

**Ifj. Rabár Ferenc:**  
**The Hungarian Province of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross**

**THESES**

**I. Objective of the thesis, outline of the subject**

Objectives of the thesis

- An outline of the Hungarian history of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross from their settlement until the withdrawal of their permit of operation (1865–1950)
- The description of their activity in the field of health, teaching and education as well as social matters
- The revelation of the inner conditions of the congregation (its structure, organization, direction, financial conditions, and spiritual life)

**II. The applied methods**

The thesis shows the history of the congregation in chronological order: the settlement of the sisters in Hungary, the establishment of the noviciate then the province, their role during World War I, the effect of the revolutions and the disintegration of historic Hungary, the development of the congregation in the Horthy-era, the events during World War II, and the withdrawal of the permit of operation of the congregation.

Fitted in this historic framework the thesis reveals the reasons, external and internal, of the successes of the congregation. During their description examples are shown from the various eras (the dualistic era, the Horthy-era) to support the general tendencies.

The thesis undertakes to describe in detail only the provincial centre, Zsámbék, from among the communities of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross. This is justified also because this was where the largest community, almost one-third of the members of the congregation lived. It fulfilled several functions at a time and it was also the spiritual and directing centre of the congregation.

**III. Theses**

**The formation of the Hungarian province (1865–1913)**

The first group of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross settled at Aranyosmarót, and after a decade's intermission, new communities came into being one after the other: 9 convents were established between 1865 and 1898 and 10 between 1899 and 1904.

This dynamic development rendered the establishment of the independent Hungarian noviciate desirable and Zsámbék was selected as its centre. Several factors played a role in this, namely, the geographical situation of the parish and the extendable castle

building, the size and regional nature of Zsámbék as well as the teaching and educational possibilities arising from it.

The Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross continuously developed their cloister, which had been consecrated on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1905, and in 1907 they purchased the house of the Notre-Dame sisters, who moved to Törökbálint, with the garden belonging to it (Theodosianum), they built a new two-storey boarding school wing and a gymnasium connected to the western tower at right angles and established their own hospital (Josephinum) as well.

Zsámbék gradually became the spiritual centre of the congregation, getting all sacramental functions of the cloister church, where spiritual exercises were held for the nuns who gathered from various parts of the country. The system of teaching and educational institutions also began to develop rapidly (kindergartens, elementary schools, and higher elementary girls' schools).

The number of the members of the congregation grew in parallel and the sisters considerably extended their activity: they undertook new tasks at 18 institutions at 15 places.

This dynamic development was motivated by reasons of religious history, social history, as well as demographic, moral, educational policy and national reasons alike.

- The fact that the sisters performed their duty at a high level and to everyone's satisfaction obviously played a role.
- In the famous historic families of aristocrats constituting the majority of the founders, which were related to one another (Pálffy, Eszterházy, Károlyi, Cziráky, and Zichy) the good reputation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross led to newer and newer foundations through collateral relations and those of the female line.
- In some cases tragic changes in the personal or family life (Imre Csicsáky, Mrs. Rudolf Zichy) also contributed to new foundations.
- Social sensitivity, the community, and dedication to the home town were also decisive (elderly people's home at Detta, orphanage of Zsombolya, nursing home of Galgóc, etc.).
- The modernity of the congregation played the greatest role. Its activity was a response to the challenges of the age. This intellectuality met the rapid development of the dualistic era extending to almost all fields and well as its challenges.

