

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN HUNGARY NOW

By András Máté-Tóth

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### **Points of approach**

It is impossible to deliver a perfectly scholarly presentation on contemporary history. To fulfill academic criteria of objectivity, historians usually require a distance of 50 or even 100 years. This is especially the case when the topic involves personal feelings, even those of the author himself. I will speak about the Church, its current position and its recent past, as a Catholic theologian, a member of the Church and a witness to this period of its history. I speak as one involved and even committed: but still not entirely subjective and unfounded. There are statistical data and expert analysis behind what I write.

### **An unarguable point**

Only a few researchers, more of them sociologists than theologians, work on inquiries into the present and recent past of the Church in Hungary. Sadly, the Church itself displays a certain reticence to demand for real discussion and expert analysis. Few accept the pains of facing the facts. Often the leaders of the Church are worried about the emerging insights and articulated criticisms: are these perhaps the sign of a returning anti-church feeling? These reactions might as well be late repercussions of the prosecution of the Church, but they also suggest a certain image of the Church, a certain theological outlook. It is primarily due to these causes that current snapshots of the Church are ‘unarguable’—due to psychological and theological reasons, such statements exist in the vacuum of the social and ecclesiastical public.

## **Change of regime**

The State Office of Church Affairs was officially dissolved in Hungary in 1989. This institution had been handling matters that arose between the churches and the state. But in addition to this declared mission, it also had an undeclared task: to supervise ecclesiastical life, and to maintain a total state control over it. The introduction of the democratic system and Hungary's return to a republican form of government created the opportunity for the Church to manage its own affairs. Evaluations of the present state of the Church usually refer back to this change of regime. This meant a veritable turning point in all spheres of social life. But a transition from dictatorship to democracy is a difficult one; much more difficult than many of us thought in 1989. It is a strong conviction in the population that freedom did not only have advantages for the country but that it also brought a number of disadvantages. The institutional system of democracy was successfully formed and stabilized. But a rise and stability in the standard of living still has not come for many people. It is in such circumstances that the Church has to find its well-defined place among the democratic institutions of Hungarian society and the people.

## **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council**

There is a third point of reference often seen in the discourse about the Church, and this point is not psychological, political or economic, but expressly theological. At the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council, between 1962 and 1965, the Hungarian Church was almost completely cut off from the world's ecclesiastical public. It could not take part in the process of the Council, in the social and (more importantly) ecclesiastical debates that followed its results. But it was precisely this Council that brought the Church closer to the needs of the modern world. It was this Council that eliminated the Church's internal resistance to democracy and human rights. It also ratified the culture of the dialogue between the Church and the world. The effects of this Council are thus exceptionally important in national churches around the world. Many think that this amounts to the abandoning of the resistance to the anti-church, atheist culture, rooted in the French Revolution. Others counter that on the contrary, the Church realized only

then that God remained a caring God even in these cultural currents, to guide the Church to a deeper understanding of the gospel. The appreciation of this Council and the application of its results to the Hungarian social and cultural circumstances current after the political changes have not become part of the discourse in Hungary.

### **The European Union**

Besides the reference points of the past, a future point is rapidly gaining importance. On 1 May, 2004, Hungary became a full member of the European Union. The processes of political, legal and economic assimilation to the EU have been a definitive feature of Hungarian political and social life for the last few years. The new situation will only influence the Church indirectly. The EU will not curtail its freedom. But many are worried that countries strongly dominating the EU's politics and view of culture seem to aim at total secularization. This will undoubtedly be very unusual for the Catholic Church of those countries where church–state cooperation and state-budget based financing of churches are customary. The liberal church policies urged by the EU are decidedly frightening for some people. These concerns have recently been articulated in the debate about whether the preamble of the EU Constitution should mention God and Christianity or not.

### **Statistics**

#### *Religiosity*

According to the data of the 2001 census, 55% of the 10 million inhabitants of Hungary are Catholics, 16% are Calvinists, and 3% are Lutherans. Other religious communities never reach 1% of the population, while 15% do not consider themselves to belong to any religion or denomination. (10% of the population declined to answer the question in the census.)

The age distribution of Roman Catholics is roughly the same as that of the population itself. Their number is higher among those older than 45 years, and lower among those younger than this. A less clear proportion is observable with the Calvinists and Lutherans. In the age pyramid of these churches, older people are found

in a much greater and younger people in much lower proportion than with the Catholics. The proportion of those not claiming to belong to any denomination is notably higher than the average among those below 35 years of age.

The data show that the religious makeup of the population in Hungary does not change in the short run. In the long run, however, it is mainly the Catholic Church which has chances of establishing a presence among the young, while the other two denominations are threatened by aging.

