

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AS “HOLY WAR”?

PRIESTS INVOLVED IN POLITICS IN A SMALL TOWN ON THE GREAT PLAIN IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Abstract: In the second half of the 19th century, especially following the Compromise (1867) that marked the birth of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Roman Catholic lower clergy became increasingly involved in politics. This phenomenon affected even the judgement of the traditional social role of the clergy. The author presents the example of Antal Hegyi, last 19th century parish priest of Csongrád (Csongrád County) and his assistant ministers, showing what consequences openly undertaken political activity during local parliamentary elections could have for the general judgement of the clergy.

Keywords: lower clergy, social role, politics, 19th century, Hungary

In Hungary the dismantling of the legal foundation of feudalism began with the April laws¹ drawn up during the 1848 revolution and freedom struggle, and was completed during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1867-1918). Especially important for our topic among the many reform measures was Section 2/d of Act V of 1848 that, among others, declared the right of priests to vote, regardless of their financial situation.² The growing signs of the “politicisation” of the lower clergy, such as participation in election campaigns or acceptance of various political offices – especially in smaller settlements that clung more firmly to

1 The article was written and the research carried out with the support of the Hungarian National Research Fund (OTKA) Grant NK81502. – The 1848 revolution and freedom struggle was inspired by the ideal of an independent Hungary, the desire to break away from the Habsburg Empire and move beyond the feudal state; the so-called “April laws” were drawn up in this spirit. The legislative package of 31 articles compiled at the last feudal diet was designed to set out the frames of a parliamentary state. The April laws created a new constitutional situation and represented a major milestone despite the fact that they were withdrawn after the defeat of the freedom struggle. The demands formulated at that time were realised in the second half of the century, in part through the Compromise (1867, defining the legal, political and economic conditions of the alliance between the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary), and in part through the continuous development of constitutional law during the dual monarchy.

2 In this period only around 10% of the population had the right to vote that was determined by the amount of taxes paid.

traditions – were a highly unusual phenomenon.³ Public opinion was divided on whether spiritual leaders should deal with secular questions and engage openly in politics. Ignoring the core of the issue and approaching the question from the angle of the social sciences, I examine what influence this new element had on the opinions formed of the *social role* of the parish priest.

We generally understand social role to mean “the sum of the forms of behaviour expected of the individual by the community”,⁴ that is, the sum of expectations attached to certain social statuses and positions. Individuals are also aware of such questions as “how a priest/cantor should behave”, and as they adapt their behaviour to them, they become role models. Expectations regarding social roles change more slowly and with greater difficulty than the structure of society. It could be said that they constantly “lag behind” and as a result the social role expected of the clergy was preserved largely intact in the progression from feudalism to bourgeois society.

In this article I draw mainly on the example of a predominantly Roman Catholic small town on the Great Plain clinging to its traditions and with a basically serf peasant mentality, to show the reactions evoked in the community by the appearance in the second half of the 19th century of a parish priest with strong political ambitions. What was the attitude of the community, the leaders of the town and the county bishop to the political role undertaken by the parish priest of Csongrád? Was the judgement of the traditional social role of the Csongrád parish priest changed by events?

In my research I focused on the period between 1850 and 1900. This was an exciting time full of contradictions, marked by the search for new directions of the peasant bourgeoisie of Csongrád seeking to free itself of the feudal legacy. It was around this time that the first religious societies, citizens’ associations, the Casino and reading circles were established; lively interest began to be shown in politics, to which not even the local clergy and the church assistants were immune. The present article analyses the behaviour of Antal Hegyi (parish priest of Csongrád from 1886-1902) and the Csongrád chaplains during the time of the parliamentary elections.⁵

The society of Csongrád, the religiosity of the people of Csongrád in the second half of the 19th century

In the 19th century the majority of the society of Csongrád, a small town on the Hungarian Great Plain at the confluence of the Tisza and Körös rivers, were peasants with small or dwarf holdings of 5-10 or 0-5 *hold*⁶ of land, landless poor and

3 It is not possible here for reasons of space to present the “culture wars” in Hungary or to analyse the twists and turns of contemporary church policy. For more details on this subject, see: FAZEKAS 2008.

4 TOMKA 1997. 64.

5 Roland Tánzos, for example, in 2006 devoted a lengthy study to the political and public life activity of Antal Hegyi, the “militant parish priest of Csongrád”. See TÁNZOS 2006.

6 A hold is an area of land equivalent to 5755 square metres, 0.57 hectares or 1.42 acres.

farm servants. In the words of Gellért Váry, a locally-born Piarist: they were the “people of Csongrád”⁷. The settlement’s social development was shaped by the fact that the inhabitants were all Roman Catholics, the majority were smallholders and all ethnic Hungarians. Anyone with secondary or higher-level schooling, with an officer’s commission, higher-ranking public servants, doctors, secondary school teachers, school principals, lawyers, whose way of life, wealth and mentality visibly distinguished them from the farmers and agricultural labourers who formed the majority were known collectively as the “intelligentsia”.

