

EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

PHD DISSERTATION

*“First God, then Saint Sebastian”*

*The Function and Importance of the Cult of the Patron Saint in the Life of a  
Sicilian Town*

– PhD thesis –

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## *I. Antecedents, goals and methods*

In my doctoral dissertation I examine and interpret how the cult of the patron saint appears in a specific context, the life of the Sicilian town Melilli. The town's patron saint is Saint Sebastian, in whose honor the inhabitants organize a major festival every year. My research sought to answer questions about the importance of the faith people place in their patron saint, the role the saint plays in their everyday lives, the people's relation to him; I was also interested in the function of the cult of the saint(s) in the people's religious life in general, and how this religious sentiment itself surfaces in the way the inhabitants of Melilli see and conceptualize the world, the phenomena surrounding them.

These questions were motivated by the results of two of my earlier research projects. The first of these I conducted at a parish youth community in Budapest, the second at a lay community in Florence, led by Franciscan monks. In the course of this work I concluded that the individual's interaction with the universal system of values and norms upheld by Catholicism led to the birth of rather different individual 'Catholicisms', and to communities significantly differing from each other. Although when interpreting the findings of the comparison between the Budapest and the Florence community, it was an appropriate and useful method to define Hungary and Italy as larger contexts (since belonging to their respective nations is an important and definitive component of the group members' identities), I soon realized that if the research is focused otherwise, more specificity would be needed in defining a context. The practice of religion means something completely different in North Italy than in the South: it is therefore useful to separate the two, and attempt to examine and interpret religious practice in these two, more specific categories.

While in Florence, I first heard about the patron saint festivals and their importance in people's lives from South Italians working in the North, and I decided that I would like to learn about and interpret religious practice appearing in a context previously unknown to me.

In choosing the cult of patron saints, I was mainly motivated by its suggestion of new interpretations, individual manifestations of the ideology and traditions of universal religion, interpretations and practices I have not encountered before. In my earlier research projects, the people I met were rather engaged in an ongoing dialogue with God and the teaching of the Church, and the stages of their lives, their everyday practice were mainly determined by this

connection, how they draw closer to or distance themselves from these; the veneration of the saints was only a secondary factor not definitive in their religious life.

I have conducted fieldwork in Sicily in two stages. In the first period, I familiarized myself with the secondary literature (after I arrived, it came to my attention that a great body of literature on the topic exists, but these works are only available in the town) and the region, trying to gain an overall impression about life there and to acquaint myself with more and more people, places and local events.

In the second stage I concentrated on Melilli, and spent as much time as possible in the town, in order to get to know the inhabitants, take part in community events, make notes and take photographs. At the conclusion of the project, I had the opportunity to participate in the Melilli Saint Sebastian festival.

I spent a little more than six months in Sicily. Three of these could be described as fieldwork with participant observation. I found this method to be the most efficient to gain the background knowledge indispensable for working in the field, develop a more or less workable knowledge of the town itself, and spend enough time there to make my observations and conclusions valid and useful for others too. I also needed this in order for these conclusions to be stable enough for suggesting further questions and research directions.

Nino Privitera, a photographer living in Melilli, played a great role in my Sicilian research. He kindly welcomed me to his home, let me into his little shop on the main street of the town: from here I had the opportunity to look into the everyday lives of the inhabitants. Since it is the network of family relations and acquaintances that governs life in this little town of 7.000 people (most of whom actually know each other),<sup>1</sup> it was indispensable for proper fieldwork to become a part of this. Signor Privitera and his family made this big step possible for me.

I spent most of my time in the St. Sebastian Cathedral: before and during the festival, I conducted interviews with the vicar, the members of the organizing committee, and the volunteers in the vestry, the back yard, and the reception rooms adjoining the building. I took part in the preparations and (during the festival) in the tasks 'behind the scenes'. Some people invited me to their homes, and I also spent a lot of time in Signor Privitera's salon, talking to

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<sup>1</sup> This is a general feature of small town life that researchers in the field hold valid for the whole Mediterranean area: see Davis, John (1977): *People of the Mediterranean: An essay in comparative social anthropology*. London, Routledge.

those who came in, accompanied them around town while they went about their business. In many of these situations I did not have the opportunity to use a voice recorder or a camera, or decided against its use, since I thought in the given situation it would be to the detriment of my work. In the lack of direct documentation, I always noted down what happened as soon and as accurately as I could.<sup>2</sup> My interviews, notes, and the photos I took during my time in the field constitute two groups: one of them serves the purpose of mapping out the background of the cult of the patron saint, and specifically the Melilli festival of Saint Sebastian, with its socio-economic aspects. The other concerned the festival itself and documents the rituals connected to it. In addition to taking photos and notes, conducting interviews, I have also made sound recordings for this latter purpose: the festival is very complex not only in its visual, but also in its auditory aspects, and certain stages are better documented in the form of voice recordings to enable an appropriate interpretation.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Borsányi László (1988): Megfigyelési technikák az etnológiai terepmunkában. [Observation methods in ethnological fieldwork] *Ethnographia*, 53-82; Babbie, Earl (2007): *The Practice of Social Research*. Belmont, Wadsworth Publishing Company.

