

THE IMPACT OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN HUNGARY DURING THE PERIOD OF STATE SOCIALISM. AN OUTLINE OF THE ISSUE

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This study outlines the impact and reception of the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary during the era of state socialism (1948–1989). Through historical analysis and personal teaching experiences, the author explores how the Church's social doctrine - primarily conveyed through papal encyclicals - was disseminated, interpreted, and suppressed in a communist regime marked by religious oppression. Despite the comprehensive and evolving body of social doctrine initiated by *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and developed through subsequent encyclicals such as *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Mater et Magistra*, and *Laborem Exercens*, the hostile political environment in Hungary significantly limited their influence. The study traces the systemic marginalization of the Church, the nationalization of its institutions, the persecution of clergy, and the censorship of religious discourse. However, it also highlights moments of resilience, such as the cautious reception of papal teachings in religious journals, and the Church's gradual re-emergence in public life during the later Kádár era. After the 1989 regime change, a renewed interest in Catholic social thought led to the revitalization of religious education and charitable organizations. The study concludes that while the Church's social doctrine had minimal institutional effect under socialism, it maintained a lasting spiritual influence that resurfaced strongly in the democratic transition period.

Keywords: Roman Catholic; Social Doctrine; State Socialism; Hungary; Papal Encyclicals; Church-State Relations; Religious Repression;

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Táto štúdia sa zaoberá vplyvom a prijatím sociálnej náuky rímskokatolíckej cirkvi v Maďarsku v období štátneho socializmu (1948–1989). Prostredníctvom historickej analýzy a osobných skúseností z výučby autor skúma, ako bola sociálna náuka cirkvi – šírená predovšetkým prostredníctvom pápežských encyklik – propagovaná, interpretovaná a potláčaná v komunistickom režime charakterizovanom náboženským útlakom. Napriek komplexnému a vyvíjajúcemu sa súboru sociálnej náuky, ktorý iniciovala encyklika *Rerum Novarum* (1891), a ktorý sa rozvíjal prostredníctvom nasledujúcich encyklik - *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Mater et Magistra* a *Laborem Exercens*, nepriateľské politické prostredie v Maďarsku výrazne obmedzilo ich vplyv. Štúdia sledu-

je systematickú marginalizáciu katolíckej cirkvi, znárodňovanie jej inštitúcií, prenasledovanie duchovenstva a cenzúru náboženského diskurzu. Zdôrazňuje však aj momenty odolnosti, ako napríklad opatrné spomínanie pápežských učení v náboženských časopisoch a postupný návrat cirkvi do verejného života v neskoršej Kádárovej ére. Po zmene režimu v roku 1989 viedol obnovený záujem o katolícku sociálnu náuku k oživeniu náboženskej výchovy a charitatívnych organizácií. Štúdia konštatuje, že hoci mala sociálna náuka cirkvi za socializmu minimálny inštitucionálny vplyv, zachovala si trvalý duchovný vplyv, ktorý sa silne prejavil v období demokratickej transformácie.

Kľúčové slová: Rímskokatolíci; sociálna náuka; štátny socializmus; Maďarsko; pápežské encykliky; vzťahy cirkvi a štátu; náboženský útlak;

Introduction

The present study outlines the impact of the Roman Catholic Church's social doctrine in Hungary within the historical context of communist oppression and the state-socialist system between 1948 and 1989. Between 2016 and 2020, I taught the compulsory course "The Social Doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church", which concludes with a colloquium, as part of the Catechist–Pastoral Assistant (BA) and Social Pedagogy (BA) degree programs at Apor Vilmos Catholic College of Vác, Hungary. Insights gained from oral examinations and conversations with students prompted me to undertake an independent study dedicated to this topic.¹ Regrettably, during certain historical periods, it was not possible to speak freely or engage in open debate about the papal social encyclicals. By way of introduction, it must be noted that high-quality studies, comprehensive summaries, and significant syntheses on the Church's social doctrine have also been produced in Hungary.² In the introductory section, I intend to briefly outline the core principles of the Church's social doctrine. According to the entry in the Hungarian Catholic Lexicon, "the social doctrine of the Church is the response of the teaching Church to the social question. The development of this teaching can be traced explicitly from the issuance of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on May 15, 1891. Its evolution can be followed, among others, through the subsequent social encyclicals such as *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Octogesima Adveniens*, *Laborem Exercens*, and *Centesimus Annus*. The foundation of the Church's social doctrine is the Gospel, and its themes - such as the relationship between capital and labour, and between employers and employees, which continuously raises new issues - are addressed from the perspective of evangelization. The Church was prompted by the early experiences of the emerging industrial society to raise its voice more emphatically in defense of the human person, proclaiming not only the universal divine origin and purpose of material goods and a social order founded on solidarity and free from oppression, but also the necessity of

¹ The research and the manuscript were funded by a grant from the National Cultural Fund of Hungary (NKA) (number: 201102/03255) in 2020. The manuscript was submitted to the NKA. It has not yet been published in English or Hungarian.