Between 1850 and 1900 the community underwent considerable change, both as regards size, structure and the distribution of wealth and occupations. The growing social stratification that followed the dismantling of the legal and political structure of feudalism brought a shift towards the separation of groups organised on the basis of wealth, occupation and religion.⁸ By the end of the century the wealthy big farmers and the Jewish intelligentsia, the merchants and the hired navvies found amusement in different places, at separate balls and lived in different parts of the town. Endogamy continued as a strict practice within the different settlement areas. The social “divergence” reached its peak during the period examined. As a journalist writing in the *Csongrádi Újság* noted: “the farmer looks down on the tradesman, the merchant dissociates himself from the society of tradesmen, and the intellectual from both classes. If the tradesmen hold a social gathering, it will not be attended by any merchants, officials or farmers. By the same token, the tradesmen and the intelligentsia are absent from the farmers’ gatherings”.⁹

What united the poor and rich, the educated and illiterate of Csongrád was their emotional, committed religious practice. Most of the Catholic community of Csongrád without discrimination flocked to mass on Sunday. There was always somebody who fainted in the throng,¹⁰ the cantor grumbled as he tried to push his way through the crowd to take part in the procession,¹¹ even the parish priest had to be helped by the police when he passed among the people to sprinkle holy water.¹² It was not by chance that by the late 19th century membership of the different religious confraternities became a question of prestige. In contrast to larger towns of that time, in Csongrád failure to attend church did not become part of the “middle class behaviour”, indeed in the prosperous farming families religion

7 VÁRY 1974.86.

8 Regarding the denominational distribution, for centuries the settlement was inhabited exclusively by Roman Catholics. A census taken in 1785 by parish priest András Kanyó mentions 61 Calvinists, all of whom lived in the affiliated parish of Tés on the opposite bank of the Tisza. The first Jewish families arrived around the 1790s. In the 1870s, in addition to the 16,772 Roman Catholics living in the inner area of Csongrád, the parish priest recorded 517 Jews, 56 Lutherans, 9 Calvinists and 2 Greek Catholics. DUDÁS 1999. 26; Nagyboldogasszony Parish Archive, Csongrád (hereinafter: NPI) *Historia Domus, Csongrád* vol. I, p. 113.

9 *Csongrádi Újság*, 8 November 1903. Vol. I, no. 3, p. 2.

10 Vác Episcopal and Chapter Archive, Acta Privatorum (hereinafter: VPL APriv.) – János Mátyus, 10 July 1823. Confession of András Makai.

11 Vác Episcopal and Chapter Archive, Acta Parochiarum Csongrád (hereinafter: VPL APar. - Cs.) 1867. undated letter of complaint from cantor Antal Sohlya to the Bishop of Vác.

12 VPL APar. - Cs. 1887. Undated letter from Antal Hegyi to the Bishop of Vác.

remained at the top of the value hierarchy and the larger donations came from this source. Their example was followed by the peasants with smallholdings, vineyard workers and fishermen, who contributed when money was collected for sacred purposes, or who themselves erected statues and crosses outside the town.

In this way society looked to the church to act as an integrating and linking bridge. On the basis of a kind of unspoken consensus the church was accepted as a “zone” free of social contradictions. An eloquent example is the flag-blessing celebration of the People’s Circle¹³ that grouped mainly middle peasants and big farmers. The tradesmen received an invitation to the event (by mistake?) and so they too processed into the church at the time indicated. An office-bearer of the People’s Circle angrily challenged the group, but the tradesmen replied that as Catholics they would go to church whenever they pleased.¹⁴

At all times the local lower clergy enjoyed special respect: people raised their hats to them in the street or kissed their hand. As Antal Zöld, an elementary schoolteacher in Csongrád wrote in 1889 in a letter: “this man (i.e. the parish priest) is the person deserving of the greatest respect in Csongrád”.¹⁵ The people of Csongrád referred to the parish priest as “master parish priest”, but since he was not the only priest in the parish, to distinguish him from the chaplains he was also called *head priest*¹⁶, *head master*¹⁷, *head father*¹⁸ or *old priest*¹⁹.

The parish priest enjoyed unconditional respect; according to the evidence of contemporary investigation protocols, the illiterate peasants took his word without reservation, for example they did not ask for written confirmation of their donations or mass-foundations. The secular authorities were also aware of the power of the word of the parish priest. It is not surprising that the town’s leaders attached such importance to the content of sermons preached in the church, or to any politically-coloured manifestations of the local clergy. This was the intellectual environment that Antal Hegyi found when he arrived in Csongrád in 1886.

An “atypical” character: the life career of parish priest Antal Hegyi

Antal Hegyi was born on 9 September 1848 in Hódmezővásárhely (Csongrád County). He attended secondary school in his birthplace and went on to study theology in Vác (Pest County) where he was ordained in August 1872. It was during his years as a chaplain in Kecskemét (Bács-Kiskun County) that we first

13 The name of a civil association preserving the spirit of the freedom struggle of 1848–49. The reading circles typically held discussion evenings and readings on political subjects. The circle in Csongrád was established by chief cantor Antal Sohlya in 1877.

14 *Csongrádi Újság*, 12 March 1905, vol. III, no. 11, p. 2.

