Hibrid köztisztviselők vagy szerzetes pap-tanárok?

II. József tanári pályafutásról alkotott elképzelése és annak hatása a magyarországi piarista tartományra

Hybrid Public Servants or Religious Teacher-Priests?

Joseph II's Concept of the Teaching Career and Its Impact on the Hungarian Piarist Province

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Összefoglalás

Ez a tanulmány azt vizsgálja, hogy II. József (1780–1790) egyházi reformjai hogyan alakították át a magyar piarista pap-tanárok életét: hivatásukat, mindennapi gyakorlatukat és közszolgálati pozíciójukat. Mária Terézia (uralkodott 1740–1780) és fia egyaránt arra törekedtek, hogy újrarajzolják az egyház és az állam közötti határokat. Ezzel társadalmi, gazdasági, kulturális, jogi és oktatási reformok áradatát indították el. E reformok középpontjában az egyház és tanító rendjei álltak, amelyek egyrészt az államigazgatás pilléreiként, másrészt szupranacionális ellenőrző eszközökként működtek. A trón és az oltár eme egyesülése nélkül az új centralizált rendszer azonnal összeomlott volna.

E reformfolyamatot pusztán „egyházi politikának" értelmezni téves lenne: ez elsősorban a Habsburg-monarchia modernizációja és állami irányultságú átalakítása volt. A piaristák a leglelkesebb együttműködők közé tartoztak. Oktató rendként, nyitott karokkal fogadták az állami kezdeményezéseket; egyes tagjai még a reformokat is megelőzték. Munkáik tanúskodnak erről: egységes tantervek, tankönyvek, politikai elméletről és történelemről szóló értekezések – mindegyikük a felvilágosodás elveinek és a legújabb tudományos felfedezéseknek a nyomát viseli. Mária Terézia és II. József jutalmazták lelkesedésüket, és rájuk bízták az új iskolák alapítását az egész birodalomban.

Az állam iránti elkötelezettségük azonban szinte végzetesnek bizonyult. II. József uralkodása alatt a császár, kihasználva a piaristák kompetenciáját és lojalitását, nem kevesebbet tervezett, mint a rend állami alkalmazottak testületévé alakítását. A terv pénzhiány miatt meghiúsult, de a megsemmisítés és a közösségi kötelékek megygyengülése miatt sok piarista elhagyta a rendet. Néhányan egyházi papok lettek, mások világi tanárok.

Abstract

This study explores how the ecclesiastical reforms of Joseph II (r. 1780–1790) reshaped the lives of Hungarian Piarist priest-teachers: their vocation, their daily practice, and their position within the realm of public service. Both Maria Theresa (r. 1740–1780) and her son sought to redraw the boundaries between Church and

DOI: 10.54231/ETSZEMLE.26.2026.2.2

State. In doing so, they unleashed a torrent of social, economic, cultural, legal, and educational reforms. At the heart of these reforms stood the Church and its teaching orders, which functioned as both pillars of state administration and supranational instruments of control. Without this union of throne and altar, the new centralized system would have collapsed at once.

To interpret this reform process merely as "church policy" is to miss the point: it was, above all, the modernization and statist reorientation of the Habsburg Monarchy. The Piarists proved among its most enthusiastic collaborators. As a teaching order, they welcomed state initiatives with open arms; some of their members even anticipated reform. Their works bear witness to this: uniform curricula, textbooks, treatises on political theory and history—all bearing the imprint of Enlightenment principles and of the latest scientific discoveries. Maria Theresa and Joseph II rewarded their zeal, entrusting them with the founding of new schools across the realm.

Yet this embrace of the state proved almost a death grip. During Joseph II's reign, the emperor, exploiting both the competence and loyalty of the Piarists, envisioned nothing less than the transformation of the order into a corps of state employees. The plan failed for lack of funds, but the fear of suppression and the loosening of communal bonds drove many Piarists to leave the order. Some became diocesan clergy; others pursued careers as secular teachers.

Kulcsszavak: abszolutizmus; állam; egyház; felvilágosodás; közszolgálat; II. József; piarista rend; vallási élet; reformprojektek

Keywords: absolutism; state; Church; Enlightenment; public service; Joseph II; Piarist order; religious life; reform projects

1. General and Special Regulations Concerning the Piarists

"I need schoolteachers, not mutes and quacks."
— Dezső Szomory, *Emperor Joseph II*

Even as heir to the throne, Joseph II accepted the principle that relations between Church and State must be adjusted to the spirit of the new age. For some time, however, it remained uncertain how he would carry this out.[1] One of his first decisive steps was to create the *Geistliche Hofkommission*, charged with selecting candidates for ecclesiastical offices. In Hungary, the commission relied heavily on the recommendations of the Hungarian Court Chancellery when appointing bishops. To Joseph, the Church was merely one branch of state administration; the Pope's authority was to be confined strictly to theological matters.[2] What was the legal foundation

[1] See further: Marczali 1884, 495–497; Mályusz 1939, 127; Valjavec 1945, 34–121; Feichtinger and Heidemarie 2016, 96–103.

