

# RELIGIOUS CONFRATERNITIES IN THE SERVICE OF GOD AND THE COMMUNITY

## The Example of the Candle-Bearers' Confraternity

In all ages piety has played an important and prominent role extending beyond the frames of individual life and also exceeding the limits of religious life in the narrower sense. Its influence can be discovered in such institutions of social life, not specifically religious in character, as the *societies* and *confraternities* organised of various grounds.<sup>1</sup> This is true even for forms of association of a specifically economic character, intended to organise production and protect interests, such as the guilds of the past, as they existed in Hungary up to 1872.<sup>2</sup> The association operating in agriculture, especially among vine-growers, were of a similar character.

The various associations, especially those of a religious character have not been given the attention due to their significance and size, in the literature of either ethnology, history or sociology.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, very little is known about the forms of association that accompanied the development of the middle class in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These arose not only on a denominational basis - and in fact they emerged in an increasingly secularised society - and preserved ever fewer features of the religious character of the bodies mentioned above. In this period too, associations of a specifically religious nature were also formed and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the high point of religious associations in the towns, market towns and even the villages: the prayer confraternities, choruses and even funeral societies.<sup>4</sup> The devotional movements which arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also developed forms of association best suiting their purposes. Prayer confraternities were formed, such as *the Heart of Jesus*, *the Confraternity of Defenders of the Holy Name of Jesus*, *the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception*, *the confraternity of the Lining Spiritual Rosary*,<sup>5</sup> and the mission society formed to support Christians living under Turkish (Islamic) rule. These obviously built on the earlier confraternities and the examples of other contemporary organisations. Pilgrims, for example, organised into confraternities in the second half of the last century on recognisably Baroque foundations.<sup>6</sup>

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1 BECK 1990. 51.

2 PÁSZTOR 1940, GERENDÁS 1943, BARNA 1982. 329-341.

3 ERDÉSZ 1957, BARTHA 1972, ÉGETŐ 1993.

4 PÁSZTOR 1940, BÁLINT 1974, 1983, LÉNÁRT 1974, LÉNÁRT 1975, KECSKÉS 1995.

5 BARNA 1992.

6 BÁLINT-BARNA 1994. 284-288.

I would like to show the functioning of the religious confraternities mainly through the example of one such organisation. The *Candle-bearers' Confraternity* of Tállya in the Tokaj-Hegyalja district<sup>7</sup> was one of the societies whose roots reached back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the century of the Baroque in Hungary.<sup>8</sup> A variety of written sources concerning the history of the confraternity are available. 1.) The so-called "Book of the Dead" containing the names of deceased members of the confraternity. This source from the end of the last century has preserved a general outline of the confraternity. 2.) The minutes of the confraternity meetings, kept from 1929 up to the present. 3.) The third important group of sources consists of documents that originated from the everyday operation of the confraternity: invitations to general assemblies, rosters for liturgical service, sheets for the collection of donations, receipts, etc.<sup>9</sup> Concerning the recent past and present I am able to draw on my observations and interviews made on the spot in the period from 1970-1980.

The confraternities were church societies formed for the exercise of some act of piety or Christian charity and, besides this, to add to the pomp of public religious services. Their functions were regulated by the canons of ecclesiastical law.<sup>10</sup>

Research on church history regards the operation of the religious confraternities in the centuries of the Middle Ages to be a manifestation of the gradually strengthening new order, the religious and community life of the middle class. The forms of association were in themselves expressions of class and corporate self-esteem.<sup>11</sup>

The aim of the religious confraternities not formed for the expression of economic interests was to cultivate the piety of their members and increase cohesion and the community spirit. They acquired individual colouring in their everyday operation from reverence of the saint chosen as their patron saint and even more from the local society whose spiritual needs the confraternity strove to satisfy in certain areas of religious life. Besides adding to the pomp of religious services and caring for the poor, they also played an important part at the funerals of members. However, where the state institutions of care for the poor were created in more recent times, or when firms of undertakers came into being in the last century the functions of these confraternities changed.

The religious associations were able to operate in Hungary up to the end of the 1940s when they were dissolved under constraint from the state.<sup>12</sup> Only a few prayer societies survived these measures, suspending their community functions, restricting public manifestations of religious life and operating in private homes or within the church building exclusively as prayer societies.

