

**UNIVERSITATEA „BABEȘ-BOLYAI” CLUJ NAPOCA  
FACULTATEA DE TEOLOGIE ROMANO-CATOLICĂ  
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ RELIGIE CULTURĂ SOCIETATE**

**Episcopia romano-catolică de Timișoara în perioada guvernării  
ordinariului Konrad Kernweisz  
(1954-1981)**

**Coordonator Științific:  
Prof.-Univ. Dr. Diosi Dávid**

**Doctorand:  
Kozovits Attila**

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## SUMMARY

The presentation and analysis of the turbulent period of social and ecclesiastical changes in the Diocese of Timisoara – I am thinking here of the consolidation of the anti-ecclesiastical political power and the often tragic fate of those who opposed it, or the liturgical changes following Vatican Council II – is inseparable from the presentation of the person and work of the Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz. A complete history of the Banat, which does justice to its history and ecclesiastical relations, is unthinkable without a study of the history of the Diocese of Timisoara.

The period of Konrad Kernweisz's ruling of the Diocese of Timisoara was a period marked by uncertainties and fears. The uncertain political situation after the Second World War, followed by the growing strength of anti-clerical forces, led to unrest and very often premature actions. A whole series of clerics chose to flee, while others paid with their lives for their dissenting political stance.<sup>1</sup> Monastic orders, especially the women's orders, were forced to live in catacombs. But everything that constituted the natural life and expression of the Church was forced into a „catacomb life”: teaching and catechizing, printing books and selling religious printed material, public church celebrations and manifestations, pilgrimages. The resolutions of the Council Vatican II, which were followed with great interest by the representatives of the communist power, could only be made known and put into practice with great difficulty.

So the diocesan administration had something to do. First and foremost, it had to make the best use of the opportunities offered by „catacomb life” and use them for the benefit of souls. Pastors had to be strengthened, both spiritually and mentally. Spiritual retreats were organised, and later on, deanery meetings were organised.<sup>2</sup> The women members of the religious orders were mainly active in teaching the faith and in „background education”, but they also played an active role in the celebration of liturgical celebrations.

The diocesan announcements and instructions were often delivered to the recipients by live word - thus posing no threat to the recipient or the publisher. Diocesan directives, which were sent to parishes on paper, contained only general guidelines.

During this period, which was by no means free from danger, the highest official of the Diocese of Timisoara was Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz. Almost always, the praise of his person

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the situation of the clergy and monasticism, see Chapters II.1.4.5 and II.1.4.6.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the spiritual retreats and the meetings and visits of the deanery for the purpose of priestly unity, see Chapters II.3.4.2, II.3.4.3 and III.5.

– published abroad, mainly in German, and rather laconic – emphasises one thing: in the thick of the measures taken by communist totalitarianism to restrict church life, he was forced to find a middle way between the possible and the permissible and to lead those entrusted to him along this path. Little, if anything, is said about the efforts to promote and put into practice the decisions of Vatican II, the attention and assistance given to priests and pastoral candidates, faith formation and the missionary journeys. All these, however, were a constant challenge for Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz, to which he found a solution with the help of his faithful Vicar General, Dr Ferdinand Cziza. With his prison-trained fellow priests and worthy deans working alongside him, the challenges were resolved to the satisfaction, if not of all, then of the majority. The Diocese of Timisoara was characterised as a neat, well-organised and united clerical community at the funeral of its Ordinary in 1981.<sup>3</sup>

The most direct collaborators of the Ordinary of the Diocese of Timisoara, like all diocesan leaders, were the priests. There were, if one can say so, three groups of clergy in the second half of the 1950s. In the first group there were the priests who had gone abroad, most of whom had fled. They were characterised by settling in and reintegrating into the host diocese, by digesting the traumas they had suffered in their home country, but also by a concern for the diocese and its clergy to which they had once been ordained. In the second group, there were those whose freedom was restricted (imprisoned, living in a camp or in a forced detention centre) and whose main concern was to survive. They did not have, nor could they have, any contact with their fellow prisoners who were at liberty. Finally, there were the priests serving the diocese in the parishes. Their daily lives were marked by minutes and hours of uncertainty and constant harassment, as well as by the service of those entrusted to them.