² BÁLINT, József, S. J. 'A Teremtő munkatársai. A megváltás szolgálói. Az egyház 100 éves szociális tanításának rövid összefoglalása – kis katekizmus' [Co-workers of the Creator. Servants of Redemption. A Brief Summary – A Small Catechism of the Church's 100 Years of Social Doctrine]. Kecskemét 1995.; MUZSLAY, István, S. J. 'Az Egyház szociális tanítása' [The Social Doctrine of the Church]. Budapest 2004.; LAKNER, Zoltán. 'Egyház és társadalom. A tanítás forradalma' [Church and Society. The Revolution of the Teaching]. Budapest 2012., https://btk.ppke.hu/uploads/articles/288257/file/egyhazi_es_tarsadalom.pdf. Accessed July 7, 2020.

spiritual and religious values for the realization of justice both at the social and individual levels. The social doctrine of the Church, especially in contemporary times, focuses on the human being who lives within the complex web of relationships characteristic of modern society, and who, with the aid of the human sciences and philosophy, increasingly understands themselves as a 'social being'. Yet true identity is revealed to the individual solely through faith; therefore, faith serves as the starting point of the Church's social doctrine."³

Based on all of the above, the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church is primarily embodied in the papal social encyclicals and the decrees of the Second Vatican Council:

- Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Things"), on the question of labor, issued on May 15, 1891.
- Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* ("In the Fortieth Year"), 1931.
- Pope Saint John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* ("Mother and Teacher"), 1961.
- Pope Saint John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"), 1963.
- The Second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* ("Joy and Hope") on the Church in the modern world, 1965.
- Pope Saint Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* ("The Development of Peoples"), 1967.
- Pope Saint Paul VI's apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens* ("Approaching the Eightieth"), 1971.
- Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"), 1981.
- Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* ("On Social Concern"), 1987.
- Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus* ("The Hundredth Year"), 1991.
- Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth"), 2009.
- Pope Francis's encyclical *Fratelli tutti* ("All Brothers"), 2020.

Therefore, my aim is to examine the reception and impact in Hungary of those documents issued between 1948 and 1989. Certain encyclicals, such as *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, enjoyed a strong reception and significant influence in Hungary; however, during the years of the communist dictatorship, this was no longer the case. It is important to note that during this period, based on the 1949 census data, the vast majority of Hungarian society was still religious. The proportion of people belonging to a religion or denomination within the total population was as follows: Roman Catholic 67.8%, Greek Catholic 2.7%, Greek Orthodox 0.4%, Reformed (Calvinist) 21.9%, Lutheran 5.2%, Unitarian 0.1%, Jewish 1.5%, other 0.4%. After the regime change, the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) first measured religiosity in the 1992 Social Mobility Survey. Comparing the results of this survey with the 1949 census data shows that between 1949 and 1992 the proportions of denominations changed little, while the share of people not belonging to any religious denomination increased from 0.1% to 4.8%.⁴

³ N. A. 'Az Egyház szociális tanítása' [The Social Doctrine of the Church]. Budapest é. n., <https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/E/Egyh%C3%A1z%20szoci%C3%A1lis%20tan%C3%ADt%C3%A1sa.html>. Accessed July 2, 2020.

⁴ KOVÁCS, Benedek – LAJTAI, Máttyás. 'Magyarország vallási viszonyai a népszámlálások és egyéb lakossági adatfelvételek tükrében' [Religious Landscape of Hungary: Insights from Censuses and Other Population Surveys]. In *Statistikai Szemle*, 2020, vol. 98, no. 6, p. 581, 587.

The dark decades of intimidation, oppression, and terror in Hungary

Before I turn to the reception of the social encyclicals in Hungary after 1945, I think it is useful to briefly summarise the history of persecution of the Church by the Communist regime. In Hungary, already during the coalition period of 1945–1947, and especially from 1948 onwards, the Hungarian Communist Party and its allies turned against the churches. During the brief democratic transitional era, the Democratic People's Party, led by István Barankovics⁵, represented Christian socialist ideals in the country. Many members of parliament, journalists, and leading intellectuals affiliated with the Democratic People's Party kept the message of the social encyclicals in mind throughout their political and public activities, as well as in their writings. From 1948 onwards, they faced decades of retaliation – including intimidation, imprisonment, forced relocation, and more – as well as exile or passive resistance. Historian and academic Ignác Romsics summarizes this era in his book as follows:

According to Act XXXIII of 1948, approximately 6,500 municipal and denominational schools were nationalized. Nearly half of these were taken from the Catholic Church. Although compulsory religious education was initially retained, the 'bastions' of religious upbringing were thereby dismantled. The 18,000 educators employed in the nationalized schools became state employees under the law, retaining their former salaries. Cardinal József Mindszenty⁶, Archbishop of Esztergom, however, forbade clergy from accepting positions in the nationalized schools. The majority of monastic, nun, and priest teachers obeyed this episcopal directive. By 1948, Mindszenty, who openly confronted the Communists with stubborn determination, had become not only a revered figure among believing Catholics but also the last hope and guiding personality for all those alarmed by the increasingly evident prospect of Communist dictatorship. For this reason, the Communist leadership decided to eliminate him as well. Accused on fabricated charges of espionage, currency trafficking, and attempting to overthrow the republic, he was arrested on December 26, 1948, and sentenced on February 8, 1949, to life imprisonment. Like many others labelled as 'enemies of the people' and 'reactionaries', he came to know Lieutenant General Gábor Péter⁷ and the sadistic interrogators and henchmen from the State Protection Authority (ÁVH) stationed at Andrassy Avenue 60 in Budapest during his imprisonment. After Mindszenty was convicted and imprisoned, the abolition of compulsory religious education was once again brought to the forefront. This was ultimately enacted by the Presidential Council's decree No. 5, issued on September 5, 1949. From that point on, the youth received religious instruction only at the discretion and courage of their parents. The battle for the souls and intellectual influence over future generations was thus effectively decided. In addition to their landed properties, the churches also lost their schools. According to the agreement concluded with the state on August 30, 1950, the Catholic Church was permitted to retain only eight secondary schools. At the same time,

