¹ Plâte 1974, 7.

⁷¹² Plâte 1974, 8. Plâte 1982/1983, 16.

⁷¹³ Plâte 1974, 32.

⁷¹⁴ Plâte 1974, 32.

perstitutions, and relics of traditional folk religion among the people. He had listened to people's confessions, finding their entanglement in magic, adultery, and various other sins, which had left a powerful, longstanding negative imprint on their spiritual life. Often these poimenics conversations revealed rather painful experiences of parenting (when children led corrupt and godless lives, committing sins under the influence of alcohol, etc.) and people in general found no peace in their faith.⁷¹⁵

The so-called "sin of magic" was a particular concern. Pläte was puzzled by the situation, since it was difficult to speak about such problems with modern people. He was well aware how offensive, unfitting, and inadequate it was to discuss these issues, not only from the secular and materialistic viewpoint, but also from the viewpoint of contemporary theology. These problems had been swept under the rug and completely ignored.

No theological faculty or academy, as it seems to me, properly addresses these questions, for they are considered unworthy topics, as some kind of medieval psychosis. The greatest obstacle, in this respect, comes from liberal theologians, who think that the devil is a medieval fairy tale, not a biblical truth and reality.⁷¹⁶

According to Pläte's opinion, this evil reality had to be taken seriously, as it was done in the book written by the German pietist theologian Ernst Modersohn, *Im Banne des Teufels*.⁷¹⁷ Pläte observed that these sins of the occult were common and widespread, being present in nearly every parish. If believers did not admit and repent of this sin, it became a major hindrance blocking their way toward true spiritual life and resilience. With several stories from his personal experience, Pläte claimed that a partial or complete renewal of spiritual life was possible only through confession and repentance of former sins.⁷¹⁸ "The sin of magic," according to Pläte's candid and self-critical diagnosis, had been found even among the most active members of his own congregation.⁷¹⁹ These kinds of spiritual perceptions about the dark unseen realities of the human soul dwelt rather heavily on his mind.

Oh, those are quite awful affairs! It would be really wonderful, if these matters

⁷¹⁵ Pläte 1974, 32.

⁷¹⁶ Pläte 1974, 33.

⁷¹⁷ *Im Banne des Teufels*. Marburg an der Lahn: Francke, 1975.

⁷¹⁸ Pläte 1974, 33. For example, Pläte told a story from his own experience: "In my congregation, there was a man who constantly wore a very warm hat for seven years, both in summer and winter. Every time he took it off in public he had terrible headaches and no medicine could help him. For this reason, of course, he could not attend church either. Moreover, he had a second "trouble": he could not touch his sister's car "Volga." When he had done that, there happened an immediate accident on his farm. After he told me these things, I gave him Modersohn's book *Im Banne des Teufels* to read. Reading that, he became convinced that he was guilty of sin of magic: he had gone for help to sorcerers and fortune-tellers. He repented of his sin, disclosed and confessed, and while on his knees praying, he renounced all the deeds of Satan. For several years already, he is freed from this possession, being a good member, decent attender of church and a helpful brother for other people in such disasters."

⁷¹⁹ Pläte 1974, 33.

were just fairy tales! Nonetheless, they are very scary realities, my friends. And it is not only around here, in this dark corner, Rucava, as we are sometimes being called. But, please, go and talk with your own congregation members about these matters, and you will become surprised by the things you are going to discover. Then you'll be able to understand Pastor Modersohn and me. Because it is truly disastrous for our congregations!⁷²⁰

In this manner, Plāte encouraged young pastors to be well acquainted with the spiritual world of the people in the pews and in the streets. It did not matter if some of them claimed to be totally secular, without spiritual relations. Pastors had to be familiar with the problems of secular life, created by the age of industry and technology, and acquainted with the worldview mostly dominated by the natural sciences. They had to be ready with apologetic counter-arguments, in order to demonstrate that secular society was also in need of faith. That could be done only if the one caring for souls stayed strong in his reliance on the Lord, who was the only true salvation not only in former times, but always. Also in the secular world, Plāte argued, human hearts remained restless until they found peace in God, according to the famous words of St. Augustine. Likewise, worldly people were looking for some kind of authoritative word which this world could not provide. Worldviews clashed and replaced one another. Nevertheless, only the Lord possessed this supreme, authoritative Word. It was critical that the one caring for souls had himself, first and foremost, received God's Word and was filled with it, so that other people could see him believing it and living accordingly.⁷²¹

Plāte was convinced that the situation of the modern world, here called "the city without God," was quite similar to that of the period of the early church. Therefore, "the city of God" (Mt. 5:14) must be upheld against "the city without God." Even the most distant, alienated people in reality did not belong to themselves. All people belonged to God, and even "worldly" people were loved by him. No one was outside and beyond hope. The promise of life applied even to the worst people. The strongest statement of God was made by the arrival of Christ and his Kingdom. His Son had come into the flesh and gone to the uttermost lengths, even through death, to take human existence under his care. Now the Lord was forever present in this world with all its ungodliness, sin, and death, being its Savior.⁷²²

At the same time, Plāte expressed his heartache about the current situation of the LELC, which regrettably was ill-equipped for the care of souls. The message of

⁷²⁰ Plāte 1974, 36.

⁷²¹ Plāte 1982/1983, 12.

⁷²² Plāte 1982/1983, 11.

the Church had lost its comprehensively biblical character and had been reduced to caring for narrow personal piety. No wonder so many modern people placed their trust in luck, magic amulets, and blind fate.

But we, being Christ's Church, have to be heralds of God's Kingdom, "the salt of the earth," as Jesus said, and under his authority we have to overturn this belief in a blind destiny, for at all times and in all places we should stress the truth that God rules everything!⁷²³

Ultimately, the Christian Gospel was the message to bring hope, encouragement, and joy to the believer's soul. According to Pläte, joy was a necessary characteristic that had to be reflected also in the personality and outward expressions of the spiritual caregiver. Sad and "long," gloomy faces only cast shadows over the message of the greatest hope.⁷²⁴ It would be easier to understand such self-evident recommendations if it is remembered how the gloomy totalitarian reality often left notably visible imprints on people's faces, such that happy and smiling dispositions had become a rarity. For that reason, the presence of true joy in believers could be a vital and powerful witness of hope that transcended the threatening environment. Christian ministers were called to attest to this joy both inwardly and outwardly. It had to be an important part of their demeanor, not because they were some kind of cheap comforters helping to foster people's private piety, but because they were joyful messengers of the Gospel proclaiming God's Kingdom. This joy was possible due to the situation when the pastor, according to Pläte, was made at the same time independent and dependent: on the one hand, independent from other people and worldly powers; on the other hand, dependent on the Spirit's guidance obtained through the study of God's Word and a life of prayer. In a special way, the spiritual caregiver was God's herald and a fulfiller of his task, going forth and preaching the powerful and living Word of God for human salvation.⁷²⁵

The pastor as God's witness and carer for souls had to preach and counsel in full accordance with God's Word. Christ had to be proclaimed by means of current, contemporary dogmatical statements, which were ideally shaped and formed with all the necessary assistance received from various theological fields. It meant that the spiritual caregiver had to be a well-prepared theologian who had been reading and studying thoroughly. Rather atypically, in this case Pläte made some favorable comments about the historical-critical research of the biblical material, suggesting

⁷²³ Pläte 1982/1983, 26.

⁷²⁴ Pläte 1982/1983, 29.

⁷²⁵ Pläte 1982/1983, 32.

that even such scholarship could offer some positive contributions.⁷²⁶

In conclusion, Plâte offered some overall observations. Pastors not only had to be well-educated, but also generally well-rounded personalities and skillful communicators with the positive perception of a conversation partner. It was crucial that they understood human existence in the modern environment, which was dominated by the natural sciences and the latest technology, and interpreted by modern psychology, psychotherapy, anthropology, and sociology. Likewise, they had to be acquainted with representations of humanity as depicted by modern art and literature. All of these were auxiliary tools for understanding the human predicament. Learning from all these fields was a vital task in order for the pastor to be prepared and qualified for the poimenical task.⁷²⁷

Plâte sought to maintain high standards and requirements for future pastors as well. By no means could they be lowered due to the shortage of pastors and the pressing, complicated Soviet circumstances. Confirming that these requirements were not only theoretical aspirations, Plâte mentioned his own recent experience, namely, a situation when he denied a recommendation to one of his own congregation members desiring to study theology and become a pastor. This specific person had a powerful drive to witness about God, which, Plâte admitted, was one of the important signs for anyone contemplating ministry. Nonetheless, it was not enough, since this drive was about the only factor that was right. The other characteristics of the person were completely inadequate for the qualifications to become a pastor; they included a lack of basic education, blind religious fanaticism, the inability to distinguish a main idea from supporting details, a quarrelsome personality, and extreme narrow-mindedness. Moreover, this person had never fulfilled any useful service in his own congregation. Allegedly, this person had denied all these objections, saying that God himself did not permit him to do other things, immediately punishing him with sickness if he did, since he had been destined for a higher call – namely, preaching! In his concluding remark, Plâte summarized his thoughts:

Undoubtedly, in our days we need people who are zealous for pastoral call, but meanwhile we need to accept only those who have a broad and fully educated outlook.⁷²⁸

⁷²⁶ Plâte 1982/1983, 53.

⁷²⁷ Plâte 1982/1983, 54.

⁷²⁸ Plâte 1982/1983, 54.

4.3.9 *Explanation of the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther (1980)*

One of the most important pieces that Plāte wrote was *Explanation of the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther: A Basic Knowledge of Christianity for Acceptance in a Congregation*. In the introduction to the compendium, he indicated that it was not only a textbook for students, but also an instruction applicable to pastors and teachers for serving their congregations.⁷²⁹ At the very beginning, he helpfully provided a brief history of Luther's Small Catechism and its translations in the Latvian language. The first translation of the Small Catechism, published in 1586, was done by Dobele Pastor Johann Rivius de Recklinghausen, whereas the first Latvian translation of the Large Catechism was published only in 1894. Plāte suggested that the best introductory work on the catechisms in Latvian was a book by Pastor Jānis Ērmanis published in the interwar period.⁷³⁰

The study, learning, and teaching of the catechisms was a crucial task, according to Plāte. A proper knowledge of the basics was required for every worker of the Lutheran Church. The fundamental issues of faith had to be taught to each and every congregation member, especially confirmands. For an in-depth study, he offered a list of books dealing with catechetics in Latvian. Some of them provided only "bibliographical and culture-historical impressions," but a few of them could be used also as practical tools. Particularly important, in his opinion, were catechetical works by J. Nissens, J. Ērmanis, and H. Grīners-Grīnbergs; quite old and theologically conservative, these books represented the "old Dorpat" theology.⁷³¹ From more recent studies, Plāte praised the catechetical explanation by Pastor Jānis Birģelis in 1939⁷³² as a treatment of the whole Catechism. In spite of "too much sermonizing," which was not very good for a textbook, he still considered it the best book at the time.⁷³³

Recognizing the vacuum of spiritual learning created by the Soviet era, Docent Plāte recommended the Small Catechism as the best way to introduce doctrine in an "obvious, concise, easy-to-grasp manner." The Catechism provided a disciplined and systematic approach to biblical study. It helped to form a worldview and guard

⁷²⁹ Plāte 1980, 1.

