

The Reformed Church and the Nobility in the Seat of Odorhei
(in the 16th and 19th century)
-Summary-

Key words: Reformed Church, Reformed nobility, Reformed elite, church-nobility relationship, ecclesiastical institutions, patronage, ecclesiastic and secular administration, curatorship, founding

The present paper studies the interference and interaction between two important and representative categories of the Transylvanian society in the 17th-19th centuries: the nobility and the Reformed Church. The nobility in general represented the secular elite of the Transylvanian society, its members actually being the main shapers of politics in the period of the Principality of Transylvania, the majority of princeps from the 17th century being of Reformed confession. Within the elite the Reformed aristocracy played a significant role until the inclusion of Transylvania in the Habsburg Monarchy sanctioned by Emperor Leopold I in 1690 in the *Diploma Leopoldinum*. The Reformed Church was in strong relationship with the protestant nobility, before 1690 its representatives were usually members of the Princely Council.

With the instauration of the Habsburgs in Transylvania and the gradual promotion of Catholic magnates in the superior political and administrative positions - to the detriment of Protestants - the latter, together with the leadership of the church are forced to organise themselves in a way to limit as much as possible the negative effects of the Habsburg religious politics. The structure and composition of the *Supremum Consistorium* of the Reformed Church was finalized by the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century with the well-defined objective to defend the interests of the Reformed Church in the new political and religious conditions.

The thesis follows the evolution of the relationship between the reformed nobility and the ecclesiastical administration in the diocese of Odorhei, being mainly based on the events from the 18th and from the beginning of the 19th century. Following a brief presentation of the subject of the research (*Introduction*), in the next chapter (*Sources*), we offered a detailed account of the archival sources that constituted the foundation of the research.

The chapter *The Parishes from the Diocese of Odorhei in the 16th and 19th centuries* presents the geographical and institutional framework of the diocese. In the 17th century, the

diocese had 64 congregations out of which 39 had a status of independent parishes and 25 were sub-parishes. The situation changed by the end of the 19th century, out of 91 parishes 39 belonged to other, stronger congregations. Some of these congregations administratively belonged to the county of Alba de Sus (Vânători, Albești, Petecu, Racoșu de Jos, Hoghiz, Văleni, Grânari, Șapartoc, Mureni), while the villages of Boiu and Țopa belonged to the county of Târnava. One after the other, we briefly presented the history of the parishes. Our aim was to present the most important moments from the lives of the parishioners (the foundation of the parish, the buildings belonging to the church, the main founders and patrons). As the area is ethnically and confessionally heterogeneous, we insisted on the details of those events, which, in a way or another, had an influence on the confessional aspect of the region. The divergences among the various confessions were quite frequent; in several places there were even armed conflicts among the fanatic supporters of the denominations, for example in Mujna. In the eastern and northern part of the diocese there were localities with Roman-Catholic population, while in the western and north-western areas there was a significant number of Unitarian parishioners. At the southern extremes of the diocese the Calvinist population was mixed with orthodox, Greek Catholic and Lutheran parishioners. The most misunderstandings were reported in the 17th century between Calvinist and Unitarian parishioners. The conflict began after 1638, when as a result of the decisions from Dej, the Unitarians became the main target of the prince's religious policy and when, under the pretext of having ties with a forbidden sect (Judaizers), several of their buildings were confiscated. Even as the conflict between the Reformed and Unitarian churches cooled off, the one with the Catholic Church became more pregnant, especially in the 18th century. The two main locations of the intrigue were Dobeni and Odorhei. The details of this conflict were recorded in the judicial registries of the seat throughout the entire century.

Besides these details, we tried to present also the administrative specificities of the congregations from the territory of the county, compared to those of the seat. The most important differences were found related to the method of administration of church lands and to the remuneration of priests. In the few villages from the county of Alba and Târnava the main problem was the payment of the tithe and of the fourth of the tithe, while in the congregations from the seat the annual payment of the priests' and teachers' salaries were established separately for each family.

In the following chapter (*The Conditions for Functioning as an Independent Parish*) we presented the five essential conditions that had to be fulfilled by any congregation to become an autonomous parish. The administrative process and the effective method to achieve a community's aim is exemplified in this chapter through the village of Tăureni, the parishioners of which led a true, several decades-long struggle in order to gain independence from Feliceni.

Starting from data of the previous chapters, where, beside what has been presented above, I also took into account the identification of protestant families and persons who supported through donations and foundations the parishes from the diocese. In the following part (*The Participation of the Nobility to the Building and Support of Churches*) we presented the history of the nobility with properties in or near the seat of Odorhei. In a first phase we presented the history of the possessions, after which we specified the wealth of each family. The research was concentrated upon the family collections and administrative funds of the estates, with the help of which we succeeded in determining the most important protestant families that were strongly linked to the geographic area in question. These families are the following: the Bethlen from Beclean, the Daniel from Vârghiș, the Ugron from Avrămești, the Székely from Ineu, the Ferenczi from Văleni, the Kis from Alba Iulia, the Nemes from Hăghig, the Nagy from Borșa, the Sebesi from Bulgăreni, the Korda from Ineu, the Kerekes from Grânari, the Lukácsfi from Tăureni, and the Kandó from Daia. Most of the families had very strong ties with the Reformed Church, the Church benefitting to a large extent from their professional and administrative activity.

