

Pázmány Péter Catholic University
Faculty of Theology

**The acquisition of priestly spirituality in the educational
system of the Seminary of Pécs between 1917 and 1951**

Dissertatio ad Doctoratum
Thesis Booklet

Author: Zoltán Fekete
Supervisor: Dr. Edvárd Kajtár

Budapest, 2023

I. Summary of the research task

As the topic of my dissertation, I have chosen the acquisition of priestly spirituality, namely in the educational system of the Seminary of Pécs between 1917 and 1951, and as a subject which presumably has much value for the seminary education of our time. In making this connection, I should note that I was also confronted with negative comments about the point of researching the pre-Council era, and the beginning of that century, since “that world is already gone, thank God”, they added. “What do I want to use it for, what can that era still teach us in our time, say 100 years later?”

For me, as well, the research of the period before Vatican II was a challenge, as I had to reconstruct for myself the spiritual atmosphere, liturgical life and, last but not least, the canonical aspects of the topic.

Similar to the self-confession of my consultant in his dissertation, I was also confused by this negative stereotype, which was held by a significant number of my former seminarian companions and priests, concerning this period immediately before the Synod – perhaps regarded as a mere transitional period – and its philosophical-theological orientation, liturgy and legal background. In the introductory phase of my work, therefore, it was necessary to do some more research in this direction. My aim was to resolve this problem, preferably by searching for papal statements and the Church's teaching of all time.

It was at this time that I discovered the idea of Pope Benedict XVI, the “hermeneutics of continuity”, and I was introduced to the idea of an ecclesial thinking that brings forth “*out of his treasure new things and old*” (Mt 13,52), among other things through his *motu proprio, Summorum Pontificum*. I was delighted to find that the same idea had inspired my consultant, my former seminary spiritual director, but I was only confronted with it (reading his dissertation) in the final stages of writing my thesis. We therefore began our work with similar motivations.

Afterwards, I dared more confidently to approach a so-called “pre-synodal” theme, not as though Vatican II would live in me as a *tabula rasa* event that closed an era in the life of the Church and something completely new had begun. I began writing my thesis in the light of the above-mentioned Benedictine reflection, hoping to find material of lasting value in this area, with content and conclusions that are also relevant to our present time.

My dissertation, nevertheless, attempts to participate in the spiritual and liturgical renewal efforts of the Mother Church – perhaps I can use the term – in her pathfinding journey. All the more so, since the successor of Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, has also taken steps in relation to the said *motu proprio*.

My conclusion, therefore, is that the topic is still relevant in this perspective in 2022/2023, at the time these words are being written, and is also the subject of continual discussion among theologians, and also a theme for conferences and other events.

II. Research methods, resources and their use

Since the primary aim of my work is to describe the system and the main challenges of priestly formation in the training system of the Pécs Institute for the Education of Priests, with special emphasis on the development of priestly spirituality, it was necessary to systematically review the source materials related to the Institute. For this purpose, it was necessary to examine my central topic, the *Szemináriumi Élet*¹ (Seminary Life), a publication of the Saint Paul's Ecclesiastical Literature Society of the clergymen of Pécs, according to the above mentioned aspects, and to present the history of its origin, as well as the related material of the superiors in a systematic way. By this we mean the systematic presentation and evaluation of spiritual bullet points, rectoral exhortations and spiritual exercises. In addition, I wanted to provide a comprehensive account of everything that can be considered in connection with the publication from a spiritual and pastoral point of view.

My further aim is to present the self-education initiatives of the seminarians of the time in the sub-area under study, and the centrality of community building as a task. I also want to describe the various devotional practices and faith-affirming efforts, and to explore the enduring, timeless values inherent in my research area. My work does not, therefore, intend to present a separate internal spiritual world, but instead to provide a perspective on the ecclesial life of the time.

Since most of the dissertation is based on local archival research, I considered it a crucial issue to process in detail the material available there and similar sources from archival databases and other archival-like records. I have used the relevant documents of the Diocesan Archives of Pécs (and the diocesan library), the presentation and analysis of the contemporary magisterial publications and periodicals, and I have used monographs and encyclopedic data to understand the analyzed time period.

