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The diocese of Szombathely (1936–1944)
The church governing of József Gröss in Szombathely

ABSTRACT OF THE PHD-THESIS

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I. The antecedents of the research, raising the subject

The 20th century history of most of the Hungarian dioceses has not been written, the diocese research dealing with modern age is only in its early phase. At the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century the revealing and publication of the history of many dioceses started. Large and significant series were the following: the four-volume work of Vince Bunyitay dealing with the history of the bishoprics of Nagyvárada, the history of the bishoprics of Csanád in eight volumes, edited by Kálmán Juhász, the four volumes about the diocese of Eger, published at the turn of the century, furthermore, the From the past of the diocese of Veszprém and the From the past of the diocese of Győr series. The former counted 13, the latter 7 volumes. The three volumes History of the diocese of Szombathely, that describes the history of the diocese from the beginning, edited by Gyula Géfin, can be also mentioned. But from the above listed books only few delineated the modern age history of the given bishoprics.

In the second half of the 20th century the formation of the historical circumstances, the anticlerical and antireligious atmosphere of the communism did not make possible the issuing of many works dealing with the history of dioceses. In this way such books usually remained in manuscript and could be published only after the changing of regime, if they were published at

all. In this age the gap caused by the lack of this kind of works, tried to be filled by Clergy Registers, jubilee almanacs but not with the demand of completeness. These usually contained about the career of the given bishop and his determinative deeds a longer, while about the main institutions of the diocese, about the cathedral chapter, the education of future priests and the churches a shorter, 1 or 2 pages long description. At the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s more works dealing with the history of dioceses could be published, but most of them were restricted themselves to the presentation of events before the 20th century or were only about a chosen section of the history of the diocese or the person of the given bishop was in the focus of their examination. After the change of regime in the issued books – apart from some exceptions – also this approach can be observed.

One of the best documented the history of the diocese of Szombathely that was edited in three volumes by Gyula Géfin, as I already mentioned. The first volume is dedicated fully, the second partially to the biographies of the bishops from the foundation of the diocese in 1777 to the age of the then bishop, János Mikes. In addition, this later is dealing with the main stations of the history of the cathedral chapter, the literary activity of the priests and the development of the Roman Catholic education. The third volume contains a historical priest register. The first two volumes were published in 1929, the third in 1935. After this about the history of the diocese was issued only a jubilee book in

honour of the 200th anniversary of its foundation, that has a chapter also about the 20th century (Ferenc Sill: The rebuilding of the cathedral of Szombathely 1946–1976), and in other chapters there are some hints at the 20th century, but does not concentrate on this historical period of time. Consequently about this age neither an organic nor a continuous picture can be got from it. So we can declare, that about the history of the diocese after 1935, has not written neither a detailed nor a comprehensive description. This gave me the idea to write its history until 1944, when – after the governing by apostolic administrator for the second time – a new diocesan was appointed at the head of the diocese.

With my dissertation I developed the results of my thesis written in 2009, in which I was dealing with the church governing of József Grósz primarily on the basis of the Circulars of the bishop. In those times it was not so prevalent the examination of this type of source, I was one of the first ones, who went into details in connection with it. During the further 3 years research I significantly expanded the examined base of sources and the visited source keeping places, this way I managed to draw a complex picture about the period 1936–1944 of the diocese of Szombathely getting an answer to those questions that only with the help of the Circulars could not be answered.

II. The followed methodology

As this period of time of the diocese was almost unknown for the historical sciences, I could lean mainly on primary sources: archival material, almanacs and contemporary newspapers. I visited 11 source-keeping places, two of which can be found in the Vatican: The *Archivio Segreto Vaticano* – where I found many important sources that contributed to the answering of the arising questions concerning mainly the background of the nomination of apostolic administrator at the head of the diocese for the first time to a great extent – and the *Segreteria di Stato, Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati, Archivio Storico*. In this later I skimmed through the material of the Archives of the Sacred Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs. Among the Hungarian source-keeping places the Primatial Archives in Esztergom and the Hungarian National Archives has national importance. In the former the material concerning the diocese of Szombathely in the church governing documents fond is quite rich. A lot can be got to know from it about the state of the bishopric benefice of Szombathely in the 1930s and 1940s. In the latter mentioned archives the files of the Foreign Ministry contain interesting additions. About the history of the diocese the most sources can be found in the Diocesan Archives of Szombathely. I regarded also fundamental to examine the relating sources of the Archives of the County of Vas of the Hungarian National Archives. As József Grósz arrived at Szombathely with wide church-

