

ISTVÁN GYÖRGY TÓTH **THE PROTESTANT REBELS OF A CATHOLIC PRINCE.
MISSIONS AND MISSIONARIES IN THE RÁKÓCZI WAR**

The relation of the war of Rákóczi and the Catholic church was far from simple. Rákóczi himself was Catholic and not only a Catholic, but a very convinced one. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Rákóczi family was the main patron of the Reformed church in Transilvania under the princes George Rákóczi I and II. However, the father of Francis Rákóczi II, Francis Rákóczi I, converted to Catholicism under the influence of his mother Sophia Báthory, last member of the famous Báthory family.¹ Francis Rákóczi II had a thorough Catholic education in the Jesuit college of Neuhaus in Bohemia. After the fall of his war of liberty, in his exiled years, Rákóczi became an important Catholic writer, author of the *Confessiones* inspired by Saint Augustin. The chief leaders of the Rákóczi war, among them the generals Sándor Károlyi, and Simon Forgách, the Transylvanian chancellor István Sennyey, and above all the strong man in Rákóczi's camp, the number two of the kurucs, Miklós Bercsényi, were convicted Catholics, too.²

However, the majority, even the overwhelming majority of the followers of Rákóczi were Protestant. Rákóczi himself wrote in his *Memoirs* that 90% of his soldiers belonged to the Calvinist church.³ What is even more important, one of the driving forces behind the outbreak and the early successes of the Rákóczi war was the „causa religionis”, the brutal Counterreformation of Emperor Leopold I, and the fight for the re-establishment of the lost liberties of the Protestant churches.⁴

Many of the early Kurutz have seen in this war only the continuation of earlier wars of liberty, lead by Protestant Transylvanian princes against religious oppression of Catholic Habsburgs, and have seen Rákóczi simply as a caretaker

¹ István György Tóth: *Mil ans d'histoire hongroise*. Budapest, 2003, 253–256.

² Modern biography of Rákóczi: Béla Köpeczi – Ágnes R. Várkonyi: *II. Rákóczi Ferenc*. Budapest, 1976, passim. For a concise critical bibliography on the Rákóczi War cf. *Magyarország története 1686–1790*. (History of Hungary), Ed. Győző Ember – Gusztáv Heckenast, Budapest, 1989, 1324–1327.

³ Ferenc Rákóczi: *Emlékiratok*. (Memoirs), Budapest, 1985, 7–38, Tibor Fabiny: Rákóczi és az evangélikusok. (Rákóczi and the Lutherans), in *Rákóczi Tanulmányok* (Rákóczi Studies), Ed. Béla Köpeczi – Lajos Hopp – Ágnes R. Várkonyi, Budapest, 1980, 365–382.

⁴ Jean Bérenger – Léopold Ier: *1640–1705, Fondateur de la puissance autrichienne*. Paris, 2004, 407–437., Karl Vocelka: *Glanz und Untergang der höfischen Welt, Repraesentation, Reform und Reaktion im Habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat*, (Österreichische Geschichte 1699–1815), Wien, 2001, 144–153. with a very rich bibliography.

for his stepfather, the legendary Lutheran prince, the famous “Kurutz king”, Imre Thököly.⁵

In the years before the outbreak of the Rákóczi war, the absolutist state of Leopold I not only augmented the taxes in an irrational way and left out of consideration the organs of self-government of the Hungarian nobility, but in the same time the Viennese government pursued an aggressive Counterreformation program.⁶

Thus Rákóczi could not alienate his Protestant followers, who joined the Kurutz army among others in the hope of re-establishing the religious liberties of the Protestant churches. These liberties (neglected by the Habsburg government), were guaranteed by the peace of Linz in 1645 – after a war won by nobody else, but by the great-grandfather of Francis Rákóczi II, George Rákóczi I.

The relation between the Catholic Church and the war of Rákóczi was a complex one as well in inner politics as well as in the foreign relations of the Kurutz state.