7 FRISNYÁK (ed.) 1994.

8 For details, see: TÜSKÉS-KNAPP 1992. with a detailed overview of the Hungarian and foreign literature.

9 The documents are in the possession of the office bearers of the confraternity.

10 Codex Iuris Canonici can. 707-719, HÖFER-RAHNER 1958, 719-720.

11 PÁSZTOR 1940. 22-23.

12 GERGELY 1985. 27-33, 49-51, BARNA 1992.

In modern times in popular Hungarian usage, the torch (*fáklya*) has been the synonym of candle (*gyertya*). This interpretation has survived in recent centuries. It is a symbol of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

The Candle-bearers' Society in Tállya was formed in 1739. In that period, following the long decades of Turkish occupation and the uncertain years of Hungarian independence struggles against Habsburg rule, Roman Catholic religious life was being rapidly reorganised in the diocese of Eger. The organisations of the diocese were set up, the parishes revived and the religious associations could also be revived within their frames.<sup>14</sup> These included the confraternities cultivating reverence for the Holy Sacrament and Mary.<sup>15</sup> It is a typical of this period that the new or revived forms of religious life spread mainly from the church centres to become popular over wide areas.<sup>16</sup>

The Candle-bearer's Confraternity of Tállya also originated from Eger, the centre of the diocese, in 1739. The confraternity was formed for the glory of the Holy Trinity and for the reverence of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all Saints.<sup>17</sup> The liturgical objects and insignia used by the confraternity – the baldachin for holy processions, the laborium and the banner – were also made in Eger.<sup>18</sup>

The Candle-bearers's Confraternity received its first rules in 1749. However, the society was subsequently re-established a number of times and continued to operate under different names. The records mention the decline of association life and specifically the excessive wine drinking, drunkenness and subsequent irregularities as the reason for the re-organisations. At such times new rules were also drawn up. Unfortunately, we know only the rules that applied in the 1860s and the 1930s.

The Roman Catholic church at Tállya is dedicated to the veneration of Saint Ladislav and also preserves a bone relic of the 11<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian king and saint. Its fine Baroque altars were presumably made in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, making it one of the most beautiful village churches in Hungary with a rich collection of objects and iconographic relics of the Baroque reverence of the saints. The church owes its high quality interior to its wealthy patrons.<sup>19</sup> At the time the church was renovated (1757), the local Candle-bearers' Society already existed. The side altar of Saint Wenceslas must have been made for them and has remained the altar of the confraternity right up to the present. Nothing is known of the circumstances under which the altar was entrusted to the confraternity or how the painting of Saint Wenceslas was placed above the altar.

The rules of 1930 contain detailed provisions concerning the admission of new members, the order of service in the church, the obligations of the member in his family and among his fellow men and, in general, in the village. The rules

13 RIPPEL 1779. *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* 3, 1974. 86-88, KÜHÁR-RADÓ 1993. 114.

14 Soós 1985.

15 Tüskés-Knapp 1992.

16 BARNÁ 1995, 195.

17 In: *Book of the dead*.

18 *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* 3, 1974. 1-2., TOMISA 1993.

19 KOVECSÁNSZKI 1994. 80-162.

set out the organisational structure of the confraternity, its office-bearers and the rules for conducting its meetings. My experiences and observations indicate that matters for which the rules give only a general frame are filled with life on the basis of tradition.

Efforts are still made to respect the conditions formulated in the rules as regards new members. This principally means practising piety and a life of moderation. In this wine-producing region, moderation applies mainly to temperance. Both the entries in the earlier minutes and current practice show that the admission of new members is put to the vote at the recommendation of an existing member and the new member's name is entered into the register at Candelmas (2<sup>nd</sup> February).

The Confraternity's patron saint is Saint Wenceslas,<sup>20</sup> although this is not mentioned in the rules. However, the Candle-bearers' Confraternity regards itself as the successor of the Saint Wenceslas Society of the last century which served a similar function to the present confraternity. The Confraternity still celebrates the feast of Saint Wenceslas on 28<sup>th</sup> September. This day is regarded as the minor feast of the church, the major feast being on 27<sup>th</sup> June, the feast of Saint Ladislav.

Saint Wenceslas is the national patron saint of the Czechs. His cult revived during the Baroque period under the influence of Habsburg dynastic piety. However, this is only one of the reasons why he appears in Tállya. The other is the legend of the saint linked to the local vine-growing which became increasingly famous from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on.

