

ZSUZSANNA BÖGRE / Péter Pázmány Catholic University

"WE CHANGED OUR CLOTHES, BUT WE DID NOT CHANGE INSIDE..."¹ Hungarian nuns and sisters before and after 1950²

INTRODUCTION

Monastic orders cannot be overlooked in respect to Catholicism. It seems logical that if someone intends to mortally wound the Catholic Church, the monasteries — the resources of faith — should serve as the primary target. It is the religious capital of its monastic orders, where you can find the inexhaustible resources of religious life, that nourishes the Church, not its political actions.³

The communist regime dissolved all monastic orders in 1950, affecting approximately 3000 'men religious' and 9000 'women religious' from 23 male and 40 female orders. This dissolution of monastic orders was preceded by the secularization of church institutions in 1948, when 'men and women religious' lost "only" their secular jobs in schools, nurseries, hospitals, and orphanages. The further step taken in 1950 also deprived them of the opportunity to live in accordance with their vocation. 3000 'men and women religious' were interned in the summer of 1950 as a first step, and all 'men and women religious' were expelled from monasteries and convents in autumn of the same year. (There were only four orders who could legally continue their activities under communism.) It was not until 40 years later, when only about 950 'men religious' and 2500 'women religious' lived in Hungary, that they could openly take up their duties once again.

'Men and women religious' did irreplaceable work in the fields of education and social welfare before the Second World War, and their authority in society was beyond dispute. The fact that ordinary people referred to them as "kind sisters" underlines this fact.

This study aims to analyze the biographies of those 'women religious' who, despite the fact that their orders no longer existed in Hungary, consciously remained loyal to their vocation. I term them "loyal 'women religious.'" On the basis of their life-stories I sought to understand how women who wanted to remain 'women religious' in a communist country were able to preserve their vocations. We know of a number of cases in which 'women religious' were forced to give up their vocation and marry after the dissolution of their orders. Their biographies are also very instructive, but for me it seemed more important to learn how "loyal 'women religious' " continued to live their religious lives.

Oral history has not yet been utilized in Hungary to explore 'women religious' ' personal experiences. Not only may this lead to a poorer historical awareness of our own lives, we may also thereby fail to discover the hidden secrets of ordinary life during the past fifty years. For example, we have more information on the terror-filled atmosphere of the 1950s than on the solidarity of certain social groups and how they sought to stand their ground. Few of us today know that the civilian population made many efforts to help 'men and women religious,' such as by forming living chains to protect the monasteries and convents. In some locations, the "beloved

congregations" (the term used in the 'women religious' ' memoirs) tracked down the 'men and women religious' who were imprisoned in order to provide them with food and also be able to inform their relatives about them. Such stories can survive only if we have the 'women religious' recall them so that we can record them.

WHO WERE "LOYAL 'WOMEN RELIGIOUS' "?

This study is based on 50 life stories. Respondents were accumulated by interviewing 'women religious' who were known to those who had already been interviewed. The interviews usually took about two hours, but many were longer. The memoirs/recollections were typically five to ten pages in length.

Previous research conducted by Edit Révay has revealed that monastic orders reacted to the communist dictatorship in three ways.⁴ First, there were four orders who were able to function legally, albeit under strict state supervision. One female and three male orders were able to continue their activities in this way, namely, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, the Benedictines, the Franciscans, and the Piarists. Second, there were orders that resisted, defied the state, functioned in an "underground" fashion, and sought to preserve the framework of their congregational life.¹ Both the leaders and members of these orders — only three or four of which we know of in Hungary — were defenseless against the political police, underwent constant harassment, and risked imprisonment. Third, a significant number of orders were unable to resist persecution, their institutions were dissolved, and their members were scattered.