⁷³⁰ Plāte 1980, 1–2. *Dr. Mārta Luterā Mazais katķisms – evaņģēliskās luteriskās draudzes dārgums*, Rīga, 1929.

⁷³¹ Plāte 1980, 3. 1) J. Nissens, *Sarunas par Luterā Mazo Katķismu*. Grāmata visiē Dieva vārda mīlotājiem. Rīga, 1872. 2) Kārlis Brandts, *Dzīvības ceļš jeb Mārta Luterā Mazais Katķisms, izskaidrots ar Dieva vārdiem*. Rīga, 1881. 3) P. Siliņš, *Mārta Luterā Mazais Katķisms*. Rīgā, 1892. 4) J. Ērmanis, *Kristīgās ticības mācība pēc Dr. Mārta Luterā katķisma*. Rīga, 1902. 5) *Vadonis katķismā*. Rokas grāmata skolotājiem. Rīga, 1907. 6) *Dr. Mārta Luterā Mazais Katķisms*. Rīga, 1913. 7) Andrejs Brods, *Mūsu bērniem*, 1. un 2. Part. No date. 8) Arnds Šellers, *Katķisms līdzībās*. Rīga, 1912. 9) *Jaunā kristīgā māju grāmata*. *Vadonis ticības mācībā*. Ed. H. Grīners and T. Grīnbergs. Rīga, 1911. From newer books: 10) Dr. Beldavs, *Esiet stipri!* No date. 11) *Es un mans nams*. Rīga, 1940.

⁷³² Birģelis 1939.

⁷³³ Plāte 1980, 4–5.

against false teachings. Plāte endorsed the Catechism as “full of deep thoughts ... giving a brief summary of all dogmatics” and avoiding scholarly theological heavy-handedness.⁷³⁴ The main aim of Luther’s piece was to demonstrate the way of salvation, as the law of God revealed the limits of human possibilities and the good news of the Gospel revealed God’s mercy in Christ. Afterwards, the Lord’s Prayer and the sacraments were designed to help the believer walk the path of faith and arrive at the ultimate destination, eternal life.⁷³⁵ In his treatment of the Small Catechism, Plāte adhered closely to the biblical text and Luther’s formulations. He widely used quotations from the Large Catechism and other writings. Besides extensive accounts, illustrations, and stories from the Bible, Plāte frequently also employed citations from classical literature⁷³⁶ and poetry,⁷³⁷ as well as illustrations from well-known works of art⁷³⁸ and different fields of science,⁷³⁹ illuminating the faith within a wider context and cultural relevance. He tried to express more complex and abstract biblical truths in a down-to-earth manner, linking them to examples from everyday life.

There are various examples of treatments in which Plāte with implicit language tried to reflect on the shadows of Soviet reality. For instance, talking about the third commandment, Plāte addressed the issue of declining church attendance when so many Christians chose to make their life easier by skipping church on Sunday. In order to change the situation for the better, he encouraged stronger discipline:

Services should be attended not only a few times a year, but regularly, each time they are held. Many Christians have become lazy about receiving the Sunday blessings. There would certainly be a more conspicuous growth in spiritual matters if believers came to church services in a more orderly and regular way.⁷⁴⁰

Similarly, when teaching about the seventh commandment, Plāte focused his attention on the Soviet principle of equal property for all. He argued that it was impossible to achieve this well-known ideological slogan by force. That ideal was wrong and needed revision:

The idea of total equality is unrealistic, since nature doesn’t know equality. Spiritual capacities differ as well. Even if suddenly today everyone were made equal,

⁷³⁴ Plāte 1980, 5.

⁷³⁵ Plāte 1980, 6.

⁷³⁶ From classical Latvian literature: Rūdolfs Blaumanis’ novel *Pazudušais dēls* (Prodigal Son), the novel by the Kaudzītes brothers *Mērnīeku laiki* (The Age of Land Surveyors), etc. From world literature: Leo Tolstoy, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Shakespeare, etc.

⁷³⁷ The Latvian poet Tīrzmaliete, German poet Heinrich Heine, etc. Plāte also used many church hymns, as well as his own poetry.

⁷³⁸ For example, *The valley of Tears* by Gustave Doré.

⁷³⁹ Physiology, biology, bacteriology, ecology, social sciences, medicine, etc.

⁷⁴⁰ Ceļš no. ¾ 1989, 39.

already tomorrow all would change again. Don't misunderstand me, I am not against ideals and aspirations of social justice. They are necessary. Yet, the Bible teaches that people should not be considered tools or slaves, but rather brothers and sisters. And it's a shame that Christians have not been able to achieve such social justice on earth.⁷⁴¹

In the discussion on the Apostle's Creed, particular attention was given to the definition of faith. Instead of viewing faith as a sort of private, narrow, subjective, and marginalized opinion (as religious beliefs were generally viewed in Soviet society), Plâte described faith from various aspects and in the widest way possible: for example, faith as having both conscious and subconscious value; faith as unfaltering trust and reliance on the Lord in the Old Testament; faith as repentance and a change of mind in the Synoptic Gospels; faith as joyful, personal intercourse with the Lord without fear and full of life revealed in John's Gospel; faith as the special power of God grasping the whole human being in St. Paul's writings; faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" as the classical formulation from the Letter to the Hebrews; and faith comprising not only the present, but also the future, and not only secular life, but also the otherworldly life with God.⁷⁴²

After several attempts at a definition, Plâte made the final conclusion that faith always remained beyond explicit description. No illustrations from human life could cover its entire meaning. Ultimately, faith was life in God and life with God, reaching beyond all human capacities and connecting the human soul with the incomprehensibility of God's gift and power. It was the Lord's own imprint on the human soul that drew believers nearer to him. At the same time, Christian confessions were meant to give a verbal articulation of faith. Confessions such as the Apostle's Creed could never get old because they gave a verbal expression of God's essential revelation in Christ and made a connection among believers of every historical period. The ancient creeds and the genuine content of the Christian faith did not need to accommodate newer and more advanced ideas.⁷⁴³

For instance, the biblical story of creation, according to Plâte, had to be accepted as the story of origins, being "wonderfully deep and unsurpassed." The story was not written for purposes of natural science. It was not even an answer to the historical question about the way this world was made. Rather, it was the answer of faith, which was the genuine and trustworthy answer. Scientific theories were only more or less reliable, always transforming with the ever-changing times and people.

⁷⁴¹ Plâte 1980, 58–59. See DeKoster 1962, 47.

⁷⁴² Plâte 1980, 75.

⁷⁴³ Plâte 1980, 76–77.

Hence, human beings were not products of evolution, but special creatures of God, the crown of his creation.⁷⁴⁴

In terms of his philosophical position, Plâte agreed with the thinkers who recognized the two basic principles predominant in both the secular and spiritual realms: freedom and determinism. All of life and nature was a perpetual interaction between set rules and variable actions. All living creatures had their types and variations. In the same way, human life was also governed by God, both in its settled destination and freedom to choose. These opposite and contrary principles could be harmonized only in the Lord. He was also the only one uniting the micro and macro worlds.

God saw and knew the great and the small, the distant and the nigh, He counted the stars and also tears in the eyes of his children, and nothing remained hidden from his sight.⁷⁴⁵

In the second article, speaking about the paradoxical unity of Christ's two natures, Plâte became particularly engaged in a discussion on human nature and the historicity of Jesus. In a particular way, the figure of Jesus had always been regarded as outstanding, so that even the skeptical and hypercritical spirit of the current age had not been able to touch him. The historicity of his person, as judged by an objective scholar, was beyond any doubt; this was also confirmed by sources of secular history. The same could be said about the historical core of the Gospels and apostolic letters.⁷⁴⁶

All suspicions, as expressed by god-deniers against the Gospels and Epistles, are totally unfounded. Even the famous German writer J. W. Goethe in his conversation with Eckermann said that he doesn't doubt the authenticity of the Gospels, because they are thoroughly genuine, for in them there is this vivid reflection of the greatness which has emanated from the person of Jesus; these accounts are based on reality. Could it really be possible that men without education, as the evangelists generally were, would be able to reproduce a detailed character, which in all its features was distinct from those that were typical for the nation? How could they possibly describe the man – the ideal who lived contrary to the traditions and didn't concur with the general upbringing, national patriotism, religious and other features, which were held by Jews to be holy and beautiful? This could not possibly be done in any other way. The writers certainly had seen the person and then described him. It's truly blindness to proceed without recognizing the historical core of the Gospels.⁷⁴⁷

In conclusion, it must be stated that Plâte's compendium on the Catechism was the best-known, most widely read, and most-employed material of all his literary

⁷⁴⁴ Plâte 1980, 80.

⁷⁴⁵ Plâte 1980, 81–82.

⁷⁴⁶ Plâte 1980, 89.

⁷⁴⁷ Plâte 1980, 89–90.

output. In the era when religious literature was scarce, such basic texts were eagerly sought after. Introducing Lutheran teaching and essential Christianity in a popular language, this book turned out to be very warmly appreciated in the Lutheran Church. As soon as publishing was made possible, the LELC had chosen to print Plāte's compendium in the renewed theological periodical *Ceļš* (The Way). This publication, as related in the introduction, was justified by two significant reasons. The first was the deeply felt necessity at this time "for books which helped to introduce and familiarize with the basic principles of Christianity and the Lutheran Church." The second was the commemoration of the 75th birthday of Senior Pastor and Seminary Docent Nikolajs Plāte.⁷⁴⁸ It was an unmistakable validation and appreciation of his legacy.

This work was published in 1989, when the new historic period of *perestroika* had already emerged. Deep spiritual hunger and yearning were felt by many people after a half century of an atheistic regime. It was a period of change, when the Church experienced a notable religious awakening and an influx of people, with greater numbers coming to church for instructions, baptisms, and confirmations.⁷⁴⁹ For those purposes, printed materials were of great value to the pastors and teachers providing catechetical instruction. Thus, Plāte's little book had come at the right time. Its value and worth was soon recognized. Already during the first part of the 1990s, this treatment became a kind of a standard textbook. In this way, even though he himself did not live to see *perestroika* and the renewal of the Church, by means of his popular catechesis Plāte was able to effect continuing theological influence on the LELC.