15 VPL APriv. Hegyi Antal, 21 February 1889. Letter from Antal Zöld to the Bishop of Vác.

16 “In our area the chapter parish priests are also known as chief priests”. VPL APar. Cs. 1867. Undated letter from Antal Sohlya to the Bishop of Vác.

17 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 22–26 August 1898. Confession of János Máté.

18 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 22–26 August 1898. Confession of Ilona Roza Lantosné.

19 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 22–26 August 1898. Confession of Viktória Nyilas Ornyikné.

learn that Hegyi “makes speeches of political incitement to the people”.²⁰ The chaplain refuted the accusations in vain: he was transferred by the bishop to Hódmezővásárhely in 1875. It was here that another of Antal Hegyi’s characteristic interests took shape: he showed special interest in religious societies and in religious community organisation. His name is associated with the establishment and flourishing of the Sacred Heart society in Hódmezővásárhely.

In 1876 Hegyi returned to Vác where a promising career awaited the intelligent but unusually short-tempered young priest. The many qualities in which Hegyi served the Vác diocese would make a very long list. At first he was a supervisor of studies in the Vác seminary, and a substitute teacher of ethics and pastoral doctrine. In 1879 he was spiritual director of the same institution, in 1880 he became a substitute secondary school teacher. Two years later he was notary of the ecclesiastical court, diocesan archivist and librarian. In 1885, the year of the death of Antal Peitler, the county bishop he greatly respected and loved, he was already secretary to the bishop, then office director, assistant inspector of schools and ecclesiastical court councillor.²¹ From here he was appointed a year later to head the Csongrád parish that had become vacant.²²

Already in his first year in Csongrád Antal Hegyi came into conflict with the Calvinist midwife, then shortly after with the church sexton.²³ In spite of his sometimes aggressive and impatient behaviour towards the church assistants and the parishioners, there can be no doubt that the church at Csongrád was visibly embellished and enriched during the time of Antal Hegyi: the furnishings were steadily renewed and new items added, the parish community purchased a bell, the Sacred Heart chapel was built in Bokros. It was he who first tried to plant trees around the church and surrounding area and keep it tidy.

Relations between Antal Hegyi and county bishop Konstantin Schuszter began to deteriorate in the late 1880s. The first, more serious conflict arose over the plan to appoint chaplain Mátyás Bozsó to Csongrád; Hegyi was not prepared to receive Bozsó as his chaplain because of his questionable reputation. Because of his disobedience he was summoned to Vác to be questioned, but under various pretexts the Csongrád parish priest failed to appear at the hearings. The consequence of the affair was a first degree disciplinary punishment. Hegyi wrote a series of indignant letters to the ecclesiastical court of the bishop of Vác that brought the judgement, declaring his punishment to be unjustified and refusing to show any repentance.²⁴ From then on relations between the county bishop and Antal

20 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 1875. Undated letter from the chairman of the church council of Kecskemét to the Bishop of Vác.

21 СНОВОТ II.1917.766.

22 TÁNCZOS 2006. 59.

23 Going against earlier tradition, he forbade the Calvinist midwife Mrs Gáspár Magdits from attending the christening of Roman Catholic children she had brought into the world. In the same year he became involved in a court case when he removed from office the sexton György Keviczky – whose family had held the post of sexton and sacristan for 120 years. VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 6 November 1888. Letter from Antal Hegyi to the district archdeacon. VPL APar. Cs. Historia Domus. Antal Hegyi’s torn out sheets 144-145. (1888.)

24 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 3 August 1888. Letter from Antal Hegyi to the Bishop of Vác.

Hegyí became increasingly bitter, with a whole series of affronts and apologies. The final consequences overtook the parish priest of Csongrád at the end of the 1890s.

It was partly because of his articles “revealing the facts” in *Csongrádi Lap* that Antal Hegyí came under rapidly growing pressure in the 1890s. In the absence of receipts, he was unable to account for the sums received from the parish priests of Biel and Winterthur (Switzerland) sent as mass-intentions²⁵, and as a result he spent his last years as parish priest of Csongrád in angry self-defence combined with attacks.²⁶ Then, not for the first time, Hegyí became involved in a case of disobedience brought by his bishop, that also drew the attention of the national press.²⁷ In the mean time he continuously resisted the introduction of civil marriage and recognition of the Jews²⁸. In 1898 he was suspended as parish priest and the former Csongrád chaplain Mihály Droppa was appointed temporary administrator.²⁹ In response Antal Hegyí had printed by György Márián in Budapest his much disputed writing titled: *Let there be light! Written in self-defence in place of a Lenten sermon and published by Antal Hegyí, suspended from his office and remuneration as parish priest of Csongrád*. In the course of the investigation, the episcopal court examined the pamphlet as an aggravating circumstance.³⁰