## II. *The structure of the dissertation*

The dissertation first surveys the theoretical and contextual problems necessary for interpreting the events of the festival, then introduces the series of events the festival is made up of, and interprets their function and significance, to be able to offer answers for the questions sketched out above.

The first chapter details the purpose of the research, its antecedents and the methods applied. Relevant theoretical problems are also discussed, as are the main questions of anthropological research in the area of the Mediterranean, and the works of local history and ethnography, produced by Melilli intellectuals.<sup>3</sup>

The second chapter briefly surveys the wider and narrower context of the research, including the historical, economic, ecological, social and cultural aspects relating to the examined phenomena.

The third chapter deals with questions of the history and anthropology of religion serving as the theoretical background of my research. In the course of this, definitions of concepts of the anthropology of religion are given – I also explain on what grounds I use these (and no other) definitions.

The fourth chapter contextualizes Saint Sebastian: his place among the saints of the Roman Catholic Church is discussed, and I also examine how his significance changed in different historical periods. Especial attention is paid to his cult in the areas that serve as the narrower context of the research.

The fifth chapter details the main events of the 2007 festival of Saint Sebastian in Melilli, and certain preliminary conclusions are also drawn here. I then proceed to a systematic description of the point of view used when interpreting my observations.

The next two chapters place the already described (and in some sense, already interpreted) details of the festival in a broader context. Here I attempt to find how these events are connected to the life of the community, adapting first the individual's, then the community's point of view.

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<sup>3</sup> See Faeta, Francesco (2005): *Demologia, antropologia e critica culturale*. Torino, Bollati-Boringhieri.

Finally I return to my original questions, and drawing on the results of my earlier research, I try to offer answers, draw the study's conclusions, and map out directions for further work.

### III. Results

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the largest Christian denominations: it is present in every part of the world and shows remarkable variety. The individual communities which together form this Church come into existence in interaction with Catholicism's universal system of norms and ideology. The Church plays such a variety of roles in people's lives and shows so many different faces that it is difficult to make assertions about it that would hold true for each and every Catholic community. Thus it is worthwhile to concentrate on the communities as they practice their religion, and approach the general picture from the individual. For this, it is necessary to examine the different manifestations of religiosity: how people live with and conceptualize their religion. By comparing the results of several inquiries, in small steps we can get closer to an understanding of how the Roman Catholic Church (and on a more general level, religious thought itself) works.

The cult of the saints is a topic many scholars of the Mediterranean have noticed:<sup>4</sup> this is in fact one of the factors, alongside the similar ecological features, social structure, and political systems, that supporters of the concept of a 'united Mediterranean' (which emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) often cite. The veneration of patron saints and the festivals held in their honor are certainly important in many Mediterranean countries, but they are not specifically distinctive of these areas. Their connections to the above mentioned several other common features, however, still make it appropriate to look at them as Mediterranean characteristics.

The purpose of my study was to examine the function and significance of the cult of the patron saints in Sicily through the life of a particular town, Melilli, thus to contribute to an inductive understanding of how modern humanity lives with the universal Roman Catholic religion, what function and significance religious faith has in people's lives today.

Saint Sebastian officially became the patron saint of Melilli after 1693, following an earthquake. Every year, the town's inhabitants organize a major festival in his honor. It is only at this time that people have an opportunity actually to 'meet' the saint's statue, since it

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Davis, John (1977): *People of the Mediterranean: An essay in comparative social anthropology*. London, Routledge; Facta, Francesco (2005): *Demologia, antropologia e critica culturale*. Torino, Bollati-Boringhieri.; Gronover, Anne Marie (2007): *Religiöse Reserven. Eine Ethnographie des Überlebens in Palermo*. Berlin, LIT Verlag; Maraschini, A. L. (1968): *The Study of an Italian Village*. Paris: Mouton.

is kept locked away for the rest of the year. In the events of the festival, there is a clear separation of an individual and a communal dimension.

The individual dimension becomes especially significant in the different types of pilgrimage: pilgrims undertake certain sorts of sacrifices and make promises in exchange of the saint's intervention in the actual crises of their lives. The relation and communication of the patron saint and the pilgrims are definitely personal in nature, and can be described in terms of relationships to members of the family group or between close friends. A century ago this was true only for the female variant of the pilgrimage, the individual 'barefoot' pilgrimage, but by now it has extended to the other type of pilgrimage, the 'run of the naked', previously only practiced by men. It can therefore be asserted that social changes (like the dissolution of clear boundaries between male and female social roles) are also mirrored in the festival – the cult has accommodated the world of its practitioners, and follows the social, cultural changes.

