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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

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"Without circumventing..."

Cardinal József Mindszenty

in the light of his radio speech of 3 November 1956

Thesis of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Doctoral School of History

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I. The topic and objectives of the doctoral thesis

Few radio speeches in history have resonated as vividly – even decades after the speaker's death – as József Mindszenty's radio speech of 3 November 1956. The impact of the speech cannot be attributed solely to the fact that it was delivered by the leader of the largest Church in Hungary at a historically significant moment. The radio speech, broadcast live in the last hours before the crushing of the 1956 revolution and freedom struggle, has remained in public memory for decades in a deliberately distorted interpretation of the Kádár propaganda.

This dissertation aims to step outside the framework of interpretations, narratives, and condemnatory or exalting opinions that have been repeated for decades.

The dissertation compares the spoken words of the radio speech of 3 November 1956 with the verbatim transcription and the speaker's interpretation. It also examines the circumstances surrounding the speech's drafting, the preliminary consultations, and the ecclesiastical and public statements before Mindszenty's speech. The radio speech under discussion - and many of its later disputed details - cannot be interpreted in isolation but only in their context.

An important factor in a radio speech is the receiving medium, the audience, and its expectations. József Mindszenty entered the studio on the evening of 3 November 1956 as a moral reference point, an inescapable public figure because of his historical antecedents. The dissertation, therefore, also examines the speaker's background: József Mindszenty's public appearances between 1945 and 1948, his conflicts, their background, the political environment surrounding him - and the press campaign against him. The latter is limited to the news of the MTI, for Hungarian Radio broadcasted these news items without change. It lent a kind of official framework and credibility to the messages conveyed in the press campaign against the Cardinal. This press campaign influenced the expectations surrounding the Cardinal's 1956 speech. Its impact was also evident in the speech's mixed reception and subsequent distorted interpretations.

Nor is speech, in general, separable from the speaker, from his or her personality as a source. However, the message is shaped not only by the speaker's intention but also by the subjective perception of the receiver. Therefore, in all cases - including the 1956 Mindszenty speech - the question is valid: Do we reflect afterward on what the speaker said, or instead on our concepts and ideas, which we associate with the speaker's person? The dissertation attempts to answer

this question by examining the reception of the speech at home and abroad, as well as spontaneous reflections and reflections guided by the Kádár narrative.

Just as important as the content of the speech is the personality of the person delivering it. Understanding this widely discussed radio speech requires considering Cardinal József Mindszenty's personality, priestly role, and entire career. The radio speech of 3 November 1956 was delivered by a living, feeling person who reflected his era and his individual socialization. Therefore, the dissertation will also examine the historical figure himself, narrowing the analysis of this rich life to the factors that help us to understand his motivations. Finally, the consistency of words and actions speaks of authenticity and identity for each individual. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is also to compare the words of 1956 with the actions of the past - that is, to examine what the speaker said and how he acted on the plane of practice when he had the means to act. This margin for action was much narrower in history than the moral, public, and historical reach of Cardinal József Mindszenty.

II. Methodology of the dissertation

The dissertation will only deal with a part of the vast literature on the Cardinal, focusing on works that are important for understanding the speech and its context, as well as the speaker himself. A separate chapter presents school history textbooks that have shaped generations' perceptions of Mindszenty. The stubbornly persisting Kádár narrative is illustrated by works written in the spirit of MSZMP-led reflection, also presented in a separate chapter. The press campaign against the Cardinal between 1945 and 1948 is limited to the news of the Hungarian News Agency, using the freely accessible digital archive of the MTI. The dissertation illustrates the expectations preceding the 1956 radio speech and the Cardinal's role through the archival material of Radio Free Europe in 1956, made digitally available by the National Széchényi Library.

The paper also compares and analyses the recordings of Mindszenty's radio speeches from a technical point of view. Three recordings of the speech given on the evening of 3 November 1956 - only one of which was broadcast live - have been made so far. These are preserved in five different digital copies in the archives. The recordings vary considerably in terms of both sound quality and duration. This fact alone justified an investigation into whether there had been technical or content manipulation of the recordings of the speech, which were later

tendentiously misinterpreted (technical manipulation refers to interventions to improve or distort the quality of the recording by altering the sound level or background noise, while content manipulation refers to editing cuts that substantially truncate the message or, conversely, insertions not pronounced in the original statement).

I examined the recordings mainly in the Archive of Hungarian Radio (now part of MTVA). I also received indispensable help from the Historical Interviews Department of the National Széchényi Library. The thesis also covers the history of the recordings - their sound quality and the circumstances under which they were stored. The technical analysis also aimed at reconstructing the quality of the speech that radio listeners of the time could hear, given the technical possibilities and constraints of the time. Could they hear it accurately? Could they understand it at all? I received help from the staff of the radio archive (László Simon and Zsolt András Szőke) and from radio technician Dénes Balás B. Balás to investigate the existence of possible intentional or merely technical interference. The software used for the analysis was IsotopeRX7, and the audio editing software Audacity.

III. Results, questions raised

The dissertation aimed to shift the focus from conflicting interpretations of speech to the speech itself - its content and the speaker's intention - the intention that actually moved the speaker, not the intention we attribute to him. Hopefully, this essay will contribute to an objective study and interpretation of speech.