- In the dualistic era the population of Hungary grew from 13.6 million to 18.3 million. This increased the tasks in the field of health service and education and entailed urgent and continuous developments.
- Urbanization had a similar effect. During half a century the urban population grew from 1.7 million to approximately 3.7 million and the share of the urban population increased from 11% to 20.3%. After Budapest those royal free boroughs were at the head of the urbanization process which could connect their administrative and traffic junction roles with modern industrialization, such as the three centres of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross: Bratislava, Timisoara and Kosice.
- Provincial and urban demographic growth required the development of the underdeveloped public health, which was especially striking in the field of hospital care (Act XIV of 1876). 88% of the 426 hospitals working in 1914 were built in the dualistic era and the smaller town- and village hospitals were renewed. Providing the staff of nurses was a big difficulty, so it was natural that the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross gradually got involved in the nursing and healing activity: besides private care (Bratislava, Timisoara, Kosice) they also served at state-owned hospitals (Bratislava, Nagykálló) as well as at county (Zombolya), town (Timisoara) and privately maintained (Futak) hospitals.
- In the Hungarian province the number of teaching and educational institutions was outstandingly high: 19 (school of embroidery, elementary school, industrial school, higher elementary school). In accordance with Act XXXVIII of 1868, school attendance became general and illiteracy decreased considerably. This was a big burden for the villages. The founders' financial generosity and the sisters' dedication jointly yielded a result.
- The development of the network of schools was connected with the national issue as well. The Catholic aristocracy of Hungarian sentiment also embraced the cultivation of the Hungarian language and the introduction of the Hungarian culture to wide layers. In the former Upper Hungary schools were sometimes established purposefully at settlements with miscellaneous nationalities or inhabited by Hungarians in minority, and the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross were entrusted with their direction. Act XV of 1891 on infants' care also served the purpose that pupils of the national minorities learned the official language of the state, Hungarian. The Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross fulfilled this task in 14 kindergartens.

- The two last decades of the dualistic era were imbued by the movement of renewal named religious renaissance when religious education in Catholic schools and kindergartens was regarded as an important element. This could be realized successfully by nuns.
- This was closely connected with moral education, in our case, with girls' and women's education at schools, various societies (e.g. St. Mary's Congregation), in the school literary and debating societies and boarding schools organized by the sisters (Enyicke, Bratislava, Zsombolya). This activity was also extended to job-seeking maid servants (Bratislava).

The number of the nunneries of the congregation grew to 37 and thus the independent Hungarian province of the religious order was established on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1913.

### **The congregation in the period of the revolutions**

During World War I the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross actively involved in the care of the wounded. In Zsámbék they transformed the Theodosianum into a hospital caring for 100 wounded people and the number of the nursing staff was increased in several towns (Timisoara, Kosice) and they involved in healing at new places, too (Ungvár, Budapest, Pöstyén, Oroszvár, Komárom). Until 1<sup>st</sup> January 1919, 222 nurses helped ill and wounded soldiers and they cared for 27,181 soldiers and 200 children at four institutes for nursing people wounded in the war.

The bourgeois-democracy which came into being after the World War was unacceptable for them

- due to the liberal ideas;
- due to Károlyi's person because they blamed him for the disintegration of historic Hungary;
- because of their passionate monarchism; they simply regarded the establishment of the republican government as a coup d'état by the Social Democrats and the revolution as a revolt against legal order.

The bourgeois regime did not bring any change in their situation. During the time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, however, even their existence was endangered. They were not evicted from the provincial centre – as opposed to other convents – and they could remain nuns and even their schools were not taken away. This can be explained by several reasons.

- The sisters resisted desperately.

- The local political conditions were favourable. The notary remained in his office and did not insist on the execution of the orders of the new power at all. The two other members of the directory of Zsámbék, the two teachers, served the communists' efforts only to a minimum extent. The delegate of the Council of Regency visiting the sisters' convent, Lajos Boroviák, was a character aiming at a peaceful solution.
- They were helped by the inhabitants of Zsámbék firmly taking a stand for them.
- However, their escape was primarily due to the uncertain policy of the Hungarian Soviet Republic with respect to alien monks and nuns. In the beginning the National Council extended its resolutions on them as well but they retreated because of the firm protest of the diplomatic representations. As a result of the Swiss diplomatic steps at the end of May, the commissary of full powers of Budafok issued an order: the nunnery could not be liquidated as it was in Swiss ownership. On 16<sup>th</sup> June the sisters received a six-week postponement again.

### **The dismemberment of the Hungarian province**

After World War I more than half of the nunneries of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross got under Czech, Romanian and Serbian occupation. The provincial leadership did not renounce their supervision and direction but their effort failed. The nunneries which had got in the territory of the successor states were separated from the provincial centre gradually, as a result of a longer process lasting from 1918 to 1922.

