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Radio Maria Transylvania: National Representation, Prayer, and Intersubjectivity in a Growing Catholic Media Network

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MEDIATING CATHOLICISMS

Studies in Aesthetics, Authority, and Identity

ARTICLES

- Mathew N. Schmalz / Overview & Acknowledgements
- Eric Hoenes del Pinal, Marc Roscoe Loustau & Kristin Norget / Introduction
- Gloria Bell / Competing Sovereignities: Indigeneity and the Visual Culture of Catholic Colonization at the 1925 Pontifical Missionary Exhibition
- Eric Hoenes del Pinal / The Promises and Perils of Radio as a Medium of Faith in a Q'eqchi'-Maya Catholic Community
- Marc Roscoe Loustau / Radio Maria Transylvania: National Representation, Prayer, and Intersubjectivity in a Growing Catholic Media Network
- Kristin Norget & Margarita Zires Roldán / Saints, Mediation, and Miracle-talk: The Señor de los Milagros in Lima, Peru

MARC ROSCOE LOUSTAU

Radio Maria Transylvania: National Representation, Prayer, and Intersubjectivity in a Growing Catholic Media Network

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INTRODUCTION: NATIONAL REPRESENTATION ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

We are living through a period of immense expansion and creativity in the field of mass media production that is reshaping Christians' identities and global imaginaries. Anthropologists have taken note of this trend and generated numerous studies of Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal/Charismatic Christian media products and institutions.¹ The Catholic Church's recent contributions to the mass media field, with some exceptions, have received relatively less attention from social scientists.² Yet over the last thirty years, Catholics have founded several new media networks and one of these, the World Family of Radio Maria, has grown so fast that it now has local chapters broadcasting in over sixty countries.³ The Radio Maria branch serving Romania's Hungarian-speaking Catholic population was founded in the mid-2000s just before I began research in the Ciuc Valley, a Hungarian and Catholic enclave in Transylvania.⁴ Like the World Family of Radio Maria, Radio Maria Transylvania has grown rapidly from a staff of three volunteers operating a single station broadcasting twelve-hours a

- 1 See Martijn Oosterbaan, "Mediating Culture: Charisma, Fame, and Sincerity in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil," in *The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism*, eds. Simon Coleman and Rosalind I.J. Hackett (New York: NYU Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814772591.003.0009>. Martin Lindhardt, "Mediating Money: Materiality and Spiritual Warfare in Tanzanian Charismatic Christianity," in *The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism*, eds. Simon Coleman and Rosalind I.J. Hackett (New York: NYU Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814772591.003.0008>. Rosalind I.J. Hackett and Benjamin F. Soares, *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). Birgit Meyer, *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
- 2 Andreas Bandak, "Problems of Belief: Tonalities of Immediacy among Christians of Damascus," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 77, no. 4 (2012): 535-555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2012.728024>
- 3 See <http://www.radiomaria.org/about-us..>
- 4 Katalin Balázs, "Mária Rádió, A Szűzanya ajándéka," *Krónika online*, April 10, 2016, <https://kronika-online.ro/eklezsia/maria-radio-a-szuzanya-ajandeka/print>. Ferenc Szatmári, "Az erdélyi Mária Rádió tizedik születésnapjára készülve (1.)," interview by Silvia Bereczki, *Vasárnap: Katolikus Hetilap Online*, April 3, 2016, <https://vasarnap.verbunkiado.ro/14-szam-2016-aprilis-3/2334-panorama/4326-az-erdelyi-maria-radio-tizedik-szueletesnapjara-keszuelve-1>. Ferenc Szatmári, "Ez a Rádió Csak Szeretből működik: Látogatóban az erdélyi Mária Rádió nagyváradi stúdiójában," interview by Judit Oszváth, *Keresztény Szó*. May 5, 2011, https://epa.oszk.hu/00900/00939/00127/keresztenszo_EPA00939_2011_05_05.html.

day to a staff of ten full-time employees and five hundred volunteers with multiple stations offering twenty-four hours a day programming.⁵

