The Role of 18th Century Church Songs, with Special Regard to the Reforms of Maria Theresa

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Abstract

The study examines the gathering and application of church songs altered by the music decrees of Maria Theresa, an educated leader from the era of enlightened absolutism. We look at how religiosity transformed from Baroque to 'enlightened' beliefs. The enlightened person did not become an atheist; rather, they started to approach their faith through reason and practicality. They sought to understand their beliefs and integrate them into the everyday life. The church songs of that period were modified to mirror this change in perspective, creating a unique cultural-historical contradiction: Baroque lyrics and melodies were replaced, and the quest for rationality resulted in the widespread acceptance of trivial and simplistic lyrics, a trend that had not been observed before. Another significant contradiction, from an educational standpoint, is the Normaschulgesangbuch (Norm School Songbook) developed by Ignaz Felbiger. This book was extensively used in Vienna for many years and shaped the singing curriculum for generations, influencing the singing culture of elementary school students and future educators, ultimately impacting public taste in a way that lacks refinement. Changes in church singing practices took place not only in Southern Germany but also in Hungary. However, it is important to note that congregations were not willing to completely replace the singing repertoire, reflecting their inherent good taste, as only a few of the more popular songs remained in regular use. Many songs that were 'in vogue' during that time are still found in the songbooks of various denominations today. These songs are still beloved and are joyfully sung in our churches today, regardless of denomination.

Keywords: enlightenment and Christianity; musical education; church reforms; religious poetry; hymnal books

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Introduction

The paper focuses on 18th century musical education, which was in close connection with contemporary church music and singing. This is how Immanuel Kant, probably the philosopher with the greatest influence in his age, summarises the ideological basis of Enlightenment in his essay entitled "What is Enlightenment?" published in 1784: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Sapere aude! Dare to know!" This imperative by Horace became the motto of Enlightenment.

The Consequences of Enlightenment for Christianity

The importance and significance of Kant's work on European thought is indisputable (see more about this: Pukánszky 2002, 136–139) however, for deeply believing Christians, Enlightenment is a concept evoking painful associations. It first brings to mind the French Revolution, which degraded the Nôtre Dame Cathedral in Paris to the temple of the Goddess of Reason and sent pious monks to be beheaded under the guillotine, the "civilisational achievement" of the age. As for examples closer to home, we could mention the decrees issued by Joseph II (1780–1790) Hungary's 'king in the hat', which led to the opening of a casino in the monastery church of the Carmelite order in Buda, as well as his instructions regarding church music, which destroyed the one-and-a-half-millennium tradition of Gregorian chant (Dobszay 1999). Education, which, as we know, was primarily under ecclesiastical authority at the time, and was responsible for the teaching of music, which was the depositary of church music, underwent crucial changes.

The paper focuses on the changing repertory of songs and the reforms regarding church music, based on the decrees of Maria Theresa (1740–1780) because

- firstly, similarly to several other figures of the age of Enlightenment, this well-educated monarch believed that improving the standard of education was the solution for society's problems (Kéri 1996, 48).

- secondly, their influence can still be felt today: the customs of church singing changed not only in the Southern German region but also in Hungary. Several of the songs which became "in vogue" at that time can still be found in the songbooks of various denominations. They are popular even today and are joyfully sung in churches, regardless of denomination (Antonicek 1980).

The transformation of religiosity from Baroque to "enlightened" religiosity

Catholic historians of religion see the origins of the Enlightenment in the religious indifference that developed as a result of the 16th century schism in the Christian church, in the ideas of humanism, and in the new philosophical thinking defined by the natural sciences (Lortz 2012).

The two axioms of the Enlightenment, rationality and utility, brought about an unprecedented development of the sciences, and resulted in the formation of a more efficient economic structure. The increasingly accelerating social changes swept away the primacy of tradition as the basic orientation principle. The new way of thinking also changed faith itself as well as the way of relating to God. The enlightened person did not become an atheist, but began to orient himself in matters of faith along the principles of rationality and practicality:

- wanting to understand his faith,
- and wanting to make it daily practice in his life.