However, our analyses of life-stories has indicated that there appears to have been a fourth group as well, namely, 'women religious' who continued their religious lives not only without the framework of their order to support them, but also *rethinking the framework and meaning of their religious life*. These 'women religious' belong typologically to the third group identified by Révay insofar as their orders were dissolved, but they nevertheless remained *loyal* to their vocation and stayed in contact with one another. They did their best to meet on a regular basis whenever possible since they felt that if they could stay together in some way they might be able to continue living as 'women religious'. They also sought to live together in smaller groups of two to occasionally five or six in order to strengthen their sense of vocation and continue their monastic lives. The term "loyal women religious" may thus refer not only to members of legally functioning or resisting orders, but also to those members of the orders that had been dissolved who wanted to remain 'women religious' and cooperated with each other in order to preserve their vocation. Preserving their loyalty to their vocation required individual decisions regardless of how the leaders of their orders were or were not able to hold their ground in a hostile political environment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE ANALYSIS

Anthony Giddens argues that biography and identity are interconnected social phenomena, and he defines self-identity as reflexively understanding oneself in terms of one's biography.⁵ Peter Berger states in a similar vein that identity means the "actual experience of the self in a particular situation," that is, the manner in which

¹ It has to be mentioned that there were religious orders, mainly apostolic congregations who in their underground existence accepted new members and continued the formation of the religious identity of these members (the Society of the Sisters of Social Service alone had more than 50 new members accepted and formed in communist Hungary).

individuals define themselves.⁶

I interpret this position to mean that individuals store, so to speak, their particular experiences in their biographies such that they come to speak about these experiences as stories about themselves. Consequently, if we analyze the changes that take place in life stories, we can deduce how the identities of those interviewed changed. In addition, if we analyze the life stories of a well-definable group, we may be able to outline the identity of that given group as a whole.

In my analyses I apply Hans Mol's theory that differentiates between two basic identities as he addresses such issues.⁷ He terms the first of these *involuntary identity*, which is nourished by *primary, face-to-face social groups* and community interactions. He terms the second *transient identity*, which is dependent on *secondary social groups* and on the nature of social encounters. This theory was further developed by P. E. Hammond in order to differentiate between two types of religious identity.⁸ He termed the first *collective identity*, the most important characteristic of which is church-affiliated identity. Belonging to a local religious community, which serves as a primary group, is a highly stressed role, and cooperation with the church is involuntary and immutable in respect to this type of religious identity. Hammond termed the second type *individualistic identity*. Although it is characterized by a low level of cooperation with local communities, the strong social environment provided by the secondary group exercises a great influence upon those belonging to it. This type of identity comprises low-stressed roles, and attitudes towards the church and religious identity from this perspective may be viewed as transient and changeable.

In my research I endeavor to examine how these two types of religious identity (collective and individualistic) appear in the life stories of those interviewed.²

MEMORIES OF MONASTIC LIFE BEFORE 1950

Philosopher László Tengelyi uses the term "fate event" to describe a personal or historical event that changes one's life and causes one to view her/her previous self in a completely differently light.⁹ We may thus consider the dissolution of monastic orders to be such a fate event insofar as it altered not only the lives of individual 'women religious', but the life of the entire Hungarian Church. Those 'women religious' who suffered the dissolution of their orders indeed divided their lives into two periods, namely, the one before and one afterwards. Since they were members of a religious order, their previous community had constituted the framework of their lives and their daily routines were rooted in it. Moreover, their memories of the time before 1950 were influenced by the period after 1950 to such an extent that everything from the earlier period was typically regarded as harmonious and positive. Even the war was no exception. The bombardments they endured and having to flee from the advancing Russian soldiers seemed better than the dissolution of their orders, which meant the destruction of everything that was important to them.

The order had meant daily routine, companionship, duties, and guidance. All the 'women religious' interviewed used the first person plural when speaking about themselves as members of an order. Hardly any "I" or "me" appeared in their descriptions of the pre-1950 period, and each and every important event was marked by "we" and "us" 'women religious' did not make their own choices, for their superiors decided everything. This in

² It has to be mentioned that the identity of the religious has deeper components than contact with primary and secondary groups or the identity of collective and individualistic but we can focus on them here.

fact was part of what it meant to be a nun. "The superior announced," "told us," "decided," and "I would have liked it another way, but my superior saw it differently" were expressions that reveal the inner life of their religious orders. Indeed, obedience to their superiors was such an important element of 'women religious' identity that even if something took place that was not to their liking, they regarded it as a "gift of grace." They thus idealized the period before the dissolution since it was followed by a very daunting and fundamentally tragic period.