Relations with priests who went abroad in the turmoil of World War II or who later fled proved to be the most complex. The so-called „letter of repatriation”, drafted in 1956 under pressure from the state, attempted to lure priests who had left abroad back to the diocese. The letter caused a stir, some of them considered returning, but in the end none returned to the diocese. According to the documents available to us, there were no consequences of this summons, or of the negative response to it, as far as the relationship between the Ordinary of Timisoara and the priests who had left abroad was concerned. The priests who were hosted mainly in German and Austrian dioceses, 14 in number, tried to maintain contacts with both the administration and the clergy of the Diocese of Timisoara. Liturgical books following the

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<sup>3</sup> See the speech given by Sebastian Kräuter, Chaplain of Temesgyarmat, at the funeral of Konrad Kernweisz, Ordinary (DOCUMENTS XVIII).

prescriptions of the liturgical reforms were mainly distributed to the diocese through them. Personal contacts were revived between the priestly brothers from the „outside” and the home country. The outsiders sent the renewed liturgical books and publications, and the inlanders learned to use them and worked on their introduction. The more open borders of the 1960s also opened up the possibility for priests working abroad to visit their old diocesan colleagues and personally bring the donations they had received. But it was not only the priests serving in the parishes who were visited, they also paid their respects to the diocesan leadership – giving them the opportunity to meet Ordinary Kernweisz in person and to discuss further donations to the diocese.

The priests who left the diocese after 1960 were also among the priests who were living abroad. Relations with them were not so friendly. As Konrad Kernweisz refused to accept their departure without a word, but imposed a suspension on them, the relationship could be described as rather cold, and occasionally not devoid of personal attacks.

The Ordinary of the Diocese of Timisoara has always visited his former diocesan colleagues in foreign countries during his travels abroad. The purpose of these meetings, apart from maintaining friendly relations, was to discuss further ways and possibilities of helping the Diocese of Timisoara.

The second group of the clergy of the Timisoara diocese was made up of pastors whose freedom was restricted (imprisoned, living in a camp or in a forced detention centre) and whose main concern was survival. At the beginning of Konrad Kernweisz's ordinariate administration (1954), the diocese's worthy priests, canons, archdeacons and deans were all in prison. They were almost impossible to communicate with: they could not communicate even with their families, and often not even among themselves, they could not correspond with the outside world, they could not receive visitors or even parcels.<sup>4</sup> The diocesan authorities and the clergy kept them in account, we know that they prayed for their release in the church of Timisoara-Iosefin, and in early 1956 the ordinary himself asked for their pardon – in vain. Only the amnesty laws opened the prison gates to the imprisoned priests, the last imprisoned priest being released in 1964. After their release, Ordinary Kernweisz entrusted them all with the responsibility of running parishes, according to the possibilities offered by the state measures. The fate of these priests, however, was one of constant fear and uncertainty.

The third group consisted of parish priests serving the diocese. Their daily lives and activities were marked by constant harassment and service to those entrusted to them.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. STOICA, Sergiu: *Biserica Greco-Catolică din Banat în primele două decenii ale regimului comunist* (The Greek-Catholic Church in Banat in the first two decades of the communist regime), Cluj, 2014, 181.

One of the great merits of Ordinary Kernweisz was to bring the three groups together: priests who had been restricted in any way in their freedom slowly returned to the diocese and took part in the pastoral work, those who were abroad made contact with their former diocesan colleagues and rushed to help them, whether in the form of books, clothes, or money and other goods. The parish priests, who had always been in parishes, turned to their helpers with a grateful spirit and, strengthened by the example of their persecuted companions, led those entrusted to them.

The strengthening of the priestly community was also the aim of the regularly organized spiritual retreats, which were held first in the diocese and from 1968 in Alba-Iulia. The spiritual refreshment days, held in German and Hungarian, taking into account the native language of the priests, provided an excellent opportunity to learn about the latest pastoral trends, to strengthen spirituality and also to strengthen mutual trust. The deanery assemblies and meetings were an opportunity to familiarise the clergy with the latest ecclesiastical norms and liturgical innovations, but also to discuss difficulties and problems that arose.

Ensuring the formation of a priestly succession was also an important task for Ordinary Kernweisz. Since the diocese had no independent seminary, candidates for priesthood were forced to study in Alba-Iulia. In many cases, there were language and cultural difficulties between the diocesan seminarians and the environment in which they were studying. The teaching body always included, through the care of the Ordinary, the priest-teachers of the Diocese of Timisoara. The Ordinary himself was a regular visitor to the seminary and, as everyone mentions, took the time to meet and talk to his seminarians. For many, these encounters were the solution to their language and integration problems.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the clergy, the pastoral work was assisted by nuns who had been stripped of their religious habit in almost every parish of the diocese. They were mainly involved in teaching the faith, organising church festivities and cantorial duties.

As the diocesan leader, or as the official state designation went, prim-protopop independent de coordinaire (independent coordinating first dean), Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz was also forced to liaise with the political powers that were in charge. These were pro-collateral relations, characterised by mutual distrust: the ordinarius, as the secret police records show, was under constant surveillance, and his recruitment into the state apparatus was discussed from time to time. The Ordinary discussed confidential communications with those concerned

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<sup>5</sup> Read more about priest training and its difficulties in chapter III.5.

outside his home, walking in the public squares of Timisoara. They also supported his appointment as bishop, at least for a time, and then backed down. He was allowed to travel abroad from time to time, but was asked to report on his travels. He was allowed to receive foreign guests, but in the background there were always undercover agents of the state, the informers.