¹ Cf. Diocesan Archives of Pécs II.4.fasc.552. (Seminary Archives) – *Szemináriumi Élet. A pécsi papnövendékek Szent Pál Társulatának értesítője* (1921–1951), in Diocesan Library of Pécs.
<https://konyvtar.pecsiegyhazmegye.hu/digitalis-konyvtar/nyomtatott-kiadvanyok> (last checked: 22 April 2023)

III. Theses of the dissertation

The thesis can be divided into two approximately equal parts. The first prepares and introduces the second, main part, an in-depth analysis of the publication entitled *Szemináriumi Élet*, which has meanwhile become the primary object of my research.

Thesis 1.

Beginning with an introduction to the interpretative framework necessary for the study of the Church's history, I will introduce the term “hermeneutic of continuity”, as it is used by Pope Benedict XVI. This approach denies that after Vatican Council II everything is new in the Church and that all that preceded it (whether in the way the liturgy was performed or in the way the faith was transmitted) has ended. Instead of this kind of rupture in sacred tradition, it argues for organic development, while not rejecting the former.

The Second Vatican Council must be seen as a development from the Councils of Trent and before, which acknowledges the spiritual values of the preceding decades, and which seeks to respond to the pastoral questions of its time, without seeking to change doctrine, faith and morals, but in unity and continuity with them. There is no such thing as a “pre-Synodal” or a “post-Synodal” Church. Our period under study is therefore not merely the final herald of a 'transitional' age, a last witness of a mode of seminary education before the “great changes”.

Thesis 2.

However, as well as being a rich period with its own values, the influence of the reform movement of the time is undeniable. The Church was faced with a new situation, as a result of the newly evident changes in state and church policy and the loss of her secular influence. Changes and reform processes were set in motion by the *liturgical movement* and renewal, with the preparation of Pius XI and Pius XII. Later, the Vatican II Council, with its decree *Optatam Totius*, also discussed and rethought the question of priestly formation, or more precisely, brought forth “old and new”. However, in our essay we will only find a condensation of its preparatory reform efforts as far as priestly formation is concerned. It is indisputable that the liturgical reform already had an impact in Pécs in the first half of the century. Changes were thus introduced in the area of dialogue, relations and even confrontation with the world, but not in matters of faith and morals.

Thesis 3.

The clerical model of the Council of Trent was examined and evaluated by the Second Vatican Council, as were the aims, principles and, in part, the methods of seminary education, which were greatly influenced by the Reformation:

“They clearly saw that the spread of the Reformation could only be halted if they succeeded in raising up pastors who were scientifically trained, faithful to the Church and pious (...) Since the main purpose was to preserve order, great emphasis was placed on everything that related to hierarchical status, the dignity and privileged position of the priest.”²

Yet this system is not closed, opposed to the world, or controlled from above at the beginning of the 20th century, but allows room for initiatives of the clergy to form specialised sections, to deepen their knowledge of theoretical and - emphatically - practical theology, and to reflect on the ideological trends of the period. The practice of the era under study is an integral part of a unified vision of the priesthood, and is not intended to create something entirely new.

Thesis 4.

However, the typical priestly image and approach of the period is noticeable and undeniable. If we look at the history of canon law in the modern age, this brings us to the great new epoch of canon law, *“the era of codified canon law, which began in 1917 and continues to our present times.”³*

This new codification of ecclesiastical legislation, written in a scholastic style, which revolutionized (systematized) canon law, deals with the question of priestly education in one place, under c. 1352-1371. Up to this period, which was a turning point in the history of ecclesiastical law, and even afterwards, the priestly ideal as defined by the Council of Trent was the dominant one. This priestly character, which was also to be kept in mind in the context of priestly education, was embodied, as we have seen above, by the ecclesiastic who was opposed to the Reformation, defended the faith at all costs and thought in terms of his scientific training in a scholastic philosophical-theological system.

