

On the Boundary Between Religion and Magic. Priests, Attitudes and Religious Amulets in Bácska in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

Based on previously unknown archival sources, the study explores the relationship between popular demands related to religious amulets and the Church's responses to them in nineteenth-century Bácska [Bačka]. The multi-ethnic region of Southern Hungary (now largely part of Serbia) offers a diverse range of data in the context of the Roman Catholic Church. The faithful sought material and written amulets primarily in the hope of healing, warding off evil and exorcising demons, the effectiveness of which was created by the ecclesiastical blessing (*benedictio*). The clergy, socialized in the milieu of Josephinism, show different attitudes in serving such needs (the trinity of denial, toleration, support). The uncertainty of the lower clergy in this theologically unclear area is almost palpable. This uncertainty is a consequence of the Enlightenment and of rationalism, along which the correctness of many earlier Baroque religious practices was called into question. The examples cited in the study include a religious-magical sheet print, a letter from Heaven, an icon to be worn around the neck and a special demon-exorcising paper slip. The best way to learn about all these is from the letters and reports of the priests, which also reflect their own attitudes.

KEYWORDS

superstition, amulet, lower clergy, Bácska [Bačka], nineteenth century

INTRODUCTION

The theological-historical argumentation of the two key concepts in the title of our paper, their definition, historicity, declarative separation or inseparability of religion and magic, is one of the

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most discussed issues in the study of religion (THOMAS 1971; PETZOLDT Hg. 1978; WÜNSCH Hg. 2006; BRÜCKNER 2013; BAILEY 2018). It is certainly a fact that some religious practices fall within the scope of magic from the point of view of another religion. The most spectacular breaking point for Christianity came with the Reformation, which eliminated many elements of earlier religious practice on this basis and relegated them to the realm of superstitions (*superstitiones*). One such element was the favored sacramentals of the medieval Church: objects, places, elements, people, physiological and work processes, etc., consecrated through blessings and curses (benedictions and exorcisms), which provided a kind of ecclesiastical service ‘arsenal’ to ensure the existential security of the daily agrarian life of the faithful (cf. FRANZ 1909; THOMAS 1971; SIEBER 2005; BÄRTH 2010). Although the renewed Catholic liturgy after the Council of Trent (1545–1563) sought to ‘purify’ such practices, the monastic orders (such as the Franciscans, Jesuits, Carmelites, etc.), which were more attentive to the needs of the faithful and often missionary in their intentions, continued to revive the wide range of benedictions offered by their own printed or manuscript collections. This widespread use, often involving automatisms, was finally suppressed by the rationalist approach of the Enlightenment, which became the dominant ideological trend in the second half of the eighteenth century (BÄRTH 2010). The change of views hallmarked as Josephism in the Habsburg Empire, which can hardly be separated from the processes of Catholic reforms and the ‘Catholic Enlightenment’ of the eighteenth century, gained considerable influence not only in the church leadership, but also in the lower clergy via the seminaries (cf. BÄRTH 2016:255–264, 2017, 2020b:236–251; LEHNER 2016).

One of the questions that has been little clarified in recent years in the research on the lower clergy¹ is the changes in attitudes that emerged after the transition of the 18th and 19th centuries

¹For the study of the history of science (cf. BÄRTH 2013) of the lower clergy (priests and pastors living locally and interacting directly with the faithful), it is worth taking into account the results of French and German Church history, which from the 1970s onwards applied social science (sociological) principles, as well as a whole series of works written with the sometimes intertwined approach of historical anthropology and micro-history. It may be a regional characteristic that in the shadow of the political-ideological dictatorships in Hungary, too, research on the lower clergy within Catholic and Protestant Church history was relatively late to gain ground. But it is a positive development that, from the 1990s onwards, quantitative and qualitative approaches to this subject area appeared simultaneously. In addition to Church history, historical ethnography has also played an important initiating role in recent decades in the study of this topic, staying with the Hungarian example. The latter circumstance can be explained by the fact that we have very few written sources from the ‘people’ themselves from the period preceding the nineteenth century, but the local clergy in the 17th and 18th centuries left behind a vast amount of written evidence reflecting the culture of the local milieu around them. The visitations, parish records, clerical contracts, wills and letters of all kinds have thus become the focus of ethnographic/folkloristic research (the ego-documents of priests in particular are a major source of interest in this respect). The local priests and pastors have become a subject of study not only as mediators of culture, but also ‘in themselves’, in their own person, mentality, culture and attitudes. It is only natural that in the history of ethnography itself, and especially in relation to the clergy, who played a prominent role from the nineteenth century onwards, the history of their relationship with popular culture should also be of interest. This process also raises a number of sub-questions: for example, how the anti-superstitious priestly attitude of the Enlightenment was transformed in the age of Romanticism into a sweeping clerical interest in pagan beliefs and folklore, and how this slowly, in the first half of the twentieth century in Germany (and then in Hungary, among other places), was transformed into an independent scientific discipline called ‘religiöse Volkskunde’, which focused on the religiousness of the people themselves, again under the leadership of practicing priests (BÄRTH 2021).

among the local communities in Hungary, partly among the parish-secular, and partly among the monastic clergy, in relation to popular needs and popular culture (cf. BARTH 2019).² What we can clearly see is that the priests supported by the communities had different attitudes towards the specific elements of the popular practice of official religion, the '*praxis pietatis popularis*.' The locally expressed demands and the clerical responses to them can also be a telling manifestation of the *local religion*.³

In this paper, we provide examples of variations in clerical attitudes based on the ecclesiastical historical documentation of the Archdiocese of Kalocsa. The timeframe of our study is limited to the first half of the nineteenth century, and the spatial scope to the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional region of Bácska [Bačka]. Bácska, with its extremely diverse network of settlements of different nationalities and denominations,⁴ with its exciting socio-cultural

²In our research we favored case studies and a micro-historical approach. The main protagonists of these stories will most often be priests and pastors in local communities who have reflected in some way on the culture of the micro-society surrounding them: often serving the needs of the believers, sometimes seeking to reform, sometimes conveying 'lower' cultural patterns to the 'elite', or, as we see in the reality of a long-term local operation, carrying out a combination of all these in their lives. A major challenge for historical studies is to model these variations in clerical attitudes, which of course can only be done locally, most graphically by unravelling and re-telling ancient histories. It is the nature of the sources that these ancient 'histories' are most often best captured in conflictual documentary material. Such documentation does not, of course, encourage the researcher to do justice to the past, since for him or her the value of the testimonies lies more in the possibility of unearthing priestly 'roles', lower and upper 'expectations', models of 'good priest' and 'bad priest'. Not to mention the fact that, meanwhile, the peasants, burghers and commoners of all kinds who speak as witnesses evoke in the first person the imprint of their everyday lives (BARTH 2021).

