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**HUNGARY AND THE II VATICAN COUNCIL
(1959–1965)**

Theses of PhD

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1. Aims and methods of the research

The II Vatican Council is probably the most important event in the history of the Catholic Church in 20th century. In the last years the studies dedicated to the participation of the bishops or theologians of some countries on the Council and their contribution to its work have taken more and more place among the different possibilities to deal with this relevant event. Intending to elaborate the history of the Hungarian presence at Vatican II this dissertation aims at contributing to the research process.

In the case of Hungary, however, it is not sufficient to focus on the ecclesiastical participation, but it is crucial to keep in view that the political leaders of the countries in the Soviet bloc carefully followed the events of the Council. As a consequence of the situation marked by the strong control of the party-state on the Churches it is an absolute necessity to analyse the following topics: the question of the Hungarian participation at the Council, the composition of the Hungarian Council delegations, their activity at the different sessions and – within the confines of the allowed extension – the contemporary reception of the Council in Hungary in the context of the Hungarian Church policy and the evolution of the relations between the Holy See and Hungary.

Therefore, to have a realistic image on the history of the Hungarian participation at the Council we have to aim at clarifying the motivations and actions of all protagonists of this history. As an Ecumenical Council is basically an internal event of the Catholic Church first of all we have to analyse the intentions of the Holy See and the whole Church too. In this context we aim at revealing how the Council suited into the new eastern policy of the Holy See which started during the pontificate of John XXIII. What did Rome do to obtain the participation of the bishops from behind the “iron curtain”? How did the Holy See intend to use the possibility of meetings offered by Vatican II to find a direct contact with the governments of the socialist countries, and – in the case of Hungary – to start bilateral negotiations? How did the Holy See try to use the personal meetings with the Hungarian prelates to consolidate the Church in Hungary? Furthermore, we aim at analysing the impact of the Council’s teaching – still in the context of the Vatican’s eastern policy – in part concerning social and political questions – and the formulated new viewpoints, that is the interaction of the practice of the eastern policy and the theoretical teaching formulated on the Council.

We have to find the place of the Hungarian participation at the Council in the context of the Hungarian government’s – and the whole soviet

bloc's – (Church) policy as well. We are going to analyse what kind of considerations led the leaders of the People's Republic of Hungary, hostile to the Holy See, to permit the participation of a Hungarian delegation? Which aspects determined the composition of the Hungarian delegations to each session of the Council? How did the rulers of the Hungarian party-state use the opportunity given by Vatican II to make contact with the Holy See and to validate their interests? By what kind of means did the Hungarian government control and influence the orientation of the Hungarian (catholic) society on the work of Vatican II and the reception of its teachings?

Only in view of these elements we will be able to accurately assess the participation of the Hungarian catholic leaders, acting in a tension of double loyalty, at the II Vatican Council. Were the Hungarian prelates mere mouthpieces of the regime, or did they try in the interest of the Church to make the best of the "limited liberty" assured by the Hungarian Church policy? Was their journey in Rome confined to mediate between the Holy See and the Hungarian government? Was it rather restricted to inform the Vatican and to promote a *modus non moriendi* in Hungary or did their activity at the same time contribute to clarify the questions on the agenda of the Council? Finally, the analysis of the possibilities and activities of the Hungarian Church in the context of the Holy See's and of the Hungarian government's pretensions and intentions enables us to assess the theological significance of the Hungarian participation. It also allows us to weigh up the impact of Vatican II on the life of the Hungarian Church and the evolution of the relationship between the Holy See and Hungary.

2. Historiography and sources

According to its importance, Vatican II has a very rich historiography. The results of the research before 2000 are summarized in the five volumes of *Storia del concilio Vaticano II*, published between 1995–2001 by the research group headed by Giuseppe Alberigo. However, from 2001 onwards a lot of studies have appeared on this topic every year. Among this rich historiography the most important articles and monographies are those which deal with the history of the diplomatic-political relationship between the Holy See and the socialist countries. They are also the ones which present the relation of various governments or episcopates to the Council and analyse the question of the condemnation of communism at the Council.