⁵ Barankovics, István (1906-1974) was a Hungarian journalist, politician, MP and a Chairman of the Democratic People's Party.

⁶ Mindszenty, József (1892-1975) was a Roman Catholic priest, Prince Primate, Archbishop of Esztergom (1945-1974) and Cardinal.

⁷ Péter, Gábor (1906-1993) was a Hungarian apprentice tailor, communist politician and the Head of the State Protection Authority

their publishing activities were restricted. From then on, various denominations were generally allowed to publish only one weekly and one monthly periodical.⁸

Pursuant to the agreement between the Catholic Church and the state, on September 7, 1950, the Presidential Council revoked the operating licenses of the majority of religious orders. However, the activities of the Franciscans, Piarists, and Benedictines – who taught in secondary schools exempted from nationalization – were still permitted. To hinder the replenishment of the clergy, the diocesan seminaries were consolidated, and theological faculties were separated from the universities. A significant portion of the Catholic clergy received the agreement with distrust, and the episcopal oath of allegiance was still awaited. In an effort to break the resistance of the clergy, Archbishop József Grósz⁹ of Kalocsa, a signatory of the 1950 agreement, was arrested in June 1951 on fabricated charges and sentenced to 15 years in prison. The co-defendants in the show trial received prison sentences ranging from 8 to 13 years. Under the impact of this trial, in July 1951 the Catholic episcopal conference took the oath to the 1949 Constitution and called upon the lower clergy to do the same. Furthermore, it accepted that the appointment of senior prelates henceforth required the prior approval of the Presidential Council. It also declared its endorsement of the ‘Catholic Peace Priests’ movement. At the same time, leaders of other churches expressed their full support for the state. As a conclusion to the agreements between the state and the churches, in September 1951 the government established the Religious Denominations Fund to cover the expenses of the churches.¹⁰

On May 15, 1951, the *Állami Egyházügyi Hivatal* (State Office for Church Affairs) was established and soon became notorious. It operated until July 1, 1989, serving as the institutional body responsible for implementing agreements between the Hungarian state and religious denominations, as well as managing the state’s administrative affairs related to religion. The ÁEH was directly supervised by the Council of Ministers and headed by a president. The affairs of individual denominations were handled by dedicated departments within the office. The ÁEH, together with state security agencies such as the ÁVO, ÁVH, and later the Ministry of Interior’s III/III Directorate, subjected churches – especially the clergy, but also the laity – to the strictest control and surveillance. Agents of these services employed all means available, showing no hesitation even to resort to assassinations. After 1956, the regime somewhat relaxed; surveillance and wiretapping conducted by secret services became more prominent. Unfortunately, the entire Catholic clergy was infiltrated by agents and recruited church personnel up until the regime change in 1989.

From 1949 onward, the numerous Catholic organizations established between the two World Wars – covering advocacy, education, social services, charity, and youth work – were subjected to immediate prohibition by the Minister of the Interior, often accompanied by the seizure of their headquarters and confiscation of their assets. This was accompanied by reprisals against their leaders and, in many cases, even ordinary members. Although there were no papal social encyclicals during this period, the influence of the earlier ones unfortunately disappeared in Hungarian public life.

⁸ ROMSICS, Ignác. ‘Magyarország története a XX. században’ [The History of Hungary in the 20th Century]. Budapest 2000. pp. 324-325.

⁹ Grósz, József (1887-1961) was a Roman Catholic priest, Bishop of Szombathely, Archbishop of Kalocsa (1943-1961).

¹⁰ ROMSICS, 2000. p. 358.

About the church policy of the Kádár regime

Following decades of repression and open terror, after the 1956 Revolution and War of Independence, the emerging and consolidating Kádár¹¹ government sought to normalize relations with the Holy See and the Hungarian Catholic Church. In the chapter on the Kádár era in *The History of the Twentieth Century*, the author duo Gergely and Izsák write about this as follows: As a sign of the international détente process, the Vatican signed a partial agreement with Hungary in the autumn of 1964, in which it recognized the Presidential Council's prior approval rights regarding episcopal appointments. The partial agreement also addressed the clergy's oath of loyalty to the state and constitution and outlined several key issues discussed during the negotiations, such as the filling of pastoral seats in dioceses, the procedures for appointing bishops, the personal status of certain bishops, the cases of arrested and suspended priests and religious, the question of priestly seminaries, religious education in schools, freedom of pastoral care, the Pontifical Hungarian Institute, the Mindszenty case, and others. This agreement was significant from both a domestic political and an international perspective. For the Vatican, it amounted to the de facto recognition of socialist Hungary and served as a model for establishing relations with other socialist countries. For the Hungarian Church, it facilitated pastoral activity and further development of church–state relations. At the same time, it established a framework for ongoing negotiations between the Hungarian state and the Vatican to resolve outstanding issues through dialogue, without considering the achieved results as final or closed.

