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Parish and Society

**Social role of the Roman Catholic lower clergy and lay assistants in Csongrád in the
second half of the 19th century**

Doctoral (PhD) dissertation hypotheses

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Research method and aims

My dissertation is an analytical study of a *historical anthropological* nature of the special relationship between parish priests and church assistants active in Csongrád in the second half of the 19th century, and *the role they played in local society*. Social role is understood to mean the sum of the forms of action expected of the individual by the community, that is, the body of expectations attached to certain social statuses and positions. Individuals also have an understanding of the question of “how a priest/cantor/bellringer, etc.” should behave, and as they adapt their behaviour to these expectations, they also become role-carriers. Experiencing and accepting the social role is a factor of key importance; accordingly the role of the lower clergy and church assistants also requires sincere identification with the moral weight of their tasks. The community judges their behaviour and everyday actions in the light of the success or failure of their role identification.

The representatives of historical anthropology – including myself – regard it as essential to clarify precisely the circumstances, to assess the cultural, economic and especially the social conditions serving as the background of the phenomena studied. In this sense the society of Csongrád in the period concerned is the context of the values and norms to which the office-bearers examined relate and adapt – in their own customary, ad hoc way. It is in this context that the decisions and responses of the individual actor acquire meaning.

Two characteristic elements of microhistory that are difficult to separate from historical anthropology can also be found in my work. One is the concept of *normal exception* associated with the name of Edoardo Grendi, that can be examined through the example of the parish priest Antal Hegyi (1886-1902). According to the theory, the examination of atypical phenomena – that is, phenomena contrary to statistical representativity – can help to reveal deep strata of social reality that, in the absence of conflict, remain hidden. Given that the individual chapters of the dissertation are restricted both in their sub-themes and in time and space, the idea of *change of scale* logically arises. The change of scale tries to form a bridge from the micro to the macro, from the specific to the general by reconstructing the fabric of social reality through an increasingly thick description of micro-level phenomena. I have treated the minor and major conflicts of the ecclesiastical and para-ecclesiastical office-bearers as the sum of phenomena that in themselves point beyond themselves and throw light on cultural and tradition-based relations. In this way the present dissertation can be regarded as a chain of case studies that, embedded into a wider social context, become historical anthropological analysis, a picture formed of mosaic pieces.

My research is thus focused on changes in the social role of the lower clergy, lay assistants and para-ecclesiastical assistants in the second half of the 19th century. According to my hypothesis, parallel with the restructuring of the society of Csongrád, the judgement of individual roles must also have undergone change, and the path to an understanding of trends influencing the transformation leads through the study of individual conflicts.

Sources

In my research I have relied heavily on the material on the parish of Csongrád (*Acta Parochiarum*) and the private documents of parish priests serving in Csongrád in the 18th-19th centuries (*Acta Privatorum*) found in the Vác Episcopal and Capitular Archive. Among the Episcopal Holy See documents, I have made use of the copies of interrogation protocols placed in the *Acta Privatorum*. In the archive of the Csongrád Parish of Our Blessed Lady I had access to the records of births, marriages and deaths, the *Canonica Visitatio*¹ and *Historia Domus*² as well as to the miscellaneous documents. I was able to examine the minutes of the Csongrád council and the documents of the school board in the Csongrád Branch Archive of the MNL CsML (Csongrád County Archive of the Hungarian National Archives). My study of the historical and ethnological archive of the Csongrád Csemegi Károly Library and Tari László Museum was supplemented with my insights on the cantors and folk life in Csongrád. The Somogyi Károly Library in Szeged, the Vác Episcopal Library and the collection of old books at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Szeged have been very useful. Thanks to the digitisation project in the Csemegi Károly Library, searching the press material on Csongrád has been greatly simplified.

It can be seen that the great majority of my sources were of a church nature: letters addressed to the diocesan bishop of Vác, canonical visitation protocols, Holy See interrogation records, newspaper articles, minutes of representative bodies, recollections of private individuals (Mihály Szántai Kiss, Gellért Váry and others). Since to date researchers have dealt only incidentally with my theme, I was able to draw mainly only analytical considerations from the Hungarian and European literature used. I studied the books I have cited in libraries in Hungary and abroad (e.g. the Warburg Institute in London, the Open University and the Folklore Society). The volumes obtained here form the backbone of the research history chapter of the dissertation.