4.3.10 Confessio Augustana: Translation and Exposition (1981)

Another contribution in the field of confessional theology and systematics was Plāte's translation and exposition of *Confessio Augustana* (CA) from 1530. Before this, the only Latvian translation dated back to 1893; it was outdated, but also difficult to find. The need for a new translation was obvious, for the CA was important as the foundational document of Lutheran Church.⁷⁵⁰ Plāte's translation was accomplished on the basis of the scholarly edition of *Liber Concordia*, edited by Dr. Heinrich Bornkamm, which reproduced the *Liber Concordia* editions of 1580 and 1584

⁷⁴⁸ Ceļš 3/4 (1989): 5. The printed version of Plāte's Explanation of the Catechism consisted of 170 pages.

⁷⁴⁹ About the situation in the LELC in the end of the 1980s, see Sapiets 1988 and Masitis 1999.

⁷⁵⁰ Plāte 1981a, 9.

and attempted to establish the original text.⁷⁵¹ Pläte admitted: “It was from this text that I made this translation with my limited Latin language skills.”⁷⁵² But he admits that he used not only Latin, but also the German original text, which was helpful to make a better sense of the theological statements.⁷⁵³ Following the translation of the CA, he proceeded with a historical and theological exposition of the work. As the main resource, Pläte cited recently printed *Confessio Augustana: Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens* (1980), which contained 24 research articles written by Lutheran and Catholic theologians, offering both a historical and systematic evaluation of the CA.⁷⁵⁴

According to Pläte, the concept of confession was rooted in the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the Early Church. The Apostle’s Creed was not to be understood as “holding the correct dogma and accepting the facts of salvation, but rather a living path, a definite movement, always advancing toward God.”⁷⁵⁵ The movement of faith was always a personal act in which the whole personality – mind, will, and emotions – was involved. Furthermore, this confession was not an expression of an isolated, individual “I,” but of the whole Christian community, saying “we confess.” The content of faith was the summation of revelation in Jesus Christ, as he spoke and acted eschatologically.⁷⁵⁶ Since Scripture was *norma normans* of the Christian religion, the confession of faith was only *norma normata*, never equal to the authority of the Bible. The Augsburg Confession was considered the main document of the Lutheran Church, in which the character of the denomination was expressed most distinctly. Referring to the words of Dr. Alberts Freijs, Docent Pläte regretted that the CA had remained so unknown in the country and that the LELC’ members viewed the faith predominantly in terms of the Apostolic Creed and the Small Catechism.⁷⁵⁷

Pläte insisted that the CA had to be considered not so much as an individual work of Melancthon, but a “distinguishing creation of the common (Lutheran) spirit,” which was better to be understood with the assistance of Luther’s views and

⁷⁵¹ *Liber Concordia*, ed. by Dr. Heinrich Bornkamm, Göttingen, 1936.

⁷⁵² Pläte 1981a, 9.

⁷⁵³ Pläte 1981a, 7. There were two distinct versions of the Augsburg Confession – German and Latin – which actually were not translations, but free renditions of one and the same theological position. The differences between them were insignificant.

⁷⁵⁴ Pläte 1981a, 1. *Confessio Augustana. Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens*. Frankfurt am Main: Gemeinsame Untersuchung lutherischer und katholischer Theologen /24/, 1980.

⁷⁵⁵ Pläte 1981a, 4.

⁷⁵⁶ Pläte 1981a, 4.

⁷⁵⁷ Pläte 1981a, 5–6.

terminology.⁷⁵⁸ The CA was not strictly a systematic work, but rather a polemic one, which was formed in a certain historic situation: the Reformation struggle.⁷⁵⁹ The Gospel remained the true measure for the evaluation and formulation of Christian teaching, being the all-important standard for the life and doctrine of the Church. The Gospel was God's address to people in Jesus Christ. It was not

a lifeless doctrinal statement, depositum, but a living and active event of the Gospel proclamation and Sacrament distribution, through which people are truly justified in Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶⁰

The exposition of the CA dealt with its primary sections, and the initial articles received the most extensive discussion. Plâte tried to introduce the vital context and fundamental controversies of Reformation history, explaining Luther's discussions with the Church of Rome on the one hand and with the so-called "enthusiasts" on the other. The interpretation of the various texts was supplemented with references to other confessional writings of the Book of Concord and also with contemporary illustrations. For example, in connection with the first article, Plâte started to argue with Dr. A. Freij's statement that the doctrine of the Trinity did not have any particular meaning for the practical religious life of the individual. Although Plâte granted that the eternal Trinity always remained the deepest "mystery for our intellect," yet he insisted that the Holy Trinity and God's evangelical character of love, goodness, and perfection had perpetual significance for the day-to-day life of a believer.⁷⁶¹

Likewise, a more extensive discussion was devoted to the doctrine of justification, "the center of all the Christian life and teaching." Plâte discussed this issue in the sequence of questions and answers. Was not the doctrine of justification stressed too much? Was not such an emphasis a narrow approach and a sign of heresy? Plâte answered: No, it is not. In his view, the doctrine of justification was the true center and focal point of all evangelical theology, and other doctrines hinged on it. But did not this teaching depend on Luther's experience? Was it possible for such a personal experience to be made into a general rule? Plâte answered that it was universal experience and Luther's evangelical statement on justification by faith could not lose its importance, even though doctrinal emphasis had changed over the centuries. If the search for a gracious God and justification today did not seem so meaningful, it was because of the secularization of the Christian community and its theology.

⁷⁵⁸ Plâte 1981a, 13.

⁷⁵⁹ Plâte 1981a, 10.

⁷⁶⁰ Plâte 1981a, 12.

⁷⁶¹ Plâte 1981a, 69.

Therefore, the doctrine of justification had to be maintained.⁷⁶²

In the summary, Plāte made several essential points regarding the importance of the CA for Lutheranism: 1) this confession expressed the true character of the Lutheran Church, 2) it drew boundaries and marked off theological propositions that were not evangelical, and 3) it was also an ecumenical statement that opened up the way for a unification of Christian denominations. Meanwhile, Plāte also expressed some reservations concerning the CA. Not all its solutions and statements could be accepted at face value by a modern man, or even by a Lutheran theologian. His most crucial reservations stemmed from its historical relativity. Being historically based, the statements of the CA needed revision in relation to the changed historical situation. What did it mean in the ordination vows that the clergy were bound to teach according to the Lutheran Confessions? On confessional loyalty, Plāte wrote, “when the LELC required an ordination vow be given, the Lutheran Confessions by no means stood on the same level as the Holy Scriptures.”⁷⁶³

In Plāte’s view, the authority of Scripture was the one and only rule, standing high above all the confessions of faith, and it was “a rule that was ruled” by the Bible. Even though he insisted that every Lutheran pastor had to be properly acquainted with all the articles of the CA, it did not mean that the ordination vow demanded obeying their “letter” but rather that pastors were urged to accept and implement its crucial and important elements.⁷⁶⁴ In that sense, Plāte taught a *quatenus* subscription instead of a *quia* subscription, which implied that pastors were to follow the CA not *because* the confession was faithful to the Bible, but only *insofar* as it was faithful.

4.3.11 Dogmatics, Parts I and II (1981)

In the field of dogmatics, Plāte had some prominent predecessors. At the beginning, the docent of dogmatics was Dr. Alberts Freijs. When he taught the course, Freijs assigned students to read Prof. Voldemārs Madonis’ work *Evanģēliskā dogmatika* (Evangelical Dogmatics), printed in 1939. Many students complained that it was a “difficult course,” mainly due to Maldonis’ complicated book.⁷⁶⁵ After Freijs’ death, the subsequent docent was Vilis Augstkalns. From his lecture notes, Augstkalns had produced the compendium *Jaunāko laiku dogmu vēsture* (The Newer History

⁷⁶² Plāte 1981a, 79.

⁷⁶³ Plāte 1981b, 138.

⁷⁶⁴ Plāte 1981b, 138.

⁷⁶⁵ Mesters 2005, 213.

of Dogma),⁷⁶⁶ where he focused on the more recent history of dogma, in which Luther was treated most thoroughly, but less so on other topics and subjects, such as Orthodoxy, Pietism, Rationalism, Schleiermacher, Biedermann, some developments in confessional theology, mediation theology, Ritschl, Troeltsch, evangelical movements, biblicism, dialectical theology, Tillich, Swedish theologians, and Reinhold Niebuhr.⁷⁶⁷

Pläte was assigned to lecture on dogmatics starting from 1979.⁷⁶⁸ While lecturing on the subject, he produced his last manuscript, *Dogmatics*, in two volumes. This manuscript consisted of 365 pages and made use of more than 40 different theological books. Apart from K. Barth, the most frequently quoted books were V. Maldonis' *Evanġēliskā Dogmatika* (1939), W. Trillhaas' *Dogmatik* (1962), K. Kerner's *Einführung in die Theologie* (1957), P. Althaus' *Grundriss der Dogmatik* (1958), and W. Elert's *Die Lehre des Luthertums im Abriss* (1924).

In the basic structure of this compendium, Pläte followed Maldonis' book: Prolegomena, Teaching on God, Christology, Pneumatology, Eschatology. But even if he employed Maldonis' structure and discussed some of its texts, his method was clearly different and independent from his teacher's. Specifically, Pläte disagreed with his "pneumatic method, where objects of faith were constructed in symbols and symbolic statements."⁷⁶⁹ He deemed this method too complicated, because it did not provide enough clarification. "Generally, this method was descriptively local and often consisted of a pure rational criticism which was disagreeable to a theologian who maintained the authority of God's Word."⁷⁷⁰

From the very beginning, Pläte voiced criticism against various types of rational and speculative theologies, because whenever theology lost a deeper connection with ecclesiastical life, it inevitably became transformed into some kind of secular science, which soon could turn into absolute atheism.⁷⁷¹ Thus, true theology could be maintained and "cultivated only in the soil of the Church."⁷⁷² In many ways, Pläte preferred to follow the theological course of Barth, whom he considered the

⁷⁶⁶ Augstkalns 1974, 2. In the introduction, Augstkalns wrote: "This compendium in the newer history of dogma was created during my work at the Academic Theological Courses in the school years 1972/1973 and 1973/1974.

The characteristic feature of this compendium is that the dogmatic views of Martin Luther are treated quite extensively, but other dogmaticians from Melancthon until our days are treated rather briefly. ... I am thankful to the Lutheran World Federation for sending the necessary literature."

⁷⁶⁷ Pläte 1981b, 3–6.

⁷⁶⁸ ^{Atis} Vaickovskis interview on January 5, 2016.

⁷⁶⁹ Pläte 1981b, 17.

⁷⁷⁰ Pläte 1981b, 17.

⁷⁷¹ Pläte 1981b, 10.

