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**Background to the Foundation of the Society of Social Mission
and its Development**
Based on Original Sources and Periodicals

THESIS OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Research Objectives

The origins and development of the Society of Social Mission has never been the subject of a comprehensive study. Recently published works on this religious order aimed at disseminating information (e.g. István Novák, *A Szociális Missziótársulat története* (History of the Society of Social Mission), Budapest, 2000; 41 pages, booklet format). Some degree theses dealt with the life and educational activities of the Society's certain institutions (e.g. Éhmann-né Antal Erzsébet, *A Szociális Missziótársulat helye és szerepe a szociális ellátórendszerben* (Place and Role of the Society of Social Mission in the Social Welfare System), Sopron, 2013; degree thesis, 40 pages).

This study focuses on a female religious order founded in Hungary, which, spearheading the Church's social teaching, endeavoured to help society's impoverished and exploited groups on the level of the society. The objective of the thesis is to explore scientifically and objectively the origins, the immediate background of the foundation and the evolution of the Society of Social Mission, as well as its past and present role.

Methodology

The thesis presents the Society of Social Mission by precise reference to contemporary newspapers. In this regard, several difficulties arose, because the press chronicled events without properly checking places and times, therefore, the data published in newspaper articles were often incorrect. Different newspapers cover the same story differently and the facts do not coincide, which made it difficult to unearth the truth. Going through original source material and unearthing archived documents helped to establish my own point of view.

Organisation of topics

The thesis basically gives a chronological overview of the history of the Society of Social Mission. An exception is the presentation of closely linked concepts (e.g. spiritual influences or the evolution of the regulation of the Society), where a chronological description would have hampered ease of comprehension.

Main topics and conclusions

Historical background

Activities of the National Association for the Protection of Women

Edit Farkas and the Society of Social Mission

Direct events and circumstances leading to the foundation of the Society of Social Mission

Overview of the history of the Society of Social Mission

Separation of the Society of Social Mission and the Sisters of Social Service

Development of the Regulation of the Society of Social Mission

The relationship of the Society of Social Mission with the modern world

The 19th century saw massive demographic changes in Europe. During a 100-year period, the population of the continent more than doubled. Population growth intensified urbanisation: during the same period of time the number of city-dwellers increased from 15% to 60%. Instead of agriculture, emphasis shifted to industry. Economic activity massively expanded and large factories were established, where a special kind of slavery was born. While factory-owners became rich, workers became poor. In addition to men, women and adolescents also worked 12-14 hours daily for a minimum wage. Pursuit of material wealth transformed families as well. Women were no longer able to stay at home, leaving children vulnerable. Young girls often found work as housemaids, leaving them at the mercy of their masters.

Moreover, one crisis followed another, the most serious ones taking place in 1847-50 and 1873-76. These made life for the thousands of destitute even more difficult. In these times of crisis, millions subsisted on meagre hand-outs or scavenged on discarded waste. Many left their home countries in search of a better life overseas.

The situation of workers was hopeless. Despite the day-long toil, they did not earn enough to make ends meet. They had no land to cultivate in the countryside, either. With liberalism gaining ground, it was more difficult to practice religion and for communities to meet, which alienated people from each other.

Several organisations were set up to protect workers' interests. The Working Men' International Association (First International) was founded in 1864, but due to constant

internal feuds, it was finally dissolved in 1876. From 1889 until World War I it was the Second International that sought to coordinate socialists' efforts. However, it also failed because of constant disagreements over political issues, strike and the necessity of war.

The idea of socialism, a new and fairer social order based on state ownership of the means of production was a noble endeavour but was nonviable in practice. Wherever it was still forcibly introduced, it resulted in a system just as unfair as capitalism.

The biggest problem of the end of the 19th century was the large number of people living in extreme poverty, the massive increase of workers and their hopeless situation. Their abject working conditions were humiliating and they could not even dream of decent wages, better working conditions or the possibility of sick leave.

The Church responded sensitively to social injustice and these problems. One of the greatest achievements of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) was to publish the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. Here he stated that it is a mistake “to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class”¹ and it is the duty of “the wealthy owner and the employer: not to look upon their work people as their bondsmen”². Furthermore, he says that ownership of wealth entails responsibilities.

The processes that took place in the 19th century, albeit somewhat belatedly, also reached Hungary. The number of city-dwellers rose sharply, misery intensified and large numbers of housemaids took up work in bourgeois homes. Simple workers were constantly ripped off and their children remained illiterate.

The National Catholic Association for the Protection of Women wanted working women to form an association to raise their moral standards, help them continue their studies and support them financially. This work was first undertaken by Ms Pálné Pálffy and continued by Soror Edit Farkas, who organised groups for working women and girls according to their education and work.