¹ *Canonica Visitatio*: lat. “church visit”, supervisory visits to parishes. In Hungary there are data from as early as the 12th century on protocols written by a bishop or archdeacon, for which the questions were compiled by a bishop. The course and frequency of such visits were regulated by the Council of Trent (1545-63).

² *Historia Domus*: lat. “history of the house”, a handwritten book kept by the priests of a parish in which they record local happenings and important events.

The significance and novelty of the theme examined

The systematic examination of the lower clergy in Hungary began with the Canonical Visitations and parish documents. The reason for this is that documents on the lives of priests (*Acta Personalia*) have survived only in part – if they have survived at all; the advantage is that using the same type of sources makes it easy to compare the data of the studies. Thus an important difference compared to earlier research is that the Bishop of Vác did not make a canonical visitation during the period examined; this meant that it was only in outlining the background that I could make use of this valuable source type that had formed the basis of earlier research. At the same time, in spite of its conciseness, the *Visitatio Paterna* made in September 1890 gives an illuminating cross-section of parish life in Csongrád. In my dissertation I have used not only official church sources, but also press materials, and the recollections of private individuals, something without precedent for the theme examined.

Nowadays scholarly interest is focused on the period when the parish network was reorganised, the 17th to 18th centuries. Research history in both Hungary, Western Europe and America shows a lack of investigation into the state of affairs in the 19th century.

The question of lay church assistants is also an area that has been little and patchily explored in Hungary; scholarly enquiry can be regarded as having largely come to an end with the study of cantors. In the light of the precedents my work represents a genuine novelty as regards both the chosen time frame and the special area of the research. The studies closest to mine – such as those by Tamás Dénesi or István Fazekas – have all been broad cross-sections at diocesan level, and covered the period up to the end of the 18th century. Such a study restricted to a narrow area – namely the community of a given parish – and in such depth is practically without precedent.

The structure of the dissertation and its scholarly results

The content of the dissertation is divided into five main parts: an introduction of an analytical nature, posing the problem, a presentation and summing up of data on the situation of the lower clergy, lay church assistants and para-ecclesiastical assistants in Csongrád. The introduction contains first the Hungarian and international research history on the lower clergy and church assistants (chapters I–II), followed by a brief history of the church and society of Csongrád from the reorganisation to the mid-19th century (chapter III). I have devoted separate subchapters to the denominational relations, the work of the monastic pastors, and to the general state of spirituality in the period. The reason for this is that the Roman Catholic majority, as a historically established local characteristic, and the presence of Franciscans basically shaped the self-image and mentality of parishioners in Csongrád. The description of the state of the people of Csongrád in the 1850s-60s serves as a point of departure for an understanding of the changes that occurred a few decades later.

The section dealing with the lower clergy begins with a description of the persons of the Csongrád parish priests in the 18th to 19th centuries, their benefices and obligations (chapter IV). This is followed by a chapter presenting the obligations of the parish priests to their church superiors (diocesan bishop) and to their secular “leadership partners” (patron, local authorities), and the characteristics of their official relations. I considered it expedient to place special emphasis on parish priest Antal Hegyi (1886-1902) because the whole dissertation is imbued with the figure of the parish priest who departed from the traditions of his predecessors but whose novel legacy remained without continuation.

In Chapter V (*Self-image and vocation*) I present and analyse the social role of the Csongrád parish priests from the angle of the lower clergy and the parishioners. The case studies presenting conflicts big and small and exceptional life situations also throw light on the less emphasised areas of practical pastoral work and its everyday problems (innovation and respect of traditions, role of sacral protector, moral life and organisation of the religious community). Here I am seeking an answer to the question of whether judgement of the role of parish priest changes in Csongrád in the second half of the 19th century. On the basis of what qualities did they judge someone to be a “good priest” and who was regarded as incompatible with the ideal of spiritual pastor?