⁷⁷² Pläte 1981b, 10.

greatest theologian of the 20th century. He went along with Barth's overall critique of foregoing anthropocentric and cultural Christianity, and he also gave him credit for reestablishing the importance of dogmatics in the life of the Church.⁷⁷³

Pläte highly valued Barth's reassertion of the authority of Scripture. For that reason, he showed his greatest appreciation for Barth's writings⁷⁷⁴ and his contribution to the contemporary developments, as his theology was able to rise above critical speculations of ratio and stand in humble submission under God's Word. Presumably, one's attitude toward the Bible was the most significant yardstick by which Pläte measured theologians:

Rudolf Bultmann with his theory of "demythologization" and Paul Tillich with his existential philosophy are deep-thinking theologians who have tried to interpret the Bible in terms of contemporary thought and to express the dogmas of the Christian faith in modern language. However, they have departed from the Bible as the witness for God's revelation in action.⁷⁷⁵

Barth's dictum "The Word of God stands in the Bible!" was extremely important and necessary for the Church in crisis. This proposition was repeated by Pläte in innumerable variations. God, his Word, and his revelation once again had to become the dominant assumptions and fundamental starting points for all theology. He repeatedly emphasized that theology could not be separated from the Church and the practical needs of pastoral ministry and Christian preaching.⁷⁷⁶ Striving to break free from the narrow confines of scientific, materialistic, anthropocentric worldviews, Pläte sought to guide dogmatics back to faith in God's Word and biblical revelation. He praised

the Christian faith as that special sphere which transcended not only science, but also all religion. Christianity started where the search of other religions came to their limits. If other religions had been only human roads to God, Christianity was God's road to humans. It was the story of how God sought man.⁷⁷⁷

Christianity was a much broader concept. The biblical faith included a total movement of the human spirit, comprising all factors and faculties of human life, encompassing past, present, and future events, including the current and the next world.⁷⁷⁸ Due to its intellectual elements, theology, to a certain extent, was a science:

⁷⁷³ Pläte 1981b, 10; 16; 40–41.

⁷⁷⁴ Pläte 1981b, 40. He used Dr. Karl Barth's *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik, Erster Band Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes. Prolegomena zur Kirchlicher Dogmatik*. 6. Auflage. Zürich, 1952. *Zweiter Band: Die Lehre von Gott* 3. Auflage, Zürich, 1948, as well as Dr. Karl Barth's *Credo. Die Hauptprobleme der Dogmatik dargestellt im Anschluss an das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis*. München, 1935.

⁷⁷⁵ Pläte 1981b, 47.

⁷⁷⁶ Pläte 1981b, 41.

⁷⁷⁷ Pläte 1981b, 2–4.

⁷⁷⁸ Pläte 1981b, 2–4.

since Christ's Church had a definite path throughout history, it was necessary to identify and describe this path. For that purpose, some adequate research methods were necessary.⁷⁷⁹ Pläte suggested the so-called dialectical method used since Barth's time. It was a method that expressed the content of God's unfolding revelation not by some direct statements, but by an interplay of contrasting statements, by thesis and antithesis. Thus, God's attitude was not to be grasped within the synthesis of one thought and one word; there were always two thoughts and two words, standing in opposition to each other and mutually casting light upon the matter.⁷⁸⁰ Only with such a dialectical approach could dogmatics communicate about grace and freedom, God and Satan, man and sin, etc. At the same time, Pläte cautioned that the dialectical method should by no means be confused with the philosophy of dialectical materialism.⁷⁸¹

In the first part of *Dogmatics*, a good deal of attention was devoted to the doctrine of God's Word, briefly considered above.⁷⁸² Apart from that, the important focus was directed at Christology, because Scripture primarily preached the "event of Christ,"⁷⁸³ by which the dynamic revelation of God's personal love was expressed. The event of Christ was not only a subject of historical and psychological investigation, but a subject of faith.⁷⁸⁴ But faith, being a personal phenomenon, always required an individual decision. Meanwhile, this faith was also willing to know and understand what it believed in,⁷⁸⁵ which led to the doctrine about the person and work of Christ.⁷⁸⁶ At the same time, Pläte admitted, the dialectical approach could create some insurmountable difficulties for an exegete or theologian. Nevertheless, it was the task of Christology to evaluate and spell out the evidence of Christ in the New Testament.⁷⁸⁷ Pläte intended to put forward a balanced Christology. It meant knowing Christ "from below" (anthropocentric) and "from above" (theocentric), because both of these approaches were found in the New Testament. Both ways had to be held together to avoid one-sidedness and incorrect conclusions.⁷⁸⁸ For Pläte, the *historical Jesus* was "a unique fact of human history,"⁷⁸⁹ which would be recognized

⁷⁷⁹ Pläte 1981b, 9–11.

⁷⁸⁰ Pläte 1981b, 19.

⁷⁸¹ Pläte 1981b, 21. See DeKoster 1962, 29; 82–99.

⁷⁸² See chapter 4.2.4 on Pläte's approach to the Bible.

⁷⁸³ Pläte 1981b, 161.

⁷⁸⁴ Pläte 1981b, 162.

⁷⁸⁵ Pläte 1981b, 30.

⁷⁸⁶ Pläte 1981b, 164.

⁷⁸⁷ Pläte 1981b, 31.

⁷⁸⁸ Pläte 1981b, 165.

⁷⁸⁹ Pläte 1981b, 171.

by any objective historian.⁷⁹⁰ He even referred to the Soviet scholar M. Kublanov, who in his book *Jēzus Kristus – dievs, cilvēks vai mīts* (Jesus Christ: God, Man, Myth?) had openly admitted the historicity of Jesus.⁷⁹¹ Meanwhile, the person of Jesus was not limited to history. Consequently, the picture of Jesus presented by liberal theology, from Plāte's perspective, was different from that of Christ's Church. He pointed out the limitations of the quest for the historical Jesus, saying: "Since the human and divine nature in the person of Christ constituted an inseparable unity, he stands beyond rational and exact study."⁷⁹²

Plāte stated that there was no real basis for skepticism toward the gospels and apostolic letters, and that any scholar failing to recognize the historical kernel of the gospels was simply blind.⁷⁹³ On the one hand, Plāte argued that everything learned about Jesus in the New Testament is *kerygma*, a message about him. On the other hand, he was critical of Bultmann's view that the historical Jesus had no importance for *kerygma*, and he agreed with Trillhaas that from the very beginning Jesus was the Jesus of faith, also with regard to his historical person. Plāte concluded that the historical Jesus could not be separated from the kerygmatic Christ: "Everything that Jesus says, does and teaches – the whole event of Jesus – claims faith."⁷⁹⁴ Yet, the historical Jesus at all times remains a mystery because the hidden God revealed himself in Jesus Christ only indirectly, "not for sight but for faith."⁷⁹⁵

From the rest of his dogmatical discourse, the most relevant topic for this study must be the ecclesiology and, more specifically, the renewal of the stagnating Lutheran Church. This perplexing dilemma weighed heavily on Plāte's mind, and he addressed the issue frequently in his writings. Plāte recognized a palpable sense of stagnation, when the Church felt like a museum.⁷⁹⁶ The dilemma was discussed in his Dogmatics under the heading of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁹⁷

Why is it so that our congregations have become increasingly empty? No, it is not our age we should blame. It would be better to investigate our own faults! ... We, Lutherans, have become so stiff, cold and restrained by the liturgical ceremony, where prayers are always read, and sermons sound tedious... Has not our Church

⁷⁹⁰ Plāte 1989, 89.

⁷⁹¹ Plāte 1981b, 170. It is a translation from the Russian original: M. M. Кубланов. Иисус Христос – бог, человек, миф? (М. Наука, 1964).

⁷⁹² Plāte 1981b, 169.

⁷⁹³ Plāte 1989, 89–90.

⁷⁹⁴ Plāte 1981b, 174–175.

⁷⁹⁵ Plāte 1981b, 182.

⁷⁹⁶ Plāte 1981c, 25.

⁷⁹⁷ In the beginning of his treatment, Plāte gave a historical overview of the doctrine on the Holy Spirit and lamented the gradual reduction of the Holy Spirit, which eventually via the Enlightenment had made the work of the Spirit insignificant and replaced it with the light of reason. Plāte concluded that there was the most miserable ignorance and misconception about Holy Spirit in churchly circles. (Plāte 1981c, 3.)

become a community of a ceremonial cult? Haven't we buried the cause of Jesus Christ under dead formalism?⁷⁹⁸

These comments are interesting because they demonstrate Plāte's disapproving attitude toward the formal, liturgical, and ceremonial expressions of Christianity. With regard to other denominations, he leaned more toward Baptists than Catholics. As attested by his son Modris, Plāte was little interested in Catholic spirituality,⁷⁹⁹ in spite of the evidence that Catholics were presumably more resistant and survived the Soviet period better than Lutherans.⁸⁰⁰

If the LELC had undergone a sharp decline in membership, baptisms, confirmations, the Roman Catholic numbers for baptisms, confirmations and even marriages remained surprisingly stable, with a smaller degree of decline. In the 1970s, as many as 60% –and in some areas 70–80% – of all Catholic children were baptized. In Catholic regions, there were five times as many marriages performed by the Church than in other parts of Latvia. Why? First, this could be explained by Catholic piety being less dependent on individual faith, the Bible, or discursive thinking. The mind and reason held a secondary place for Catholics. The center of focus for Catholics stood beyond intellect, as seen in their tendency to call things a mystery. And such a sense of mystery could not be easily overcome and swept away by the rational arguments of the Soviets. Secondly, this mystery stood together with the authority of the Pope, magisterium, and clerical hierarchy, which for them embodied the whole truth. It was not like the Lutheran individual conscience, which had to stand before God more or less alone with God's Word. For Catholics, it was more collective, where each baptized member enjoyed the guardianship of the RCC. A Catholic believer did not have to solve all questions or doubts by oneself, but rather trust and be obedient to the RCC, which provided shelter for all. For a Catholic, therefore, it was easier to lay aside one's own private judgment, overcome doubts and contradictions inflicted by the Communists, and simply obey the Church.⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁸ Plāte 1981c, 24.

⁷⁹⁹ Modris Plāte interview on December 12, 2014. A credible explanation for his distaste could be his early experiences growing up in the Latgale region, where the Catholic religion was largely dominant and commanding, while Nikolajs Plāte belonged to the strong-willed Lutheran minority. For a better understanding of the Catholic mentality in Latgale, see Strods 1996.

⁸⁰⁰ Sildegs 2013.

⁸⁰¹ Outward Christianity for Catholics was crucial. Rituals were cultivated, and holy acts were performed with sacred objects, conferring spiritual blessings *ex opere operato*. The biggest "headaches" for Communists were caused by this persistent Catholic lifestyle and traditions, such as outdoor crosses, veneration of holy images, signing of the cross, kissing of the priest's hand, and the mutual greeting ("Praise be to Jesus Christ!"). Those things endured in spite of all opposition. As one Soviet propagandist complained, in Catholic areas you could hardly find an apartment without holy images! It appeared that this outward ritualism helped keep the Catholic identity alive, as they kept attending services, baptizing, getting married and performing funerals in church. See Strods 1996, 289–344.

