The Catholisation of the Armenians in Transylvania (1685–1715)

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- Core of Ph.D. thesis -

Aim and methodology

The 17th and 18th centuries has been regarded as one of the most exciting periods in the history of Hungary and Transylvania. The wars of liberation to terminate the Ottoman occupation, the integration of the Transylvanian Principality into the Habsburg Empire after 150-years' relative independence, the colonisation of the uncultivated lands during the Ottoman rule, the re-organisation of daily life and Rákóczi's independence war (1703–1711) indicated serious challenges for the Habsburg Court in Vienna.

This period (1686−1711) felled serious duties to the Hungarian Catholic Church, too. Prior to these duties, the process called re-catholisation in Hungary's eastern and northern regions was getting increasingly under way: the Orthodox Ruthenians and Romanians (Vlachs) in Transylvania united with the Roman Catholic Church. The bishops, who were highly supported by the missionaries delegated from Rome in order to re-organise the Hungarian Catholic Church's religious life, re-appeared at the seats of the abandoned dioceses after the 150-years' Ottoman occupation.

The Armenians' catholisation in Transylvania must be, in fact, analysed in this church-historical context. The Armenians escaping from Moldova and Podolia, between 1668–1672, should be regarded practically as a *terra incognita* from both the Hungarian and international church-historical point of view. The catholisation of the Armenians in Transylvania is primarily associated with Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's (henceforward: Oxendio) missionary efforts. His pastoral activity embraced an approximately thirty years-period, which coincided with the Transylvanian Principality's integration into the Habsburg Empire, although there had been just very few information about this problem in Hungarian and international scholarship for a long time. However, there were well-known events in touch with the Armenians for instance the colonisation of the Armenians in Transylvania led by Bishop Minas Zilifdarean T'oxat'ec'i in 1672; Bishop Minas' alleged confessional of faith made in 1686, Lemberg; the declaration of the church-union with Rome in about 1690; the foundation of the city called Szamosújvár (Gherla, Armenopolis), 1696–1712; finally, Bishop Oxendio's death in Vienna, 1715.

One of the greatest problems in researching the Armenians in Transylvania is that the majority of manuscript documents are preserved in foreign archives, such as in Italy, the

Vatican, Romania and Armenia, and not in Hungary. Furthermore, secondary literature concerning their union in Hungarian or any other languages is extraordinarily few. Research has become difficult since the majority of these, aside from some exceptions, proved to be very obsolete, that is to say, these have already come to light at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. These monographs or articles very often referred to each other. Thus, they adopted entire chapters word by word from each other. They had the same opinion upon Bishop Oxendio's missionary efforts in Transylvania. Most authors did not go into the details examining his pastoral activity. Moreover, they bequeathed an idyllic view of the Bishop to posterity, who stood steadily for his people's interest under the hardest circumstances in Transylvania. For this reason, the Uniate Bishop was considered to be a so-called "Priest-" or "Apostle" Prince and be appeared as a national leader of the Armenians (namely Ethnarchos). Among others, the main aim of this Ph.D. thesis is to handle this idyllic view with reservation and re-examine the church-union and its circumstances historically and accurately.

Besides the above-mentioned questions, the catholisation of the Armenians raises a question to be answered, to which the previous literature has not given any satisfactory reply. It has been unknown for a long time what kind of role the Habsburg Court in Vienna and the Hungarian Catholic Church played in the Armenians' church union. At the same time, there was not any knowledge of what role was given by the Habsburg Court in Vienna to the Armenians after the Ottoman occupation. That is to say, the Court applied consciously the Habsburgs' demographic, confessional and population policy to them or not. It is not clarified that the Habsburg Court in Vienna had any intention to unite the Armenians with Rome on the basis of previous church-unions done in Hungary. Consequently, the Armenians' church-union in Transylvania can be compared to other church-unions or church-union attempts occurred among the Serbs in Southern-Hungary, the Ruthenians in North-Eastern Hungary and the Romanians in Transylvania. Furthermore, it must be emphasised in this Ph.D. thesis that their union happened solitarily/ independently of the Hungarian Catholic Church's activity, or not.

Because of the lack of sources for an analysis, the problem has not been cleared that the Armenians' church-union was conducted by the restoration of the church's unity idea. Thus, it is also not studied whether the Armenians' church-union had previous patterns from the Middle Ages or the Early Modern Period: namely, that the initiatives for church-unions coming from Rome among the Armenians carried out in Cilicia, Florence, Brest and Lemberg had an actual influence upon the Armenians' church-union in Transylvania.