The interviews reveal an increase in memories concerning precautionary measures as the date of the as yet unknown final dissolution approached. It thus appears evident that the orders neither expected, nor even imagined such a devastating action on the part of the communist authorities, but rather only a brief transitional period of some sort. In addition, the 'women religious' ' recollections testify that the majority of superiors were uncertain of what they should do under such circumstances. They arrived at firm decisions only in respect to those who had not yet taken their final vows, who were sent back to their families if they had living relatives. We also know from the memories related to us that those who had already taken their final vows left their convents only if their superiors ordered them to do so. All those interviewed felt it important to emphasize that hardly anyone left their convent if their superior gave "only" permission to do so and not a specific order. This emphasis indicates that those interviewed considered remaining loyal to the end as the correct thing to do. We can see from this the value that 'women religious,' being members of a religious community, placed upon their convents and upon living in accordance with their vocation in the traditional sense of the term.

The order was their primary group and the most important local community. They lived their lives within their particular convents even when they worked in different places, such as the schools, kindergartens, hospitals, and prisons where they performed a range of services. Furthermore, the superior directed their lives in all respects, and their lives had a pre-established daily routine that was questioned by none of those interviewed. The superior also guided spiritual life, and 'women religious' spoke of a type of mother-daughter relationship with their superior, that was particularly close and intimate.

Joining the order seemed an obvious step for the sisters.

At a certain point in my life I began to feel that God was calling me, and I knew immediately that my true place was there.

Their identity could be described as "collective" and stability characterized their religious dedication during the pre-1950 period, when the primary community was the order itself. Their primary group and the place where they lived in accordance with their vocation were one and the same. The significantly important persons in both their private and social lives were also the same, and there was no distinction between their sacred and ordinary lives.

MEMORIES OF INTERNMENT

The dissolution of monastic orders began with the internment of 3000 'men and women religious' , with convents being subject to night-time raids by the State Security Authority (SSA) between June 6th and September 7th, 1950. The interviews testify that 'women religious' expected the arrival of the SSA with increasing fear in

June 1950.

Sister Immaculata had been wearing her corset for two weeks. She did not dare to remove it for fear that she would not be able to put it on quickly enough. I told her to take it off and rest more comfortably. I naively thought that the SSA would ring the bell, but they simply broke open the gate.¹⁰

We expected to be interned in various different camps or even in Russia. We undertook these hardships for love of God.¹¹

In their recollections the 'women religious' often mentioned the rudeness to which they had been subject during the raids, the violent behavior, the dreadful bayonets, and being forcefully rushed around. Some 'women religious' also gave accounts of physical abuse. They all remembered the humiliation they suffered along with the general neglect of faith and of the rights of the sick and elderly. But the public could not always be kept away even during night-time raids. There were cases when members of the local population surrounded the convents to prevent anyone from getting in or used the bell to warn the 'women religious' and others of the presence of the SSA. Congregations expressed their sympathy and solidarity even though they could not prevent the 'women religious' being taken away. The sisters remembered how

People kept crying and crying the following day. They streamed to the convents, crying and shouting "What did the sisters do wrong to deserve being treated like this?"¹²

The 'women religious' reacted to their internment in a disciplined way. Their fidelity to one another became even stronger and they helped each other in every way they could.

We became one heart, one soul. We sang in choirs, recited the Office, and strictly kept our daily routines. We had little water, but we learned to economize.¹³

In their recollections they remember how they refused in unison the offer of the State to leave freely if they voluntarily renounced their vocation. There were a number of dramatic and moving stories about "not signing anything" because they had "wanted the same thing." They rather set off into an uncertain and fearful future. A high point of these events was their collective refusal of the state offer, which must have provided them with a spiritual reserve that lasted many long years.

They announced to us that accommodation, clothes, and jobs would be made available to those who would sign the declaration ["I quit the order"] before leaving the room. The superiors left the room first without signing. Then all 400 'women religious' marched out in dead silence. Nobody signed it. It was such an incredible testimony. The officers just stood there, staring at us in astonishment. We went to the chapel without talking about it.¹⁴

The last station of their common life was the internment camp, where their monastic self-consciousness became even stronger. They had lost everything, but they were still together, and their clinging to their order and to one another was tied to their rejection of the prevailing political power. These 'women religious' had previously never been involved in politics in any way, but now they were forced to be. The state had deprived them of all outer vestiges of their religious life, including their convents and the prestige of their superiors, but

they continued to live as if nothing had changed — they continued to live as if the framework of their lives had not been destroyed. They prayed together, followed the orders of their superiors, and perhaps even attended mass if a priest could come in secret. Moreover, society supported, fed, and protected them as much as possible.