The spiritual father of enlightened Catholicism is considered to be the founder of Italian historiography, Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750). Already at the age of 24, he was the director of the Ambrosiana Library in Milan, and from 1700 until his death, he headed the Este family's archive and library in Modena. Muratori's diverse oeuvre mainly includes historical works, but he also conducted important source research on the Roman liturgy. He also dealt with the burning issues of the church of his time. In his writings on this subject, he advocated a more correct religious practice by adhering more strictly to the teachings of the church. Criticizing the excesses of Baroque religiosity, he emphasized the importance of tolerance and charitable activities. In his first work, *De ingeniorum moderatione in religionis negatio* (On Moderation in the Practice of Religion), published in 1714, he laid the ideological foundation for enlightened Catholicism:

- return to early Christian practices
- bringing religious ideas closer to real life
- connecting faith and practice
- using the mother tongue in the liturgy for understanding.

In his later writings, he also discussed the most pressing religious issues of the time: charity *Della carità christiana* (1723) and superstition *De superstitione vitanda* (1740). In his last work, he outlined the ideal of the welfare state *Dela pubblica felicita oggetto de buoni principi* (1749). (For more on thi, see Horak, 1991.)

Muratori's teachings were attacked by many, his enemies even accused him of heresy, but Pope Benedict XIV, despite disagreeing with several of his statements, acquitted him of all charges, and even called him "the light of Italian science". (Hollerweger 1976)

The popularity of Muratori's works is proven by the fact that they were quickly translated into German and his writings were read as spiritual books by the literate class. His most influential work, one on correct religiousness, *Della regolata divozione de' christiani* (1747) was first translated into German in Aschaffenburg in 1751, with the title *Die wahre Andacht des Christen*. The first Vienna edition of 1757 was followed by four more editions up to 1780, and its use in Hungary can be attested by the fact that the National Széchenyi Library also preserves a German-language copy. In the Southern German areas, this work was the second most important basic textbook for public education after the catechism.

The effect of Muratori - the religious heritage of Maria Theresa

Muratori had such close ties to the dynasty that he dedicated two of his works to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI, father of Maria Theresa. The Habsburg court, proud of its Catholicism, cherished valuable religious traditions. Emperor Rudolf I established the family's veneration of the Blessed Sacrament in 1264. Ferdinand II took the Blessed Sacrament to the battlefield, where his soldiers saluted it with trumpets and drums (Coreth 2004, 13).

For centuries, the most important feature of Habsburg Catholicism was the cult of Mary. In the fight against the Ottoman armies, Mary was considered the patroness of the Christian armies, and after the victory at Lepanto in 1571, several churches were dedicated to the "Victorious Mary", *Maria von Siege*. Ferdinand II gave his soldiers war banners decorated with the image of Mary and worshipped her as his "Generalissima", i.e. highest commander (Coreth 2004, 60. Cited by: Watzatka 2012, 355).

The Viennese veneration of Mary was introduced by Ferdinand II's mother, Maria of Bavaria, at the end of the 16th century. Ferdinand III had a statue of Mary erected on a pedestal on the Platz am Hof in Vienna, before which the inhabitants of the city regularly performed devotions. On March 18, 1647, on the eve of the main feast of St. Joseph, the betrothed of the Virgin Mary, a traditional Baroque holiday, he offered himself, his children, people, armies and territories to God and the Virgin Mary in front of this statue (Coreth 2004, 60).

Charles VI gave his daughter, Maria Theresa, a careful upbringing. The music playing king also instilled a love of music in his daughter, who had teachers such as Gottlieb Muffat and Georg Christoph Wagenseil, and often performed together with her father's beloved teacher, Antonio Caldara. Until her coronation, she regularly performed arias (Antonicek 1980).

Another defining feature of her personality is that she grew up in the traditions of the Habsburg House and was characterized by a deep religious conviction throughout her life. She prayed and fasted regularly, and often received the sacraments. Already at the beginning of her reign, there were courtiers around her who respected Muratori's teachings. The young queen not only accepted the new teachings, but what she found useful and correct in them, she implemented into her reign with a deep sense of responsibility in order to promote the moral and material well-being of the people she governed by all possible means. We also have her personal example before us: this energetic, purposeful person, for whom nothing was impossible, gave birth to sixteen children and raised ten of them.