³On the concept of local religion, see CHRISTIAN 1981; STEWART 1991. Local religion is a focal point that includes not only what historians and ethnographers call 'popular' religious elements, but also the 'official' religious practices of the local clergy and, importantly, the extra-religious (labeled magical, superstitious) terrain of beliefs and customs. This represents an almost paradigmatic turn in ethnographic studies in Central and Eastern Europe, where previously the economics of local cultures were often violated along the lines of specific academic disciplines: separate researchers (researches) dealt with the popular customs of a given locality, separately with its popular beliefs, separately with its popular religiosity (i.e., the popular practice of official religion), and ethnography did not consider as its subject the manifestations of official religion and liturgy represented by the local clergy.

⁴Covering over ten thousand square kilometres, in the early modern period this region showed a line of development similar to parts of Hungary's Great Plain. During the time of the Turkish occupation population numbers, particularly those of Hungarians, dropped dramatically, and a previously dense network of villages became sporadic. In the seventeenth century the area came to be populated by groups of militarized Serbs and Catholic Southern Slavs. As regards the latter, the Franciscan missionaries are known to have played a great part in sustaining and leading this population. The origins of these population groups are much debated in ethnically oriented historical literature, but they were mostly Croatians from Bosnia (Bunjevats; Shokats, Ratz-Croatian) and are referred to in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century clerical and lay Latin sources under the umbrella term of *Illyricus*. In the same documents the Greek Orthodox Serbs were given the appellation of *schismaticus*. The plurality of Bácska in ethnic and religious terms was mostly determined by demographic processes that took place after the Turkish occupation. Devastated medieval villages were replaced by whole waves of new ones over the eighteenth century. There were two main ways in which new populations arrived in the area: either through organized settlement or by what is called spontaneous migration, an essentially North-to-South process according to the relevant research. The majority of the organized relocation took place with the support of the Habsburg state and resulted mostly in the immigration of Roman Catholic Germans. Earlier historical literature spoke of villages following the ground plan of a chessboard populated by Roman Catholic Germans loyal to the Kaiser and enjoying considerable privileges. This stereotype, however, is challenged by data which indicate that there were measures taken by the same state administration in the last decades of the century to support the settling of Lutheran Germans in the same locations. Organized population 'import' also brought Greek Catholic Rusyns to a few villages in Bácska, adding an intense new stroke of color to an already multi-colored ethnic and religious

characteristics and its excellent ecclesiastical sources,⁵ almost invites us to include it in the comparative series of studies on the local religions of the early modern and modern period in Europe.⁶ Of the diverse phenomena, we focus our analysis on the use and ecclesiastical perception of (written) religious amulets (cf. KRISS 1968; KRISS-RETTEBECK – HANSMANN 1966; GRUBE-VERHOEVEN 1966; BRÜCKNER 2013).

TRACES OF THE USE OF RELIGIOUS AMULETS IN BÁCSKA IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

The popular use of religious amulets and the multi-faceted form of the Church's attitude towards them can be traced in the source material on Bácska in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁷ As early as the eighteenth century, small (sheet) prints appeared among the Church sacramentals, containing officially non-approved prayers, prophecies, heavenly messages, and remedial and salvation practices. Some of these have been categorized in ethnographic research as 'letters warding off trouble,' 'letters from heaven' and amulets (*őrszer*, literally meaning guardian substance) (BÁLINT 1937; JUNG 1994). Their ecclesiastical (typically Franciscan) blessing took place mainly in the places of pilgrimage. Their popular use was already frowned upon in the second half of the eighteenth century by the early Church Enlightenment, which pointed to their superstitious aspects.⁸ In the first third of the following century, in 1828, a central secular

map, which was finally made complete by continuous spontaneous migration. This process primarily increased the number of Hungarians who were arriving from all points of the compass and were mostly of the Roman Catholic faith, with some Calvinist presence. Spontaneous migration also brought some Slovaks and additional Germans to the region. The picture was completed with the arrival of a group of Armenian merchants from Újvidék [Novi Sad] and Jews settling in a sporadic manner in a scattered diaspora, all of this resulting in the emergence of a highly diverse region. In rough figures, leaning on the results of the first Hungarian census, it may be said that by the end of the eighteenth century there were about 400,000 people living in 100 communities in Bácska. Some two-thirds of the population were of the Roman Catholic faith, and a quarter were Orthodox Christians. Add to this a 10% presence of Protestants and a Jewish population amounting to some 1%. Hungarians were in a relative majority by this time, with a marked presence of Germans, Catholic Southern Slavs and Serbs. The ratio of Slovakian, Rusyn and Jewish inhabitants amounted to a mere few percent. In terms of religious and ethnic differences we rarely encounter sharp and clear boundaries. The definitive points in the composition were the Orthodox faith of the Serbian and the Roman Catholic affiliation of the South Slavic (Croatian) groups. Similarly distinctive is the fact that Rusyns followed the Greek Catholic religion, the Armenians their unique brand of united Catholicism, and the religious identity of the Jewish population. The remaining ethnic groups are not as easy to classify. While most Hungarians in Bácska were Roman Catholics, we also need to reckon with a fairly significant Protestant (mostly Calvinist) minority which carried highly distinctive cultural characteristics. Similarly, alongside the Roman Catholic German majority there was a considerable portion of Lutheran and even some Calvinist Germans settling in the region. Most of the Slovaks living here were Lutherans, colored at some points with some Roman Catholics. For more detail, see: BARTH 2020b.

⁵These sources can be found in the well-organized Kalocsa Archdiocesan Archives (*Kalocsai Főegyházmegyei Levéltár*, hereafter: KFL), for its system, see LAKATOS – LAKATOS – SZABÓ 2002; and the informative and continuously improved website <https://archivum.asztrik.hu> (accessed March 16, 2024)

⁶For the background to our argument on this point, see BARTH 2016, 2020a, 2020b.

⁷The topic was last discussed in a different context in BARTH 2023.

⁸See, for instance, the sentence in the work of Ferenc Nagy, parish priest of Törökszentmiklós (*The Origins of the One, True and Blessed Faith*. Eger, 1767:124): "Similar to this is the prayer printed on the two notebook-leaves, which is called the Seven Holy Seals of Heaven, and promises similar receptivity and benefit."

