

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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**THE CATHOLIC PRESS MOVEMENT  
IN HUNGARY  
1896–1932**

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## The subject

At the end of the XIXth century, the intellectual elite of the Hungarian Catholicism started to take an interest in the question of ecclesiastical press. It was indicated by series of articles, studies and discussions. Theoretical endeavours were followed by practical steps and by formation of associations in order to organize Catholic press support and to create a competitive ecclesiastical press.

The framework of the press movement was formed by different organizations for that cooperation on occasion and controversy over details were simultaneously characteristic. However, even contemporaries used the term “press movement” what shows that different groups were conceived as parts of a coherent system. The most successful organizations emerged to the basic institutions of the Catholic public life. The Women Press Committee that had been founded in 1911 worked even during the Second World War, and the Pázmány Association held its last general assembly in 1949. The most important undertaking of the press movement, the Central Press Company (CPC) published its newspapers last in 1944, but some attempts were made for its rearrangement even during the years of the coalitional governance.

The relevant historiographical works present this topic in general only on the level of facts and they offer snapshots on the movement. In turn, an analysis exceeding the frames of the traditional press history may be useful even from the view-point of social history and the exploration of Catholic associations is thought to be one of the most important tasks of the research in church history. Therefore, it seemed reasonable for me to elaborate this subject.

The history of the press movement is not only interesting per se, because the efforts for the competitive ecclesiastical press were continually interlocked with the intent to confirm Catholic identity. Catholics seeking for redefine denominational identity in modern times credited the media with great significance. They hoped that the success of Catholic press would underpin the attachment to the church and it would strengthen their political influence. So the exploration of the history of the Catholic press movement may contribute to the better understanding of the Catholic political identity.

The operations of the Catholic press movement were influenced by several factors. The most decisive ones were the willingness of the high clergy to give subsidies, the actual interests of political Catholicism, the press politics of the state, the interconfessional relations and the circumstances on the press market. In my work, I try to explore the history of the movement, having regard to the factors mentioned above.

The history of the press movement, of course, is connected in many ways with that of the Catholic press since the publishers of relevant newspapers organized regularly campaigns to gain support for themselves and the leaders of the press movement often established new periodicals. The most important Catholic publisher of the period, the Central Press Company, grew up from such an enterprise, as well. It justifies that I place emphasis on the main events of the history of the Company since the establishment and operation of the CPC was the most important goal of one group of the press movement.

The starting point of my work is the founding of the first significant organization, the Pázmány Association in 1896. 1932 as a closing year can be justified by two reasons: the initiation of the Actio Catholica (AC) marks an era in the internal life of the movement, and after the Gömbös government had taken office, the state-church relationship started to change. However, the history of the press movement went on as late as the liquidation of the public pluralism at the end of the 1940's.

## **Sources and historiography**

The scantiness of archive sources and the almost chaotic richness of printed ones are simultaneously characteristic for the facilities. The records of the press movements were not saved by storms of history. The office of the Press Women Committee was plundered by troops of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the record office of the Pázmány Association was destroyed during the siege of the capital in 1945, and the sources of the Jesuit Order were dispersed during the dissolution of the order in 1950. Nothing is known about the records of the CPS, which might turn up from the Budapest City Archives. The material of the Prime Minister's Press Office is preserved in the Hungarian National Archives only in an imperfect way.

The most important sources can be found in the Archives of the Primate in Esztergom since the support of the head of the Hungarian hierarchy was inevitable for the different groups of the press movement. These records are completed by the material from the Episcopal Archives in Székesfehérvár that supplies important data in spite of the fact that bishop Ottokár Prohászka, who had a decisive role in the movement, left behind relatively less documents. Very useful is László Tápay-Szabó's correspondence, who directed the CPC's newspapers during 1921–1922. His records can be found in the Széchényi National Library.

A lot of printed sources are available. The material consists of the periodicals of the press movement, the articles and commentaries of the Catholic press, as well as materials of the non-ecclesiastical press.

