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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the exercise of religion in Hungary

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the exercise of religion in Hungary

Balázs Schanda

The first COVID-19 cases were reported in Hungary early March, followed by rapidly developing restrictive measures. On March 11 the “state of danger” was proclaimed that granted to Government additional competences. The state of danger was suspended on June 18, although some precautionary measures remained in force over the summer. In the first wave of the pandemic there were 605 death cases due to the infection and statistics did not show additional mortality. Restrictions seemed to be effective – certainly one can never prove if the response do the danger had not been overreacted.

The second wave of the pandemic has hit the country more dramatically (may be many did not take the danger serious based on their experiences of spring). The state of danger was introduced on November 10 again and restrictions apply to various fields of life. Measures, however, are somewhat different from than over the spring. An example could be education: in the first wave all schools went digital and also kindergartens were closed, whereas now kindergartens are open as usual and schools until grade 8 function normally, only classes 9 to 12 run digital, as well as universities.

The death toll has risen to 12 thousand by the end of January what shows that the second wave has become serious emergency.

1. General rules and religious exemptions

During a state of danger the Government has a special constitutional mandate. Government decrees can limit the exercise of a number of fundamental rights – normally this would fall in the competence of the Parliament.¹ Limitations, certainly, have to

¹ Gerencsér, Balázs Szabolcs: Special legal orders, In: Varga, Zs. András – Patyi, András – Schanda, Balázs (eds.) The Basic (Fundamental) Law of Hungary. A Commentary of the New Hungarian Constitution, Clarus Press, Dublin 2015, 305, 319.

respect the test of necessity and proportionality, they shall not curtail the essential content of fundamental rights and they have to have a legitimate aim like a competing fundamental right or a constitutional value. Besides the freedom of assembly and the freedom of movement also the free exercise of religion is one of rights that could be subject of limitations. Government decrees issued to limit business activities, gatherings, movement and a number of other aspects of everyday life, however, do not limit religious activities.

Neither the measures adopted for the spring nor those adopted for the fall/winter wave of the pandemic relate to religious communities. In the spring lockdown exercising religion was explicitly mentioned as a legitimate reason for leaving one's home.² All meetings, gatherings were suspended but religious services were and are not restricted by law. It was left to the decision of religious communities to adopt measures – measures that were expected to follow the general policy. As all denominations complied with this policy the approach was not really tested. How would have authorities reacted if a religious community had not been cautious enough?

During the spring lockdown religious communities decided to suspend all their public worship services at churches. Catholic churches remained open only for individual prayer. At some Catholic churches faithful could receive the Eucharist at the entrance of the church – after following the mass on-line at home.

The summer has brought significant relief. Many major events were suspended – including pilgrimages, the Saint Stevens' Day procession (August 20) – or postponed, e.g. the International Eucharistic Congress that was scheduled to Budapest for September 2020. At these occasions, faithful from different communities and even different countries would have met. Local communities, however, could hold their local feasts as well as summer holidays, scouts camps etc. Many, however decided to cancel events.

² Government Decree 71/2020. (III. 27.) Korm. § 4 (1) u)

According to the rules of the present state of danger since November 2020 “all public events are forbidden, including cultural events”, however “worship services of religious communities can be held upon the decision of religious communities. The Government requests religious communities to establish rules concerning worship services in line with the general rules.”³

Certain general rules affect religious services by nature. As masques have become compulsory in all public spaces, this relates to churches as well. As attendance at funerals is limited to 50 people this is to be respected by funeral service provided by a religious community as well. Church weddings have no civil effects in Hungary but the attendance at religious weddings was restricted as well. Since November 11 there is a curfew from 8PM to 5AM. This by nature makes late evening services at churches impossible.

For Christmas Eve special rules were adopted. The curfew was lifted for that one special night (what was not repeated for New Year’s Eve). This differentiation shows that the religious content receives more accommodation than enabling party time. This way the midnight mass was made possible, however many churches decided to celebrate a vigil mass in the afternoon instead of the traditional midnight service especially in major cities where there was a fear that too many people would gather for the night service. Decision was left for the local communities. An additional aspect contributing to uncertainty was that the lifting the curfew was only communicated on December 21, this way on the last Sunday before Christmas one could not know yet. For family reunions the ten-person maximum has not been lifted (children under the age 14 do not count).

2. Diverse policies

As the state regulations leave a wide discretion to religious communities, their differences are of peculiar interest.

³Government Decree 484/2020. (XI. 10) Korm

As for the Catholic Church, the general policy in the second wave of the pandemic is that all churches remain open and masses are celebrated as usual. Fragile members exempted from Sunday duties. Only hand communion is possible and disinfection before communion is required both from the priest and from members of the congregation. Holy water is not used and shaking hands as a sign of peace is avoided. Donations are collected at the exit while leaving the church. Maximizing the number of attendees is a sensitive issue. Those not sharing a household are supposed to keep 1.5 meters distance which is difficult to maintain in many churches. Instead of confessionals more spacious rooms are to be used to hear confessions.