This dissertation has not fully explored the speaker's personality, for the tools of historical science are insufficient. However, this thesis will hopefully bring us closer to an understanding. For reasons of space, the thesis only examines those parts of the career that help to reveal the speaker's motivations. Thanks to the staff of the Radio Archive, the thesis presents the surviving recordings of the controversial radio broadcast as comprehensively as possible, explaining the significant differences in the duration and sound quality of the recordings. Thanks to the archive staff and the music editor, we could identify the previously unidentified organ music played at the end of the speech. (Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor).

The thesis tries to answer some questions, while others can only be raised while left unanswered. The thesis sought to answer whether József Mindszenty was involved in politics (as he is repeatedly accused of being) and whether his intransigent behaviour benefited his

Church. It is difficult to answer this question objectively and beyond doubt. During one of the most turbulent periods in Hungary's history, the Hungarian Catholic Church was led by a fundamentally autonomous person who never shied away from confrontation. In his position of ecclesiastical leadership, his personality took on a public dimension.

He did not examine the events of his time from a *realpolitik* perspective. At the same time, he was ahead of most of his contemporaries in recognizing that communism was on the verge of total domination - and, therefore, could not afford the luxury of allowing a structure to function that was capable of creating and maintaining cohesion and that had values that were contrary to his own. Sensing the threatening tendencies of the Church, the Cardinal sought to stand in the way of this process. That became one of the main reasons why the permanent epithet of 'politicizing prelate' has been branded on his name by the communist narrative. The self-description of József Mindszenty as the country's first public dignitary is still seen by many as proof that the Prince-Priest could not acknowledge the radically changed political and public environment after the war.

However, the discourse on Mindszenty's role seems misleading: this debate is still repeating and reinforcing the communist narrative that has been consistently perpetuated for decades. Even the public discourse of the 21st century is trapped by the phrase 'politicizing high priest,' making it difficult to interpret the role of Cardinal József Mindszenty and his words of 1956 factually. That is also evident in the debates of posterity. The thesis will present the different narratives while attempting to break with them.

The dilemma of "whether or not the Cardinal was ultimately engaged in politics" can be resolved simply, according to the conclusion of this essay: Cardinal Mindszenty never got involved in politics - at least not in party politics as the representation of partial interests. However, he considered it his responsibility to concern himself with public life and the common good - for the Church to have political representation. He expected the country's leaders to define the framework in which society lived and functioned in an evangelical spirit - and in his time, the majority of society was identical to the Catholic community. His words and actions must be weighed in this context. In the period under discussion, it was a position against a political force that openly regarded religion as an enemy and sought to seize power by force. Even if the man of the age in the coalition period did not necessarily foresee a looming dictatorship instead of democracy, the Cardinal recognized the danger. He logically foresaw

what this would mean for the Church. Mindszenty's words and actions cannot be taken out of this context.

The questions raised but not answered in this dissertation are more of a social philosophical than a historical nature. What can be considered political activity on the part of the Church? What resonance does a statement by a church leader on a public issue have in the minds of the faithful? In communication, the reception and interpretation of the message conveyed is necessarily subjective. That is why a statement made by a church leader – regardless of the era, country, or subject matter – is bound to spark controversy. Is there any issue on which a priest, a high priest, or even the Pope can take a stand without being questioned by a few or many?

There can be no unanimous answer to this question because the Church cannot be separated from society. Church members in every country are also members of society. Consequently, the laws that govern the life of society directly affect believing communities. In any country where there are church schools, measures taken in the field of education policy also affect church schools. In any country, the legal and economic environment also impacts social issues - and in the social field, churches traditionally have a great deal to do because of their evangelical mission. For the period covered by this essay - and the century before - the question is: what can the Church do when, in response to the severe deprivation of the masses, an idea appears that promises a solution to social needs but denies spirituality? This question was answered by the Pope himself - Pope Leo XIII and his answer was the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

We might ask who Mindszenty used his inflexibility for. The Cardinal's actions were significant in the context of the events of the period in question. When anti-clerical politics seeks to destroy the credibility of the Church, to detach the masses from the Church, and ultimately to destroy religion, the existence of a reliable moral compass can be crucial to social resilience. In the period covered by this essay, this was the role played by József Mindszenty. Posterity already knows that his action was doomed to failure - as were more sophisticated forms of resistance. The benefits of his moral integrity cannot be measured in practical but in spiritual terms. That is why he became a moral reference point, and that gave public weight to the radio discourse examined in this thesis.

Regarding the radio speech, the most important question is not why Mindszenty spoke at all or in what tone he did so. A more worthy question is the content of his speech: What future did the Cardinal outline for the country? Notably, his proposals do not parallel the schemes of his

time, nor do they reflect his earlier, stuck-in-the-past thinking. On the contrary, they were more forward-looking than the age could bear. In essence, a picture of a 21st century, Western-style democracy emerges from the Cardinal's speech, based on the main aspects: sovereignty, universal suffrage, multi-party system - with parties competing on equal terms and free to be elected - freedom of religion, and freedom of private property - imposing legal limits on capitalist greed based on Christian socialist principles.

Cardinal József Mindszenty's words and his role as head of the Church were partly shaped by factors like the social embeddedness of the Catholic Church in Hungary at the time - and the Communist dictatorship that identified the Church as an enemy. However, just as important was the Cardinal's personality. Therefore, in weighing up the life of Cardinal Mindszenty, we must also take into account the defining patterns of his early childhood, which led to the growth of a highly influential ecclesiastical personality from a peasant child born in a small village who stands with us inescapably decades after his death, even in the 21st century. His actions, words, church politics - and the subject of the dissertation, his radio address of 3 November 1956 - cannot be understood without knowing József Mindszenty, or more precisely: József Pehm, the man.

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