
The author focuses on a recently rediscovered topic, the relations between Catholic monasticism and the Enlightenment. His investigation concentrates on the Benedictine monasteries of the former Holy Roman Empire. As he himself puts it in the introduction of his book: although monastic institutions are commonly considered as the places of seclusion, it has long been known by scholars of history, literary history, art history and the history of philosophy that these ecclesiastical centres definitely played crucial role in the process of cultural transmission. In the 18th century, moreover, they undertook a leading role in the propagation of the ideas of the Catholic Enlightenment.

The monograph is divided into ten chapters. The detailed introduction is followed by a survey of the cultural activity and the everyday life of the monastic communities. Monastic orders have paid special attention to historiography from the beginning. Exploration of their past together with recording contemporary events, as the author points out, were considered as important legitimizing factors by the communities. In the age of the Enlightenment the new approaches of the Maurist Congregation had an immense impact upon European Catholic historical writing, including the historiographical activity of the German Benedictine abbeys as well. The author presents the Benedictine historical writing of the first half of the 18th century through the works of Bernhard and Hieronymus Pez. Their early correspondence has become accessible after the publication of Lehner’s work thanks to the edition of Thomas Wallnig and Thomas Stockinger. In this chapter Lehner also touches upon the debate of Bernhard Pez and Gabriel Hevenesi. The importance of this dispute lies not only in the fact that it reinforces our view on the general antipathy towards the Jesuits in the age, which, as demonstrated by this case-study, was widespread even amongst Catholic intellectuals. Gabriel
Hevenesi was indeed the head of the Austrian Jesuit Province, but in the same time he was one of the most significant representative of the Hungarian Jesuit historiography. (The Hungarian Jesuits also belonged to the Austrian Province.) Therefore, the debate of the two scholars can be considered as the clash between the two schools of historical writing.

The next chapter deals with the change of the monastic life under the influence of the Zeitgeist. First, the author discusses the restrictions affecting the monasteries, especially the reduction of the number of novices. I think that Lehner makes an important point when he emphasises that this decree had positive consequences too, namely that the monastic office-holders could select the applicants more effectively, which contributed to the increase in the quality of the convent. Ecclesiastical historians traditionally regard this regulation as a harmful measure against monastic communities.

The author continues with a long discussion of the changes in monastic life. These include the reduction of the number of the canonical hours or the release from the community prayer. This process, as he stresses, was partly due to the increase of the scientific activity of the monks, but, from these times, they also had to undertake pastoral duties, which prevented them from continuing their earlier practice. I have to emphasise that the reduction and, finally, the disappearance of the community prayers was in fact a breach with the Benedictine traditions, as the lectio divina plays a central role in the Regula of Saint Benedict.

We can find ample examples of formerly prohibited activities amongst the Hungarian monks. The Piarist Bernát Benyák regularly went out with a company of ladies; wearing beard and tonsure resulted in tensions in the Pauline Order; late 19th century Cistercian historians recorded disapprovingly that their predecessors equipped the abbey of Zirc with a billiard hall. It seems therefore, that in similar changes took place in the German and Austrian territories, and the neighbouring Kingdom of Hungary.

The travels of the erudite monks remind the Hungarian reader of the Piarists as well. There are two generations of Piarist monks who acquired their knowledge and completed their studies during these scholarly journeys – primarily in Rome of course. As the author calls our attention in another context, the Piarists, in accordance with their principal rules, were only allowed to travel in pairs.

We can find further, quite lively examples to the inner conflicts of the abbots and the convents amongst the Hungarian Benedictines too. The authoritarian archabbot of Pannonhalma, Benedek Sajghó (1722–1768), virtually waged a war with the members of his convent. His adversity with Odilo Koptik is remarkably infamous, as it became commonly known in Benedictine circles after Koptik found shelter in the Benedictine monastery of Göttweig. Amongst the reasons behind these conflicts we can find the nomination of the
dependent abbots, the limitation of the rights of the convent and financial issues too, which, in many cases, are very similar to the examples discussed by the author.

The author points out that, although considered as an enlightened order, only a few of the Benedictines supported the French revolution, while the majority defended the ancien régime. This fact accords with the Hungarian examples: although a police report recorded that a Piarist in Kőszeg, Celesztin Piller drank General Dumouriez’s health, and many monks were involved in the Hungarian Jacobin movement, the majority still opposed the revolutionary ideas. This fact also demonstrates that the ideas of the Enlightenment and the revolution do not necessarily correspond with each other.

One of the most important features of the age of the Enlightenment is the transformation of communication. It was an appropriate decision, therefore, to devote an independent chapter to this question. The issue of the two Benedictine journals is specifically interesting. Researchers mainly focus on the Protestant press, whose significance is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the first Benedictine journal was printed in Protestant towns. Although this journal, titled as Banzer Zeitung, is considered as a moderate supporter of the Catholic Enlightenment, the second, anonymously edited Benedictine journal (Benediktinermuseum) formulated some criticism towards monasticism. Scepticism towards the mendicant orders also appears here, which, besides the rejection of the Jesuits, is another common trait amongst the representatives of the Catholic Enlightenment.

While the chapter on the transformation of the monastic life offers negative examples, we can also learn here about the positive side of this change in connection with Melk. We read about conscious and well-reasoned reforms which served the more effective pursuit of their studies.