governing practice and his earlier career could determine his later orders and way of thinking and as Szombathely was not the last station of his career, but Kalocsa, I regarded it important to visit also the Diocesan Archives of Győr and the Archiepiscopal Archives of Kalocsa. Finally I was in some such archives and library that at first hearing do not have a strong connection with the bishoprics of Szombathely, but yet after thorough study of this period of the diocese, could not be evaded. These are the Archiepiscopal and Cathedral Chapter Archives of Veszprém, the Archives of the Archabbey of Pannonhalma and the manuscript collection of the Library of the Archabbey of Pannonhalma.

Revealing the sources I always kept in mind that every historical period was formed as a result of a certain course, has an antecedent and usually also a consequence. Accordingly I examined the documents not only between 1936 and 1944, but where I regarded that necessary, I also went back until the 1920s and looked up the events of the years following 1944.

To the methodology belongs not only the presentation of the source keeping places but also the outlining of the principles that I followed during the writing of my dissertation. Hence, I would like to share some thoughts in connection with it. The basic work of Tihamér Vanyó written in 1937 with the title: How to write the history of a diocese? served as an excellent starting point. The Benedictine monk described the principles of the model of how to write the history of a diocese on the basis of

French examples, mentioning the classification of Alfred Dufourcq, university professor of Bordeaux and canon Georges Bonnenfant. The former listed in ten points what a good literature about the history of a diocese has to contain by all means, the latter in his book about the diocese of Evreux grouped around six bigger topics his thoughts. The guidelines touch upon all of the segments of the history of the diocese (for instance: the clergy, the parishes, the culture, the moral and liturgical life, the religious orders, the believers, the property of the Church, the personality of the bishop and his relations with the ecclesiastical and secular authorities). Do not concentrate only on the bishop. In my work I tried to keep in mind these principles and building in organically the larger subjects. Naturally it does not mean that I would have devoted a separate chapter to each of them. For example I built in the bishop's relations with the ecclesiastical and secular authorities always in the given chapter, as in my opinion it is attached to almost every momentum of the diocese. I neither dealt with the state of the bishopric benefice alone, only together with the offices of József Grósz at the head of the diocese, as there is an obvious relationship between the two. Furthermore I deliberately did not write a separate chapter about the personality of the bishop, as I am convinced that the best picture can be drawn about him through his ordainments.

Tihamér Vanyó gave only general guidelines to the writing of the history of a diocese, but I geared them in my PhD-thesis to the local circumstances and the

characteristic of the given historical period of time. Accordingly for instance I was dealing in a longer subchapter with the *Actio Catholica* – that was founded by Pius XI and which was organized in Hungary only in the first half of the 1930s – that was a favourite institute of József Grósz. Just like the *Opus Vocationis* – that was founded by Pope Pius XII in 1941 – that was introduced in the diocese in 1943. In addition, it belongs to the characteristics of the examined period of time the antecedents of the World War II, its breaking out and how the bishop, the clergy and the believers could cope with it. Because of its significance I wrote about it in a separate chapter.

All of these I strung on an own logical chain of ideas. My principle was that I must not put in the centre of my examination merely the person of the leader of the diocese. However his personality can be determining from the point of view of governing the diocese that can be formed also by his origin, growing up and former career. It is important how he chose his immediate workmates into the diocesan office, to what extent he left them to arrange the daily affairs or how far he controlled himself the matters, how was his relation with his priests, what were his aims, how and in what extent he contributed to the realization of these, which initiatives and why he supported and finally how he could communicate with the believers. I also studied how he built into the local practice the ecclesiastical and secular ordainments, dispositions, initiatives.

Furthermore, I examined the background of his two nominations of apostolic administrator.

Along with the bishop or apostolic administrator in the diocese the cathedral chapter and its members were determinative from more aspects in the diocese. I regarded it important the thorough and detailed analysis of their functions, from which it can be delineated their key role in the governing of the diocese in the age.

Neither the bishop, nor the cathedral chapter could govern the diocese alone without suitable office team that gave a certain frame and form of the governing of the diocese. Accordingly I examined comprehensively the offices of the central church governing of the diocese and the organs of the territorial church governing of the diocese, as well, pointing out the general tendencies and relations.