In 1968, a new series of negotiations began between the Holy See and the Hungarian government, during which they not only reviewed the consequences of the 1964 partial agreement but also agreed to regulate episcopal appointments on an ad hoc basis in the future. Following this successful agreement, ten new episcopal appointments were made in the subsequent years. The Holy See then abolished its 1957 measure that prohibited priests from engaging in political activities—such as holding parliamentary seats or participating in peace movements. Around the same time, in 1971, the “Mindszenty issue” was also “resolved”. As a result of the negotiations between representatives of the Holy See and the Hungarian government, the Presidential Council granted a pardon to Cardinal Mindszenty in 1971. Pope Paul VI promised that in 1972, when Mindszenty would turn 80, he would persuade him to resign, or if not, ensure his retirement by the Holy See's intervention, thereby formally ending the primatial seat of Esztergom. Cardinal Mindszenty left Hungary on September 28, 1971, and after a short stay in Rome and a longer lecture tour in the United States and Canada, he settled in Vienna at the Pázmáneum. However, he refused to resign from his archiepiscopal office despite any requests from the Pope. Subsequently, at the end of 1973, Pope Paul VI declared the archiepiscopal seat of Esztergom vacant, and in February 1974, appointed László Lékai¹², titular bishop and ap-

¹¹ Kádár, János (1912-1989) was a communist politician, MP, Minister of the Interior (1948-1950), First Secretary (later: General Secretary) of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (1956-1985), Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Hungary (1956-1958, 1961-1965). The name of János Kádár marked the era of socialist Hungary between 1956 and 1989, during which the country was known as the “happiest barrack,” where “goulash communism” or “refrigerator socialism” was implemented, referring to the higher standard of living and more relaxed political atmosphere compared to the surrounding countries.

¹² Lékai, László (1910-1986) was a Roman Catholic priest, Primate, Archbishop of Esztergom (1976-1986) and Cardinal.

ostolic administrator of Veszprém, as apostolic governor of Esztergom. Cardinal József Mindszenty passed away in Vienna on May 6, 1975, at the age of 83.

After obtaining the prior approval of the Presidential Council, Pope Paul VI appointed László Lékai as Archbishop of Esztergom on February 10, 1976. Later that same year, the Pope elevated him to the cardinalate in a secret consistory. This completed the hierarchy of the Hungarian Catholic Church after more than a quarter of a century and marked the beginning of a new chapter in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the party-state.

As a result of the good relations established between the Holy See and Hungary, in the summer of 1977, János Kádár became the first communist party leader – who did not hold a state office – to visit the Vatican, where he was received by the Pope, causing an international sensation. By that time, six church leaders served as members of parliament, many worked in local councils, and several hundred participated in various committees of the *Hazafias Népfront* (Patriotic People's Front).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, every major church was represented in the National Council of the People's Front, with a total of seventeen members. Cardinal Archbishop László Lékai was also a member of the council's presidency.¹³

The social encyclicals of Pope Saint John XXIII

The impact of the social encyclicals written in the 1960s and 1970s was moderately felt in our country. The Hungarian Catholic Church, suffering under the repression of the Kádár regime, carried out its activities under the continuous supervision of the ÁEH (State Office for Church Affairs) and the watchful eyes of the state security services. The authorities did everything to isolate the Church from society, so there could be no wide-ranging discussion about the content of the encyclicals outside the Church's framework. I believe a lot can be said about the era by the fact that in a popular 1987 publication, the Book of Facts '88, information about the Hungarian Catholic Church fit into just under two pages.¹⁴ The communist regime did everything from 1948 onwards to make impossible and empty out the Church's devotional, social, educational, and youth organizations, as well as its press.

Nevertheless, the papal social encyclicals published in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s could typically be read in fourth types of publications. First, obviously, in the remaining, modest number of strictly censored Hungarian Catholic press outlets, notably the Catholic weekly *Új Ember* and the Catholic literary and scientific monthly journal *Vigília*. Second, in Hungarian Catholic periodicals published in the diaspora, especially in *Katolikus Szemle*, a quarterly journal published in Rome from 1949, originally issued by the Saint Stephen Society as a literary and scientific periodical. Among Hungarian Catholic media operating abroad, the Hungarian service of Vatican Radio deserves special mention, as it played a crucial role in supplying Hungarian believers with reliable information during the dark years of communism. Its editors also endeavoured to cover the papal social encyclicals. Third, in the domestic Marxist press, where the dominance of *Világosság*, a "materialist worldview journal," dealing with encyclicals was striking. Additionally — among

¹³ GERGELY, Jenő – IZSÁK, Lajos. 'A huszadik század története' [The History of the Twentieth Century]. Budapest 2000. pp. 428-429.