*Prayer*

Prayer is an important indication of religiosity. One third of the Catholics pray daily, the remaining two-thirds less or much less often.

**Katolikusok imádsága**

		Spalten%
frequency of prayer	every day	34,5%
	more than once week	5,7%
	once a week	11,7%
	at least once a month	9,1%
	several times a year	6,5%
	less often	13,7%
	never	18,9%

*Church attendance*

The majority of Catholics do not attend church every week.

**Katolikusok a templomban**

		Spalten%
spend time in church	every week	13,0%
	once twice a month	9,1%
	few times a year	19,4%
	not at all	58,5%

If we take a look at attendance frequencies of different generations, we see that there are more young people than middle aged who attend church with weekly or monthly regularity. Frequency dramatically decreases between the older generation and the middle aged group, probably due to the anti-clerical, violently atheist influences.

V105 attend rel services \* NV292 Generation Kreuztabelle

% von V105 attend rel services

		NV292 Generation			Gesamt
		1901-1946	1947-1963	1964-1985	
V105 attend rel services	more than once week	88,9%		11,1%	100,0%
	once a week	54,8%	21,0%	24,2%	100,0%
	once a month	48,8%	19,5%	31,7%	100,0%
	christmas/ easter day	35,5%	31,8%	32,7%	100,0%
	other spec holy days	40,0%	60,0%		100,0%
	once a year	30,0%	40,0%	30,0%	100,0%
	less often	46,0%	26,0%	28,0%	100,0%
	never, pract never	47,0%	36,1%	16,9%	100,0%
Gesamt		44,7%	29,2%	26,1%	100,0%

One of the primary characteristics of the Catholic Church is the exceptional power of the community. It is a great challenge for the Hungarian Catholic Church to strengthen this communality further and to expand it to cover a greater number of Catholics. Past inquiries have not examined the community programs organized by the Church (other than mass). Such non-liturgical events could be offered by the Church to appeal to people living openly away from the everyday life of the Church but still appreciating Christian values.

**Christianity**

The variable ‘Christianity’ measures the attitudes to Christian teachings and the recourse to the services of a given church. It naturally also means an orientation of values. The following data concern Catholics only; we were seeking to answer questions about the stability of Catholics in contemporary Hungarian society in the fields of belief, belonging to church, and orientation of values. We surveyed three age groups: the old (those born between 1901 and 1944), the middle aged (1944-1961), and the young (1962-1981).

*Belief*

84% of all Catholics believe in God. Roughly half of this percentage comes from the age group of the old, and the other two quarters from the middle aged and the young. 38% believe in life after death, 29% in hell, 39% in heaven, 56% in sin. Belief

in certain non-Christian ideas is also measurable: 45% believe in telepathy, 21% in reincarnation. Even among those Catholics who have a ‘great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in the Church, more than 50% believe in telepathy, one-fifth in reincarnation. It is only the regular weekly churchgoers (only 5% of the sample here) whose majority believes strict Christian dogma.

These data show that classical Christian dogma is believed in only by less than half or one-third of Catholics in Hungary. This is thus a real challenge for preachers of the Church: these ideas have to be articulated for the people in the contemporary discourse.

*Sacraments*

EVS here examines the frequency of the demand for church liturgies which are associated with certain turning points in life. The need for Church assistance is felt by 90% of Catholics at birth, marriage, and death. The age distribution of those feeling this need show that the old represent 50% of this, while the remaining 50% is shared roughly equally by the two other age groups. At the same time, the proportion of the young is much lower than that of the middle aged group among those who refuse such Church assistance at turning points in life. We could interpret this as a sort of ‘regeneration’ connected with religious-ecclesiastical liturgical offering, after the communist era. Based on these data we can probably say that this need will remain stable in the near future.

Refuse	Old	Middle aged	Young
Baptism	-5	-17	-11
Marriage	-7	-16	-11
Funeral	-4	-11	-8

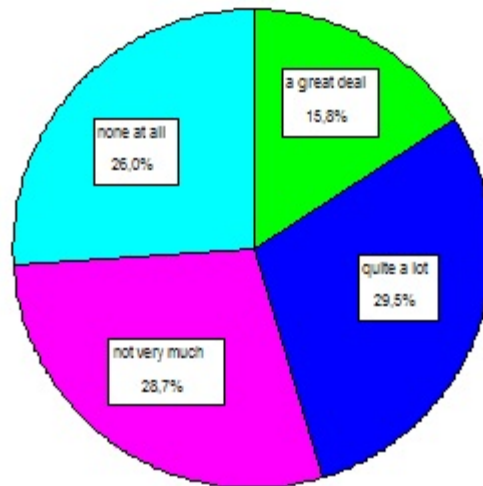
A similar decrease can be observed in the full sample representing the whole of the population.