In the rich historiography of the II Vatican Council we can find writings specifically dealing with the Hungarian participation as well, but a comprehensive elaboration of this topic has remained unfulfilled up to now. First, it was within the framework of the international pastoral theological research programme *Aufbruch* – which analysed the reception of the Council in Hungary – that András Máté-Tóth dealt with the Hungarian participation at the Council. His study was exclusively based on sociological surveys on religion and on the general file (*objektum dosszié*) code named “Canale” available in the Historical Archives of the State Security Organs. Only the same general file was used by Gábor Kiszely in his superficial, one-sided study containing a lot of errors. This same document was used by Frigyes Kahler in his introductory study to the facsimile publication of some pages from the “Canale” general file.

This one-sided view of previous publications was changed by the source-publication of Csaba Szabó in 2005, based on extensive archival researches and presenting the II Vatican Council in the context of the relations between Hungary and the Vatican. It was also altered by our studies analysing the background of the Hungarian delegation’s participation and its activity at the first session of the Council, respectively the standpoint of the governments of the soviet bloc regarding the II Vatican Council. In addition to these studies of an approach of primarily political history, some papers – regarding the reception of the Council in Hungary and our writings on the proposals of the Hungarian bishops to the Council – specifically concern the Church historical aspects of Vatican II.

Nevertheless in the light of the shortage of scholarly literature regarding the Hungarian presence at the II Vatican Council it became essential to conduct (archival) basic researches. However the possibilities are limited in this field too. The main reason is that the documents concerning the period in view are not yet available for researchers in the *Archivio Segreto Vaticano* and the Hungarian ecclesiastical archives. Anyway, we don’t have to renounce all the necessary ecclesiastical sources. The Archives of the Second Vatican Council (*Archivio del Concilio Vaticano II*) is open to researches. Moreover the documents of the preparatory period and of the four sessions of the Council are already published. Furthermore we have the official statements of the Holy See at our disposal. They were usually published in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* but we can also consult texts of the pontiffs which were not considered official in the volumes containing the discourses and writings of the popes. It is of revolutionary importance for our analysis that in the archives of Parma (*Archivio di Stato di Parma*) the legacy of Agostino Casaroli has been opened to the research recently. Documents from these papers published by Giovanni

Barberini make it possible to get an insight into the contemporary decision-making process of the Holy See even before the opening of the relative files of the Vatican Archives. There are some Hungarian source-groups of the Catholic Church as well which became accessible to the research recently. Most important for us are the documents of the consultations of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference in the period between 1949–1965, published by Margit Balogh, but there are some interesting documents in the legacy of the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Emigration, József Zágon preserved at the Saint Steven Foundation in Rome, or in the files of the US Embassy to Budapest about József Card. Mindszenty as well.

However, it is not only the relatively limited ecclesiastical sources which justify that we primarily used documents deriving from Hungarian state organs – available at the Hungarian National Archives, Budapest City Archives and in the Historical Archives of the State Security Organs – while writing the history of the Hungarian participation at the II Vatican Council. As a consequence of the severe control on the life of the Hungarian Catholic Church a lot of information on the internal affairs of the Church, the activity and the sentiment of the Church leaders were aggregated at the various party or state organs – the different departments of the Hungarian Communist Party, the Hungarian State Office for Church Affairs, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the State Security. Always keeping in view the peculiar ecclesiology, approach and language which pervade this type of sources, from these papers it is possible to reveal not only the concrete events and the manipulative activity of the Hungarian authorities, but also the attitude of the Hungarian Catholic Church toward the Council. Besides, the activity and intentions of the Holy See are also partly shown. Undertaking a critical analysis of the sources produced by the party and state organs, and comparing them with other already available documents we can draw a rather correct picture on the circumstances, background and results of the Hungarian participation at the II Vatican Council even before all sources become accessible – not excluding of course that this picture can be completed, refined or modulated by means of new (ecclesiastical) sources.