Such types of thinking were alien to Pläte. It was apparent that his approach was much more low-church and Protestant-oriented. Hence, when Pläte had to find possible solutions for the Church in crisis, he did not look at outward piety, external fixes, or institutional reforms, but rather inner spiritual repentance and renewal of faith. He focused on such sources of strength as God's Word, revelation, and the work of the Holy Spirit, as well as useful church traditions. The main tools and spiritual resources to rejuvenate the Church were to be found in the message and individual conversions. Pläte insisted that the best hope was not some kind of outward activism or increased numbers, but true spiritual vitality and strength.⁸⁰²

Subsequently, Pläte tried to explain the Spirit's works in the soul, applying not only biblical witness but also the old Lutheran *ordo salutis*.⁸⁰³ Meanwhile, he admitted that dogmatic formulations did not cover the whole range of religious experience, pointing also to the variety, spontaneity, and depth of pneumatic work that comprised all types of religious traditions and experiences. This work involved all human faculties (mind, will, and emotion) and, interestingly, also included art and science as secondary tools of the Spirit's *illuminatio*.⁸⁰⁴ The primary mission of the Spirit was to spread the salvation won by Christ's death and resurrection. The Spirit accomplished this by means of grace – preaching the Gospel, baptism, absolution, the Eucharist – by which the Church of Christ was created, gathered, and kept in true faith until the point of salvation. But “whenever some traditions were about to stifle (the Church), the Spirit provided some new impulses and urgings.”⁸⁰⁵ God's Spirit was the Spirit of regeneration, renewal, and the source of all life. He was not some kind of inner “divine spark,” but God himself present and working in humans.

If Christ could be called God for the sake of human beings, then the Holy Spirit was God in human beings. And the purpose of the Spirit's work was to dwell in man and to bring man into the closest proximity to God.⁸⁰⁶

A whole subsection in *Dogmatics* is devoted to the question of charismatic renewal. Despite having no personal experience with this phenomenon, Pläte nonetheless thought it important to introduce it to his students. From the book *Evangelischer Erwachsenenkatechismus*,⁸⁰⁷ he provided the following conclusion: the charismatic movement ought to be seen as a sign of the times and a call from God that should be taken seriously and with an open mind. Even though the historic experience of the

⁸⁰² Pläte 1981c, 23.

⁸⁰³ Pläte 1981c, 12–13.

⁸⁰⁴ Pläte 1981c, 13–19.

⁸⁰⁵ Pläte 1981c, 19.

⁸⁰⁶ Pläte 1981c, 20.

⁸⁰⁷ *Evangelischer Erwachsenenkatechismus*, ed. Werner Jentsch, Gütersloh, 1975.

Pentecostal movement had not achieved the long-desired renewal in the traditional denominations (often causing divisions and splits), the charismatic realities should not be ignored or dismissed, “because even through those experiences God speaks and we should pray that we receive these realities for ourselves and for the blessing of the Church.”⁸⁰⁸

Pläte noted that in ecumenical conversations, both the Orthodox Church and charismatic evangelicals had often asked about these phenomena: What did the Lord mean by them? Thus, charismatic phenomena always ought to be carefully evaluated in terms of whether the alleged Spirit’s witness was in agreement with the witness of Jesus and whether love for one’s neighbor was present. In conclusion, Pläte once again repeated that the whole Church was in need of renewal, but these newer movements had to stay faithful to the older traditions, which had sustained the faith for ages.⁸⁰⁹ Pläte observed that in the minds of people, there were various images, projections, and also misconceptions about the Church:

For some the Church is a fatherland, a safe hiding place, a signpost on the road, a way to peace, while for others the Church is a self-evident custom, tradition, a distant conductor, which occasionally provides some trustworthy knowledge or a solemn framework for important moments in life. Furthermore, for others the Church is a place of meeting and exchange of ideas and reflections, a source for impulses, engagement and activities. And, finally, for many the Church is an age-old, stifled, and dying institution, which brings only negative sentiments. Accordingly, on the one hand, the word ‘church’ causes feelings of aggression, but on the other hand some higher, often unconscious longings.⁸¹⁰

According to Pläte, the true spiritual understanding of the Church always comes from searching Scripture. Principally, the Bible has taught that the Church is a community of believers, grasped and held together by Jesus Christ. There are a variety of metaphors, words, and pictures in the Bible that describe the Church as a field, temple, God’s house, Christ’s bride, etc.⁸¹¹ For a basic definition, the people of God,⁸¹² the body of Christ,⁸¹³ and the community of believers⁸¹⁴ were the most important. Likewise, the four essential attributes of the Church were given in the Apostles’ Creed: *Credo in unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam.*⁸¹⁵

The main marks of the Church, according to the Lutheran Confessions, were

⁸⁰⁸ Pläte 1981c, 23

⁸⁰⁹ Pläte 1981c, 23.

⁸¹⁰ Pläte 1981c, 26–27.

⁸¹¹ Pläte 1981c, 27–28.

⁸¹² Pläte 1981c, 28.

⁸¹³ Pläte 1981c, 29.

⁸¹⁴ Pläte 1981c, 30.

⁸¹⁵ Pläte 1981c, 32–33.

“Word and Sacraments.” Pläte quoted CA 7, which defined the Church as the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel was preached in its purity and the holy sacraments were administered according to the Gospel.⁸¹⁶ From Smalcald Articles IV, he borrowed the idea that the chief mark of the Church was the Gospel, delivered through baptism, the holy sacrament of the altar, the power of the keys, and the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren.⁸¹⁷ Pläte basically agreed with Luther that the safest and greatest mark, the only unfailing and real “guiding star” revealing the locations of Christ and his Church, was the Gospel.⁸¹⁸

But what did true Gospel mean? How could this mark of the Church be recognized? For Pläte, this “*recte docetur*” of God’s Word meant that the message was rooted in biblical content, the historical Jesus, the apostolic teaching, and the revelation which was the basis of the proclamation (Heb. 1:1–2). Furthermore, due to the historical relativity of biblical revelation, the scriptural word could not function as an infinite, ultimate “weapon of truth.” For that reason, Pläte suggested that it was necessary to *actualize* the biblical word, in order to take the Word out of its original setting and apply it to the current conditions. Accordingly, since the historical and spiritual situation, by its very nature, was always changing and posing new dilemmas, the Bible at all times needed new and realistic interpretation.⁸¹⁹

What did these dogmatic formulations and standards mean for the current reality? Pläte was quite aware that it was one thing to talk about elevated ecclesiastical ideals, but it was quite different and more problematic to face the actual Soviet-era reality. Considering these conditions, he asked: How far could one get with these high-flying words and definitions? Where could one find the true Church while living under the harsh limitations of real life? With questions like these, he pursued a realistic, historical evaluation of the Church as a formation in motion, always changing, rising and falling.⁸²⁰ In this section, Pläte came somewhat closer to discussing his down-to-earth vision of the ecclesiastical structure and its having a better chance to endure and survive the current crisis. Once again, he approached it via types and examples of the overall historical experience. Church history offered at least three discernible theoretical types of church formations, which could be distinguished by specific features – “three centers of gravity” or three different convictions – by which churches developed in different directions as they stressed their

⁸¹⁶ Tappert 1959, 32.

⁸¹⁷ Tappert 1959, 310.

⁸¹⁸ Pläte 1981c, 35.

⁸¹⁹ Pläte 1981b, 46; 59.

⁸²⁰ Pläte 1981c, 35.

specific ecclesiastical aspects.⁸²¹ These three types were:

1. *Church as the mediator of salvation.* This type of church (most clearly, Roman Catholic, Orthodox) strove for a mediating position in order to be the impressive, orderly, and universal distributor of salvation. Being a solid institution, this type also tended to be hierarchical, sacramental, and legalistic. The positive feature of this type of church was its historical permanence, often withstanding all changes like a rock. The negative was that behind this strong ecclesiastic authority and guardianship, the individual became considerably less important and remained immature.⁸²²

2. *Adult or mature church.* This type (for example, Baptist and different groups within the traditional churches) emphasized personal faith, individual responsibility, and the universal priesthood. Usually, this type of church was characterized by its democratic structure, close fellowship, and a mentality of separation from “the world.” The problem with this type was its oftentimes legalistic approach, resistance against tradition, and its denial of infant baptism.⁸²³

3. *Church as a group of action.* This type (especially national or people’s churches) was intent on serving the wider society. The Church was meant to serve others, often the whole of society. It was in this tradition that Plâte saw the participation of the Church in the fight for peace, social justice, welfare, opposition against oppression, etc. This type of church started social and political actions, even attempting to change societal structures. The problem with political involvement, in his opinion, was that it usually transformed the mission of the Church, taking the main focus away from Gospel ministry, causing secularization and a loss of ecclesiastic identity.⁸²⁴

While these were only classifications, lacking purely analogous examples in reality, in each of these ecclesiastical types Plâte recognized something essential to the character and mission of the Church. If taken to the extreme, these types surely could cause damage to the Gospel and also produce negative effects in the life of the Church. Therefore, Plâte contemplated a vision of an “ideal type,” trying to find a balanced approach, so that those centers of gravity might be harmonized in a correct relationship with each other.⁸²⁵

What were the results of this quest for the ideal? “Which denomination has succeeded in this task perfectly?”⁸²⁶ No doubt, Plâte asked a rhetorical question here.

⁸²¹ Plâte 1981c, 36.

⁸²² Plâte 1981c, 37.

⁸²³ Plâte 1981c, 39.

⁸²⁴ Plâte 1981c, 40.

⁸²⁵ Plâte 1981c, 41.

⁸²⁶ Plâte 1981c, 42

In the empirical reality of denominations, such an ideal was not to be found. No ecclesiastical body satisfied all of the criteria. Therefore, after considering all the options, Plāte brought the argument back to the Word and Sacraments. The Church was present where the Gospel was present. The full reality of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church was ultimately a matter of faith. There was no way around it – the reality of the Church had to be believed. Thus, the actual task of the historical church was to remain faithful to the Gospel and the Confessions, standing under the authority of the Bible and rooted in the right tradition, and organizing ecclesiastical life for the long run.⁸²⁷

4.4 ENDEAVORS WITH POETRY

An essential element of Plāte's personality was his intense love for poetry and literature. He certainly felt very passionate about it, continually reading, translating and producing some of his own material. As recalled by one of his contemporaries, Plāte had a number of personal journals filled with collections of poetry. From different sources he had gathered spiritual poems of German hymn-writers and translated them into Latvian. A good deal of his own compositions and translations were inserted in the leaflets used for cemetery festivals and other occasions.⁸²⁸ One of Plāte's hymns, treating the subject of the divine Word, was printed in the Hymnal of 1992.⁸²⁹

To be sure, it was more than just a pleasurable pastime. It became a lifelong passion that he took very seriously. Plāte started writing poems already in his early youth. He published a few of his poems for the first time during his student years.⁸³⁰ His passion for poetry could be attributed both to his education and personality. The time of national independence, when Plāte was raised and educated, was pervaded by the spirit of national romanticism that spread throughout the entire society – culture, ideology, and the school system. Even church life was affected by these romantic tendencies. Hoping that the LELC could be a true national church and spread the Gospel throughout the nation, many of the Lutheran theologians became actively engaged in the cultural surroundings in order to read and discuss writings – both poetry and the novels of the famous Latvian authors – and to implement them for

⁸²⁷ Plāte 1981c, 41

⁸²⁸ Staburags (7.01.1995), 5.