While in 1954 many of the parish buildings bore the damage of World War II, whether from artillery fire or looting, by 1981 the priest's houses were tidy and modern: almost all had running water and bathrooms, and a motorbike or car was parked in the courtyard. Foreign aid organisations rushed to the aid of the diocese's clergy, but so did individuals - priests and civilians working abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz seized almost every opportunity to ensure that the diocese made progress towards modernisation. During his travels abroad, he often visited aid organisations in the German-speaking world, from which he always returned with concrete results: aid for the renovation of churches, or funds for a car or a motorbike. Churches have been enriched with clock towers, harmoniums or heaters. The physical comfort and well-being of the pastoral clergy was ensured.

The largest church building project in communist Romania was carried out in our diocese. The new church of Orsova, built with the permission of the state authorities and with huge foreign aid, replaced the old church of Orsova, which had been swallowed up by the waters of the Danube, swollen by the construction of the Iron Gate I hydroelectric power station. The building, which is modern in every respect, is a tribute to the ingenuity of the diocese's leadership and the selfless donations of the relief organisations.<sup>7</sup> Besides the church in Orsova, churches were built in several smaller communities during the time of Ordinary Kernweisz. New parishes were established to meet the needs of the faithful or were completely renewed. The completion of church construction or renovation works and the blessing of the finished works provided opportunities for Konrad Kernweisz to meet with the community of the faithful again and again.

As far as the faithful community of the diocese is concerned, in addition to its multi-ethnicity, the war and its consequences have left a deep mark on it.<sup>8</sup> The majority were German, who were perhaps the most affected by the end of World War II. Many left their homeland with

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the situation of the diocese's properties, see chapters II.1.4.7. and II.1.8.5.

<sup>7</sup> More on the building of the church in Orsova in chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> On the consequences of war in the life of communities of the faithful, see chapters II.1.4.7 and II.1.8.

the retreating German troops. Those who were able to work were deported to the Soviet Union for forced labour, and after their return home, they were subjected to expropriation, disenfranchisement and silencing. Some were sent to forced labour. Then came the Bărağan forced labour camp. The improvement in their fate and situation was only noticeable from the 1960s onwards.

In addition to the Germans, Hungarians made up a significant percentage of the Catholic population of Banat. Many of them, especially the big landowners, were punished with forced settlement in Bărağan. But we are also talking about a Hungarian migration to Banat: housing and fair wages attracted many Transylvanian Hungarians. The number of Hungarians thus increased during the time of Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz.

Romanians, Croatians, Czechs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, the diocese's faithful were mixed – so many cultures, customs, but also challenges. It is to Ordinary Kernweisz's credit that he respected and embraced all nationalities equally, providing pastoral care in their native languages. Throughout his diocesan administration, he has endeavoured to ensure that the faithful entrusted to him, in the political, economic and social circumstances, have the greatest possible opportunity for religious deepening, attachment to the Church, peace and unity.

During the administration of Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz, one of the greatest events in the modern history of the universal Church, Vatican Council II, took place. Although it initially appeared that the Romanian government would give its consent for the Ordinary of the Diocese of Timisoara to attend the Council, in the end no one from our diocese represented the diocese at this event of the universal Church. The diocesan leadership and the clergy were informed of the proceedings and decisions of the synod through foreign radio broadcasts and through the smuggling of brochures across the border. The most difficult task was to communicate and put into practice the liturgical reform of the Council. In an era when almost no ecclesiastical publications could be published, every innovation, every change or alteration was a particular challenge. Pastors learned about the latest changes through foreign news channels, wrote them down and then used ad-hoc methods to reproduce them and make them available to all their fellow priests. These typescript ritual books, bound in a volume, can be considered as liturgical history curiosities - their language and wording show unique, one could say „banatian” characteristics and praise the pioneering work of their compiler. Renewed Hungarian-language liturgical books could only arrive from Hungary after 1971, German-language ones became available after 1972 thanks to foreign aid organisations, and the first Romanian-language mass

book was published in 1977. Translations into Bulgarian, Slovak or Croatian have always – in Bulgarian to this day – only circulated in locally translated and reproduced form.<sup>9</sup>

The possibility of liturgical renewal and the possibility of conducting services in the native language in a multilingual community has become a source of minor conflicts: how much and what the priest should say in one language, how much and what in the other, so as not to antagonise his parishioners of either nationality, so that everyone feels equally the care and attention of the priest. Following the wise guidance of Ordinary Kernweisz and after his inspections in parishes almost everywhere, liturgical celebrations became for everyone, regardless of nationality, an occasion for praising God and meeting with God.

