Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Arts

Doctoral dissertation theses

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The societal activity of the Catholic Church
and the political Catholicism in the Diocese of Szombathely 1867-1914

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Selection of the topic

During the period of Dualism, the territory of the Diocese of Szombathely covered the whole of Vas County and the North-Western part of the historical Zala County. On the territory of the diocese most the believers belonged to the catholic faith. Many of them - by their mother tongue - declared themselves as being nationalities other than Hungarian: German, Croatian or Slovenian (“vend”). Following its establishment in 1895, the People’s Party performed well in the territory of the diocese. In his well-known work entitled “A keresztényszocializmus Magyarországon, 1903-1923”, Jenő Gergely traces back the foundation of the Christian Labor Association of Szombathely in 1903 to the above-mentioned characteristics of the diocese, as well as the increasing significance of the political Catholicism, and the industrialization of the region. Emerging from this, the movement evolved to a country-wide association. The original aim of my dissertation was to unwrap the above process outlined by Jenő Gergely based on the local sources, and with that contribute to the elaboration of the history of the Diocese of Szombathely during the age of Dualism.

Sources of the topic

Up until now, the only monograph elaborating the history of the Diocese of Szombathely is “A szombathelyi egyházmegye története” edited by Gyula Géfin. In this work, the history of the diocese is presented through bishop biographies, and the history of certain significant institutions. The bishop biographies of the volume show several deficiencies, since the archival sources necessary for a thorough analysis were not explored by the authors. As the bishops of Szombathely in Dualism period did not leave behind considerable works, the specialized literature has not paid attention to this era of the diocese so far.

Consequently, I put special emphasis on exploring the archival sources. Among the primary ecclesiastical sources, I reviewed one by one the official documents of the episcopate in the Archives of the Diocese of Szombathely (Acta cancellaria); the correspondence of the episcopate with the government offices (Intimata documents); and the relevant pieces from the private archives of the chapter. My aim was to collect the “historia domus” documents to be found in the archives of the parishes, which beyond describing the ecclesiastical events, hold several references to social, and political history as well. Concerning the secular archives, I made investigations in the Archives of Vas and Zala County, where I reviewed the documents of the Executive Commission, the lord lieutenant, and the inspectors of public education.

The Szombathelyi Ujság founded in 1895 by the diocese, served as the basis of the reviewed press matter, since this paper provided profound, however biased knowledge about the Catholic associations, the operation and the inner life of the People’s Party, the major events of the Catholic public education, and basically the highlights of the religious life. I consulted the Vasmegye and Zalamegye journals that are linked to the Liberal Party only then, when knowing the viewpoint of the opposition was necessary for the interpretation of certain events.
Structure of the dissertation

In the historiographic and literature review, relevant details of the local and national literature introducing the development of the Catholic society are presented, along with the evaluation of the applied archival sources.

Although the operational structure of the diocese was quite similar in practice to the rest of the dioceses, the personalities behind the system, and the special territorial characteristics of the diocese – the case of five villages belonging to the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom while being under the control of the Diocese of Szombathely in church-administration; the case of two villages belonging to Austria by public administration while being under the control of the Diocese of Szombathely in church-administration; and the case of the Muraköz-area, being constantly in consideration for a possible transfer by the church-administration - made the introduction of its functioning inevitable.

The Catholic education in the diocese was analyzed much more in relation to the socio-historic changes evolving around the educational field, than from an educational-historic point of view. The communalization of schools, the operation of the school councils, and the improving financial status of the cantor-teachers, because of the 1868:38 Law on Public Schools, generated changes serving as a basis of the further development of the Catholic society.

While analyzing the relationship between the diocese and the national minorities, I touched upon the questions of language use in religious practice, and the problems of public education with special respect to the consequences of the 18th Law on Teaching Hungarian Language of 1879. I paid special attention to the press and publishing activity of the national minorities, because the edition of writings in languages other than Hungarian was carried out mostly as part of the “vend project” with the joint support of the Government of Hungary and the Diocese of Szombathely.