In this article, I will examine the relationship between two distinct practices of storytelling that are a prominent part of Radio Maria Transylvania's public discourse: Storytelling about the founding and rapid growth of Radio Maria Transylvania and narrative prayer requests to the Virgin Mary for assistance. In the first section, I perform a symbolic analysis of the network's origin narrative as it appeared in major Hungarian-language Catholic publications between 2005 and 2010. I show that Radio Maria's administrators liken their work to representing the Hungarian national minority's needs before the Vatican, which they construe as a powerful international bureaucratic authority. Implicitly, these stories point back to the post-World War I peace negotiations as a historical trauma.⁶ In Hungarian public memory, delegates to the peace conference brought maps and statistics showing Hungarians' population distribution throughout the region that were supposed to back up delegates' claim that the post-War Hungarian state's borders should be large enough to include these groups. According to this narrative, the international powers summarily ignored this evidence. They drew a new map that left large Hungarian-speaking populations as minorities in newly created or expanded successor states like Romania.⁷ My analysis therefore does not simply construe Radio Maria Transylvania's founders' discourse as symbolic meaning-making that facilitates an intellectual grasp of the events that produced this new media network. Rather, I follow anthropologist Michael D. Jackson in arguing that storytelling works "at a 'protolinguistic' level, changing our experience of events that have befallen us by symbolically restructuring them."⁸ Radio Maria Transylvania's administrators describe the network's origin as a reversal of the fortune that befell both the post-War Hungarian state's representatives as well as the entire Hungarian nation.

5 Szatmári, "Az erdélyi Mária Rádió."

6 Géza Jeszensky, "Trianon, az európai tragédia," *Magyar Szemle* 14, no. 5-6 (2005): 7-24.

7 Gábor Törke, "A 'vörös térkép' árnyékában," Hungarian National Archives, June 2, 2014, http://mnl.gov.hu/mnl/ol/hirek/a_voros_terkep_arnyekaban. Ignác Romsics, "Hónapokig rajzolgatták a trianoni határokat száz évvel ezelőtt," accessed July 17, 2019, https://foter.ro/cikk/20181206_honapokig_rajzolgattak_a_trianoni_hatarokat.

8 Michael D. Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14-5.

Radio Maria Transylvania's administrators both reinforce their position as leading representatives of the Hungarian nation and also authorize a notion of the global Catholic Church as an institution responsive to statistical and scientific evidence.

In the next section, I introduce and provide social context for the collection of listeners' petitions to the Virgin Mary that I subsequently examine in this article's third and fourth parts. I use several ethnographic vignettes to situate the practice of narrating petitionary prayer between two Catholic Church- and state-sponsored practices of cultural creativity. On the one hand, the Catholic Church has often encouraged devotees to publish prayers about their family life as a way to involve them personally and financially in emerging devotional initiatives like new saints' cults and shrines.⁹ On the other hand, a state-sponsored revival of "traditional Transylvanian Hungarian culture" has encoded a bourgeois gender ideology that insists family problems belong to a "private sphere" and should not be discussed with "outsiders."¹⁰ In the third and fourth sections, I analyze examples drawn from my own collection and Radio Maria Transylvania's online archive of prayers. Radio Maria Transylvania hosts a twice-weekly prayer request program during which devotees call and recite their prayers on the air. Radio Maria Transylvania also invites devotees to publish prayers through an online form at <https://www.mariaradio.ro/imaszandek/>. I examine texts published on the Radio Maria Transylvania web site between 2011 and 2015, which I accessed and analyzed beginning in 2013. It is true, as many historians and anthropologists have noted, that listeners directly contradict neither the Church's nor the traditional culture movement's gender ideology. However, looking for such a categorically oppositional stance can actually obscure a nuanced and sensitive understanding of how devotees use prayers to draw unexpected conclusions and create subtle but significant distinctions.

9 Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

10 Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400843008>. Krisztina Feherváry, "American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a 'Normal' Life in Postsocialist Hungary" *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 67, no. 3 (2002): 369-400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184022000031211>. Krisztina Feherváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2013).