Maria Theresa's Church Reforms

She issued decrees concerning the church from the beginning of her forty yearreign. Even though she was a well-educated musician herself, her interference with the issue of church singing was largely motivated by political and ethical reasons. She intended to mitigate the excesses of Baroque religious life by significantly reducing the number of church holidays, in great agreement with Pope Benedict XIV. On the other hand, she ordered numerous prayer times as well as praying and thanksgiving (*Te Deum*) church services. Arranging her prayer decrees in chronological order, we get the chronicle of the wars she waged during her reign (Hollerweger 1976, 63–65).

Her later reforms were openly in the direction of the Enlightenment and were alien to her personal religious practice. According to religious historians, their declaration was influenced by the special circumstance that from 1865 her son, Joseph II, participated in her decisions as co-ruler (Burger 2002).

On June 15, 1768, she approved the secret instruction for the construction of her state church system. It meant that thence, the internal affairs of the Catholic Church only consisted of the preaching of the Gospels, religious education, the ethical discipline of the priesthood and administering the Sacraments and the masses and other church services providing the framework for the above. The state claimed the right to oversee all the other activities of the church. The direct continuation of this trend was the Ratio Educationis, issued in 1777, the introduction of which does not constitute the topic of this paper. Suffice it to say that this was the time when institutional education first came under state control (Holik 2006).

Maria Theresa issued important decrees even in the years before her death:

- raised the age limit for ordination and vows to 26 years
- provided for religious asylum, and
- for religious tolerance.

In 1773, she dissolved the Jesuit order to eliminate the key role of Jesuit teachers especially in higher education and censorship, and to place these under the supervision of the state. Pope Clement XIV followed closely with his bull in 1773 (Valentné 2019). Many of his practical provisions continue to this day as natural established practice:

- funeral on the third day
- · age limit for ordination and vows
- replacing the coffin with a shroud in the church.

The influence of Lutheran religious poetry on the use of Catholic church songs in the 18th century

In the first half of the 18th century, religious poetry flourished in the Protestant areas of Germany. The religious poems of Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–1769) and Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803) opened a new era; the people loved

them and sang them as hymns in churches. (Giessler 1928) The poems also became popular almost immediately in the predominantly Catholic Southern German region. About two centuries after Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, this literary communication between the Northern and Southern German-speaking areas led to a new stage in the German language reform, which made the more elegant language of the Northern – mostly Lutheran – population into the literary language of all Germany. The religious poems of Gellert and Klopstock also inspired Catholic priest poets, and the reformed language made possible a more precise and lighter form of poetry (Watzatka 2012, 357).

"A significant part of the 200 songs of the Cantus Catholici¹ are adaptations of the 16th-century Protestant hymn poetry (verse psalms, praises, thanksgiving songs) ... and through further editions of this influential book – expanded with new pieces in 1675, 1703, 1738 and 1792 – it was the main guide to Catholic practice for about 150 years." (Dobszay 1999 55) István Bartalus was the first to deal with a more detailed analysis, processing and the domestic sources of the publication in his study entitled "The ceremonial songs of the Hungarian churches in the 16th-17th centuries" (Daragó 2015, 281).

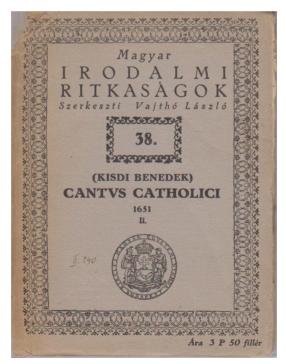


Figure 1 Reduced-size facsimile publication of Cantus Catholici. Source: László Vajthó (1935, editor): Rarities of Hungarian Literature 38. Budapest.

¹ Reduced-size facsimile publication: László Vajthó (1935, editor): Rarities of Hungarian Literature 38. Budapest.

In the Book of Psalms, this exhortation appears three times: "Sing to the Lord a new song..."², which was interpreted and adhered to literally during the Age of Enlightenment. In Southern Germany, the entire set of hymns was replaced. The first hymnbook that broke with Baroque traditions was published in Cologne in 1741. It was published by the poet Heinrich Lindenborn, who published 200 of his own new poems entitled *Tochter Sion*³ (Daughter of Zion). The songs were accompanied by notations, elaborated exclusively with new melodies and numbered basses. The songs, written in accordance with the new fashion, were so successful that they were published three times during the 18th century (Bäumker 1962, 67).