The role of the religious orders, teachers and believers neither can be neglected. As there would not have been a flourishing spiritual life if there had not been people, who organize programmes, found associations, lead retreats, missions, organize pilgrimages, take the initiative and support the building of churches, catholic schools, vicarages, crosses, the foundation of *expositurae, curatiae*, parishes and who contributed to the education of the young people, future priests and laymen. Therefore I examined the role of the clergy, monks and nuns, teachers and the working of the parish churches, the different kind of associations and the *Actio Catholica* in the diocese.

Naturally, I presented all these not as a static picture, but as a dynamic system that although has certain permanent elements, always moves, putting in the context of the Hungarian Catholic Church and the given age.

III. The new results

After the above delineated methods, now I outline what are those statements with which my PhD-thesis could contribute to the so far results of the historical sciences.

My first significant statement is that the diocese of Szombathely was one of the most Catholic dioceses, had very few lands that after the World War I because of the devaluation of the government securities, war loan bonds, the capital levy and economic world crisis had serious financial problems. The conflict of the then bishop János Mikes and the cathedral chapter added to it, mainly around the investment and making profit of the capitals. They found particularly derogatory that the bishop kept in his own administration the aid, allocated – as a compensation because of the loss of value of the war loan bonds – to the foundations that were administrated by the chapter and he himself wanted them to invest. Finally the conflict were at such point, that two members of the chapter, Ferenc Rogács and Béla Honti in the December of 1933 and in the March of 1934 described their complaints to the nuncio, as a result of which started a financial examination against the bishop. As he did not manage to refund the revealed deficiencies, at the request of Pope Pius XI he had to resign. Parallel he had heart disease, but it was only the formal reason of his resignation from the Episcopal see.

Analysing the circumstances of the resignation becomes clear why an apostolic administrator was

nominated to the head of the diocese in 1936. In connection with it I state that primarily because the bishopric *mensa* could not maintain two bishops because of its indebtedness. In addition, election of a vicar capitular – regarding the small number of canons and that two of them were old and ill and their conflict with Bishop Mikes – would not have been easy, what is more, the *sede vacante* was expected to be long lasting. József Grósz was chosen as an apostolic administrator, as he had a considerable experience in church governing in the neighbouring diocese, mainly during the illness of the bishop Antal Fetsner, when he worked as an auxiliary bishop. Moreover, István Breyer the new bishop of Győr did not need him in this position regarding that he himself was also rather young and healthy, so from 1934 he was not an auxiliary bishop. Besides, János Mikes more times called him into the diocese of Szombathely to substitute him in certain functions.

Examining the background of the second nomination as an apostolic administrator, I faced with the problem why in 1939 a bishop was appointed. In connection with it I declare that the bishopric appointment of József Grósz was a hurried step that was based on wrong expectations. Namely the government thought it was high time to appoint a bishop, as the handing over and taking over of the bishopric benefice (from Bishop Mikes to the Religious Fund that treated it during the *sede vacante*) will be terminated in a short period of time and the bishopric benefice will be unencumbered. The second expectation was that the financial state of

the bishopric benefice will be improved from the Bishopric of Veszprém. Both of the expectations were proved to be delusion. The *praescissio* from Bishop Mikes was realized only in 1940 with significant concessions. The new bishop had to take over the benefice without *fundus nobilior* and with debt and the bishop of Veszprém offered such estates that were situated far from the boarder of the diocese and yield only small profit that were rejected by József Grósz.

After these I arrived at the problem of the background of the second apostolic administration. From the above written inevitably arouse the question: after the appointment of József Grósz as the archbishop of Kalocsa who would be bound to take over the benefice in such state? For this meant a solution the second nomination as apostolic administrator. Hence, during the *sede vacante* again the Religious Fund administrated the benefice, with which – as the example of Bishop Mikes shows – in the *praescissio* it was easier to come to an agreement. Additionally, as the Episcopal see of Veszprém and Szombathely were at the same time vacant, during this period it could be hoped that from the bishopric of Veszprém the bishopric of Szombathely would be improved with more profitable estates than had been offered. It would have been more difficult with filled bishoprics. There was also a third aspect: Miklós Esty, who was the *gentiluomo* of Jusztinián Serédi, seems to know that at second time an apostolic administrator was nominated, because at the asking of consent to the archbishopric see of Kalocsa József