It is rarely emphasised that the community’s spiritual leader was never likely to be faced with a *tabula rasa*; he naturally became a link in the chain of local tradition and memory. He had to face and deal with feedback points, patterns of memory, reflections and comparisons referring to his predecessors. His task and the field required for pastoral activity also depended on the “legacy” left by his predecessors. The expectations made of the priesthood appear in our sources when the ideal image has been damaged and the parishioners try to express their wishes and desires arising from their disappointment, whether justified or otherwise.

At the end of the 19th century excessive participation in political and public life was added to the more serious “priestly sins”, such as dereliction of duty found in pastoral activity (neglect of confession, lateness in saying masses) or failure to set a moral example (money-grubbing, contact with women). By involving confraternity members and the lay church assistants in political agitation and giving political content to his sermons, parish priest Antal Hegyi created a conflict between his role as a priest and his personal convictions, that was noticed and remarked on by those in his environment.

The Csongrád parishioners clearly had definite ideas about the character of a “genuine, good spiritual pastor”. The main motifs in the highly stereotyped desires were empirically based, they evoke different features in the behaviour of the previous priests. The characters they longed to see return and the personalities that were not accepted come to form disproportionately extreme opposites. This can be found in the case of András Kanyó and János Mátyus, and in the second half of the century Lajos Virter and Antal Hegyi. In this way the parishioners adjusted their expectations regarding the social role a priest should play, not to seminary norms unknown to them but to the priestly ideal of an experienced but past “golden age”.

As regards the behaviour of priests in crisis situations, in the light of our sources Antal Hegyi seems to be a priest who was more rational in his thinking and more ready to act than his predecessors had been. This is not surprising: in the second half of the 19th century he had the possibility of providing centrally supported, organised help and of elaborating a rescue strategy. A new kind of what could be called “civil” features were added to his sacral function. While as chairman of the flood defence committee he was working on ways to strengthen the levees, he led expiatory prayer sessions and commended the threatened community to the mercy of the Heart of Jesus. All this indicates an enlargement of the traditional social role of the parish priest and at the same time also to a certain degree its transformation.

Although the question chosen as the title for chapter VI (*Fellow priests or assistants?*) focuses on the relationship between parish priest and chaplain, my sources give evidence of a much more nuanced problem; the “potential ambiguity” of the role of the chaplains, the failure to clarify their rights and competencies. It is certain that the attempts at self-definition by the assistant ministers in Csongrád were accompanied by a series of conflicts. While the cantor (would have) adopted a collegial approach towards the assistant ministers, the Franciscan had to defend his autonomy from the autocratic orders given by the chaplains, moreover the parish priest did not always treat the assistant ministers equally.

Both the parish priest and the assistants had their own ideas of how the other party should behave. The behaviour patterns for the correct behaviour of a spiritual pastor applied equally to the parish priest and the chaplains; but their expectations of each other were shaded by their differing positions in the parish hierarchy. The parish priest as “superior and fellow priest” expected obedience, while the assistants expected the fullest equality or at least its appearance. The well-balanced functioning of the parish required the mutual recognition and respect of the expectations. In such a situation, the personal manner and congeniality of the parish priest and his assistants become key issues.

In the case of Antal Hegyi resistance to his disposition towards favoured fellow priests and his favouring of certain chaplains did not depend solely on fellow-feeling. Since the case descriptions cited in the dissertation are all from the period when parish priest Hegyi’s political activity was at its peak, it can be rightly supposed that mutual advantages arose from the supports given. Both during the parliamentary election campaigns and the time of propaganda directed against civil marriage, Hegyi relied strongly on firm action by his assistants; he not only turned a blind eye to political activity by his assistants, he even encouraged it. In this way in the last decades of the 19th century the Csongrád chaplains strove to support and copy the parish priest in both church and secular matters. This “opening” added entirely new features to the ideas the lower clergy of Csongrád had of their own social role.

The unit discussing the situation of church assistants begins with a description of the position of cantor,

the most highly-trained lay church office-bearer (chapter VII). From 1860 right up to 1902 Antal Sohlya was the cantor in Csongrád; I have therefore placed special emphasis on the discussion of his life career, activity and the role he played in local society. How the Csongrád cantor saw the position he occupied within the parish hierarchy, and how the parish priest regarded him are questions to be answered.