After a certain hesitation, a minority of the Hungarian Catholic clergy took the side of Rákóczi, among them the only Kurutz member of the Hungarian episcopal hierarchy, the bishop of Eger, István Telekessy. The prince took the oath as *dux confederationis* in the hands of the bishop Telekessy, and in this oath he engaged himself to keep the liberties of the three accepted religions, Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran – in Transylvania, as a prince, he was obliged to maintain the liberties of four religions, the above mentioned three and the Unitarian (Antitrinitarian).

However, the greatest part of the Hungarian Catholic clergy remained on the side of the Habsburgs.

The diplomatic relations of Rákóczi with the papacy, the center of the Catholic Church, were very difficult, too.⁷

Both the main enemy of the Rákóczi war, the Habsburg dynasty and the main patron of prince Rákóczi, Louis XIV, as well as his Bavarian ally, were

⁵ Katalin Péter: A múlt és a jelen a Thököly-felkelés ideológiájában. (Past and present in the ideology of the Thököly uprising). In: *A Thököly-felkelés és kora*. (The Thököly uprising and its age), Ed. László Benczédi, Budapest, 1983, 199–203.

⁶ István György Tóth: Hungarian Culture in the early modern age. In: *A Cultural History of Hungary. From the Beginnings to the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. László Kósa, Budapest, 1999, I, 154–228.

⁷ Kálmán Benda: Rákóczi és az európai hatalmak (Rákóczi and the European powers). In: *Európa és a Rákóczi-szabadságharc*. (Europe and the Rákóczi War of Liberty), Ed. Kálmán Benda, Budapest, 1980, 25–33. Cf. Tamás Esze: Rákóczi valláspolitikája. (The religious policy of Rákóczi), *ibidem*, 285–296, József Borovi: Rákóczi világnézetének vallásos vonatkozásai. (Religious aspects of the ideas of Rákóczi), *ibidem*, 297–298., Tibor Fabiny: Rákóczi diplomáciájának egyházpolitikai vonatkozásai. (Aspects of church policy in the diplomacy of Rákóczi), *ibidem*, 301–306.

Catholic. Rákóczi hoped that after the diplomatic mission of the abbot Domokos Brenner sent to Rome in 1707, the pope Clement XI would acknowledge him and his state.⁸ The pope, however, first avoided to take parts, and later, as the general situation of Rákóczi's state as well as the situation of the papacy vis-à-vis the emperor Joseph deteriorated, refused to establish contacts with Rákóczi.⁹

In this relation I do not want to speak about the diplomatic manoeuvres of prince Rákóczi concerning the papacy or his steps to gain the sympathy of the Hungarian bishops, these questions were studied by other historians, among them the excellent expert of the Rákóczi period, the late Kálmán Benda. I propose to examine a completely different aspect of the relations between the Catholic Church and the Rákóczi war of liberation. On the basis of the archive materials of the Roman congregation Holy Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (*Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide*) that are under publication in a four volume edition in our institute, I would like to examine how the Catholic missions and the Catholic missionaries have seen the years of this war. This is a very special view on the Rákóczi war of liberty, not yet examined, – a view from *below*.

If we look into the documents, conserved in the Roman archives, the reports and letters written by the missionaries to Rome, we soon realise that Hungary was still a very much fragmented country some years after the peace of Carlowitz and the liberation of Hungary from one century and a half of Turkish occupation. The situation for the Catholic missions was indeed very different in the different parts of historical Hungary.¹⁰

It was in Northwestern Hungary, in the missions of the only monastic order founded in Hungary, the order of Saint Paul, that the impact of the Rákóczi war was the most evident.¹¹

In Upper Hungary (actual Slovakia) the Pauline missionaries had a flourishing mission which was founded by János Vanoviczy, the first Pauline missionary. However, in these years, the correspondence between the Pauline missionaries was cut off because of the Rákóczi war. As the head of the mission

⁸ Kálmán Benda, *Rákóczi és a Vatikán. Brenner apát küldetése XI. Kelemen pápához (Rákóczi and the Vatican. The diplomatic mission of the abbot Brenner to Pope Clement XI)*, *Történelmi Szemle*, 1959, 8–24. with further literature.

⁹ Kálmán Benda: II. Rákóczi Ferenc török politikájának első évei 1702–1703. (The first years of the Turkish policy of Francis Rákóczi II), *Történelmi Szemle*, 1962, 189–209.