[2] In Ferdinand Maaß's concise formulation: *„Die schrankenlose Einflussnahme des Staates auf alles kirchliche zu begründen und zu rechtfertigen"* (*To establish and justify the unrestricted influence of the state on all ecclesiastical matters*). Maaß 1951, XVII; Duchhardt 2007, 144–146.

of Joseph's measures? Nothing other than the *placetum regium*—the royal right of assent.[3] The urgency and scope of his intervention are evident: within a few years, dozens of decrees concerning the Church were issued, often to be implemented within weeks.[4]

The nexus decree regulated the ties of religious orders to their superiors abroad. Every order subject to imperial authority was to sever its links with foreign houses, central leadership, and—most significantly—Rome.[5] The main points of the decree, sent via the Lieutenancy Council to the Hungarian Piarist provincial, were as follows:[6]

1. Every religious and every house within the Habsburg Monarchy must renounce all former ties with members or monasteries abroad, save for prayer and intercession for spiritual goods.
2. Each house must either form an independent body or associate with others, and notify the emperor within two months.
3. Henceforth, no house may maintain any connection with its superior general[7] or foreign affiliates—whether in matters of jurisdiction, discipline, or finance. Religious communities were placed under the authority of their provincial, the local archbishops and bishops, and the appropriate state body, such as the Lieutenancy Council.
4. No religious in the empire might attend a general chapter abroad (*capitulum generale*)[8] or receive visitators from outside.
5. Only native or naturalized citizens could be elected superiors at provincial chapters. In Hungary, the holding of a chapter required permission from the Lieutenancy Council, to which all decisions—

[3] This royal "privilege" had already been applied in Hungary by King Sigismund of Luxembourg (r. 1387–1437) in 1404. In practice it meant two things: ecclesiastical benefices granted by the pope were invalid without the king's consent, and every papal decree was subjected to royal oversight. Tusor and Nemes 2011, 284–285.

[4] Mezey and Gosztonyi 2020, 257.

[5] This did not apply to entities within the Habsburg Monarchy (provinces, houses, etc.).

[6] The various decrees and intimations arrived one by one, "thread by thread," until in 1785 the Lieutenancy Council summarized them under the title *Sylloge* and sent the relevant provisions to Hungary: PMKL, APHV, *Intimata Regia* III. 1784–1785. Here I provide only a brief, content-focused summary in points, since the document itself would amount to an entire study.

[7] The *generalis* (superior general) was the highest leader of the order, with his seat in Rome. The *provincialis* (provincial) governed a province within a given country. From this point on, however, terminology shifted among the Hungarian Piarists: they began calling the provincial their "general," since their ties with the actual general had been severed.

[8] The general convenes the *capitulum generale*, in which the universal order is represented by the official delegates of each province.

especially those concerning finances and discipline—had to be reported.

6. Travel abroad for study, particularly to Rome, was forbidden.
7. The purchase of foreign liturgical books (missals, breviaries, and the like) and the transfer of money abroad required imperial approval.

Beyond the nexus decree, Joseph II went further: he dissolved those religious orders he judged "useless" to society. Their property was transferred to the Religious Fund[9], which financed the establishment of new parishes. Joseph explained the logic himself in a letter to the Archbishop of Salzburg in 1781:

"Once the veil has been torn from the monastic institution; once I have banished from my universities the Andromache's veil of ascetic doctrine; once I have turned purely contemplative friars into working citizens—then let the zealots quibble over my reforms. I have taken on a great task: I must decimate the armies of friars, turn fakirs into men, men before whose shaven heads the people kneel in reverence, men who have secured greater dominion over souls than any other force that can move the human mind."[10]

From 1782 onward, religious communities fell year after year. At first the emperor targeted houses that were bankrupt, purely contemplative, morally dubious, or simply mismanaged. Soon, however, even wealthy and well-run communities found themselves in his sights. Historians generally agree that in the Austrian provinces between 700 and 800 houses were closed; in Hungary, 134 male and 6 female communities were suppressed, involving 1,484 men and 190 women. The closures inflicted heavy financial and artistic losses, though the Religious Fund did indeed finance pastoral work. Yet the deeper wound lay not in money or art, but in the very questioning of the monastic vocation: the collapse of confidence in priestly and religious callings, and the long-term decline in new recruits.[11]

The essence of Josephinist church policy lay in two principles: the partial dismantling of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and discipline, and the state's assumption of control over vocation, training, and employment. Religious orders were henceforth supervised by their bishops and provincials. Provincials now served three-year terms, without exception. The aim was to erase the distinctions rooted in different charisms and to forge a single, uniform clergy.[12]

The chosen instrument was the *seminarium generale*—a network of central seminaries directly subject to state authority, not the hierarchy of

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9 Marczali 1884, 135.

