

Thesis Proposals for the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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"Without a veil, bare in this world."

**The History of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer
During the Decades of Persecution
in the 20th Century**

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I. The Background and Aims of the Research

I first took notice of the history of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer long before I started my doctoral studies. In addition to my long-standing interest in the history of women's religious communities, I was also able to gain deeper insights into the centenary of their settlement in Buda as a teacher at the order's school.

The historical exploration of female religious orders in Hungary – with a few very valuable exceptions – has not really been at the forefront of church historical research. Neither the periods before 1945 nor those after have been significantly explored by "nun studies," although the communist dictatorship that emerged after World War II mounted substantial attacks on Catholic religious communities, including approximately 8,000 nuns who wished to continue living according to their vows after 1950.

Through my research, it became clear that it would be particularly valuable to examine the period in the history of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer when the sisters, due to their dispersal, could no longer live together in community within traditional convent settings. The starting point of my dissertation, therefore, was the question of how the sisters managed to ensure the continuity of their order during the forty years before its revival, and what kind of life strategy this entailed in their everyday lives – one that was self-authentic, socially active, and, necessarily, "anti-regime."

The sources I became acquainted with further confirmed that uncovering the lives of the order in its illegal existence, understanding its networks, exploring individual and community survival strategies, and the specific mentality that sustained this existence could yield useful results. A thorough examination of all these aspects was possible only through an effort to understand and reveal the full history of the community in Hungary, even though my dissertation primarily focuses on the "period of persecution," from the late autumn of 1944 to the so-called period of revival, ending on August 30, 1989.

The dissertation presents the history of the founder, as well as the development of the community in Sopron up to 1944 from various perspectives, and then in the main chapters, it discusses the challenges faced by the order. This includes the period of military transitions, as the first real trial for the community came with the arrival of both the Nazi and, especially, the Red Army forces in Hungary. A major historical episode is the period from the spring of 1945 to the summer of 1950, when the expulsion took place. During this period, I focus on the shrinking space, the worsening living conditions, and the situation of the nuns deprived of their vocation as teachers and nurses. This is followed by the period of dispersal, primarily explored through state security sources, with a more nuanced picture that illuminates the specific life situations of the exiled nuns.

Another important episode in this research is the exploration of other legal procedures – internment, legal trials – which helped to reveal the specific dynamics of the nun community, its operational mechanisms, and not least, its underground hierarchical structure and relationships. Finally, from a mental history perspective, I analyze the period of illegality, focusing on aspects such as the forced removal of the religious habit, the description of new life situations, and the emotional and spiritual trials, which could have led to "identity loss."

The aim of the dissertation is to address, through the presentation of a female religious community and the exploration of its decades spent in illegality, the gap in historical memory regarding women's orders, both in historical scholarship and in the enumeration of the victims of the dictatorship. Furthermore, the communities of nuns are particularly worth examining not only from an ecclesiastical history perspective but also from other points of view, such as education, medicine, and of course, women's history, in the case of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer.

II. The Sources and Methods of the Research

The primary source base of my research is the archive of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer – Hungarian Province, which holds the majority of the remaining documents of the religious community. The archive contains more than fifty boxes of documentation covering a wide range of genres, including governmental documents, papers related to real estate and transactions, schematism, chronicles of the houses (the motherhouse in Sopron and its branch houses), reminiscences, various notes, biographies, and correspondence, to name a few. The organized document collection provided a guide for uncovering the history of the order, and essentially, this formed the starting point of my research.

The documents discovered in the Historical Archive of the State Security Services opened new directions for the study. While examining the sources found here, the period of dispersal became the focus of my attention, as the state security agencies had created abundant documentation on this period. The majority of the documents relating to the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer consist of so-called operational dossiers. These documents are the result of secret investigative work, classified as "top secret," and typically include reports from agents or the police. An operational dossier was created for the order itself and for its then Superior General, Flettner M. Archangela. A separate dossier was also initiated under the name "Sisters of the Divine Redeemer," which contains surveillance reports on several nuns who were active after the dispersal, offering a glimpse into the fabric of continuity. This material is invaluable for our topic because, thanks to the detailed descriptions, it provides insight into the daily lives of the order members, who lived in a cellular structure even in illegality. The reports, written with the precision of an observant participant, reveal the specific monastic mentality that manifested in various forms of behavior, and this helped shape the individual path of my dissertation.

I reviewed the investigation files related to the "Baugartner Pál and others" case, concerning the protest against the nationalization of church schools in Sopron on June 7, 1948, as well as the materials from the "Lányi János and others" trial. For this, I had to also consult the court trial documents found in the Archives of Budapest City, including the petitions for clemency. The material from the Historical Archive of the State Security Services provided rich background information on the Lányi case, including agent reports, notes, drafts, and assessments. This material was particularly valuable because it offered data to understand the order's structure, hierarchy, dynamics, connections, and provided insights into the life stories of several Sisters of the Divine Redeemer. In the Archives of Budapest City, I processed the court documents from the Flettner Márta and others trial, where the Superior General, accused of foreign currency abuse, and Father Béla Szappanyos, a parish priest from Szentendre, were put on trial. This allowed me to trace a further episode in the persecution of the Superior General and her fellow sisters.