⁸²⁹ Dziesmu grāmata latviešiem tēvzemē un svešumā 1992, no. 207. (Hymnal.)

⁸³⁰ Jaunais Cīnītājs (1937/9, 1).

theological purposes. Likewise, many of the Lutheran clergymen published poetry of their own. Even a substantial portion of professors at the Theological Faculty were said to be preoccupied with poem-writing.⁸³¹ Following the prevailing mode, Plāte, like many students at the time, became strongly influenced by the poetic and eloquent style of expression and strove to imitate it.

Although Plāte studied philology and literature for just a semester and was not highly trained in the field, poetry became an enduring interest and leisure activity. Subsequently, he committed himself to extensive individual study, thereby acquiring a good sense for the poetic craft. In one way or another, Plāte remained continuously engaged with poetry. However, most beneficially, he was able to use his skills in regards to hymns. Plāte's poetic endeavors were also supported by his colleagues in the ministry who had similar interests. Such clergymen as A. Vecmanis, J. Luksis, E. Sēnals, and J. Bērziņš continued to be active with the Lutheran hymnody throughout the Soviet era, producing a considerable amount of new material. Eventually, all of these men, including Plāte, were invited to participate in the Hymnal Emendation Commission, a group appointed by the LELC to carry out a revision of old hymns and an introduction of new ones.⁸³² Plāte's efforts and contributions in the area of the Lutheran hymnody later became well-recognized and appreciated.⁸³³

The love for poetry accompanied Plāte for the most part of his life. Presumably, it was the emotional and invigorating value of poetry that appealed to him most strongly. He seemed to be convinced that through this specific medium, some of the most intense, inexplicable, and mysterious sensibilities of human life could be articulated. Indeed, Plāte read and wrote poetry not only for aesthetic delight and an inspiration of faith, but also as a means of dealing with various difficulties in his personal life. This is attested by the fact that even during his darkest hours, when he had to cope with the tragic loss in his family, Plāte resolutely turned his heart to the introspective and symbolic language of poems. It is apparent that he highly valued the solitary power of poetic words and considered them to be very helpful in sorting out one's emotional struggles and promoting healing of one's inner life.⁸³⁴

Moreover, Plāte's involvement with poetry brought to light another, rather unexpected trait of his character, namely, an emotional awareness and sensitivity. This characteristic contrasted with the external toughness and somberness that Plāte

⁸³¹ Biezais 1995, 221.

⁸³² LELBA, *Dziesmu grāmatas emendācijas protokoli*, 1981. Regrettably, there are few resources preserved from the work of this Hymnal Emendation Commission which could describe Plāte's role in it more extensively.

⁸³³ BK 1984, 198–199.

⁸³⁴ See chapter 3.2.4, The tragedy of losing a son.

displayed in his family and social interactions. Therefore, it sometimes felt as if two contrasting elements were fused together in Plāte's personality, as he often behaved tough on the outside and soft on the inside. It appeared as if Plāte, whether consciously or not, immersed himself in poetry for the sake of mitigating his difficult character, thereby conveying a milder side of his personality. This observation was made by a long-time Rucava parishioner and family friend, Natālija Zuļģe. In retrospect, she remembered the impressive production of his poetic labors and expressed her amazement about it. Zuļģe deemed it paradoxical that Plāte, a tough character in his private life, was able to craft poetry with a light and lyrical style, gentle rhymes, and delicate phrasing. Apparently, these poetic talents served as a good counterpoint for balancing his outwardly reclusive and introverted nature.⁸³⁵

Moreover, Plāte's literary abilities were also clearly beneficial for practical church work. Plāte definitely had a way with words, which positively contributed to his pastoral ministry. He did not hesitate to insert suitable poems into his proclamations. He used a wide range of literary elements throughout his preaching and writing, bringing into play pointed artistic images and applicable hymn verses in almost every sermon. Since poetry made up a great part of the Bible, he assumed it to be a fitting and effective vehicle to reach the human soul and to express beliefs of Christianity that were often ineffable. Apart from that, poetic expressiveness also afforded some unique opportunities to approach human beings from an angle that did not require scientific verification. In such a manner, Plāte's way of speaking and writing was marked by poetic strength and vigor, and it became one of the main components that made his voice so distinctive.

4.4.1 Spiritual Songs: Poetry From the Period of Youth

Plāte's unique voice can be heard most distinctively in his own poetry. The finest selection of his poems is provided by his self-made poetry book, which was put together in 1970 and includes some of his earlier compositions. The book is called *Garīgas dziesmas: Jaunības laika dzejas* (Spiritual Songs: Poetry From the Period of Youth), which contains 80 pages and around the same number of poems. Structured according to themes, it resembles a small hymnal where each song refers to a corresponding melody. This collection starts with the Trinity, then continues with Christ and salvation, and afterwards proceeds to the themes of Christian living and, finally,

⁸³⁵ LL 2007/01 (218), 16.

to some other hymns for special occasions.⁸³⁶ In order to provide a brief summary and overview of this book, only a few compositions can be selected and a cursory reading afforded. Given the general difficulties of rendering poetry in translation, a loss of eloquence also appears inevitable. Thus, in the following examination, his poems will be paraphrased and turned into prose, in this way offering at least some idea of his approach to doing poetry and developing poetic notions.

In one of the first poems, Plâte treats the topic of creation. He begins with a few rhetorical questions: Who has the wisdom to explain the origins of universe? Is it possible that life started from dead matter? His answer is no. Even the best human accounts about the origins are not convincing and cannot give true peace of mind. Therefore, people must be freed from a fallacy of polluted human wisdom, scorn, and prejudice, in order that every thirsty soul can learn from the Scriptures and drink from their genuine wisdom. It is on this road that people will find the primary source, the Creator himself, who is able to create everything out of nothing and generate life of a thousand types while displaying the true grandeur of his created world. Even though humans are just like specks before the all-seeing eye of the Almighty, nevertheless the divine truth prevails “that the Lord loves me, an earthling, as if I was the only one.” Along this line of biblical faith, Plâte sought to guide all the “quick-witted fellows,” offering an answer to the human quest for origins which truly satisfies and provides peace of mind.⁸³⁷

In the next section, a memorable Christological hymn of praise is found. In this poem, Plâte depicts the figure of Christ as being completely unique and without equal: “Jesus was noble and pure of heart, acting meek and manly, and subjecting his will to God’s.” For that reason, Christ keeps shining forever through the shifting clouds of ages and remains a perpetual inspiration, when in the power of his renewing love the Lord always raises new heroes in his flock. Even if the roots of Jesus stem from ancient times and a foreign land, where he suffered hatred and mockery, he is nonetheless crowned with everlasting glory and splendor. In the end, the poet extols Christ by asking: Who on earth is like him, who covers sins, serves all people, and delights with his love? Is there anyone like him who is able to offer such great blessings? In this manner, Plâte praises Jesus as the only begotten Son, being elected from eternity.⁸³⁸

In another poem, he renders the popular story of Nicodemus. From the very

⁸³⁶ MPPA Plâte 1970b, 1–80.

⁸³⁷ Plâte 1970b, 6.

⁸³⁸ Plâte 1970b, 15.

beginning, Pläte creates a rather specific atmosphere with an opening line and the repeated refrain “sparkle stars in heaven’s window.” The restless and troubled Nicodemus is making a mysterious visit by night and is kindly welcomed by Jesus. The old man listens to the tale of a new birth and genesis of a new and liberated race, which is just around the corner. Nicodemus is greatly puzzled by the statements of Jesus, because his own death seems closer than a new birth. He gets to hear the harsh teachings about the end of the old order, the limitations of the flesh, and the regenerating Spirit sent to overcome sin and death. After such an enigmatic conversation, the old man walks home perplexed. Yet, in spite of his bewilderment, Nicodemus has heard the promise of the Gospel, which proclaims that his time of freedom is also at hand. Indeed, the same story holds true today: through new birth and the forgiveness of sins, every old man can be born anew and become rejuvenated with eternal life.⁸³⁹

Yet another compelling image is employed by Pläte in his Pentecost hymn, where he chooses to portray the event of Pentecost as a frightening picture of a human soul caught up in fear and trembling. The terrified soul happens to stand in the middle of a tempest, a thunderstorm shaking all of the doors and windows, causing the human heart to tremble. The premise of this poem is initiated by an anxious question: What sort of storm and lightning is this, where tongues of fire are hovering over the crowd of people? *Kyrie eleison!* The tension is released by the fact that there are still some people in the crowd capable of speaking. What is more, they are able to praise the wonders of God in tongues that are intelligible to everyone. Finally, the poem is concluded by a statement that the ancient phenomenon of Pentecost has in fact spread its fire over believers of every century. By means of the Holy Book and prayer, it keeps burning even today. The wind and fire of God’s Spirit is undeniably strong enough to consume all sin and evil, as well as to regenerate human lives.⁸⁴⁰

The theme of neighborly and brotherly love is taken up by Pläte in another poem. The harsh realities of daily existence have hurt and wounded many people, while others have become utterly hardened and yet others coldhearted and indifferent. At the same time, however, these weary people with their solitary existence are still our brothers and sisters. Hence, the poet asks: “Love, have you become weary, too?” After that follows a prayer pleading to God for the wonderful power of love, which is the only true force to carry all burdens, to raise every soul, and to renew human vitality. The poet seeks to support all those who are unable to carry on by bringing

⁸³⁹ Pläte 1970b, 17.