¹⁴ BALÓ, György-LIPOVECZ, Iván (eds.). 'Tények Könyve '88. Magyar és Nemzetközi Almanach' [Book of Facts '88: Hungarian and International Almanac]. Budapest 1987. pp. 813-815.

others — analytical articles about the encyclicals can also be found in *Theológiai Szemle*, “the journal of evangelical Protestantism in Hungary.” Finally, the fourth category comprises the often overlooked Hungarian Catholic samizdat literature, which, while not always explicitly, engaged with the papal social encyclicals and reflected on their influence within Hungary.¹⁵

In the present study, I primarily draw from the most important articles on encyclicals published in *Új Ember*. Thus, I mainly examine how the officially approved Catholic publications reflected on the issue. Based on the sources and the research of other historians, it can be stated that the papal social encyclicals proclaiming the social doctrine of the Church had only a theoretical, spiritual impact in Hungary during the decades of socialism, and then only among a narrow circle of clergy and interested believers. Neither the Rákosi nor the Kádár regime allowed Roman Catholic social, educational, youth or charitable organisations of any kind to be founded and operate on the basis of the encyclicals. This only took place on the eve of and during the transition from the very end of the 1980s onwards.

Pope Saint John XXIII’s encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (“Mother and Teacher”), 1961.

In the June 3, 1962 issue of *Új Ember*, Vid Mihelics¹⁶ published the first significant summary of Pope John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra* encyclical: In this, the Pope recalls the social changes since the earlier major social encyclicals – *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* – and sets out new guiding principles for the Catholic Church to address the problems of the modern era. The encyclical emphasizes that social progress must keep pace with economic growth and has a distinctly anti-capitalist tone. It particularly stresses the acceptance of nationalization and social ownership, as well as the right of workers to participate in the management of their enterprises. In the agrarian question, a new element appears in the support of cooperative farming as the best means for smallholders to survive and prosper.

The encyclical speaks about socialism in a moderate and open tone and does not completely exclude the possibility of reconciling economic and social views. Several points — such as support for developing nations — have received recognition beyond the Catholic community. It highlights that aid must be selfless, rejecting attempts by developed countries to use assistance for political or economic domination. As the world increasingly becomes a global economic unit, the realization of international social justice, especially improving the living standards of developing countries, becomes urgent. The Pope also strongly warns that the political exploitation of such aid would represent a new form of colonialism and pose a threat to world peace.

This encyclical offers a broader perspective than its predecessors, which tended to address social issues primarily on a national level. This is especially important for those living

¹⁵ See more on this issue: POVEDÁK, Kinga. ‘Popular Hymnody and Lived Catholicism in Hungary in the 1970s–1980s’. In *Religions*, 2021, vol. 12, no. 6, pp. 1-16.; VÖLGYESI, Orsolya. ‘Túlélés vagy megújulás? Himfy Ferenc káplán és a katolikus alsópapság szerveződése az 1940-es, 1950-es évek fordulóján’ [Survival or Renewal? Chaplain Ferenc Himfy and the Catholic Lower Clergy’s Organizational Efforts at the Turn of the 1940s and 1950s]. In *Századok*, 2015, vol. 149, no. 6, pp. 1445-1461.

¹⁶ Mihelics, Vid (1899-1968) was a Hungarian journalist, editor, social policy expert and MP.

in socialist countries, where ownership and the distribution of goods are viewed differently, and where questions of social justice arise in new contexts.¹⁷

Pope Saint John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"), 1963

In the September 22, 1963 issue of *Új Ember*, Antal Ijjas¹⁸ published an article titled "In Hungarian – To Every Person of Goodwill," reporting on the Hungarian edition of Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in terris* encyclical and commemorating the recently deceased pope. The article emphasizes that this encyclical is extraordinary because it addresses not only the Church but all humanity, "to every person of goodwill." Its style is both accessible and dignified; it expresses profound and serious ideas in clear, everyday language. The encyclical highlights fundamental human rights, such as the right to life and bodily integrity, decent living conditions (food, clothing, housing, rest, medical care), freedom of expression, and the right to work.

Furthermore, the encyclical discusses issues of the common good, the state, nations and minorities, the obsolescence of colonialism, and emphasizes the principle of equality among peoples. It critically addresses the arms race, especially nuclear weapons, and in the name of human dignity urges disarmament, supporting the role of the United Nations in maintaining global peace. Finally, the encyclical calls on Catholics to actively participate in the public life of their countries and to work together toward establishing a new, just order of human relations—between citizens, states, and nations alike. Thus, the encyclical is not only a document but the legacy of Pope John XXIII, now available in Hungarian, bringing us closer to the universal ideal, will, and hope for peace.¹⁹

The Second Vatican Council and the social encyclicals of Pope Saint Paul VI

The Second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (Joy and Hope) on the Church in the modern world (1965)