*Belonging to Church*

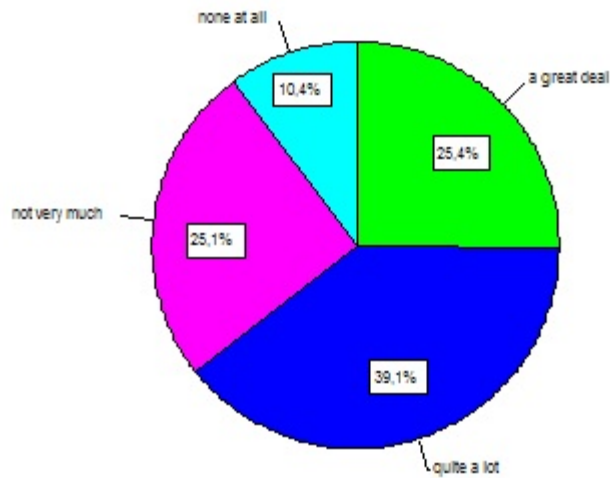
58% of the sample claim to belong to some religious denomination. The age distribution of denomination belonging shows about a half of these to come from the older group, while the proportions of the middle aged and the young are roughly equal

(30% and 25%). 71% of the old age group are members of some denomination, but only half of the middle aged and the young groups can claim to belong to one. The real fraction line can thus be seen to run between those born before the communist seizure of power and the following generations. The slight difference between those born in the first and second halves of the communist era shows a certain stability. It is not probable that there will be dramatic decreases in the number of denomination members in the near future.

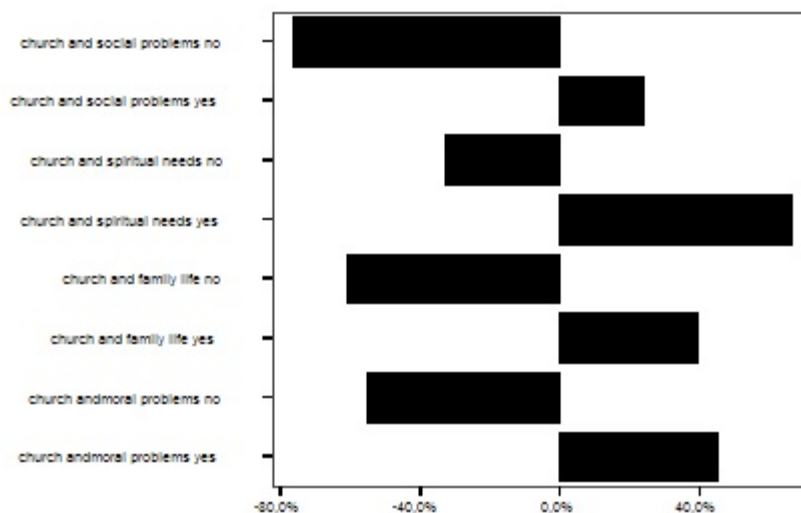
The values of 'Confidence in the Church' lean somewhat towards distrust. 54,7% is more or less distrustful.



Among Catholics, the attitude of confidence is dominant, but the proportion of those who are more or less distrustful cannot be ignored.



We can concretize the general feeling of confidence and distrust by relating to it the responsibility of the Church. EVS has examined four fields concerning which subjects were asked about the Church's responsibility regarding questions of morality, of society, spiritual orientation, and family matters. The subjects tend to have the most confidence in the church in connection with spiritual orientation (66,3%), and the least confidence in its competence in social matters (-76,7%). Distrust is the stronger feeling both concerning questions of morality and family.



Among Catholics, subjects naturally tend to accept the Church's responsibility in higher proportion, but even so, the picture is varied. The number of those who affirm the responsibility of the Church is higher in every field except that of social problems. Concerning these social matters, only 10% less Catholics deny the Church's responsibility than the population in general.

		Spalten%
church and moral problems	yes	57,3%
	no	42,7%
church and family life	yes	51,9%
	no	48,1%
church and spiritual needs	yes	80,2%
	no	19,8%
church and social problems	yes	30,1%
	no	69,9%

A decisive acceptance in the spiritual dimension and a strong refusal in the social dimension seem to suggest the privatization of religion. This trend was encouraged by the communist era in Hungary, when the Church avoided publicity, from which it was partly excluded on the one hand, and which, on the other hand, was utilized by the state

for all-out anti-church propaganda. Following the political changes, the Church took a place among those major social institutions which entered the redistribution of power. In this process, all such institutions lost some of its social prestige: the Church lost most of it. Thus the religious privatization characteristic of modern societies was paired up with the post-communist social heritage. From a theological perspective, and concerning the future pastoral strategy of the Church, this requires serious considerations, to which we will return later.