10 Supka 1913, 38–39. On criticism of certain religious orders in the empire, especially those sustained by begging: Bendel and Spannenberger 2015.

11 Vanyó 1986, 53–54.

12 Vanyó 1986, 54.

the Church.[13] Joseph put it bluntly:

"I shall take care that the building I erect for the future will stand firm; the central seminaries will be hotbeds of priests formed in my spirit, and the pastors trained there will carry into the world a purified mind and instill right teaching into the souls of the people."[14]

The Hungarian Piarists escaped suppression, but not absorption into the "state" seminary system. Their own houses of formation were closed.[15]

2. Further Decrees and Their Impact

The imperial regulation on priestly training struck the Piarists at their core: the formation of their novices was now almost entirely removed from their control. The consequences were immediate and severe. Fewer young men entered the order; fewer teachers could therefore be trained. Those who had already joined but had not yet taken solemn vows found themselves in limbo—uncertain, uncomfortable, and often disillusioned. Their commitment wavered; their sense of vocation faltered. In many cases it collapsed altogether. The result was widespread dissatisfaction, moral decline, and mass departures. In 1782 the order counted 418 members; by the last year of Joseph's reign the number had fallen to 329.[16]

The Hungarian Piarist provincial replied to the Lieutenancy Council after receiving the imperial decrees, and his letter was duly forwarded to Vienna. He pleaded the province's desperate finances: it had scarcely managed to feed and clothe its young teacher-candidates within the houses; how, then, could it possibly pay for their training in the newly established general seminaries? He made two requests—money from the court, and permission to admit new novices. Strikingly, the Lieutenancy Council sided with him. It judged the complaint realistic and even advised the emperor to suspend or at least postpone the decree in the case of the Piarists. Joseph, however, was not easily moved. For a long time he offered no concession. Only after repeated and detailed petitions did he grudgingly acknowledge the validity of the complaint. At last he permitted the order to admit twenty new candidates. This was, of course, no solution to the shortage of teachers. The official reply made that plain enough: a thorough reform of the order was already in preparation, and under such conditions, fresh recruitment was hardly necessary. What sort of reform this meant, we shall soon see.[17]

Through further decrees Joseph II thoroughly reshaped the election of superiors and abolished the offices of provincial assistant and counselor.

[13] Kosáry 1980, 514–515.

[14] Supka 1913, 40.

[15] PMKL, APHV, *Intimata Regia* III. 1784–1785, 6806 Item.

[16] The figures are taken from the official register of the province: PMKK, *Familia Domus* 1782; *Familia Domus* 1790.

[17] Pallmann 1914, 60–61.

Each house (*domus*) was henceforth to elect its own rector: by absolute majority if possible, by relative majority in a third round if not. The vicerector presided over the vote. The provincial's role was reduced to little more than a notary's: he could confirm the election or annul it in cases of obvious incompetence, nothing more. The choice of vicerector and of the lesser offices now belonged exclusively to the rector. Thus each house became a "petty kingdom" unto itself. Rectors enjoyed near-absolute power within their own walls, while the authority of the provincial was cut down to the bone. He could transfer members (*dispositio*) only for the gravest of reasons, and conduct a visitation (*visitatio*) only when extraordinary circumstances justified his presence.[18]

The Piarist school network suffered another blow on September 20, 1784, when Joseph II dissolved the *convictus nobilium*—boarding schools for the sons of the nobility.[19] These institutions, condemned as wasteful, were abolished not in isolation but as part of the emperor's new system of tuition and scholarships.[20] Talented but poor students could still study free of charge. Moreover, three categories of scholarships were introduced, worth 260, 200, or 160 florins annually. The funds came partly from the confiscated endowments of the former boarding schools and partly from the new tuition fees. There is no doubt that the Piarists suffered heavy losses—financially and in student numbers—in the towns where such colleges had existed: Debrecen, Kisszeben (Sabinov), Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), Nyitra (Nitra), Rózsahegy (Ružomberok), Szentanna (Sântana), and Trencsén (Trenčín). In Cluj, the situation was particularly bleak: some Piarists were forced to leave the city altogether, among them the rector himself. The house remained leaderless for six years.[21]

The enlightened monarch—in open contrast to the principles of the Piarist order—introduced tuition fees in 1785. By imperial decree, free education was abolished in gymnasia, lycea, and universities. Students now had to pay moderate fees. Those unable to pay—except for poor but outstanding students—received only a private progress report, which conferred no right to scholarships or to compete for state positions. This marked a turning point. Countless impoverished noble youths and des-

[18] The decree was communicated in summary form to the members of the order by Provincial Norbert Conrádi (1718–1785): PMKL, APHV, *Protocollum domus* 1758–1804. For the full text see: PMKL, APHV, *Intimata Regia* III. 1784–1785.