(state) decree was issued, according to which “the superstitious prayers sold by the small traders who come around here should be banned” (EXTRACTUS 1846:247). It is worth looking at the original decision and its consequences. The two-and-a-half-page printed decree was issued on December 9, 1828 under number 32169 by the Council of Governors.⁹ In it, referring to the request of the Archbishop of Eger, the use of superstitious (*variis superstitionis refertas*) little prayers (*precatiunculas*) spread by wandering sellers of holy images and prayer books published irregularly without author and imprint, which were contrary to true piety (*verae pietati adversas*) and which were seen as an agitation to the Catholic faith (*fidem Catholicam diversis cavillationibus exponentes*), was prohibited. The Hungarian titles of some of them were listed as examples.¹⁰ The Archbishop of Eger ordered the clergy of his diocese to protect their faithful from the contagion of superstition, to collect and burn such prints. In this provision, the Council of Governors confirmed and extended this prohibition to all Hungarian dioceses, with reference to the irregularity of uncensored printed material, following earlier royal decrees. The Archbishop of Kalocsa, Péter Klobusiczky, who received the order of the Council of Governors at the end of February 1829, immediately instructed the priests of his diocese to act in accordance with the order against both the vendors and their parishioners who used such prayers.¹¹ To the latter, they were to explain that such prayers have no meaning before God but only serve the interests of the enemies of religion. The archbishop’s circular letter seems to have had some effect: the parish priest of Óbecse [Opština Bečej], Antal Szathmáry, informed his archpastor in a letter dated May 19, 1829 that he had confiscated three copies of such a superstitious and against the true faith printed book from a (presumably local) woman. The woman was selling them at the market and claimed to have gotten them from a printshop in Szeged. The priest banned the woman from buying and selling them. In his letter, the priest noted that, prior to the archbishop’s order, he had collected similar prayers from his parishioners and burned them on several occasions. He attached the originals of the confiscated sheet prints to his letter. This was none other than the aforementioned “Prayer of the Seven Holy Seals of Heaven, which may be said in remembrance of the bitter sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of his five deep wounds, for the removal of all the unholiness, both now and hereafter, and for the deliverance of the souls suffering in Purgatory”, folded in eighth.¹² György Ferenczy, the dean parish priest of Sükösd, in 1845 sent seven locally confiscated ‘eternal damnation’ sheet prints to the Church leaders in Kalocsa, with a similar dismissive attitude as the priest of Óbecse. The lessons and local parallels of his letters and prints were recently explored by Kelemen Kothencz in his thorough study of the *Seven Holy Seals of Heaven*, in which he also drew attention to the clear Hajosch (Hajós) German parallels (KOTHENCZ 2017). The origins of the written religious amulet, which is popular among the German population in Hungary – similar to the Hungarians – are still unclear, but scattered data suggest the parallel existence of bilingual analogies in the

⁹KFL I. 1. a. Disciplina fidelium.

¹⁰Translation of titles: “Three very beautiful and pious prayers in the last hours of a dying person, and useful for eternal salvation, anno 1827 impressae”; “The Prayer of the Seven Holy Seals of Heaven etc.”; “The Seven Holy Seals of Heaven, which a God-fearing pilgrim obtained from his guardian angel praetensive Coloniae ad Rhenum procusae”; “A wonderful picture. It hangs on Mount Michaelis, and will not leave anyone who pleads to it, it is inscribed with gold letters, and sent there by the Archangel St. Michael, etc.”

¹¹The order was read out at a meeting of the archbishop’s consistory on February 26, 1829.

¹²KFL I. 1. a. Disciplina fidelium.

eighteenth century, and their widespread use in the nineteenth century can be traced in both ethnic fields. Among the written religious amulets, we can include the objects that were called *motya* in the first half of the nineteenth century in the Western Bácska region, in the Croatian and Hungarian language context. The Croatian origin of the word is clear.¹³ The written (and material) religious amulet ensemble having additional power is probably related to the Bavarian *breverl* (and its European equivalents with other names).¹⁴ The apotropaic function was mainly provided by the printed or handwritten sacred text, the amulet-like lettering and the smaller iconographic representations. According to our data, the written text alone was not enough, the protection and additional power could be enhanced (according to some data: generated) by the ecclesiastical (mainly Franciscan) blessing. People carried the consecrated writings with them, or more precisely on them, and the small case made for this purpose could also contain other sacred objects (e.g., consecrated rue, wax, coins, relics, small crucifixes, etc.) (cf. BARTH 2010:316–336).

We find the mention of the *motya* in very memorable circumstances in the history of ‘the cord movement of St. Miska’ in Bácska in the late 1810s.¹⁵ According to numerous letters, testimonies and indictments, a furrier lad from Kupuszina [Kupusina], Mihály Frankovich, as the leader of the widespread religious movement, distributed *motyas* to his followers as a means of protection.¹⁶ In the Frankovich case, to whom the Church leadership referred as a ‘pseudo-hermit,’ the then priest of Kolluth [Koluth], Ferenc Szuhányi,¹⁷ was just about to be brought before the Church court for supporting the locally significant religious movement of a fanatical, lay ‘hermit’. The ‘cardinal sin’ of the priest, by the way, was not that he allowed the religious leader to distribute the same ‘*motya*,’ a written amulet, among the people; nor was it that he allowed the layman to bless the water of the parish well and sell it for money as holy water to the people; but that he himself kneeled among the people to receive the blessing of the hermit’s

¹³I would like to thank Sándor Horváth for identifying the possible Croatian terms behind the etymology of the word in the feminine gender (moć: strength, power; moćnik: relic-holder; strong, powerful person).

¹⁴On the *breverl* and its function, see BRÜCKNER 2021:89–101.

¹⁵From the old and new literature of the story: BENDE 1890; SILLING 1994; VIRÁG 2001a, 2001b; BARTH 2020a:265–286. In the latter study, we also dealt separately with the attitude of the parish priest of Kolluth [Koluth], Ferenc Szuhányi, who, according to the accusations brought against him by the Church leadership, allowed the ‘consecrations’ (water, cord) and ‘deceptions’ (distributing *motya*) performed by this ‘pseudo-hermit’ in his parish for financial gain.

¹⁶The first (*motya/motsa*?) mentioned in June 1818, in a letter of Imre Nagy, parish priest of Kishegyes [Mali Idos] (KFL I. 1. a. Acatolica. Wearers of the Cord. Letter of Imre Nagy, parish priest of Kishegyes, June 24, 1818) was probably varied in its specific text even in Frankovich’s practice. The parish priest enclosed a small, badly cut piece of paper with his letter, containing a shorter prayer and supplication to St. Anne in Hungarian (with rudimentary language skills and restrained literacy), while the county records contain a longer Hungarian letter, also in the genre of a genuine ‘letter from Heaven’. The latter was published in VIRÁG 2001b:250–252.

¹⁷Ferenc Szuhányi was born in Baja in 1777. The priestly registers record that he was first a novice of the Dominican Order and from there he was admitted to the seminary in Kalocsa. He was ordained a priest at the turn of the 19th century. He was first a chaplain in Mélykút and then in Sükösd in 1800–1801. He became the temporary deputy head (administrator) of the parish there in 1802, but soon afterwards he found himself as administrator in Cséb [Čelarevo] (1803), further south in Bácska, and after a year in Bukin [*Mladenovo*] (1804). His first long-term post was at Parabutty [Ratkovo], where he served first as administrator (1805–1811) and then as parish priest, appointed between 1811 and 1816. It is a tribute to his merits here that in 1814 he was appointed notary of the district of Lower Bács for a few years. The most important period of his life was undoubtedly the almost two decades he spent in Kolluth between 1817 and 1836. He died as the village parish priest in 1836 (BARTH 2020a:281.)

laying on of hands, and thereby greatly diminished the authority of the Holy Church, and magnified the symbolic capital of the lay leader.

