

“TAKING ON A VISIT TO THE LORD JESUS...”

Eucharistic education of children in the Heart Brigade¹

Abstract: At the turn of the 19th to 20th century in Hungary too the growing veneration of the Sacred Heart was closely linked in Catholic religious practice to observation of the first Fridays and frequent Holy Communion. These practices were also of great importance in the Heart Brigade, veneration of the Sacred Heart organised for children in the form of a confraternity. It was considered important for children to learn at an early age the most important element of religious life because it was thought that what they learned in childhood would be carried into adult life and subsequently passed on to their own children. The intention in giving children a religious education was to better society over the long term.

Keywords: Sacred Heart, Apostleship of Prayer, Eucharist, childhood education

According to Norbert Busch the success of veneration of the Sacred Heart was largely determined by its cult character and the German Catholic minority's² endangered situation.³ This problem was not limited to Germany. The increasing force of the social and economic changes that appeared from the second half of the 19th century also had an influence on religiosity. The formation of nation states, embourgeoisement, the Enlightenment and secularisation changed the role of the church in society.

“The nation states that were coming into being in the second half of the 19th century came into conflict with Catholicism practically everywhere in Europe, although with differing intensity.”⁴

The Catholic religion became only one of the recognised denominations, its norms were not applied in all areas of life, it became gradually restricted to

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1 The name of the association abroad is Apostleship of Prayer

2 In Germany before the Second World War, under the influence of the Reformation, around two-thirds of the population were Protestant and one third Catholic.

3 BUSCH 1997. 31.

4 KLESTENITZ 2013. 21.

private devotions and the institutionalised occasions of religious practice.⁵ Thus secularisation

“was a two-way process: on the one hand religion in fact ceased to be a force organising society, but parallel with this forces representing the religious world view and the interests of the churches also appeared.”⁶

Under the influence of these changes it became even more important for the church to rely on its believers to a greater extent than previously. Pope Leo XIII himself also emphasised the need for adaptation to the modern challenges and for self-organisation that included reaching out to ever wider groups and the use of modern tools in apostolic work.⁷ In his *Rerum novarum* encyclical⁸ he drew attention to organisation among the workers. It was also during his reign that an awareness arose of “the possibility and need for popular Christian (Catholic) mass organisation at the highest level of the universal church”.⁹ The church also recognised that the community of believers cannot be regarded as a homogeneous mass, as the religious communities organise themselves too with different aims. The differentiation of 19th century confraternities was achieved on the basis of these aims and needs rather than on a societal basis. Confraternities established in the 19th century and earlier were often organised along the lines of the institutional structures of the modern world, which also affected their structure.¹⁰

In the 19th century the aim of the Jesuits who were foremost in initiating and organising veneration of the Sacred Heart was religious revival, to promote the Catholic Church and the general recatholicisation of Europe. The Society of Jesus regarded veneration of the Sacred Heart as its mass evangelisation program and proclaimed social solidarity and reconciliation as the “remedy” for social renewal.¹¹ The Jesuits too considered it important to use modern tools and methods (press, literary products, popular missions and education of the priests/clergy), that made possible a certain degree of individualisation of religion, addressing individual believers. In addition they and the church leaders also placed great stress on early and frequent communion. The greatest opponent of this was the Jansenism movement¹² that

“allowed only persons who lived a very devout life and were free of even minor sins to take holy communion”¹³

5 KAPITÁNY – KAPITÁNY 2007. 383–384.

6 KLESTENITZ 2013. 21.

7 Klestenitz 2013. 32.

8 SZABÓ 2006. 575–576.

9 GERGELY 1977. 8.

10 BARNA 2011. 27.

11 BUSCH 1997. 44; 48–49.

12 GÁL – SZABÓ 2000. 665–666.

13 PETRÓ 1937. 11.

in the words of József Petró papal chamberlain and teacher of theology.