In parallel with reviewing the tangible assets of these families, we tried and succeeded in delimiting three main directions through which their actions brought a significant contribution to the safeguarding of the Reformed Church's interests in the region. The first direction was the foundation and maintenance of the Reformed parishes from the diocese. In the localities where they had significant properties, the representatives of the Calvinist nobility committed themselves to support the local church, either through various donations or through foundations. In the sub-chapter entitled *Foundation of Churches and their Support* we presented in detail the engagement of the Bethlen, Ugron, Borsai Nagy and Kis families in the foundation process from the diocese of Odorhei in the 17th and 19th centuries. With the help of the sources from the diocese's archives, we had the possibility to follow the way in which the Reformed religion took roots in Racoșu de Jos, Hoghig, Dârjiu, Sânpaul, Mărtiniș, Dobeni,

Filiași, Șimonești, Mureni, Feleac, and Șapartoc due to the insistence and sacrifice of one or more protestant aristocrats. The most important results, however, were brought about by the activities related to the administration of the seat and of the diocese. First of all, we should point out chancellor János Bethlen, the founder of the Reformed Gymnasium of Odorhei and of several Reformed churches. In the mid 17th century, the chancellor frequently participated in joint ecclesiastic commissions, which had the mission to issue a final verdict regarding the use of places of worship by parishioners of a recognised religion. This way, following the inventories carried out in the localities of the diocese of Odorhei, the Reformed population from Cristur, Mujna, Șoimoșu Mic, Șoimoșu Mare, Eliseni, Bezid, Boiu and Vânători gained exclusive ownership over the religious properties of the villages, to the detriment of other denominations.

Beginning from the mid 18th century and until its end, the Daniel family from Vârghiș, through István senior and junior succeeded in obtaining the most important political function from the seat Odorhei, the Supreme Court. Their emergence on the political scene of the seat represented the most important pillar of Calvinism against the Catholic nobility and the hierarchs. Their reputation, prestige, professional capacity, and, last but not least, their experience in administration represented the warranty of success both for the seat, on a political level, and for the Reformed population, on a religious level. It is easy to understand how professor Gergely Kiss succeeded in successfully carrying out in a decade two very important commitments for the Reformed culture of the town and of the area of Odorhei, which, at the same time represented a heavy financial burden for the religious institutions of the period in a poor financial situation: the construction from the foundations of a new building for the Reformed Gymnasium (1770) and of a church (1780-1783) in the main square of the town.

The top leadership of the diocese was ensured by the clerical elite, represented by the archpriest, the notary and the assessors, and by a secular forum made up of noblemen and aristocrats of reformed religion. In general, the Calvinist personalities with a major influence on the political life of the seat were invited by the Supremum Consistorium to commit themselves to the defence of church interests by assuming the function of supreme curator of the diocese and of the gymnasium. Thus, the two Istváns from the Daniel family or, later, Mihály Kandó became the supreme curators of the diocese of Odorhei, immediately after they were installed in the position of supreme judges of the seat. At their turn, the vice-curators

were proposed and elected from among the clerks of the seat: the seat judge, the notary, the tax collector, the praetor etc. Due to some well-determined reasons, the participation in the leadership of the diocese went through some changes over the years. Curators responsible for the school were also chosen from among the people dealing with the relationship of parishes and of the diocese with the central institutions of the church: the episcopate, the Supremum Consistorium, and the General Synod. The solving of problems became even simpler at the beginning of the 19th century, when curators were chosen to deal with the problems of the parishioners living on the territory of the counties. They usually came from among the wealthy Reformed nobility from the region in question. For reasons of efficiency and the rapid settlement of issues, the curators were designated from among the persons living in the proximity of Cluj and of the Supremum Consistorium.

In this chapter we also succeeded in clarifying the questions related to the structure and the competence of the ecclesiastical forums of the diocese. The mixed structure (ecclesiastic and secular) that developed at the top of the Reformed Church's leadership in the 17th century was described for the first time by József Pokoly in his work published at the beginning of the 20th century. Gábor Sipos presented the conditions and ways in which the Reformed nobility competed in higher political institutions in order to protect the interests of the Church. However, the details and the operational mechanisms of diocesan administration were never analysed. Dezső Buzogány made several references to the fact that the central political and ecclesiastical institutions showed correspondences with the dioceses, as early as in the 17th century. In the archives of the diocese of Odorhei we identified a protocol (*protocollum tractuale consistorium*), which attests to the fact that the structure outlined by Buzogány existed and functioned effectively. Its members established the operational mechanism, the composition and structure of the diocese consistory. In the period between 1776 and 1796 the meetings were held in the *praetorial house* of the seat and the deliberations were limited especially to financial and educational matters. Its members were the supreme curators of the gymnasium and of the diocese – from the part of the secular elite – and the bishop, the diocese notary and a few priests – from the part of the clergy. We can thus state that it was a body formed following the model of the Supremum Consistorium and had the goal of efficiently protecting the Calvinist interests in the seat.