[19] A significant proportion of young Hungarian Catholic nobles studied in boarding schools originally founded by the Jesuits and, after their suppression, run by the Piarists. These were known as *noble convictus*. Most of the students were indeed of noble origin, though many also came from other social strata. Varga 1992, 195; Schindling 1994, 80; Kökényesi 2025, 89–110; Szekér 2025, 111–134.

[20] In this period, Piarist institutions in Hungary largely operated on a foundation basis and were in fact tuition-free. Ausenda 2003, 82.

[21] Kosáry 1980, 441–442.

titute students lost their chance at higher education. Attendance plummeted. Within five years, the number of students in Hungarian gymnasia and academies was cut nearly in half: from 8,356 in 1784 to only 4,629 in 1788.[22]

True, the new system recognized poor but gifted pupils and sought, in part, to counteract noble tax immunity (*immunitas*). From 1785 onward, weaker students paid 12 florins per year at gymnasia, 15 florins in philosophy, and 30 florins in law and medicine. In the 1785/86 academic year, fees raised 38,500 florins: 25,600 were redistributed as scholarships, the rest went to needy schools. By the following year (1786/87), the scholarship fund had more than tripled: 86,300 florins were awarded to talented students.[23]

The situation was made worse by Joseph II's language decree of 1784, designed to make German the single administrative tongue of the Habsburg Monarchy. One instrument of this policy was to replace Latin with German as the language of secondary education. The emperor ordered that official business, county administration, the courts, and the schools all abandon Latin in favor of German—allowing only the briefest transition period. The decree went further: from the following school year, only pupils with at least a basic command of German could be enrolled in the first year of gymnasium. The conditions for such a change, of course, did not yet exist. But the emperor's rigid command was duly forwarded by the Lieutenancy Council to the schools: beginning in 1787/88, German was to be the sole language of instruction in all secondary and higher schools. In 1787, however, the authorities softened the blow. District school directors were told to begin German instruction only in the lowest gymnasium classes and to advance by one grade each year.[24]

The Lieutenancy Council ordered that all secondary school teachers who did not already speak German must master it within three years. In the German-speaking towns of the Monarchy, this caused little trouble—even if textbooks were lacking. In non-German areas, the difficulties were obvious. Neither teachers nor students spoke the language, and many rectors, stirred by national sentiment, resisted or delayed the decree's enforcement.[25] Ironically, it was the language decree—rather than the financial blows—that provoked real opposition from the Piarists. Several priest-teachers pressed instead for a greater role for Hungarian in education. András Dugonics (1740–1818), one of the order's most famous figures, wrote of the decree:

"*Our emperor, wishing to spread the German tongue in Hungary, found three most suitable methods. First: he commanded that Latin and Hungarian*

[22] Balanyi, Bíró, Bíró, and Tomek 1943, 147–148.

[23] Kosáry 1980, 441–442.

[24] Kann 1974, 185; Mészáros 1980, 55; Benda 1978, 385–386.

[25] Benda 1978, 385; Katus 2021, 92.

be abandoned, and that Hungarian children be taught only in German. The language cracked on their lips; they could not grow accustomed to it. In resistance to this effort I published algebra and geometry in Hungarian, to show the nation that German could never serve as well as Hungarian in explaining the sciences."[26]

The situation of the Hungarian Piarist province worsened by the day. Internal disintegration and the threat of external suppression loomed at once. Since the order operated many schools, the state too had an interest in preventing outright collapse. Joseph II therefore took pains to stress that he did not intend to abolish the Piarists. Quite the contrary: he meant to reorganize them. Soon enough, his reform plan arrived. The Lieutenancy Council forwarded it to the order's new provincial, József Königsacker (1733–1797).[27]

3. The Radical Reform Plan

The crisis just described—caused in large part by the emperor's own decrees—brought the future of the Piarist order ever more frequently before the Viennese Court Study Commission.[28] In its deliberations, the options ranged from outright dissolution and the secularization of the order's property—specifically, its absorption into the Study Fund—to the transformation of the order into a secular teacher-training institute under the commission's direct supervision. The historical sources are clear: even before the provinces were officially informed of the impending measures, anxiety spread among the Piarists. They feared the same fate that had already overtaken other religious orders. An atmosphere of uncertainty pervaded the order, discouraging young men from joining its ranks.[29] A reform was coming—that much was obvious. The only question was whether it would be survival by transformation, or death by dissolution.

