

Secrets of the West about Cardinal Mindszenty

Ádám Somorjai OSB: *Az amerikai levéltárak titkai – Válogatott írások Mindszenty bíborosról.* [The Secrets of American Archives – Assorted Writings about Cardinal Mindszenty.] Magyar Napló – Írott Szó Alapítvány, Budapest, 2021. 166 pp. ISBN 978-615-5195-94-5.

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Cardinal Prince Primate József Mindszenty was in the centre of significant domestic and international attention even in his lifetime, and there were a few who already declared him as a saint then. The details of his life and work – despite of the great interest – were overshadowed by the Iron Curtain. However, this curiosity has been unbroken ever since, as demonstrated in particular by the latest research and the considerable amount of literature written on his personality. And his beatification process is already in progress.

Ádám Somorjai's recently published study volume also enriches this topic. It contributes with old and new details to the description of the life and decisions of the cardinal, and the events influencing these. Ádám Somorjai was a Benedictine monk-teacher in Pannonhalma, who obtained his doctoral degree in moral theology from the Pontifical Lateran University, and previously he dealt with the history of the orders as a church historian. He lived in Rome for nearly 20 years, and also worked for the Vatican Secretariat of State when he was appointed as a trained postulator¹ of the Canonization Congregation to take part in the beatification process of Mindszenty József first as a consultant² and later as a relator³. His work resulted in several significant volumes of document publications and research,, which contributed to the best possible answer to the questions raised, with new investigative aspects and relevant findings..

1 Proponent: the appointed officer of beatification and canonization processes. His task is to collect all the necessary data and define the reasons based on which the process of beatification and canonization can be requested.

Source: <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/P/posztul%C3%A1tor.html>, date of query: 24. 05. 2022.

2 counsellor

3 expert

The newly published high-quality book contains writings that the professional public were familiar with before, but this time the “new insights” are aimed at a wider readership, which can be considered also as a kind of response to the criticism the author received for his findings. In total nine studies were edited, in a different thematic order from that in which they were written, and concluded with a summary study written especially for this volume. In the preface of his book, the author provides the sources he used, the circumstances in which the studies were born, and the aim of the volume in detail.

The common point of the writings is the examined sources. József Mindszenty lived in American semi-captivity for almost fifteen years, so, the length of this period and the peculiarities of the embassy life prompted the researcher to examine the archival documents stored at the US Embassy in Budapest. Accordingly, the majority of the studies depict the events on the basis of the notes, reports and letters written here, which are also supplemented by the records of the British diplomacy, the Vatican Archives and the photography archives in Rome.

Based on these, the author’s thoughts revolve around issues such as the closer relationship between the Diplomacy of the Vatican and the bishops of Hungary, and the weakening of the relationship of the Vatican and the Cardinal. According to Somorjai, these changes were primarily influenced by pastoral considerations. The chapter which examines the issue of filling the chair of the archbishop of Esztergom also explores pastoral issues. In particular, what motivated Mindszenty to remain within the embassy, and what prompted Pope Paul VI to finally declare the archbishopric vacant. Somorjai sees the decision of Pope Paul VI as political in nature but pastorally motivated since it was taken in order to settle the situation of the Hungarian ecclesiastical government. In contrast, the bishop’s comprehension – in the author’s view – is basically political, for “the pastoral considerations are dwarfed by the public ones,”⁴ which is why the cardinal preserved for a long time and remained at the embassy to “fulfil his constitutional role when the time came.”⁵

József Mindszenty could have left his forced residence four times, before he finally left for the Vatican, but he did not live with any of these options. A separate study on the subject clarifies the (American) legal background to the cardinal’s stay in the embassy residence: he was granted refugee status and not asylum. In light of this, the attitude of American diplomacy can be interpreted as a strict regulation of the cardinal’s relations with the outside world. The study finally examines the possibilities for the cardinal to travel abroad, which includes twice a trip to a conclave and then medical treatment for his deteriorating health. On one occasion, Mindszenty himself wanted to leave the embassy

4 Ádám Somorjai OSB: *Az amerikai levéltárak titkai – Válogatott írások Mindszenty bíborosról.* [The Secrets of American Archives – Assorted Writings about Cardinal Mindszenty.] Magyar Napló – Írott Szó Alapítvány, Budapest, 2021. 28.

5 *Ibid.* 27.

after the Americans accredited an ambassador to Budapest, but Pope Paul VI persuaded him to stay at that time.

The following chapter is about the reasons why the cardinal finally left Hungary. The refuge of the Princely Primate was initially intended by the Americans to be temporary, but later he became increasingly isolated from the outside world. He could only write letters within strict limits. Over the years, however, he wrote his memoirs, the publication of which was important for him because “he reserved to himself the right to speak the last word.”⁶ However, while he was at the U.S. Embassy, he was unable to publish it. This, together with the diplomatic turn, eventually led to the cardinal’s departure abroad, while all three negotiators considered it essential that the decision be taken by the cardinal himself.

József Mindszenty’s departure abroad and his stay in the Vatican are relatively well documented but there are still some unanswered questions. One such debated point is the details of the first meeting between the cardinal and Pope Paul VI. More specifically, whether or not Pope Paul VI handed over his own ring, chest cross and cloak to the Cardinal, as it is written in the memoirs of the Cardinal-The author sought to answer this question in a study, in which he reached new conclusions with the help of a Roman photographic archive, the Felici Foto.

The next chapter deals with the preparations for the Second Vatican Council, for which the Americans did not forward the invitation letter to the Cardinal, while other Hungarian Bishops were also restricted from communicating with the Vatican. The problems arising from isolation are also highlighted in another study, illustrating the differences between Pope Paul VI’s speech given in front of the United Nations General Assembly, and the information that reached Mindszenty about that speech.

The author’s two further studies somewhat broaden the scope of interpreting the events. One discusses the relationship between the papacy and King St. Stephen, followed by Mindszenty’s personal interpretation of the jurisdiction over the ‘first public dignitary’. The next chapter presents the reader with the ‘evaluation’ of British diplomacy of Mindszenty, from 1945 onwards, when the ambassadors in Budapest and the British Holy See believed that the Archbishop of Esztergom had become too involved in politics, and they considered this dangerous and flawed.

In the final study of the volume, Somorjai investigates Mindszenty’s years at the US embassy – which account for nearly one-fifth of his life. Based on these, he argues that the cardinal’s oeuvre cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of his own considerations. Furthermore, the allegation that the Americans subordinated the cardinal to their own Cold War interests is unfounded, as is the fact that the Vatican abandoned him. Finally, he concludes that the cardinal “simultaneously wanted to live up to his supposed or real number of national, public dignity and ecclesiastical authority. He did not come to the

6 Ibid. 80.

conclusion that if he confined himself to the latter, as Wyszynski did, he would better serve the former.”⁷ Elsewhere, however, the author notes that the details of Mindszenty’s greatness are not lost, “but rather bring his story closer to people and make it more understandable to us, two generations later.”⁸

Ádám Somorjai’s book is logically structured, clear and readable. The author has made excellent use of the embassy’s sources, and his thorough and logical analysis of them, and his high-quality interpretation of the overall picture are remarkable. A particular strength of the volume is the analysis of the photographs included. The occasional repetitions in the study volume – which the author himself also points out – are sometimes disturbing, but this does not detract from the value of the book.

On this basis, the book is recommended for a wide range of audiences. Beyond the narrow field of historians and theologians, it is for all those who would like to know more about the life of the Prince Primate, the circumstances that influenced his life, and the ecclesiastical and diplomatic history of the period. ■

7 Ibid. 159.

8 Ibid. 82.