¹⁰ István György Tóth: *Politique et religion en Hongrie au XVIIe siècle, Les lettres des missionnaires de la Propagande*. Champion-Slatkine, Paris, 2004. passim. Edition of the letters of missionaries: *Relationes missionariorum de Hungaria et Transilvania (1627–1707)*, Edited István György Tóth, Roma-Budapest, 1994, and *Litterae missionariorum de Hungaria et Transilvania (1572–1717)*, Edited István György Tóth, I-II, Roma-Budapest, 2002.

¹¹ István György Tóth: A remeterend vándormisszionáriusa. Vanoviczi János, az első pálos misszionárius levelei (1642–1677), (The wandering missionary of the hermit order, The Letters of János Vanoviczi, first Paulist missionary), *Levéltári Közlemények*, 72 (2001), 187–245.

complained – even the correspondence between the neighbouring Pauline monasteries was impossible, as there was no security on the roads.

This prefect of the Pauline mission was Lajos Barilovich who was already once and who later became again the general of this order. Before the Rákóczi war, Barilovich had already a long experience as Pauline missionary. He spread the Gospel at the Pauline mission in Upper Hungary, where he was beaten and even seriously wounded by the Protestants. From 1679 to 1689, and then again from 1704, during the Rákóczi war, he was the prefect of the Pauline missions in Hungary. From 1690 to 1696 and then again from 1709 until his death in 1712 he had the function of the general of the Pauline order.

The letters of Barilovich describe the situation of the Pauline monasteries during the Rákóczi war. These monasteries are “castles closed in themselves”, with very little communication among themselves.¹²

Barilovich lived during these years at the very end of Hungary, in Pozsony, Bratislava, at the monastery of Máriavölgy (Marianka, Marienthal) near Pozsony, and in Stomfa on the Moravian border. He had to confess in several letters to the cardinals of the Holy Congregation that he had no news at all on the missionaries working in the region of Kassa /Kosice.

In 1708 he wrote to Rome that because of the Rákóczi war there is no post service in Upper Hungary any more. He had only rarely contact with his missionaries. One Pauline monk had to flee from the Szepesség (Zips) region and brought him news to Pozsony: the Pauline missionaries in the Szepesség continue to work in spite of the Kurutz rebellion and they have even converted some Protestants. Another source of information for the head of the mission were the Pauline monks working as military chaplains in the camp of the imperial army. They brought some news about this menaced, but surviving mission in the Szepesség, too. The Pauline provincial has sent the guardian of Pozsony to Nyitra, but he was taken prisoner by the soldiers of Rákóczi. After four days of dire captivity these Kurutz soldiers sent him back with a letter written to the provincial. The Kurutz soldiers threatened the provincial in their letter with dire consequences if he would dare to send further monks to the Kurutz controlled territories.

However, the Pauline missionaries' main suffering was not caused neither by the imperial, nor by the Rákóczi army. They suffered mostly – and this was an experience shared by the majority of the Hungarian population – mainly because of the plague that swept away good part of the population in Upper

¹² Obligationis meae foret utique Sacrae Congregationi et Illustrissimae Dominationi Vestrae de fructu missionis patrum meorum quem anno proxime praeterlapso in conversione animarum cum gratia divina praestiterunt, demisse informare, verum cum ob modernum turbulentissimum statum afflicti hujus Hungariae regni omnes correspondentiae ideo sint interclusae ut nec ex vicinissimo monasterio ullam litteram recipere possim. Archivio di Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide (=APF) SC Ungheria Transilvania Vol. 3. Fol. 228.

Hungary.¹³ The priests, who cared about the soul of the dying, confessed them and gave them the holy communion and the *viaticum*, were especially in danger.¹⁴ Most of the parish priests and all the three above mentioned members of the Pauline missions of the Szepesség region died of the plague in 1710, therefore Barilovich had to take three new monks into the mission. – The missionaries of the Szepesség mission endured heroically the Kurutz soldiers' attacks, but they could not survive the menace of an invisible enemy, that of the plague bacteria.¹⁵

The Pauline monks replaced the Catholic parish priests expelled by the revolt or killed by plague, and brought the holy sacraments to several thousand souls even far away from their missions. They even converted some people, Lutherans, Calvinists alike, among them a Lutheran surgeon, and some servants in the town of Késmárk, who however, all, immediately after conversion, died of plague.