3. The structure of the dissertation

The structure of our dissertation is defined both by the intention of analysing the major influential elements on the Hungarian participation and by the peculiarities of the available sources. The thematic arrangement which prevails beside a basically chronological structure (1./ preparation

of the Council, 2./ the period of the four Council sessions and 3./ an overview of the postcouncilar period) testifies that the evolution of the events was a resultant of the activities of the Holy See, the regime of Budapest and the Hungarian ecclesial leaders.

The first part of the dissertation summarizes the plans of Pope John XXIII with the Council, the changing of the standpoint of the Holy See towards the communist ideology, Hungary and the Hungarian Church at the end of the fifties. It also sums up the start of the sixties and the efforts of Rome to obtain the Hungarian participation at the Council. Then, it presents the process of paradigm changing in the Hungarian Church policy with its implications in the external policy, contemporary with the changes in the Vatican. It also shows how the regime of Budapest went ahead with the decision to allow some Hungarian prelates to participate at Vatican II. Eventually, at the end of the first part it shortly presents the situation of the Hungarian Catholic Church at the moment of the announcement of the Council, the expectations of the Hungarian prelates towards the Council in preparation, and their efforts to answer the obligation of participation.

The central part of the dissertation first summarizes the major elements of the teaching formulated by Vatican II. It reviews the theoretical basis and main fields of the Vatican's ongoing eastern policy and examines the role of the Hungarian participation in the negotiations between the Holy See and Hungary which led to a partial agreement. Then it shows by what kind of measures the Hungarian regime tried to maintain the total control on the Hungarian Church during the Council and how it tried to fulfill its aims set at the moment of allowing the participation. The dissertation finally analyses how the severe state control influenced the internal relations of the Hungarian Council delegation, what was the contribution of the Hungarian Council fathers to the work of the Council, and how they used the opportunities of direct communications in their discussions with representatives of the Holy See.

The final part of the dissertation first sums up the effects of Vatican II on the eastern policy of the Holy See and the relations of the Vatican and Hungary. Then it presents how the Hungarian political leaders assessed the II Vatican Council and how they tried to influence the Hungarian reception of the Council's teaching in interest of the regime. Finally – without aiming to provide a conclusive or comprehensive analysis on the history of the Council's reception – it summarizes the results of the past research in this field and delineates some questions which could originate further researches.

4. The results of the dissertation

(1) Summarizing the results of the dissertation first of all, it can be stated that the participation of the Hungarian prelates on the Council was allowed by a lucky constellation of the interests of three actors. A catalyst role was played by Pope John XXIII, elected in 1958, who regarded as one of the most urgent tasks to renew direct contacts with the Church behind the “iron curtain” broken in the late 40s. After the first unsuccessful tentative Pope Roncalli looked more and more upon the Council in preparation as a unique opportunity to implement this plan. Consequently, on top of the pretension to guarantee the universality of the II Vatican Council, this pontifical intention was in the background of the efforts to obtain – even by accepting concessions – the participation of the bishops from Eastern Europe.

On the other hand the possibility of the Hungarian participation at the Council was created by the new, more pragmatic model introduced in the Hungarian Church policy in the period of the preparation of the Council. The goal of the regime remained the total elimination of religion, but the leaders of the Church policy saw that this could be achieved only in the long-term. Therefore, in the middle-term the leaders regarded as more expedient to exploit the Churches in order to consolidate the country’s internal regime and make it come out from an international isolation. It was all the more obvious since after the failure of the 1956 revolution the Churches in Hungary took into account the durable existence of the regime and were willing to compromises.