⁸⁴⁰ Pläte 1970b, 24.

them to the almighty God, in whose love every wound can be healed. Under the guidance of the Savior, everybody is called to share the same road and the same goal, in order to walk with true faith through the short days of life, as believers are covered with the coat of immortality and joined together with the bond of love.⁸⁴¹

The next hymn worth mentioning deals with the Eucharistic meal. Its main lines describe a believer's hope and longing for the future heavenly feast. Since the road to God's Kingdom is narrow, lengthy, fraught with perils, and surrounded by darkness, each traveler has to remain vigilant and hasten on before night comes. Every earthly mortal should be allured by such a celestial feast, for which God himself is setting the table and serving his children with the cup that is filled with joy and peace. In anticipation of this heavenly meal, the Lord is already now accomplishing some mysterious things inside the ancient church walls. Already in the present, God is building his bridges and uniting his Spirit with ours. Through this meal, believers become privileged to ascend the celestial stairs and look at the pearly gates, as they kiss the flower of Christ's blood while singing: "Holy, holy, holy!" In virtue of such an experience, believers acquire a bird-like freedom to take off and partake in a renewed, sanctified life, when they will begin listening to the sound of heavenly music that conveys to their hearts true joy and peace.⁸⁴²

Another poem to be briefly examined here deals with the subject of confirmation. The situation with diminishing numbers of youth and the increasingly aging Church had made the task of keeping youngsters in the church very critical. Bearing in mind the acute situation, the poem is specifically focused on faithfulness. Each verse begins with an admonition to loyalty and steadfastness. But all proper wisdom starts with counting one's blessings. First, there is the blessing of one's God-given parents, who are more valuable than silver or gold. Secondly and most crucially, there are the blessings drawn from the wonderful treasures of faith. According to Pläte, these precious gifts are gravely threatened by the surrounding world. He denounces this world as extremely shortsighted, without "eternal thoughts" and providing only empty, fruitless illusions. Yet, when the dark hour comes, strength comes only from the Lord. Therefore, youth should stay on the narrow road that leads to eternal life. Despite all worldly scorn and blasphemy, this road secured by Jesus will be blessed with God's peace. The poem ends with Pläte's repeated invitation to stay faithful: be faithful even unto death! In due time, all faithfulness will be rewarded, all believing youth will stand in the good graces of God, and their parents will be overjoyed to

⁸⁴¹ Pläte 1970b, 35.

⁸⁴² Pläte 1970b, 46.

watch their children standing together with them before the Lord and praising him forevermore.⁸⁴³

The last part of this collection consists of a variety of compositions dealing with the daily walk of Christians. Among four morning songs, the most expressive poem describes the difficult challenges that each believer has to face daily. To start with, Pläte provides a picture of a devoted soul waking up from a long night's sleep and immediately clinging to the hand of the Lord. Inevitably, the day will have its hardships. Everyday tasks at work and home that lay ahead will be rough and complicated. Even the best efforts cannot promise the fully ripe fruit of happiness and well-being. The reason for this is that every good and perfect gift only comes from above, descending from the Father of heavenly lights. Since all these blessings can be found in the nearness of the Lord, the believer's soul always needs to plead to remain close to him. Pläte warns against all self-seeking that leads to perdition. He encourages every believer to spend one's life for the glory of God, always trying to avoid selfishness, being charitable to others and living not for oneself but for others. Such striving will grant true peace of mind. Then, when the sunset of one's life arrives, the faithful pilgrim will safely return home.⁸⁴⁴

⁸⁴³ Pläte 1970b, 48.

⁸⁴⁴ Pläte 1970b, 71.

V CONCLUSIONS

Nikolajs Plāte lived his life at the time of the radical ideological changes of the 20th century. After the idealistic years of his youth and education in independent Latvia, the optimistic beginnings were reversed by the Soviet occupation and World War II, and Plāte had to fulfill his ministry as a clergyman under a monolithic regime with heavy-handed control over individuals. Since most freedoms were limited by the totalitarian state and Christianity was oppressed, the LELC as an institution was rapidly transformed into a ghetto-like minority, becoming a silenced and marginalized group on the outskirts of Soviet society.

The regime kept all people under a tight grip, working to reshape the mentality of the whole society. For the sake of survival, everyone was forced to adjust and conform. The Church was subjected to persecution and humiliation, and its pastors were hit especially hard. Unavoidably, serving the Church became a constant uphill battle. The identity and mentality of the LELC were gradually changed, and the whole experience left some painful scars. The life story of Plāte, who started as a young and energetic minister shortly before the war, reflects such pain, as later he changed and his pastoral mentality turned increasingly timid, fearful, and socially disengaged.

Shortly after the end of World War II, Plāte married Modra Augstkalne. They spent over 38 years together, raising two sons, Modris and Āris. His wife became a loyal partner, both at home and at church. Their family life was shaped in an independent spirit, fostering piety and raising their children in the Christian faith. The loss of their younger son Āris in a tragic accident at the age of twenty-three was the darkest hour of their family life. Modris followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a clergyman and one of the church renewal leaders. In spite of serious health problems near the end, the older Plāte managed to stay active until the very last year of his life.

Plāte's pastoral ministry was, generally speaking, the focal point of his life. Most of his time, efforts, and energy were devoted to the work of the Church. Singularity of purpose was an essential trait of his personality, and other interests became subordinated to the main mission. Plāte himself deliberated on his life in a letter to the Archbishop in the early 1950s, expressing regrets for his formerly hectic and chaotic road, on the one hand, and hoping for a more solid and stable road ahead, on the

other. He prayed for greater predictability in the future, so that his ministry would not be scattered in various directions. At least in some ways, his wish was granted. For the remainder of his life (1953–1983), Pastor Plāte was able to stay in one place, Rucava, serving the local parish and other surrounding congregations.

Compared to their honorable status in pre-war Latvia, the social role of clergymen under the Soviet regime changed dramatically. Now, being considered members of the non-working class, pastors were treated badly and humiliated in various ways. While Plāte was not deported, he still had to suffer serious abuse from the authorities, as well as personal attacks by the media and local community. The social impact of rapid urbanization and secularization, along with ideological exclusion and isolation, made pastoral work even harder. Increasing numbers were alienated from the faith, thus reducing the size of the congregations. Even a lively parish such as Rucava, despite Plāte's relentless work, suffered a steep downward spiral in attendance that seemed impossible to reverse. It was a condition of permanent crisis. Keeping the Church alive was the most urgent task. A strategy for survival for Plāte (as for other pastors) was to keep a low profile, stay patient and forbearing, and continue the work where possible. The former aspirations of a people's church with nationwide ambitions were changed into those of a small remnant willing to stay faithful despite the outside opposition. Nominal Christianity was no longer a problem. Now the struggles of this sifted, tested, and loyal Christian minority had become the priority.

The whole mentality underwent a change. Living under constant pressure, the believers were put on the defensive. As the Church pulled back and withdrew from overall Soviet society, in many ways it led to a ghetto-like mentality. As seen in Plāte's case, in spite of all his efforts, his ministry was increasingly dominated by defensive thinking and reacting, and by a conservative, inward-looking mindset. Indeed, he was well aware of how unhealthy this mindset was, and he preached against it and encouraged an active disposition to life. Plāte desperately tried to resist the trend by adding to his own workload and expanding his church activities. Nonetheless, these endeavors were often overshadowed and overpowered by the atheistic monoculture. Inevitably, the degraded and humiliated reality turned congregations into remote, secluded, and ghetto-like communities of believers. Similarly, Plāte's own character displayed some of these antisocial traits, demonstrating a manifest aversion and distaste for any engagement with the socialistic environment.

In his pastoral ethos and approach, Plāte was clearly a low-church minister with

some strong pietistic influences. He thought it necessary to invigorate the stifled forms of Lutheranism. Instead of formal liturgical and sacramental Christianity, he preferred revivalistic and evangelistic approaches to preaching, teaching, praying, and singing. Similar to Baptists, he allowed a good amount of lay participation with individual performances of songs and poetry during church services. And even though Plāte was a generally conservative clergyman, he became one of the first to welcome female candidates to preach to his congregations. In his pastoral praxis and care of souls, he made a point of fighting against different sorts of superstition, magic, and occult fixations among his congregation members.

Plāte preached from well-prepared scripts, delivering easy-to-follow biblical material. Given his gift of language, his preaching combined a popular style, thoughtfulness, and instruction. In his messages, he tried to be unprovocative, avoiding confrontations with the government and rarely commenting on contemporary Soviet realities. When Plāte addressed the existing state of affairs, he did it by using indirect and metaphorical language. Some biblical images were typically employed to describe the contemporary conditions, where the believers were depicted as aliens and travelers despised by the rulers of this world. The Christian cross and sufferings had to be taken as an integral part of the biblical faith. In Plāte's view, staying true to the little flock of Christ and to the confession of his name was the way to proceed through the complicated historical situation of the day.

Compared to his fellow ministers, Plāte seemed to be even more socially isolated than other clergymen. His service in Rucava, on the western edge of Latvia, removed him relatively far away from his closest brethren and friends. His own reclusive personality also led to withdrawal and disengagement. That said, Plāte's activities steered toward the intellectual field; he was more inclined to read and write theology than many other pastors. As proven by his solitary work, he produced reasonably systematic theological and ecclesiastical results, which enabled him to contribute to various spheres of church life. Archbishop Tūrs recognized Plāte's abundant and fruitful contribution to the LELC, awarding him the title of Senior Pastor in 1960.

Sometimes Plāte's personality appears to be more easily accessible through his pastoral and theological activities, the main driving force where he poured his heart and showed his passion, than through his private life. The system of his thought is best known through his numerous writings. Acknowledged by the LELC leaders as an inquisitive mind and prolific reader, Plāte was invited to become one of the permanent lecturers at the renewed seminary in 1968. His experience and accumulated

knowledge helped him to start teaching and producing substantial theological manuscripts immediately. The task of lecturing became a major stimulus to advance his theological ideas, while his literary talents allowed him to lay his knowledge out in well-written textbooks.

All in all, Pläte produced nine different compendia with several thousand pages of material for students and pastors to use. From a contextual point of view, this literature was strongly overshadowed by the totalitarian conditions, with their taboos, self-censure, and various internal and external limitations. Theologically speaking, these writings give evidence of the distinctive influences from Pläte's past: his roots in pietistic and revivalistic Christianity, the early impact from the strong-willed LELC leaders and Gymnasium teachers with their conservative theological heritage from the 19th-century Tartu Faculty, and his education from the Theological Faculty, with its school of religious philosophy and liberal critical scholarship. Near the end, Pläte was also crucially influenced by Karl Barth. Thus, his theology was a mixture of many things.

The theme of adjustment became pivotal not only in Pläte's life and work, but also in his theology. He constantly had to come to terms with the new historical reality under the totalitarian rule, which made him realize the inevitability of change. The profound crisis of the depressed Church drove him to look for renewal, which could come about only by means of adjusting the biblical focus and applying theology strictly in the service of the LELC. He argued that it was not the right time for extravagant theoretical arguments and free-ranging speculations in terms of historical criticism. Pläte was deeply distressed by the current conditions, in which the biblical foundations of faith were targeted by a flood of anti-religious publications, believers were surrounded by atheistic propaganda, and the Bible was the target of heavy attacks. He insisted that, for the sake of survival, the discredited Bible ought to be spared from additional theological criticism, so that trust in the Scriptures could be restored.

In situations where open discussions with atheistic critics were impossible, Pläte got involved in internal ecclesiastical controversies, speaking up against liberal theology and higher criticism. In his fight for the Bible, he searched for credible arguments to defend its reliability. When teaching at the seminary, Pläte discovered that Barthianism provided the best answers to contemporary dilemmas. In his view, dialectical theology was key to restoring the authoritative Word. The old scheme of liberal theology, with its stress on revelation in immanence, had to be forsaken.

