

THE APPEARANCE OF FOLK EMBROIDERIES ON LITURGICAL TEXTILES OF ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN HUNGARY

Abstract: A slow but far-reaching reform began in the liturgy of the Catholic Church from the second half of the 19th century. One of the principal aims was to involve the faithful in the life and liturgy of the Church. Innovations were initiated for example in the order of the mass, its language, the provision of the sacraments, the formation of the liturgical space and the textiles used in the liturgies. The Second Vatican Council accepted the reforms and as a result they spread rapidly throughout the world from the end of the 1960s. After a brief introduction on the historical background the study attempts to answer the question of why a relatively new form of folk embroidery, *Kalocsa embroidery*, was the first to appear on the renewed liturgical textiles of the Catholic Church. The author also presents a few of the first textiles decorated with Kalocsa embroidery.

Keywords: Catholic Church, liturgical reform; liturgical textile; folk embroidery; Kalocsa embroidery, influence of the Second Vatican Council

Works of art have accompanied Christianity throughout the two thousand years of its history. These works represent values that make the mystery of Christ and the Church tangible; they were created by men but speak of God and to God; they are visible but transmit invisible goods; they are the result of activity but invite contemplation; they are born in this world but point to Heaven. Over the centuries countless works of art have been produced in the fields of architecture, painting, sculpture, artistic metalwork, book art, music, poetry and other branches of art. During the Middle Ages, art, whether individual or collective, largely served the official and public cult of the Church, the *liturgy*.

In the Roman Catholic Church these works of art were created mainly by men. However, there are areas of *sacral art* in which women were also active. One such area was the making of textiles used in the liturgy. In the monastic or beguine communities following various rules great emphasis was placed on manual work, in many places especially on handwork, the making of “*things for the holy church, works and ornaments for the relics of saints*”.¹ Although the special fabrics, such as silk, brocade and velvet, were procured through merchants, they were able to make most of the materials used, linens and threads of various quality.² The

1 ÉRSZEGI 1987. 113.

2 The legend recording the life of Saint Margaret of Hungary, for example, mentions a *beguine* called *Méza* who earned her living making gold thread. ÉRSZEGI 1987. 163. For more details on the beguine communities, see: MEZEY, László 1955.

beguines and nuns making *liturgical textiles* did embroideries not only for their own church or the male monasteries belonging to their order but also for “outside clients”. They made the vestments worn by preaching orders (*surplices, stoles, albs, cinctures, maniples, dalmatics, chasubles, copes, humeral veils, episcopal tunics, birettas, bishops’ mitres*), and the textiles decorating the altar and other liturgical places (*antependia, altar cloths, chalice veils, corporals* placed beneath the chalice, *palls* and *burses* covering the chalice) and the *banners* used in processions, observing the universal rules applying to the Church everywhere, but also taking into account local characteristics, demands and possibilities. The donations in money or kind received for the handwork helped to maintain the everyday life of their community. Presumably kings and queens, aristocrats and their wives also donated such convent embroideries to the churches they founded or supported.

Most of these works were destroyed during the 150 years of Turkish rule. After the expulsion of the Turks, from the end of the 17th century work began on reconstruction of the previously occupied territories. The entire structure of the Catholic Church had to be organised, new churches erected in place of those that had been destroyed, and equipped with the articles needed for the liturgy. In the resettled towns and villages, and in the clusters of houses on the plains gradually becoming settlements, supporting the local church was no longer the exclusive privilege of the landowner. Couples and families that gradually became prosperous through farming followed the centuries-old examples and either individually or together with other families donated objects to this “sanctified world” – paintings, statues, crosses, stations of the cross, pews, glass windows, vestments or altar cloths.

“We now know that some of our folk embroideries are of church (convent) origin. (...) We now know that the symbols used by the Church for the decoration of churches often find their way into folk art where they undergo distinctive further development,” wrote Sándor Bálint in *Népünk ünnepei* [Feasts of our people].³ This process can undoubtedly be traced in various areas of material culture: in peasant architecture, the interiors of homes, items of furniture, on textiles made for various occasions. Among Catholics for a long while this reception was a one-way process, it could not operate in the opposite direction towards the Church. While right from the time of their establishment the Protestant churches not only addressed followers in the vernacular language but also incorporated folk art into their own culture (it is sufficient to think of their painted wooden ceilings and their altar cloths), for a long while the Catholic Church jealously guarded its uniform, universal culture developed over centuries.