Among the Catholic periodicals, the most relevant ones are related to the leaders of the movements. The bulletin *Mária Kongregáció*, published from 1907, tells us the opinion of the Jesuit Order on press matters. The review *Magyar Kultúra* was established by Father Béla Bangha, and the religious periodical *A Szív* was related to the Order, too. The Women Press Committee, dominated by the Father, published *A Sajtó* 1916–1919, and in 1929 it was restarted under the name *Sajtószemle*.

Among the periodicals independent from the Jesuit Order is the *Egyházi Közlöny* the most informative. During the dualistic period it was the most popular periodical among clericals. Its role was taken over by the *Egyházi Lapok Papok Közlönye* after the first World War. Several other periodicals discussed on occasion the question of Catholic press, such as *Religio*, *Katolikus Szemle*, *Magyar Szemle*. Among the Catholic newspapers are the most useable ones *Új Lap* – published 1902-1944 –, from the dualistic period *Magyar Állam* and *Alkotmány*, and from the period after 1919 the CPC's papers *Nemzeti Újság* and *Új Nemzedék*.

Some non-Catholic newspapers followed with attention the operation of the press movement, as well. Especially *Az Est* – condemned by integralist Catholics as a flagship of “destruction” – publicized inside information that often prove relevant. Also, pieces of news of *Népszava* and *Világ* regarding to the establishment and internal affairs of the CPC deserve also attention. On the other hand, pieces of information publicized by the Viennese press of Hungarian emigrés proved less trustworthy.

Another essential group of sources is the biographies of the leaders of the movement. The most important one is Zoltán Nyisztor's Bangha-biography. Nyisztor, as one of Bangha's followers, knowingly assumed that his work would be subjective. The apologetic biography suggests that the significance of the Father's life-work was the leading of the Christian counter-movement against “destructive” spirit of the age and revitalizing Catholic self-awareness. It can be explained with this conception that he completely omitted from his work the political turn of the CPC led by Bangha in 1921.

The history of the Catholic press – similarly to the whole Hungarian press – does not belong to the most frequently researched fields. This topic is usually treated by reference works together with another questions, and only on a small magnitude. The most essential work is Béla Dezsényi's study from 1943, which presented the Catholic press of the XIXth century as the practical trustee of ideological pluralism and the freedom of press, as opposed to liberal press. Dezsényi described the separational process during which from

the purely religious and defensive clerical periodicals evolved the ecclesiastical newspapers, the political press, and after the First World War, the mass press.

In the 1970's, Tamás Derzsi treated the Catholic press in some of his works. Miklós Szabó presented the press endeavours of political Catholicism as an answer for the civilian radicals' challenge. Jenő Gergely elaborated in his work on political Catholicism Bangha's role. After the changing of the regime the interest grew for this subject. This was indicated by Erzsébet Szolnoky's new Bangha-biography – which did not bring to much new results –, the source-book by László Rónay, and the monography by Jenő Gergely, which treated the question of the press movement and the CPC in a separate chapter. Politological approach has recently become important, as well, for instance works by Zsolt Enyedi and Mária Rita Kiss. The most essential source-book contains the records of the episcopal conferences, edited by Margit Beke.

## **The structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation contains seven chapters. The introduction presents the subject and gives an overview on the sources and the historiography. The second chapter treats the modernizing efforts of the Hungarian Catholic press and the beginnings of the press movement. The three sub-chapters of the third unit examine the institutionalization of the movement, describe the establishment of the National Pázmány Association, the Catholic Press Association and the women press committees, analyze the characteristics of their work, present their achievements and failures. The fourth unit examines the consequences of the first World War. The fifth one treats the establishment of the CPC. It presents the press discussion in 1917, the opinion of the episcopacy, the reaction of the Catholic People's Party, the public reception of the Company, and the endeavours of the organisers to launch new newspapers. The sixth part explores the history of the CPC between 1919 and 1922. The last chapter follows the history of the press movement till 1932 and presents the measurements made to avoid the CPS's insolvency, the reorganization of the women press committees, and the insertion of the movement into the framework of the Actio Catholica.

## **New results**

The first aim was to get to know the institutional framework and the internal connections of the associations. The National Pázmány Association was fundamentally the labour organization of the Catholic writers and journalists. However, it committed itself to the defence of the general interests of the Catholicism, as it was demonstrated on the example of the Defence Office. The journalists were loyal towards the church, they drew public criticism only between 1917 and 1918, during the discussion over the CPC. The association cooperated with the other labour organizations to protect the journalists' common interests. These ties broke in 1919 but were restored in 1922.