Before turning to the reform plan itself, it is worth noting that the signs of crisis did not first appear under Joseph II, but already in the reign of Maria Theresa. During the unusually long provincialate of Zsigmond Orosz (1717–1782)—sixteen years—the state began to move decisively into the sphere of education. A Piarist was always three things at once: religious, priest, and teacher. When the state added new attributes to the last of these, the question arose: how far must he adapt?[30] To illustrate the complexity, let us take only one example—money. The *Ratio Educationis* of 1777 prescribed payments even for religious teachers—above and beyond their support within the house (!). How much exactly was paid, who

[26] Szinyei 1883, 16.

[27] PMKL, APHV, *Intimata Regia* IV. 1786–1787.

[28] Established by Maria Theresa in 1760. Katus 2021, 81.

[29] Riedel 2012, 302–303.

[30] There are, of course, several other examples of the link between the religious orders and the Enlightenment from this period: Balogh 2019.

authorized the sums, and how each Piarist received the money remains unclear—and is not the concern of this study.[31] What matters is the effect. With this step, the institution of common life (*vita communis*) began to loosen. At the same time, the positive feedback loop with the state grew stronger. Rome was far away—and after Joseph II, it would vanish from the horizon altogether. The Italian province had its own problems and could offer little guidance. Solutions had to be found here, within the shifting circumstances of Hungary itself. It now seemed that the chief function of a Catholic school was no longer re-Catholicization but the transmission of a culture deemed "useful to the king and to the public."[32] If a Piarist could provide this, then he was not merely a servant of the Catholic Church but also an employee of the emerging state administration—justified in feeling himself a citizen of two states at once. The question was: which allegiance would prove stronger?

From the provincial letters of Zsigmond Orosz[33] it is clear that the state's new vision of the teaching career—an alternative public-service path—took its toll on the Piarists, at the expense of their religious identity. The provincial confessed how difficult it had become to assign teachers to particular schools. His *dispositiones* were resisted—sometimes ignored altogether—by rectors and those teaching under their supervision. In his view, the cause was obvious: secular authorities (*superiores saeculares*) claimed ever greater jurisdiction over the religious. Some Piarists openly defied orders; others lived like laymen already—seeking freedom from discipline and even planning to abandon the order. A few went so far as to seek protection from local officials against their own provincial. Orosz traced the problem to one of Maria Theresa's decrees, which had curtailed the power of superiors to punish. This, he argued, struck directly at obedience and discipline. The results were predictable. Those weary of religious life, chafing at the cloister, now lived for comfort. Meanwhile, others—taking their vows seriously—demanded that such men be disciplined, punished, or even expelled. Plainly, not all welcomed the reforms imposed by the empress. Least of all, the provincial himself.[34]

In this context, Joseph II's decrees must be understood as reinforcing a new mentality among the Piarists: that their role as teachers and intellectuals "protected" them from provincials whose authority had been clipped, and

[31] For the 19th-century situation, the source material is richer: Balla 2025.

[32] *Ratio Educationis*, point IV: Mészáros 1981, 21.

[33] PMKL, APHV, *Encyclicae provincialium*, 1734–1847: drafts of circular letters sent by the provincials to the members of the order, as well as those copies that circulated through the houses by post, to be read aloud and copied into the protocol books. For this study I used the protocol book of the Kecskemét house: *Archivum domus Kecskemétiensis, Protocollum Domus, 1758–1804* (hereafter cited as PMKL, APHV, ADK 1758–1804).

[34] PMKL, APHV, ADK 1758–1804, 173–174.

offered them a new kind of "hybrid" career.[35] Could the secular identity of the order be pressed still further? Two documents say yes. They show that the emperor's aim was not to abolish the order but to reorganize it. The first is a copy of the original German text, made by the Piarist scholar and archivist Keresztély Kácsor (1710–1792). The second is a Hungarian translation—though one that does not entirely capture the sense of the original. Both documents appear in a familiar source: the *Intimata Regia* volume of 1786.[36]

The content of the reform plan was startling. In effect, it aimed to turn the Piarist order into a state-run teacher-training institute—what the document bluntly called *"eine blosse Pflanzschule tüchtiger Lehrer"* ("merely a nursery of competent teachers"). Accordingly, the opening paragraphs declared that those unfit for teaching should be relegated to pastoral duties in the order's churches. From that point on, however, their upkeep was to come not from the order but from the Religious Fund, so that as many promising young men as possible could be admitted and trained as teachers. Those accepted were not to be encouraged to advance to higher clerical orders, since such steps would distract them from the teaching service. Anyone determined to become a priest would have to continue his studies in the new state seminaries at his own expense. The province was not to bear the cost.[37] A teaching order, then, stripped of its priesthood: the emperor's vision was unmistakable.