As aspect of the saint's legend associated with vine cultivation can be seen on the side altar of Saint Wenceslas in the Tállya church, painted by the outstanding Austrian Baroque artist, Franz Anton Maulbertsh. On Saint Wenceslas' day the members of the Candles-bearer's Society decorate the Saint Wenceslas altar, the space between the pews leading to it and recently also the altar used for mass, with garlands of flowers and bunches of grapes. They begin collecting money to cover the costs from Saints Joseph's day. The vine-growing members of the confraternity donate their finest bunches of grapes for this purpose; these are commonly known as Wenceslas grapes.

The decoration of the altar is finished by Saturday afternoon. It is an important part of the spiritual reparation that many of the members then go to confession. Two bottles of wine are also placed on the Wenceslas altar in the morning of the feast; one is for the parish priest and the other for the visiting priest. Elements of the cult of Saint Wenceslas suggest that the Candle-bearers' Confraternity is also a special society of vine cultivators; these elements are also found in other market towns of the Hegyalja region.

In addition to the tasks set out in the rules, everyday life also imposed other obligations on the Tállya confraternity. They prepare the four Corpus Christi tabernacles for the procession, for example. The rules describe in detail the altar service the members are required to do in the church. Among others, the

20 HÖFER-RAHNER 1965. 1044-1046., BÁLINT 1977. 305-306., AMBRÓZY 1938.

"confraternity shall do candle service before the altar" on the first Sunday of every month, at Easter, Christmas and Whitsun, on the feast day and also at the masses and litanies of the major Mary feasts. Six candle-bearers generally participate on each of these occasions. They also play a part in the processions on Candlemas day (2<sup>nd</sup> February) and up to the end of the 1940s they accompanied the faithful on Rogation days before Ascension Day. The present practice is largely the same.

On Saint Joseph's day (19<sup>th</sup> March) the Confraternity has mass said for the living members and at the feast of Saint Michael (29<sup>th</sup> September) for deceased members. All members of the confraternity were and are expected to attend these masses, to confess and take communion.

According to entries in the parish announcements book for the 1950's the priest announced the confraternity masses from the pulpit together with the other announcements, and this is the practice today too. Through these announcements the life of the confraternity merged with that of the larger community and the religious life of the congregation and it must have provided an example for the community too. The Confraternity appeared as one of the leading representatives of the community in important matters. A number of the members are also members of the congregation council.

One of their most important tasks has always been to parade as a body with candles and banners for the funeral of deceased members. The 1930s rules devote a separate chapter for the funeral insurance for members of the Candle-bearers' Confraternity.

There are few entries in the minutes concerning the payment of aid but far more mentions of participation at funerals, of failure to appear, and of wreaths ordered. In the 1980s the Confraternity purchased a wreath. The chairman said a short valedictory speech at the end of the ceremony. After the ceremony the members gather in the home of the record-keeper and the family members of the deceased bring wine, scones and curd cheese. In this way they hold the funeral feast for the deceased. Besides commemorating the deceased, this also provides an opportunity to discuss affairs of the confraternity. No minutes are kept of this.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Candle-bearers' Confraternity was often invited to funerals of non-members and even to those of other denominations. The reason for this is that the people of the village regard a funeral accompanied with candles as attractive and imposing. In this way the Confraternity's role as a funeral society was strengthened.

Participation in ceremonies did not cause any particular problem during the period of private farming, that is, up to the 1960s. But it did represent a problem in the case of active workers of co-operatives or enterprises. This imposed and still imposes a greater burden on the retired members of the already ageing confraternity. It was especially difficult to draw up a roster of members for funerals and church service at the time of seasonal work in the vineyards. The president informed the members of the roster in a circular letter.

Up to the 1940s the Candle-bearers' Confraternity organised balls and amateur performances which brought proceeds. The teacher or a more enterprising priest gave assistance in this area on a number of occasions.

According to the rules, the top leader of the confraternity, that is, the *president*, or *church president* was the parish priest or assistant priest appointed by him. However, the person of secular president was more important: in practice he was the de facto president of the Confraternity. He handled the affairs of the Confraternity between meetings and was responsible for the organisation of everyday life, for keeping trace of the society's feasts and organising them and also for supervising financial affairs. According to reminiscences, before the turn of the century he was known as *gazda* (master).

The main task of the *record-keeper* was to keep the minutes which he periodically had countersigned by *certifiers*. This office was created at the turn of the century. In the practice before 1950 there was also a separate treasurer.

The Confraternity was once directed by a ten-member *board* composed of the *president*, the *record-keeper*, the *treasurer* and *seven elected members*. The minutes sometimes report on the re-election of officials, while at other times this was restricted to election of the president. Even this was a rare occasion, held after the death of a president. According to the rules of 1930, the supreme forum of the confraternity was the general *assembly*.