According to some sources, it has not been hitherto stated that Bishop Minas made a confession of faith with Rome preparing the Armenians in Transylvania for the church-union. So, circumstances of the Armenians' church-union have not been cleared up definitely. Similarly, it is a less-known fact that the relatively exact date of their church-union is unknown. Scholarship has not yet examined with the necessary caution and thoroughness whether the church-union itself took place without any apostasies and conflicts in Transylvania, and, additionally, whether the Armenians could persist in their previous ecclesiastical costumes after the union, or they were forced to be Latinised entirely by Oxendio's intention. Therefore, it should be thoroughly analysed how Oxendio thought about the use and means of the church-union. He was faithful to the pure Latinisation overshadowing the Armenian rite. Moreover, the research did not discover that Oxendio's missionary activity in Transylvania extended to other provinces. Finally, we should answer the question that the Armenians' church-union has proved to be successful comparing to other church-unions carried out in Hungary or Transylvania or their union should be rather regarded as a failure.

In this Ph.D. thesis, we have tried to look for evident responses to these afore-mentioned problems, resting on the partly discovered and undiscovered sources as well as analysing critically a few of secondary literature. In this manner, we do believe that this Ph.D. thesis has managed to clear up the obscurity that has hitherto cast a veil over the research of the Armenians' church-history in Transylvania, 1685–1715, at the field of Hungarian and international scholarship.

Sources

The backbone of this Ph.D. thesis has been constituted on the basis of the lately discovered documents kept in the archives at the Holy See, which contains detailed information, surveys, relations and letters on Bishop Oxendio's activity and the Armenians in Transylvania in 1685–1715. Furthermore, Hungarian and international scholars had also drawn the attention to the importance of the untouched documents on the Armenians in Transylvania in the archives at the Holy See from church-historical point of view, for example Antal Hodinka, Tihamér Vanyó, Ferenc Galla, Kálmán Benda, Edmond Schütz, Athanasius Welikyj, Gregorio Petrowicz, György István Tóth, István Baán, and Antal Molnár. Especially, at the historical archive of the Holy Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) in Rome, and the Secret Archive in Vatican City (*Archivio Segreto Vaticano*) where a large amount of documents on the Armenians in Transylvania are being

kept. It should be noted that these well-documented sources have qualified as the most authentic ones on Oxendio's pastoral activity and Armenians' church-union in Transylvania.

A handful of documents can also be found dispersedly concerning the period of this Ph.D. thesis at the archives and libraries in Hungary. The Hungarian National Archives in Budapest contains generally conscriptions and commercial papers on the Armenians in Transylvania. At the same time, few additional documents can also be found on Oxendio's life and activity. These explicitly do not deal at all with Oxendio's missionary activity. Primarily, the sources contain information on Oxendio's captivity at Prince Rákóczi's Court, as well as his pleas written to the Court in Vienna or the Gubernium in Transylvania concerning the case of the newly-founded city called Szamosújvár's privileges.

Very handful documents are preserved at Primate's Archives in Esztergom on the church of Armenians from 1692. These are very important complementary sources to those kept at Holy See's archives. Further on, these documents have greatly contributed to tinge Oxendio's personality and activity in Transylvania.

The so-called Hevenesi's Collection belonging to the Library of the ELTE State University comprises some valuable documents on the Armenians in Transylvania from church-historical point of view. The Czech-Moravian Jesuit missionary, Rudolf Bzensky, compiled a material on the peoples and churches existing in Transylvania at the behest of the Jesuit Gábor Hevenesi's request at the end of the 17th century. Bzensky devoted a subchapter to the Armenians describing their history from the settling down to Oxendio's nomination as a Bishop. The Jesuit father renders authentic accounts of the Armenians. Presumably, he obtained his information from Oxendio, directly. Bzensky's work was made at least in four copies. On the whole, further document on the Armenians can also be found at Hevenesi's Collection. Namely, the document under the title 'Fidelis relatio' attributed to an unknown ecclesiastical author tells the church-history of the Armenians from their settling down in Transylvania to controversy amongst the Armenians in Ebesfalva (Ebbeschdorf, Elisabethopolis, Dumbraveni), 1692.

