

LITTLE APOSTLES OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

Abstract: According to the promises of the Sacred Heart, He will protect and bless those who honour Him. As the children's branch of the Society of the Sacred Heart, the most important aims of the Apostleship of Prayer were: atonement of the Sacred Heart of Jesus through the hearts of children, to raise better, more loving-hearted children, to act as apostles to adults by and through children, to participate in the community of virtue and prayer of the universal church. Publications associated with veneration of the Sacred Heart mingled the traditional world-view image with the post-Enlightenment world-view. Religious answers given to the social and economic problems reflected the responses of other rival world-views and societies of the age. The proposed answers to social problems included the idea of saving the nation through the Sacred Heart.

Keywords: Sacred Heart, Apostleship of Prayer, childhood education

Following the Enlightenment, the role of the Catholic Church underwent increasing change. This was accompanied by the rationalisation of religion, in which earlier superstitions were removed from the official practice.² In the 19th century rationalisation went together with an indifference to religion. The clergy saw the cause of this in the "spirit of the age". The gradual shift away from the churches must be seen as a long historical process³, according to some in the western literature it is a phenomenon of the modern age. However, they agree that it is not a linear process, but rather a cyclical fluctuation of religious crises and revival movements.⁴ Placing the schools under state supervision strengthened the process. However, for the masses estrangement from the church was not a programme but the result of indifference.⁵ The church had to face a number of competing world-views. At the same time if the church was to address the faithful more effectively it needed to make use of the increasingly important forums that the "opponents of the church"⁶ – by their own admission – were using to gradually and imperceptibly alienate believers from religion.⁷ The Jesuits wanted to use the

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2 See: DÜLMEN 2005. 137–267.

3 See: KÓSA 2002. 250.

4 See: ALTERMATT 2001. 15.

5 See: KÓSA 2002.252.

6 In the words of Pope Leo XIII.

7 See: KLESTENITZ 2013. 32.

mass media to counterbalance the alienating influence on youth and the intelligentsia.⁸ This aspiration can be observed later too, for example, in the columns for children in *The Heart* paper established in 1915.

Child education and society

According to Ariès, a change occurred from the 17th century in the way children were seen; a new word usage appeared among the bourgeoisie, “childhood” was restricted to its present meaning.⁹ The concept of childhood innocence also appeared as a fundamental notion.¹⁰ According to Linda Pollock and later Shulamith Shahar, this did not mean that earlier ages had been indifferent to children. At the same time infant mortality was very high right up to the end of the 19th century due to hygienic conditions, epidemics, the way of life and the undeveloped state of medical science.¹¹

In traditional societies the child learnt the norms, rites and customs within the family, in the course of socialisation. These included the religious knowledge and practices of the family and immediate community.¹² The child was seen as the guarantee of the community’s future and correct education was therefore held to be important. This was not just the internal affair of the family: for a long while it was under community control.¹³ However, the “religious indifference” of adults also influenced the children’s education. Placing schools under state supervision was also part of the process of secularisation. The church schools were often accused of being outdated.¹⁴ The migration of young people to the towns and the radical change this brought in the way of life, their escape from community control, the socio-economic changes and mixed marriages also caused a change in the regulating role of religion. By the middle of the 19th century people turned to the church only at the major milestones in human life.¹⁵ From the second half of the 19th century religion was increasingly relegated to private life and the events of confraternities.¹⁶ As a consequence, children did not necessarily learn the religious rites at home or were not familiar with the basic teachings of the Bible. This problem also appeared in the interwar years. Religious institutions and societies took over the religious education of children. This was also the case of the Apostleship of Prayer, a religious organisation for children aged 6 to 14 honouring the Sacred Heart of Jesus, established in Szeged in 1920 but also operating throughout the country.

8 See: KLESTENITZ 2013. 93.

9 See: ARIÈS 1987. 26.

10 See: ARIÈS 1987. 26.143.

11 See: DEÁKY 2011. 21–22.

12 See: DEÁKY 2011. 191. See also: Kresz, Fél

13 See: DEÁKY 2011.10–11.

14 See: KÓSA 2002. 256.

15 See: KÓSA 2002. 252.

16 See: KAPITÁNY – KAPITÁNY 2007. 383–384.

Secular problems, eschatological responses

The activity of the Apostleship of Prayer can be interpreted within the frame of the “Catholic renaissance” that unfolded as a revival movement from the 1890s. In addition to the education of children in a religious spirit, the aim of the Apostleship of Prayer was for children to become little apostles who would lead their immediate environment back to the church. The prayer apostle “practices virtues corresponding to his age and is diligent in prayer to establish the country of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in his own heart and also in the souls of others.”¹⁷ They traced the importance of a religious education for children and their role in apostleship back to the Gospel of Mark: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.”¹⁸