Edit Farkas, who lived at the turn of the century, realised that traditional charity organisations were not sufficient to remedy the problems. Instead, communities with their own professional trained staff were needed. Therefore, in 1908, she established a new, exclusively female Hungarian religious order, the Society of Social Mission.

¹ RN 19

² RN 20

The mission of the Society of Social Mission was to establish an organisation whose members considered social work to be the main objective of their life. After receiving appropriate training, they fully dedicate themselves to serving the poor, the downtrodden and the vulnerable. The Society was to consist of people who wanted to do the kind of work that other orders, due to their restrictions, could not. Moreover, it would comprise people who could coordinate the activities of those who were able to help only as part of their activities or only for a definite period of time. All in all, all their activities aimed at serving the Church through liturgical apostolate and taking over social responsibilities.

Carmelite priest Pater Leo played an important role in paving the way for the Society of Social Mission. He wanted to establish a religious association. Initially, 10 girls signed up but their community was short-lived. Only two of them stayed on and they were supported by Edit Farkas. She founded the Society of Social Mission and invited three other secondary-school teachers to join it.

The foundation of the Society of Social Mission was sorely needed at a time when people in general were inclined to turn to each other and the well-to-do were ready to donate for good causes. There were also young ladies who wanted to devote their whole life to God and to serving their fellow humans. The Society organised programme for every age group. They set up missionary houses in Budapest and in several small towns. They wanted to alleviate all forms of human misery. They opened soup-kitchens, provided shelter, set up game clubs, dressmaker's shops and treated the wounded in war. Their lifestyle allowed them to provide help to many people in many ways.

In addition to sisters who took an eternal vow, the Society of Social Mission also had external female members who, apart from their responsibilities in their respective families, provided assistance with particular duties. There were also patron members who supported the monastic communities with financial donations.

In two years' time, the Society became a full-fledged organisation. Its scope of activities also expanded: they ran afternoon courses, so called patronages, for women workers and children. They organised associations for housemaids, shop assistants and

students; provided corrective education for young girls who committed crimes; managed orphanages; had prison missions; opened missionary houses and soup-kitchens; provided shelter for the homeless; visited the sick and treated wounded soldiers. Outside Hungary, they had houses in what is now northern Croatia and Vojvodina (in Serbia), Transylvania, Subcarpathia and in the territory of current Slovakia. They also performed social work among Hungarians in the United States.

After the country was dismembered in the wake of the Treaty of Trianon (4 June 1920), the Society also suffered serious losses in the territories beyond the borders.

Between 1920 and 1922, the superior of the Society allowed sisters to engage in politics. One of them, Margit Slachta, was elected member of parliament. Indeed, the superior was proud of the courage and resourcefulness of the sisters to enable the Society to take part in forming a Christian government. She had, however, concerns whether it was right for sisters to become embroiled in everyday debates with each other and the outside world because of political disagreements or whether it would be better to look after the war-widows and war orphans who flooded the capital. Meanwhile, the adverse effects of political engagement also intensified, creating tensions among the sisters themselves. Therefore, at the time of the new general elections in 1922, the superior revoked the sisters from political life and introduced a very strict monastic regulation. Some of the nuns who were unable to comply and denied obedience left the Society in 1923 and joined another religious society.

The separation process of the Society of Social Mission and the Sisters of Social Service has so far been addressed by historians only from the point of view of the history of the Social Sisters. In the dissertation I will attempt to present the events of 1923 in an objective manner. The tension stemmed from four reasons: 1.) diverging positions on whom to accept as the legitimate ruler of Hungary (Charles IV or Miklós Horthy); 2.) several sisters did not agree with the superior's decision to stop political activities; 3.) changes in the sisters' duties; and 4.) stricter rules for the Society. Edit Farkas had the opportunity to modify the draft regulation of the Society in a historical situation that provoked critical events and the sisters were expected to display the virtue of obedience.

Afterwards, the activities of the Society started to surge. It took up new responsibilities, set up a dressmaking plant, a printing press and a book bindery. The sisters settled in every large town, as well as in small villages and even on farms across the country. In its heyday, the Society comprised 250 dedicated sisters, as well as 10,000 external members and countless patrons and benefactors who carried out social work. Organisation tasks multiplied, women's associations and youth movements were launched. The Society always emphasised the role of secular Christians and involved an increasing number of people in social work.

It took 33 years (1908-1941) to draft the final regulation of the Social Mission. During this period the Mission was constantly exposed to spiritual influences, and the external changes and conflicting proposals coming from the Church made it difficult to adopt a final constitution.

The Society of Social Mission was founded on 19 November 1908, on the day of the celebration of St. Elizabeth of Hungary. Although it had no adopted constitution at the time, Edit Farkas had compiled a draft regulation before the Society was officially founded.