Through describing the operation of Catholic associations, I introduced the varied and colorful developmental process of the Catholic society, which provided a background for the evolution of political Catholicism. In this variety, the heyday of the Catholic associations in the Catholic renaissance between the two world wars was foreseen.

The operation of the religious orders in the diocese plays an important role in my work from several perspectives. Although, the religious orders were not part of the Church hierarchy, being in the territory of the diocese, they had an important effect on the education, the media and the life of associations as well. To be effective in all these areas, the religious orders operating in a liberal manner needed a reform. The sooner an order carried out the reform and managed to overcome the inner conflicts, the earlier could they start the effective pastoral work. The religious orders played an important role in the question of national minorities as well, since the language use of the given region influenced their field of activity.

The Szombathelyi Ujság became the mouthpiece of the People’s Party, and the later evolving Christian socialism. The journal was founded by the bishop and the chapter, and was issued before the publication of the laws on Church policy, to strengthen the social support of the opponents of the planned laws, and joining the processes of Catholic journal publications in the country. The Szombathelyi Ujság, which later became a daily paper, and its ‘sibling’, the Szombathelyi Kis Ujság did their bit in organizing the Catholic society.
From the devotional point of view, besides these two most important official papers, another journal, the Rózsafüzér Királynéja published by the Dominicans, played an important too. Concerning the national minorities, the Jézus legszentebb Szíve nagy képes népnaplóra published from 1901 by the press of the diocese, was also published in a vend-Slovenian version from 1903, and a monthly journal, the Nevtepeno propriijeta Devica Marija must be mentioned as well.

In the chapter about the operation of the People’s Party in the Diocese of Szombathely I investigated the already existing Catholic political aspirations in the diocese. Moreover, I examined the organizational framework and the bases of the People’s Party, and its performance in the elections.

The Christian socialism appeared in the diocese along the aspirations of the People’s Party, somewhat like being a subfamily of it. The organization had a close connection to the local press and the various associations. Then, after the 1910’s elections, when the People’s Party could not agree on the person of their candidate neither in Szombathely nor in Szentgotthárd, their places were taken over by the Christian socialist candidates, embracing already political aims by that time.

The main conclusions of the dissertation

After the compromise between Hungary and Austria in 1867, the Catholic Church in Hungary got into an unprecedented and strange situation. Parallel to the development of the civilian government, the responsible Hungarian governments claimed more and more strongly the 20th law of 1848 declaring religious equality. Because of this, the state church character of the Catholic Church started to decline gradually.

The school councils of the villages, which were established based on the 1868:38 Law on Public Schools, had great significance, since the peasants, living as bondsmen thirty years earlier, after 1868 choose their teacher autonomously, and – within a certain framework - determined their payment.

Keeping the Catholic character of the schools and reinforcing the educational and pedagogic work of these institutions served as a basis for the Catholic renaissance evolving already at the turn of the century, and strengthening itself in the countryside after the II. world war.

In response to the social needs, the church paid more and more attention to the question of female education. The Dominican sisters settling down in Kőszeg in the beginning of the period of Dualism, were partners in this work, while becoming important agents of the movement of female education of the era.

The impact that schools made on the Catholic society is reflected very well if we compare Vas and Zala county. Namely, in Zala county, where maintaining a catholic school became practically impossible for the small villages without a church, and thus much of the schools were taken over by the state, only a few devotional or social associations were formed.
The system of parishes under patronage, and the owners of patronages – the Religion Fund among them, operated previously by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education – had a strong influence on the assignment of priests. Therefore, it became impossible to determine, what kind of an idea of the bishop - concerning the question of national minorities – stood behind the nomination of each parish priest. This fact was so far overlooked by the specialized literature, although it is very significant both from the point of view of the question of national minorities and the development of political Catholicism.