The Spreading of Catholic Religious Poetry and Hymn Translations in Vienna

In 1773, the Jesuit monk Franz Xaver Riedel published 156 metric hymn translations in Vienna entitled *Lieder der Kirche aus den römischen Tagzeiten und Meßbuche übersetzt*. He also included 57 new, fashionable melodies that were completely unsuited to church services. Despite this, some of Riedel's hymn translations became very popular and were included in later hymnals. It can only be assumed that the dubious value of this publication gave the Vienna consistory the impetus to take over the affairs of church singing. The consistory commissioned former Jesuit monk Michael Denis to prepare the new hymnal for the Vienna diocese. He was first a teacher of philosophy and later a teacher of literature at the *Theresianum* in Vienna, and after the dissolution of the order, he was the librarian of the *Theresianum*, then the royal court librarian and privy councillor. The following year, the *Geistliche Lieder zum Gebrauche de hohen Metropolitankirche bey St. Stephan in Wien und des ganzen wienerischen Erzbistums* (Spiritual Songs for the Use of the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna and the Entire Archdiocese of Vienna) was published in print (Vienna, 1774).

Denis composed 17 lyrics in the new religious spirit, but these did not contain notations as they were marked with *ad notam*, which meant that they could be sung to the tune of well-known songs. The majority of them were paraphrases of similar songs for similar occasions in the spirit of enlightened Catholicism (Horak 1991).

² Psalms 33:3; 96:1; 149:1, and even Isaiah 42:10!

³ The title of the hymnal, however, is still "truly baroque": "New songs for church and home, dedicated to God and the Lamb, showing the mysteries of faith and the church order, encouraging the sinner to repent, strengthening him with virtuous exercises and stimulating him to praise the Holy One. For the Daughter of Zion, who is wandering towards the heavenly Jerusalem on the threefold path of perfection... etc.

However, these popular tunes were relatively new, originating from the end of the 17th or the first half of the 18th century, and were mostly joyful, major tunes, which suited the new world-view and sense of life. Furthermore, the material of the song collection also reflects the new attitude in the following aspects:

- the ecclesiastical year was represented by songs for the most important holidays,
- the cult of Mary was restricted to only three songs,
- songs of the saints were represented by a single song: that of St. John of Nepomuk, who was the favourite saint of the age.

However, song for various occasions appeared:

- for rain,
- for good weather,
- during a time of great expenses and war,
- miscellaneous songs to be sung in all kinds of calamity.

The consistory distributed Denis's hymnal by every possible means.

"The consistory once again mentions on this occasion that, with the highest approval, already in 1774, the church hymns composed by Father Denis with melodies known to Vienna and the region were distributed to the people in all churches in no small number and free of charge, and their singing was ordered alongside the prohibition of the old hymns. Nevertheless, the fate of these hymns is such that the people have still not gotten used to them, although we have repeatedly called on the churches to put the old ones aside and introduce these new ones" – reads a letter dated October 8, 1781, which the consistory addressed to the Lower Austrian government.⁴

Maria Theresa's songbook published in 1776

Less than two years after the publication of Denis's hymnal, Maria Theresa had a notational hymnal published, entitled *Katholisches Gesangbuch auf allerhöchsten Befehl Ihrer k. k. apost. Majestät Marien Theresiens zum Druck befördet. Wien, im Verlag der katechetischen Bibliothek* (Catholic Hymnal, Printed in Vienna by the Highest Order of Her Imperial and Royal Majesty, Maria Theresa, Published by the Catechetical Library). Even though she was ordering increasingly radical church reforms at the time, it requires further research to reveal whether the publication of the hymnal was her own idea or she was pressured by Joseph II, who reigned as her co-ruler.

⁴ Vienna Diocesan Archives (Diözesanarchiv), marked Kirchenlied 1.



Figure 2 Maria Theresa's Notation Hymnal 1776

According to the table of contents, it contains 87 lyrics and 48 melodies. Its design is extremely practical, because the melodies are placed on fold-out double pages in the second half of the book, so you can read the lyrics on the left and the melody on the right at the same time. The lyrics and melodies provided are almost completely new. The two hymnals also differ in concept.

