

Historical roots of Hungarian Christian democracy I.

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*Up until today, Christian democracy, at least on a conceptual level, has been decisive in Hungarian politics. In our analysis, we investigate the historical roots of Hungarian Christian democracy. After presenting the international and domestic antecedents, we wish to focus on the origins of Hungarian Christian Democracy by examining Pope Leo XIII's encyclical entitled *Constanti Hungarorum* and its consequences.*

Keywords: *Christian democracy, Hungarian politics, Kulturkampf, Pope Leo XIII, Ottokár Prohászka*

Introduction

On 29 October 2021, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was re-elected as one of the Vice-Presidents of the Centrist Democrat International, formerly Christian Democrat International (CDI).¹ His position in the organisation is often contrasted with one of his previous offices: between 1992 and 2000, the Prime Minister held the position of Vice-President of the Liberal International. The journey between the two international associations took a while for Fidesz's president.

The speeches at Bálványos Free Summer University in 2014 and 2018 are considered to be the cornerstones of Viktor Orbán's relationship with Christian democracy. Notwithstanding, the 2014 speech circulated in the international press in connection with the "illiberal" label. However, the term "illiberal" can be adequately interpreted in relation to the Prime Minister's definition of Christian democracy when – in the 2018

speech – he explains: *“Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal.”*² In this speech, Viktor Orbán identifies Christian democracy and the Christian democratic elite as an alternative to liberal democracy and the liberal democratic elite. At the same time, he gives a marked definition of his concept of Christian democracy:

*“Christian democracy is not about defending religious articles of faith – in this case Christian religious articles of faith. Neither states nor governments have competence on questions of damnation or salvation. Christian democratic politics means that the ways of life springing from Christian culture must be protected. Our duty is not to defend the articles of faith, but the forms of being that have grown from them. These include human dignity, the family and the nation – because Christianity does not seek to attain universality through the abolition of nations, but through the preservation of nations. Other forms which must be protected and strengthened include our faith communities. This – and not the protection of religious articles of faith – is the duty of Christian democracy.”*³

It is crucial to note that a month earlier, in a radio interview, he expressed that *“We are not liberals, and we are not building a liberal democracy: we are building a Christian democracy”*, and later, he continued, *“I could say we are working on building an old-school Christian democracy, rooted in European traditions.”*⁴ Since then, he has been using it as a recurring label to describe his politics. Most recently, for instance, at the Fidesz congress, Prime Minister Orbán said that if they could continue the civil and Christian democratic governance, they would be able to make huge progress again in the next ten years.⁵

The purpose of our study is not to analyse Viktor Orbán’s perception of Christian democracy. Neither does it undertake to compare the Prime Minister’s definition with international examples of Christian democracy. With the quotations in the introduction, we only wished to draw attention to the fact that Christian democracy – at least on a conceptual level – is still present in Hungarian politics. We can even disregard the Prime Minister’s statements and examine the results of the last three parliamentary elections in Hungary: the Christian Democratic People’s Party (Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt, or, in short, KDNP) – in a party alliance with Fidesz – participated in the government since 2010. However, we would not wish to evaluate the political performance of the KDNP either. We focus exclusively on where Hungary’s Christian

democratic roots – the consequences of which are still present in the 21st century - come from.

International and domestic antecedents

In our previous [articles](#), we have already presented that one of the most critical milestones in the development of Christian democracy was Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891. This document – along with several other papal pronouncements – became one of the foundations of the 20th-century Christian democratic parties.⁶ The encyclical basically draws attention to the social question, emphasising the rights of workers and the false teachings of socialism. At the same time, Pope Leo XIII made recommendations on how employers and workers should organise themselves. Catholic worker's associations and trade unions were established based on these proposals, which later served as a basis of the nascent politics of Christian democracy.

Before the official teaching of the Church, there were already signs of Christian democratic politics. In many respects, the French liberal Catholicism⁷ is among its precedents, associated with the name of Felicité de Lamennais; while in the German landscape, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz, is treated as an example who founded Catholic worker's associations nearly 50 years before the *Rerum Novarum*. Yet, as Gabriel A. Almond argued, the Church tried to confine these initial attempts as acts of *caritas*, i.e., acts of benevolent human love. The American political scientist also concluded that “*at the point where they resulted in encouragement of workers' self-help and trade unionism, they met Church and conservative Catholic resistance.*”⁸ In 1832, Pope Gregory XVI condemned Lamennais's ideas on the freedom of press, religion, and secularisation. Thus, it was a long process until the Church reached 1893, when Pope Leo XIII, in *Constanti Hungarorum*, pronouncedly encouraged Hungarian bishops to actively use the press.

In Hungary – similarly to the French developments – liberal Catholicism is seen as one of the forerunners of Christian Democracy. The scientific literature⁹ highlights József Eötvös and Ferenc Deák as figures who tried to combine democratic politics and their Christian commitment. It is well known that Eötvös was in active correspondence with Charles de Montalembert, who – together with Lamennais – founded the Catholic

journal *L'Avenir*, which was considered liberal at the time. Eötvös's letter from 1868 addressed to the French count is exciting:

*"I am of the opinion that the incessant influence that Christianity has exerted on the development of our civilisation – if we would like to explain this historical given by natural reasons – is above all attributable to the fact that Christianity never connected itself to any political form, instead, any form of state it met was used for the spreading of its basic tenets and doctrines, so in all cases, this way, it exerted a very significant influence on the transformation of political relations, although not by influencing the state's constitutional form, but by influencing people's feelings and beliefs."*¹⁰

With this statement – that Christianity is not connected to a specific form of state – Eötvös should be considered a significant figure of liberal Catholicism (which prepared the way for Christian democracy), even on an international level, since he formulated this view before it became an official Church teaching and before it was adopted by the magisterium. Theologian László Gájer points out that Pope Leo XIII clearly taught that the Church could work together with any form of state, and to pass on its message authentically, it must seek this cooperation.¹¹ However, between Pope Leo XIII's encyclical entitled *Diuturnum illud* – in which he articulates the "disinterestedness" concerning the forms of state – and Eötvös's letter, 13 years passed.