The Second Vatican Council, held between 1962 and 1965, was the 21st ecumenical council that renewed the Roman Catholic Church in the 20th century. It took place during the papacies of John XXIII (1958–1963) and Paul VI (1963–1978) and was the most significant event in 20th-century Church history. "The Church's social teaching took concrete form in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (Joy and Hope). *Gaudium et spes* is the fruit of the Church's dialogue with the modern world. Although pastoral in nature, its dogmatic foundation is unquestionable, and following a breakthrough after the first session, the views of more progressive theologians increasingly prevailed. The constitution summarizes the Church's social teaching with regard to promoting the common good and social justice. The cornerstone of the Church's social teaching is the personal dignity of the human person and the assurance of their vocation supernatural. Over the past 100 years, the popes have fought against the errors of both one-sided collectivism (Marxism) and excessive individualism (capitalist liberalism). Papal encyclicals have increasingly viewed

¹⁷ MIHELICS, Vid. ' Amit a modern kor problémájának nevez a Mater et Magistra' [What the Mater et Magistra calls the problem of the modern age]. In *Új Ember*, 1962, vol. 18, no. 22, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ijjas, Antal (1906-1980) was a Hungarian journalist and writer.

¹⁹ IJJAS, Antal. ' Magyarul – minden jóakarátú emberhez' [In Hungarian – To Every Person of Goodwil]. In *Új Ember*, 1963, vol. 19, no. 38, p. 1.

issues of development and peace, justice, and solidarity from a global perspective. They have not forgotten the situation of the Third World or the imbalance between the northern and southern hemispheres. The Church professes the essential equality of all people and the equal personal dignity of every individual. The strikingly large economic and social disparities between individuals, ethnic groups, and nations 'contradict social justice, fairness, and the dignity of the human person; at the same time, they endanger social and international peace.'²⁰

Pope Saint Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* ("The Development of Peoples"), 1967.

When beginning to investigate the impact of this encyclical in Hungary, the first striking fact for me was that – unlike previous encyclicals – a lengthy article about it appeared in a regional daily newspaper, *Kisalföld* of Győr-Sopron County, titled "Encyclical on the 'Progress of Peoples'" on May 11, 1967. Since this newspaper was published by the county organization of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) and the county council, the article naturally reflected the official position of the regime.

Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum progressio* ("The Progress of Peoples") comprises approximately twelve thousand words and stands as one of the most significant documents addressing the vast disparity between poverty and wealth. The encyclical sharply highlights the "scandalous" inequality between starving and affluent peoples, explicitly attributing responsibility for this condition to colonialism and capitalism. The document criticizes the monocultural economies left by colonial regimes and the dominance of leading industrial nations in global trade, while condemning the social consequences of unfettered "liberal" capitalism, which further exacerbates poverty.

This encyclical represents a new direction in Catholic social teaching, as it rarely previously broached the limitation of private ownership of the means of production and refrained from condemning communism outright, though it remained within the framework of capitalism. The document surprised major powers such as the United States, whose official circles received its contents critically. It reflects a transformation in the social thinking of the Catholic Church and fosters dialogue between Catholics and communists. Although not Marxist in orientation, the encyclical advocates reform of capitalism and an active role for the state in promoting social justice, while simultaneously defending the Church's position in the Third World. However, in matters of international cooperation, it adopts a less pragmatic stance compared to its predecessor, Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*. Overall, *Populorum progressio* constitutes a significant advance in the Church's social doctrine, recognizing global changes and focusing attention on the problems of the Third World, identifying colonialism as the root cause of widespread poverty.²¹ In my opinion it is interesting and telling that an article about this encyclical appeared in a county newspaper, published by the MSZMP.

²⁰ N. A. 'Gaudium et spes'. Budapest: Szent István Társulat, é. n., <https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/G/Gaudium%20et%20spes.html>. Accessed July 2, 2020.

²¹ G. E. 'Enciklika a „Népek haladásá”-ról' [Encyclical on the 'Progress of Peoples']. *Kisalföld*, 1967, 23 (109), p. 2.

Pope Saint Paul VI's apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens* ("Approaching the Eightieth"), 1971.

In a 1972 interview published in *Új Ember* about the *Octogesima adveniens* papal letter, József Udvardy²², Bishop of Csanád, emphasized that although the document is not an encyclical, it represents a significant new direction in the Church's social teaching. The letter does not offer universal, one-size-fits-all solutions but rather encourages local Christian communities to discern the necessary path for social, political, and economic changes based on their own circumstances and in the light of the Gospel. It highlights the importance of dialogue among Catholics, with other Christian denominations, and with all people of goodwill. The letter draws attention to emerging social issues: severe housing and employment shortages caused by mass migration to cities; the increasingly critical social situation of youth; unresolved questions of women's equality in many countries; and persistent problems of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination, emigration, and underdeveloped labour organization. It also stresses the significant social impact of mass communication, which has become a powerful force shaping human consciousness.

Particularly noteworthy is its emphasis on environmental protection: the excessive and reckless exploitation of natural resources has caused serious ecological damage that threatens humanity's future. Pollution, waste, new diseases, and the destruction of the natural environment have become not only ecological concerns but grave social problems affecting the entire human family.