The Pauline missionaries had to learn at their own expense that the religious situation was much more complicated than the simplifying **Catholic Habsburg party, Protestant Rákóczi party** schema would suggest.

When during the Transdanubian campaign the Kurutz soldiers occupied Csáktornya, they caused great damage in the Pauline monastery here. However, the very important monastery of Máriavölgy of the Pauline order was ransacked by Protestant soldiers fighting for the Habsburg cause. These Protestant soldiers fighting under the commandment of the imperial general Hannibal Heister ransacked the monastery and did not even refrain from robbing out the church and taking away the chalice. Heister was obliged to put an imperial soldiers' commando for the defence of this monastery.

The Pauline monastery of Elefánt was devastated by soldiers fighting equally in the Habsburg camp, this time they were Orthodox Serbians. The monastery of Sopronbánfalva suffered from imperial soldiers, too: The imperial commander Plumberg himself was a Lutheran, but it was much more important that he suspected the Pauline monks of Sopronbánfalva to hide Kurutz soldiers in their monastery.

¹³ Praefectus Eminentissimis Vestris reverenter notificat qualiter grassante in dicto regno annis praeteritis peste, tres suae religionis patres ad munus missionum deputati morte exstincti sint, quibus orator alios tres ejusdem religionis subrogavit. APF SOCG Vol. 577. Fol. 460.+ 461/v.

¹⁴ Quantum ad missionarios meos praeter tres qui in servitio pestiferorum diversis in locis animas suas Deo tradiderunt, reliqui adhuc cum gratia divina muneri suo insistent, fere soli in toto Scepusio in hac contagione animabus inservientes, in toto siquidem praefato comitatu (prout scribitur) vix aliqui parochi et animarum curatores supervivant. APF SOCG Vol. 576. Fol. 520-523/v.

¹⁵ APF SC Ungheria Transilvania Vol. 4. Fol. 1.

If the Kurutz soldiers only menaced the Pauline monks, the Italian missionary Girolamo Orca working in the region of Pécs was even beaten by them, he suffered a lot from their hands.

Girolamo Orca worked as a missionary from 1690 in the diocese of Pécs, especially in the region of Szigetvár, in this town and in the surroundings, in 10-11 villages, where he converted many Unitarians to catholicism. He served at a village as a parish priest. However, in 1705, during the Transdanubian campaign of the Rákóczi army, the “rebels” attacked him. They chased him from his parish and robbed him of all his goods. Because he converted so many Unitarians, the angry Protestants tied him to a tree, he was scolded, beaten, and even condemned to death, however, he was left alive.¹⁶

Some kilometres more to the south, Luca Natale, a secular priest, a missionary from a Ragusan noble family, had a quite different experience.¹⁷ Luca Natale was one of the leading figures in the Southern Hungarian mission for more than two decades, he was one of the very few priests who endured here even the turbulent years of the great war between Kahlenberg and Carlowitz.¹⁸

Luca Natale studied at the Collegio Illirico at Loreto from 1672 to 1680. From 1680 he was parish priest in Nempti (Nijemci) and then in Valkóvár (Vukovar) in the Sirmium region. For eight years he was the vicar of the bishop of Belgrade, then the vicar of the bishop of Sirmium. The Turks captivated him several times. Natale was one of the very few Catholic priests who remained at their parishes in the 1690s, during the great Turkish war. After the peace of Karlowitz in 1699 he returned into the Sirmium region. In 1708, Pope Clement XI appointed him to bishop of Belgrade and apostolic vicar of former Turkish Hungary. After the Rákóczi war, in 1715, on behalf of the duke of Saxony, archbishop of Hungary, he – himself a Croatian from Dalmatia – visited the northwestern part of Hungary, and preached in Latin in the German, Hungarian, Slovak villages.¹⁹

For Luca Natale, just as in the years before Carlowitz, the main enemies of the missions were the Bosnian Franciscans – these (according to him) ignorant and aggressive monks who chased away the Dalmatian secular priests from this mission.²⁰ He wrote to the pope Clement XI. himself in the interest of this mission.

