

**BABEŞ – BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
ECUMENE DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

DOCTORAL THESIS

Scientific leader:

Dr. Nóda Mózes, University Professor

Candidate:

Ambrus (Ambrus-Pál)

Arnold

Cluj-Napoca

2025

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**The Cult of the Eucharist outside the Mass and the
role of the Altar Associations in the Diocese of
Transylvania / Alba Iulia in the 19th and 20th
centuries.**

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Keywords

church history, mass, Holy Mass, Eucharist, cult of the Eucharist, Day of the Lord, paraliturgical forms of prayer, adoration of the sacraments, theophoric procession, holy hour, novena, hour of adoration, Eucharistic societies, altar association movement, altar associations, altar association journals

Overall thesis/research presentation

The cult of the Eucharist in the liturgical practice of the early Christian communities represented the Holy Mass itself, the communal celebration of the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus, and the “sacramental communion” with Him, recalling the events of the Last Supper. Therefore, in the early Christian period, we cannot speak of the cult of the Eucharist outside of liturgies in the primary church communities. However, it should be noted that the preliminary elements of paraliturgical practice are already present in the worship life of these early church communities. For example, the custom of preserving consecrated bread (viaticum) was maintained for administering Holy Communion to the sick and elderly or for the communion of those on their deathbeds.

Starting from the second millennium, in Western Christianity, the focus of Eucharistic cult towards Christ present in the Holy Mass through His sacrifice increasingly shifted towards the preservation of the Holy Sacraments left after the celebration, as well as the corresponding adoration and worship: the elevation and development of theophoric processions, which gave rise to the cult *par excellence*, the practice of Eucharistic worship outside of the Mass, and the forms of devotion and prayers that express, in short, “the means of worship: its form and content”. A starting point and an impetus for this cult was the movement of the altar associations that emerged in the mid-19th century and spread worldwide. Its main purpose was to engage women but also men, in religious life through their worship activities and through the social, charitable, cultural, and scientific activities of these organizations.

The goal proposed by each altar association, at local, diocesan, national, and global levels, has been to promote the cult of the Eucharist outside the Holy Mass by revitalizing or introducing theophoric forms of worship and prayer. For this reason, Bishop Mailáth Gusztáv Károly, a “prelate with an Eucharistic spirit”, supported and promoted, through his pastoral

letters, the establishment of these associations in the Diocese of Transylvania. Under his protection, the main goal was to centralize Eucharistic worship within the altar associations. The brief history of approximately fifty years of these associations has significantly influenced the liturgical life of the Diocese of Transylvania, highlighting its accents and forms. Through the activities of local and central associations, paraliturgical forms of devotion were introduced and practiced, and by organizing social, charitable, and cultural events, as well as establishing an Eucharistic magazine at the Diocesan level, there has been a considerable impact on the liturgical and spiritual life of the diocese. Consequently, this research topic is relevant and important as it allows us to uncover new information for a holistic evaluation of the history of the Diocese of Transylvania (tracing the history of the church and the diocese), with a special focus on the forms of devotion that express and popularize the cult of the Eucharist and their contents, namely exploring the liturgical life of the diocese in the 20th century (liturgical tracing).

The relevance of choosing this research topic is also given by the fact that, in the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia, after the revolution, the life of the altar association at the Diocesan level, which had been unable to operate due to the socialist state regime, was only resumed in the 1990s, when the Women's Association of Transylvania aimed to preserve this tradition as its main objective. Today, therefore, there are no altar associations at the local or Diocesan level, although their significance in the past is undeniable, as we will see in the liturgical and socio-charitable life of the Archdiocese of Transylvania, and later of the Archdiocese of Alba Iulia. For this reason, it is important to reveal the history of the formation of the altar associations movement at the Diocesan level and the wide range of activities they conducted, as I believe that the light of these associations has not extinguished but has simply ceased to operate in an institutionalized form. From this perspective, it becomes clearer to understand the formation and establishment of liturgical and devotional forms that are linked to the cult of the Eucharist and that are still practiced with great love, from the existence of the tabernacle and the eternal candle to sacramental worship and adoration.