## **Priorities**

### *Law*

After the period following the political changes, the clarification of the legal status of the Church became a key task. The peculiar connectedness of the Church to the Vatican meant a separate issue in this. The legal status of churches is regulated by Law 1990/IV. There are three different Vatican agreements which support this status of the Catholic Church, especially regarding financing. Churches can now operate in Hungary fully assured of their rights and legal status.

The separation of church and state follows a sort of mixed model concerning financing. The financial basis of the Church's operations is attained from sources in the state budget under several headings. The contributions of the members of the Church only account for a very small part of the whole Church budget.

### *The system of Catholic schools*

The largest project of the Catholic Church in Hungary following the political changes was the revival of the system of Catholic schools. The older generation still clearly remembers the educational system of the between-war period, where the overwhelming majority of primary schools was operated by the Catholic Church. But it is not only the old and the committed Catholics who have high hopes in Catholic education, because people see in them an emphasis on good morality and a student-centered approach in addition to high professional standard. These schools do not only teach but also form character, as the popular saying goes.

The Catholic Church today has 50 kindergartens (1.1% of all children in the age group attend these), 97 primary-level schools (2.6%), 50 boarding schools (10.8%), and 76 institutions of higher education (4.9%). 60% of all denomination schools are Catholics. These institutions of Catholic education are attended by approximately 50.000 students, who make up 3% of the full population of the compulsory school attendance group. Most Catholic schools experience more applications than they can accept..

#### *Areas of pastoral activity*

The most important project of the Church today is the pastoral care of the youth and of families. In an overview of the latter, we can survey the current problems of pastoral activity in general. The stabilization of the family and family values is a main issue for the Catholic Church, which is strongly supported by the Vatican. This is only natural, seeing that the number of divorces has been steadily increasing in Hungary in recent years, and that the media infuses an acceptance of 'other types' of relationships as real alternatives to the traditional marriage model. Children in many families do not receive proper parental care and guidance, and even couples who choose to stay together encounter considerable difficulties.

Catholic bishops in Hungary recently issued a long circular on the pastoral care of families, in which they emphasized the importance of happier and fuller family life. The bishop responsible for pastoral activities in this field is currently attempting, with all his efforts and with the help of the diocesan family project assistants, to build up a nationwide, stable system for the pastoral care of families. There are accredited educational programs and there have been advances on the field of the necessary institutionalization. A great number of Catholics are ready for cooperation; but a clearly planned pastoral scheme is still lacking, not to mention the financial support for its operation. Most of the dioceses have not yet found the appropriate way of practical action to support and finance this exceptionally important field. It is a sad possibility that volunteer enthusiasm will fade and the authority of the Episcopal pronouncements about the importance of the field will diminish in the lack of such actual support.

## **Perspectives**

Some theological considerations about the present state and the future of the Hungarian Catholic Church could be added to this survey of historical interrelations and the statistical data. These do not run counter to the conclusions of history and statistics, but are grounded in them.

### *A deeper faith*

One of the most characteristic features of the Christian faith is the radical proexistence, the culture of living for others, for which the normative example of Jesus Christ provides the model. In the individual subject's life, the base for such a behavioral culture is a deep faith in God. This attitude to life as a service to others, motivated by considerations not of this worldly life, is a resource for communal and social cohabitation which is especially needed in the time of significant and fundamental social changes. Faith can also function as a resource for increasing social solidarity, for balancing social problems and for a strengthening of moral qualities. It is easily seen that such a culture of radical service to others has an effect on every sphere of society, from the economy to education.

A deepening of Christian faith is necessitated by the fact that the subject profits from service to others only in the long run. In a society where historical and social stability have been uncertain, such a life of service becomes increasingly difficult to lead, since it apparently does not have its palpable advantages. But faith can start and support one in this culture even when social profits appear only later.

### *A community that preserves*

Churches, especially Christian churches, play a key role in the maintenance of the culture of service and its propagation. The members of these church communities can be reinforced in this culture through liturgy, teaching, and communal activities. They can, therefore, represent this culture in the context of other social strata and institutions, when their efforts are not directed at the everyday routine of institutional operation or the preservation of social influence.

*More up-to-date communication*

Changing the social communication practices that evolved in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a formidable task for the Church, the seriousness of which we can witness in any debate over public matters. The process of learning the ways of modern social communication has started, but it is still only in its initial phase. The population apparently expects primarily spiritual orientation from the Church, but the Church has also its social mission to accomplish. What is more, it has to be carried out in a way that modern people understand and with contents that fit the gospels and the Church's social teaching.

Such communication, building on the deep faith of Christians, the preserving community of the Church and its social commitment, is beneficial in a number of fields of contemporary Hungarian society, and an essential element of its future.