The mention of *motya* (*moća*) appears in the lawsuit of the wearers of the Cord in a predominantly Hungarian linguistic context, as a clear South Slavic appropriation. It can be hypothesized that the Hungarians of Bácska learned about this religious amulet from the Catholic Croatian groups living there and incorporated it into their local religious practice. We found a very instructive letter on the local Croatian (Bunyevats) use of religious amulets in the archbishop's archives in the "*Cultus sanctorum*" fonds. The reform-minded parish priest of Zombor [Sombor], Ernest Kelle,¹⁸ who often reflected on the local culture in other letters, wrote an indignant, almost stumbling letter to the Consistory of Kalocsa on September 17, 1845.¹⁹ In it, he detailed his altercation with a local woman (Anastasia Odákovits) and enclosed the scapular he had confiscated from her.²⁰ At several points in the letter, he linked the wearing of a small holy image around the neck with the use of the very similarly intended *motya*, and in all of this he emphasized the special needs of the Catholic South Slavs. The parish priest of Zombor complained to his superiors that the local Slavs clung to this sacrament with tooth and nail, hoping for superstitious remedies and healing. Since he refused to consecrate them, they went to the shrine of Máriagyűd in southern Transdanubia to have the Franciscans there bless the amulets. The superstitious attitude of the people is shown by the fact that, according to the faithful, "only Virgin Priests and those who do not know women can give" such amulets.

The letter reflects the parish priest's firm reformist attitude based on rationalism and his rejection of the idea²¹ with which he sought to educate his parishioners and guide them towards good Christian behavior. He did so with the confidence that the solid, rational foundation of high theology, acquired in the seminary, provided him: he knew perfectly well the right way, the theologically impeccable attitude to the sacramentals as an earthly sign of divine grace, but to the level of individual and rational faith, his own followers, especially the 'cowardly' (anxious? gullible? superstitious?) Catholic South Slavs were utterly unable to achieve it. How could they have done so if, in his view, the Church itself was harboring the seeds of *superstitio*, especially in the practices of certain monastic orders (here named:

¹⁸Ernest(in) Kelle (Ernő) was born on March 11, 1804, in Kupuszina. After his ordination (1828), he first served as chaplain in Szántova (today Hercegszántó) (from 1828), and then in 1841 he was appointed administrator in Zombor. From 1842 until his death in 1866 he was parish priest of the free royal town of Bácska. In 1852 he was also awarded the title of provost of Oront. LAKATOS ed. 2002; <https://archivum.asztrik.hu> (accessed March 16, 2024)

¹⁹KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Letter of Ernest Kelle, parish priest of Zombor, to the Consistorium of Kalocsa, September 17, 1845) The Hungarian version of the letter is published in full in BARTH 2023:25–26.

²⁰The priest described how the widow entered his room with a strange reverence and took from her bosom a picture of Mary painted on a canvas, asking the priest to bless it and solemnly hang it around her neck. The priest questioned her about how she had obtained the object. The answer was that she bought it from a vendor in the pilgrimage fair in Máriagyűd, and had it blessed by the local Franciscans, who advised her to pray two Our Fathers, Hail Mary and the Apostles' Creed, every day, and to fast on Wednesdays. The priest tried to dissuade her from this practice and encouraged her, with clear theological arguments, to worship God directly. He would neither bless nor give her back her scapular. The woman finally burst into tears and pleas, complaining about the clergy of the time who, unlike their predecessors, refused to serve the needs of the faithful with such blessings and objects (*motya* and scapulars).

²¹For a later and more distant (Transdanubian) parallel of Kelle's rejectionist attitude, see BEDNÁRIK 2020.

the Franciscans) and their practices at the shrines? The latter references are also important for us because they point vividly to the ecclesiastical ‘services sector,’ which in the mid-nineteenth century provided the unwavering and complex means for the collective religious experience (pilgrimage) of the faithful (the people of the time) and at the same time the smaller and larger material manifestations of their individual earthly well-being. The symbiotic relationship between the vendors at the shrines and the Franciscan friars who blessed their scapulars jointly operated a market for solutions to the physical and spiritual ills of the faithful (here embodied in religious amulets). With the superiority of the learned secular priest and the strong extension of his authority, the grousing parish priest actually wanted the Archbishop of Kalocsa to ask the leaders of the Diocese of Pécs to issue a decree forbidding the Franciscans of Máriagyűd from distributing these *motya* amulets and scapulars, so as not to ‘deceive the faithful who flock there.’²²

The sober, discerning and dispassionate response of the Consistorium on September 22 must have been unexpected and disappointing for the priest, because it stated that the wearing of images of the Virgin Mary and the saints around the neck or on the chest should not be condemned in general, and that such images could even be recommended to the faithful as ‘protectors’ against sin. The clergy should try to eliminate misconceptions from people’s minds: believers should not trust in the objects themselves, but in God and the mediation of the saints, and should not think that simply wearing them will secure them eternal salvation. So the picture was returned to Anastasia Odákovits, which she was free to use with her voluntary, free-will (and therefore not binding) prayers. They also added that the Franciscans of Máriagyűd could not be condemned simply because the woman had not bought the portrait from them, but from merchants.²³

It is not known whether the scapular returned by the Consistorium was returned to its original owner. The woman from Zombor ‘pleading’ with the priest must have been delighted when this happened. Her joy was probably not even dampened when the parish priest explained to her the correct way of the use of such images and the theological concepts behind them. She continued to believe what she wanted to and certainly tried to get her scapular blessed and solemnly hung around her neck by other priests.²⁴ Ernest Kelle certainly did not comply with this original request, because he had not received any instructions from his superiors. The position of the Consistory of Kalocsa moved the use of religious amulets, which had been forbidden for decades but apparently could not be eliminated (especially among the local Southern Slavs), into the prohibited category, with restrictions. A few years later, the time came for the archdiocesan leadership to issue a circular letter to clarify the misinterpreted and misguided nuances of the practice of amulet use. It is at this point that the following story begins.

²²KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Letter of Ernest Kelle, parish priest of Zombor, to the Consistorium of Kalocsa, September 17, 1845)

²³KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Draft of the response of the Holy See of the Archbishop of Kalocsa to the parish priest Ernest Kelle of Zombor, September 22, 1845)

²⁴It is instructive and requires further analysis as to why the woman did not consider the blessing of the Franciscan friar of Máriagyűd sufficient, why she sought to confirm the efficacy of the object through her own parish priest. It could well be that there was a desire for legitimacy, which in this way backfired.