Antal Hegyí’s growing number of ecclesiastical and civil litigious affairs reached the limit of tolerance in 1902: his punishment now expanded to a three-month prison sentence. After the Csongrád parish priest unsuccessfully appealed for clemency to the Minister for Justice and to Francis Joseph Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, he left Csongrád on 5 November 1902 and travelled via Budapest and Hamburg to New York. While in Hungary a warrant was issued for his arrest and his belongings were auctioned, in Cleveland he took over the editing of the weekly paper *Magyarok Vasárnapja* (Hungarian Sunday) and later was appointed parish priest of Fairport³¹. Years of calm followed in Hegyí’s life: he responded from abroad to accusations made against him in the press in Hungary, while in *Magyarok Vasárnapja* he published writings in self-defence, outlining the circumstances that led to his emigration. For some time articles in *Csongrádi Lap*

25 According to the Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia, the purpose of a *mass-intention*, or mass-foundation is “to have one or more masses said over a longer period of time (10, 20, 50 years) for the soul of the person making the foundation or another deceased person.” See: <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/M/misealapitvany.html>

26 “Neither prison nor the scaffold will make another person of me than what God created. This is why I disdain this whole, miserable earthly life full of persecution, and if I am forced I will go to great extremes together with my friends: but what happens will cause whoever hears about it to fall silent.” VPL APriv. Antal Hegyí, 9 December 1895. Letter from Antal Hegyí to the Diocesan Authority of Vác.

27 On 6 January 1889 the county bishop forgave Hegyí’s disobedience, but since his behaviour continued to be aggressive, in February 1893 the archbishop also expressed his disapproval.

28 Act XLII of 1895 declared the equal status of the Jewish religion in Hungary.

29 *Csongrádi Lap*, 23 January 1898, vol. VIII. no. 4, p. 3.

30 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyí, 31 August 1898. Protocol of the Vác ecclesiastical court.

31 Fairport had a population of 300, mainly Hungarians who had emigrated from Zemplén and Ung counties. Slovaks, English people, and Finns who had emigrated from Russia also lived in the settlement. TÁnczos 2006. 72.

and *Csongrádi Újság* had been referring to Hegyi as “morally dead” and kept his memory alive among the population with short gibes.³²

In 1906 Antal Hegyi returned to Hungary on what he intended as a short visit, to collect money for a Hungarian orphanage in America. However the authorities were not swayed by his noble aims and Hegyi was brought to court in Szeged. After five months of imprisonment, the petitions and official missions by the American community he had left behind and by people of Csongrád were successful and in November 1906 Antal Hegyi was released on a royal pardon.

The former parish priest returned to Csongrád, where he took over management of the Christian Consumers Cooperative he had established, and later of the Christian Steam Mill Co. Between 1911 and 1919 he was chief magistrate of Csongrád.³³ Apart from celebrating mass he did not perform any other priestly function. After 1919 he retired and the newly appointed county bishop of Vác, István Á. Hanauer assisted him in his serious financial difficulties. In September 1922 a festive mass was said to mark the 50th anniversary of his ordination. Antal Hegyi died a lonely man on 9 July, 1923 at the age of 75.³⁴

New ways of shaping opinion: the parish priest as newspaper editor

Following the crushing of the revolution and after the conditions of the dual monarchy were set out in the Compromise (1867), the Hungarian political scene was dominated by liberal–royalist parties³⁵, also known as parties of “67”, or parties clinging to the independence ideal of “48”. The *Szabadelvű Párt* (Liberal Party) (1875–1906) representing the spirit of the Compromise was in power for 30 years with the exception of 1905, while – due to the particular nature of the dualist state – the parties of “48” could only remain in opposition. As an enthusiastic supporter of the political opposition, Antal Hegyi did not accept the justification for the dualist state and so favoured the so-called “48” and Catholic parties, namely the *Függetlenségi és Negyvennyolcas Párt* (Independence and 48 Party), and the *Katolikus Néppárt* (Catholic People’s Party) (1894–1918).³⁶

32 “They are whitewashing the church tower, raising scaffolding around it and attracting the attention of several passers-by. A pretty young woman joins the gazers and as she lifts her eyes up to the tower she says with deep conviction: ‘Antal Hegyi is coming home, they are whitewashing the tower so that he won’t find it dirty, they are afraid that he will once again sweep out the whole town hall.’” *Csongrádi Újság*, 17 July 1904, vol. II, no. 29, p. 3.

33 SEBESTYÉN 2002. 83–84.

34 TÁNCZOS 2006. 74.

35 In Hungary liberalism appeared in the form of laws abolishing the privileges of Catholics that violated religious equality. Outstanding among these were the introduction of civil marriage and registration of births, marriages and deaths by the state.

36 The aim of the Catholic People’s Party, often referred to as the People’s Party, was a review from the Catholic point of view of the laws on church policy, while at the same time it took a stand against the excesses of capitalism. It was perhaps due to the liberal leanings of the Hungarian political elite that the People’s Party never had a sufficient number of representatives and so was unable to become the general representation of Hungarian Catholicism. TÓTH 1993. 305.