² GOJÁK, J., *A papi eszmény fejlődése a Trentói Zsinattól napjainkig* in *A II. Vatikáni Zsinat dokumentumai*, Szent István Társulat, Budapest 2000, 338.

³ ERDŐ, P., *Az egyházjog forrásai*, SZIT, Budapest 1998, 13.

During this time, the Church explicitly demanded greater holiness of life from the priests than from the laity. Thus, seminarians had to be educated in this spirituality. Even in § 1 of the 1936 diocesan synod of Pécs, the first chapter of the *Statuta Synodalia*, which deals with the priestly life, is quoted the relevant canon of the CIC:

*“The new Code of Canon Law requires of priests a life more holy than that of the laity, and an example to the faithful (Cn. 124), because they can only form Christ in the faithful if they themselves first of all live an interior spiritual life.”*⁴

Thesis 5.

Following the history of the St. Paul's Ecclesiastical Literature Society, it can be stated that within the framework of the Society (of which all students became members in Pécs upon entering the institute), a very active sectional work is established in the various branches of theology. The Church can only respond effectively to the questions and challenges of the times with apostolic ministers who are ready to act in this way.

By 1946, they were already looking back on decades of experience in missionary activity and evaluating the work of the various (ecclesiastical literature, rhetorical, social) departments which had been operating within the framework of the Society:

*“Our task: to synthesise the eternal, unchanging Catholicism with the ever-changing, ever-modern life. It is a beautiful but difficult vocation, because there seems to be a contradiction between theory and practice, between seminary and life. But the Society of Saint Paul builds a bridge between the two, a school of seminary practice on the one hand, and a preschool of life on the other. It is here that we try to turn faith and theology into life and change, and it is also from here that we watch the passage of time, ages and currents. If we look at the past year of work of the Society from this point of view, we can say that we have tried to feel and know the wind of the times: ‘the turning of the wind.’”*⁵

⁴ *Statuta Synodalia – Pécs-egyházmegyei zsinati határozatok*, Dunántúl Kiadó, Pécs 1936, 7.

⁵ *A mi feladatunk*, in *Szemináriumi Élet* no. 23 (December 1946, 12).

Thesis 6.

At the beginning of the period under study, we find the paper entitled *Hangok Hazulról*, which was published between April 1917 and July 1918, and functioned as the paper of the Seminary of Pécs for “military seminarians”.⁶ The spiritual correspondence of Dr István Sipos with the students forms an essential part of the journal: this contemporary historical document gives us a glimpse into the spirituality of the seminarians, even in the midst of the trying difficulties of the World War. From 1917 on, the seminary students of Pécs began to be conscripted, and this is the reason for this publication. As the spiritual director timelessly states in his exhortatory teaching:

In every state of life, man is moving towards a specific goal, and so it is in the spiritual life, where the ultimate goal is absolute happiness. The movement comes from self-determination, and the goal is union with God, to want and love only what He wants and loves, in short, to belong to God is man's supreme beatitude. The intelligent creature moves towards this end by free will, by morally good actions on the path of perfection, but since this is supernatural, natural actions alone - those resulting from his own performance and effort – are not sufficient. Indeed, to reach the *finis ultimus*: supernatural help is needed. This help comes by sanctifying grace, the theological and moral virtues, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, God's inspiring, illuminating, helping grace, and His protection, which enable man to act supernaturally. Spiritual life can be defined as activity, of which living faith is the first. Whatever our state of life, our situation, our mood, and therefore our passions, we must believe all that God has revealed to us, according to what the Church has proposed. From this point of view, it makes no difference whether the pupil is in the trenches or in the peaceful and quiet seminary chapel; in the midst of the joys of vacation or the struggles of death; in the midst of trials, in good days and bad, he must remain spiritually alive and faithful, professing his faith to the death. Frequent adherence to the sacraments, prayer, self-denial, sacrificial love for one's neighbour, the common good, one's country (and even for humanity), and, as a culmination, love of God, which is the driving force behind all these, are all important – the spiritual director reminds us of their importance. Prayer is one of that makes alive our relationship with God, our ultimate goal, the