The members of the association took part under József Gerely's direction in the founding of the Catholic Press Association in 1908. It followed the model of the Austrian Piusverein and its aim was to organize social support for the Catholic press. This association under the direction of Ottokár Prohászka raised financial resources by organizing "press Sundays" for some newspapers – mainly for *Alkotmány* and *Új Lap* – to improve their quality. Its work was not really successful because it did not have local organizations, and the clergy remained in general indifferent towards its efforts. It concentrated its energy on the fund-raising and neglected the propaganda work.

Some leaders of the press movement had been planning to take into the middle-class ladies but it actually happened as late as 1911. The Jesuit Father Béla Bangha founded the Women Press Committee as an autonomous organ of the Catholic Press Association. Its position was more favourable because it could found itself on the basis of the Congregations of the Blessed Mary that had been organized by the Jesuit Order. Nevertheless, the employment of the pious congregations in public life caused some conflicts within the Order. The main aim of the press women was to popularize the Catholic press and organize its sale and in 1918 they had an important role in the implementation of the capital issue of the CPC.

After the first World War, only the work of the Pázmány Association remained continuous. The Catholic Press Association gave up its activity. The press women took part vividly in the propaganda for the CPC in 1919–1920. After this, their work was hindered by the breakthrough of the "general Christian" women organizations and Béla Bangha's absence in Rome. The reorganization of the movement and the establishment of an independent National Press Women Association happened only in 1928 when Catholic newspapers did stand in need of propaganda.

After the *Actio Catholica* had been established in 1932, leaders of the Press Women Association tried to gain institutionalized influence in the press department but their

attempt remained unsuccessful. Theoretically, with the formation of AC proper conditions were created to lead a standardized press support on national level. However, in practice, the action potential of the organization depended on the local leaders' commitment who considered the question of press in general not as the most important. Béla Bangha could receive the leading position in the press department of the AC only after Béla Turi's retirement.

The dissertation examines the connections between the press movement and political Catholicism. In the 1890's, the groups protesting against the governmental church policy intended to create their own newspapers and formulated boycott calls against the "bad" press. The Catholic People's Party that stemmed from this movements published its own newspapers and it could receive lots of subsidies from the Catholic Press Association. That's why the party tried to preserve its favourable position. Nevertheless, within the Catholic movement arose plans to launch newspapers that were independent of parties because it was hoped that these ones would have been able to reach "a la carte" Catholics. The People's Party could defeat these attempts before 1918, but then it was unable to hinder the establishment of the CPC led by Bangha, so it signed an agreement with the organizers. The newspapers of the party supported the CPC, which in exchange promised to give financial aid for them. The connections between the groups remained untrusted and the agreement was denounced by the CPC in October 1918.

The newspapers of the CPC could be launched only in September 1919. In a dramatically changed political situation the company started to serve the policy of the newly organized Christian party instead of being politically independent as Bangha had planned previously. The press of the CPC supported the official Christian National governmental policy, propagandized its ideology and participated in the campaigns against the "destructive" press between 1920–1921. Nevertheless, this papers already sympathized with legitimism openly during this period. In October 1921, the directorate appointed the liberal Catholic László Szabó to general editor and broke with the non-royalist groups of the Christian National forces.

In the directorate got the decisive role the group of legitimist aristocrats led by János Zichy after they had raised the capital of the company in March 1922. From that time, the papers of the CPC served the Christian party led by Zichy. By the 1930's the situation of the party deteriorated since it had supported unpopular governmental measures and had lost its character. That's why among integralist Catholics reappeared the idea that the wider strata of Catholic society should be addressed by newspapers that are independent of parties and not by the press of CPC.