During the time Antal Hegyi was parish priest of Csongrád, four parliamentary elections were held in the country: in 1887, 1892, 1896 and 1901. Because he arrived in Csongrád barely a year before the elections of 1887, he still had little insight into the political leanings of the local population, consequently it was mainly during the elections of 1892 and 1896 that he can be said to have carried out real propaganda activity. In 1901 Antal Hegyi and the judge István Ludrovai Tóth together drew up the platform of the *Független Magyarország Párt* (Independent Hungary Party) they had founded. The parish priest acted as the representative of this new party.³⁷

During the 1891–92 parliamentary elections the parish priest strove to give legitimacy to his unusually strong political ambitions through the local press and pamphlets. His aim was to defeat Imre Szivák, the government party member of parliament for Csongrád and tried to achieve this with the support of his fellow priest, János Hock. Hegyi was not fastidious about the propaganda tools he used: he organised meetings, made campaign speeches, and went from door to door drumming up support for Hock. According to some sources he even used the church pulpit for his oratory against Imre Szivák, but Antal Hegyi steadfastly denied those accusations.³⁸

Parish priest Hegyi's persuasive rhetoric and his strongly worded articles deeply divided the parishioners of Csongrád. When Antal Hegyi took over the editing of the weekly *Tiszavidék* (from 1892), then in 1894 launched his own paper, *Csongrádi Közlöny* the result was a veritable standing war. In his articles the parish priest constantly criticised the positions of *Csongrádi Lap*, a liberal paper with a slightly socialist tone, edited by János Éder³⁹. These Csongrád publications reflected the national trends of the time in their style and structure⁴⁰, and for the most part responded to each other in highly personal terms. The stakes of the bare-knuckled fight between *Csongrádi Közlöny* and *Csongrádi Lap*, that is, between Antal Hegyi and János Éder were shaping the political views of the population, and achieving success in the election campaign.

Parish priest Hegyi's activity as a newspaper editor and journalist shows a definite intention to shape opinion that also represented a broadening of the traditional priestly role. János Éder treated his newspaper editor colleague in

37 On the party's platform, see: ERDÉLYI – GOMBOSNÉ SEBŐK 1989. 261.

38 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 2 January 1892. Letter from the Bishop of Vác to Antal Hegyi.

39 János Éder was the paper's editor-in-chief from 1891 to 1915. His father was a lawyer, a major in the 1848 National Guard, and member of parliament for Csongrád; his mother was Charlotta Csemegi, a descendant of Károly Csemegi the Hungarian legal expert born in Csongrád. Éder graduated from the Academy of Forestry and later earned a diploma in Budapest too. After completing his education he worked as a teacher in the Csongrád boys secondary school from 1883 to 1913, then acted as principal of the school from 1913 to 1919. János Éder was a committed socialist and a member of the Szeged Masonic lodge. If, in addition to all this we take into account his mother's Jewish origin, the complex reasons for his mutual antipathy shared with the parish priest are easier to understand. DUDÁS 1985. 89; DUDÁS 2004.

40 They shaped their profile in the light of the principles of the "48" in opposition or the liberal-government party.

keeping with liberal ideals,⁴¹ that is, during the parliamentary election campaign he expected him, as a responsible public figure, a kind of public official, to take a stand in the press in support of his candidate and to bravely tolerate the tone of the opposite side that citizens involved in politics could expect.

However, Antal Hegyi found it difficult to strike a balance between his political activity and his priestly vocation.⁴² Nor could the people see him apart from his status as a priest – although it is true that Antal Hegyi made no attempt to help them in this.⁴³ The reason for this failure was that, by his own admission, the parish priest had entered politics with the intention of defending the faith; in other words he supported the opposition because of what he saw as the anti-religion measures of the Hungarian government (such as the introduction of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths, and civil marriage).

“This hated man is unfurling the banner of the opposition in Csongrád (...) and the people are moving with him”

Antal Hegyi faced the daunting task of combining and winning acceptance for the figures of authentic priest and authentic citizen, but his efforts led to an overall image that was ambiguous, open to attack and still shifting. Numerous sources confirm that Hegyi engaged in political agitation from the pulpit, he involved his chaplains, the parish clerk and members of the religious societies in his organising activities.⁴⁴ He began to compare the parliamentary elections to a veritable “holy war”. When chief constable Ferenc Réti called on Hegyi through the press to withdraw, in reply he referred to his appointment as parish priest confirmed with a vow that was more lasting than the office of chief constable.⁴⁵ The biblical comparisons that he liked to make in self-defence when he was the target

41 The liberal ideal strips the priestly vocation of its transcendental aspects, and interprets religion as a kind of morality or intellectual attitude. See: Romsics 2007. 723.

42 His chaplains complained to the bishop of Vác: because of the parish priest’s “constant rambling, we ran the office too, and he did not pay much attention to the many people who came for confession because the constant campaigning, meetings and especially the muck-raking paper he edited occupied all his time.” VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 4 March 1894. Letter from the Csongrád chaplains to the Bishop of Vác.

43 One instructive passage from a piece written by a committed admirer of Hegyi will serve as an example: “The supporters of the county have declared that this outstanding parish priest of the church is the most hated priest in the world. And this hated man is unfurling the banner of the opposition in Csongrád, and in the name of pure patriotism he is raising his apostolic voice under this banner; the people are moving with him, they will sweep away the government party and with it Szivák who has been declared unbeatable.” LABÁDI 2007. (The quotation is from 1892 – Szentesi Lap.)