By giving children a religious education in the Apostleship of Prayer, an attempt was also made to offer a solution to the social problems of the age: “As a consequence of excessive intellectuality, modern teachings alienate hearts from God and the transcendent – and rivalry, jostling, class struggles separate human hearts from each other. The practical veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus remedies these two troubles: it teaches love as well as the other virtues (dutifulness, the readiness to make sacrifices, humility) in the spirit of love, making them pleasant and attractive to children. And for transcendent reasons the grace that derives from honouring the Sacred Heart will help them overcome the difficulties that we are unable to cope with in our helplessness under the present grave circumstances.”¹⁹ In this way they attempted to remedy through children the alienation from religion. Ferenc Bíró S.J. also stressed the importance of veneration of the Sacred Heart in connection with the solution of social problems: “it is this devotion that offers society and the church the hope of escaping the present catastrophic problems”, then added: “there is a place and need for all other devotions too, but all other devotions are only a means, a path.”²⁰

The solution of social and economic problems through veneration of the Sacred Heart was also a response to other rival ideologies of the time, especially the left-wing movements that also made efforts to win over children. Lajos Farkas reported on this in 1943: “The liquidation of the socialist children’s association was a big achievement of the Szeged Apostleship. The ‘Friends of Children’ kept the many children veritable captives with weekly activities, language lessons, general knowledge talks, films and public lectures, and finally with gift parcels. Its advantage was that its headquarters were close to the school. The Apostleship counterbalanced this with regular weekly collections, rewards, performances, that is, by very similar means. Here, rewards were given only for honest work which

17 ZSÍROS 1935. 25–26.

18 Mk 10, 14–16.

19 N.N. 1929. 10.

20 BÍRÓ 1932. 4.

encouraged serious activity on the part of the young apostles.”²¹ This struggle grew even more intense after 1945, then in 1948 ended with the dissolution of the Apostleship of Prayer. György Alaker S.J., national director of the Apostleship wrote in 1946 to the bishop setting out his concerns in this connection: “It would be a great help for the apostles if some support of benefit for the children could be obtained through the Apostleship from large-scale foreign charity campaigns. However, despite repeated attempts there has been no success in this direction. But the greatest percentage of members of the Apostleship are the children of families living in poverty. Given that the Pioneers operate with great material aid, there is a danger that they will win over many apostles if the Apostleship is unable to provide any form of material assistance for its members.”²²

Mária Blaskó wrote the story “Silver tray, red heart” for the Apostleship of Prayer as a reflection on the social problems of the time and to strengthen the children’s social sensitivity. The hero is a young apostle who is outstanding in all areas but held himself to be better than others and looked down on his fellows he considered to be of less value regarding their social status, origin or material worth and less skilful. As punishment he was unable to present his heart to the Infant Jesus – in the words of the angel of the story – “the silver tray on which we offer our heart to Jesus is love of our fellow men. Alas, Little Peti, you do not have such love. Because you must love everyone, even those who others unjustly do not love.”²³

The young apostles also strove to help solve problems with prayers. The monthly prayer intentions received from the religious instructors and the prayers in the Sacred Heart calendar were followed by brief moral stories and explanations to ensure that the children understood the essence of the prayer intention. For example, in the 1940-41 school year the following intentions (among others) were set: may the sinners, believers in false faiths, and those with no faith be converted; may all Christian families be religious in an exemplary way; may there be many, zealous and holy priests and may the Lord’s blessing be on them; may there be peace in hearts, in families, between peoples and countries, everywhere.²⁴ These prayer intentions generally coincided with the intention of the Pope.

In the 1937-38 school year the young apostles took part in the prayer campaign of the holy year; on request they prayed for sick persons and the dying. According to the teacher’s account, after a while the help given with prayer by the children of Szeged-rókus proved to be so effective that people close to the teachers and the children also asked them to pray for help in problems (sickness, work, financial problems).²⁵ There were also cases where they sought the help of the Apostleship in the hope of a good death. The children met the requests sent to them in writing:

21 FARKAS 1943. 15.

22 Documents of the Szeged-Csanád Diocesan Archive (SZCSEL) Documents, 2293/46.

23 BLASKÓ 1944. 42.

24 See: BLASKÓ 1940. 62–76.

25 Chronicle of 6 Apostleship of Prayer groups in the Szeged-rókus state elementary school, Vol. II. p. 70. 1938–1939 school year. Jesuit Archive and Library on the History of the Order, II. 4.5.