However, the *liturgical reform* that unfolded from the second half of the 19th century set off slow but far-reaching changes in the life of the Catholic Church that culminated in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Litany of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).⁴ The renewal movement began

3 BÁLINT 1938.

4 Full text in Hungarian: CSERHÁTI – FÁBIÁN (eds.) 1992. 106-128.

in Belgium and the Netherlands, then quickly spread to Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain and England. It was principally received and spread in their environment by the Benedictine abbeys. The main aim of the reform was to involve believers in the life of the Church; to achieve this it called for innovations, among many other areas, in the order of the mass, its language, and the provision of the sacraments. From the turn of the 19th to the 20th century the new trend gradually spread into Hungary too.

“The many centuries-old Roman liturgy is a veritable work of art: it is like a majestic dome, a decorative garment, beautiful lace, enchanting rhythm, perfect art, order and beauty, the most fitting that can be given to God. Nevertheless, however much peoples and ideals have built on it and beautified it over the centuries, it became increasingly cold and foreign,” wrote Bishop Gyula Szakos and Antal Várnagy, professor of liturgy in an analysis presenting the Constitution on the *Sacred Litany* of the Second Vatican Council.⁵ The coldness and alienation that gradually developed over the centuries was dangerous for the Church because it could lead to the loss of the essential element of the litany, life. For this reason, an important element of the liturgical movement was the active participation of believers in liturgical celebration, a return to the apostolic age and the traditions of the early church. The correctly experienced liturgy is not a thing of beauty for its own sake, it serves a purpose: personal encounter and intimate communion with God in Christ and with each other in the church of Christ. This encounter can be helped (but not replaced) by external factors such as the church building and its furnishings, the works of art and objects used in the course of the mass. The prelates who joined the movement encouraged those entrusted to their care to draw on their own endowments to enrich their communities so that *life* can be returned also to liturgical celebration. They made it possible for *“the characteristic endowments and heritage of different peoples and nations”*⁶ to be incorporated into the life of the local church, for the objects, vestments and textiles to be adapted in material and form to local characteristics and for local traditions and motifs to be used in their ornamentation. It became possible not only for professional artists commissioned by the Church and persons in the church but also for the laity, ordinary believers belonging to the local community to take part in shaping the community space, furnishing it and providing it with objects.

Precisely at the time this liturgical renewal appeared in Hungary a new embroidery culture was emerging in Kalocsa, seat of the historical archbishopric of Kalocsa⁷ and in the surrounding scattered settlements. In 1935 in an introduction to her study on *The Origin and Development of Kalocsa Embroidery* Irma Eckert wrote: *“Since it is only in the last two years that the more educated classes in Kalocsa have taken note of this art – and only when it had spread in its full splendour and individual features – many mistaken opinions have been formed of it. It is compared to this*

5 CSERHÁTI – FÁBLÁN (eds.) 1992. 91.

6 CSERHÁTI – FÁBLÁN (eds.) 1992. 112.

7 The Kalocsa archbishopric was one of the first dioceses in Hungary. It was founded by King Saint Stephen in the year 1000.

or that folk art, its centuries-old past, its Slav or Sárköz origin are debated. The two years I have spent collecting data and material have convinced me that there is no need to seek such romantic paths leading back to the original homeland. Like the other folk-style arts, this too emerged in the 19th century, and much later than its relatives flourishing in various parts of the country, and so it is the youngest branch on the vast trunk of Hungarian folk art. (...) According to the confessions of the oldest women, there was no folk art of any kind in Kalocsa and the surrounding area 70–80 years ago.”⁸

It can be said that *Kalocsa embroidery*, now known throughout the world and often identified with Hungarian folk art, did not begin to emerge until the 1860s and 1870s. The first *needlewomen* who created the embroidery did not compose patterns drawn from ancient motifs or use independently designed patterns but, instead, went to the workshop of a local master, Ferenc Szeidler, to have patterns *stamped*. And the master only had patterns that met the demands of the middle class and reflected bourgeois taste. Up to that time it had been urban middle-class women who ordered the pre-printed patterns from him that were then often sent to women living in the scattered settlements around Kalocsa who were paid to do the embroidery. These peasant women ordered patterns from Szeidler for themselves too, and following bourgeois taste, imitated them using exclusively white thread for *cut-work*, *scallop-stitched* embroidery with a few stem-stitched motifs. At times it was difficult to reach the town from the outlying settlements and the stamping also cost money, so one or two skilful women tried drawing the patterns at home. They copied the *catfish*, *plum stone*, *winged roses*, *hearts*, *pears*, *rosemary*, *roses turned to the sun*, *peacock tail* and other motifs with fantasy names seen from the urban master into their own pattern books. They then copied motifs from the pattern books almost unchanged onto the white, factory-made *cambric* for the other local women.⁹