- As a first step communication between the Hungarian provincial centre and the nunneries was rendered impossible: the letters were confiscated and passports were not given for entry into the country.
- This was followed by open action: sisters were arbitrarily dismissed (Bratislava), expelled (Trnava) or transferred (Zsombolya), and unrealizable obligations were set to them. In the former Upper Hungary the knowledge of the Slovakian language was required while in Serbia the schools were nationalized.
- Finally, in 1922 a strong diplomatic offensive was launched at the Swiss embassies. As a consequence, a vicariate was established in Slovakia and the nunneries in the south were liquidated.

### **The development of the congregation (1920–1944)**

By 1922 the number of the members of the congregation decreased from 351 to 172, while by 1938 it increased to 369. In Hungary the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross were the fourth largest order from among the 29 women's orders in 1927 and in 1943

they were the sixth most significant order from among the 41 women's orders. All this can be explained by several reasons.

- The congregation offered a modest but safe subsistence to its members.
- The strengthening of the religious sentiment between the two World Wars also played a role.
- The harmony of a meditative and active life could also be attractive.
- The congregation offered various careers to the young girls (nursing, teaching, education, caring of orphans and the poor), from among which the candidates could choose the one most suitable for them.
- A series of prescriptions and regulations served for the establishment and maintenance of the corporate spirit. So the members of the congregation could find a home in the family of nuns.
- It provided protection for them in their illness or loneliness in their old age.

During this period the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross considerably extended their activity as well. In 1922 they worked in 14 communities and in 1943 in as many as 33 communities. They established a new network of poorhouses (Bicske, Érd, Orosháza, Kosice), and took an active part in the caring and education of endangered children and orphans (Children's Home of Hűvösvölgy, National Home for Destitute Children of Budapest, "Horthy Miklósné" Children's Home of Bicske, "Szent Erzsébet Szabadlégi School" of Kisvelence, "Mária Oltalma" Young Ladies' Boarding School of Törökbálint). They also extended their hospital activity (Erzsébet Hospital of Nyíregyháza, Town and Ophthalmic Hospital of Körmend, Surgical Clinic of Pécs, Hospital of Mohács). According to data of 1943, they maintained and directed 36 educational institutions at 20 locations. They performed special tasks at certain institutions (Szabadlégi School of Kisvelence, Children's Home of Bicske, Institute of Törökbálint), and they had peculiar – and sometimes even pioneering - undertakings (private higher elementary school of Hévízszentandrás, boys' higher elementary school of Zsámbék, girls' economic school). They taught and educated at 11 kindergartens and 16 elementary schools, and established higher elementary schools in Nagyatád in 1923, in Érd in 1936 and in Sümeg in 1940. In 1929 they opened their teacher's training institute in Zsámbék, which was developed into a centre of national significance during a decade. Their successes were helped by several factors.

- Zsámbék was built into a centre of national significance. In 1923 the two corner turrets were raised and a new storey was built onto the one-time baroque castle. In 1929 a new wing with four classrooms was built, in 1931 the boarding house was extended and in 1932 a new wing including seven rooms was established in the castle building. In 1934 another storey was built onto the boarding house, and the new patients' house of the members of the order was completed in 1936. In 1937 a new gymnasium and an indoor swimming pool were built and in 1943 a garret roof was erected on the building of the boarding house. They also developed the infrastructure: at Christmas in 1923 they introduced electric lighting and in 1937 they established a clarifier of Prister system on the southern side of the building and using the water of the spring on the side of Nyakas hill they established an up-to-date water-system.
- The educated and charismatic provincial mother superiors, who had been experienced already at the time of their election, played a decisive role in the development of the province. They had good abilities of organization and enforcement of interests and won the support of the highest clerical and secular circles (archbishops, primate of Esztergom, ministers, Franz Joseph, Mrs. Miklós Horthy). They monitored the development of the members of the congregation and intervened, when necessary, or dismissed them at the very worst. They ensured the uniform spirit of the congregation. The meetings discussing partly theoretical and partly practical issues organized for the mother superiors from 1929 onwards served for this purpose. They visited the communities personally each year and – with the help of the bishops – ensured the most important personal and objective conditions of spiritual life (confession, holy mass, Holy Communion, spiritual exercises, etc.) for the sisters living in the various nunneries. They took care of the health of the members of the family of nuns (permitted them four – or sometimes five – meals a day, which was extended even to the Lenten tide, and refused the fulfilment of extra burdens endangering the sisters' health). They established the conditions of recovery. They built a new station at Hévízszentandrás in order to nurse the convalescent sisters there. In Zsámbék they erected a new hospital building in 1936 and in the case of more serious illnesses they took arrangements themselves and personally visited the operated sisters.
- For ensuring their diverse activities they were greatly helped by bishops outstanding in historical terms as well (Ottokár Prohászka, Lajos Shvoy, Gyula Glattfelder, Nándor Rott).