44 *Csongrádi Lap*, 1 January 1892. Vol. II, no. 1, p. 2. “Not only the parish priest and the church caretaker, but also the chaplains, cantors, members of the Sacred Heart Society, all the rosary-reading and banner-carrying sons and daughters of the church vied with each other in their fanaticising and terrorising machinations.” LABÁDI 2007. 88. (*Szentesi Lap*, 25 March 1892. Vol. XX, no. 25, pp. 1-2.)

45 *Csongrádi Közlöny*, 5 May 1895. Vol. II, no. 18, p. 3.

of political attacks represent a rhetorical peak.⁴⁶ This obvious double standard irritated his political opponents. “When he slanders his bishop he claims that he is speaking as a citizen, that is, he feels himself to be outside the laws of the priesthood, but if he commits an offence as a citizen, he hides behind the bastion of the priestly vestment”⁴⁷ – wrote the parishioners struggling for his transfer.

The magistrate and notary of Csongrád observed with surprise the unprecedented activity of the parish priest. A letter from Konstantin Schuszter to the county bishop of Vác reveals sincere alarm. According to the argumentation of the public officials, the task of the parish priest is the moral, not the political leadership of the people; consequently Hegyi’s behaviour was “not fitting for a priest”, and so the case required immediate intervention.⁴⁸ In response to the events, the bishop of Vác wrote a long, fatherly letter to the Csongrád parish priest in which he set out his position as bishop.⁴⁹

The bishop acknowledged that the clergy who shared in the public burden of taxes was also entitled to the exercise of civil rights, but he regarded preserving the dignity of the priestly vocation as more important than support for any passing political formation. In this way Bishop Konstantin urged moderation on Antal Hegyi, at the same time strictly forbidding any politics from the pulpit, open organisation or door to door agitation.⁵⁰ In his reply letter, parish priest Hegyi stated that he regarded his political opponent as the opponent of the church and so he felt it was his duty – even in defiance of the bishop’s reprimand – to enter the struggle to defeat member of parliament Imre Szivák.⁵¹

46 “Did not the opponents of Christ our Lord do the same when they held up their own lies as proof against Him? [...] Why should they not mistreat me in the most unspeakable way when they mistreated Him, the master, to death?” VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 30 September 1894. Letter from Antal Hegyi to the Bishop of Vác. In 1895 the *Csongrádi Lap* launched a separate satirical paper under the title of *Karvaly* (Sparrowhawk) to nettle “Antal Gyihe, editor of the Csigerhát Gutter Paper” who compares himself to Jesus, to Saint Augustine or to John the Baptist. The phenomenon must have been a common one in the period examined. In a history of the Tata parish, by Adolf Mohl, the parish priest defends himself against the accusations of the Calvinists by “crying out with Saint Paul”. MOHL 1909. 154.

47 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 14 March 1892. Letter from inhabitants of Csongrád to the archbishop.

48 “The priest, who should stand above all parties, stoops to behaving like a common political agitator in a pub.” VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 31 December 1891. Letter from the Csongrád magistracy to the Bishop of Vác. A month later Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky also voiced his disapproval: “In Csongrád the political situation has become critical as a result of the unbridled incitement by the RC clergy and especially the parish priest Antal Hegyi [...] the consequences of which have once again become unforeseeable – including from the angle of the church.” VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 8 January 1892. Letter from Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky to the Bishop of Vác.

49 According to Konstantin Schuszter, if during the elections the priests support with their vote the goals of the throne, the homeland and the church, and on occasion give advice to those who turn to them on political matters, this deserves support and recognition. At the same time “because of the special position of the priest among the believers and his vocation – as the angel of peace, proclaiming and spreading agreement – the man of the church [...] is obliged to remain within certain limits [...] he cannot take a leading role for any political party.” VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 2 January 1892. Letter from the Bishop of Vác to Antal Hegyi.

50 To give sufficient emphasis to his warning, he called Antal Hegyi’s main political support, chaplain Gábor Bajcsy, to his side and did not allow him to return to Csongrád. VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 20 January 1892. Letter from the Bishop of Vác to chaplain Gábor Bajcsy.

51 “I will not allow any factor to restrict my freedom as a citizen to bring about the electoral defeat [...] of the open enemy of my church” VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, 5 January 1892. Letter from Antal Hegyi Antal to the Ecclesiastical Authority of Vác.

It can be seen that both the county bishop of Vác and the local authority regarded Antal Hegyi's activity in politics and public life as incompatible with his priestly vocation. According to a letter of complaint signed by “residents of Csongrád”, “the seeds of hostility, hate, embitterment, anger, revenge and immorality” had been scattered in the parish community as a consequence of the parish priest's political activity.⁵² *Csongrádi Lap* went so far as to blame parish priest Antal Hegyi because he considered that “the people of Csongrád morally are on a slippery slope”.⁵³

Later too, the *Csongrádi Lap* regularly confronted parish priest Antal Hegyi with the real or imagined expectations of the parishioners. In May 1896 it published a lengthy article stating that a good priest does not engage in politics but devotes himself to the spiritual care of his flock: “[if only] we could choose a pious, God-fearing, gentle and tolerant parish priest. One who does not treat the parishioners rudely, who does not conduct a political campaign: who is a spiritual pastor; who would use his pulpit not to make campaign speeches but to preach the word of God [...] a meek-hearted spiritual father”.⁵⁴ The good parish priest is thus the embodiment of peace, the guarantee of social consensus, who smoothes away the divisive force of politics.⁵⁵ Rising slightly above the moral plane, it is worth recalling that *Csongrádi Lap*, supporter of Imre Szivák, had very practical interests in pushing Antal Hegyi “back within the walls of the parish”.

