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## THESES OF DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION

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**The history of the diocese of Győr 1956–1960,  
in the light of the aspects of  
church policy and state security**

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## **I. Aims and background of the research**

During the more than three decades following the regime change of 1989-90, numerous articles were written by professional historians about the role of the Hungarian Catholic Church in the 1956 revolution, as well as the retaliatory measures taken by the party-state power after the fall of the revolution. However, a more complete picture still requires a great deal of research. With my doctoral dissertation, I try to take my share in this exploratory work by examining this period in detail in relation to the bishopric of Győr.

I began my research in this field as a university student when, in search of a thesis topic, I interviewed Béla Németh, a priest from the diocese of Győr, who was imprisoned during the reprisal that followed the 1956 revolution. He drew my attention to the person of the main defendant in his trial, Canon János Lányi. Studying the documents of this trial, I became interested in the fate of the churchmen involved. In my later research, I focused on them, as well as on the history of the clergy in the centre of the diocese, around the elderly and ailing Archpastor, Kálmán Papp.

The basic aim of the research is to explore the involvement of the bishopric of Győr and the clergy serving in its centre in October-November 1956, the *caritas* activities that began in the days of the revolution, and then the retaliatory measures taken by the authorities in response, as well as placing all of this in the wider context of church policy, and finally presenting the subsequent development of individual life paths.

Special attention is given to the activities of János Lányi, the director of the Caritas, the head of the parish of Győr-Belváros, and Katalin Rétháti, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer, as they and their connections were later the main focus of the official proceedings. Based on the relevant state documents, the dissertation follows the sister's illegal trips abroad, during which she conducted various negotiations on behalf of the bishopric of Győr. As a result of her travels and negotiations, she received shipments of clothes and food arrived in the country, and she was able to bring large amounts of currency and forints across the border to support the Caritas and the diocese. In this thesis, I examine several details of recent Hungarian church history, among them the cryptic contacts between József Zágon, the office director of the diocese of Győr who emigrated to Rome, and the bishopric of Győr in the spring and summer of 1957.

In the main chapters of my dissertation, the typical procedures of state power in the public history of the period are unfolded. I describe the retaliatory measures taken against the bishopric of Győr after the revolution, the various methods of the political police, the information-gathering activities of several agents employed by the church, and the details of the Lányi trial conducted in 1958. I will discuss how the isolation of the Bishop of Győr, Kálmán Papp increased during and as a result of the trial, and what 'fault lines' were created between the defendants in the trial. I present the process of how priests and nuns who were previously active in the service of the church, became passive as a result of intimidation, as well as how the party-state authorities used the charges of the Lányi trial against the Hungarian Bishops' Conference, and how incited divisions within the diocese of Győr. In the

final chapters of the dissertation, I reveal the further development of the careers and fates of three young priests of the diocese of Győr, László Bóna, the episcopal ceremony organizer, Pál Zsebedits, the cathedral choir chaplain, and József Búzás, the episcopal archivist, who were arrested during the reprisals following the revolution. Their detention and the efforts of the political police to put them in the service of the church policy of the Kádár regime largely determined their subsequent years. In their personal destinies, the story of three very different, still typical priestly lives is revealed to us.

The thesis is intended to fill a gap, since the presentation of this part of the bishopric's history has been awaited until now. The work can also be considered a pioneering one, since no similar research has been done on any of the Catholic dioceses in Hungary during the 1956 revolution and the period of the subsequent repression.

## **II. The source base of the dissertation, the methods of the research**

In the custody of the Budapest City Archives (BFL) there is a collection of documents nearly two thousand pages named *Dr. János Lányi et al.* A significant portion of the abundant document material was created between September 1957 and March 1959, but it also contains documents from the first half of the 1960s. It includes a significant part of the documents created during the investigation phase of the proceedings against János Lányi and his associates, arrest and search warrants, interrogation and witness interrogation protocols, and confessions. The set of documents also contains the documents of the trial conducted at the Budapest Capital Court, the indictment, the minutes of the trial, the verdicts, and pardon applications. The document material is a particularly important part of the source base of my doctoral dissertation.