The internment lasted two to three months, ending in September with the crushing defeat of the religious orders. The irreversible decision had been taken — with the four exceptions noted above, the state officially disbanded the monastic orders.

Seeing poor Sister Clementina wrenched my heart. She was sobbing desperately when we had to part; her eyes reflected a child's helplessness and fear.¹⁵

Thus began the new life that lasted for forty years.

It almost broke my heart to see our community torn apart. Whenever I sat at a table, I could not help thinking about my beloved family of sisters.¹⁶

They had stuck to their collective type of religious identity even in their threatened position, and they had been able to remain in their primary groups while being interned. They had taken extraordinary care to observe their usual daily routine and the framework of the prayers. Since they were not allowed to work, they in fact had more time to devote to prayers. Most of those interviewed claim that they had spent the most peaceful and "wonderful" months together during that period.

I would be less than I am now if I had not been there."¹⁷

"WE HAD TO LIVE OUR LIVES..." WAITING FOR THE FALL OF COMMUNISM (1950-1956)

Even though the 'women religious' primary groups had ceased to exist after the dissolution of their monastic orders, they were nevertheless unable to accept what had happened to them. They put their trust in the faith that communism would not last long.

My superior allowed me to go home with some others in the belief that we would be together again very soon. This "very soon" ended up meaning fifty years.¹⁸

This period proved to be the most taunting from a physical point of view. Not only were 'women religious' forbidden to wear their religious habits and made to live in new locations, they were forced to learn a new way of life in an environment where they had lost all their former social prestige. They looked after children, washed dishes in restaurants, or worked like men in factories.

I stood in line in front of the steel works in Ózd for weeks until, with great difficulty, I finally got a job. The comrades looked at us as if we were slaves and selected us. I was hardly able to get in. The department where I worked produced cannon balls. Some workers were able to lift twelve or thirteen of them at a time, but I could lift only five or six. "Oh my God!" I thought. "How long will they keep me in this job?"¹⁹

Two of us went to the employment office. They first sent us to a factory. We were

told to write a CV when we arrived. We began with "We are 'women religious'." They immediately sent us away with no jobs. We went back to the office, and at the new place they sent us we also had to write our CVs, just like at the first factory. We again wrote "We are 'women religious' " because we wanted to be honest. The others got jobs, we did not. We asked if we were turned down because we were 'women religious', but the man didn't answer — he just sent us away with a bow of his head. We begged for any kind of job. We were ready to even sweep the streets because we had to live on something.²⁰

Although their orders and, consequently, their primary groups had been forcibly destroyed by the political authorities, they strove to keep in contact with their fellow 'women religious' friends in spite of the various prohibitions. They frequently visited one another and their superiors, and those who were more fortunate could rent an apartment together or work at the same place.

A woman like me could get a job in the steel industry. I was employed at the Hungarian Steel Goods Factory together with my superior and four other sisters. Two of us worked in the tempering shop, two others as lathe operators, and the other two as locksmiths. While the furnaces were heating up and we waited for the metal to turn red hot, we had time to get in contact with one another spiritually. We did live a spiritual life. And since I worked with my superior, we could live a monastic life every day. Although we were forced to live in different places, we were considered 'women religious' by the Church. That gave us real encouragement.²¹

Moreover, some sisters continued their monastic lives illegally in spite of all the bans and prohibitions.

Sometimes we were able to gather to say the Rosary. We would talk about what we had been doing, what we had been able to accomplish, and what our plans might be. I often visited the patients in the terminal wards of two hospitals. I tried to create an atmosphere that would enable me to call the priest for those who were dying.²²

Attending mass together in major towns could be an occasion that would bring them together. In addition, small groups of 'women religious' might organize weekend trips together or gather in various attics in secret. It was essential for them *to remain in contact with other sisters of their order*.