Grósz insisted on it, as according to his opinion there was no one in the cathedral chapter who would have been suitable to the governing of the diocese. Hearing it, the nuncio declared that it can be only realized, if they do similarly with the Episcopal see of Veszprém. This later condition, regarding that it could have been scarcely refer to that that there is no suitable personality to the governing of the diocese in either of the cathedral chapters, strengthens our suspicion, that the main aim, why not a diocesan was appointed was the improvement of the diocese of Szombathely with better conditions, than in 1940. My observation is supported by many documents in my dissertation. As a result of the *praescissio* from József Grósz to the Religious Fund, the improvement of the benefice yet was managed to achieve in the February of 1944.

Summarizing there is a strong relationship between the real or the guessed state of the bishopric benefice and the offices of the leader on the head of the diocese. At the same time, I am convinced that the church governing interweaved in more respects with the members and role of the cathedral chapter, as well. The canons had a notable influence as the advice giving organ of the bishop, the filling of the leading diocesan offices (e.g. vicar general, provicar and the chairman of the diocesan court were canons) and the archdeaconries, furthermore, as the administrators of certain – from the point of view of the diocese determining – funds and foundations. Even if these latter could not work properly because of the devaluation of the government

securities and the retaining of compensation for war loan bonds. In addition, in certain – particularly of financial nature that concerned the whole diocese – questions the bishop could decide only after asking their advice or asking their consent. Besides in the public life of the county they represented the interest of the believers and the Catholic Church.

The third component of the church governing was the diocesan curia. I ascertained that basically the bishop chose its members in the prescribed cases with asking the opinion of the cathedral chapter. In his choice dominated the aspects of practicability and expertise. Accordingly, its members were mostly canons who lived in the capital of the diocese, the professors of the theological college, the parish priest of Szombathely and those priests of the diocese who were learnt and had enough practical experience. If we would like to delineate the nature of the offices in the Curia, we can outline three kinds of them – among which there are naturally overlaps: the organs of the diocesan administration, of the diocesan court and other institutions that were founded for the realization of one given task.

The other, horizontal aspect of the diocesan governing was the territorial governing, the main components of which were: the archdeaconries, the deaconries, the parishes and the ministries. These latter developed into parish later, their spiritual leader was in case of *curatiae* an independent, in case of *expositurae* a delegated pastor. In this chapter an important remark of mine was

that during the church governing of József Grósz in Szombathely – unlike the news of the Circulars (where the erection of two *curatiae* was not mentioned) – two *expositurae*, seven *curatiae* and four parishes were erected in the diocese. In the Prekmurje – that had only a common leader with the diocese of Szombathely in the person of József Grósz, who was an apostolic administrator of Prekmurje from 1941 – two parishes and one *curatiae* were erected.

I devoted a separate chapter to the presentation of the pastors and the religious orders, who I featured as the leavens of the diocese, as many important tasks were concentrated in their hands: pastoral, administration, religious education, leading of the associations, parish churches and in more cases role in the public life. It was incumbent on the clergy to realize the conceptions and the ordainments of the ordinary that he took in the light of the changing circumstances, rising acts, regulations, adapting to the local conditions. In case of the religious monks and nuns, I put the emphasize on those activities, with which they contributed to the flourishing of spiritual life.

From the regulations of József Grósz we can deduce the essential characteristics of his personality. In connection with it I state the following: he was quite thorough, he regulated everything detailed, but it did not mean that he would not have listened in many questions to the opinion of others. He was a bit graphoman individuality, who noted down many things – to the fortune of the historians. He led the clergy with strong

hand, where it was necessary he employed rigidity, where he regarded it deserved, he employed compliments or granted honorary titles. Besides these he was a jolly person, who maintained a good relationship with everyone and who took part also actively in public life. He put a great emphasize on the local organizing and working of the *Actio Catholica*. He started a separate newspaper that reported about this institution in 1937 with the title: Szombathelyi Katolikus Tudósító. Accordingly, I devoted a separate chapter for this organization and for the association life that started out from it.