After studying all these documents - in order to put the topic in a broader context and to search for control sources - I continued my research in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security (ÁBTL).

Among the investigation files kept at the ÁBTL, one can find a series of investigation files consisting of eight volumes with over two thousand pages, also under the name of Dr. János Lányi et al. In accordance with the general practice of document preservation, the source material does not include the documents of the court stage of the Lányi trial, nor the clemency petitions written in the early 1960s. All of these can be found exclusively in the group of documents kept by the BFL. It does, however, include detention agent reports created during the investigation phase of the procedure, which can also be used as a control source, and the materials of state security combinations developed and implemented during the investigation, which are not found in the source material kept in the BFL.

Although it is rare in the practice of state security, documents created during a confidential investigation were sometimes placed in investigation files when the documents were sorted. This has also happened in the case of the document material found in the ÁBTL under the name of Dr. Lányi János et al. Thus, the set of documents not only contains the documents of

the open but also of the confidential investigation. This includes the agent reports found in the dossier series, the various notes and drafts of the state security, as well as summary and evaluation reports. These not only provide background information for the aforementioned source material, but also contribute decisively to the fullest possible exploration of the topic of the dissertation. In addition to all this, they also serve as a control source for the documents created in the open phase of the investigation at many points.

In the course of my research, in addition to the series of files mentioned above, I also relied on the source material of several other collections of documents kept in the ÁBTL. Studying the investigation files of László Bóna and József Búzás proved to be essential to uncovering the role of the bishopric of Győr and the clergy serving in the centre of the diocese during the 1956 revolution.

I browsed several object files created during a confidential investigation with great profit. As an example, the collection of documents named *Roman Catholic Diocese of Győr* can be mentioned. This includes a number of agency reports, as well as state security memos and summary reports, which documents greatly contributed to answering the questions raised during the research and drawing a complex picture. It also proved useful to study the object file of the *Hungarian Catholic Episcopal College*, the relevant sources of which helped to explore the police procedures carried out in the Diocese of Győr during the reprisals following the 1956 revolution, as well as the broader church political connections of the Lányi trial.

I used the sources of the group file opened by the state security in 1957 under the pseudonym ‘*Csempészek*’ as a decisive control source. In addition to all these documents, it was important to study several agent work files for this topic.

I also conducted research in the Hungarian National Archives, the Győr Archives of the Győr-Moson-Sopron County National Archives, and the Győr Diocese Archives. However, the relevant documents of the ÁBTL and the BFL make up the majority of the source base of the dissertation.

To write my doctoral thesis, I used manuscript recollections and material from interviews made as a result of my own collecting activity. I had the opportunity to visit contemporaries who are still alive. The common feature of manuscript recollections and oral history materials is that the informants put their memories on paper and recounted the events as much as forty or fifty years after the events, in their old age, beyond the regime change of 1989–90. These sources contributed to a better understanding of the human feelings behind the events, to the exploration of personal life paths and destinies shaped by history. However, since the subjective sense of life and the interpretation formed over time can greatly influence the memory, I strived to subject these sources to an extremely strong source-critical analysis.

### **III. The results of the research**

The main results and conclusions of the dissertation can be summarized in the following statements:

1. In the city of Győr, the attitude of the Catholic Church during the revolution corresponds to the national pattern - according to which the Catholic Church was neither the leader nor the initiator of the events - and can be considered a local level mapping of it.

The church showed solidarity with those in trouble and provided help for those in need. This is exemplified by the bishopric's acceptance of aid donations from abroad, the creation of the diocesan caritas, as well as József Búzás's trip to Austria, which the young priest undertook as an interpreter for a delegation obtaining medicines.

Several priests tried to influence events with their words and speeches at demonstrations and meetings or undertook various services through their language skills. Lajos Horváth's speech from the balcony of the town hall, as well as László Bóna's speech at the meeting of the Temporary National Council of Győr, as well as the speeches and interpreting services of the Benedictine monk teacher Iréneusz Galambos can be mentioned here.