Increasingly, Plâte relied on Barth's teaching on the paradoxical workings of God with his Word, which had to break through from transcendence and remain beyond human rationalization. He believed that the Barthian description of revelation was a better way to see how God spoke to the current world. To Plâte, science and religion had to be considered as two distinct spheres that stood on different levels, without contradicting each other. Yet, these two perspectives were impossible to unite and reconcile, as attested by the widening gap between Christianity and the Soviet atheistic society.

Only faith in the living Word of God, proclaimed as an eschatological message, could bridge this gap supernaturally and overcome the temporal bonds of history. As the Lord of history, God held all the power to intervene, even in the Soviet totalitarian reality, at all times being ready to build something new on the ruins of the past. In that sense, Plâte expected the Church to receive new hope and rejuvenation in the power of God's Word. One had to trust the Lord's guidance through historical ambiguity, without surrendering to paralyzing fear and bare instincts of self-preservation. On those grounds, he warned against apathy, passivity, and a ghetto mentality in the Church. A stifled and stagnating mindset had to be resisted via the power of the Word and true faith while spreading hope and love to secular people.

These and similar aspirations are expressed in Plâte's writings. These texts were produced as seminary lectures starting in 1968 until almost the end of his life in 1983 (in the period between 1975 and 1979, his lecturing was for various reasons interrupted). Initially, he focused mainly on practical theology. Most of his lectures were delivered in the field of Old Testament practical exegesis, some in poimenics and catechetics, and, finally, also in confessional theology (CA) and dogmatics. He was also serious about providing practical help for theological candidates in their immediate church work. It was his conviction that they needed more than just theories, scientific tools, or mere knowledge, but also piety and actual application of biblical insights.

In his understanding of the Old Testament, Plâte relied heavily on the so-called *heilsgeschichte* approach, prophetic hermeneutics, and Christological interpretations, whereby the Scriptures were understood in their unity and conformity with the New Testament. Old Testament history was also applied by Plâte to the Soviet context, and he used the texts in a typological sense in order to express God's redemptive work in the seemingly secular events of world history. By means of metaphorical and prophetic language, he tried to stress the Lord's constant divine direction and

guidance in ungodly surroundings. The Old Testament pattern of God's judgment, correction, and suffering, through which ultimate salvation was brought to his remaining flock, was also viewed in light of the Soviet conditions.

Poimenics were understood by Pläte as the pastoral care of offering salvation to an individual. He lamented that the LELC, with her narrow view of personal piety, was presently ill-prepared to deliver such care. The challenges of the new society, with its modern, secular, and atheistic lifestyles, urged theologians to dig deeper and address the contemporary issues of humans with existential depth. The pastors needed skills to turn a secular conversation into a spiritual one when teaching the way of salvation. Pläte insisted that even atheism was a God-given call to repentance by means of which a modern person could discover their need for Christ. For that purpose, Lutheran clergymen had to become suitably trained and develop well-rounded personalities. Hence, the educational standards for pastoral candidates could not be lowered, even under the pressure of the current Soviet conditions.

Pläte's most outstanding achievement was most likely his writing on catechetics. His explanation of Luther's Small Catechism was written in 1980 and printed in 1989. This filled a void and offered a valuable manual for religious instruction at the transitional time of perestroika when the Church was experiencing religious awakening and an influx of people. The treatment was a skillful exposition of essential Christianity, showing its place and role in the scope of modern life. This catechism was widely used and highly valued by both students and pastors, leaving a lasting imprint on the LELC during this time of change. By printing and promoting this book, the Church affirmed and validated Pläte's enduring legacy.

Similarly, Pläte's translation of and commentary on the Augsburg Confession was a significant reminder of confessional identity. Although not a major student of Luther and the Reformation, in the text he greatly emphasized the doctrine of justification and the gospel-oriented character of the Lutheran Church. His main interest was in the positive, ecumenical, and unifying doctrinal statement of this document. At the same time, he accepted the Lutheran Confessions of *Liber Concordia* as only historical witnesses, and he recommended their conditional subscription at the ordination of pastors.

Pläte's last – and, arguably, culminating – accomplishment was his two-volume *Dogmatics*. Similar to Barth, by means of dogmatics Pläte worked for the rejuvenation of the Church. He insisted that dogmatic theology at all times had to serve ecclesiastical interests. All theological thought had to remain under the Word of

God, but simultaneously ascending above critical *ratio*. Central in his work were the doctrines of God's Word, Christology, and the Church. When dealing with these, Plāte also aimed at addressing the future hopes and possibilities of the revival of the stagnating LELC. In his treatment, he wanted to supply a contemporary expression of doctrine and respond to modern challenges and human skepticism. The fact that this work has been recently published by a small printing house and employed as one of the textbooks for students at the Luther Academy in Riga shows that Plāte's texts have survived beyond his time and remained relevant.

A note should be made about Plāte's literary talents and poetic language. He was preoccupied with poetry throughout virtually all of his life, and it became both an expression of faith and a statement of artistic personality. It was especially his creative and imaginative approach to writing that made his texts so accessible and enjoyable to read. The best embodiment of his literary aspirations was the poetry book he himself produced.

As viewed from today's church life, Plāte's legacy is ambiguous and not easily visible. Without doubt, he was instrumental in sustaining the Church and keeping its mission through the dry and difficult Soviet era. Although lacking direct followers and disciples, Plāte left a clear imprint on a generation of LELC pastors by his teaching and writing. Furthermore, many of the well-known conservative attitudes of the present-day LELC can be traced back to such men as Plāte. His individual road through the turmoil of the 20th century is a good illustration of just how painful and complicated the process of adjustment to the hostile environment was. No wonder that the Church often chose to be better safe than sorry and that a noticeably cautious and traditional mindset prevailed. It took time to grasp the meaning of the new historical realities. But even more time was needed to start interpreting them theologically. In his theological work, Plāte spent most of the time looking back, coming to terms and catching up with the fast-paced historical changes. Those were mostly conservative and survival-oriented reactions. Only at the end of his life did he begin to look forward and dare to hope for brighter days ahead. Plāte made a note of hopeful signs as he observed his son in the ministry and the emerging renewal movement in the Church, to which he gave his support. The final years of his life allowed him to believe that God had started something new.

These research results also help to sketch some feasible future projects. As observed earlier, sometimes the most vital phenomena from the Soviet-era church life are connected with internal struggles, not external ones. The value of this particular

study has been to survey Plāte's life in its totality and take a more nuanced look at the path of a believer, pastor, and theologian in historical context. Likewise, this study provides a deeper insight into the inner tensions, conflicts, and agonies of his conscience, when often an almost superhuman strength was required to overcome them. Plāte's life, work, and theology demonstrate an inner resistance and principled opposition against adverse surroundings, where he managed to retain a persistent outlook and hope for a brighter future. The very existence of such people in the totalitarian society could be compared to light shining in the dark, providing positive expectations for those unable to see beyond the immediate obstacles. For this reason, additional research might be suggested on the totalitarian methods and propaganda tools, but also the profound mental stress and psychological tension experienced by its subjects. This topic has already been discussed in different contexts at various times (for instance, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* by Reinhold Niebuhr). Seeing the tendency of totalitarianism to return in ever new patterns, extended work would be needed in the field of history of ideas. There is an obvious urgency to get a fuller grasp of the dynamics of inner motivation and principles of conscience that allow humans to persist and push ahead in spite of seemingly desperate and hopeless conditions, planting seeds for a better future.

There are many other topics to be addressed. A continued study is needed on other Lutheran pastors and theologians from this era (Freijs, Taivāns, Jundzis, Žibeiks, Akmentiņš, Feldmanis, Augstkalns, etc.) – extraordinary personalities and “strange birds” – shaped and formed by intensely unfavorable totalitarian surroundings. Even if the constrained environment did not allow them to become great theologians or intellectual giants, they were clearly “originals” in their own right. Another issue worthy of in-depth exploration would be the so-called Aesop's metaphorical language, which was employed by the theologians to get around Communist taboos and restrictions, thus uncovering hidden thoughts to their members in a shrouded manner. In conclusion, I would like to express my sincere hope that this study has been able to contribute to the general understanding of this era and incite other scholars to get involved with Soviet Latvian church history.

APPENDIX A: STATISTICS OF THE RUCAVA PARISH: 1953–1983.

Year	Members	Bapt.	Conf.	Weddings	Burials	Euch. Attend.	Sick visits	Festival services	Midweek services	Weekly services
1953	600	35	54	5	19	637		700	40	150
1954	600	42	66	19	58	721		700	40	150
1955	650	39	53	13	49	663	22	600	40	150
1956	700	41	52	13	44	655	18	600	40	150
1957	700	39	60	16	49	625	21	600	40	100
1958	700	51	49	24	53	612	23	600	35	100
1959	700	53	46	30	47	654	23	600	35	100
1960	700	23	26	18	48	554	12	500	30	120
1961	700	37	21	20	42	552	19	500	30	100
1962	700	41	19	10	14	175	13	400	25	100
1963	700	19	17	11	15	189		400	25	100
1964	600	28	5	10	13	214		400	20	70
1965	600	15	7	4	15	179		300	20	70
1966	600	26	5	4	14	180		300	20	60
1967	600	9	4	2	24	173		250	20	50
1968	600	15	2	1	19	176		250	20	50
1969	580	18	5	12	22	171		220	20	40
1970	550	12	4	6	29	180		200	20	40
1971	520	13	4	7	25	158		200	20	40
1972	500	8	0	1	18	160	19	200	20	50
1973	500	2	3	5	23	140	15	200	20	50
1974	500	8	3	5	23	140	8	200	20	50
1975	500	6	5	3	22	146	9	200	20	50
1976	500	8	4	4	28	140	16	200	20	50
1977	470	7	9	3	22	125	14	200	20	50
1978	450	5	7	1	21	150	18	200	20	50
1979	420	9	6	0	20	126	14	200	20	50
1980	400	3	6	5	18	90	11	200	20	40
1981	400	7	5	3	15	110	7	200	20	40
1982	350	5	2	1	9	75		200	25	40
1983	345	1	0	0	5	78		150		50

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ALCH

Nikolajs Plāte's letters to Edgars Ķiploks⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴⁵ These sources have been provided by Professor Jouko Talonen.

NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

- BK Baznīcas Kalendārs 1937, 1938, 1942, 1944, 1975, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1987, 2015
- BZ Baznīcas Ziņas 1942–1944
- CB Ceļa Biedrs 1980, 1986
Ceļš 1989, 2015
Jaunais Cīnītājs 1937
- JC Jaunatnes Ceļš 1936
- LDV Latgales Draudžu Vēstnesis 1938
- LL Latvijas Luterānis
- PD Padomju Dundaga 1950
Staburags 1995
- SvR *Svētdienas Rīts* 1940; 2014.
- SvZ Svētrīta zvani 1989.
- ZED Zalles un Ērberģes draudžu pirmais ziņojums. Pārskati par 1940. un 1941. gada darbību. Rīgā. 1942.

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