The first step in further development of the embroidery was when they used satin stitch to fill in leaves in place of cut-work. The embroidery thread remained white but the original cut-work was increasingly replaced by satin stitch. In the 1890s pure black thread came to be used as well as white, then dark blue and red appeared, and these colours were used to complement each other as well. Either motifs placed side by side were embroidered alternately in black, red and blue, or two colours were used within a *wreath*.¹⁰

Beside the first pattern drawers, known in Hungarian as *íróasszonyok* (writing women), a new generation was brought up and became independent pattern drawers who did not follow so closely the “tradition” of pre-printed Szeidler patterns. Together with the old motifs they enriched their pattern books with new motifs seen elsewhere: wheat, tulips, lilies, roses in numerous versions.¹¹ They often took motifs from factory-made textiles imported to Hungary from other

8 ECKERT 1935. 56. 61.

9 For more detail, see: ECKERT 1935; 1936.

10 For more detail, see: BÁRTH 1978.

11 The stylised flowers were generally called simply roses. Descriptive adjectives were added to distinguish between the different roses.

regions of Europe, but sooner or later these were adapted to the taste of the local community and the world they saw around themselves. They also began to use new colours, although they were more restrained than the later range of bright colours. Beside the white, black, dark blue and red, the first decades of the 20th century saw the appearance of wine-red, yellow and then “dull” green.

The years following the First World War brought more change. In courses organised by the National Cottage Industry Federation in the 1910s women in Kalocsa too learnt to do machine embroidery, English Madeira and Richelieu embroidery that was another big influence on the local embroidery culture. Around this time Hungarian aristocratic and bourgeois circles began to show greater interest in folk art. The Kalocsa needlewomen and their daughters received more and more orders through the Federation and embroidery became a source of income for growing numbers. Under the influence of the *Gyöngyösbokréta* (Pearly Bouquet) movement launched in 1931, folk dance groups were formed in Kalocsa and the surrounding villages and scattered settlements. Increasingly spectacular costumes embroidered with bigger, brighter-coloured flowers were made for the groups’ performances. The earlier designs using two or three colours with motifs arranged in relatively narrow bands underwent a transformation: they became wider and spread out over larger areas. The embroiders used many colours and also began to use different shades of the colours. They tried to fill the whole surface with embroidered and Richelieu flowers arranged in bouquets. Besides the countless floral motifs of the so-called *cifrapamukos* (fancy threads) embroidery using close to thirty different colours, a new kind of embroidery known as *szomorúpamukos* (sorrowful threads) developed with more restrained colours in shades of blue, purple, yellow, green and occasionally wine-red. However, these patterns and colours were often intended only for the outside world, for clients. The embroidered textiles with pre-drawn patterns for their own use were often much simpler than the ones made for sale.

The *House of Folk Art* set up in Kalocsa in 1936 became the centre of folk-art goods production, and as such was even more influential in making the most recent style of Kalocsa embroidery developed under external influences known throughout the country and later also Europe – together with the Matyó and Kalotaszeg embroidery. After the Second World War this fame became even greater and can be said to exist even today.

The process of the emergence and development of Kalocsa folk embroidery coincided with the start and unfolding of the reform movement in the Catholic Church. The effect of this renewal trend was increasingly felt after the years of the First World War. The Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ Conference had not yet embraced it at that time but did not ban the introduction of minor innovations. How much the attempts at innovation were allowed inside the church depended on the local clergy. This was the case in Kalocsa and the surrounding scattered settlements too. This coincidence in time created the possibility for Kalocsa embroidery to appear on textiles in churches in Hungary, relatively soon after its development.