The chapter on the monastery prisons does not only exemplify the effects of the transformed human ideal, but it offers detailed case-studies on how the state interfered into the internal life of the monasteries. Most scholarly literature on the topic only touches upon the measures of the Austrian and Bavarian government on the restrictive regulations on prisons. Only after gathering all the sources together, however, became evident what these measures had meant in practice. The chapter demonstrates palpably that there were considerable differences between those abbeys which were under the control of the government, and the Imperial Abbeys. The case of Marianus Gordon shows clearly that the signs of Enlightenment and confessionalisation appeared parallel in the age. Amongst the exciting stories about runaway monks there is one case that can be compared to a Hungarian one. The runaway and conversion of abbot Gregorius Rothfischer happened quite similarly to
the flee and Protestant conversion of Anton Niklas, abbot of Heinrichau and Zirc, in 1724, which is generally explained by the expansion of Jansenism.

In the part about the new theories of law the author clarifies that the absolutist ecclesiastical policy can be understood on the basis of the natural law. This approach has not yet been accepted by Catholic ecclesiastical historians. The author rightly calls our attention to the elaborateness of the Protestant school of natural law and, therefore, its dominance over that of the Catholics. It is also an important statement that the representatives of these schools, after all, voiced arguments against monasteries, especially against Imperial Abbeys. In fact, those monks who propagated Catholic natural law attacked their own form of living. As Anton Schindling has argued, the Imperial Abbeys representing Catholic Enlightenment had themselves participated in their own annexations.

On the one hand there are several parallel examples of the conflict of the bishop and the monastic community. The conflicts of Márton Padányi Biró, bishop of Veszprém, are well-known in the Hungarian research. On the other hand these clashes clearly show that enlightened reforms often coincided with the aspirations of renewal after the Council of Trent. It was the Council itself which gave rise to the adversity between the diocesan bishops and the monastic communities, when reinforced the monastic privileges and, in the same time, obliged the bishops to undertake the pastoral control of their bishoprics. This adversity was further enhanced by the increasing monastic self-consciousness.

The activity of Anselm Desing, abbot of Ensdorf, and his criticism towards the Protestant natural law, discussed in the same chapter, sheds light upon the complexity of the Catholic Enlightenment. In this question, Desing clearly represented the conservative standpoint, while his historical works show similarity to the Protestant school of Göttingen. His approach is understandable: as he recognised the threat of the natural law to the monastic life, in his works he defended monasticism, which served as the framework of his community’s as well as his own life.

While reading the chapter on the new philosophy, the Hungarian reader is reminded of the Hungarian Piarists, who devoted all their efforts to introducing the new approach of Corsini, and, above all, the principles of experimental physics. They also renewed Hungarian philosophy teaching.

In relation with the new theology discussed in Lehner’s book, I have to call attention to the agreement of the goals of the Tridentine reform and the Enlightenment. They both focused on the practice of pastoral care even if their means differed in many cases. Peter Hersche has already called attention to the fact that the Austrian Jansenists considered themselves as the
main propagators of the Tridentine reforms, while their antagonists were regarded as the opponents of the Council’s spirit.

At this point, Lehner discusses the theological activity of Martin Gerbert, abbot of St. Blasien. On the one hand, Gerbert is an excellent example of the so-called unconscious Enlightenment, since, as Lehner states, the abbot might have opposed the idea that he was a follower of Enlightenment. Similar examples could be listed from Hungary. On the other hand, Gerbert’s activity demonstrates the process of the incorporation of the auxiliary sciences into the methodology of the new theology, above all that of patristics, ecclesiastical history and archaeology. However, Gerbert gave a good example of the practice of pastoral care: similarly to the ecclesiastical architecture after the Council of Trent, he implemented the goals of the Enlightenment when he reconstructed the abbey church of St. Blasien.

The emergence of the ideas of the ecumenism is also a good example of the re-evaluation of former attitudes in the theology of the Enlightenment. We can witness the revival of the ecumenical movements in the works of Beda Mayr, after their first appearance subsequent to the Treaty of Westphalia. Benedict Werkmeister’s interpretation of the idea of tolerance presupposes the direct influence of Max Anton Wittola. Wittola’s work, which had been published some years before that of Werkmeister, derives the idea of tolerance from the principles of Christianity, just as the Benedictine monk of Neresheim did.

At the end of this chapter as well as in his conclusion, the author, similarly to Peter Hersche, Harm Klueting and Anton Schindling, writes about the prospectless future of the Catholic Enlightenment. On the one hand, the revolutionary wars and the emergence of Napoleon discredited the ideas of the Enlightenment amongst Catholic intellectuals, while on the other hand, the secularisation in 1802 dissolved the centres of Catholic Enlightenment: the monastic institutions of the former Holy Roman Empire. The prevailing ideas of the 18th century disappeared from the Catholic intellectual life until the modernist debates of the 20th century and the Second Vatican Council.

Ulrich L. Lehner’s monograph discusses an important but still little-known chapter of the Enlightenment. His work exploits the scientific results of the recent decades, published mostly in German, while he also completes them with the results of his own investigation into the sources. On the basis of his monograph and the vast educational documentation attached to his application, I definitely recommend the initiation of the habilitation procedure for Ulrich L. Lehner.

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