

Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Faculty of Theology

Thesis Summary

The life-vocation of the Jesuit Jenő Kerkai based on the
theological hagiography of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Dissertatio ad Doctoratum

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Basic Theses

The basic statement of my thesis is that Jenő Kerkai's life can only be evaluated by theological means. From a purely ecclesiastical or political-historical point of view, rather contradictory interpretations of his mission are possible. This paper is an attempt at a theological interpretation of Jenő Kerkai's vocation, using the method of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological hagiography. I considered Jenő Kerkai's life as the realisation of a vocation and mission given to him by God. I sought to find the mission that gave meaning to Jenő Kerkai's life, that gave direction to the unfolding of his talents, and united the whole of his life journey. As far as I know, there has never been an example of such an application of the Balthasar method in Hungarian. Although the theological approach is the dominant one, the thesis also contains a number of novelties from a historical point of view. The sixth chapter, which describes the decisive points in the life course, and the first part of the fifth chapter, which summarises the preparatory years, are the longest summary of Jenő Kerkai's career from a historical point of view.

Short biography of Jenő Kerkai

Jenő Kerkai (Czinder), one of the most important Hungarian Jesuits of the 20th century, was born 120 years ago, in 1904. In 1935, he founded the National Association of Catholic Agricultural Youth Associations (KALOT), which grew into a movement of hundreds of thousands of members within ten years. The movement became the largest association in the country and was considered the most significant European Catholic agrarian youth initiative of the time. Jenő Kerkai's courageous stand for social justice brought him into conflict with the status quo. He was persecuted under both totalitarian regimes, the Nazis and the Communists. He was a key figure in the Christian Democratic movement in Hungary. His *modus vivendi* brought him into tension with Cardinal József Mindszenty. His movement was dissolved by the Communist authorities in 1946 and he himself was arrested in 1949. He was released after more than ten years of imprisonment. Among the Hungarian Jesuits, he spent the longest time in prison of the Communists in Hungary. For years he worked as a hand labourer, and was no longer allowed to work as a priest. The Communist state considered him a dangerous person until the end of his life (1970). In these years, he did physical labour and spent his time praying and writing. He

was remembered with appreciation by his fellow Jesuits, his colleagues and even his opponents. He was and still is regarded as a saint by many.

The mission of P. Kerkai

Kerkai's mission can be summarized as follows: he was sent by God to work as a Jesuit priest for the uplift of the poorest and most neglected social class of his time, the agrarian youth, in all dimensions of human life (faith, education, economy, national consciousness), thus contributing to the evangelization and uplift of the entire Hungarian nation. So that the Hungarian people may fulfil its mission more fully, so that Christianity may become a point of crystallization in the world, especially among neighbouring and related peoples, and thus participate in the mission of the universal Church to unite humanity in Christ. It was part of Jenő Kerkai's mission to involve others and to take up the crosses that this mission entailed, which he lived with the spirit of martyrdom. His whole life was marked by the drive to fulfil the desire of the Heart of Jesus to restore the glory of God in souls, in society, in economics, in politics – in every aspect of human life – and to renew the Church of Christ in faithfulness to the Gospel. Jenő Kerkai's life is a Christlike destiny, an expression of God's love, care and faithfulness to the Hungarian people.

Previous scientific works about P. Kerkai and sources

Until the beginning of my research, the first period of Jenő Kerkai's life – the KALOT period – was the most extensively covered, thanks to Margit Balogh, whose 30-page study, published almost three decades ago, was the most complete scholarly work on the whole of his life. Several shorter biographies have been published, as well as a few studies on personal aspects of his life, but a more comprehensive work on the whole of his life's work was missing. As for the inner motivations, vocation and spirituality of Jenő Kerkai, few studies have been published.

In terms of the sources of my work, compared to previous researchers, I had a number of new documents at my disposal, first of all through the materials collected in the Hungarian Jesuit archives, a significant part of which – for example, Jenő Kerkai's spiritual records of his youth (1924–31), his series of talks of an Ignatian retreat (1948), his family correspondence – were completely unknown and unprocessed. The archival material has also been enriched by my research through bequests donated to our archives by persons

connected to KALOT, friends and family members of Kerkai. With the help of the Arcanum Digital Library, I was also able to include in my research a number of reports on Kerkai in the contemporary press. Until now, the materials of the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security are also among the sources to have been poorly researched.