Bishop Udvardy underlined that the Pope does not intend to provide ready-made solutions valid in every situation but instead entrusts local Catholic communities with the responsibility to make decisions adapted to their circumstances. The letter calls for dialogue, critical analysis, and social action grounded in the Gospel. When it warns against certain ideologies, it does not seek to argue or reject but rather to aid in their proper discernment and to promote Christian cooperation.²³

The social encyclicals of Pope Saint John Paul II

Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"), 1981.

A summary of Pope John Paul II's new encyclical *Laborem exercens*, released on September 15, appeared in the September 27, 1981 issue of *Új Ember*. The encyclical focuses on work and workers, and in his announcement, the pope highlighted that May 15 of that year marked the 90th anniversary of the social encyclical *Rerum novarum*, to which he refers as he continues the Church's teaching on social issues. John Paul II emphasizes that work is present already in the first pages of Scripture, where God calls human beings to have dominion over the earth, and that manual labour is exemplified in the life of Jesus. The encyclical points out that work is not merely a means of livelihood but a vocation through which a person can serve, grow in fulfilment, and contribute to the humanization

²² Udvardy, József (1911-2000) was a Roman Catholic priest and Bishop of Csanád.

²³ N. A. 'A jóakarátú emberek közös útján – az igazságosságért és a békéért. Beszélgetés Udvardy József püspökkel az „Octogesima adveniens” kezdetű pápai levélről’ [On the Common Path of Goodwill People — For Justice and Peace. A conversation with Bishop József Udvardy about the papal letter *Octogesima adveniens*]. In *Új Ember*, 1972, vol. 28, no. 2, p. 3.

of the world in brotherly love. Work is a path to sanctification, closely linked with prayer, and thus becomes a participation in God's creative and redemptive work.

The document is unique in that it focuses exclusively on human work and continues the social teachings of previous popes (Pius IX, John XXIII, Paul VI) while offering a deeper and more comprehensive approach. Father Jan Schotte²⁴, Secretary of the *Justitia et Pax* Commission, who presented the encyclical to the press, noted that *Laborem exercens* arrived somewhat unexpectedly, yet was long-awaited because John Paul II had shown keen interest in the social and human dimensions of work since the beginning of his ministry. Schotte stressed that the encyclical addresses not only the economic aspects of work but also deeply considers the dignity and rights of the human person, which are expressed through everyday labour. The document speaks to society as a whole, and as the Pope states, "we are all workers," making the message resonate with everyone. In summary, the encyclical is an important step in the Church's social teaching, emphasizing the value and dignity of work and the role of the working person in shaping society and fulfilling human life.²⁵

Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* ("On Social Concern"), 1987.

A lecture by Cardinal László Paskai²⁶, Primate and Archbishop of Esztergom, on Pope John Paul II's social encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* appeared in *Új Ember*. The encyclical addresses issues of social development, particularly from the perspective of contemporary Hungarian society. Cardinal Paskai emphasized that the Pope does not propose concrete solutions but rather guidelines, as the Church cannot provide technical answers to the problems of underdevelopment. Nevertheless, drawing on its experience and religious mission, the Church seeks to assist humanity in preserving human dignity.

He highlighted that the foundation of genuine social development is a firm moral basis, which is currently in crisis worldwide and also felt in Hungary through the weakening of moral ideals. It is therefore important to stress that Catholic moral teaching rests on absolute foundations: faith in the Creator God, who establishes norms before which we are accountable for our actions. Without maintaining these God-given moral norms, true social renewal is impossible. Cardinal Paskai paid special attention to the issue of abortion, noting Hungary's regrettably prominent position internationally. He drew attention to the fact that the protection of life is not merely a demographic matter but the fundamental basis of individual and communal morality; consequently, he addressed a letter on this issue to the Prime Minister. Social development is a communal responsibility requiring cooperation and solidarity from all. Cardinal Paskai reminded that the clash of differing opinions is natural and constructive but becomes dangerous if it deteriorates into personal antagonism, a form of discord characteristic of Hungarian society. The encyclical warns against this to ensure that reforms may proceed effectively.

²⁴ Schotte, Jan Pieter, CICM (1928-2005) was a Belgian Roman Catholic priest, Cardinal and the official of the Roman Curia.

²⁵ N. A. 'Mindnyájan munkások vagyunk. A Szentatya új enciklikája' [We Are All Workers. The Pope's New Encyclical]. In *Új Ember*, 1981, vol. 37, no. 39, p. 2.

²⁶ Paskai, László, O. F. M. (1927-2015) was a Roman Catholic priest, Franciscan friar, Primate, Archbishop of Esztergom (1987-2002) and Cardinal.

Alongside democracy, he emphasized the importance of understanding and learning dialogue, which connects people, enables listening to others, and weighing their opinions, while rejecting the imposition of views by authority. Dialogue serves solidarity, enriching all participants, whereas poor dialogue leads to hostility. Following the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed itself to dialogue in all areas, producing many positive outcomes, and the Hungarian Church, drawing from this spirit, supports cooperation and solidarity, which are the foundations of social development.

As an example, Cardinal Paskai cited the commemorations of the 950th anniversary of *Szent István* [Saint Stephen]’s death, which strengthened national unity and Christian values, demonstrating that social development can be realized on the basis of national identity. He underscored that Hungarian social renewal cannot ignore our history and culture, especially amid modern welfare societies and technological advancement, which may cause us to forget our spiritual and intellectual values. He regarded initiatives aimed at preserving national values as encouraging but stressed that all such movements must be firmly rooted in Hungary’s historical foundations.