The second, communal dimension, gains articulation primarily in emphasizing those elements of Saint Sebastian's Melilli legend that hint at the town being 'chosen'; in the processions that take place during the festivals; and the revival of the cult in immigrant communities. Different historical periods, historical, social, and cultural events continually redraw the frameworks within which (and in relation to which) any given society defines itself. For the people of Melilli, faith in Saint Sebastian (especially the Melilli St. Sebastian) constitutes a very important dimension of their communal identity. It can function like that by continually being questioned and reinterpreted: why the patron saint is an important part in the life of the Melilli community, why he is fitted to be an authentic 'first man' of the town are questions that come under constant negotiations. The function a patron saint fulfills for a community perpetuating its cult cannot be the same today as it was decades or centuries ago: this tradition could stay so alive and intensive only because it offers opportunities to be fitted to the present context.

The results of my Melilli research demonstrate very suggestively how the members of an actual community interact with the universal teachings of religion, how they transform them into 'livable' principles in a definite socio-cultural framework. All humans strive towards a comprehensive knowledge of the world that surrounds them: when this world changes, explanations have to be found for new things and relationships. The world picture of a community is only tenable until it can offer answers to the constantly emerging new



questions. If in certain respects it is unable to do this, it needs reconsideration, and some of its elements inevitably need to change. In some Sicilian towns, the changes of patron saints illustrate this well, but in even clearer terms, the Melilli festival of the patron saint and the interpretation of its changes already pointed in this direction.

In Melilli I have encountered a 'Catholicism' based on the cult of the saints, the religious faith invested in the saints, who mediate efficiently between the human and the sacred world. The individual outlook of the community under examination is defined by the life story of the saint, the history of his cult, and the current interpretation of these. In addition to the other teachings of the Catholic Church, people integrate these into their everyday lives, and from then on, they relate to them not as separate from the secular, but according to the rules of that world. Among other things, this is explained by the fact that the everyday lives of the people of Melilli are fraught with crises that only religion offers to solve satisfactorily.

#### *IV. Further directions*

In the six months I spent with fieldwork in Melilli, I only had the opportunity to examine a few specific aspects of the people's religiosity. To gain a more in-depth and comprehensive picture of the worldview and system of norms by which they live, and to progress to more general conclusions, more research will be needed: from different points of view and points of departure.

The two dimensions of the festival described in my dissertation certainly merit closer, more specific inquiries. For a deeper understanding of the cult of the patron saint in the life of the individual, it might be necessary to conduct a participant observation of one of the characteristic pilgrimages of the Melilli St. Sebastian festival, the 'run of the naked'. This new study can be realized in a three-year time frame, or with the help of other researchers: one could accompany all three groups through the pilgrimage, or conduct interviews before and after the festival. These together might contribute to a more shaded picture of individual motivations, and thus of the operation of religious worldview.

Further research into the social function of the cult of the patron saint is possible in Middletown, among immigrants originally from Melilli and their descendants. Methods similar to those used in Melilli could be effective there: one has to observe their participation in the Saint Sebastian festival, and learn about the people's daily lives. Naturally, this situation will necessitate the posing of new questions, and theories concerning the interrelatedness of religion and ethnicity deserve more specific attention.

I consider these two directions the primary possible extensions of my research. My previous results and insights, if complemented by these further conclusions, can offer a comprehensive picture of both the phenomena under examination, and the framework serving as the context of research, eventually contributing to important general conclusions about religiosity.

V. *Some important publications relating to the research*

„A Krisztusnak beszéde lakozzék ti bennetek gazdagon” [“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you”] In: A. GERGELY A.- PAPP R.- PRÓNAI Cs. (szerk.): *Kultúrák között*. [Between Cultures] Budapest, Nyitott Könyvműhely, 2006. 179-187.

Az értékek, mint egy kultúra sarokkövei. Egy firenzei római katolikus ifjúsági közösség kulturális antropológiai bemutatása. [Values as the Cornerstones of a Culture. A Cultural Anthropological Description of a Roman Catholic Youth Community in Florence] In: A. GERGELY A. – PAPP R. (szerk.): *A szakralitás arcai*. [The Faces of Sacrality] Budapest, Nyitott Könyvműhely, 2007. 31-62.

„És a hatodik napon...”- A római katolikus vallás ökológiai antropológiai vonatkozásai. [“And on the sixth day...” – Ecological Anthropological Aspects of the Roman Catholic Religion] *Anthropolis* (forthcoming).