Methodology

The methodology of my thesis is presented in chapter four. I have tried to keep in mind the whole of the life vocation as a Balthasarian figure (Gestalt) and to avoid overemphasising any of its sub-problems. Since the research question is theological – I was looking for God's action in Jenő Kerkai's life and work –, my thesis emphasises those sources in which Jenő Kerkai's inner world, intentions, relationship with God and prayer life are expressed in some way. His diary entries, correspondence, writings, retreats and other speeches testify to the way he viewed his life's task at different stages of his life.

The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of my thesis examine Jenő Kerkai's life on the basis of the Balthasarian question: how does the glory of God shine forth in his life (Herrlichkeit)? How does the glory of God unfold in the dramatic action of God and man (Theodrama)? What divine message is conveyed by the journey of life (Theologik)?

If we look at the experience of the application of the Balthasar method, we can see that it does indeed help to bring out more clearly the world of Kerkai's inner life. It reveals his life's work more richly than a chronological biography. Even if few of Kerkai's diary-like personal notes were available, his letters, speeches, writings and the memoirs of his contemporaries gave us an insight into his inner life. It is easier to see what the inner motivations were that moved this very rich life story in very different historical situations, and through which we can discern what God sent Jenő Kerkai to do. The six dimensions accompany him throughout his life. A disadvantage of the Balthasarian method is that some themes are repetitive, and the same period is presented from different perspectives in different places, which can make it difficult to see the whole.

Theses

The fifth chapter of the thesis shows that Jenő Kerkai brought from his family the values of diligence, honesty, patriotism and respect for ordinary people. His religious

development was influenced by his aunt, then by his teachers of religion – Gyula Géfin, József Pehm (Mindszenty) József, László Székely – and his teacher of Hungarian language and literature, Boldizsár Marton (later Father Marcell, a Carmelite). He was greatly influenced in his Jesuit training by Fr Lajos Müller, Fr Ferenc Bíró and Fr Elemér Csávossy, as well as by his international experience of the Church's social teaching and theological studies in Innsbruck (e.g. Fr Oswald von Nell-Breuning). In 1935, he arrived in Hungary with serious plans to start an agrarian youth movement.

Considering the essence of Jenő Kerkai's mission, analysing his own testimonies, the impact of God's Word, and the opinion of others, I have come to the conclusion that there are six structural elements in it: his priestly vocation, his Jesuit vocation, his service to the poorest, his desire to uplift the whole Hungarian people, his service to the renewal of the Church, and his carrying of the cross.

In analysing the Balthasarian archetypal dimensions of mission, I found that an insight into the archetypal dimensions also provides an interpretative framework for the *modus vivendi* conflict between Cardinal József Mindszenty and Jenő Kerkai. The tension between Saint Peter, responsible for unity, and Saint Paul, with his strong missionary dynamism, can also be observed in the Acts of the Apostles. One of Mindszenty's main aspirations and concerns was the unity of the Hungarian Church, which he perhaps imagined as too monolithic, while Kerkai was pushing the boundaries, willing to negotiate with anyone in order to be able to preach the Gospel. The different visions and dynamics of a distinctively Petrine or Pauline charism were a natural source of tension. But, tragically, their relationship was broken.

The sixth chapter of the essay is about the dramatic unfolding of Jenő Kerkai's career. By the time he graduated from high school, the desire to help the poorest and uplift the Hungarian nation was already present in him, and these desires played a central role in his first major decision in life, the choice of the Jesuit vocation. To follow that calling, he had to overcome the opposition of his parents. His choice of vocation may also have been determined by a motive of grace. The role of the clergy of Zalaegerszeg, especially parish priest József Pehm, may have been important in convincing the parents.

As a Jesuit, during his time as a regent in Kalocsa, the direction of social apostolate crystallized in him, and his first writings were published. One of his pamphlets drew the disapproval of the diocesan censor, but his superior, Fr. Elemér Csávossy, unequivocally supported it. It was perhaps at this time, or a little earlier, during his philosophical studies in Szeged, when during a retreat the idea for the future KALOT movement was born.

After completing his training, he started to found KALOT in 1935. To develop the organisation, he had to decide on a number of practical issues. His decisions were taken after consultation and prayer, in accordance with Jesuit procedure. He was deeply inspired by the example of Jesus, who invited, trained and sent a small group of disciples out into the world. Similarly, Kerkai chose collaborators, gave them spiritual exercises and then entrusted them with tasks to work for the uplift of the poorest in society.