The primary purpose of Maria Theresa's hymnal was to maintain discipline during Mass, to ensure that the congregation would pay attention to the Mass and not engage in other devotions, such as the rosary, private prayer or reading spiritual books. Denis completely replaced the traditional baroque lyrics, but the connection to tradition was maintained through the familiar melodies. Maria Theresa's notational hymnal, by adding completely new melodies to the new lyrics, finalised the break with tradition. The effect of this is also evident in school singing lessons.

Lyrics of the "enlightened" church hymns of Catholicism

Although the poetic imagination, language use and creativity of the authors differ, and thus the quality and effect of the songs they compose also differ, certain characteristic features make an enlightened song text easily recognizable. Its specific characteristics are as follows: its main purpose is teaching, presenting and explaining the sacred mysteries, therefore the core of the song text deals with the theological expression of the mystery of faith related to the relevant holiday. While a baroque song text was little more than a declaration of love, for example: "Sweet Jesus, my love", "Sweet, Beloved Jesus, I want to love you", "Let me languish, let me melt...", the enlightened lyrics is like a religious lesson, with all its advantages – rationality, content – and disadvantages – emotional poverty, flat message. The part that stirs human emotions is usually absent from enlightened songs, and instead there is most often a moral exhortation that derives the responsibility of the believer from the grace received from God.

An excellent example of this is the song which begins *Dem heiligsten Dreifaltigkeit mein Leben*, also sung in Hungarian, the text of which is quoted in a literal translation by Watzatka from Mihály Szentmihályi's 1798–1799 hymnal:

1) To the Holy Trinity my life, / I offer my body, my soul.

/ I will praise Him/ and glorify Him: / Bless you, Holy Trinity, /forever one Reality.

2) The Holy Trinity is one in nature, / so, one power in three persons:

/ Father and Son, Holy Spirit are only one. / Bless you, Holy Trinity, /forever one Reality.

3) The Father created us out of nothing, / Heaven and earth were made for us by his power.

/ He is still alive, / sustains us in all our affairs: / Bless you, ... (Cited by: Watzatka 2012, 361).

Denis completely replaced the Baroque or traditional lyrics, but the songs remained connected to the tradition by the well-known tunes. Marie Theresa's notation songbook (1776) presented completely new tunes to match the new lyrics, thus completely severing the connections to tradition. The influence of this is also obvious in music teaching in schools (Bäumker 1962).

Even after two centuries, it is still a mystery for church historians why the editor of Marie Theresa's songbook had ignored Denis's sophisticated poetry and preferred poems by Ignaz Franz (1719–1790), a vicar of Silesian origin, along with others by unknown authors. It would be interesting to find out the reason for the Monarch's decision particularly because in some of Franz's poems, the reader is shocked by their simple-mindedness and triviality already in the first line (Watzatka 2012).

For example:

Da wir nunmehr gehört die Messe, wie man soll / We have attended mass, as is fit...

Ich geh aus meinem Schlafgemach / Going out of my bedroom...

Ich glaube fest und zweifle nicht / I believe strongly and doubt not ...

Zum reinsten Opfer ruft die Pflicht / Duty calls for the purest sacrifice ...

Several similar examples could be listed. These lyrics reveal an apparent cultural historical contradiction: it was precisely the pursuit for rationality and common sense that allowed the silliest and most trivial lyrics to spread widely. It attests to the good taste of churchgoers that only a few decent poems from Franz several volumes remained in use for a longer period, whereas Denis's songs were sung for over one hundred and fifty years. Ignaz Franz also had a direct effect on the music teaching of the age. This prolific poet not only composed songs to fill several songbooks [in his rather primitive style], but also had a good relationship with Johann Ignaz Felbiger, who invented and constructed the system of norm schools. The norm school complex was an educational institution consisting of several branches which, according to the 1777 *Ratio*, had to be organised in the seat of every school district. The educational profiles of the branches created a complex education and training system. The branches were the following:

a) primary school;

b) teacher training branch;

c) drawing school: young people and citizens working in the guilds that took part in the training were taught technical-industrial drawing or artistic painting and graphics, and teacher trainees were taught calligraphy and board drawing;

d) music school: those participating in the training and teacher trainees were taught church singing and (organ) music.