In Catholic teaching Holy Communion (Eucharist) is one of the seven sacraments in which Christ appears, the communion is the mystical union of the priest and the believers with Jesus.¹⁴ This is why it was considered important in religious childhood education, including in the children’s societies, for children to participate in communion as early and as often as possible. This was not only an initiative from the grassroots. Pope Pius X also supported the aspiration, striving to promote it with his measures supporting frequent (1905) and early (1910) communion.¹⁵ The Fourth Council of the Lateran and the Council of Trent¹⁶ linked the time of first communion to the “years of discretion”. Tihamér Tóth¹⁷ argued similarly:

“The Eucharist can only be celebrated fittingly with a Eucharistic soul. One must first know the Sacrament, then live from it – and only then celebrate”.¹⁸

The time of the first communion was adapted to local customs, so the ages may differ.¹⁹ The assessment of “discretion” also depended on the way children were judged by the society. A significant change in thinking about children took place from the 17th century. From then on a kind of cult of the child can be observed, a separation of the world of children from that of adults (this could be seen particularly in children’s games, moral and pedagogical literature).²⁰ From that point on it was considered acceptable for children to take communion from the age of seven. Here too the condition for this was that the child should be aware of its sins, as it was compulsory for communion to be preceded by confession, the sacrament of penance.

It can be seen that receiving frequent communion and propitiatory communion after confession on the first Friday of every month were an important element in Sacred Heart devotions. According to tradition the Saviour asked Saint Margaret Alacoque²¹ to have people devote the Friday following the octave of Corpus Christi to veneration of his Sacred Heart.²²

The children’s branch of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Heart Brigade also regarded frequent communion, observation of the first Friday and

14 Communion is also one of the sacraments in Protestant churches.

15 See: JORIO 1929.

16 1545–1563. Catholic reform synod.

17 Roman Catholic bishop, church writer, university teacher (1889–1939). A highly influential writer on spiritual matters, his writings addressed to youths and boys were popular in Hungary and were translated into many languages abroad.

18 TÓTH 1938. 6.

19 JORIO 1929. 8–10.

20 ARIÉS 1987. 142–143.

21 SZABÓ 1930. 35. Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690) entered the Visitation convent at Paray-le-Monial in 1671. Between 1672 and 1674 she received three private revelations on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On 24 April 1864 she was declared Blessed, and canonised on 13 May 1920.

22 SZABÓ 1930. 36. In 1856 Pope Pius IX extended the feast of the Sacred Heart to the whole church.

living together with the church as a vital task for children. Citing the Bible²³, mediæval and contemporary authors,²⁴ this was made compulsory by the guidebooks and handbook of the Heart Brigade. The publications produced in preparation for the 1938 International Eucharistic Conference held in Budapest in particular emphasised that children must receive communion by the age of seven:

“Children spend the seventh year of their life in the first grade, thus they must then receive communion. This divine and church order also applies to them at the age of seven if, whether due to their own fault or for reasons beyond their control, they do not attend school or religious instruction. In countries where there is no religious instruction in the schools, they prepare for first communion in the church.”²⁵

Similarly to the national trends, in the Heart Brigade groups in Szeged-Rókus²⁶ it was considered important to receive communion and observe the first Friday. However they were unable to achieve this in practice up to 1936 because:

“...spiritual care of the Heart Brigade members was left to the single religious instruction teacher who was incapable of performing the task because of the steadily growing number of members. Under such conditions it is not surprising that in the biggest school of the country’s second largest Catholic city the Heart Brigade did not cultivate ‘communion as often as possible’. The children could not be taken to the monthly collective communion by the brigade leaders for the simple reason that there was no one to hear their confession before communion. As a result the Heart Brigade did not participate in a collective communion for years on end.”

wrote Anna Dolch, teacher and brigade leader in her report.²⁷ The situation changed from December 1936 when the newly ordained priest Elemér Vida joined in the work as religious instructor and brigade leader. The children’s confessions could be heard with the help of the Society of Jesus.