PARISH PRIEST JÁNOS NIKOLITS AND HIS PATIENTS (A SKETCH OF A STORY)

In the parish of Csávolý, inhabited by Germans and Catholic South Slavs (Bunyevats), János Nikolits²⁵ was serving in the mid-nineteenth century. He arrived in the village in the spring of 1850 from his previous station in Vajszka [Vajska].²⁶ On April 21, he recorded the first baptism he performed in the parish register,²⁷ which he diligently continued to keep, together with the marriage and death registers and other necessary parish records, until his death in 1864. The minutes of the diocesan regulations and circulars can be found in Csávolý, as well as in other villages.²⁸ Nikolits was equally adept at keeping records of this. Whenever something came from the superior Archbishop of Kalocsa or his consistory, he meticulously entered it into the pages of the bulky volume. In one particular case, however, he made an exception – certainly not by chance. When he received the circular No. 1510 of the Consistorium of the Archbishop, dated August 7, 1851,²⁹ and carefully interpreted it word for word, something prevented him from carrying out the routine clerical action of writing the circular into the minutes. That something was certainly the fear that came over him after reading the archbishop's letter to all the priests in the diocese. Fear that he had made a serious and irreversible mistake in his practice in previous years.

The said diocesan circular was about the correct use of amulets and the prohibition of impropriety.³⁰ According to him, the church leadership has become aware that some of the secular clergy and monastics are 'even today' distributing amulets to the common people in violation of pure religion and morality. This activity leaves a noticeable scar on religion and morals in the eyes of the faithful and provides a basis for a negative perception of the Church and its ministers among antagonistic elements. The circular explained that there are several types of amulets: the difference lies in their (correct or incorrect) use and interpretation. There are practices similar to amulets, but not at all wrong: for example, wearing a cross or an icon on

²⁵The biographical sketch of János Nikolits (Nikolics) can be compiled partly from the archdiocesan history manuals and partly from various documents in the archdiocesan archives of Kalocsa. He was born in Apatin on October 23, 1791, and according to his birth certificate he was baptized there on October 25, 1791. The child of Joannes Nikolits and his wife Lucia was baptized by Antonius Ibisits and his wife Theresia. He served as chaplain first in Hódság [Odžaci] (1816–1819), then in Zombor (1821–1822), and again in Hódság (1822–1827). In 1827 he became parish administrator in Vajszka [Vajska], and in 1842 he was appointed parish priest there. From 1850 until his death in 1864 he was parish priest of Csávolý. His German and Croatian were excellent, his Hungarian intermediate. LAKATOS ed. 2002; <https://archivum.asztrik.hu> (accessed March 16, 2024); KFL I. 1. c. János Nikolits; KFL I. 1. b. Vajszka, Csávolý.

²⁶According to the historical schematism of the archdiocese, he was the parish priest of Csávolý from 1851 (LAKATOS ed. 2002:170), but both the registers and some personal documents support the fact that Nikolits was already in Csávolý in April 1850. The end date (1865) is also incorrect, since the parish priest died on December 27, 1864. Cf. KFL I. 1. c. János Nikolits.

²⁷KFL V. Csávolý. Baptismal register 1845–1863 (vol. 323.)

²⁸KFL V. 30. Csávolý. *Protocollum Decretorum Archiepiscopaliū Currentaliū* (1823–1855).

²⁹For the issue: KFL I. 1. e. A. *Protocollum Archi-Episcopale*, 1851.

³⁰The full text of the circular can be found in several parish protocols; for our work we used the Protocols of Csátalja and Hajós, which were a verbatim match. KFL V. 51. *Protocollum Currentaliū ab Officio Dioecetano* 1847–1857. 32–33; KFL V. 29. Csátalja. *Protocollum Encyclicarum Archi-Episcopaliū ac Litterarum Consistorialiū* 1840–1857.

one's chest in order to increase one's piety or some good cause in one's heart, or as a reminder of the positive vow of the object itself. On the other hand, if amulets are associated with the presumption of warding off and removing something negative, for example, believed to ward off disease, relieve penance, or grant absolution without the sacrament of confession, this falls entirely within the framework of superstition (*superstitio*) and their distribution for such purposes is inappropriate (*abusus*) and sinful (*peccatum*). The priests are advised to transmit to the people the Church's teaching on the relics of the saints, which is also relevant in relation to these. In particular, those who distribute such things against diseases should be reported to the Church magistrates – says the strict circular, signed by Vicar General György Girk, Bishop of Adras, Grand Provost.

The parish priest of Csávolý felt in the crosshairs. After a few months of rumination, in mid-December he began a long letter in which he told voluntarily, tormented by scruples of conscience, his story about his patients.³¹ The four-page letter addressed to György Girk was originally dated December 15, 1851, but after holding it back for weeks, he added two more pages and sent it to Kalocsa on February 2 of the following year. Already in the first line of the letter, Nikolits almost blurted out that he had been treating patients for many years. At the beginning of his priestly career, as a chaplain, he himself was often ill, so he always had some medicine at home, and he also bought some medical books from Pest.³² He recommended the remedies he used to others, and when his parishioners came to him with physical problems, he gave them advice. He became particularly popular during his years in Vajszka, where there was no doctor, so he helped people with medicine and advice, especially during the cholera epidemic (that is, in the early 1830s).

Once, Stanislaus Kablarovits, an elderly teacher from Vajszka who studied humanities and also read Latin, came to him in desperation and for help. The teacher said that his son, named Fábíán, had a swollen wound that doctors had treated in vain, but the unbearable pain that lasted day and night would not go away. The medicine offered by the priest did not help, the boy kept wailing and crying. Old Kablarovits, in tears, begged the parish priest to write down a prayer (*oratio*) on a piece of paper to be used against the attack of evil spirits. (Since the medicines do not work, it is clear that the latter are the cause of the problem.) Since the parish priest Nikolits did not know this *oratio*, the teacher brought him a book of rituals (*rituale*) with the prayer to be written on the consecrated card. The parish priest (not foreseeing the consequences) wrote this down in good faith, as the instructions said, and put the required rue, salt and wax, which the teacher had brought him, next to the slip of paper. In his letter, the priest stressed in his defense that he had not given it to the teacher as an amulet, but as an *oratio* written on a consecrated card, with instructions to keep it next to the patient.