At the Diocese Archive of Győr, I found six bundles of documents related to the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer from between 1909 and 1931. The documents in these bundles vary considerably, covering topics such as the situation of sisters who had moved to the southern territories, requests for exemption from vows, permissions for various matters, opening new branch houses, and settlements. These ecclesiastical governance documents helped to provide information for the years preceding the dispersal.

The Hungarian National Archives – Győr-Moson-Sopron County Archives holds educational materials related to the order's various schools in Sopron, including the Csorna school documents. Important educational historical materials include documents on various types of schools such as the women's industrial school, commercial girls' high school, girls' lyceum, teacher training school, kindergarten teacher training school, girls' secondary school,

and a practical elementary school. In the dissertation, these sources are referenced briefly, as they fall outside the main questions of the dissertation in terms of both subject matter and time span, but they are indispensable for understanding the order's history.

During my research, I also visited several smaller archives that contributed small but valuable pieces to the topic. In these cases, my primary goal was to contextualize and nuance the self-representational image derived from the primary sources – particularly the order's documents – and to consider any self-justification present in these sources at their true value. I sought documents in the Jesuit Archives related to areas where Jesuit priests worked alongside the sisters. In the *Historia Domus* of the Mezőkövesd Jesuit house and in the documents of the Jesuit house in Nagykapornak (Zala County Archives of the Hungarian National Archives), I found some small pieces of data. However, among the primarily economic documents, there was no house history or specific documents relating to the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer. At the Pannonhalma Archabbey Archives, I found data related to the settlements of Kajár (today Kajárpéc) and Nyalka, which were part of the Pannonhalma diocese. The Sisters of the Divine Redeemer arrived in Kajár in 1897 to serve in the elementary school and later in the kindergarten. In 1950, they provided church services in Ravazd and Nyalka, and several documents record these activities.

Additionally, I visited local historical collections, which greatly enriched my understanding of the role the sisters played in local communities. Not only documents but also objects, images, and memories added depth to the picture formed from written sources. In addition to Mezőkövesd, I visited the towns of Csorna and Szil, as the "Convent Museum" in Szil is the only place where the memory of the local work of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer is preserved in the form of an exhibition. Regarding local sources, the entries in the *Historia Domus* of the Fót Parish provided useful data for processing the period of internment.

During my research, whenever possible, I tried to interview people who still remembered the sisters in local communities. Conversations were initiated with former students and family members who had lived through these events. Using oral history methods or ethnographic collection, I aimed to nuance and better understand the image created by the sources, shedding light on the sisters' mentality and their place in society.

III. Research Findings

1. The primary goal of my research was to uncover the history of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer, particularly during the period of dispersion, using sources to present this period. Since the complete history of the community in Hungary has never been fully explored and presented, I aimed to contribute to this effort. In the thesis, I sought to place the history of the order within a broader context to make the community's role in both Hungarian social history and church history more visible. Along with providing data, my aim was to create a comprehensive overview that spans from the establishment of the order in Hungary in 1863 to its renewal in 1989, focusing on the period of persecution between 1944 and 1989. The discussion of the period prior to dispersion was motivated by a desire to explore not only the history of the community but also to understand and uncover their mentality. Through this overview, a picture of a dynamically developing community emerged, one that grew significantly in both material resources and human capital, and gradually occupied a more prominent position among Hungarian women's religious communities. I believe this success was due to many factors, such as thoughtful leadership, adaptability, flexibility, a well-established network of relationships, and, not least, the acceptance of a subordinate role within the church hierarchy.
2. To date, Hungarian ecclesiastical historical research has given little attention to the historical exploration of female religious communities. Researchers studying monasticism have mostly focused on male communities, pushing the larger female communities into the background, despite their significant impact on society through their activities. In this thesis, I aimed to highlight that, for instance, the history of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer also justifies the need for research on female religious orders, as such research can help us better understand the deeper mechanisms of the church's operations. Through deeper explorations, the nature of the hierarchy, as seen in the Lányi case and the case of the Rétháti sisters, can also be illuminated.
3. The most significant objective of this dissertation was to uncover the hardships, persecutions, and the operational mechanisms of the community during the underground period, between the frontline crossing and regime change. The sources used in this research, including the records of the State Security Services Historical Archives, the order's internal chronicles, personal memoirs, and documentation, led me to conclude that while the community was deeply shaken by these persecutions, the determined attacks by the dictatorship did not destroy the order, as the regime had hoped and might have expected. Even in illegal circumstances, the nuns could still be considered as religious sisters, though with peculiar circumstances and lifestyle, which did not, however, undermine their vocation or commitment. The network that developed in secrecy shows that the order continued to exist like a "spring" waiting for the right moment to surface. However, it is important to note that the long waiting period weakened the community and presented a significant challenge, which might have been a greater hardship than the direct blows of the 1950s dictatorship. Over these four decades, the community was unable to generate sufficient replacements, making the process of renewal and the subsequent period more difficult.