As far as the period of the Ph.D. thesis is concerned, just very few of documents are being kept in Transylvania. The Library of the Armenian Catholic Parish in Gyergyószentmiklós (Niklasmarkt, Gheorgheni), Romania, only contains one Armenian manuscript on the history of the parish, describing Oxendio's role in creating the parish. The library of the Historical Museum in Szamosújvár (Gherla, Armenopolis), Romania, contains five manuscripts written in Latin and Armenian on this period. The majority primarily deals with the founding of the city's Self-Government and privileges. Finally, the National Archives of Armenia known as

Matenadaran in Yerewan, Armenia, preserves five gospels made in Moldova. Their colophons (*yišatakaran*) render useful information on the Armenians' immigration from Transylvania caused by the church-union and other vicissitudes.

The documents of Armenians' church-union and that of Oxendio's missionary activity have not been hitherto published *in extenso*. Moreover, the majority of these documents are unpublished at all. In 1885, the Jesuit Nicolaus Nilles published documents on the history of uniate churches in Hungary in two volumes. Nilles himself devoted some documents to Armenians living in Transylvania. However, his monograph turned out to be based on documents being kept at Hevenesi's Collection belonging to the ELTE State University's Library.

There is just one volume published on Armenian church-history. This is the Chronology of the Armenian Church compiled by the Armenian Uniate Bishop Stefan Stefanowicz Roszka in the 1730's. The manuscript of this volume is preserved at the Mechitarist Abbey's archives in Vienna. This was published by Hamazasp Oskean in 1964. Roszka in this chronology compiled the Armenian church-history from the beginning to his age with a strong Roman Catholic attitude. Furthermore, his work has an emphasis on the church-history of the Armenian Diaspora in Poland. Roszka, however, deals with the Armenians in Transylvania very concisely. His chronology briefly narrates Bishop Minas's death, Oxendio's missionary activity and death in 1715, and, finally, Elia Mendrul's confession of faith on behalf of the Armenians in Transylvania, Lemberg, 1689.

At the end, Athanasius Welikyj, Kálmán Benda, György István Tóth in their volumes published one-one short document on the Armenians kept at the Holy See's archives. Although these volumes are mostly concentrated on the documents of the Catholic missions in Ukraine, Moldova, Hungary and Transylvania, the published materials scarcely ever deal with the Armenians in Transylvania.

Conclusions

Bishop Oxendio's activity and the church-union of the Armenians in Transylvania proved to be a marginal subject from church-historical point of view for a long time. This qualifies as simultaneously advantage as well as disadvantage. It was an advantage because just few information had been at scholarship's disposal through long decades. Furthermore, the literature concerning this theme was not easily available. Additionally, the research of this problem claimed special knowledge of Armenian studies.

The advantage of the above-mentioned marginality was actually concealed beneath that of the disadvantage. On basis of the less-systemised documents, very interesting and colourful view unfolded upon the Armenians' confessional situation. As a matter of fact, we received inspection of the events in Transylvania belonged to the period 1685–1715, from the Armenians' point of view. If we regard the Armenians' church-union in Transylvania from the Habsburg Court's point of view, especially for the Habsburg's demography and church policy, then a problematic picture has emerged on them. First, the Armenians were not the integral part of the demography policy mastered by the Habsburg Court in Vienna: because the Habsburg Court on the basis of the constitutional projects made by Cardinal Leopold von Kollonich and Palatine Pál Esterházy was explicitly concentrated upon Hungary's central and southern regions – recaptured from Ottoman Turks. They were not involved in Transylvania at this level. Only did the charge of the Roman Catholic Bishop's office in Transylvania occur in the constitutional projects. The Habsburg Court just dealt with the Armenians in Transylvania when it intervened in the negotiations on the donation of Szamosújvár's domain for the Armenians, which was approved by the Court at the end in 1696. (But it concretised later in about 1700.) Moreover, the Armenians moved in Szamosújvár from Beszterce and its neighbouring villages only after Rakóczi's independence war in 1712.

Missions among the Armenians, of which the object was to create the church-union, were initiated by the Armenian Uniate Archbishop in Lemberg, 1684. The Archbishop's intention to unite them with Rome was that Lemberg (Lwów, Poland) had jurisdiction on the Armenians living in the Crimea, Poland and Moldova, before its union. So, the Armenians in Transylvania did not escape the spiritual leadership because they emigrated from the regions e.g. Moldova and Podolia (Poland), which were subdued to the Archbishop's jurisdiction.