Some form of commitment, however, was still required. Candidates might be expected to take a vow—not of poverty or chastity, but of repayment.[38] If they left the order, they would reimburse the cost of their training. This logic stemmed from the plan to divert the order's endowments to the Study Fund, since they were to serve educational purposes in any case.[39] The draft also made explicit the separation of religious life from teaching. Only those rules valid for laymen were to be retained; the exaggerated monastic regulations were to be discarded. In general, members were promised better provisions and greater freedom. Better provisions, of course, came with advancement. Promotion was to be earned on merit. A good teacher might become rector, inspector, or provincial assistant; he

[35] Julia Riedel provides a detailed account of the minutes of the Court Study Commission, which record the emperor's demand that the Piarists "in the future should be assigned exclusively to teaching duties". Riedel 2012, 372.

[36] PMKL, APHV, *Intimata Regia* IV. 1786–1787, Angelegenheiten (no page numbers).

[37] PMKL, APHV, *Intimata Regia* IV. 1786–1787, Angelegenheiten.

[38] One of the most obscure parts of the document concerns precisely what kind of vow was expected...

[39] Although this plan was never realized, in embryo it already reveals the later legal disputes surrounding Catholic foundations. See further Fenyő 2003, 61.

would draw a decent salary and, in old age, enjoy a pension.[40] Thus the Piarist, once bound by vows, was to become a civil servant on tenure—his cassock exchanged for a contract.

The central question, of course, was this: if the priesthood were taken from the Piarists, what remained? The very name of the order carried a clerical stamp—*clerici regulares*, priests under rule. The abolition of ties with Rome, the curtailment of provincial authority, even the language decree—none of these was as radical as this transformation. From the standpoint of the state, full nationalization of the order and its conversion into a teacher-training institute might have been useful. But would such a body have attracted young men at the close of the eighteenth century? Who would join a "hybrid" Piarist community shorn of its priestly character?[41] Contemporaries never had the chance to answer. Joseph II abandoned the plan. Why he did so, and how the provincials responded to this attempted transformation—those are the questions to which we now turn.

One might expect the provincials of Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary to have rejected the reform outright and defended the religious character of the order. In fact, they thought otherwise.The Austrian provincial, for one, broadly accepted the points of reorganization—or at least voiced only the most cautious criticism. He especially welcomed the proposal that the state assume financial responsibility for the members' salaries and pensions. He further suggested that, while maintaining religious discipline, the "secular" teachers should take solemn vows (*vota solemnia*)—but never be ordained. For pastoral duties in the schools, however, it might still be useful—*with His Majesty's permission*—to ordain one or two men. However the future might unfold, the provincial closed his letter with a pledge: he would always support, and faithfully execute, the decrees of His Majesty.[42]

The Bohemian provincial likewise supported the introduction of state salaries for members of the Piarist order. For retired teachers, he asked that the state allow them to spend their old age within a Piarist community. Unlike his Austrian colleague, however, he questioned the emperor's restriction on admitting young candidates to higher orders. In his view, this would, in the long run, endanger recruitment—and thus indirectly reduce the number of teachers. More than that: the state would lose a reliable ecclesiastical ally. The Piarists, as he reminded the court, had "preached the Gospel with honor and spread Enlightenment at every opportunity."[43] If

[40] PMKL, APHV, Intimata Regia IV. 1786–1787, Angelegenheiten.

[41] "Yet Joseph II's plans for the exclusive employment of lay teachers failed. The modest salary, the disciplinary rules that had become especially rigorous under the emperor, and their constant enforcement deterred lay candidates, while the qualifying examination—tied largely to Latin—narrowed the pool of possible applicants." Ugrai 2014, 122.

[42] Quoted in: Riedel 2012, 375–376.

[43] "They proclaimed the Gospel with glory and on every occasion spread the

they were cast aside, the emperor would still have to replace them. Nor could one overlook the practical fact that schools required priests for the administration of the sacraments.[44] Another problem, as the Bohemian provincial wrote in his reply, was that many parents were deterred by the requirement that anyone leaving the Piarist vocation must fully repay the cost of his education. True, wealthier candidates might provide a cash deposit (*Kaution*), but the majority of applicants were poor and simply lacked the means.[45]

After consulting the Austrian and Bohemian provincials, the emperor also informed the Hungarian Piarists of his plans and asked their provincial for an opinion. Of the three replies, the Hungarian was the shortest and the least critical. He judged the reform points well considered, and noted that the order's chief mission—educating the young—would remain at its center.[46] He insisted that those already ordained in the order should retain that status. Like his colleagues, he stressed that retired members must be guaranteed a place in a Piarist house in old age. He further suggested that the restructuring should be accompanied by a new constitution—one acceptable to all and binding on all. As for remuneration (*Remunerationszahlungen*), he proposed steady increases after three years of service, confident that this would make the order more attractive to young men. Königsacker closed with praise for Joseph II's wisdom, which he declared would surely benefit both the state and the teachers alike.[47]