Therefore, the popular practice of forms of the cult of the Eucharist constitutes the current relevance of the research topic, which is still manifested today through the beliefs and religious practices of the faithful and parishes within the developing Eucharistic paraliturgical worship in the Catholic Church.

The central purpose of the research is to develop and establish paraliturgical forms of the cult of the Eucharist through the activities of the altar associations in the Diocese of Transylvania, with particular regards to the patronage and support of Bishop Mailáth Gusztáv Károly, which is evident from his pastoral letters, and later of Bishop Márton Áron provisions, through which we will discover the role of the altar associations in reviving the liturgical life of the Diocese and in disseminating reforms within the Universal Church.

Among the devotional associations in the Diocese, the altar associations, particularly the central association of the Diocese, were the ones that ensured the spread of the cult of the Eucharist at both local and Diocesan levels. Through the magazines published by the central association “Erdélyi Oltáregyesületi Lap” and later “Az Oltár”—the articles and article series promoting liturgical reform, mass, and liturgical instruments simultaneously addressed the intellectual public while providing spiritual nourishment to lay believers in the field of liturgics. Therefore, these magazines had a significant impact on the reform of the liturgical life of the Diocese.

Considering all this, I will address the unfolding history of the altar association within the context of Diocesan and liturgical history, outlining its chronological story from its establishment to the state-imposed limitations in 1948, under the leadership of the two previously mentioned ordinary bishops. My research hypothesis is formulated based on the following questions: In what ways can the role of altar associations in the paraliturgical cult of the Eucharist be observed? What significance did the establishment of altar associations have in the religious life and practices of the faithful and parishes? What effects did these associations have, based on the concept of *participatio actiosa*, from the Second Vatican Council in fostering a deeper, more vibrant, and fruitful involvement of lay Christians in the liturgical and prayer life of the Church; What liturgical innovations did the altar associations movement bring to the liturgical revitalization of the parish; What roles did women and men play in the founding and activities of the altar associations; What innovations and socio-cultural phenomena did the altar associations movement introduce through the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity;

My research hypothesis is, therefore, that in the 20th century history of the cult of the Eucharistic in the Diocese of Transylvania, it is inevitable to discuss the phenomenon of altar associations, whose presence, activity, and role in the diocese contributed to the flourishing of

Eucharistic worship by reinstating frequent communion and, from the perspective of our study, by establishing and regularly practicing forms of Eucharistic worship outside of the Holy Mass. Reversing the hypothesis, we reflect on how much the existence and activity of the altar associations movement, especially the central ones (from Alba Iulia and Cluj), contributed to the revitalization of Eucharistic worship and spiritual life in the Diocese of Transylvania.

Through this research, new chapters in the history of the Diocese of Transylvania are uncovered, with the Eucharistic worship developed at the diocesan level in the early 20th century at their core: the return to frequent and regular communion, the liturgical life of the parish, and the pastoral and liturgical directions of the Transylvanian ordinaries during this period (Bishop Mailáth Gusztáv Károly and Márton Áron). Thus, by appealing to the auxiliary sciences of liturgics within theology, we will examine the role of the altar associations, highlighting aspects of church history and pastoral theology.

By mapping the phenomenon of altar associations, the liturgical life of each parish comes into focus: the evaluation and interpretation of the Holy Liturgies, the Eucharist, and other forms of devotion. Through all of this, the reception of the 19th-century liturgical reform at the diocesan level and the unfolding of the renewal process can be reconstructed. By emphasizing the socio-charitable and socio-cultural activities of the altar associations, we highlight the place and role of these organizations in the lives of individuals, genders, and communities.

For a comprehensive understanding of the research, it was necessary to initially analyze the nature of the church's liturgical practice, with a particular focus on the cult of the Eucharist and, especially, on its forms of cult outside of the mass. From the beginning, I pursued its evolution through a deductive method, highlighting its manifestations in the life of the Diocese of Transylvania. In this direction, numerous studies, articles, and scientific works have emerged, which is why this chapter will be written in a summative form.

To achieve the research objectives, it was necessary to review the general literature regarding the cult of the Eucharist, aiming to establish the scientific relevance of the research and the significance of the chosen theme. Thus, following the questions and fundamental aspects of the first section, in the second part, I mapped the theological foundation and the current state of the research subject, exploring the status questionis of the paraliturgical cult of the Eucharist and the development of its forms.