The activities of the clergy of Győr during the revolution, in addition to those mentioned above, can be grouped around the aspects of the steps taken for the free operation of the church and the settlement of church disciplinary problems. This includes the effort to remove peace priests and the ecclesiastical commissioner, the attempt to resolve issues related to religious education, and the articulation of the grievances of the church.

2. In the period immediately following the suppression of the revolution, the church provided concrete and tangible help in the lives of those in need through the operation of the Győr Caritas.

After all, the activities of János Lányi and Katalin Rétháti unfolded and bore fruit in the months following the bloodbath of the freedom struggle. Thanks to the donations received from abroad as a result of their work, not only the city of Győr, but also the needy population of Sopron and Mosonmagyaróvár received effective help. The approximately 156,000 lunches distributed by the soup kitchens operating in the three settlements until the end of May 1957 provided concrete help to many people who were in a difficult situation due to the general poverty in the country.

3. A correlation can be shown between the amount of foreign aid received by the Diocese of Győr and the geographical conditions of the Diocese.

The fact, notably, that the Caritas of Győr received a significant amount of money, food and clothing donations, in addition to numerous personal and human qualities (for example János Lányi's previous experiences and Katalin Rétháti's efforts and ready-to-do spirit), can also be attributed to the geographical location of the bishopric. Preceding its isolation from the free world by the Iron Curtain, the diocese, which is located along and near the western border, had more lively and intensive relations on the other side of the border than the national

average. One of the main reasons for this is that a part of the diocese of Burgenland in neighbouring Austria was under the jurisdiction of the bishopric of Győr before the creation of the Trianon borders. After the hermetic seclusion caused by the Rákosi era, the previous relationships and emotional attachment were quickly activated. This is exemplified by the personal commitment of István László, bishop of Burgenland, which greatly accounts for the fact that he, as Archpastor, provided significant support to the Caritas in Győr, independently of the national organization. Due to historical reasons, the importance of geographical location became really decisive through personal relationships. The decisive importance of personal ties is supported and exemplified by the figure of József Zágón, the former episcopal office director in Győr, who - alongside István László and perhaps before him to some extent - as a priest that emigrated to Rome, greatly contributed to the operation of the Caritas in Győr for more than half a year through his influence and network of contacts.

4. I explored in detail the cryptographic communication between József Zágón and the bishopric of Győr and showed that it also served as a hidden link between the Hungarian Catholic Church and the Holy See.

When summarizing the results of my research in this regard, it is worth pointing out that the secret channel operated for a short time, from March 1957 to September 1957, i.e. for only half a year. It came to an end with the arrest of Katalin Rétháti, but the nurse's detention was not related to the operation of the secret channel, since the political police did not have any knowledge about it at that time. Later, however, when János Lányi and Katalin Rétháti were convicted, it already had an important role and significantly influenced the gravity of the sentence imposed.

The cryptic correspondence concerned issues - financial support from abroad, requests for foreign writings to help religious education and shape spirituality, state pressure on the filling of church offices - which were a major concern for the Hungarian Catholic Church, in terms of its operation and relationship with the state, throughout the period. The listed issues were also of interest to the party-state power.

Examining the functioning of the secret route, the most notable result was the rejection of the petition for the so called 'priests for peace' by the Holy See. Of course, we cannot claim that the response of the competent congregation would undoubtedly have been positive without Katalin Rétháti's letter, but in any case, the rejection coincided with Kálmán Papp's real intention.

With the help of the illegal channel, light was shed on a specific case of state pressure applied to filling church offices, but in the long run, the government mostly succeeded in filling senior church positions with the right people.

Since the secret route of information flow was quickly exposed, it was not suitable for a bishop under pressure to use it as a means of informing the Holy See in a long-term, authentic manner about the situation and problems of the Hungarian Catholic Church living in the grip of the state. Soon after the revelation of the secret channel, there was a major change in the way the Holy See was informed, starting in the early 1960s. Since that time, the Holy See and

the Hungarian People's Republic maintained regular contact with each other. The existence of this official relationship supported the efforts of the party-state power to keep the way of informing the Holy See in its hands to the greatest extent possible, in accordance with its own interests.