After receiving the provincials' broadly favorable replies, the emperor wrote with enthusiasm to Baron Gottfried van Swieten, head of the Study Commission:

"*My dear Baron Swieten! Since the educational institute under the Commission's direction has already achieved good results with the boys, I now wish to secure its continuation—especially for the training of the necessary teachers. For this purpose, I have already destined the entire property of the Piarist order, insofar as it is not reserved for pastoral needs. I also intend to extend this institution to the female sex [...]. All the other houses and communities mentioned above shall in future fall under the authority of the Commission, like the Piarists, and therefore must pay their full income and property into the Study Fund [...].*"[48]

Enlightenment.") Quoted in: Riedel 2012, 377.

44 Riedel 2012, 377.

45 Riedel 2012, 377.

46 In his wording: *„(...) daß der Haupt, und vornehmste Endzweck, warum wir in diesen Orden getreten, nämlich die Unterrichtung der Jugend ganz beibehalten wird."* ("...that the principal and foremost purpose for which we entered this order—namely the instruction of youth—will be fully maintained.") Quoted in: Riedel 2012, 378.

47 Riedel 2012, 379.

48 Quoted in: Riedel 2012, 380–381.

From the emperor's enthusiastic letter it is clear that he also wished to tackle female education and teacher training by the same method—state appropriation—he envisioned for the Piarists. Why, then, did he abandon the reorganization? The chief reason for this sudden change of course seems to have been financial.[49] Once the court obtained precise information on the order's property, the figures told an unpromising story. The 1787 report of the Study Commission to Joseph II hinted as much: the Piarists' assets were meager, barely sufficient to sustain their schools and hardly adequate for training new teachers. Absorption into the Study Fund, therefore, promised little profit.[50] A second obstacle lay in the nature of the reform itself. What kind of vow were the new teacher-candidates supposed to take? What would it mean in law and practice? How could discipline be maintained under such uncertain terms? Better, the report concluded, to leave the traditional religious vows intact. Its final recommendation was blunt: the Piarists should be left as they were, with their foundations and rules, while other means should be sought in future for training teachers.[51]

4. Another Ultimatum: The Fate of the Decrees

In 1790, through the Lieutenancy Council, the emperor issued yet another—and final—instruction.[52] After duly praising the noble vocation of the order, he turned to the question of how the provincial should be chosen. The ruling essentially confirmed the existing arrangement: the head of the Hungarian province was to be the provincial—not the Roman general—elected by the members of the order according to their old customs (*consuetudines*). The decree also restored the offices of provincial assistant and counselor, so that decisions might once again be taken with their participation.

On the final page there appears something like unspoken self-criticism: an admission that the order's discipline had slackened under the weight of reform. To restore the religious spirit of the Piarists[53]—by now nearly extinguished—and to ensure proper staffing of the schools, Joseph

[49] Already under Maria Theresa began the financial surveys of Piarist houses and schools, recording their capital, and the annual income derived from interest and revenue. PMKL, APHV, *Acta Provinciam Hungaricam concernentia*, 1741–1788.

[50] PMKL, APHV, *Fassiones collegiorum*, 1783–1788: this file contains the statements of property and income prepared for the Lieutenancy Council under the government of Joseph II. Riedel 2012, 381.

[51] Riedel 2012, 382–383.

[52] Below I provide a content summary of this: PMKL, *Intimata Regia* VI. 19549. 1789–1790.

[53] *"Insuper tam ad restabiliendum jam fere ex integro extinctum ejusdem Ordinis Religiosi Spiritum (...)"* ("Moreover, to restore the religious spirit of this order, which had by now almost entirely died out...").

II decreed that the rules of religious life and discipline be observed according to the Piarists' own *Regulae*, under the supervision of the provincial and the oversight of the diocesan bishops. As for the selection of future teachers, every effort was to be made to choose men who might also be trusted with positions of leadership.

Conclusion and Outlook

"Joseph, father of immortal deeds, is dead! Alas, dead!"
— Beethoven, *Cantata on the Death of Emperor Joseph II*[54]

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Piarist Dénes Katona (1782–1874) recalled in his autobiography[55] a childhood memory: as an eight-year-old in his village of Dercsika, he witnessed the public burning of the emperor's decrees. He could hardly have imagined that he would one day enter an order whose mentality had been so deeply shaped by the final decade of enlightened absolutism. Consider only this: the nexus decree remained in force so firmly that it was only partially rescinded at the beginning of the twentieth century[56]—and that only at the urging of Pope Pius X. Meanwhile, the Piarists, beyond their full religious support, drew state salaries for their teaching duties[57], combined with opportunities that made them privileged intellectuals of their age: higher education, the teaching profession, headmasterships, university chairs, publishing and textbook writing, even public service in the Study Commission of the Lieutenancy Council. Nor was this merely a Josephinian phenomenon. Already under Maria Theresa, one of the order's outstanding figures, Bernát Benyák (1745–1829), teacher and rector, openly criticized the *Ratio Educationis* and its prescribed textbooks in his reports, later directing sharp comments against Josephinist reforms as well. Paradoxically, the Lieutenancy Council rewarded him with further assignments in educational mat-

[54] The text was written by Severin Anton Averdonk (1768–1817), a Catholic priest.