The growth of the movement also generated a number of tensions. Their courageous stand for social justice (e.g. pushing the issue of land distribution, standing up for the rights of agricultural and factory workers, etc.) provoked resistance from those who were opposed to social changes. They also had serious critics in the Hungarian bishops' conference, but Pope Pius XII's support for the movement provided a protective umbrella.

It was an increasing challenge to pay the salaries of the growing number of staff of the growing movement. And after the outbreak of World War II, there was a real danger that the militarizing Hungarian state would ban KALOT, so they went ahead and signed an agreement (October 1941) with the youth movement of the state (LOK), which ensured the survival of the movement and provided it with financial resources. Kerkai saw this agreement as a *modus vivendi*, which, in addition to survival, allowed the ideals of KALOT to act as leaven for the masses and to counteract and mitigate the influence of extremist ideologies. Indeed, through its training, KALOT was able to influence a broader part of the Hungarian youth, but the militant and chauvinistic influence of the increasingly radicalising state youth organisation, the LOK, inevitably had an effect also on KALOT youth.

In the late 1930s, Kerkai and his colleagues took a strong stand against social democracy and Communism, and also became aware of the dangers of National Socialism. In the late 1930s, KALOT found itself in increasing competition with far-right movements

(Volksbund, Arrow Cross) for the loyalty of the peasantry. Their language therefore became more radical in its formulation of social issues, and they were not without anti-Semitic rhetoric in their criticism of liberal capitalism. While Kerkai was able to think prophetically in terms of social justice and the recognition of alien ideologies, he was himself a child of his time in some respects. Like most Catholics, he thought along the same lines on the issues of territorial revisionist war propaganda and anti-Semitism, and on a few occasions he himself made anti-Semitic statements. However, Kerkai was able to gradually re-evaluate his views, and realized that it was an inappropriate tactic to use anti-Jewish rhetoric to keep the masses of the peasantry away from the Arrow Cross movement. From 1943, as one of the leaders of the Catholic Social People's Movement and as an organizer of the Christian Democratic People's Party, he was already preparing for the post-war democratic transition. KALOT became part of the anti-German coalition of the Hungarian Front. In July 1944, Kerkai encouraged Bishop Mindszenty of Veszprém to lobby Governor Miklós Horthy for armistice as soon as possible. From the autumn of 1944, he risked his life to participate in the rescue of persecuted Jews. In December, he himself was persecuted and his movement was disbanded by the Arrow Cross.

The war had not yet ended, when Kerkai and his colleagues broke through the front and began to reorganize their movement. This was not a trivial conclusion, as the leaders of the sister movement EMSZO decided to disband their organization, seeing the violence of the Communists. Kerkai was convinced that his movement was in Providence's plan, and the Roman Jesuit leadership supported his decision to continue.

Kerkai took a strong stand for democratic transformation, saw value and opportunity in democracy, and called many aspects of the pre-war social system unjust and pseudo-Christian. This led him to engage in controversy with those who harboured nostalgia for the Horthy regime.

After the war, Communist propaganda immediately called for the dissolution of KALOT and the imprisonment of its leaders. Kerkai tried to avoid open confrontation, but, at the same time, he sought to prepare the young people to confront atheist propaganda by deepening Catholic faith and social teaching and by spiritual exercises. They were not merely fighting against something, they were seeking to deepen the socially sensitive

Catholic faith, because Kerkai was convinced that this would provide the real immunity against Communist ideology. Kerkai sought a *modus vivendi* with the Communist state power. They tried to buy time by negotiation and bargaining so that they could continue to train the peasant youth for as long as possible. This tactic brought Kerkai into serious conflict with Cardinal József Mindszenty, who did not understand his intentions, and considered the attempts at *modus vivendi* as a breach of unity. Kerkai experienced this tension as a deep struggle of conscience, feeling himself caught between two fires between the Communists and the leader of the Hungarian Church. He saw that only KALOT would be able to preserve the faith and Hungarian identity among the peasantry, and that even after the dissolution of the KALOT in 1946, all alternative ways had to be used to continue the work. His actions were not partisan, since he had the support of Pope Pius XII and the Roman Jesuit leadership behind him; in the following years, he tried to mediate between the Holy See and the Hungarian bishops, and to convince them of the value of the *modus vivendi*.