As is usually the case, the somewhat extorted and coerced 'cure' produced spectacular results: the sick boy's wound split open, and he started to feel better. Word of the cure and the special

³¹KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Letter of János Nikolits, parish priest of Csávolý, December 15, 1851, February 2, 1852)

³²Unfortunately, we have not yet been able to find any trace of the priest's own catalogue of books. The 1841 Vajszka church visitation report does contain a list of the parish's book inventory, but it does not include the titles of the priest's own books, which were already separate from those of the period. Vis. Can. 1841c. Among the books of the parish of Csávolý, catalogued in 1876, i.e., a decade after Nikolits' death, only one volume on medical subjects appears: the volume by Mihály Lenhossék, which is given the descriptive title 'Liber de curatione variolae vaccinae'. KFL I. 1. b. Csávolý. 2. a. 1. *Inventarium Bibliothecae Parochiae Csávolýensis* A. 1876.

treatment spread quite quickly. The incurable sick in the area came one after another to Vajszka's newly famous priest. Those he used to send to doctors or give advice from his own wisdom now all demanded the exorcism slip. The priest confessed that he gave in to the requests: he wrote down, blessed and handed over the handwritten prayers, but he warned everyone that, in addition to the health of the body, the things of the spirit were also important. He reportedly also told the patients that they had received their sorrows from God because of their sins and urged them to seek Christ through the sacrament of confession, not to put their trust in a piece of paper but in God, and if they had the slip of paper with them, not to sin, for this was incompatible with sacred things. He encouraged them to pray the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary regularly. After they are healed, the slip will be thrown into the fire, because a healthy person tends to sin more. Older people usually vowed not to sin, only to carry the slip on their person (which he could not forbid them to do). This is what Nikolits saw as the benefit of it: he could force many people to live a righteous life. In his letter, he stressed that he had not accepted any compensation in exchange for the *oratio*. People donated things to the church, such as shawls and tablecloths, through the apostolic syndic (*syndicus*). A man from Szerém [Srijem, Srem] wanted to leave money by force, but he returned the amount he had not accepted to him through the syndic. Nikolits claimed that he tried to refer outsider patients who were not under his jurisdiction to their own priest, and even asked a neighboring parish priest to 'treat' incurable patients among his own parishioners in this way, but he was reluctant to do so. He did all this in public, not in secret, often in the presence of his fellow clergymen, one of whom warned him that, although there was nothing wrong with his activities, he should report them to his superiors. This is what prompted him to write this letter.

János Nikolits continued in his letter: when he was transferred from Vajszka to Csávolý, he hoped that he would not be further burdened by patients. However, a craftsman from Baja named Csuwardits, who was suffering from epilepsy (*morbus caducus*), came to him and asked for the prayer to keep on him, because, as he said, he had heard of someone who had been cured of an incurable illness. Although the priest did not know of such a cure, the man begged him for the prayer and has not had a single seizure since. In his joy, he sent to the new parish priest of Csávolý all the epileptics in the neighborhood. This is how a man named Szakmáry came to see him about his daughter, a bootmaker about his wife, a man named Hirrmann about his 4-year-old child, a vineyard worker from Szentivány (Felsőszentiván) about his wife, a man named Shimits about his son, and most recently a woman came to see him at the suggestion of Csuwardits. All of them suffered from *morbus caducus* and specifically asked him for the prayer written on a slip of paper. In the meantime, the bishop's circular on the amulets had arrived, which scared Nikolits, fearing that his well-intentioned deeds might be judged negatively. He did not even comply with the last woman's plea but instead began to write this letter to his superiors, asking what to do with the woman, to whom he had of course given good advice (leading a godly life, going to confession).

Nikolits once again set out to describe his treatment of patients and his methodology. Many people come to him, to some he suggests bloodletting, some come with eye pain, fever, dysentery; he usually refers them to a doctor, but he has noticed that people come to him because they try to avoid doctors. Although it is exhausting to care for so many patients, he does it out of neighborly love, and he has observed that there is a moral benefit to the activity, because great sinners repent of grave sins and turn to the godly path. He does not engage in this practice out of ambition but for spiritual gain. He sows the seed in the hope of a good harvest. On the last page

of the somewhat redundant letter, he referred to the darker side of his service both in Vajszka and Csávoly, but wrote rather metaphorically, with little concrete detail, rather in riddles, about his persecution and the dangers looming over him from the scheming of people with malicious intentions. It seems likely that he had already reported these conflicts to his superiors in other letters.³³ In the spirit of Christ, he explained that he prays for his persecutors and is not afraid of them, just as he was not afraid of the historic upheaval of a few years earlier (here he is clearly referring to the events of the 1848/1849 revolution and freedom fight), even though many decent people, including priests, were persecuted then.³⁴

In a two-page addendum to the first letter dated December 15, which he added on February 2 of the following year, he wrote that he had hesitated to send the letter, but since then the patients kept coming and coming and he was completely at a loss. A man from Császártöltés brought his wife to him, who was tormented by the evil spirit, and told him that they had been to Kalocsa to visit high priests and to the Franciscans in Baja, but it was no help. So now they came to the parish priest of Csávoly for the much-talked-about manuscript prayer. Nikolits suggested bloodletting for the woman, but the husband said they had already tried this at a doctor's on the advice of the priest from Kalocsa. Nikolits then found out that the woman was a sinner, took her confession, and dismissed her with the desired slip of paper. A little later, a woman from Csávoly came to him, who was also tormented by the evil spirit, and whatever she did, it was always with her, and she could neither pray nor sleep nor eat. Her syndrome was very similar to that of the woman from Császártöltés. The parish priest found her in sin during his examination, had her confess, and dismissed her with a slip. Both women were about to commit suicide, even though Nikolits tried to explain to them that the evil spirit is like a dog in chains, it cannot harm anyone but those who submit to it willingly. He made them confess and, thus, they were freed from their sins and hopefully from the persecution of the evil spirit. Nikolits, calling himself a most humble chaplain (*humillimus capellanus*), asked the members of the Consistorium not to read his letter aloud, but only in private, because of the disgust and dislike it might evoke.³⁵

We do not know in which interpretation the letter of János Nikolits, the parish priest of Csávoly, was finally read by the members of the Kalocsa consistory led by Vicar Girk, but it is certain that the matter was discussed at the meeting of February 26, 1852. The short transcript

³³The detailed history of these conflicts is not within the scope of our narrow subject, but traces of them (undated complaints against the parishioners of Vajszka who – apparently in 1848/1849 – had disobeyed the payment of priestly dues, threatened the life of their parish priest, who suffered persecution as a result) can be found in Nikolits' personal documents: KFL I. 1. c. János Nikolits.

³⁴Here he is clearly referring, but anonymously, to the priest of Bács [Bač] who was persecuted in 1849. This priest from Bács can only be identified as Bálint Polareczky, who died on August 9, 1849. His name is not mentioned in the source publication on the role of the clergy of the Archdiocese of Kalocsa in 1848/1849 – LAKATOS – SARNYAI eds. 2001. In 1849 Nikolits first applied to his superiors for the vacant parish priest's post in Bács, and in 1850 he expressed his desire to apply for the post in Csávoly. As regards Bács, he implied that he would be able to return to his home region, and that since he had bought two houses and a plot of land in Bács with the 5,000 forints he had received from the former priest of Hódság, Ferenc Schwinghammer, he would be close to them and could more easily look after their upkeep. His main argument in applying for the parish of Csávoly was that he felt in danger in Vajszka, and that changing stations would be necessary for his own safety. – KFL I. 1. c. János Nikolits.