- The challenges characterizing the period between the two World Wars and the goals of the sisters coincided. They took an active part in the development of religious life by education (prayerful life, regular partaking of the sacraments, the establishment of Catholic consciousness and conviction in schoolchildren).
- They realized moral education, which was put into the foreground, irrespective of age (children, youth, adult), sex, and activity (hospital care, teaching, social activity). The education of young ladies and women was a high-priority field. They aimed at preparing girls for a career and at establishing the traditional Christian ideal of a woman in them.
- Jointly with their pupils as well as societies consisting of young people and adults (“Mária” Congregation, Eucharistic Children’s Association, Youth Red Cross, Women’s Congregation) the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross performed a considerable social activity: they took up collections for the poor (clothes, shoes, food), distributed meals, supported poor pupils, and joined the relief actions organized by the state.

### **The congregation at the time of World War II**

At the end of World War II (1944–1945) Zsámbék got under Russian occupation and participated in the German efforts at the liberation of Budapest (Konrad I, II, III), and the German counterattack launched in the region of Lake Balaton (Frühlingserwachen).

During the 90-day period – which the sisters mentioned as a siege – serious but not irreparable damages occurred in their buildings. One sister died during the war actions. The sisters went through the Russian presence with less suffering as compared to the circumstances, other settlements and other nunneries. This can be explained by several reasons.

- The Russian commanders showed numerous signs of their benevolence (e.g. they ordered a sentry duty in front of their building).
- The sisters coming from the south and from the former Upper Hungary spoke Serbian and Slovakian well and so they could communicate with the Russians.
- It was a security for them that they were many.
- The sisters followed a resolute strategy. They were always friendly and helped the Russians in this spirit (baking of bread, mending of clothes, nursing of wounded people), but they did not show fear and acted very resolutely when necessary.



### **Withdrawal of the permit of operation of the congregation**

After the retreat of the front in 1945–1946 they renovated their buildings and institutions and established the minimum conditions for their life and activity with great difficulties but from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1947 they also got among the flour-ration card-owners. In spite of the adverse political atmosphere they extended their activity in Hungary. They joined the healing activity at new places (hospital of Szőny, sanatorium in Vilma királynő út, Budapest, hospital in Miskolc, TB clinic in Tokaj). They developed their network of elementary schools and kindergartens (Mezőberény, Levelek, Rezi), and the higher elementary school at Nagymaros also got under their direction.

Act 33 of 1948 ordered the nationalization of “non-state-owned schools” and the school building of the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in Zsámbék was also sequestered. The sisters were removed one after the other from the welfare and nursing institutes as well. Their building in Zsámbék was made available to the Ministry of Agriculture in 1949, which intended to open an Academy of Agriculture from 1<sup>st</sup> July. As the boarding house built for 200 persons was too little for 300 adult students of the Academy therefore the sisters were evicted from their nunnery. Law-decree 34 of 1950 terminated the permit of operation of the religious orders in the territory of the Hungarian People’s Republic. On 5<sup>th</sup> November 1950 the Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross were transported in tilt trucks from Zsámbék to Gyón, to the orphanage and nunnery of the Carmelite sisters. The 446 sisters dispersed and during the next decades they partly performed works meeting their qualifications (teaching, nursing, parochial service) and partly led a retired life with their families or in homes for elderly people. The congregation became legal again after the democratic transformation but it did not get a sufficient replacement. On 4<sup>th</sup> October 2007 the Central European province was established, which comprises the one-time four Austrian, as well as the Bavarian, the Slovenian and the Hungarian provinces.

At present four sisters live in the house in Városmajor utca, Budapest, which was returned in 1994, and their activity focuses on secular apostolic activity at their civilian workplaces as well as ministering to the elderly sisters, the organization of meetings at weekends serving for spiritual renewal, and the organization of camping for disadvantaged children.