5. Following the 1956 revolution, the political police took measures against the bishopric and the clergy serving there in two waves of arrests. I explored the methods used by state security and the power interests behind the detention revenues.

The first wave of arrests, which took place in the spring of 1957, resulted in the detention of four young priests (Pál Zsebedits, László Bóna, Lajos Horváth and József Búzás) who served in the centre of the diocese, but partly due to their age and position did not belong to the confidential circle of the diocese bishop. There is nothing to suggest that Kálmán Papp shared any of his concerns about the governance of the diocese with his episcopal ceremony organizer László Bóna. The detention of the four young priests clearly indicated to the bishop and those around him the determination and strength of the authorities to act against the churchmen who had taken part in the revolution and against the church itself.

In accordance with the national trend, the number of agents in the bishopric of Győr also decreased with the de-conspiracy of József Szele during the revolution. At the same time, the arrests in the spring of 1957 were motivated by the intention of the political police to use the detentions to carry out recruitment operations.

After the revolution, the second wave of arrests that hit the bishopric lasted longer than the first. As part of the latter, János Lányi was detained in mid-July 1957, as well as Katalin Rétháti and her sister Mária Rétháti approximately two and a half months later, in late September and early October 1957. This second wave of arrests had a stronger impact on the diocesan pastor than the first. In the person of János Lányi, one of his most trusted friends suffered retribution. The reason behind the abduction of the priest was the intention of the state security to carry out his recruitment by means of pressure. With this step, the officers of the political police wanted to have a network of people whose authority and friendship with Kálmán Papp would enable them not only to keep the high priest in check, but also to influence and control him in accordance with the interests of church politics. However, this all failed by János Lányi's opposition to recruitment.

6. The break of Bishop Kálmán Papp, which occurred during the retaliation following the 1956 revolution, was not realized as a result of a pre-developed strategic plan, but as a consequence of the step-by-step measures determined and implemented by the political police.

In the context of the second wave of arrests that hit the bishopric, it can be clearly demonstrated that the political police succeeded in exerting such a fear-inducing effect on the diocesan bishop that, as a result, both his mental and physical health was shattered.

7. The church policy of the consolidating party-state power was definitely enforced in relation to the bishopric of Győr. The persecution of the main protagonists of this dissertation is not only a local case, but fits into a national trend of retaliation.

It can be interpreted as part of the concrete, local implementation of the church politics of the post-revolutionary years that during the reprisals the representatives of the dictatorship managed not only to remove János Lányi, a priest who was considered reactionary and extremely active in his actions, from Kálmán Papp's immediate environment, but also to force him to be very passive. The same aim was achieved in the case of the Rétháti sisters, whose activity was also broken by police measures and court proceedings. After their release, the two nuns led a life of complete seclusion and no longer carried out any active service within the Church.

Although the episcopal office director György Póka, who was considered reactionary by the authorities, was not directly affected by the proceedings against János Lányi and his associates, his removal from the lobby may have been the result of the blackmail that started from there. The reinstatement of the two prominent 'priests for peace', László Pajtényi and János Nedesovszky, to the positions of vicar and office director, respectively, can also be integrated into the process of implementing state church policy at the local level.

The retaliatory measures following the 1956 revolution were carried out against various groups of society defined by the authorities as hostile. The representatives of the dictatorship considered the churches, including the Catholic Church, to be such a hostile category. The persecution of the protagonists of the dissertation and the trial of János Lányi and his associates cannot be considered isolated phenomena, but rather part of a series of measures aimed at breaking up social groups that were resisting the system. After the end of the revolutionary reprisal, which was also used by the authorities to break the Church and the clergy, the consolidating Kádár regime put its relationship with the Catholic Church on a new footing. One of the fundamental features of the new church policy was that it tried to use the churches and church figures as much as possible to ensure the stability of the system.