³⁵KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Letter of János Nikolits, parish priest of Csávoly, December 15, 1851/February 2, 1852) On the connection between sins and demonic possession, see BARTH 2016:198–200, 2020a:275–276, 2020b:178–180.

No. 488 issued here tersely asked the parish priest only to send in the order of service, which included the blessing of the slip of paper with the prayer against evil spirits.³⁶ A few months later, on May 20, Nikolits sent a one-page letter with the printed page he had cut out of an older, late eighteenth-century copy of the Kalocsa book of rituals (*Rituale Romano-Colocense*, 1798), which was no longer in use.³⁷ This is how the “*Benedictio et exorcismus chartae contra daemones, et spectra, quae infestant et vexant homines, vel jumenta, vel domos etc.*” was returned to Kalocsa as an attachment to a letter from a village parish priest, so that the Church leadership could study its contents. The irony is that it is an *ordo* that was part of the selection of benedictions of the official Kalocsa book of rituals from 1738 until the 1830s,³⁸ and the volume from which it was cut out was published less than half a century before the events, with the approval of the Church leadership of the time. In any case, on June 3, the vicar wrote a reply, in which the parish priest of Csávoly was warned that the ritual order submitted was not included in the official *Rituale* of the time and was therefore forbidden to be used. Similarly, it was not generally permitted for a parish priest to perform an exorcism, either verbally or in writing, without the permission of the Ordinary. For the use of amulets, he was ordered to follow the instructions of a circular issued a year earlier. If he is visited by a sick person, he has to use the ritual order of the blessing of the sick (*Benedictio infirmorum*), as given on page 285 of the official diocesan *rituale* of the time (COL 1838). He should not believe demonic possession readily, because there are deceptive diseases (e.g., black bile), but there are certain signs that can be used to distinguish these phenomena from each other. It is important to note that all such matters must be submitted in advance to the diocesan leadership.³⁹

The Church leadership considered the problem settled: the letters of Nikolits and the drafts of the correspondence were collected in a file and placed in the *C. sanctorum* of the archbishopric archives, and marked as the amulet case (*amuleta*).⁴⁰ The priest of Csávoly continued to live and work in his mission for more than a decade, but his voice was no longer heard on such matters. We suspect, from his attitude as revealed in his letter, that he must have given up blessing and distributing exorcism slips of paper, fearing the consequences, but that he tried to provide priestly services in his own way, responding to the needs of the faithful, which were often motivated by despair and desperation.

THE CULTURAL HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EXORCISM CARDS

The detachment of the mid-nineteenth-century ecclesiastical leadership in Kalocsa towards the consecration of demon-exorcising cards is particularly instructive because it reveals a gap

³⁶KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Draft of the transcript of the Consistory of the Archbishop of Kalocsa, February 26, 1852).

³⁷KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Letter from János Nikolits, parish priest of Csávoly, 20 May 1852)

³⁸Until the publication of the new *Rituale* of 1838: COL 1838.

³⁹KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. (Draft of the instruction of the Vicar General György Girk and the Consistory of the Archbishop of Kalocsa, June 3/July 6, 1852)

⁴⁰KFL I. 1. a. Cultus sanctorum. 1095/853. Joan. Nikolits. Amuleta. Parocho Csávolyensi ne chartam amplius benedicat contra daemones.

between the eighteenth-century Baroque *praxis pietatis* and the post-Josephinist Catholicism of the nineteenth century, after the Enlightenment. The common individuals of the villages of Vajszka, Csávolly and the various nationalities of the Danube-Tisza Interfluvium, who appear in the above story, all longed for something in the mid-nineteenth century that had been almost common and established church practice a century earlier, but which was displaced and banned at the turn of the nineteenth century with the change in demonological thinking. The above-mentioned card blessing was included in the modern-age Kalocsa *rituale*, first compiled by Gábor Patachich, despite the fact that it was not included in the Esztergom or any other Central European diocesan book of ceremonies (COL 1738:375). This is not the only peculiarity of the *Rituale Romano-Colocense*, published in 1738. In any case, Patachich thought that the priests of the diocese could be well served by this order of ceremonies, because the needs of the faithful could be sufficiently met in some cases. By the end of the century, all the copies of the 1738 edition were out of print and there was a great shortage of the book of rituals, so a new edition was prepared. In view of the liturgical history, it is almost inexplicable why the Kalocsa edition of 1798 contained the minor ordos of the exorcism ritual order, such as the cleansing of the demon-possessed house, the benediction against fire and flood, and the above-mentioned exorcism cards (COL 1798). Unfortunately, the 'Rituale' fonds of the archbishopric archives of Kalocsa do not contain any information about the background of this decision.⁴¹ It is possible that it was simply a coincidence, as this circumstance escaped the attention of the church censors during the reprinting of the Patachich edition.

The text of the ceremony itself is rather short: it is limited to the exorcism and the benediction of the card (sometimes called a slip, *schedula*).⁴² After the obligatory *responsorium*,⁴³ the exorcism of the card was pronounced: this exorcised the devil's deceitfulness and transferred divine power into the piece of paper, which could lead the user to eternal salvation through the written text.⁴⁴ After that, the blessing in this case meant sprinkling with holy water. The card was inscribed with the letters I.N.R.I. in the shape of a cross, followed by the prayer for deliverance and exorcism beginning "Qui verbum caro factum est," written in the first-person singular.⁴⁵ In the concluding instructions of the ordo, they added to include exorcised and consecrated salt, a piece of wax from an Easter candle or other consecrated candle, and consecrated rue; all of this, sprinkled with holy water, was to be wrapped in the card and placed

⁴¹KFL I. 1. a. Rituale. The arrangement of ritual matters into a separate fund was not started until 1888.

⁴²For the full Latin text of the ceremony, see BARTH 2010:322–323.

⁴³"Vers. Adjutorium nostrum in nomine domini. Resp. Qui fecit caelum et terram. Vers. Domine exaudi orationem meam. Resp. Et clamor meus ad te veniat. Vers. Dominus vobiscum. Resp. Et cum spiritu tuo" (COL 1798:391).

⁴⁴"Exor+cizo et conjuro te charta, per titulum domini nostri salvatoris (Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judaeorum) per omnia verba et nomina, quae de creatore omnium creaturarum dicuntur, et per eum, qui tribuere et facere potest, ut omnia, quae in te scribentur, ad effectum salutis aeternae perducere valeas, et ut omnis fallacia, et virtus diaboli exeat de te, et intret in te omnis virtus praedicta sinemora. In nomine Pa+tris, et Fi+lii, et Spiritus + Sancti. Amen" (COL 1798:391).