Their church-union was tightly related to Oxendio's pastoral activity in Transylvania. After all, the appearance of the missionary Oxendio, born in Moldova, in 1685, was a result of the Archbishop's request in Lemberg. Against the initial difficulties, particularly the Armenian priests' resistance, his pastoral activity proved to be hard. Oxendio needed at least a four-year hard work to fulfil his mission. The missionary had a contradictory relation to Minas, the Apostolic Bishop of the Armenians in Transylvania. He knew with a complete certainty that the key to unite the Armenians with Rome was to convince the Bishop Minas of the conversion to Catholicism. Oxendio was not able to persuade the old Bishop to unite with Rome. However, he managed to win the Bishop to come with him to Lemberg and start negotiating with the Apostolic Nuncio at Warsaw and the Armenian Uniate Archbishop in Lemberg, at the very end of 1686.

According to the posterity, due to Oxendio's persuasion, Bishop Minas made a confession of faith with Rome. This event was yet attested by some scholarly unelaborated documents written by Rudolf Bzensky, a Czech-Moravian Jesuit father, in the mid 1690's. At the same time, the sources (namely missionary letters, reports and relations), which can be found at historical archives of the Holy Congregation for the Propagation of Faith in Rome, decidedly disproved the fact that Bishop Minas could have made a confession of faith with Rome. But these documents rendered only accounts of Bishop Minas's death and its circumstances.

The Armenians in Transylvania declared effectively the church-union in Lemberg on February of 1689 when they made a confession of faith with Rome in the Uniate Archbishop Vardan Hunanean's presence. It is not easy to decide the exact date of the union. But since the general session of the Holy Congregation for the Propagation of Faith discussed the Armenians' church union on 8th of April, 1689, it is advisable to accept this date. In connection with their union, several problems have emerged. First, the church-union itself was exclusively confined to acknowledge the Roman Pope's primacy. Second, the church-union did not touch several details, for example Uniate clergy's social status and payment, the Uniate priests' marital status, usage of language in holy liturgies, usage of the unleavened bread at Holy Eucharist, the *Filioque*-prayer, the Purgatory and dogmas of the Ecumenical Synod in Chalcedon, 451 A.D. It was important because this problems were circumstantially clarified at the time of other Eastern churches' union with Rome.

Oxendio, prior to his higher-education at Urbanian College, Rome, was faithful to pure Latinisation. According to his opinion, the Uniate priests must have the same duties as the Latin rite clergy. The Uniate clergy in Transylvania, however, was henceforward attached to old Armenian liturgical costumes despite the church-union. In their point of view, the church-union was only focused upon acknowledging Pope's primacy and nothing else. The problem of interpreting the church union caused tensions within the Armenians. These led to priest Vardan Martinus Potoczky's apostasy in Ebesfalva, 1691–1692, and Elia Mendrul's case in Beszterce, 1697. Furthermore, these troubles had perfectly undermined the previous well-known scholarly opinion that Armenians' church-union in Transylvania as a process took place without any difficulties. Consequently, the church-union had just realised its purpose in 1699, when Bishop Oxendio with his assistants forced the apostate Armenians to accept the church-union. His opposite in the church, however, with several Armenian families left Transylvania and returned to Moldova. Therefore, Oxendio tried to organise a mission among these emigrant Armenians in Moldova in order to reconvert them to Catholicism. At the same time, Oxendio's strife to organise a mission in Moldova failed because of the harsh resistance

of the Holy See, the Nuncio at Warsaw, the Uniate Archbishop in Lemberg, the authorities in Moldova and Rákóczi's independence war.

It was complicated to define that question whether the Armenian church-union in Transylvania could have historical antecedents. It cannot be parallel to the attempts to unite the Armenians with Rome in the Cilician period as well as the Synod of Florence in the Middle Ages. These councils were particularly occupied in dogmatic and liturgical questions but the Armenian Apostolic Church had decidedly refused these referring to national interest. Similarly, it cannot be stated as to the dogmas of the Council in Brest, 1596, from the Armenians' point of view in Transylvania. In this case, it was true that the union of Brest was built on the dogmas of the council in Florence, but the Armenians stayed away randomly, too.

Another question should be emerged: has the Armenian Church in Transylvania qualified to be an integral part of the church-union processes in Hungary? The answer is a definite no. Their church-union was not initiated by the Habsburg Court, but not the Hungarian Catholic Church, either. In Hungarian church-history's point of view, their church-union proved to be marginal. In addition, the official declaration of the union took place in Poland, and not in Hungary.