[55] PMKL, *Religiosi*, Katona Dénes bequest.

[56] For more detail see: Endre Fekete, *A magyar piarista rendtartomány reformjára vonatkozó legfontosabb okmányok, I–III.* (The Most Important Documents on the Reform of the Hungarian Piarist Province, vols. I–III), 1906–1910.

[57] Its precise sum is difficult to determine in the era of the *Ratio* decrees, since those regulations do not specify details. According to a document of 1791—*Status Salarialis Gymnasiorum*—the highest salary was received by the rector (600 Ft), while the lowest went to the catechist (300 Ft), with the others falling in between. As the account books of Piarist houses from this period do not record members handing over their salaries to the rector, it is reasonable to assume they kept them for their own purposes—most often for books, as can be inferred from the surviving probate inventories. PMKL, APHV, *Status domorum* 1727–1848; *Regulae nostrorum* 1791–1847.

ters and raised his salary more than once.[58] Among his contemporaries we find equally colorful Piarists: Károly Koppi[59] (1744–1801), professor of world history at the University of Pest, a committed Josephinist, member of the *Lesegesellschaft*[60] in Pest, a Freemason[61], and rumored associate of the Martinovics conspiracy; Lipót Schaffrath (1734–1808), rector of the Piarist gymnasium in Pest, a censor, and master of the local lodge[62]; Celesztin Piller (1742–1821), rector of the Piarist school in Kőszeg, who allegedly organized clandestine gatherings in the house where freethinking texts were read and anti-clerical ideas discussed—at least according to the report of a county vice-comes[63]; and Remig Franyó (1762–?), a Piarist novice[64] admitted in 1781, later a teacher, remembered less for pedagogy than for a plot against Joseph II and the high treason trial that engulfed him until its resolution in 1795.[65]

After 1790 a fever of visitations and reforms gripped the state and ecclesiastical authorities—though not the Piarists themselves—all the way into the twentieth century. The aim was to "save" the Piarists from the very consequences that the state itself had, directly or indirectly, inflicted upon them. The Lieutenancy Council instructed Archbishop László Kollonich (1736–1817) to conduct a canonical visitation of the order and submit a report.[66] (One should recall that Joseph II had already placed the Piarists under the jurisdiction of both the Lieutenancy Council and the bishops.) The records[67] reveal striking details: some members were already living outside their houses among the laity—plainly incompatible with religious

[58] Takáts 1891, 186.

[59] More recently on Koppi's political reform program: Forgó 2025, 96–103.

[60] Doncsecz 2016, 340.

[61] Horváth 1940; Forgó 2010.

[62] Benda 1957, 446.

[63] A radically different view is found in another report. Quoted in: Benda 1952, 129.

[64] He must have left the order at some point, since he never took solemn vows. PMKL, Léh István bequest on departed novices.

[65] Sörös 1910.

[66] KFL, Ecclesiastical Governance Documents, *Ordines Religiosi*, Piarists, 1742–1862.

[67] Excerpt from a letter of the Lieutenancy Council: "Since until now, despite numerous decrees—even those issued under the highest royal authority—it has not been possible to compel the members of the Order of the Pious Schools who are residing dispersed in private homes to return to their own houses and there perform the duties proper to their vocation (...) every other member, whether on account of age, health, pension, annuity, or for any other reason remains outside the houses without an official public function, is henceforth obliged without further delay to return and to live under the rules of the Order, in common discipline and fraternal community." KFL, *Egyházkormányzati iratok*, *Ordines Religiosi*, Piarists, September 10, 1790.

life. The list could be continued, but that would exceed the scope of this study. What is certain is this: the forces eroding the religious identity of the Piarists did not vanish by the end of the visitation in 1815. Even the Hungarian national synod of 1822 still labored to restore discipline among the religious—without success.[68] The reforms had ended, the emperor was gone, yet the disintegration he set in motion outlived them both.

[68] On this see in greater detail *Az 1822. évi magyar nemzeti zsinat története* (The History of the Hungarian National Synod of 1822), as well as the document prepared by the Piarists on the national synod: PMKL, APHV, *Acta synodum nationalem concernentia* 1819–1822.