On the internal level there was no obstacle to put into practice the distinction – which was taken theoretically – between the “clerical reaction” and the loyal ecclesial structures. The first was viewed as to be persecuted and the second was regarded as apt to set into the service of the regime’s goals. However the extension on the international level of the model working in Hungary was not self-evident. On the one hand, it needed the approval of Moscow, on the other hand, there was a risk that – on the external field – the control slips through the regime’s fingers. Consequently, the positive decision on the Hungarian participation at the Council was taken in the last minute, in the summer of 1962. It was decided only after the Soviet standpoint was no more determined by the fear of the creation of an anticommunist Christian unity front but by the recognition that the participation at the Council could serve the opening in external policy. To reach these goals also the leaders of the Hungarian (Church) policy considered acceptable the risks of allowing the participation of a limited delegation at the Council, and tried to minimize these

risks by permanently appointing and controlling the members of the delegation.

(2) The intention of Pope John XXIII of giving a pastoral character to Vatican II basically excluded any political implication. The results of our research however suggest, that in consequence of the interests of the Holy See and the Hungarian party-state related to the Council, – in the perspective of Hungary – Vatican II was not primarily an ecclesial event, but it remained closely joined to the negotiations between the Holy See and Hungary.

On the basis of the standpoints presented during the communications with the Hungarian bishops and during the negotiations with the representatives of the party-state it can be concluded that the Vatican had two principal aims: to guarantee the fidelity of the Hungarian Church to Rome and its free activity on jurisdictional and pastoral fields. With the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ of 1964 the Holy See could however achieve only the first goal: the Hungarian government testified, with its readiness to negotiate, that it acknowledges the competence of Rome in internal ecclesiastic affairs. It was also seen as positive by the Vatican that by completing the Hungarian hierarchy the preconditions for the distribution of all sacraments and for the survival of the church structures were guaranteed. While the Holy See could decline a Hungarian schism perceived by the Vatican as a real danger at the end of the 50s and beginning of the 60s, it did not significantly succeed in improving the elbow-room of the Hungarian Church. It could only achieve some symbolic results – such as the removal of the commissars of the State Office for Church Affairs from the Episcopal courts. Consequently, in the second half of the Council the Holy See aimed at encouraging the Hungarian bishops to make the best of the existing reduced circumstances.

At the same time the Hungarian state could almost entirely achieve its goals: the approval of the *status quo* that is the acceptance of the regime’s legitimacy and the improvement of its international prestige. Furthermore, the participation at the Council and the fact that the authority on Pontifical Hungarian Institute in Rome returned to the Hungarian Catholic Church permitted to join the Vatican’s information sources. In order to obtain these results an important role was played by the more favorable position of the Hungarian negotiators. While the Hungarian People’s Democracy accomplished its main goal by the fact that negotiations with the Holy See were started, the points on the agenda of the negotiations were of high importance for the Vatican predominantly – and the survival of the

Hungarian Church. Moreover, the Holy See could have pressurized the Hungarian leaders only with his moral authority and by menacing with an international isolation. However, by accepting – and even urging – the secrecy of the negotiations, it renounced on these tools.

The results of the bilateral negotiations and the evolution of the relationship between the Holy See and Hungary were furthermore decisively influenced by the precision of information at the two parties' disposal. No wonder that the Council became for the Vatican and the Hungarian regime both, a special forum of information-gathering. Consequently, the very first expectation towards the Hungarian Council delegation was from none of the two sides that it should contribute actively to the work of the Council. At the first session its task was to prepare direct negotiations; at the further sessions it was to provide continuous information and advice.

The analysed documents reveal that in spite of the increasing number of information on Hungary the Vatican's position during the negotiations was weakened by the fact that the Holy See didn't succeed in getting comprehensive information on the situation of the Hungarian Church. In the absence of information on the critical point of view of the Hungarian clergy towards the regime the Vatican could not control the information provided by loyal prelates who were in some cases even linked to the Hungarian State Security organs. Therefore, the policy of the Holy See became vulnerable because the Hungarian regime endeavoured to manipulate and give false information to them. At the same time the open new possibilities guaranteed a more favorable position to Hungary, which could widely gather information on the plans of the Holy See (regarding the Hungarian Church).