In 1896 the *Csongrádi Lap* tried to weaken Hegyi's position by citing alarming examples and writing about the failures of the clergy engaged in politics. In January the news came from Kiskundorozsma that “the chaplain is distributing People's Party proposals among the church members in the village, to spread propaganda for this party of trouble-making chaplains and magnates and in addition to stir up hatred among the denominations”.⁵⁶ A few months later we learn about the unfortunate political activity in Kecskemét of chaplain József Járvas.⁵⁷

In 1901 the parish priest entered the elections, contesting the parliamentary seat of the government party representative Gábor Baross. He lost by only 20 votes to Gábor Baross, but the election was reviewed because of the suspicion of unfair agitation. The investigation found that the opponents frequently used alternative means of persuasion, particularly “wining and dining”. The court therefore ruled that Csongrád was to be deprived of its right to elect a member of parliament until the next elections.⁵⁸

52 VPL APriv. Hegyi Antal, 14 March 1892. Letter from the people of Csongrád to the Archbishop.

53 “The people of Csongrád have in essence greatly changed: they know no respect, they are not law-abiding; they make fun of their superiors and leaders; they hate gentlemen. Whether they have a reason for it or not. They are so envious that they look askance even at decently dressed clerks: because they think that the clothes have been acquired through their own sweat and fat.” *Csongrádi Lap*, 29 October 1899. Vol. IX, no. 44, p. 3.

54 *Csongrádi Lap*, 24 May 1896. Vol. VI, no. 21, p. 2.

55 “He will be an arbiter for the quarrelsome, he will smooth out inequality, he will reconcile enemies, and will bring an end to the bitter struggle between the people and the intelligentsia.” *Csongrádi Lap*, 26 February 1893. Vol. III, no. 9, pp. 1-2.

56 *Csongrádi Lap*, 6 January 1896. Vol. VI, no. 1, p. 2.

57 *Csongrádi Lap*, 15 November 1896. Vol. VI, no. 47, p. 3.

58 For more detail on the elections, see: ERDÉLYI – SEBŐKNÉ GOMBOS 1989.

Csongrád chaplains during the parliamentary elections

Like the parish priest, the chaplains were among the figures who shaped public life in Csongrád. The various civil associations and circles vied with each other to win the chaplains, as members, as speakers, often asking them to hold leading posts. These efforts greatly strengthened during the parliamentary election campaigns. Chaplain Gábor Bajcsy made the following confession in a letter: "They wanted to elect me to all kinds of committees and to invest me with various offices during the elections, but I rejected all such distinctions, I refused to accept them."⁵⁹

The local authorities were also aware of the potential power of the local priests to shape opinions and so they followed with close attention the political activity of the chaplains and complained to the parish priest at the slightest sign of any "deviation" judged to be unfavourable. In 1862 the sub-prefect wrote the following letter to parish priest Lajos Virter: "I have found in a number of places that certain ministers, chaplains and teachers have hostile feelings towards the government and have been agitating. I confidentially invite you to kindly report to me without delay any such cases in the district."⁶⁰

In 1886 the mayor of Csongrád, Antal Csemegi wrote a letter to the bishop of Vác complaining about the chaplains of parish priest János Edelényi. The mayor claimed that all the priests of the parish were responsible for the fact that public order was disrupted in Csongrád following the election to parliament the previous year of the opposition politician Zsigmond Csatar. The chaplains – in league with the cantor and the sexton – had organised meetings for political aims and made speeches of dubious content in the church. According to Csemegi the incitement threw a bad light on the government, the local authorities and the mayor; he therefore requested an immediate investigation into the priests of Csongrád. While the mayor later recognised the political neutrality of the parish priest, he sent a complaint against the two chaplains to the ministry of the interior through the sub-prefect.⁶¹ Our sources are silent on the fate of the chaplains, but the case nevertheless indicates the antipathy of the local authorities regarding political activity by the local priests.

Suspicious of this kind arose with growing frequency in Csongrád in the second half of the 19th century. There can be no doubt that Antal Hegyi's political views had a strong influence on the young priests working under his supervision. We know of four chaplains who actively agitated for the election of János Hock. *Csongrádi Lap* wrote in an ironic tone about the alleged incident where János Csapó and Géza Krezsák were "thrown out" of the Csongrád polling station.⁶²

59 VPL APriv. Antal Hegyi, n.d. 1892. Letter from chaplain Gábor Bajcsy to the Bishop of Vác.

60 DUDÁS 1998. 116.

61 VPL APar. Cs. 18 February 1876. Letter from archdeacon Gáspár Lichtner to the Bishop of Vác.

62 *Csongrádi Lap*, 28 June 1896. Vol. VI, no. 26, p. 2.