Both Jenő Kerkai and József Mindszenty dedicated their lives to the service of the Church and the Hungarian people. They both saw atheistic Communism as a grave threat to the faith and the Hungarian nation, but they saw the need for different tactics against it. Confrontation and *modus vivendi* were two authentic Christian alternatives. It is tragic that after decades of fraternal and friendly relations, they could not work well together in this extremely complex and difficult situation. Yet, their fates are similar. Both were imprisoned and oppressed by the Communist regime. József Mindszenty could not find any value in Communism, it can be said that he was rigid and incapable of compromise. Kerkai, on the other hand, was flexible, willing to engage in dialogue and able to appreciate some of the features of the Socialist system (e.g. the fight against poverty). Yet, they both received the same punishment. Despite Kerkai's efforts to lift up the poorest, he was imprisoned, his health was ruined, and he was not given any place to work after his release. His sidelining also shows that even in the 1960s, the system did not accept any other type collaborators than servile.

It was with deep pain that Kerkai experienced the crisis of faith of his friend, Töhötöm Nagy, and his departure from the Jesuit order (1948). Kerkai decided to remain in contact with him, and not to withdraw his friendship from him.

In 1948, many urged Kerkai to leave Hungary, but he stayed, because he wanted to share the fate of the Hungarian people, and was prepared to be martyred. In prison, he was regularly abused and blinded in half his eyes, but he saw this time as a gift, even though there were times when he experienced a deep crisis and an inner darkness. The sacrifice of his sufferings for the Hungarian people lifted him out of the bitterness that haunted him again and again.

During the 1956 revolution, he was released for a few months and began organising again. Kerkai, keeping to his earlier decision to remain in Hungary, did not emigrate, although many people begged him to flee from the country. In the spring of 1957, he was sent back to prison.

After his release in 1959, he deliberately chose a life as a labourer out of solidarity with the Hungarian people and Jesus, a worker. He lived as a worker-priest, praying and writing in the hope that his writings could serve the future. He was pained to learn that his new initiatives (the Somogyi Plan: cooperation between church and state in agriculture and the social sphere; his dream of a health centre in Pannonhalma) were rejected. With difficulty, he accepted that he could not work without endangering others, and was condemned to inaction by the Communist authorities and his superiors. He accepted the argument that if he did not expose himself, perhaps other members of his order could work more freely. Yet, finding it difficult to bear the inaction, he submitted his application to emigrate, hoping that he might still be able to do something for his people and the Church abroad, but this was rejected, too. He then devoted all his remaining strength to the patients of the old people's home in Pannonhalma, serving them in their most ordinary needs. With patience and faith, he experienced his gradual paralysis, his total blindness, and finally, with creaturely devotion, he accepted death.

The seventh chapter of the thesis summarizes the six dimensions of Jenő Kerkai's mission and its relevance today. As a priest, he was characterized by a supernatural vision and a profound belief in the power of prayer. He was a man of the Eucharist in all circumstances, even in prison. He was a true spiritual father to his co-workers, members of his movement and fellow prisoners. Not only his external life (preparation, apostolic years, suffering), but also his interior life was Christlike, characterized by love and forgiveness.

He lived his Jesuit vocation in an exemplary way, his apostolic work was inspired by his spiritual exercises, and his apostolic activity was permeated by spiritual exercises and Jesuit missionary methods. Although he was surrounded by an inspiring environment (the Jesuit order, the city of Szeged), an important motive was that he paid attention to the personal call in his heart, which led him to prepare for social apostolic work for many years. Without his personal initiative, KALOT might never have been born. KALOT can also be seen as a Jesuit mission tailored to the Hungarian peasant youth, which bore the characteristics of inculturation (e.g. cultivating folk culture, building on the desire of peasant youth for personal prosperity). Its spirituality was deeply marked by the veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In his interpretation the atonement was the restoration of God's fallen glory. He offered his life as a sacrifice for the Hungarian people, and this idea gave him strength even in the darkest moments.