Luca Natale visited the region on the Turkish border that was firmly in the hands of the imperial border guards, where several thousand Catholics came to see him. Even hundred years old Catholics told him that not even their fathers

¹⁶ APF SOCG Vol. 556. Fol. 257.+ 260/v. Fol. 258. +259/v.

¹⁷ APF SC Ungheria Transilvania Vol. 3. Fol. 268-269/v.

¹⁸ APF SC Ungheria Transilvania Vol. 3. Fol. 492.

¹⁹ APF SOCG Vol. 565. Fol. 380/r-v. + 383.

²⁰ István György Tóth: Between Islam and Catholicism. Bosnian Franciscan missionaries in Turkish Hungary, 1583–1717. *Catholic Historical Review* 89 (2003) 409–433.

who died at the age of eighty, have ever heard that any Catholic bishop visited this region. After two centuries of Turkish occupation, Natale had no idea to which bishopric this region belonged to. He urged the Holy Congregation to send those Croatian missionaries into this region who were educated in Italian colleges at the expense of the Propaganda Fide and who now live a comfortable life in Venice or in the Dalmatian cities.²¹

The main ambition of Luca Natale, as new bishop of Belgrade, was to visit his residence, Belgrade and the region of Temesvár which were both in Turkish hands even after the peace of Carlowitz. He received a passport from the emperor and he went to these two cities. The Pashas received Luca Natale with honour in both towns, it seems that Natale knew both Pashas from earlier times, but neither of them dared to allow him to preach and confess until the permission of the sultan would arrive. They pointed out that in the XIII paragraph of the peace of Carlowitz there is no word about the free travel of the bishops, only of that of the Catholic priests. Following the advice of the interpreter of the pasha, Luca Natale asked for support: The archbishop of Esztergom should ask the emperor to tell the imperial ambassador in Constantinople to ask for a permission from the sultan that Natale could carry wine (forbidden in Muslim territories!) and his servants could carry weapons against the highwaymen. However, Natale did not wait in Temesvár for the results of this rather complicated way of diplomacy, he turned back to Vukovár. This above way was often tried, either through the imperial or through the French ambassador in Constantinople – these attempts had never results, as only bribing the local Turkish authorities helped the missions.

For Luca Natale living on the Turkish borderland, in Sirmium, in a territory that remained always in the hands of the Habsburg army, the Rákóczi war did not seem to be an issue – his letters reflect a reality of the seventeenth century even at the beginning of the next century.

Natale has found another Ragusan missionary in Temesvár, the last Catholic missionary of Turkish Hungary.²² Ludovico da Ragusa was a Ragusan Observant Franciscan, born in Ragusa in the year of the great earthquake, in 1667. He was military chaplain of the imperial army. In 1703 he was sent as missionary to Bulgaria, to Plovdiv. However, he interrupted his journeys and stayed at Temesvár, still in Turkish hands. From 1706 to 1712 he spread the Gospel in Temesvár and surroundings instead of Bulgaria, almost as in a „private mission”, in spite of the prohibitions from his superiors. He reconstructed a ruined church at Temesvár and another in Temesrékas. Because

²¹ APF SOCG Vol. 575. Fol. 199-203.

²² István György Tóth: Un francescano raguseo a Timisoara: l'ultimo missionario cattolico nell'Ungheria turca. *Atti e Memorie della Società Dalmata di Storia Patria*. XXIII (N.S. XII). 2001, 3, 73–103.

of the persecution by the Turks, he went to Istanbul where he got a privilege from the Grand Vizier for the Catholics.²³

For Ludovico da Ragusa the Rákóczi war meant above all Catholic refugees. He occupied himself as a missionary not only about the Catholic slaves the Turks had there, and the Catholic Croatians (Southern Slavs) living in the region, but many soldiers of the imperial army who deserted and fled to the Turkish territory of Temesvár – Fra Ludovico became their chaplain, too.