The case of the 1896 parliamentary elections differed from earlier examples because – although the chaplains had been easily swept into local political movements earlier too – up to this point the role of the parish priest had remained irreproachable and any investigations had involved only the chaplains. *Csongrádi Lap* used unflattering terms in writing about the parish priest’s chaplains involved in agitation, calling them *trouble-making chaplains*, and the *priest’s outriders*⁶³.

The expanding social role of the priesthood

Those who successfully embody a social role reproduce themselves, that is, their own role, by following the traditional expectations, thereby passing on the system of norms they have inherited.⁶⁴ The end result is that the system becomes rigid, responding with sanctions to attempts at innovation – whether they are aimed at limiting or expanding the role. It can be seen from the case studies presented that, rather than conserving the institutionalised norms, the behaviour of parish priest Antal Hegyi was directed towards a reformulation and expansion of his own social role.⁶⁵

The official leaders of Csongrád expected a parish priest to set an example of civil humility, rule-following, respect for superiors; he himself should be content with leading their immortal souls to salvation, and should not venture into the field of politics. By undertaking a role in public life and engaging openly in politics, the parish priest of Csongrád came under the cross-fire of serious conflicting interests. By shaping public opinion and with the help of the press his political opponents attempted to force him back into the confines of the parish. In a series of long articles they criticised his human nature and complained about the consequences of damaging the respect due to a priest. Besides the public servants, the Jewish intelligentsia and the majority of the tradesmen, as well as all those who disliked Antal Hegyi’s short-tempered and restless nature joined in the campaign against the parish priest.

In this way by the end of the 19th century the social role of the Csongrád parish priest was supplemented with a very definite role in public life and politics. The changes were seen in very extreme forms. The articles in the press give the impression that those who criticised Antal Hegyi feared that the ideal of spiritual pastor would be damaged; but this fear often hid the defence of their own best interests. The involvement of the public sphere and the press can be regarded as a new form of sanctions against the “norm-violating” parish priest, on occasion supplemented with pamphlets and open letters. When they took a stand in defence of their much-attacked parish priest, Antal Hegyi’s committed supporters were also motivated by a variety of factors.

63 *Csongrádi Lap*, 1 January 1892. Vol. II, no. 1, p. 2. *Fullajtár (outrider)*: was the surname of the assistant organist in Csongrád.

64 TOMKA 1997. 66.

65 Institution: a system of norms that has its own existence; reality that stands opposed to the individual as an external fact of constraining force. TOMKA 1997. 26.

When he lost the confidence of the leading stratum, the small and middle peasants, the big farmers supporting the political opposition and the wives of farm hands and fishermen who held positions in the religious societies became Antal Hegyi's main base. With the exception of a few prosperous big farmers, they constituted a broad but for the most part illiterate stratum with very little political or decision-making influence, receptive to the influence of Hegyi's rhetoric.

Antal Hegyi was aware of the power of directness. He kept the affairs of the parish firmly in his own hands: he himself led the religious societies⁶⁶, he taught the new prayers, at the act of adoration he prayed together with his parishioners. At the same time he had a great fondness for impressive processions and consecration ceremonies held with unprecedented pomp amidst altars smothered with flowers. In the eyes of the middle peasants of Csongrád these virtues represented real value. Set beside the impressive beautification of the church, the giant Sacred Heart bell, the new Bokros chapel and the eloquent Sunday sermons, the political campaigning, the constant litigation and the scandalous newspaper editing were easily forgivable sins. It was true that his social role was expanded with unusual elements, but compared to his predecessors he showed greater sensitivity in recognising and effectively satisfying the religious demands of the common people. In this context they interpreted Antal Hegyi's political ambitions as an offensive in the defence of religion. The majority of parishioners supported the election to parliament of János Hock, but at the same time unconditionally denied the justification of civil marriage and the registration of births, marriages and deaths.

On the whole the role expectations of the Catholic believers in Csongrád remained unchanged, but there was a shift in the values held by the different social (and interest) groups, the way they saw things, and the points of emphasis in their judgement of actions. In this way Antal Hegyi became an extremely divisive figure; while the small and middle peasants celebrated him as a determined and zealous priest, to his "educated" opponents in Csongrád he remained a manipulative, unchristian money-grubbing man of interests.

66 In the last decades of the 19th century the role of the chaplains became more limited in some respects, while in others it expanded. Although the Csongrád chaplains showed interest in public affairs and politics already in the 1860s-70s, it was only when Antal Hegyi became active politically that they began to take a definite role in public life. This "opening" was in the parish priest's own interest. The withdrawal of the chaplains from the organisation of the religious societies also served the parish priest's aims, as the presence of another "leader figure" stood in the way of Antal Hegyi's efforts towards centralisation.

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Antal Hegyi, parish priest of Csongrád 1886-1902. Csemegi Károly Library and Tari László Museum, portrait collection. Without inventory number.