All parish meetings are supposed to be online – except when personal presence is necessary for preparation of sacraments.

In general it can be observed that for the Catholic Church the administration of sacraments is clearly the top priority. The Holy Mass is much more important than any other devotions or occasions (rosary, adoration, recollections, Bible courses etc.). Traditionally Catholic parishes are accustomed to receive central, bishopric rules. In the current situation local conditions may be different and often bishops only recommend awareness and reasonable responsibility. In some places over the fall church doors were kept open to enable a better circulation of fresh air. Until winter cold some churches provided for loudspeakers so that faithful around the church could follow the mass. The number of altar boys was limited at many parishes in order to leave more distance. Faithful are recommended to go to their own parish church to avoid unnecessary encounters. Some bishops suggested the elderly to attend mass on a weekday instead of Sunday when the church is more crowded.⁴

Solemn weddings are possible but precaution is recommended. In some cases this means that only the testimonies, and closest relatives are welcome. As wedding parties fall under the general ban, many couples decide to postpone their wedding.

It has to be noted that for the Greek Catholics bishops passed slightly different rules. E.g., hand communion does not come into question for them. As a special measure

⁴<http://vaciegyszemegye.hu/hirek/4170/JARVANYUGYI-INTEZKEDSEK-A-VACI-EGYHAZMEGYEBEN.html>

separate spoons are to be used for communion by each attendant. Worshippers are asked not to touch or kiss icons.

The second most numerous denomination, the Reformed Church has followed a different path. The general rule for the Calvinist Church is to suspend all church occasions. Home services are encouraged calling for each head of family to share the bread. From the general rule, local exemptions can be made where the necessary precautionary measures can be respected. This way each parish council decides whether they hold common services or not. Instead of singing instrument music is recommended. Unfortunately local infection rates are not published in Hungary (only county rates). This way the local community has to act reasonably and responsibly based on the information they have (size of the church / the congregation etc.). Meetings should be held online, usual events for kids, or love feasts should not be held. The local autonomy of each and every congregation is deeply rooted in the Calvinist tradition. Although the Reformed Church in Hungary has bishops, the synod only issues recommendations rather than decrees.⁵

In a remarkable way Lutherans have adopted a different approach. Services at Lutheran Churches follow the regular schedule (like Catholics do) but there should be no singing at church and there is no communion in the services (what Catholics would never leave behind). This policy has been reached after suggestions to use small separate chalices and is regarded as a way of fasting. Sharing the bread at home by non-ordained members of the congregation is not welcome practice. Whereas for the Catholic Church the Eucharist would be the last thing that could be abandoned, for the Lutheran Church the

⁵<https://reformatus.hu/egyhazunk/hirek/koronavirus-ismet-online-terbe-koltozik-egyhazunk/>

service without the communion is still worthwhile. There is also a recommendation to bring own prayer books and not to use the common ones.⁶

Both the major (conservative) as well as the Chabad Jewish Community have suspended all common worship occasions. Members receive detailed information on available help as well as on home delivery of kosher food.⁷

Also smaller religious communities – from Jehovah’s Witnesses to Calvary Chapel – are exclusively on-line. Special occasions (like baptisms by dipping) are usually postponed.

The offer on on-line services developed a lot. The digital skills of clergy (and the faithful) has developed lot too. Also the public media broadcasts a Catholic mass and a Reformed service every week. Local communities proved to be creative in finding new ways of community life especially with generations that are more open for digital fora (the local Christmas custom like carol singing was organized for kids in this way in many places). The risk of losing lonely and elderly members from sight is a real one and needs special attention.

3. Counting on church related services

In handling the crisis – taking care of the elderly, the lonely, the sick etc. religious communities may have a special role. Praying for the victims of the pandemic as well as for an end of the crisis certainly belongs to the core identity of religious communities. Religious leaders are also active in enhancing the willingness to vaccination. The pastoral care of the sick has raised sensitive issues. Pastors are supposed to cautious but

⁶<https://www.evangelikus.hu/indokolt-komoly-elovigyazatosag-puspoki-utmutatas-az-egyhazi-szolgalatrol>

⁷E.g.:<https://obudaizsinagoga.hu/>

the faithful may feel extreme need for reconciliation and anointment. Hospital pastoral should also be possible at times of the pandemic when other visitors are not allowed to health care institutions but under the given special circumstances all outside visits can be banned (exceptions only relate to the closes relatives of dying as well as mothers giving birth can be accompanied by the father of the baby). Chaplains do not qualify as heath care personal – e.g. for vaccination they have no precedence to other citizen.

Emergency rules hardly relate to the activities of religious communities or the exercise of religion. The government did not make use of its special competences with regard to religious activities. The Fundamental Law refers to the cooperation of the state and of religious communities that is besides separation a guiding principle of church-state relations (Article VII (2)-(3)). The self-limitation of religious communities could be a good example of this cooperation.