Mass²⁸ was followed by sessions for children similar to religious instruction, that is, Guard meetings. The children reported on what they heard in ways appropriate for their age,²⁹ with the help of drawings or short texts. The drawings

23 Mk 10:13, 14, 16. and Mt 18:3–5.

24 Especially Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Augustine and Pope Pius X.

25 PÉTERY 1944. 3–4.

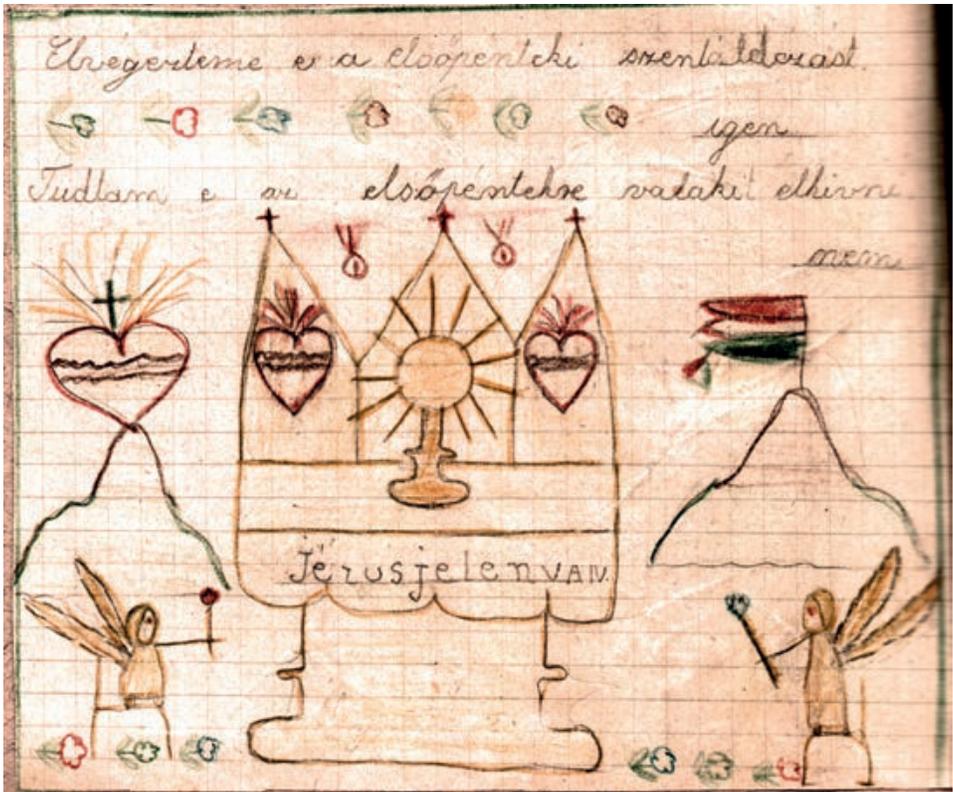
26 Szeged-Rókus, part of the city of Szeged, it was populated by the 18th century. Up to the Second World War the city’s poorest people lived here.

27 A Szeged-rókusi állami elemi iskola 6 szivgárda-csoportja krónikájának I. kötete, 1937–1938-as tanév. [Volume I of the Chronicle of the 6 Heart Brigade groups in the Szeged-Rókus state primary school, 1937–1938 school year.] Jezsuita Levéltár és Rendtörténeti Könyvtár (JTMR.) II. 4.5. 22.

28 Mainly on Sundays.

29 Children between the ages of 6 and 14 could be members of the Heart Brigade.

clearly reflected how the children interpreted what they heard at the session. The best drawings have survived as illustrations in the three-volume Chronicle (Fig. 1). Pen drawings or Art Nouveau coloured ink drawings done by Guard leaders (Fig. 2) were also included as illustrations at the top of recollections or reports when the Chronicle was compiled. The last volume was edited during the Second World War, but even despite the bombing raids it was considered important³⁰ that it should have the same external appearance as the other two volumes.



Child's drawing of the Eucharist and the Sacred Heart. Source: JTMR. II. 4.5.

Frequent communion for children was held to be of great importance also because it was thought that children are still uncorrupted in their early years and the sooner their education for a Christian life is begun the more effective it will be. It was thought that the absence of such an education had an effect on the adult soul, its attitude to the church and to Jesus.³¹ Women were faced with two possi-

³⁰ The final volume was compiled mainly by the teacher and Guard leader Anna Dolch (Dombrádi) who preserved it after the Second World War. It then passed in 1987 to Dr. József Bálint S.J., and finally to the Jesuit Archive and Library on the History of the Order.