“The next letter in fact reported on a good death. The Lord heard the children’s prayer; they did not want to ask for something in general but came before their heavenly father in concrete matters...”²⁶ Intercession through prayer supposes an active image of God. Within the Catholic renaissance in the interwar years we can observe a return to a pre-Enlightenment, traditional world-view, mingled with the modern ideals of the period. Imhof has shown that “the embeddedness of the life of our predecessors in the notions of Christian faith – however far they were from the official views – always also meant that their own little world, their microcosm, was part of a larger world. [...] The microcosm was part of the macrocosm, hundreds and thousands of little worlds were nestled in the big world that united everything, and according to the Christian ideas this world rested in the protecting arms of the all-powerful God.”²⁷ This world-view closely resembles the way Sándor Bálint wrote about the “world-view of the old peasantry”: “While the urban dweller tended to attribute unexpected, strange or surprising turns in his life to chance, the peasant soul saw symbolic meaning, divine inspiration or even command in them: God directs people’s lives with signs. [...] God’s angels and saints are always ready to be at people’s service, to smooth out their problems.”²⁸ Because, as the gospel said, children were especially dear to Jesus,²⁹ they were regarded as suitable for interceding before God in the interest of adults. The intercession of children – their role as intermediary – can be regarded as similar to the ritual power of those outside the social structure or at the bottom of the social hierarchy, what Turner calls the “power of the weak”.³⁰

Children’s societies similar to the Apostleship of Prayer were also established in other countries. Despite this, Dömjén Szabó O.F.M. considered it important to emphasise the Hungarian origin and character of the Apostleship of Prayer: “The Apostleship of Prayer is dear to us because it is a truly Hungarian patent. It was invented by a Hungarian brain, it developed in Hungarian soil, it was sprinkled by Hungarian tears and warmed by the sun of love from Hungarian hearts.”³¹ This was written in Kolozsvár/Cluj – that was already beyond the border at that time – but similar opinions can be found in other authors. In addition to the national character of the Apostleship of Prayer, great emphasis was also placed on the dedication of the country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus by Francis Joseph during the First World War. With reference to this the devotees of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – among them the young apostles – repeatedly prayed to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the salvation and resurrection of the country, by which they understood territorial revision.³² Denominational interpretations in Hungary at that

26 Chronicle of 6 Apostleship of Prayer groups in the Szeged-rókus state elementary school, Vol. II. p. 74. 1938–1939 school year. Jesuit Archive and Library on the History of the Order, II. 4.5.

27 IMHOF 1992. 23–24.

28 Bálint 1981. 39.

29 Mk. 10, 14–16.

30 TURNER 2002. 126.

31 SZABÓ 1930. 161.

32 With the Trianon Peace Dictate in 1920, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and more than half its population. More than one-third of the Hungarian-speaking population came under the jurisdiction of foreign states.

time regarded the peace dictate that ended the First World War as divine punishment for the religious indifference observed earlier in Hungarian society, similar to the destruction of the Sanctuary in Jerusalem in the Ancient World and the scattering of the chosen people. This is why the children's apostolic tasks included "offering recompense for the sins of the Hungarians" and "through veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus by little Hungarians to appease the Heart of the Lord punishing the Hungarian people."³³ According to the formulation of this in a way that children could understand, the First World War and the subsequent peace treaty happened because people sinned and turned away from God. The thought of doing penance for sin and cutting short the war in this way appeared already in publications during the First World War.³⁴

Conclusions

The aim of the Apostleship of Prayer movement in the interwar years was practical religious education for children. In the publications intended for the children and the Apostleship leaders, modern, rational ideals of the 19th-20th centuries mingled with the pre-Enlightenment world-view. It is in this way we can interpret the aspiration that children could help to solve the social and economic problems of their age through their veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, their prayers and apostleship. However, the children's principal apostolic task was to lead their immediate environment back to religion and the church community. To achieve this the young apostle first of all offered himself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; at the same time, because the local and national leaders of the Apostleship regarded the family as the basic unit of society, they also urged families to offer themselves too. In many families it was also the children who could achieve this. The dedication of families was also linked to the notion of "saving the nation" because the possibility for the salvation ("resurrection") of the homeland was seen through Christian families.³⁵

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33 N.N. 1929. 13.