In connection with the themes presented in the second chapter, it should be noted that several interconnected works have already been written about the development of the cult of the Eucharist outside of the Holy Mass, the reasons and consequences of this, as well as the evolution and current situation of the paraliturgies created by this worship within the Church. Therefore, our aim was to establish the scientific character of the topic, outlining a historical and theological arc to facilitate the understanding of the chosen subject.

In the third chapter of the dissertation, I examined the formation of altar associations, from Belgium and Rome to Hungary. To understand and evaluate the movement, it was necessary to trace its development history, starting with the first foundations, leading to the revelation of the direct antecedents of the first associations in the Diocese of Transylvania and up to the establishment of the first associations in Hungary. The first altar associations in Hungary served as a model for the establishment of those in the Diocese of Transylvania, whose main objectives, organizational structure, and areas of activity were also the subject of detailed analysis based on published primary literature, referring primarily to Statutes and the journal “Örökimádás”.

Based on the discussions in the third chapter, we can assert without hesitation that there is no comprehensive scientific work in Hungarian about altar associations in the worldwide church, nor is there a summarizing work on the movement of altar associations in Hungary. Therefore, I outlined the history of the formation of the Central Altar Association in Budapest, highlighting the importance of the ecclesiastical and lay individuals who played a significant role in this.

Additionally, there is no comprehensive, chronological, and problem-centered research on the history and content of the journal “Örökimádás”. For this chapter, I reviewed the entire series of the publication, approximately four hundred fifty issues, as they provided relevant data for the movement of altar associations in the Diocese of Transylvania. Furthermore, there has not been a holistic work published regarding the objectives and tasks of the altar associations; their structure and network; their members and activities; nor about the privileges related to indulgences.

In this context, I analyzed the life history and field of activity of the Central Altar Association in the Diocese of Transylvania and its effects on social, cultural, and, most importantly, religious life.

Chapter IV of the thesis summarizes the most important part of the research, in which I explored the emergence of the altar association movement in Transylvania, the formation of the first local associations, and subsequently the establishment of grassroots associations at the diocesan level. I developed a history of the Central Altar Association in Alba Iulia (1898–1928) and its successor, the Central Association in Cluj (1928–1944), based on archival documents, highlighting the liturgical, social, charitable, cultural, and scientific aspects of the life of both central associations and their branches: from the prayer and liturgical life of the associations to their relief efforts and cultural and scientific events. This was primarily achieved through archival sources, written documents, minutes, extracts, their own journals and other interested periodicals, pastoral letters, and regulations, as well as through their reception in contemporary works and the press.

For the main part of the work, I applied cross-sectional research methods and case studies to analyze details related to the life of altar associations, focused on specific issues. Thus, the real innovation of the research lies in Chapter Four, which presents in full, along a historical thread, the essence of the altar association movement in the Diocese of Transylvania. Through the operation of local associations, and especially central associations, a systematic network of altar associations was created at the Diocesan level. The greatest difficulty in this process was identifying sources and chronologically organizing the found data, as well as the actual lack of sources.

Therefore, I aimed to provide a comprehensive work on the first altar associations that emerged in the Diocese of Transylvania and on the consolidation of the altar association movement, starting from the year 1859. Since its establishment, the Central Altar Association in Alba Iulia (1899) has fulfilled the fundamental objectives and tasks of altar associations. Through its activities, it fostered faith and the cult of the Eucharist, reviving both new and old forms of devotion. We refer to the Holy Mass, which was associated with the first meeting of the committee on the first Sunday of the month, communion, and a full day of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, which became a designated time for organizing individual prayer hours. Additionally, before the major feast days of the association (Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart of Jesus), a novena was organized, and these celebrations were planned with great rigor and attended enthusiastically. Among other forms of prayer organized by the association were the

hour of adoration every Friday, as well as processions, spiritual exercises, and pilgrimages. The most important innovation was the continuous emphasis on the necessity of regular participation in Holy Communion, so that members could benefit daily from the Holy Sacrament.