⁴⁵"Qui verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis, nascens ex MARIA Virgine, per ineffabilem pietatem et misericordiam suam piissimam, et per intercessionem B. Virginis MARIAE, angelorum, sanctorumque omnium, et maxime apostolorum et evangelistarum Matthaei, Marci, Lucae et Joannis, et sancti N. martyrum, virginum et viduarum, ipsum quaeso, ut dignetur me liberare et conservare ab omni infestatione Satanae et ministrorum ejus. Per eundem dominum nostrum JESUM Christum, qui cum Patre et Sancto Spiritu vivit et regnat etc. Amen" (COL 1798:391).

around the neck of the afflicted person or in the place that was tormented or troubled by demonic forces.⁴⁶

The consecration of the exorcism cards in the *Kalocsa rituale* is a relatively short and simple version taken from a much wider range. The text on the card itself is a very widespread exorcism and apotropaic (repellent) invocation, which can be traced from the late Middle Ages onwards, and which was widely used throughout Europe, alongside a series of similar shorter and longer texts serving the same purpose. However, they were rarely found in official books of rituals, but rather in the pages of semi-official printed and manuscript benediction books, mainly in the practice of monastic orders. If we look only at the Franciscan practice in Central Europe, we can find the parallels of the card-blessing at a glance.⁴⁷ The popular Franciscan prayer book *Arca Domini*, which went through several editions in eighteenth-century Hungary, contains the blessing of paper cards, an important component of the high end of the Baroque religious amulets, the *breverls* (here *breve* or *Agnus Marianus*), which were used to expel the devil and ward off bewitchments. Besides the blessing of the names and letter combinations of Jesus and Mary, as well as the demon-exorcising prayers of St. Anthony of Padua, St. Francis and other saints, these included the above basic prayer (*Qui verbum caro factum est...*) and longer and more complex exorcisms (AD 1774:172–180; BARTH 2010:323–328). Also in Franciscan use was the richly detailed and lengthy procedure for the preparation of the exorcism card, which was found in manuscript form by Lajos Katona in the library of the Franciscan monastery of Gyöngyös at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the ritual order he published in a verbatim Latin transcription in the columns of the *Ethnographia*, the priest was instructed to exorcise not only the sheet of paper of the card, but also the ink and pen, and the seal stamped on them. The famous folklorist published a copy of the seventeenth-century ceremonial order, probably of Bavarian origin, made in 1764 in Kassa [Košice] (KATONA 1902). Although he did not investigate the parallels of the sacramental called Luke's slip (*Lukács-cédula*), or the antecedents of the published ordo itself, he demonstrated an enviable sensitivity to the subject by publishing the text in the central journal of ethnography.⁴⁸ Parallels of the blessing of Luke's slip for demonic expulsion have also been found in Moravian sources.⁴⁹

One of the Central European sources of the ritual orders listed above may have been the vast book of benedictions entitled *Rituale Franciscanum*, compiled by the Czech Franciscan friar Bernardus Sannig and first published in 1685, which included several such demon-exorcising card blessings and methods of making *breverls* (FRA 1685:280–290). It is characteristic of the

⁴⁶“Deinde accipiatur sal exorcizatum et benedictum; item modicum cerae de cereo paschali, vel alterius benedicto, et ruta benedicta, et omnia aspersa per aquam benedictam; ponantur in praedicta charta benedicta complicata, et suspendantur in collo patientis, vel in loco vexato et infestato, et Dei gratia conservabitur” (COL 1798:391).

⁴⁷The data from Hungary in the 17th and 18th centuries were summarized in a thorough and extremely rich study by KNAPP 2021.

⁴⁸Not to mention the fact that the volume was lost after the dissolution of the Franciscan monastery in Gyöngyös in the mid-twentieth century, leaving Katona – unknowingly – the unique chronicler of the source he published.

⁴⁹*Cumulus Selectiorum Benedictionum...*, eighteenth century, Maximinus a S. Ludmilla. Manuscript of the University Library of Budapest (EKK), I. 197; *Liber exorcismorum et benedictionum*, 1751. Moravian State Library (Moravská zemská knihovna), Brno.

book's popularity that even in the nineteenth century there was a copy of it in the libraries of many parishes in Hungary. It is not surprising, therefore, that a copy of an edition of this popular book of benedictions is listed in the catalogue of books compiled in 1876 in the parish of Csávolgy, which was one of the settings of the story.⁵⁰ We do not know how much János Nikolits spent leafing through the book, one of the richest collections in the early modern arsenal of benedictions. In any case, if he did so, he was revisiting an old, bygone liturgical practice, compared to which the ecclesiological-priestly proposal of his own time, responding to the unchanging everyday needs of the faithful, was formulated in a very different, rationalist, individualistic and (from a demonological point of view) 'devoid of magic' religious field. It remains a question whether he, with his own helping attitude, felt comfortable in this changed and disempowered world...

CONCLUSIONS

In our study, we have attempted to explore, in a narrowed time interval, in a highly demarcated region, on a specific, controversial issue (basically functioning as a litmus paper), what manifestations we can find in the primary archival documentation from the lower clergy, which, on the one hand, can be seen as contradicting the position of the Church leadership, and on the other hand, through them the needs of local communities are expressed.

The main lesson of the cases presented above is that we must be cautious about generalizations in terms of the universality of trends and movements in Catholic ecclesial thinking and mentality. This is particularly true when examining the transitions between the 18th and 19th centuries. Undoubtedly, the transformation of demonological thinking in the context of the Catholic Enlightenment from the perspective of the ecclesiastical 'elite' is indeed well documented globally and in general (LEHNER 2016:125–153), and there was indeed a clear decline in the ecclesiastical practice of exorcism and demon expulsion across Europe from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards (YOUNG 2016:155–207). At the same time, the micro-regions of Central and Eastern Europe, especially those similar to Bácska, which are border regions (on the border between Eastern and Western Christianity), may hold surprises: on the one hand, in the form of late confrontations (cf. BARTH 2020b), and on the other hand, in the form of practices that are being reactivated again and again among the monastic community and the lower clergy. As the examples in our study show, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the rationalist, dismissive attitude and the priestly character of wanting to help people with their physical and spiritual problems with the discarded resources of the late medieval and baroque ecclesiastical 'arsenal' practically coexisted. One might suspect that this duality and ambivalence is not only a feature of this period but also of later centuries, and in a sense still persists to this day. This is precisely why we believe it is important, in addition to identifying and describing the major trends, to delve into the depths accessible by the method of microhistory, as a kind of control, in order to explore the system of relations between priests and local communities and the variations in priestly attitudes towards popular/local culture.

⁵⁰KFL I. 1. b. Csávolgy. 2. a. 1. *Inventarium Bibliothecae Parochiae Csavolyensis* A. 1876.

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