In the beginning of our era, in 1867 in the territory of the diocese there were altogether 6 religious orders (five male and one female order) in 11 monastic quarters, with 91 monastics. 47 years later, in 1914 there were already 12 orders (five male and seven female) in 21 monastic quarters, with 276 monastics. The reason for this development cannot be explained simply by the natural increase of the population, that is, out of more believers, more should become priests. Especially, because a significant number of nuns were still of foreign nationalities. The real reasons are originating in the inner development of the church. The reforms started earlier in the German speech areas influenced not only the male orders, but resulted in a revival of female orders as well. Congregations were founded in the spirit of the new approach, which took the old regulations as a basis, but at the same time integrated them with new regulations corresponding to the challenges of the era. In this manner, new female orders were founded.

It seems, that the presence of German population was of high importance concerning the settling of female orders. Among the female orders settling down in the territory of the diocese in the 19th century, only a few choose to settle in Zala county, since this region did not have a significant German population.

The Catholic, or National People’s Party was strongly supported in the territory of Vas and Zala county, which was reflected by the election results as well. This support and the election results were thanked to the advantageous capacities of the region and the diocese.

The high number of Catholics and national minorities, the dense network of parishes, the political activity of the clergy, the Catholic political press starting from 1895 were all favorable circumstances for the People’s Party. Not to mention the strong and well organized Catholic society, which was already present by the time the People’s Party was founded.

The nationwide performance of the People’s Party, and its political changeovers necessarily affected the operation of the parties of the constituencies in the territory of the diocese. On a local level, it was exactly this search for directions, and the relatively common changeovers influencing the structure of the party, that apparently turned out to be one of the biggest if not the biggest mistake of the party. The Catholic League of Nations strongly promoted from 1908, being closely connected to the People’s Party, united the potential voters of the party within the framework of an association representing social and educational aims. Thus, the Catholic League of Nations played an important role in the election results of Vas county.

Between 1895 and 1914, the People’s Party attempted to take a step towards the structure of a modern political party. It is not clear, whether the success resulted in the new

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1 Vallásalap
2 Katolikus Népszövetség
tactics of the era, based on the associations and the activation of the Catholic society, or simply in the support of the Catholic clergy.

As opposed to the statement of Jenő Gergely, the foundation of the Christian Labor Association of Szombathely in 1903 was not induced by the local episcopal seat, the numerous Catholic association, the strong People’s Party of Vas county, or the closeness of the Austrian Christian socialists. The aim of the local clergy with the foundation of the Christian Labor Association was to distract the wind from the sail of the rising social democrats. It is proved by the fact, that Jenő Herényi, the founder of the movement, whose goal was to accomplish the actual protection of laborers, was after an unsuccessful strike practically chased away from Szombathely.

The metamorphosis of the diocese between 1867 and 1914 was a very complex transformation composed of more parallel processes, which can be originated in the reactions of the clergy, believers, and bishops of the Diocese of Szombathely. The aim of my dissertation was to introduce this system, which is composed of the educational matters, the relations with the national minorities, the development of religious orders, the life of Catholic associations, the establishment and performance of the Catholic press, and finally, the strengthening of the political Catholicism and thus, the appearance of Christian socialism. These processes are obviously connected, they influence and strengthen each other. The system, built up in this way, shows a mosaic-like framework rather than a pyramid shaped structure. The history of the associations connects in many points to the spread of the political Catholicism, while the development of the Catholic press can be paralleled with the achievements of the People’s Party and the Christian socialism. Furthermore, the inner reform of the religious orders in the middle of the 19th century and the appearance of new congregations organized around the apostolic work, stimulated the Catholic education, the press, and many aspects of the political and associational life.

The dissertation elaborates the Catholic social transformation of the Diocese of Szombathely in the period of Dualism. It is demonstrated, that the Catholic renaissance between the two world wars had considerable antecedents, and the process was not induced, but only amplified by the lethargy aroused by the tragic consequences of Trianon.

Publications in the topic


A katolikus reneszánsz előhangja: Katolikus egyesületek, társaságok Vas vármegyében, 1867-1914. Vasi Honismereti és Helytörténeti Közlemények 2009. 3. sz. 53-68.