As future teachers had to be trained to teach singing in elementary schools, Felbiger compiled a set of songs for school use from Franz's poems called *Normaschulgesangbuch*, (Norm School Songbook) (Pelesz 2019). This volume was in use in Vienna for decades and provided the songs and lyrics to be taught at schools for generations. Unfortunately, this collection of songs determined the musical culture of elementary school pupils and future teachers and through them, public taste, in a way that could hardly be called sophisticated (Daragó 2015).

Tunes in the Hymnal of Maria Theresa

The hymnal, published by decree of the Empress, does not bear the date of publication, nor the names of the editor or the composers. Since the hymnal contains numerous adaptations of lyrics that already had melodies attached to them, it is likely that they were not created by a single author. At the time the hymnal was completed, the position of conductor of the court orchestra was held by Florian Leopold Gassmann (1729–1774). According to some assumptions, he may have been the editor (Watzatka 2012, 363).

The identity of the composers is an important but, to date, still unanswered question because the melodies are new, with two exceptions.

One of the old melodies is the medieval melody of *Christ ist erstanden* (Christ is risen...), the other is a chorale from the Lutheran hymnals, beginning as *Herzlich thut mich verlangen*⁵ (I desire with all my heart...) or *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* (O Christ's head with many wounds...) It is known as the lead chorale of Johann Sebastian Bach's St. Matthew Passion.

⁵ The melody of the chorale was composed by Hans Leo Hassler (1564–1612). It can also be found in the folk song collection "Holy, O Lord!" with the beginning "The bright face of God...". See in this Appendix.



Figure 3 Notation from Maria Theresa's Hymnal

The Hymnal contains settings for two female voices and continuo, and most of them were composed in major tonality. The instrumental-like music is dominated by eighth and sixteenth values. The musical structure of the hymns is not homogenous. However, the singing voices generally move parallel in third and sixths intervals, the voices end accidentally by five- or six-note chords. This decreased use of polyphony and the melismatic, more song-like melodies of the voices and its ornaments obviously refer to the gallant style. The suspension at the end of the passages is also a typical musical gesture. The style of the hymnal is also not homogenous and does not reflect any kind of ecclesiastical (not to mention liturgical) manner. (Watzatka 2006)

Conclusions

The church reforms of the second half of the 18th century, and particularly the reforms of church music, closely related to them, were conceived in the spirit of enlightened absolutism. The customs of church singing changed not only in the Southern German region but also in Hungary. Several of the songs which became "fashionable" at that time can still be found in the songbooks of various denominations. These songs are popular even today and are happily sung in our churches by the congregation, regardless of denomination.

The two axioms of Enlightenment, reason and utility affected the people of the age in a way that they did not become atheists but started to orient themselves along the principles of reason and practicality also in the matters of belief: they wanted to understand their belief and make it an everyday practice in their lives.⁶

Interference by the musically educated monarch with matters of church singing was motivated by political and ethical reasons rather than by aesthetic or musical sophistication. Nevertheless, people were not receptive to the replacement of the entire set of songs either in Austria or in Hungary. New lyrics were welcomed, but traditional tunes were often preferred to the new ones. Aggressive reforms were opposed almost everywhere, but those remaining in touch with the traditions were accepted. Lyrics by Denis, which touched spiritual depths, were preferred to those by Franz, which rhymed but were too simplistic and naïve and only became popular with norm-schoolers.

It is interesting to note that some well-crafted songs by Ignaz Franz immediately became popular and have remained so until today in German-speaking areas, such as *Herr, ich glaube, Herr, ich hoffe*, (My lord, I believe and hope ...), as well as a *Te Deum* in verse; *Großer Gott, wir loben dich.*

With some additions, these songs comprise the basis of the set of songs that determined church singing from the end of the 18th century for the next one and, at some places, even up to the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, they also determined the teaching of music and singing in the Hapsburg Empire as well as in Hungary, which constituted its part.

However, the presentation of songs from this era that are still popular today and their adoption into the Hungarian practice will be the subject of a subsequent study.

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⁶ However, these two axioms not only passed on the importance of the role of singing to the people of the time, but there are also abundant interpretations of this in later centuries, both in terms of individual and community life. (cf. Ladnai 2021)

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Appendix



Figure 4 The bright face of God...



Figure 5 O Christ's head with many wounds...