It was in the practice of religious education that the political power was most felt: in addition to bans and harassment of priests teaching religion, the issue of luring and discrimination against children was also on the agenda. But everyone knew that on Saturdays, in the church oratory, the priest or a nun in civilian clothes would be waiting for the children, against all odds, to teach them to pray, sing, and teach them the catechism, and then at the end of the lesson, a rare saint's picture or rosary would be placed in each child's hand. First Communion celebrations were mainly for the younger children, who learned the basic prayers and simple hymns through play.<sup>10</sup>

The administration of the Sacrament of Confirmation was already a major challenge for both the local community and the Ordinary himself. The state authorities often placed obstacles in the way of organising the celebration. Initially, the Ordinary was made uncomfortable when he arrived for the venue and then forbidden to administer the sacrament of confirmation. Then, when he was free to go and perform the rite, the young people and their parents were harassed and mocked. Confirmation preparation - and religious education in general - was the 'other' in a maze of clichéd political speeches and events. In the context of the religious education lessons, there was the opportunity to watch a film on a religious theme, to receive a religious book or magazine and, last but not least, the priest would reward the children's attendance and participation with a block of foreign chocolate or sweets. All this, of course, was done with the knowledge and consent of the Ordinary, who encouraged and supported his priests in the noble task of catechesis to the fullest extent. The large number of people confirmed by Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz throughout the diocese testifies to the fact that the confirmation ceremonies

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<sup>9</sup> More on the efforts to introduce liturgical reforms in our diocese in Chapter III.2..

<sup>10</sup> For more on religious education and its difficulties, see Chapter III.3.



were celebrations of perseverance and commitment to the Church, celebrations which are still alive today, especially in the memory of the older generation.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most beautiful expressions of religious life is pilgrimage, visiting shrines and worshipping there. The Diocese of Timisoara has two shrines that have attracted pilgrims for centuries: Maria Radna and Maria Ciclova. Our shrines, visited especially on the great marian feasts, were also very popular in the time of Ordinary Kernweisz.

The pilgrims, regardless of the prohibitions and obstacles of the communist authorities, always found the opportunity to pay their respects where their ancestors had gone and where they experienced divine closeness and help again and again. The patron saints' feasts of the communities were usually attended by priests and parishioners from the surrounding villages, and in many cases by the ordinary himself.<sup>12</sup>

Ordinary Konrad Kernweisz is remembered by the older generation as a quiet, reserved and taciturn, but at the same time attentive and helpful church leader. A man of flesh and blood, who struggled with humiliation, constant uncertainty and ultimately illness, who sought new and new ways of doing things every day in the face of ever narrowing possibilities for action. The 28 years of his administration (1954-1981) defined the life of the Diocese of Timisoara during almost the entire period of communism.

The illness and death of Konrad Kernweisz marked the end of an era: the era of German-majority catholic parishes, of communities of faithful who cherished their traditions and customs, who stood by their priests, who clung to their Church and its institutions, to make way for an era of increasing emigration, of generations increasingly alienated from the Church.

The period 1954-1981 was one of the most eventful in the history of Banat, but also in the history of the Diocese of Timisoara. There is still a long way to go to fully explore the history of the Bărăgan displacement and the ethno-economic and religious changes in the settlements affected after the displacement. Also, as a large part of Banat was a border zone during the period in question, there is still a need to research the dismantling of settlements in the immediate vicinity of the border, to explore the role of the political police in the life and day-to-day existence of the communities concerned and to speak out against those who would cross the border illegally. The manifestations of ecclesiastical life in the period in question should also be a constant focus of research, as new archival material is constantly coming to

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<sup>11</sup> For more on confirmation roads, see Chapter III.2.

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see also Chapter III.2.

light and it is hoped that the archives of the Romanian secret police will be opened up to research, although they are currently closed to study.

Konrad Kernweisz was a personality of the Diocese of Timisoara who was in the most opportune place at the most opportune time. His calm and balanced demeanour, stemming from his deep faith and devotion to his Church, made him an accepted diocesan leader before the political authorities and a highly respected figure among the clergy and the faithful of the diocese. His contacts abroad provided considerable material support to priests facing problems and difficulties. He found the golden mean not only between what was possible and what was permissible, but also in pastoral care for the ethnic groups living in his territory, renowned for its multi-ethnicity – everyone felt cared for, respected and valued by his archpastor, and the clergy spoke, taught and comforted the faithful in their own language without distinction.

He is remembered with gratitude!