³¹ RÉVAY 1944. 5–6.

ble vocations: to become a wife or to enter a convent. The options were similar for men: to become a father or to join a monastic order.³² Families were considered to be “the pillars of national existence”, and so “saving families means saving the nation.”³³ They held that if children received a religious education they would carry what they learnt there into their own families.

The “Meeting with little Jesus” was realised first in the church when taking first communion, but the lasting arrival happens after death. This is why it was regarded as very important that children should be prepared in their souls. Accordingly, sick, dying members of the Heart Brigade were provided with the sacraments by their spiritual guides and were prepared for the journey to the “eternal home”, as their aim was to ensure a “good death”.³⁴

In addition to the “church command”, the first Fridays and communion were considered important also because of the 34th International Eucharistic Congress held in Budapest in 1938 and the Saint Stephen Commemorative Year³⁵. The Heart Brigade groups made big efforts to prepare for the occasion, then from 25 to 29 May, after the Congress, they travelled to Budapest as a group with 1500 children to pay tribute to the Holy Right Hand. Those who were unable to take part in the event strove to join in with novena prayers and spiritual exercises.³⁶

Besides the celebration in Budapest, numerous local celebrations were also held. The technical achievements of the period, the press, radio and film contributed to the effectiveness of the series of celebrations. Veneration of the Sacred Heart was closely linked to observance of the first Fridays and frequent communion, and accordingly these practices were also decisive in the Heart Brigade. The “meeting with little Jesus” could be in this world or the other, individual or collective.

In this article I have shown the interpretations concerning early communion for children. The Catholic Church involved children in communion with the intention of shaping society. It was thought that if children “live together” with the church from an early age it would have an influence on their later life, and they would also pass it on to their future family. Since families were seen as “the pillars of national existence”, great emphasis was placed on pastoral work in this area. Moreover children were considered to be more receptive to religious faith than adults: “the working of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the child is much less doubtful because it hardly comes up against any obstacle. Entirely wilful and

32 A Szeged-rókusi állami elemi iskola 6 szivgárda-csoportja krónikájának II. kötete, 1938–1939-es tanév. [Volume II of the Chronicle of the 6 Heart Brigade groups in the Szeged-Rókus state primary school, 1937–1938 school year.] JTMR. II. 4.5. 114.

33 MIHALOVICS 1942. 42–43.

34 A Szeged-rókusi állami elemi iskola 6 szivgárda-csoportja krónikájának II. kötete, 1938–1939-es tanév. [Volume II of the Chronicle of the 6 Heart Brigade groups in the Szeged-Rókus state primary school, 1937–1938 school year.] JTMR. II. 4.5. 51–52.

35 900th anniversary of the death of Saint Stephen, the first king of Hungary (1000–1038) that was commemorated throughout the country.

36 A Szeged-rókusi állami elemi iskola 6 szivgárda-csoportja krónikájának I. kötete, 1937–1938-as tanév. [Volume II of the Chronicle of the 6 Heart Brigade groups in the Szeged-Rókus state primary school, 1937–1938 school year.] JTMR. II. 4.5. 52–56.



Guard leader's drawing of the first Friday. Source: JTMR. II. 4.5.

customary sin has not yet cast its shadow on the light of faith, passion has not yet polluted God's living temple. God feels entirely at home in such a home,"³⁷ wrote Lajos Müller. The examples show that this aspiration was a determining factor not only at the individual level, but also in the confraternity form organised for children for veneration of the Sacred Heart, the Heart Brigade.

In face of the rational, secular explanation of social problems, the shaping of society through children drew on religious teachings as its interpretation capital and the created world in which the transcendent is an active actor is its interpretation frame. The social, political and economic crises of the early 20th century were given an interpretation on a different level, that of God shaping the world and the faithful resting in his hand. This was not exclusive to the Christian religious renaissance. The Orthodox Jewish religious renaissance formulated similar discourses along the lines of the Everlasting One intervening in the life of his chosen people and the chain of generations continuously embracing and therefore maintaining the revealed teaching. The child was a key motif in this religious renaissance too.³⁸ Regardless of denomination, the next generation was the focal point of crisis management in the case of religious revival trends.

³⁷ MÜLLER 1912. 13.

³⁸ GLÄSSER 2008. 235, 238; GLÄSSER 2012. 90–98.

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