⁶ For the complete first volume and the only issue of the second volume, see the website of the Electronic Periodical Archive [EPA], in MAGYAR, I. – FALUDI, F. (szerk.), *Hangok hazulról (a pécsi szeminárium katona-kispapjainak)*, Dunántúl Nyomda, Pécs 1917-1918., in Electronic Periodical Archive, <https://epa.oszk.hu/html/vgi/kardexlap.phtml?id=2646> (date of research: 5 April 2023)

source of our happiness. “Conversation” with Him, coupled with self-denial, helps us to rise above the difficulties of life and is a source of strength in enduring suffering and in the midst of our cross-bearing.⁷

Thesis 7.

The second, main part of my dissertation is an in-depth, section-by-section analysis of the publication entitled *Szemináriumi Élet*. I admit that I did this in contradiction to my original aim, since at the beginning of my research I wanted to systematically process the entire archival material of the Seminary,⁸ as well as the rector's exhortations. And furthermore, the reflection points, and the pastoral materials given by the spiritual director.

On the one hand, however, I realized that there was not enough material available, and that it would not be enough for a doctoral dissertation. On the other hand, the *Szemináriumi Élet* and other press products provided sufficient material, so that the former publication has in the meantime emerged as the main subject of research. The direction of further research, if it leads to anything, is the processing of the clerical and magisterial legacy, in which I have not delved because of my apparently good choice of topic.

In this part of my thesis I have pointed out the enthusiastic and joyous self-educational work within the framework of the Society of Saint Paul, the pastoral experience opportunities already existing at that time. And the scientific activities of the sections, which had a missionary and even ecumenical dimension. While not forgetting the practical application of the Church's social teaching. It is clear from the material processed that there was effective pastoral formation at the time.

In several places I have touched on my main area of research, the question of priestly spirituality, which also permeates my work. The “spiritual charge” of the seminary has played a major role in ensuring that the students have a strong spirit, fidelity to their vocation and a firm character during this short half century of trials and tribulations. My theme, in addition to its pastoral character, has become essentially a history of spirituality, which is why it has been included in the subject area of the discipline of Church History.

⁷ Vö. SÍPOS, I., *n. d.*, in *Hangok Hazulról I* (1917/3), 1-2.

⁸ I conducted my research mainly in the Diocesan Archives of Pécs, paying special attention to the documents of the *Seminary Archives*.

Thesis 8.

After a systematic overview of the spiritually-related writings and pastoral initiatives published in each chapter, the fourth chapter, entitled “Lelkiségtörténet” (History of Spirituality), presents each topic thematically, strictly in a perspective manner, i.e. in relation to events outside the walls of the Seminary.

I have chosen three major themes, one for each decade. Each is a significant event with a remarkable history of impact. In the 1920s, I dealt with the urban mission in Pécs (with its local parish-level manifestations); in the 1930s, the effects of the International Eucharistic Congress – in the context of Pécs; and in the 1940s, the relevant events of the Marian Days in Pécs, in preparation for the “Year of the Blessed Virgin Mary”. Since the impact of the city mission on the life of the four main parishes of the time is better documented separately in terms of archival sources, I have provided this section with subsections. I was unable to make such a division on the basis of the other two events, either because no such reference existed or because no relevant data could be found.

IV. List of publications on the subject of the work

Introducing the Society of Saint Paul, I examine the antecedents of the bulletin-like publication, its implications for priestly spirituality, and conclude with the direction of further research into exhortations and pastoral exercises. My published articles on this topic are:

FEKETE, Z., *A folyamatos papképzés*, in *Centralista XLVII* (2), Központi Papnevelő Intézet Magyar Egyháziroldalmi Iskolája, Budapest 2019, 21-32.

FEKETE, Z., *Dr. Sipos István spirituális levelezése kispapjaival az első világháború alatt*, in *Papi Lelkiség XVII*, Új Ember kiadványok, Budapest 2023, 37-48.