The benevolence of the episcopacy was essential for the press movement. Although the ecclesiastical hierarchy recognized the importance of the professional Catholic press after the enactment 1894–1895 but the prelates did not act uniformly to reach this goal. They made attempts to strengthen the press only in periods, when the ability of the church to carry out its interest seemed to decrease or the relations to the state threatened with deterioration. The obligatory organization of "press Sundays" was ordered in most of the dioceses in 1909 after the positions of the People Party had worsened. In 1911, the episcopate decided to give the party and its press financial subsidy on a regular basis after the party had been declining. In 1918, several prelates realized the possible consequences of the social disintegration caused by the World War, therefore they supported the CPC whose leaders intended to gain more social background for the Church. After the reign of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the press gained on importance from the episcopate's point of view. Nevertheless, it did not do anything to maintain its influence in the CPC after the capital raising by the legitimist aristocracy. After the beginning of the consolidation period under prime minister Bethlen they did not consider the press decisively important. Synodal decrees enacted in this period also show that press support was held a really important question only by Ottokár Prohászka and Gyula Zichy.

However, the prelates were forced to subsidize the CPC on a regular basis from 1926 onwards. The reasons for it were the effects of the franc counterfeit scandal, the defence of the prestige of Catholicism, but the most decisive ones were the interests of the Christian party and the Bethlen government. In the treated period, the episcopacy took on subsidizing the Catholic press twice. The operation that had been launched in 1911 collapsed soon because of the poor paying discipline of the bishops and the disappointing guideline of the press of the People's Party. The fulfilment of the decisions that had been made in 1926 also happened with lots of troubles, but the press support system initiated that time, after some modifications, endured for a longer period.

The press movement had a role in shaping Catholic denominational identity. In the dualistic period, the advocates of the movement held the reading of ecclesiastical press the decisive condition of self-conscious Catholicism. They urged the believers that impart their ambience their denominational commitment even with the choice of their papers, and take up incidental social disadvantages. They considered important to stand for the Catholicism not only against the liberal ideology but also against the other denominations. This had changed by 1918 when the organizers of the campaign of the CPC, following their political motivations, asked for support to articulate not "Catholic" but "Christian" interests and they propagated cooperation with protestant denominations. A group of the press movement, led by Bangha, complied with the Christian National phrases. It was

propagating “general Christianity” while some Catholic integralists were stressing their scepticism against the political programme that spread “religious indifference”. The question of the Habsburg restoration had deteriorated by 1921 and after that Béla Bangha himself turned against “general Christianity” and he assumed that its real aim was to cover up the “excessive” influence of the protestants in the government. The women press committees reorganized by Bangha in the late 1920’s tried to fight against “general Christianity” and made attempts to screen out “interest Catholics” that rejected religious engagement. The CPC depending of governmental subsidies complied with the expectations of the denominational peace. More militant Catholic manifestations got place principally in the provincial newspapers and in the reviews.

The press movement used the methods of propaganda wittingly. Initially, the Pázmány Association and the Catholic Press Associations tried to reach the public with organizing cultural events. In addition, in 1908–1909 appeared “press Sundays” that were held in every year. However, the success of this events depended on the local priests who were – despite all efforts of the centre – often not motivated enough. The appearance of the Press Women Committee brought new methods into the press propaganda. The organisation that worked on a more regular basis than the ones previously operated with the agency of ladies with high social prestige, organized the sale of newspapers, published an agitational periodical and staged “press plays”. During the years of the First World War they were of service to the Catholic propaganda with their caritative activity, as well.

The Catholic press propaganda reached its greatest success with the capital raising of the CPC in 1918. It was due to the growing activity of the clergy, the extensively prepared campaign that used a variety of methods and propagandized the Christian National phrases, and the renewed argumentation that advertised the company as a remunerative investment. However, the outstandingly successful fund-raising was followed by decline and the majority of the clergy did not hold the question of the press significant from the mid 1920’s onwards. Any the less that the new idea of ministerial work that was presented among others by Ottokár Prohászka was based on the indirect and personal connection with the believers would have been considered important to influence the reading habits of the laymen.

The press movement contributed to the social self organization of the Hungarian Catholic society. The associations that belonged to the movement gave the chance for their members to separate themselves from their laicised fellow citizens. The journalists gathering in the Pázmány Association bounded themselves from their non-Catholic colleagues against whom they felt themselves deteriorated on financial field and prestige and rejected the routine of the non-Catholic press that they held unprincipled. The

propaganda of the Catholic Press Association, the press women committees and the CPC tried to lead the Catholics to orientate themselves exclusively from the papers (and later: from broadcastings) that they held reliable.