The first real draft regulation, called *Directorium Spirituale*, was written by Engelbert Mázy, a Benedictine monk of Pannonhalma. In 1911, on the basis of the *Directorium Spirituale*, the diocesan of the town of Kassa (Kosice), Ágoston Fischer Colbrie gave permission to the sisters to perform social work on a professional basis.

Edit Farkas wanted to forge closer ties with Benedictine monks but the chief abbot of Pannonhalma refused the Lady-Foundress's request.

After the rejection of the Benedictines and in order to alleviate tension amongst the sisters, in 1923 Edit Farkas introduced a new, stricter, Jesuit-style regulation called *Summarium*. Some of the sisters did not even want to try this new regulation and abandoned the society. The foundress expected the new regulation to be approved by the bishops, which did not happen.

Finally, in 1932, involving several religious orders in the work and with the help of cardinal Jusztinián Serédi, Edit Farkas drafted the constitution, which integrates the Benedictine influence, Jesuit spirituality and professional social work. This was first the

provisionally, then, from 1941, the finally adopted regulation of the Society of Social Mission.

In 1950, religious orders were dissolved and the Society was unable to carry on with its work. Their houses were nationalised. Sisters found secular jobs in parish communities or with families but they never neglected their primary vocation even in these disgraceful times. They served those in need and worked for their own and for others' salvation.

After the fall of communism, the sisters reclaimed their houses, moved back in their headquarters and although fewer in number, they energetically joined forces to take up social work and manage their institutions.

Today, the Social Mission is a small community but pursues the same objectives and ideas as it did in its prime. The sisters serve each other, work towards maintaining the order and provide spiritual comfort. They devote certain hours every day to mass and common prayer and continue to believe in what Edit Farkas taught them: 'The only thing that matters is the salvation of souls'. As regards their vision for the future, members of the Social Mission believe in another idea of the founder: it does not matter whether we are a light that is small or big, visible or hidden, what matters is that we shine, because this is our mission.

Today the sisters, external and secular members run 5 institutions: Farkas Edit Szeretetotthon (Care Home) (Bp. Krisztina körút, headquarters); Názáret Leányai Kollégium (Student Residence 'Daughters of Nazareth') (Bp., Tusnádi utca); Bethánia Napközi-otthonos Óvoda (Kindergarten and Day nursery) (Szikszó); Bethánia Szeretetotthon (Care Home) (Szikszó); Farkas Edit Római Katolikus Szakképző Iskola és Kollégium (Farkas Edit Roman Catholic Vocational School and Student Residence) (Keszthely).

Farkas Edit Szeretetotthon (Care Home) is located in the headquarters of the Mission in Krisztina körút, Budapest. At the beginning it had a capacity for 40 elderly people. After the institute won a tender, it expanded the facility with 60 additional rooms. The sisters of the Social Mission live in the same building as the inmates, so they are able to talk to and provide spiritual care for the elderly, which has a positive influence on them.

Before the fall of communism (1989), Názáret Leányai Kollégium (Student Residence 'Daughters of Nazareth') was used as the headquarters of the Mission. When the original house was returned to the sisters, this building in Tusnádi street was converted into a student residence to provide accommodation for 20 girls studying in higher education institutions.

Bethánia Kindergarten and Day-Nursery and Bethánia Old-Age Nursing Home are located in the village of Szikszó, in the north-east of Hungary. The building was originally used as a borstal then an orphanage. During communist times it was used as a chicken hatchery. After the political changes, the building was renovated. The kindergarten was established in 1995 with a total of 95 children in four activity rooms. The old-age care home was set up in 1999 and provides care for 48 elderly persons.

Farkas Edit Roman Catholic Vocational School and Student Residence, situated in the town of Keszthely, was established in 1991. It offers courses in hospitality/catering and social care provision.

Ottokár Hadiárvaház (War Orphanage) is no longer maintained by the Mission but by the Saint Francis Foundation of Déva and its name is Élet Héza (House of Life). After World War II, 90 orphans were raised in this house, situated in the village of Csobánka. Between 1950 and 1995, the building complex housed the National Institute for Special Education. In 2007, the Mission relinquished the right to use the building and handed it over to saving children's souls. Since it was restored, Élet Háza has been functioning as a social-care home for children and a retreat house.

As regards the future of the Society of Social Mission, it is certain that there is a need for the teaching and institutions of the Mission. Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, who was the main patron of the Mission, said that it was '*manus Dei nihil aliud*' (nothing other than God's hand) that created the Mission and has maintained it for 106 years and will hopefully do so in the future.

In conclusion, it is the duty of each and every monk to devote their entire life to God. When Saint Clare of Assisi went to see Saint Francis of Assisi, he asked her, 'What did you come for?'. Clare's eternally valid reply was 'For God.'. The sisters of the Mission

also agreed to live a monastic life for God, to take a triple vow and lead a common life of fraternity. And God alone is enough. God is love. It is possible to love till our last breath. The sisters of the Society can share even their last smile, because this is what makes them a member of the Mission.