We produced the archontology of the seat and of the diocese until 1849, based on which we analysed the family relationships between the figures and families included in it. The most

important finding is that these families and persons had very strong relationships. At the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century a very strong link was established through the multiple marriages between the Bethlen and Borsai Nagy families. During the 18th century, the Reformed elite of the region was held together through the marriages between the Bethlen – Nemes – Korda – Ugron families. In fact these were the connections between the wealthiest Calvinist families from the region of Odorhei. Within the secular elite we could identify two distinct categories: the group of aristocratic nobles who occupied the most important functions both in the seat and in the diocese and a more numerous group of the nobles whose influence did not go beyond the limits of the seat. These two categories kept this delimitation in case of marriages, too: usually a person of higher rank did not marry another from the middle nobility. We can firmly state that among the Reformed elite of the seat there were very strong relationships between persons and families, therefore, family relationships were well defined, and this led to the formation of veritable circles of kinship.

The first part of the chapter entitled *The Support of Priests and Educators* presents the archival sources that constituted the starting point in the development of the priests' and educators' archontology from the diocese until 1849. Their remuneration and its structure and quantity are analysed in detail in the continuation of the chapter. The Transylvanian society from the 17th and 19th centuries was a predominantly agrarian one; the payment for the priest, established through convention (conventio) was carried out primarily in kind (wheat, corn, wood, hay). The living conditions of the priests from rural areas did not differ at all from those of the peasants. It was the task of the wealthier families and of the nobility to support and help them. According to a statistics carried out in 1784 by the representatives of the diocese, in the 46 localities there were a number of 62 benefices and foundations, the goal of which was the support of priests by complementing their remuneration. Besides priests and educators, the members of noble families took care of the reparations of the parish and of the church buildings, thus the contribution of the small nobility to church support activities was important not through the volume of the donations but through its constancy and regularity.

The last chapter of the paper is entitled *The Financing of the Reformed Gymnasium in Odorhei (1670-1849)* and presents the ways of financing and support for the institution with gymnasium rank, founded by chancellor János Bethlen with a donation of 5000 forints in 1670. The representatives of the clergy administered the educational institutions from Transylvania until the end of the 18th century. The Reformed Gymnasium in Odorhei was

maintained and administered by the Reformed Church. The council of the school was ensured by two curators appointed by the Reformed Supremum Consistorium (out of which one was always from the family of the founder, the Bethlen) and by the bishop of the diocese. At the beginning of the 18th century, with the reorganisation of the Supremum Consistorium, the representatives of the clerical elite were removed from the council and the inspection of the institution was entrusted exclusively to the Reformed nobility.

In 1804, when curator László Toldalaghi was installed at the head of the gymnasium, the tax collector of the institution carried out a report on the school benefices and funds. At the time there were over 50 foundations with various, but strictly defined goals (scholarships for the alumni, teachers' salaries, library etc.), amounting to a capital of 60 000 forints. The money was lent out, the institution becoming the main creditor of the region. The annual revenue obtained was of around 3600 forints. The wages of the personnel, including the teachers, were above 3500 forints in 1804, a value that was close to that of the revenues made. Following the analysis of the benefices and foundations, we can say that the majority of the capital was made up of the donations of the aristocratic nobility, especially of the Bethlen, Teleki and Bánffy families. As in the case of the Reformed elite of the seat, the relations between the families and persons supporting the gymnasium are very important. The annex of the paper contains an illustration in which we presented in detail the family relationships between the patrons of the school. Their vast majority came from or had strong ties with the Bethlen or Teleki families, who were otherwise fervent supporters of Calvinism.

The relationship between the secular and ecclesiastic elite was of notable significance. The persons from the leadership of the Church in their youth benefited from the appanage of the Bethlen or Teleki families, and this represented a major turning point in their later career. In the first half of the 19th century, the vast majority of the professors of the gymnasium and of the bishops came from the entourage of the Bethlen family, as previously they were priests at the family court from Boiu. Concomitant with their functions as bishops or teachers, the inspection of the gymnasium and of the diocese was ensured by the members of the Bethlen family from Boiu. The family, thus, had a determining role in the recruiting, formation and maintenance of the clerical elite. Almost all the ecclesiastic personnel of the diocese benefited from their financial support and influence over obtaining managing functions. It is, thus, clear that the persons from close family and friendship relationships, who concomitantly held the most important functions in public administration, represented an

important factor of influence and a reliable support for the Reformed Church in the conditions of the intolerant politics of the 18th century and of the first half of the 19th century, full of social changes.

We are convinced that within the protestant nobility from Transylvania, the support for the Church and for the Reformed institutions, as well as the commitment to the education of the new generations of clerical elites represented a natural activity and a moral obligation. Even though there are no similar analyses from other dioceses and Calvinist institutions yet, we are convinced that also in their cases we can successfully delineate a well-established circle of supporters and patrons.

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