The leaders of the movement intended that the Catholics would be able to make all phases of the publishing with their own companies that employ colleagues attaching to the Catholicism.

This aim was served besides the Pázmány Association by the Apostol press, the typographer-women's organization led by Bangha and the network of the news-women organized by Father Ferenc Bíró. That's why they tried to establish sale and correspondence networks for the papers by taking in the provincial parish priests and to organize reading circles and people's libraries. On the background of their operation was the intention to serve for the indifferent Catholics with a good example and to confirm the self-conscious Catholics in their commitment.

Nevertheless, the press movement has never become a mass movement, it remained an issue of a tight circle. Its main goal, that each Catholic should read only Catholic newspapers, was regarded as unreal even by some of its leaders. Even so, its operation contributed to the professionalization of the Catholic press within the framework of the CPC. Its limits are signaled by the fact, however, that the CPC presented in public life the ideas of "general Christianity" and legitimism. That's why the leaders of the press movements urged the recatholisation of the company at the end of the 1920's.

## V. List of publications

1. A katolikus sajtómozgalom történetének forrásai. [The sources of the history of the press movement] In: „Alattad a föld, fölötted az ég...” *Források, módszerek és útkeresések a történetírásban*. Szerk.: Balogh Margit. Budapest, 2010., ELTE BTK Történelemtudományok Doktori Iskola. 141–159. p.
2. Felekezeti reneszánsz és „általános kereszténység” az 1920-as évek magyar katolikus sajtójában. [Revival of denominationalism and “general Christianity” in the Hungarian Catholic press in the 1920's] In: *Kommentár*. 2010. 5. szám. 53–64. p.
3. A tördöfés és az újságírók. Sajtóellenesség a keresztény-nemzeti kurzus éveiben, 1919–1922. [The dagger snubbing and the journalists. Antijournalism during the Christian National course, 1919–1922] In: *Médiakutató*. 2010. nyár 85–99. p.

4. A magyar katolicizmus és a sajtó kérdése a XIX–XX. század fordulóján. [The Hungarian Catholicism and the question of press at the turn of the XIX–XXth centuries] In: *Fejezetek a tegnap világából. Tanulmányok a 19-20. század történelméből.* Főszerk.: Gergely Jenő. Budapest, 2009., ELTE Történelemtudományok Doktori Iskola. 160–178. p.
5. Prohászka Ottokár sajtószervező tevékenysége. [Ottokár Prohászka as a press-revivalist] In: *Prohászka-tanulmányok, 2007–2009.* Szerk. Mózessy Gergely. Székesfehérvár, 2009., Székesfehérvári Püspöki és Székeskáptalani Levéltár. 45–67. p.
6. Sajtó, felekezet, politika. A Központi Sajtóvállalat első évei (1919–1922). [Press, denomination, politics. The first years of the Central Press Company (1919–1922)] In: *Múltunk.* 2009. 3. szám. 171–201. p.
7. Médiaháború 1919-ben: a Déli Hírlap ügye. [Media war in 1919: the case of the Déli Hírlap] In: *Médiakutató.* 2008. tavasz. 69–80. p.
8. A katolikus újságírók önszerveződése: az Országos Pázmány Egyesület a dualizmus korában. [The self-organization of the Catholic journalists: the National Pázmány Association in the dualistic period] In: *Ahogy mi látjuk.* Főszerk.: Gergely Jenő. Budapest, 2007., ELTE BTK. 115–134. p.
9. A Mária kongregációk és a sajtókérdés a dualizmus korában. [Congregations of the Blessed Mary and the press in the dualistic period] In: *Magyar Egyháztörténeti Vázlatok.* 2005. 3–4. sz. 83–100. p.
10. A „sajtóapostolok”. A Katolikus Sajtóegyesület és az egyházi megújulási mozgalmak oszloposodási törekvései a századelőn. [The “press apostles”. The Catholic Press Association and the pillarization endeavours of the Catholic revival movements] In: *Századvég.* 2005. 2. sz. 129–160. p.