The *Máriácska* (*Little Mary*) cloth from Résztelek preserved in the ethnographic collection of the Viski Károly Museum illustrates the initial period of *Kalocsa embroidery*. Judging by its name it must have been used beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary. Its maker edged one side of the white linen with a simple hem and decorated the other three sides with minute cut-work embroidery. The pattern drawer designed a daisy with a spider stitched centre in each scallop and above it a four-leaved clover. The cloth is embroidered entirely in white with mainly cut-work, it is only in the finely curved stems from the daisies and clover that stem stitch is used. There is no sacral reference in any of the motifs of the *Máriácska cloth*. It most closely resembles the *sideboard cloths* made at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.¹²

The motifs sewn in black, red and blue representing the second stage in the development of Kalocsa embroidery are not found among the liturgical textiles. However, the Viski Károly Museum preserves many pieces made especially for church use from the subsequent period marked by a much wider range of colours, and there is hardly a Catholic church in Hungary today that does not have an altar cloth or vestment decorated with Kalocsa embroidery. The reason for this must be sought in the fact that it was precisely in the period of the “discovery” and flowering of Kalocsa folk art that it became possible to include certain details of local folk tradition into the liturgy of the Catholic Church and among the decorations of liturgical textiles. Perhaps we are not mistaken if, beside this door opened wide by the Catholic Church we add the awareness of themselves as folk artists of the Kalocsa women who had been embroidering quietly for their own pleasure and on work for bourgeois ladies, an awareness that was strengthened by the influence of the Pearly Bouquet movement. The cooperation of such creative individuals and representatives of the Church was needed for works serving liturgical purposes and decorated with Kalocsa embroidery to be produced and now occupy a place in all Roman Catholic churches in Hungary.

Among the original pieces drawn by “writing women” and embroidered by local women are the church textiles made in *Alsómégy* and now in the ethnographic collection of the Viski Károly Museum in Kalocsa: altar cloths, veils, narrow cloths for side altars and statues, church banners. These textiles inspired by folk art are highly varied. Some are pure white, others coloured, with crocheted or madeira edges, decorated with cut-work and Richelieu work. What they all have in common is that in colour and form they represent the “most recent style”. Some pieces have the date they were made embroidered on them. An *altar* cloth made in 1933 clearly reflects individual experimentation. The *Sacred Heart motif* placed in the centre is not a local design: the local “writing woman” probably copied it unchanged from a pattern used by the Catholic Church. She supplemented this with her own design, arranging Kalocsa flowers in garlands (in bands around the edge of the cloth) and in bouquets. In keeping with the “new style” these flowers were large and spread out, but not as crowded as in the compositions of later years. The

12 See: LENGYEL 1983. 21-24.

colours are still quite restrained. Two pleasingly harmonised shades each of light blue, pink, purple, yellow and green were used to embroider the vegetal motifs. Red and wine-red appear only on the *Sacred Heart motif*. A bunch of forget-me-nots tied with ribbons in the national colours placed symmetrically on either side of the heart is an individual solution. The edge of the cloth is emphasised with crocheted lace.

The *banners* made scarcely three years later, in 1936 are representatives of the fully developed “most recent style”. In the centre is the *Sacred Heart* familiar from the altar cloth, encircled with a crown of thorns, and the related *Sacred Heart of Virgin Mary* in a wreath of roses. The hearts are clearly not rooted in Kalocsa folk art; instead the designer must have copied them from an already existing liturgical textile used by the Church further away in time and space. But the compositions surrounding the hearts in a horseshoe shape, arranged in bouquets and sewn with *sorrowful threads* reflect the local stock of patterns. The arrangement of the forget-me-nots like bunches of grapes on either side of the bouquets and the two tiny motifs of cross and grapes in the machine-sewn Richelieu edging a handbreadth wide around the banner are drawn from the stock of Christian motifs, intended to strengthen the ecclesiastical character of the banners.

Liturgical textiles from the *Szakmár* church now in the Kalocsa museum, were also made in the 1930s. The vestments comprising *stole*, *chasuble*, *humeral veil* and *cope* as well as chalice veil and burse are uniform in material and motifs. Each piece in the collection embroidered with *fancy threads* on a white silk fabric has been minutely worked with great skill. A narrow garland runs around the edges of the *chasuble* and because, until the resolution of the Second Vatican Council, priests prepared the offertory with their backs to the congregation, the back of the *chasuble* was decorated with a three-part wreath in the form of a cross. In the centre of the cross an IHS inscription has been embroidered in gold, surrounded with forget-me-not tendrils. A gold-coloured, factory-made silk fringe has been sewn on the two ends of the *humeral veil*, above it is a narrow and a wide garland band. In the centre is the same IHS inscription as on the *chasuble*, set in a wreath. In the space between the wreaths, following the crosses woven into the white silk fabric, each row is decorated with three or four *scattered flowers*. Perhaps the most striking piece in the collection is the *cope*. A narrow band of *tendrils* runs around the edges of the *cope* which is open in the front and held in place with a clasp. On both sides of the front this band widens into a three-part wreath. The spectacular wreath in the shape of a shield decorating the back, embroidered on a separate piece of textile, is also arranged in three parts. The priest wore the *chasuble only for the mass*. The *humeral veil* was worn on the shoulders when setting out the offertory, for blessing with the Eucharist or in procession to cover the hands holding the *monstrance*. The *cope* was worn, besides for mass, at solemn ceremonies – litany, exposition of the sacrament, in processions, and when administering the sacraments of christening and marriage. This “collection” from *Szakmár* is a fine example of how local folk art – in the present case an embroidery culture – can be incorporated into the sacral art of the universal church.