We constantly met with one another. At times there were twenty of us in the flat.²³

Although their religious commitment could be characterized as what Mol termed involuntary identity prior to 1950, it began to change after the dissolution. The sisters had to protect and nourish their commitment without background support from their orders, which we identified about as their primary groups. The order as a cohesive force no longer existed, but many fellow 'women religious' and superiors were still alive and they sought to keep in touch with each other.

In this changed environment, the role of the primary group was taken over by regular contacts with their fellow 'women religious', and these meetings helped them live in accordance with their vocation. We know from the life stories that were told to us how important the secret meetings and the shared flats and workplaces were for loyal 'women religious' since they had to seek out people who could, to some extent, replace their primary groups. The "convenience" of their previous involuntary religious identity, such as fixed times for prayers, the

role of the superior in the community, and similar ways of thinking, all of which helped 'women religious' live in accordance with their vocation, had ceased to exist. They were forced under such changed circumstances to learn how to make their own decisions since there no longer was someone to do it for them. Not only did they lack the daily support of their primary groups, they even had to conceal the fact that they were 'women religious'.

SECRET MONASTIC LIFE UNTIL THE 1989 DEMOCRATIC CHANGES

It became obvious to everyone after the 1956 Hungarian revolution that communism would not end anytime soon. One could say that society as a whole subsequently came to "suffer from depression," with people having to make long-term accommodations to the system. Even 'women religious' had to find their places in society.

Living in small groups demanded ever more conscious determination for a number of reasons. For example, when superiors became ill or old, their tasks had to be taken over by others. But it was also dangerous to keep in contact with each other since 'women religious' and their families were often threatened with police harassment, imprisonment, or being fired from their jobs.

Around 1960 renewed police pressure forced us to stop singing in the choir because there were secondary school students. Several times I was followed and taken to the police station.²⁴

The life stories recounted to us also reveal that being a nun during this period meant doing jobs that no one else was willing to do.

In the 1970s I undertook the task of caring for a devout elderly woman. I took care of her in my own house together with six other older people. I did this so that they would not be alone when I was at church.²⁵

This was the period of faithfulness and endurance.

We stayed in contact with one another like the old Christians in the catacombs. One of our sisters lived at Nagyvárad Square in a private house. We would gather in her attic. When we went to "visit" her, we always took a piece of wood so we could light a fire. When there were too many of us, we asked the priest at the city church to let us gather in the crypt. At that time there were forty of us. We could not be destroyed, we still had our spirit. Those sisters testified to the truth of our vocation which persevered during that period.²⁶

However, it was not possible to meet on a daily basis in spite of all their efforts — some of the sisters also mentioned that their numbers were slowly decreasing and that their superiors had died over the years. In addition, they also had to share their attention with secondary groups, which in their case meant colleagues at work and relatives. But a sense of being missionaries spread among them, whereby they tried to "consecrate their environment through their lives." Without words or explanations, their upright and compassionate behavior gave witness to and communicated their vocation to their environment.

The House of Pensioners opened on Fogarasi Road. I went to work there. During

the day I worked as a matron at my workplace and at night I was the nurse on duty in the House of Pensioners. I worked day and night. The elderly people expected my help at night. "Please, Margitka, come and visit this patient, he is so sick." I kept praying that I would be able to say "Yes" to everyone. I was afraid that "I can't do it" might slip out of mouth. I worked day and night.²⁷

Those we interviewed told us in most cases that their colleagues valued their work highly and that they themselves liked their workplaces and endeavored to work conscientiously. They had to adapt themselves day by day to the secondary groups in their lives since after 1950 only remnants of their primary groups remained. And these remnants comprised only small groups of a few members with whom they could meet only occasionally even they should have been living with them as a primary group in accordance with their vocation. The opportunities to meet that did present themselves were invaluable to the sisters, but the *loyals* nevertheless had to build good relationships with the new environment to which they had to adapt their lives.