(3) Due to their mediation-, later consultative capacity, the authority of Hungarian prelates increased. Their activity was however moderated by the exigency of answering to the requirements of double loyalty. During the work of the Council they unwillingly fulfilled the expectations of the regime. They tried to achieve those tasks only that they viewed in some way as serving the interests of the Hungarian Church. In the background of the relatively scanty activity at the Council we could suppose – at least partially – the intention of avoiding proclaiming a viewpoint contrary to their conviction.

At the same time the Hungarian delegation expanded a significant deal of energy dealing with diplomatic-political mediation and information activities outside St. Peter's Cathedral. The bishops allowed to attend the Council tried to inform the Holy See on the situation of the Hungarian

Church in a comprehensive way. However, their suggestions were determined, on the one hand, by the fact that they tried to justify their loyal behavior and on the other hand, by the fact that they aimed at validating partial or individual – material or carrier – interests.

(4) Our research results also reveal that although there is a direct connection between the Hungarian participation at the Council and the bilateral negotiations, we can not detect such a direct relationship between the teaching of Vatican II and the theoretical background of the Vatican's new eastern policy.

The Vatican's new *Ostpolitik* was not the consequence of a new theoretical groundwork but – according to the age-long tradition of the diplomacy of the Holy See – it was the application of the theory of “thesis and hypothesis” in practice. Contrary to Pope Pius XII who aimed at ensuring the liberty of the Church (*thesis*) as well as possible, Pope John XXIII accepted the actual situation (*hypothesis*) and was ready to make significant concessions in order to achieve a partial improvement of the situation. The theoretical basis of the new pragmatic political practice was however elaborated later. It was partly drawn up in the encyclical letter *Pacem in terris* and in the documents of Vatican II which dealt with topics related to the eastern policy – such as the declaration on the religious liberty and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*. At the same time the II Vatican Council provided a favorable background for the new *Ostpolitik*. It resulted from the open-minded atmosphere at the Council and the introduction of a new dynamic-inductive approach. This approach completed the previous theology which was static-deductive. The acceptance of the new theological approach had namely a confirming effect on the pragmatic political practice.

The analysis of the Hungarian example suggests that one of the most important deficiencies of the Vatican's eastern policy was that it remained in the framework of the traditional theory of “thesis and hypothesis”. This model concentrating on guaranteeing the *libertas ecclesiae* was namely revealed as no more adequate vis-à-vis the new tactics of the Hungarian Church policy. This policy regarded its main task as no more the undisguised persecution of the Church but the liquidation of the religious ideology by a more sophisticated persecution of the religion and faith. It tried to use the Church as a pure instrument to legitimate the regime. After Vatican II, according to the teaching set out in the declaration *Dignitatis humanae* the urging of the *libertas religionis* had a more and more important role. Nevertheless, it was Pope John Paul II –

arriving from the socialist bloc – who recognized that it was the claim for the fulfillment of religious liberty based on human dignity which should be set against the socialist Church policy aiming at introducing an ideological monopoly.

(5) Contrary to the hopes of the Holy See the completed Hungarian hierarchy was not able to sufficiently counterbalance the deficiencies of the Vatican's eastern policy. As a result, in the short-term the II Vatican Council could not become the basis of the renewal of the Hungarian Church. The increased status of the bishops' role resulting from the new ecclesiology rather improved the positions of the party-state. It was due to the decentralization of the pastoral activities which made easier the control in many cases and influenced the life of the Church and the reception of the Council.

A comprehensive analysis of the role played by the Hungarian (Catholic) press in the Council's reception would have exceeded the scope of our dissertation. Our sources however suggest that the well prepared information policy of the regime had a decisive role. Indeed only the elements of the Council's teaching which stabilized the regime or at least were not dangerous for it were allowed to be implemented. Furthermore, the revealed sources suggest that the comparison of the writings – by the journalists, at the same time agents of the security services – published on newspapers or reviews with their reports to the security organs would bid fair to appraise the effective impact of the manipulative attempts of the Hungarian Church policy.