Cantor Antal Sohlya demonstrated remarkable versatility during the 40 years he spent in Csongrád: he was at once singer and composer; a public figure engaged in politics; singing teacher and teacher of voice methodology, a writer on these subjects, poet and vine-grower. His talent was matched by his self-esteem, thus the key problem in this chapter can be traced back largely to Sohlya's character. The *éneklész*³ tried to treat the priestly community of the Csongrád parish as a socially equal "company of educated persons", the consequences of which can be read in connection with the 1867-68 Alvinczy-Sohlya affair.

The conflict between parish priest Ferenc Alvinczy and Antal Sohlya showed the need to reconsider their official relations and clarify their expectations. The parish priest could only conceive of this within the traditional hierarchical frames; he regarded himself and his assistant priests as the cantor's *superior*, and called the cantor himself his *subordinate*. A letter written by Antal Sohlya reveals an entirely different point of view: "it has been brought to my attention [...] that I am *a subordinate to my priest superior*, but as one educated man to another I would have wished for a different style, even if I were in fact guilty. In my humble opinion, both I and the parish priest are servants of the church of God, with the difference that *the parish priest is my superior in rank, but he is not my dictator!*" With this sudden change of perspective, we have before us not an ordained priest and church cantor, but two educated persons who are both servants in the house of God. In the surprisingly self-assured rhetoric of Antal Sohlya, 'he pulled the priestly robe closer to the earth', which naturally did not win the full approval either of the bishop or the parish priest.

Not only the parish priest who was authorised to discipline him but also the parishioners took note of the cantor's actions. Disrespect shown towards the priesthood was judged more seriously than transgressions affecting parishioners directly – even financially or in their livelihood. In the eyes of the parishioners there could be no question that the parish priest and the chaplains were superiors. They expected the cantor at all times to represent the church in a fitting way, to respect the local priests, in short, to show patience and obedience. Seen in this light it is not surprising that the cases where the cantor openly expressed his dislike of the chaplains or the parish priest created such a great stir.

On the whole a very many-sided relationship existed between the cantor and the parishioners who made use of his services. On the one hand the cantor demanded that people attending the church showed respect to him, greeted him first and used the correct form of greeting. At the same time he kept his behaviour and manifestations under control as he was fully aware that his actions had weight and were regarded as a model; he stood in the crossfire of refined expectations. The office of cantor was thus a lifestyle and model that imbued all areas of life: it obliged the person holding the office to behave with dignity, to set an example and live a consciously Christian life. If these conditions were not met, or were only partly met the parishioners were not slow in complaining to the parish priest, or censuring or criticising the cantor in person, or discussing the matter among themselves. In view of his education it could be said that "he was a master serving a master", but his church office ensured him social prestige that, if used wisely, would bear fruit even for his children and

³ I use the expression *éneklész* as a synonym of cantor.

grandchildren.

In Csongrád the positions of bellringer and sacristan were never separated, indeed: in the Saint Roche Church in the inner town under the advowson of its patron, at times it was also combined with the role of sexton (chapter VIII). From the time the church was built in the 1760s members of the Keviczky family inherited from father to son the post of bellringer and sacristan in the outer town church. The tradition was kept alive solely by customary law, as the first oral agreement reached with the first parish priest of the church (namely that the family should hold the office, as long as it “remained in decency”) was never confirmed in writing.

In 1889 parish priest Antal Hegyi pointed out that the entitlement on the basis of descent rests on very shaky ground. At that time, following a heated debate, by merely declaring that the bellringer had lost his post, at a stroke he invalidated the oral agreement between the first Keviczky and his forerunner as parish priest. Since no written record had ever been made of the inheritance of the post or the criterion of “worthy discharge of obligation”, this *usus* based on custom proved to be inadequate at the end of the 19th century.

Both the community and the local authorities were shocked to hear of the dismissal of György Keviczky and resisted the action. The leaders of the settlement used every means at their disposal to prevent implementation of the “reform”: for months they postponed the eviction and the withdrawal of the bellringer’s income.