The central associations, successively over time, at the social and charitable level, have carefully fulfilled the second objective of altar associations: to provide liturgical equipment and cult objects for poorer churches and parishes. This work and task aimed to bring to life the first objective of the associations: to offer adequate spaces and resources for worship and veneration. This was achieved through exhibitions and aid actions organized by the Central Altar Association from Alba Iulia, and later from Cluj, which, according to data, benefited nearly all parishes and branches in the Diocese from these donations. The condition for receiving assistance was that, where no association existed yet, one had to be established as a branch of the central association, and existing ones had to join it. This was done with the aim of creating a network at the Diocese level. Subsequently, with the introduction of the organizational principle of district organization, there was no parish without an altar association.

His Excellency Bishop Mailáth Gusztáv Károly emphasized this in his circular letters and made considerable personal efforts for the success of the altar associations' movement, significantly contributing both materially and financially to its achievements as the main patron of the Central Association. At the end of an inspection visit in 1905, the bishop noted: “even in the poorest village church, the activity of the association is evident, externally through the cleanliness of the church, and internally through the devotion of the faithful towards the Holy Sacrament.”

The Central Altar Association of the Diocese of Transylvania was available on all fronts for its branches, providing donations when necessary. Over time, its specialists organized professional training courses to help local associations ensure their own liturgical maintenance. Comprehensive reports and articles on all these efforts were published in the magazine “Erdélyi Oltáregyesületi Lap” and later in “Az Oltár” The Central Association not only made lasting contributions to spiritual life but also to cultural and scientific fields, organizing cultural evenings of high artistic quality and, on a scientific level, presenting projections during committee meetings and at craft classes, especially on theological topics.

The initiative for cooperation between the associations promoted by the central association and the membership of individuals in these organizations also accompanied the history of the center's formation. A highlight of cooperation among associations came in 1933, when, at the initiative of the Central Altar Association from Cluj-Napoca, the Council of Catholic Associations and Corporations was established, leading to the creation of the Catholic Caritas in Cluj-Napoca. Regarding the partial question about the historical evolution of altar associations by gender, we can affirm, after examining various perspectives, that most members were women. We discussed the reasons and consequences of this aspect. Additionally, the Central Altar Associations did their best to encourage men to join their community; therefore, they discussed in magazines the role and place of genders in the altar associations' movement.

Through the publication of the magazines “Erdélyi Oltáregyesületi Lap” and “Az Oltár” the center reached a new level in communication with its branches and their members. The writings that expressed and discussed the Eucharistic faith provided spiritual nourishment for subscribers. The magazines continuously built the vitality of the episcopal network, with each section aimed at addressing all layers of the communities of believers. They sought to engage the faithful in the continuous adoration of Christ present in the Eucharist, as well as in the works and service for the dignity of the places where we live. Each article, paper, and study published aimed to increase the intensity of the altar associations' movement in the Diocese and to implement the reforms and revitalization processes announced by the liturgical movement at the diocesan level.

In conclusion, based on the reviewed sources, I have outlined and attempted to justify my research hypothesis. Thus, we can affirm that, in the 20th century history of the Diocese of Transylvania, the movement of altar associations is a particularly relevant theme, especially in liturgical terms. Through the activities of the central associations, a bishopric network was developed that manifested a vibrant and dynamic cult of the Eucharist. The presence, activity, and role of the altar associations contributed to the flourishing of the cult of the Eucharist, through frequent communion during the Holy Mass and through various devotional practices accompanying adoration and atonement.

All of this helped the Church, on a global, Diocesan, and parochial level, to return to the “peak and source” of the cult of the Eucharist, centralizing it, with the “Sitz im Leben” being

regular communion. The altar associations thus became promoters at the Diocesan and local levels of Eucharistic worship, acting as “translators” of the liturgical reform and precursors of liturgical renewal. Pope Leo XIII synthetically articulated this in his encyclical “*Mirae caritatis*” published in 1902, paraphrased by Bishop Prohászka Ottokár: “The encyclical is a beautiful apotheosis of the Holy Sacrament and a testimony of Leo XIII's conviction that the current 20th century will be the century of the Lord Jesus, reconciled through the cult of the Eucharist”. In this context, the altar associations played an essential role.