Regarding the Church’s role in social life, Cardinal Paskai emphasized that Christian faithful must assume an active and responsible role not only in pastoral and liturgical activities but also in shaping society. Historically, their opportunities and practical preparation for this role have been limited, but now greater space is opening. For the healthy development and flourishing of Hungarian society, the Catholic Church is necessary, and its members bear the responsibility - guided by Church teaching and historical tradition – to participate actively in societal formation.

During this period, on the eve of the regime change, “freer winds” were already blowing in Hungary, and this was also reflected in Paskai’s statements. The Hungarian Roman Catholic Church was already preparing for the transition and the new social challenges that came with it.²⁷

Conclusion and outlook after 1989

The regime change, the fall of communism, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted action from the Polish pope, John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła), who had long paid special attention to the region. The pope played an indispensable role in bringing about a peaceful transition, and in the fact that many Central European countries opted for negotiated transitions of power. In several instances, the ruling communist parties were forced to hand over power peacefully, accept democratic transitions, and call for free elections. The year 1989 marked a great historical turning point in Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and later that year, in Romania and Bulgaria as well. The Soviet Union was also beginning to crack, with the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – taking the lead toward independence.

Following four decades of atheist, anti-church communist terror, repression came to an end in 1990. Freedom of speech, assembly, the press, and religion – alongside other civil liberties -once again became foundational elements of society. With the persecution over, the Church resumed its public role with renewed strength. The state sought the Church’s partnership primarily in the fields of education, healthcare, and social services, making the

²⁷ N. A. ’Egyházunk a társadalmi fejlődés szolgálatában’ [Our Church in the Service of Social Development]. In *Új Ember*, 1989, vol. 45, no. 13, pp. 8-9.

Church, in many cases, a major institutional actor. Within societies experiencing a power vacuum, many Catholics felt a renewed need for papal guidance, particularly given the radically changed circumstances.

These factors, along with the centenary of *Rerum novarum*, led to the writing and publication of the *Centesimus annus* encyclical in 1991—an encyclical that, I believe, can rightly be considered epoch-making in the life of the Roman Catholic Church. According to the pope himself, as reported in the article titled “The Social Teaching of the Church at the Beginning of a New Era” published in *Új Ember*, the papal encyclical *Centesimus annus* has already sparked widespread discussion around the world. As is always the case, commentators have interpreted the teaching in a wide variety of ways. It is therefore by no means insignificant how the Pope himself reflects on the encyclical. In his address during the general audience on May 1st, Pope John Paul II emphasized that the Church never looks to the past in order to avoid confronting the problems of the present. Rather, a deep understanding and evaluation of the past serves as a resource that can provide inspiration for the present—so that we may prepare a more just future with even greater depth and authenticity. According to the pope, the year 1989 marked a turning point in history. The era commonly characterized by the concept of Marxism has come to an end – and the reasons for its collapse are closely tied to the very causes foreseen by *Rerum novarum*. In this moment of closure, we may rightly feel a sense of satisfaction that a structure of power and an ideology – both of which had made every effort to extinguish religious sentiment – have collapsed. Yet this fact must not give rise to a sense of triumph. Across the world, entire nations continue to live without rights, deprived of the most basic means of existence, suffering in poverty and misery. Meanwhile, in the so-called welfare states, there is a lack of meaning, a loss of the sense of happiness, and a diminished hope for the future. Alienation is widespread; the sense of personal freedom has disappeared. Many perceive themselves as faceless cogs in the machinery of production, forgetting that God bestowed dignity upon humanity – along with their human nature – by creating all of us in His own image. One system may have disintegrated, but the great problems of humanity remain unresolved. The pope emphasized that these problems must not only be addressed within the economic and personal spheres, but also within the transcendent dimension – a realm that must never be abandoned.²⁸

Pope John Paul II’s visit to Hungary from August 16 to 20, 1991 – including the outdoor Mass he celebrated on August 20 at Heroes’ Square in Budapest before a crowd of approximately 200,000 – together with the popularity of *Centesimus annus* and the heightened public interest surrounding the Pope in Hungary, all likely contributed to the strengthening of charitable and aid organizations in the country in the early 1990s. The Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta (*Magyar Máltai Szeretetszolgálat*), founded in 1989; the Caritas Hungary (*Katolikus Karitás*), re-established in 1991; and the Hungarian Interchurch Aid (*Ökumenikus Segélyszervezet*), also established in 1991, all gained national prominence and expanded significantly during this period. It was also at this time that the Hungarian Kolping Association (*Magyar Kolping Szövetség*) resumed its operations. In addition, the responsibility assumed by social institutions maintained by Hungarian dioceses

²⁸ N. A. ‘Az egyház szociális tanítása egy új korszak kezdetén’ [The Social Doctrine of the Church at the Beginning of a New Era]. In *Új Ember*, 1991, vol. 47, no. 20, p. 5.

grew stronger in their commitment to assist society's most vulnerable groups. This process continues to the present day and remains influential.

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