If we hold to the idea that what lay behind the decisions on church discipline made by parish priest Antal Hegyi was typically the intention to strengthen his own position and the image of a centralised parish leadership, it can be rightly presumed that he wished to fill the post of bellringer and sacristan with a “strategic person” holding principles close to his own. It would appear that the elderly bellringer was not fit for the role the parish priest had in mind. This assumption is supported by the fact that after the departure of the old Keviczky, Antal Hegyi ignored the patron and the local authorities and appointed a successor from among his own supporters. But after 1889 the parties with a vested interest in the position of bellringer, that is, the settlement and the patron began to pay increased attention to the fate of this position that was basically one of trust and that could henceforth no longer ensure the calm that had been enjoyed by the Keviczky family for 120 years.

The central figure of chapter IX, Rókus Bába Szabó curator supervised the expenditures and revenues of the Csongrád outer town church for 50 years. Bába Szabó can be described as a kind of polymath: besides acting as the master of ceremonies at weddings and writing poetry, he also made important notes on local history, was engaged in land surveying and vine-growing, held various public offices, supervised the enlistment of recruits to the army, etc. After looking at the written records to be found on Csongrád curators, I take the example of Rókus Bába Szabó to show the contradictory situation that arises when the jurisdiction of his position as a man of the church comes into conflict with the centralising efforts of the parish priest. The aim of the chapter is thus to show the causes that led to the “emptying” of the post of curator in Csongrád, how it became a nominal position and was finally abandoned.

Local newspaper articles from before 1898 give the impression that parish priest Antal Hegyi had found a man after his own heart in Rókus Bába Szabó. If all that is true of this is that the curator worked in quiet cooperation beside the parish priest, it would be sufficient reason for Bába Szabó to become one of the main targets of the political opponent, the *Csongrádi Lap*. However, after a decade filled with minor attacks in the newspaper, the relationship between the “worthy student” and the parish priest gradually deteriorated. In April

1898 it was rumoured that Antal Hegyi – at that time already suspended as Csongrád parish priest – had threatened the church curator with dismissal. Since the curator had readily cooperated with the administrator appointed for the time of Hegyi’s suspension, the ex-parish priest accused his former confidant as being a disloyal traitor. And this was merely a foretaste of what was to happen in the summer of 1898.

In August 1898 Vilmos Matejka, commissioner of the Holy See began his investigations into the suspended Antal Hegyi by hearing more than fifty witnesses. Matejka questioned Rókus Bába Szabó in great detail about the parish’s finances. The replies were fair and precise, but when the questions began to move away from minor matters – such as the fee charged for burial plots – Rókus Bába hesitated and became uncertain. In reply to Matejka’s disbelief, he admitted: as curator he knew nothing about the parish’s general revenues and expenditures. In reality his task was limited simply to accounting the collection boxes. Bába Szabó’s devout sincerity had an unpleasant effect for Antal Hegyi, given that the general rules of the Vác diocese required that the parish priest discuss in advance the revenues and expenditures with the curator.

It is not possible to determine from our sources whether Rókus Bába Szabó lost his oversight of the parish’s financial affairs only after the appearance of Antal Hegyi or whether his post had been purely formal under the earlier parish priests as well. It is certain that as the “chief manager”, Antal Hegyi handled the church’s assets with confidence and without any serious limitations. Rókus Bába Szabó was prevented by his humility that can be felt in his letters and statements from asserting the authority that went with his post. This quiet curator was the ideal partner for Antal Hegyi’s centralisation efforts: he did not have to be pushed into the background, he found his own way there. This is probably the reason why the relationship between the difficult parish priest and the church curator remained undisturbed up until the beginning of the investigation by the Holy See. Two months after the statement made in August the suspended parish priest officially returned to his post in Csongrád. One of the first things he did on his return was to write a letter dismissing Bába Rókus.

I consider it important to note in connection with the above examples that it would be a mistake to attribute all the changes of personnel made during the time of Antal Hegyi solely to personal conflicts. The steps taken by the parish priest could also be interpreted as a series of measures aimed at ensuring the more efficient operation of the parish. Hegyi was striving to create a highly centralised parish organisation and the church assistants were to play a key role in its realisation. Who was able to identify with his aims and to what extent was extremely important for him. With slight exaggeration it could be said that unwavering loyalty was made the principal virtue of the church assistants. Antal Hegyi quite clearly motivated the image of a team that was able to identify unconditionally with his goals; one indication of this is that on several occasions he went beyond his jurisdiction in an attempt to influence the choice of church assistants. This had probably been the case before his time too, but since the changes then were not inspired by political or public life aims, they did not typically involve conflicts either. Because of the multiple interests involved his intentions were only realised in part, but his measures stirred waves far exceeding the significance of the actual results.