At the same time, the Armenians' church-union is similar to other unions in some aspects. For example, the Protestant élite in Transylvania left no stone unturned to impede the unions. Namely, the Protestants feared that church-unions could have broken the confessional balance to the Protestants' detriment in Transylvania that had been functioning well for decades. That was the reason why they had tried to divide the Uniate Romanians and reconvert them to Orthodoxy (in Gábor Nagyszeghi's and Ion Tisca's case) or they had supported, directly and indirectly, such rebel Armenian priests e.g. Vardan Martinus Potoczky and Elia Mendrul against Bishop Oxendio. Another parallel to other church-unions could be that both Ruthenians and Romanians suffered by Rákóczi's independence war, too. But the Armenians did not have problems with schismatism (in Romanians' case) and canonical debates about the vacancy of the Bishopric seats (in Ruthenians' case). Many Armenians left Transylvania and settled down in Moldova owing to Rákóczi's independence war. Bishop Oxendio and his assistants permanently feared that Armenian priests might have come from Moldova to reconvert the Uniate Armenians in Transylvania at the Armenian Catholicos's behest. This fear has proved to be unreal save an isolated attempt happened in Ebesfalva, 1708. At the same time, their fear could have been underpinned by the fact that the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan in Bucharest sent out priests to preach against the church-union of the Romanians in Transylvania.

Oxendio was appointed consciously as a titular bishop by the Holy See. Rome should have taken the Hungarian Catholic Church's interest into consideration, because the Hungarian Church had an intention to restore the non-functioning Roman Catholic diocese in Transylvania. Consequently, the Hungarian Catholic Church tolerated just one Catholic bishop, and not more in Transylvania.

Finally, the last question should be answered whether the church-union of the Armenians in Transylvania was successful comparing to other church-unions in Hungary/or Transylvania?

It is well-known that the union of Serbs was an evident failure. The Habsburg Court in 1690 donated serious economical and political privileges to the Serbs escaping from the Motherland. This made the strife for the church-union with Rome nonsensical. Further on, the previous attempts to unite the Serbs with Rome came to a dead-lock because of the canonical debates and resistance of the Serbian Orthodoxy.

The church-union among the Ruthenians in this period (namely 1685–1715) should be depicted as a half-success. The union was, in fact, declared in the mid 17th century. Moreover, uniate priest's payment and status were clarified, however, the practical realisation of these things were drawn out up to the 19th century. Thus, the canonical debates of the Uniate Bishop's office in Munkács between the Ruthenians and the Roman Catholic Bishop of Eger exercised a very sensitive influence upon their church-union. These debates were trailed on until Empress Maria-Theresa's period when the independent Uniate diocese in Munkács was organised in 1771.

Romanians in Transylvania concluded a successful church-union with Rome in 1701. On the contrary, the Romanians attained to organise their own diocese (with centre of Fogaras) at the Holy See against the Roman Catholic Bishop's will in Transylvania. But the success of the union was overshadowed by the lower clergy's resistance and the so-called schism-movements led by Serbian and Romanian priests/monks.

So, in comparison with other church unions in Hungary/or Transylvania, the Armenians' church-union proved to be successful. In our opinion, reason of this success was that the number of Armenians in Transylvania was much less than that of the other peoples' uniting with Rome. By the end of the 17th century, the number of the Armenian inhabitants significantly reduced owing to emigrations from Transylvania to Moldova. At the same time, the Armenian community became more homogenous and easily-governed from the denomination's point of view.

If we regard the church-union internally, then the union itself has proved to be a failure because the union, in time, resulted in linguistic and cultural assimilation. In the course of history, those Armenian communities that had united with Rome or Constantinople assimilated linguistically and culturally to the peoples surrounding them.

The Armenians' tenacious adherence to their religion and language, the carriers of Armenian consciousness, always helped to preserve the ancient Armenian culture and national identity in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. In this manner, the church symbolised national unity among Armenians living in the Motherland or in the Diaspora. To preserve religion, language, identity and culture was, however, even more difficult in Diaspora. At the same time, Oxendio by his bishopric office – and also the church-union – in Transylvania actually broke down such an old Armenian tradition in which the Armenian community was equal to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The forced process of Latinisation managed by Oxendio decreased the importance of national identity.

Oxendio gained distinction to create the church-union. The posterity was never employed in his stubborn personality. Rather, his pastoral and missionary activity was primarily pointed to create the church-union and found the city called Szamosújvár (Gherla, Armenopolis). On the contrary, posterity forgot to mention the church-union's circumstances in connection with the internal debates and drawback of Oxendio's pontiff. The idealistic and charismatic view of the Diaspora leader known as Ethnarchos, was borne in the minds on the personality of Oxendio. In this respect, the assimilated Armenians in Transylvania regarded Oxendio's personality as a piece of the glorious past in their history. Probably, this could be the reason why posterity did not want to be employed in the negative attitude of his pontiff in Transylvania.

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