#### **IV. Publications on the topic of the dissertation**

Búzás József győri egyházmegyes pap tanúságtétele a náci és a kommunista diktatúra idején. In: *Magyar Egyháztörténeti Vázlatok*, 25. évf. (2013) 3–4. sz. 133–147.

Zágon József és a győri egyházmegye titkos kapcsolattartása az 1956-os forradalmat követően. In: *Primus inter omnes: Tanulmányok Bedy Vince születésének 150. évfordulójára*. Szerk.: ARATÓ György, NEMES Gábor, VAJK Ádám. Győr, Győri Egyházmegyei Levéltár, 2016. 309–326.

A győri papság az 1956-os forradalom napjaiban. In: *Collectanea Sancti Martini IV.: A Pannonhalmi Főapátság Gyűjteményeinek Értesítője 4*. Pannonhalma, 2016. 219–237.



## Other published studies

Elszigeteltség és a szabadulás kérdőjelei. Polgár Vilmos küzdelme a politikai rendőrség szorításában a pártállami diktatúra idején. In: *Collectanea Sancti Martini: A Pannonhalmi Főapátság Gyűjteményeinek Értesítője I.* Pannonhalma, 2013. 181–216.

Bencések a Magyar Néphadseregben. In: *Bencések Magyarországon a pártállami diktatúra idején I.* Szerk.: DÉNESI Tamás, BOROS Zoltán. Pannonhalma, Pannonhalmi Főapátsági Levéltár, 2017. 235–245.

Leendő teológusok a Magyar Néphadseregben. In: *Közös küldetésben katona és lelkes az ember és a nemzet szolgálatában.* Szerk.: BERTA Tibor, HAUZINGER Gyula, HOLLÓ József Ferenc. Budapest, HM Zrínyi Térképészeti és Kommunikációs Szolgáltató Közhasznú Nonprofit Kft, 2017. 289–300.

Bencés cserkészek a Rákosi-korszakban. In: *„Illegális ifjúsági munka.” Cserkészközösségek a diktatúrában.* Szerk.: TABAJDI Gábor. Budapest, Magyar Cserkészszövetség, 2017. 79–83.

Tanórán kívüli foglalkozások a pannonhalmi és a győri bencés gimnáziumban a Kádár-korszakban. In: *„Illegális ifjúsági munka.” Cserkészközösségek a diktatúrában.* Szerk.: TABAJDI Gábor. Budapest, Magyar Cserkészszövetség, 2017. 184–188.

Legányitól Szennayig. Egy főapátválasztás margójára. In: *Bencések Magyarországon a pártállami diktatúra idején II.* Szerk.: DÉNESI Tamás, BOROS Zoltán. Pannonhalma, Pannonhalmi Főapátsági Levéltár, 2018. 27–46.

Szerzetesi megújulás Pannonhalmán a II. Vatikáni Zsinat fényében. Az 1969-1971-es rendi nagykáptalan. In: *Bencések Magyarországon a pártállami diktatúra idején III.* Szerk.: DÉNESI Tamás, BOROS Zoltán. Pannonhalma, Pannonhalmi Főapátsági Levéltár, 2018. 7–27.

## Published review

Egy fogoly apát feljegyzései – Endrédy Vendel zirci apát feljegyzései az ÁVH börtönében. Szerkesztette: CÚTHNÉ GYÓNI Eszter. Budapest, METEM, 2013. In: *Magyar Egyháztörténeti Vázlatok*, 27. évf. (2015) 1–2. sz. 188–190.

## Manuscript for publication

Utak a letartóztatásból. Papi pályák a Győri Egyházmegyében az 1956-os forradalmat követő évtizedekben. In: *Küzdelem a lelkekért. Pártállam és egyházak a hosszú hatvanas években.* Szerk.: ERDŐS Kristóf, SZULY Rita, TABAJDI Gábor, WIRTHNÉ DIERA Bernadett. Budapest, Nemzeti Emlékezet Bizottsága, 631–657.