The next thematic section of the dissertation is devoted to the case studies of the other para-ecclesiastical assistants, separately from the church assistants. These are the lay office-bearers whose primary, practical tasks – such as guarding the cemetery or helping at births – are not tied to the church but because of the special nature of their work, they are in close contact with the parish. We learn about the relationship between the Csongrád cemetery guard and the parish priest from the situation that arose in connection with the *deaconess*

who led the rosary confraternity (chapter X). In 1892 the deaconess informed the newly hired cemetery guard that, with the oral permission of the parish priest, she wished to use half the area of cultivated land within the cemetery. For years the guard did not dare to ask whether parish priest Antal Hegyi had really authorised this unusual use by Julianna Vajdovics. What could this situation mean: did the cemetery guard regard the position of the head of the rosary confraternity as more “illustrious” than his own, that he had to accept her word without question? How did the parish priest evaluate the situation and did he intervene?

The office of cemetery guard was sufficiently far from the parish and Mihály Kókai the guard proved to be sufficiently timid for such a case to remain hidden for years. So it happened that the deaconess Julianna Vajdovics “generated” church income for herself for six years without the knowledge of the local leadership. The devout cemetery guard did not even dare to ask Antal Hegyi about the rightfulness of the land use, despite the fact that the two men were in regular contact in the matter of burial site fees. The case concerned – also taking into account the mentality of those involved – is a typical example of autocratic action by the leader of a lay society acting officiously out of piety and considering herself close to the church, an action that was regarded by the parish priest as the private conflict of equal partners.

The question of the attendance at christenings of midwives of different denomination raises a problem of an entirely different nature from those discussed so far (chapter XI). According to the description given by the parish priest, in the spring of 1888 a Calvinist midwife arrived late for a christening and so the chaplain performing the christening gave the child of the tradesman Benjámín Légrádi the name provided by the godmother. By the time the midwife arrived the entry had already been made in the register of births. It then turned out that it was only the midwife who knew about the name chosen by the parents, and so she began to demand that the entry be changed. An argument arose between the chaplain and the midwife and as a consequence Mrs Gáspár Magdics turned to the district court for satisfaction. When the case came to the knowledge of the parish priest Antal Hegyi he banned the midwife from entering the church sacristry and attending the christening of Catholic children.

The documents on the affair paint a picture of the traditional occupation of midwife legitimised by common law. The midwife claimed that her ban from the church prevented her exercise of her occupation, in short she was deprived of her earnings, consequently she was effectively demanding her “restoration to her function of midwife”. The background to the argument was very simple: pregnant women chose midwives who fully met the criteria of common law, from assisting at the birth, through attending the christening right up to the woman’s churching. It was only together with the whole of these functions that tradition recognised the services of the midwife as fully discharged and she was paid on this basis. Accordingly, the absence of any element of the traditional tasks could lead to loss of confidence in the midwife, to her “unofficial loss of position”.

Although parish priest Hegyi was not renowned for his tolerance, the case of Mrs Gáspár Magdics cannot be regarded as purely a denomination-based conflict. In the arguments put forward by the Calvinist midwife, her “professional” employment by the town gave legal force to her tasks enshrined in tradition. Accordingly, if any element of the activity expected by common law was prevented, it meant that she was prevented from the full exercise of her activity as a midwife, and this also violated the interests of the settlement that employed the midwife. It took the church and secular authorities close to three years to study the connection before they dared to take a firm stand against Mrs Magdics who cited the unwritten expectations of the

community.

The changes that occurred in the second half of the 19th century in the self-image, values and social role of lay church assistants and other para-ecclesiastical assistance are of special importance for my dissertation.

The Csongrád cantor had firm ideas of his own position and the nature of “fitting behaviour” towards him. Compared to the uneducated mass of Csongrád parishioners and the other lay church assistants, he regarded himself as having indisputably higher status and influence, the only problem was caused by the clarification of mutual relations with the lower clergy. When Antal Sohlya tried to lay the foundations within the parish of a “civil” relationship based on equal standing and worthy of educated persons, his attempt failed. Parish priest Ferenc Alvinczy regarded the cantor’s novel idea of his role as a serious threat to the priesthood and automatically turned to the available means of discipline.