Central to Kerkai's thinking is the concept of the people, and in this he has many affinities with the idea of the Theology of the People (Teología del Pueblo), so important to Pope Francis (love of the ordinary people, example of their faith, value of their religiosity, uplift of the poor), a branch of South American liberation theology. Kerkai also rejects the idea of a violent, revolutionary transformation of society from above, and, in contrast to Marxism, he advocated a transformation from within. While South American liberation theology emphasizes Old Testament liberation stories, Jenő Kerkai's inspiration is evangelical and closely linked to the worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Kerkai saw his movement as a step towards the service of the church and the evangelization of the whole Hungarian society. His work was inspired by the universal horizons of the Church and the Society of Jesus. Without the social teaching of the popes, the resolutions of the Jesuit General Congregations and international examples, Jenő Kerkai's work would be unthinkable. He constantly followed the efforts of the universal Church and the Jesuit order. He saw in the work of Pope John XXIII and in the Second Vatican Council the fulfilment of his long-standing dreams. In the areas of working together with his secular colleagues, cooperation with Protestants, missionary spirit, and appreciation of folk traditions, he proved to be a forerunner of the Council in Hungary, and in many respect he was a pioneer of the aspirations of Pope Francis (service to the poor, evangelisation, pastors who smell of sheep, etc.).

Jenő Kerkai's life was deeply marked by the cross of Christ. Through the Spiritual Exercises, he committed himself to following Jesus crucified. He was persecuted by both totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Yet he was able to accept persecution as a companion of the humble and cross-bearing Saviour, as an inherent part of following Christ. He was able to be faithful in times of the greatest darkness, both external and internal. He experienced the cross-bearing in the light and hope of the resurrection, forgiving his persecutors, living in sacrificial love in all circumstances. He can be said to have been a white martyr.

His example can also inspire us to root our lives in prayer and to follow God's personal call. We Jesuits can be inspired to take the worship of the Sacred Heart, our spiritual exercises and our inculturation traditions seriously. The example of Jenő Kerkai can call us to hear the cry of the poor today – whether they are Gypsies living in abject poverty, or our wounded creation. Kerkai's dream of a Garden Hungary and the vocation of Hungarians is still relevant today. His love for the Church can also be an example, in its universal implications and in his appreciation of Vatican II, and his attention to the Pope of the day. Finally, the spirit, the fidelity and the sacrificial love of Jenő Kerkai's journey of the cross can also be a guide for us in a historical period which seems to be bringing great challenges.

I hope that my thesis can contribute to reviving the work and legacy of Jenő Kerkai, who was born 120 years ago this year. He devoted his life to serving the Hungarian people and the Church, enduring with a martyr's spirit. I hope that his example will serve as an inspiration for us today.

Publications related to the research

KORONKAI, Z., *Hans Urs von Balthasar teológiai hagiográfiája*, in *Teológia* 56 (2022/1–2), 21–28.

A 2022 novemberében tartott Kerkai-konferenciánk kötete:

KORONKAI, Z. – SZIGETI, SZ., szerk. *A legnagyobb magyar szociális szervező, Kerkai Jenő SJ életműve*, Jezsuita Kiadó, Budapest 2023.

This is the core of my doctoral thesis:

KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő élethivatásának teológiai elemzése*, in *uo.* 21–62.

Shorter writings:

KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő, a magyar nép prófétája*, in *A Szív* 108 (2022/10), 30–33.

KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő, a munkáspap*, in *A Szív* 108 (2022/5), 58–61.

KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő, a szociális apostol meghívástörténete*, in *A Szív* 107 (2021/12), 52–55.

KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő levelezőlapjai*, in *A Szív* 110 (2024/2), 35–37.

KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő 1956-ban és 1956-ról*, in *Új Ember* 2022. október 23., 8.

KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő lelkülete*, in *A korszellem viharában, Válogatás az mkdsz.hu szerzőinek írásaiból (2021–2023)*, szerk. HOJDÁK, G., MKDSZ, 2023, 129–133

KORONKAI, Z., „Mindszenty kellemetlen, Kerkai veszélyes”, in *M.I.N.D.* (2021/4), 36–39.

The volume of our November 2023 Kerkai Conference is about to be published:

KORONKAI, Z. – SZIGETI, SZ., szerk. *Kerkai Jenő keresztútja, Egy jezsuita sors az üldöztetés évtizedeiben*, Jezsuita Kiadó, Budapest 2024.

Including: KORONKAI, Z., *Kerkai Jenő mint fehér vértanú?*,