4. During my research, I aimed to shed light on the community's significant role in the development of elementary school networks, especially in the Diocese of Győr, but also in other parts of the country. Additionally, the work they did in the education of girls was not insignificant. Through their secondary schools and modern institutions, they provided a base for the aspiring daughters of Christian bourgeois and peasant families, offering an education that made their students competitive in society.
5. **The Community's Contribution to Healthcare:** The community's work in healthcare not only demonstrated that the order's charism primarily unfolded in this field but also that the emerging healthcare system in Hungary demanded their services. Moreover, the order's leadership recognized that the sisters needed specialized training to maintain their positions in healthcare and provided opportunities for them to acquire the necessary professional knowledge.
6. Although the original purpose of the research was basic research, I also saw the importance of briefly touching on gender history, given that nuns are underrepresented in this field. This topic requires deeper exploration, as it is evident from the sources that the nuns, forced into secular life, could be categorized in some ways as part of the working socialist woman archetype.
7. **The Role of the Sisters in Local Communities:** In the context of the research, the role of the sisters in local communities was briefly explored. The presence of religious sisters in rural society has not attracted much attention from researchers, although it is worth studying from the perspective of social history and ethnography. Based on the sources, it became clear that the smaller communities in the branch houses added a unique element to local intelligentsia. They raised generations of women, organized and built communities, and embodied the type of religious sisters who stepped into the world, often living for the benefit of the faithful.
8. **The "Complete" History of the Dispersion:** Within the scope of the current research, the "complete" history of the dispersion was not fully uncovered. The state security sources reveal an active network, but these records primarily relate to the 1950s and 1960s. We do not yet know exactly how the network changed over the following two decades, who replaced the aging members, and how the system may have contracted due to diminishing new recruits.
9. Every aspect of this research requires the exploration of additional controlling sources to provide a more nuanced picture of the community. The data presented here should be expanded upon by uncovering further materials, which could deepen our understanding of the community's history and its place within Hungarian society and the church.

IV. Publications

Published Publications on the Topic of the Thesis:

The Quality Education Base for Girls in Buda Between the Two World Wars: Everyday Life at the St. Margaret High School from Its Founding to Nationalization In: J. Újváry Zsuzsanna-Mezei Emese (eds.): *Snapshots of Lifestyle History I*. Budapest, 2018. pp. 115–130.

Flettner Márta Archangela SDR In: Paréj-Farkas Katalin (ed.): *Memorial Book for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of St. Margaret High School*. Budapest, Budai Margitosok Baráti Köre, 2022. pp. 194–201.

Memorial Book for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of St. Margaret High School. Budapest, Budai Margitosok Baráti Köre, 2022 – Volume Editor.

The Sisters of the Redeemer in the Trauma of Dispersion: The Sisters of the Divine Redeemer in the 1950s and 1960s in the Light of Recollections and State Security Reports In: *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica*. 67 (2022) 2, 379-414. DOI: 10.1556/022.2023.00012

Publications Pending Release:

“They Were Called the Guardian Angels of the Village” The Sisters of the Divine Redeemer in the Service of Villages as Reflected in the Chronicles of the Branch Houses. In: Keszeg Vilmos – Szakál Anna (eds.): *Kriza János Ethnographical Society Yearbook 31*. Cluj-Napoca, Kriza János Ethnographical Society, 2025.

Modernity, Female Roles, and Religious Self-Realization in the Community of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer in Hungary in the 19th-20th Century as Reflected in Recollections In: Frauhammer Krisztina (ed.): *Women, Roles, Opportunities in 20th Century Hungarian Ecclesiastical Life*. Szeged, Gerhardus Publishing, 2025.

Published Reviews:

"Wearing a Mask – Always in Role" Petrás Éva: *Behind the Masks. The Lives of Nagy Töhötöm*. In: *Betekintő*, 16th Year (2022) No. 1, pp. 157–163.

Other Publications:

“The Turning Point in a Child’s Life” First Communion and Related Customs in a Village in Göcsej. In: Horváth Gergely Krisztián (ed.): *Rural History 2*. Budapest, 2019. pp. 253–268.

The Hunyady Family in Somogy: Additions to the History of the Count Kéthelyi Hunyady Family in Somogy In: *Axis – Journal of Religious and*

Ideological History, 5(1), 99-118.

<https://doi.org/10.61176/Axis.2024.5.1.6>