(6) Finally, the results of the dissertation also contribute to understand the division of the tasks on the level of the Church Policy in the Soviet bloc. At the same time it inspires further – comparative – analysis. This issue is particularly interesting because at the end of Vatican II we can observe a significant differentiation in the previously unified standpoint of the Soviet bloc's states regarding the policy towards the Catholic Church. The Soviet, the Polish and the East-German leaders of the Church policy appraised the II Vatican Council and the open-mindedness revealed in the Vatican's new *Ostpolitik* as a dangerous tactic which was to be rejected. At the same time in the view of the Czechoslovak and Hungarian leaders it was possible to set into the service of the regime the negotiations and ideological dialogue proposed by the Holy See.

Further researches are needed to verify whether the autonomy allowed to each country to form its own standpoint meant that Moscow designed Czechoslovakia and Hungary to a test field – these two countries having

in several aspects similar features in Church policy. A comparative analysis of the negotiations of these two countries with the Holy See and the opening of the Vatican Archives is necessary so as to know the reason why Hungary became the only experimental laboratory of the *Ostpolitik*. Was it because of the Vatican's decision or of the Soviet's instruction?

The dates at our disposition suggest that it was already a decision of the Holy See. At the beginning of the Council the Vatican aimed at making contact with the Church of each socialist country and through them – and in their interest – with the government of each state. In a second step, however, on the basis of what was experienced in Czechoslovakia and Hungary it was the more rigid standpoint of Prague which brought the Vatican to the point that it started to treat Hungary in a distinctive way and to look upon the relationship with it as an example to follow for other socialist countries as well. After that, the agreement of 1964 did not fulfill the expectations. It was this failure which led the Vatican to treat the Hungarian model as experimental and to consider the convention with Yugoslavia, signed in 1966, as precedent for bilateral relations.

5. The author's publication related to the subject of the dissertation

1. A II. Vatikáni Zsinatra szánt magyar javaslatok sorsa. A pártállami egyházpolitika egy jellemző fejezete. [The Fate of the Hungarian Proposals for the Council Vatican II. A Typical Chapter of the Church Policy of the Communist Regime] *Protestáns szemle* 2004/3. 131–138.
2. Presenza ungherese alla I^a sessione del Concilio Vaticano II. Formazione ed attività della delegazione secondo le fonti statali ungheresi (1959–1962). *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 42 (2004). 85–203.
3. A Szentszék kapcsolatfelvételi kísérlete a magyar katolikus püspökökkel 1959 tavaszán. [The Attempt of the Holy See to Contact the Hungarian Bishops in the Spring of 1959] *Valóság* 2006/4. 68–81.
4. König bíboros első találkozása Mindszenty Józseffel. A bécsi érsek látogatása az Egyesült Államok budapesti követségén (1963. április 18.). [The First Meeting of Cardinal König and Josef Mindszenty. The Visit of the Archbishop of Vienna at the US Legation of Budapest (18th April 1963)] *„Isten szolgája”*.

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5. XII. Piusz és a magyar 1956. [Pope Pius XII and the Hungarian 1956] *Magyar Katolikus Egyház, 1956. A Lénárd Ödön Közhasznú Alapítvány évkönyve 2007.* Szerk. Szabó Csaba. Budapest 2007. 65–79.
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7. „Hontalanok”. A római emigráns magyar papok, a magyar kormányzat és a Vatikán új keleti politikájának kezdetei. [“Stateless people”. The Hungarian Catholic Emigration, the Hungarian Communist Regime and the Beginning of the Vatican’s New “Ostpolitik”] *Történelmi Szemle* 51 (2009) 1. 59–89.
8. Magyar javaslatok a II. Vatikáni Zsinatra. [Hungarian Proposals for the Second Vatican Council] *Vigilia* 74 (2009) 7. 548–553.
9. A Szentszék új keleti politikája a II. Vatikáni Zsinat idején. [The New Eastern Policy of the Holy See at the time of the Council Vatican II] *Világtörténet* 2009. ősz–tél. 36–56.