The other sphere that was a favourite of the bishop was the education. He led this activity with those care and exactitude that was habitual from him. He regarded particularly important the supporting of the agrarian youth by organizing courses for training the future leaders of the KALOT and the Kalász and by opening the KALOT adult education centre. Besides he strongly stood up for the Catholic Student Residence Movement. He supported those, who wanted to be priests with the introducing of the *Opus Vocationis* movement into the diocese. I revealed the local working of this institution and I ascertained that the erection of the junior seminary was due to the answer of the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities to the relation about the seminary, regarding that the diocese of Szombathely was the only one, where there was in no form a separate junior seminary. Furthermore, József Grósz also made the senior seminary enlarged.

All of these activities could not be done independently from the national and local policy, therefore I regarded it important to analyse what was the standpoint of József Grósz in the political life, what initiations he supported and how was his attitude towards the ideologies of the age. In connection with these I came to the following conclusions. Although he did not take sides openly supporting one given part, he basically agreed with the programme of the Christian party. He also condemned the wrong doctrines of the extremist ideologies, the national socialism and the communism, but he was convicted that until the Hungarian Nazis are believers and practicing Catholics there is no problem with them. He agreed with the social efforts, what is more also with the giving of one third of the bishopric estate of Sorokmajor to smallholders. In connection with the Jewish acts his point of view was that it was necessary the repression of the economical expansion of the Jews, but at the same time the Hungarian people have to be educated to the negotiation, diligence and solidarity that are the characteristics of the Jews. According to him the converts and the children who were baptised in Catholic faith should be taken out of the legal force of the acts. But taking away of the Jewish estates he regarded a mistaken step in wartime. As far as Trianon concerned, he wanted full revision. I reckon that my statements also light a bit better the background of his later Calvary. Furthermore, in my dissertation I examined the point of view of three outstanding priests:

Mihály Huszár, László Szendy and József Pehm (Mindszenty).

Finally it must not be forgotten that the events of the examined eight years happened in the shade of a threatening war, then from 1941 with the declaration of the state of war as cold reality with active Hungarian participation in the war. So in the last bigger chapter I am dealing with the subject the diocese in the course of the events of the World War II. In the light of these it is even greater achievement that József Grósz managed to make the believers – who struggled with significant economical difficulties themselves – to donate the church buildings and different movements of the diocese and forming a living spiritual life with many associations, retreats and pilgrimages.

The new bishop of Szombathely, Sándor Kovács brought an approach that differed from those of József Grósz, he was rather a pastor than a bureaucrat and he had to hold on among different circumstances. The active bombing of Szombathely started, the agrarian reform took away further estates from the diocese of Szombathely, and the steam of people, who fled from the Russians quit to the West through Szombathely. The rebuilding took place in such age, in which the communists gradually took over the power and the believers and the clergy soon had to suffer hard trials.

IV. Publishing activity in the subject

- *A papnevelés története a szombathelyi egyházmegyében Gröss József egyházkormányzása alatt*, Századok. Tanulmányok a 200 éve született Horváth Mihály emlékére (ed. Anita Bojtos – Ádám Novotnik), Budapest 2010, 167–178.
- *Gröss József oktatáspolitikája a szombathelyi egyházmegyében*, Politika – egyház – mindennapok. Tanulmányok (ed. Andor Lénár – Edit Bencze Lőrinczné), Budapest 2010, 97–117.
- *Gröss József patronázs tevékenysége (1936–1944)*, Sorsfordulók és mindennapok. Tanulmányok a 19-20. századi magyar és egyetemes történelemről (ed. Péter Strausz – Krisztián Péter Zachar), Budapest 2011, 170–191.
- *Egy apostoli adminisztrátori kinevezés háttere. Gróf Mikes János lemondása a szombathelyi püspökségről*, Magyarország és a római Szentszék (Források és távlatok). Tanulmányok Erdő bíboros tiszteletére (ed. Tusor Péter), Budapest–Róma 2012, 281–327.
- *Adalékok Mikes János püspök lemondásához*, in the study volume of the conference organized on the 3–4 November 2011 in Szombathely, ed. Balázs Bakó – Ferenc Pál, 2013 [in press]
- *Gröss József szombathelyi egyházkormányzása (1936–1944)*. In the study volume of the conference organized in Kalocsa on 3 October 2011 for the 50th anniversary of the death of József Gröss the archbishop of Kalocsa, 2013 [in press]