34 N.N. 1915. – see illustration No. 1.

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Ph. Schumacher.

**Elő akarod-e segíteni a háború szerencsés
befejezését?**

**E kérdés miatt nagyot nézesz és sóhajtasz:
Bár elősegíthetném! De hát én nem vagyok
hadvezér, hogy csapatainkat döntő győzelemre
vezethetném, sem államférfiú nem vagyok, hogy**

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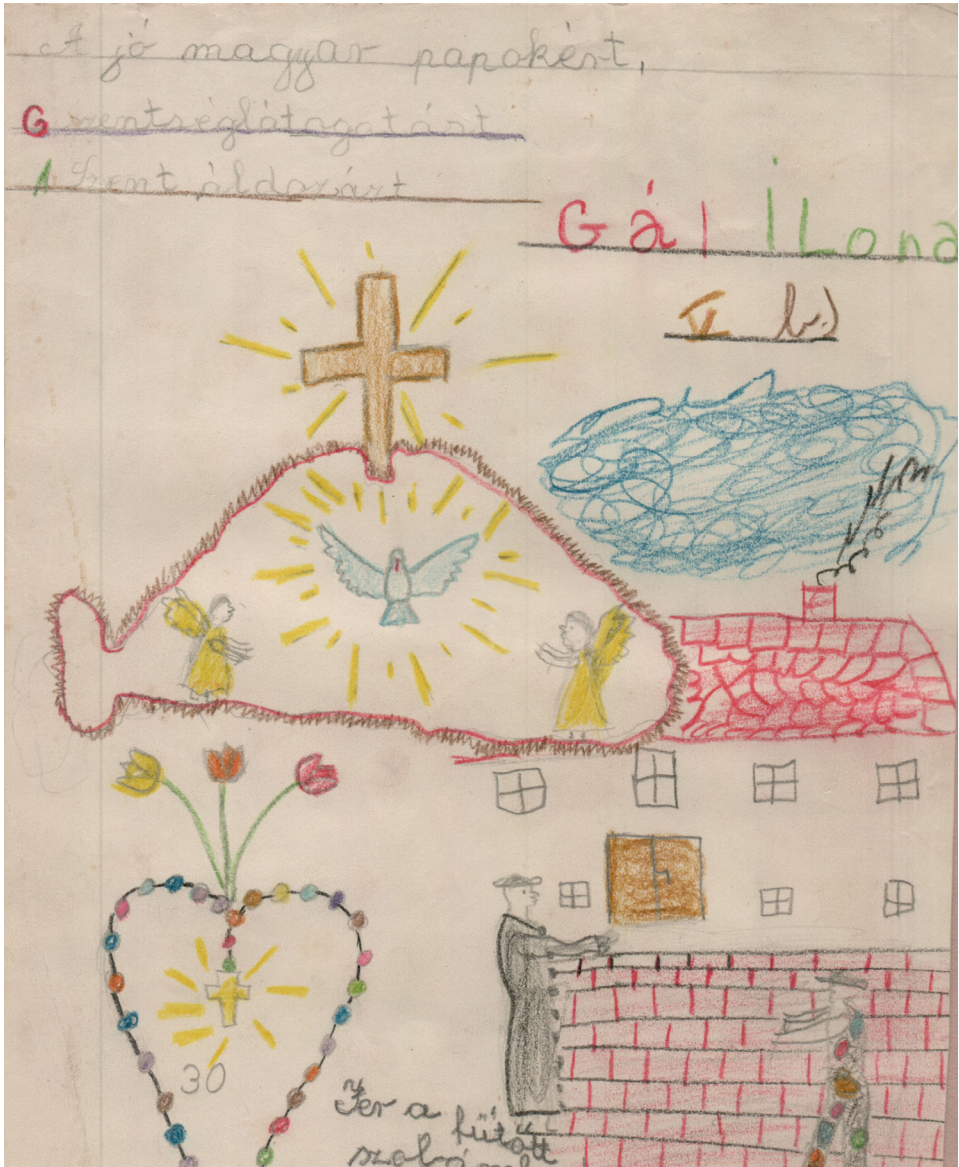
First World War propaganda publication, 1915.



Young apostles in Szeged praying the rosary. Source: Jesuit Archive and Library of the History of the Order, II. 4.5.



Young apostles in Szeged praying for peace. Source: Jesuit Archive and Library of the History of the Order, II. 4.5.



Let us pray for good Hungarian priests! Child's drawing. Source: Jesuit Archive and Library of the History of the Order, II. 4.5.