The Society gained undisputed credit to realise that based on Jesus' teaching, the Church was and will be obliged to help people in crisis and promote social equality. Since its inception up to this day, the Society has taken care of the poor and the destitute. It is an eternal command for every generation to serve our brethren, which is more relevant today than ever before.

The Society of Social Mission sets an example of serving other people. It has had and still has the courage to give a helping hand to marginalised people: workers, maids and ordinary people. It supports people with low self-esteem who are despised by others. The Society helps unskilled people who often live in poverty and it will preserve this charisma in the future.

Current liberal ideologies consider that people at the beginning and at the end of their lives are superfluous in economic terms as well, because they do not yet or no longer produce material wealth. They consider it acceptable to kill foetuses that develop malformed and to help old people to die.

The Society reaches out to marginalised people. In the village of Csobánka, the institute of *Életháza* (House of Life) helps mothers before and after childbirth, giving every foetus a chance to live. The elderly are accommodated in old-age homes, where they are provided with a room with en-suite facilities of their own. The staff take care of them for the last period of their lives and help them prepare for death.

Current ideologies also consider small children superfluous, because they need constant care and make no financial profit. These little ones produce nothing but take up a lot of time, energy, attention and care.

The Society sees small children as the future generation and helps them by running kindergartens, looking after them and helping them acquire lots of memorable experiences so that they become adults who pay attention to others.

Liberal schools teach selfishness. They think that success in life can only be achieved at the expense of others. Only those are able to succeed who unscrupulously ride roughshod over other people. Liberal ideology also promotes the idolisation of the body and proposes seeking pleasure and joy to the extreme.

The guidelines for the Society are basic Christian principles. Instead of taking a secular stance, it follows in Jesus's footsteps. As its motto says: "What is necessary is the salvation of souls." It teaches that those will be happy who live for others and serve their brethren. It should be noted that although a sound body is important, an innocent soul is even more important. Happiness is the reward of those who lead a disciplined life and act in the world in the hope of gaining eternal life.

Helping ordinary people requires constant search. Children coming from ordinary families will get a higher-level of education thanks to the help of personal, financial and educational help and may become white-collar workers. Their children may also become highly educated persons and can break out of the spiral of low education and poverty. If an institution like this wants to continue taking care of the poor, it will constantly have to find simple families and help them.

These days, the Society runs a vocational school in the town of Keszthely for secondary-school girls with special education needs who lag behind with their studies. The Mission meets simple non-educated parents every year through the girls who attend this school. They spur children to study hard and parents to do their everyday jobs honestly.

In Hungary, Catholic primary and secondary schools have been unable to educate young people to have an unshakeable faith. After their final exams, these youngsters often stop practising their religion daily and may get mixed up in shameful activities with their fellow students. Most of the time, it is only when they start their own family and raise their children that they return to the Church.

The Mission did not establish secondary schools, but taking account of current needs, it set up a student's residence for girls in secondary and higher education. Here the Mission can help them in small communities with personal guidance, high-quality programmes and a disciplined lifestyle to develop a commitment to the Church.

Technical innovations transform our daily life, reducing the number of physical personal contacts. Conversations in the afternoon or evening start to disappear from our lives.

The Mission is keen to make use of the conveniences provided by such new electronic devices. It is, however, aware that they are merely tools, which can in no way replace personal encounters, but can help arrange for their times. They still lay an emphasis on time spent together in everyday life, considering it important to have personal conversations and personal contacts with people who need it.

In terms of social matters, Edit Farkas was by far ahead of her time. She established institutions to provide assistance at the level of the society.

In addition to her motto (“The only thing that matters is the salvation of souls”), ‘Unity, loyalty and discipline’ also stood the test of time.

Unity is sorely needed today when families disintegrate and the gap between generations often seems unbridgeable. Children and even members of married couples want to have a room of their own. Young people are unable and unwilling to share the house with their parents. In today’s society, though we are physically close, separated only by thin walls, spiritually we are far from each other.

Loyalty in today’s world is an outdated concept. Couples, if they get married in the first place, do not consider it important to be faithful until death. A typical characteristic of our times is to shy away from commitments and our relationships are reduced to short-lived contacts with no perspectives. Paradoxically, while we are willing to sign a declaration of loyalty with a mobile operator for two years or with a bank for 20 years, we are afraid of long-term cooperation with other people.

Discipline has also disappeared from our lives. Schools and places of work are full of undisciplined and unruly children and adults respectively, who are unable to control their desires. Today people want everything instantly, unable to wait. Whatever we see or perceive, we want to possess immediately.

Finally, pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes* declares: “Human activity, to be sure, takes its significance from its relationship to man. Just as it proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates

his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has”³.

³ GS 35