Although the children of the Csongrád bellringer and sacristan were tradesmen and employees of the town hall, teachers and newspaper editors, approaching the end of the 19th century there was no change in the way of life, world-view or ambitions of the old bellringer. Since he was satisfied with the position he had inherited from his great-great grandfather and with his tasks defined by tradition, György Keviczky was a perfect vehicle and preserver of his own social role.

Cantor Antal Sohlya and curator Rókus Bába Szabó had in common a complex activity in the community and public life. They were members of practically every lay association or body in Csongrád between 1886 and 1900. Whether the cause was the establishment of the Casino (a club) or the Savings Bank, the flood defence association, school council or 1848 Popular Circle: one of the lay church office-bearers was certain to be among the members of the board. The “opening” of the lower clergy and the lay church assistants towards the civil associations shows that the parish personnel must have played an important role in the search for directions by the society of Csongrád that had set out on the path of peasant embourgeoisement.

Tracing the careers, marriage and kinship relations of their descendants can help to define the social role and special position of the church assistants. How far did the pattern of the parents determine the life careers of their descendants? What intellectual heritage was represented and passed on by the children of the church assistants? What prestige did para-ecclesiastical posts have in the society of Csongrád, and what paths and opportunities opened up to their descendants?

It can be seen from our sources that the lay church office-bearers of Csongrád enjoyed uniform respect and were highly appreciated for their education. After primary school they sent their children – of both sexes – to the secondary school. Before the secondary school was opened in Csongrád the boys were sent to Kecskemét or Szeged to study. They were motivated in this by dreams of white-collar or public service careers and by the shortage of land. By the end of the 19th century the children of the church assistants and other lay church assistants had become important factors in the public administration offices in Csongrád. Among them only the son of the cantor Antal Sohlya was in a real decision-making position, but Keviczky and Magdics boys were found in most of the positions for registrars and supervisors. The key positions in the church and public affairs remained in the hands of a few local families and their relatives.

The process outlined began already before Antal Hegyi’s arrival in Csongrád, so by the time the church assistants were “replaced” the parish priest had to struggle with an entrenched circle with influential

descendants. The children in public service used entirely new tools to protect their parents, in particular they made use of the printed press in an attempt to turn public opinion against the parish priest. A whole series of privately issued pamphlets and open letters followed the dismissal of the bellringer György Keviczky and the affair of the midwife Magdics. In the end their efforts were not successful, but they significantly impeded the parish priest in realising his intentions (causing, for example, a long delay in eviction of the bellringer).

Compared to the 1850s, change had begun in the society of Csongrád, it had been restructured and parallel with this the strength and nature of attachment to the church had become differentiated. In the concluding sections of the dissertation (chapters XII-XV) I analyse the role played by the parish priests of Csongrád, and especially by Antal Hegyi, in the process of social transformation in this period. Above all, I stress his political ambitions and his desire to edit a newspaper.

Parish priest Hegyi's activity as a newspaper editor and journalist shows the definite intention to shape public opinion that also represents an expansion of the traditional priestly role. János Éder, editor-in-chief of *Csongrádi Lap*, the newspaper on the other side, treated his "colleague" in keeping with his liberal ideals; during the parliamentary election campaigns he expected him, as a responsible public figure and a kind of official, to take an open stand in support of his candidate in the press, and to tolerate the tone of citizens campaigning for the opposition.

However, Antal Hegyi found it difficult to strike a balance between his political activity and his priestly vocation. The people could not ignore his status as a priest either – true, Antal Hegyi did not encourage that. His reason for supporting the opposition was the government measures considered to be directed against religion (civil registration of births and civil marriage): Hegyi was actually defending the church's old privileges and began to engage in politics with the aim of defending the faith.