The situation of the Catholic missionaries was very different in Transylvania.

At the end of the seventeenth century, during the devastating Turkish wars, the Conventual Franciscan missionaries had to flee from Moldavia to Transylvania, and they began a very flourishing mission here. These Conventual Franciscans had an important school first at Esztelnek, and then at Kézdivásárhely, in the outskirts of this market-town called Kanta. The head of the mission was Bálint Raszlaviczy, a Hungarian friar from Upper Hungary. At this missionary outpost Hungarian, Italian and German Franciscans worked together, (the German friars came from the region of Cologne), and tried to go on mission to the neighbouring principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, too. In these difficult decades, this missionary school of Esztelnek was one of the most important Catholic schools in Transylvania.²⁴

The religious situation can not be oversimplified in Transylvania neither. The missionaries suffered from the excesses of the imperial soldiers as much as of the Kurutz soldiers, they complained about both of them. However, they could count on the support of the Kurutz aristocrats. Many of the Transylvanian aristocrats, fervent supporters of Rákóczi, were in fact Catholic. The Székely aristocrats, as the count Mihály Mikes, a relative of the most famous member of the Rákóczi emigration in Turkey, Kelemen Mikes, as well as Dávid Petki, from an old Székely Catholic family, wrote to the cardinals to Rome even from their exile in Moldavia, when they had to flee from Transylvania from the army of Rabutin. In their letters from Focşani they asked help from Rome for these Transylvanian missionaries.

After these fragmented images, we have also an overview on the situation of the Catholic missions in Hungary. The Italian missionary, Francesco Scacchi lived from 1690 in Hungary, he served at the newly liberated Pécsvárad. As so many other missionaries, he hoped for a bishopric. In 1707, after an audience allowed to him by Pope Clement XI, he prepared a great report for the cardinals of the “Propaganda Fide” on the situation of the Catholic religion in Hungary.

He wrote that Upper Hungary was full of heresy, but for the moment it was inaccessible for the missionaries because of the rebels – the same view

²³ APF SOCG Vol. 577. Fol. 687. + 690/v.

²⁴ APF SOCG Vol. 556. Fol. 174/r-v.

expressed by the Pauline missionaries. He described in detail the great lack of Catholic priests in Southern Transdanubia and Southern Hungary, these territories were only very recently liberated from the Turks. In this region for the Catholic church the Turkish devastation seemed to be the main factor, not the Rákóczi war. In the whole diocese of Sirmium there were only three secular parish priests and four Franciscans. In the diocese of Pécs, there were only six parish priests – that was the whole Catholic clergy here, while in the archdiocese of Kalocsa, according to Scacchi, there was not even one Catholic parish priest. From Transilvania, because of the campaign of Rabutin, many Catholics fled to Moldavia. The Propaganda should send here Italian missionaries, Scacchi proposed, they would have no difficulties, because the Romanian language remained here in use from the time of the late Roman emperors. Actually, “the Romanian language is an Italian, only so much corrupted that you can not understand it,” as he wrote it: *un italiano tanto corotto che non s’intende...*

At the first sight, the missionaries’ view on Rákóczi’s Hungary is a surprising one. However, it recalls in memory the fact, often forgotten, that the state of Rákóczi controlled **only one part** of Hungary, and after the peak of the revolt, this “Kurutz” territory diminished quickly. In other parts the Kurutz revolt had less effect, the Turkish occupation’s lasting heritage was much more important. The excesses committed against the missionaries demonstrate another easily forgotten fact: In spite of the good will of this open-minded ruler, the Catholic prince of the Protestant rebels, and the laws of the Kurutz diet, it was very difficult to make religious peace **on the village level** among “papists” and “heretics” after the decades of brutal Counterreformation.

The Catholic missionaries suffered from the imperial soldiers, too. For them, the Rákóczi war was not a glorious period, but an interruption of peaceful life. However, the greatest horrors for these missionaries were caused neither by the Kurutz nor the imperial cavalry, but by the devastating plague. No doubt, a great part of the Hungarian population, whether Catholic or Protestant, shared with the missionaries this very same experience and view.