It is historian László Csorba who draws attention to the fact that Ferenc Deák took a stand in a parliamentary debate in 1868 by proclaiming, "*free Church in a free state, that is my motto*", which, according to some, originated from one of the most significant representatives of the liberal Catholic trend, Charles de Montalambert, while others claim that it was brought to the public consciousness by the Prime Minister of Piedmont, Camillo Benso di Cavour, who achieved the Italian unification and is also known for his liberal church policy.¹²

An encyclical for the Hungarian bishops

Although the two liberal politicians had a crucial role in shaping the intellectual environment, the basis of Hungarian Christian democratic politics, namely the Catholic associations and the press emerged to a visible extent only after Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, entitled *Constanti Hungarorum* was published on 2 September 1893.

To understand the significance of the encyclical, it is crucial to see the status of the Hungarian Catholic Church at the time. The encyclical addresses the Hungarian bishops in the midst of the Hungarian *kulturkampf*. The source of the conflict was that in 1868 the parliament prescribed that in mixed marriages, the boy child should follow his father's religion, while the girl child should follow her mother's. With this, they attempted to weaken the dominance of the Catholic Church. Already during this debate, the division between the bishops along the lines of being loyal to the pope or to the government emerged. As historian Tibor Klestenitz points out, in Hungary, due to the practice of appointing bishops – the Ministry of Religion and Public Education had a significant influence on the process – the high priests depended on state funds. Therefore, after 1867 it occurred often that religiously less devout, but towards the government spectacularly committed and openly political, liberal bishops were appointed.¹³ The conflict between the state and the Church intensified with the formation of the Wekerle-government in 1892, which made the adoption of ecclesiastical laws part of its programme.¹⁴ The papal encyclical was born amidst this situation, which served as a guideline for the Hungarian bishops to solve this situation.

The pope described mixed marriage as a significant danger which might cause – especially the children – *“to become accustomed to viewing all religions as equal because they have lost the power of discriminating between the true and the false.”*¹⁵ The pope provides several specific proposals against the enemies of the Catholic faith and for the defence of the Catholic religion. It stipulates that *“annual meetings of Catholic men, in which under episcopal leadership common directives are discussed”*¹⁶ are effective in forging unity, so they are desired to be held. It also asks to be *“diligently aware that only men of religious orthodoxy and proven virtue be elected to the legislative assemblies.”*¹⁷ The papal document deals with the issue of education on several levels; it urges the appointment of supervisors and the development of seminars. It also encourages that *“your people should use every means to counteract their writings with writings”*¹⁸ and asks for organisations: *“this is the opportune time for the clergy to revive the sodalities and confraternities of the laity to their former honor and glory [...] these sodalities can help you and your clergy not only by carefully cultivating in the people piety and a Christian way of life, but also of strengthening that salutary harmony of mind and heart that we strive for so ardently.”*¹⁹

As a result of the encyclical, the bishops already in the same year gathered and issued a joint pastoral letter in which they cautiously condemned the reforms and allowed the holding of a national Catholic assembly under strict conditions and control.²⁰ The *kulturkampf* finally ended with the laws of 1894-95, which made civil marriage and state registration compulsory, as well as the reception of the Israelite religion and declared full religious freedom. The new and reviving associational life, the assemblies, and the Catholic press – which came alive as a consequence of the papal encyclical – contributed to the forming of Hungarian Christian democracy. Why? Because the Catholic People's Party (Katolikus Néppárt) established at the initiative of Ottokár Prohászka, later bishop of Székesfehérvár, was based on these initiatives, and came as a reaction to the laws.

Conclusion

In his book entitled *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*, Yale professor Stathis N. Kalyvas names the process of the Church organising itself against the liberal state as the first step in creating Christian parties.²¹ By this first step, he does not mean the creation of political organisations but rather various civil society initiatives. In fact, influenced by the papal encyclical, this process of the organisation started in Hungary in 1893.

Also, a paradoxical situation occurred: the early liberal Catholic aspirations (see Eötvös and Deák) provoked a reaction against the state from the part of the Church. This reaction was self-organisation, which – in the longer term – carried the possibility of creating Christian democratic politics. In Zsolt Enyedi's interpretation, where the self-organisation took place, the Church had to experience that these civil society movements and the national Catholic assemblies were not able to provide effective protection against the state.²²

In the theory of Kalyvas, the second step is still not the foundation of a Christian political party; it is only when the conservative support begins to take place. The third step will be the foundation of an independent Christian political party. In Hungary, these two steps cannot be separated entirely because of the historical situation. One of its reasons could be that due to the division of the episcopacy, the Hungarian Catholic

Church could not take a clear stand in favour of the individual candidates in the 1892 elections.

In summary, the Catholic People's Party was a political reaction whose purpose was the political representation of the interests and values of the Catholic Church. At the same time, from an ideological perspective, this formation can be classified much closer to the trend of Christian socialism. Thus, the historical roots of Hungarian Christian democracy are interestingly intertwined with the political engagement of progressive liberal Catholics and the idea of Christian socialism.

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