The last Csongrád parish priest of the 19th century was fully aware of the power of directness. He kept the affairs of the parish personally in hand: he himself led the religious confraternities, he taught the new prayers, he prayed together with the parishioners at the Act of Adoration. In addition he was attracted to splendid processions and consecration ceremonies that were conducted with unprecedented pomp with masses of flowers on the altars. These virtues represented real values in the eyes of the middle peasants of Csongrád. Compared to the spectacular beautification of the church, the giant Sacred Heart bell, the new chapel in the Bokrospart district and the stirring Sunday sermons, the political campaigning, the constant litigation and scandalous newspaper editing were merely minor sins. It was true that his social role acquired unusual features, but compared to his predecessors he had a greater ability to recognise the religious needs of the common people and he satisfied them more effectively.

Antal Hegyi, often described as "silver-tongued", used his persuasive rhetoric to build a sound social base, particularly among the women. And through the women he had a good chance of winning over the family heads too and shaping public opinion. Following his suspension it was members of the rosary confraternity who became leading figures of the forum stressing his innocence; together with their husbands they saw Antal Hegyi's political ambitions as a drive to defend religion. The majority of his parishioners supported the election of János Hock to parliament, and at the same time they unconditionally rejected the idea of civil marriage and registration.

If we regard the activity of Csongrád's last 19th century parish priest from the perspective of peasant

embourgeoisement, it must be said that one of Antal Hegyi's greatest merits was increasing the readiness of the common people to engage in politics. Even the least educated parishioners learnt about the government's measures, and the platforms of the candidates in parliamentary elections from the parish priest's – undoubtedly somewhat biased – sermons. The opposition's Reading Circles operating as legal organisations were filled with peasant smallholders and large crowds listened attentively to the campaign speeches.

Those who fulfil a social role successfully by following the traditional expectations reproduce themselves, that is, their own roles and in this way also the system of norms they have inherited. The end result is the ossification of the system that responds with sanctions to attempts at innovation – regardless of whether they are aimed at restricting or expanding the role. It can be seen from a series of case studies that, rather than conserving the institutionalised system of norms, the behaviour of parish priest Antal Hegyi was directed at reformulating and expanding his own social role, that culminated in his playing an increasingly assertive role in public life and politics. The judgement of the changes was very extreme. It appears from the articles in the press that Antal Hegyi's critics were worried that the ideal of spiritual pastor would be damaged; but often this fear masked protection of their own personal interests. The involvement of openness and the press, in cases supplemented with pamphlets and open letters, can be regarded as a new form of sanctions against the parish priest's "violation of the norms". Antal Hegyi's committed supporters also had a variety of motivations in taking a stand in defence of their much attacked parish priest.

On the whole the role expectations of Csongrád Catholics remained unchanged, but there was a shift of emphasis in the values and "spectacles" of some social (and interest) groups and in the judgement of actions. It was in this way that Antal Hegyi could become an extremely divisive figure; while the small and medium peasants welcomed him as a "fiery priest" prepared to do anything, in the eyes of the "educated" opposite camp in Csongrád he remained a manipulative, unchristian, money-grabbing man pursuing his own interests.

The failed career of parish priest Antal Hegyi and his secret flight to America shows a disjunction between the demands of society at the time and the behaviour pattern he represented. This disharmony reached an extreme state around the turn of the century. But, together with the many factors listed, what could have been the main cause of Antal Hegyi's downfall?

In 1886, the time of the arrival of the new parish priest, changes had already begun in the very simple structure of Csongrád society of earlier centuries. These changes affected mainly the landless strata. The former serfs could become navvies or agricultural labourers, the merchants – clerks, the tradesmen – public servants or church assistants. Thanks to the spread of education and the growing value attached to it, unprecedented new opportunities for a rise in status and opportunities to assert their own interests opened up for the children of lay church office-bearers. By the last decades of the century it was difficult for people to find their bearings among the changed and constantly changing social relations, connections and special interests.

As I emphasised in the clarification of methodology: norms and expectations regarding social roles follow the pace of structural changes with varying degrees of time lag. It is true that in 1900 the structure of Csongrád society was entirely different from what it had been a half a century earlier, but as regards the community's values and role expectations patterns inherited from the age of feudalism still remained viable. This is particularly true in the judgement of the parish priest. The fact that Antal Hegyi was incapable by nature of compromise did not make life easier for him, indeed it could only lead to his downfall.

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