The “mother church” of the Kalocsa folk artists is the Saint Emmerich parish church in Eperföld, consecrated in 1933. Many valuable liturgical textiles are preserved here and are still in use. All of these pieces are representatives of the “most recent style”. A good number of them are linked to the names of two outstanding individuals in the world of Kalocsa embroidery, *Mrs János Kovács née Illus Király* (1886-1966) and *Mrs Lajos András née Julis Piris* (1900-1987). They drew the patterns for the veils, altar cloths and banners that were later embroidered by skilful needlewomen attending the church. The work of the “writing women” and needlewomen with ties to the parish gained new impetus in 1969 when Géza Antal, who was fond of Kalocsa embroidery, became their parish priest. “Father Géza’s” love of folk art and the mandatory liturgical reforms introduced throughout the country in the wake of the Second Vatican Council came together in a fortunate encounter in the Eperföld parish. Under the influence of the reforms, not only the interior arrangement of the church and the liturgy but also some of the textiles used in the ceremonies had to be changed.

On 9 November 1969, on the day of the church feast, the new altar facing the congregation was consecrated. For the occasion the women had prepared a special surprise for their parish priest: in barely two months they had embroidered a cloth for the new altar with a design drawn by Julis Piris. To match this altar cloth that is still used on major feasts, over the past decades they have made *banners*, a *canopy* held over the priest carrying the Eucharist in processions, an *antependium* for the main altar, textiles for the side altars and cloths beneath the statues. The new litany also brought a change in the priest’s vestments. The women also embroidered vestments to meet the new requirements: chasubles, stoles, surplices and albs in colours corresponding to different times in the church year. These too were decorated with the colours and motifs of the “most recent style”. Together with *Julis Piris*, the design, drawing and working of these textiles was supervised by her daughter, *Mrs László Ivók née Julianna András*, and *Illus Király’s* niece, *Veronika Zsubori*, a Kalocsa School Sister who serves as cantor in the church.¹³ After the death in 1994 of Géza Antal, the priests and faithful of Eperföld parish preserved the tradition: over the course of the year embroidered Kalocsa flowers decorate the church’s altars and on major feasts also the priests’ vestments.

Altar cloths, stoles, surplices, chasubles and banners embroidered with Kalocsa motifs can be found in Roman Catholic churches throughout Hungary.¹⁴ Perhaps there is not a single Roman Catholic church used by Hungarians living in the diaspora that does not have liturgical textiles decorated with Kalocsa embroidery. The motifs imagined, drawn and embroidered by simple religious women living in the scattered settlements around Kalocsa have become fully integrated into the stock of motifs of sacral art in Hungary. Besides Kalocsa embroidery, in recent decades other elements of the local embroidery culture have been introduced to liturgical textiles. Folk artists working today strive to continue and further

¹³ Personal communication from Erzsébet M. Jolán Vancsura Kalocsa School Sister (†2014), a former associate of the Kalocsa-Eperföld parish and caretaker of the textiles.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II wore such a chasuble when he consecrated the Hungarian chapel in the crypt of Saint Peter’s basilica in Rome in 1980.

develop the tradition of their predecessors. Their efforts not only bring beauty to ordinary and feast day ceremonies, they also help to achieve one of the aims of the liturgical reform: "With these actions it must be made manifest to Christ's faithful that although they are not of this world, they are nevertheless the light of the world and they glorify the Father before the people."¹⁵

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Corporal and chalice veil in Kalocsa embroideries. In the collection of Károly Viski Museum, Kalocsa. (Photo by Ibolya Kerekes)



Chasuble with Kalocsa embroideries. In the collection of Károly Viski Museum, Kalocsa. (Photo by Ibolya Kerekes)



Surplice and chasuble. Used in the parish church Kalocsa-Eperföld.
(Photo by Ibolya Kerekes)