After the 1950s this system was greatly simplified: the parish priests no longer exercise their right as president. There is no record-keeper or treasurer and the board has also practically ceased to exist.

Meetings were generally held four times a year: on Saint's Joseph's day, at Easter, on Saint Michael's day and at Advent. These were supplemented by end ad hoc gathering already mentioned, usually at funerals. Circular letters were and still are sent to members for the meetings, following the pattern of the guild convocations. This was the task of the president and the record-keeper. In the 1980s the village was divided into four districts so that the circular letter sent out in four copies could in theory be passed around the whole settlement in one or two days. However, in practice there were minor hitches. Even in the interwar years the minutes often contain complaints that the circulars were not passed on, stopping the flow of information. As a result many members are absent from liturgical events or funerals.

Up to the late 1940s and early 1950s the meetings were held in the school because the confraternity had and still has no premises of its own. With the nationalisation of the schools this was no longer possible. Since then the meetings have been held in the home of the confraternity's recordkeeper or president, or occasionally in the church or sacristy.

Up to the 1940s the confraternity was very active outwards too. This represented the secular side of its life. The Candle-bearers presented amateur dramatic performances. They organised the popular carnival candle balls. According to reminiscences of the members, these balls were the most famous in the village

and the best attended. The confraternity also intended them as a way of increasing this receipts although the minutes show that this only rarely succeeded.

The liturgical innovations of the 1960s brought a change in their roles of a religious nature. What were known as sacred liturgical occasions became rarer. This meant that the need for their participation became less frequent. In the mean time, such traditions as guarding the Holy Sepulchre in the church before Easter, which has been the task of the Candle-bearers up to the 1960s, or the Rogation days, were abandoned. However, they still carry the Easter candle and it is also traditional for them to bear it together with the statue of the risen Christ in the Easter resurrection procession.

The outside observer has the impression that the religious practice of the candle-bearers has become deeper. Because of their rosteres service and the confraternity's feasts they receive the sacraments and confess more frequently.

According to a written record of membership I copied on a collection trip on 12 April 1979, the confraternity had 27 active and 5 very elderly members. However, of these 32 members only 5 were active workers, the others were old age or disability pensioners. By occupation, there were 17 miners, 9 private vine-growers, 2 railway-workers, 1 merchant, 1 shoemaker, 1 cabinetmaker, 1 blacksmith, 1 tailer and 1 field guard. They always made efforts to recruit new members, especially among the younger people.

One of the requirement set out in the 1930 rules was that it was the duty of members of the Candle-bearers's Confraternity to support principally the Catholic candidates for the local council elections and in the national elections. This direct political role has now faded too.

The fact that even despite the ban in the recent past, the Candle-bearers's Confraternity has been in existence for more than 250 years shows that it has always had a social role in the life of the Roman Catholic community of Tállya. The confraternity always found its place in the life of society, including among associations formed for other purposes. Its role is now different from what it was in the past and no doubt there will be further changes in the years ahead. It remains to be seen whether the ageing Confraternity will cease to exist or succeed in renewing itself; whether the local society needs this form of community sacrifice and service to God and the community.

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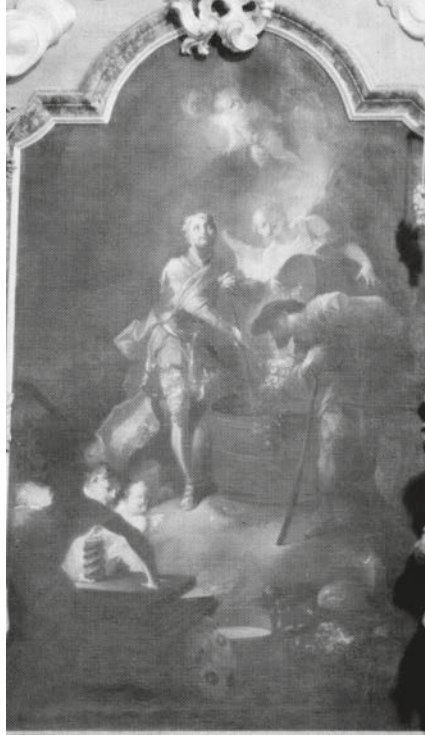


Fig.1. Group of the candle-bearers before the St. Wenceslas-altar.  
(Photo: Kovács, Pál. 1984)



Fig.2. Candle-bearers in the procession. (Photo: Kovács, Pál. 1984)