SUMMARY

A number of these loyal 'women religious' had, of course, passed away prior to the democratic changes in 1989 and the subsequent revival of their orders. Most of those alive at the time returned to their orders, but there were also a certain number of them who admitted that they were unable to undertake community life again. They remained where they had settled down after the dissolution, confessing that "We have grown old." One can question what that means in the case of 70-year-old 'women religious' smiling and bustling about, but it was certainly quite challenging for elderly 'women religious' to leave the environment to which they had grown accustomed, even if they did miss their fellow sisters. It is understandable if some of them lacked the courage to begin their life in the convent all over again. In addition, they had been forced during forty years of communism to make their own individual decisions in order to preserve their vocation. This long period of time could not be erased in an instant without leaving any traces.

The data we collected enables us to demonstrate that the religious identity of loyal 'women religious' changed. Their former involuntary religiosity, which is characteristic of collective identity, was gradually transformed into a series of conscious, individual decisions. In Mol's and Hammond's terms, the 'women religious' 'religious identity became individualistic. Our analysis also reveals that the role of secondary groups in the sisters' lives became significantly more important because the primary groups were no longer available for them in their daily lives. The secondary groups came to regulate their life-styles, schedules, and daily routines, something that otherwise would have been the responsibility of their primary groups.

However, it is necessary to point out that individualization clearly meant something other in the lives of those interviewed than it does in Mol's and Hammond's theories. Analysis of the historical periods described in the life stories (that is, before and after the 1950 disbanding of religious orders) makes it evident that community relations in the primary groups were weakened solely because of political force, at least in respect to *loyal* 'women religious'. It was not that the sisters had renounced their local communities, but rather that the latter had been destroyed by the political dictatorship. 'Women religious' responded to this situation by insisting on staying in contact with one another even if doing so placed a burden on their lives.

Relation to the Church for those interviewed cannot be considered transient and mutable, as it is in Mol's

conceptual system, even if it had been transformed. Quite the opposite is in fact the case: ‘women religious’ in a changed environment sought to preserve immutability and remain loyal to themselves, a cornerstone of which was the stability of their relation to the Church. ‘Women religious’ identity underwent a forced individualization in what can only be described as uniquely national terms.

*Péter Pázmány Catholic University
Budapest-Piliscsaba, Hungary*

See References below

1 Sister Gilberta (Franciscan Sisters of the Poor). All translations from Hungarian in the text are by the author.

2 A monograph on this topic co-authored by the historian Csaba Szabó and the present writer is forthcoming.

3 Nigg, Walter (1984) *A szerzetesek titkai* [The Secrets of the Monks]. Budapest: Szent István Társaság, p. 18.

4 Révay, Edit (2003) *Újrainduló szerzetesrendek egy megújuló társadalomban* [Reviving Monastic Orders in a Reviving Society]. Budapest-Csíkszereda: Magyar Egyházzociológiai Intézet.

5 Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 244.

6 Berger, P., B. Berger, and H. Kellner (1974) *The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 73.

7 Mol, Hans (1978) *Identity and Religion*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

8 Hammond, P. E. (1988) "Religion and the Persistence of Identity." *Journal for the Scinetific Study of Religion*, 27 (1), pp. 1-11.

9 Tengelyi, László (1999) *Élettörténet és sorseseemény* [Life-story and Fate-event]. Budapest: Atlantisz.

10 Sister Mary (Society of Saint Ursula).

11 Sister Gilberta (Franciscan Sisters of the Poor).

12 Sister Mary (Society of Saint Ursula).

13 Sister Assumpta (Franciscan Sisters of the Poor).

14 Sister Mary (Congregatio Jesu).

15 Sister Mary (Society of Saint Ursula).

16 Sister Vincencia (Society of Saint Ursula).

17 Sister Jacinta (Dominican Sisters).

18 Sister Mary Tarzicia (Servitian Sisters).

19 Sister Mary Tarzicia (Servitian Sisters).

20 Sister Gilberta (Franciscan Sisters of the Poor).

21 Sister Melanie (Franciscan Sisters of the Poor).

22 Sister Claire (Dominican Sisters).

23 Sister Mary (Congregatio Jesu).

24 Sister Augusta (Society of Saint Ursula).

25 Sister Augusta (Society of Saint Ursula).

26 Sister Magna (Congregatio Jesu).

27 Sister Gilberta (Franciscan Sisters of the Poor).

[Return to Main Page](#)

[Return to Contents](#)