Acts of petitioning powerful others for assistance on behalf of a family are central features of Radio Maria Transylvania's storytelling—on behalf of a national family in the case of the network's origin narratives and a natal family in the case of prayers to the Virgin Mary. The trope of representing the family and the existential experience of objectification—becoming an object acted upon rather than an author of one's own story—therefore stands behind both these distinctive forms of narrative practice. In addition, these storytelling practices help construct Radio Maria Transylvania's predominant view that its fate as an organization is dependent on relations with other institutional actors and their practices of delegation and representation, a view that dovetails with related notions circulating in Transylvanian Hungarian communities that institutions are the major social actors in the global social field constructed by the Catholic Church. Taken together, these narrative practices provide an account of how Radio Maria Transylvania's programming shaped the identities and global imaginary of its listeners during the period of its rapid growth.

NATIONAL MASTERY PLAY ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Ferenc Szatmári, a Catholic layperson and leader in a group promoting devotion to the Virgin Mary of Medjugorje, founded Radio Maria Transylvania in 2003. In his accounts of the network's early days, Szatmári describes a personal narrative arc from skepticism to enthusiasm mediated by a sense of service to the Hungarian national community—a calling to use this position to represent Transylvania's Hungarian Catholics on an international stage.¹¹ Szatmári's first introduction to the World Family of Radio Maria was inauspicious. Two network representatives paid an unannounced visit to his group's headquarters. A colleague asked him to take the meeting by saying, "Some people are coming from some radio thing to see us and I don't want to be alone."¹² He then admits that, at first, "I did not take the whole thing too seriously." But then he participated in one of the World Family of Radio Maria's international congresses where he saw countries as far afield as

11 Szatmári, "Ez a Rádió Csak Szeretből működik."

12 Szatmári, "Ez a Rádió Csak Szeretből működik."

Africa and Asia “representing themselves.”¹³ When he agreed to take on the role of president, but with a condition that implied how he viewed Transylvanian Hungarian Catholicism’s relationship with the Vatican:

I told them I would take on the role, but only if we could establish either two separate radio stations—one Romanian and one Hungarian—or one with two equal amounts of Romanian and Hungarian programming. They blanched at this, but I had come equipped with precise statistics showing denominational and national distributions. I explained everything to them. They understood and agreed to support the station.¹⁴

Szatmári takes pride in the forethought that he demonstrates in predicting his hosts’ ignorance about the population and distribution of Transylvania’s Catholics. In Transylvania, there are more Hungarian-speaking Catholics who practice the Latin-rite Mass than Romanian-speaking Catholics who use the Eastern- or Greek-rite Mass. In Romania as a whole, Hungarian-speaking Catholics outnumber Romanian-speaking Catholics. Brubaker, et. al document numerous instances of Transylvanian Hungarian minority intellectual elites using statistical representation to represent the community’s needs before state and international institutions. Establishing parallel ethnic cultural institutions was also a primary desideratum in these cases.¹⁵ Szatmári came prepared to defend his national minority community’s need for equal representation and financial support with these statistics organized as documentary evidence. The fact that he successfully persuaded the World Family of Radio Maria’s Vatican officials sends the message to readers—some of whom might be skeptical in the same way that Szatmári once was—that they should have confidence such bureaucratic reason is authoritative in the emerging media institutions of the global Catholic Church.

Lurking behind Szatmári’s account is Hungarian intellectuals’ desire to redress a sense of historical injustice from the period following World War I. A staple of

13 Szatmári, “Az erdélyi Mária Rádió.”

14 Szatmári, “Ez a Rádió Csak Szeretből működik.”

15 Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox and Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 149-52.

contemporary Hungarian public memory is a story about the post-War peace negotiations in which Hungarian delegates brought scores of maps and statistical information—including one document now known infamously as “the red map” (*a vörös térkép*)—describing the geographic and numerical distribution of the Hungarian national population.¹⁶ Nationalistically-minded commentators bolster public estimation for this evidence by describing it as the accomplishment of a large team of researchers who worked under challenging conditions to produce a masterful collection of statistical information. In the words of one journalist, “The Hungarian delegation traveled to the peace negotiations in January 1920 carrying a comprehensive and detailed collection of material of surpassing scientific quality.”¹⁷ Such high estimations underscore the callousness and lack of concern on the part of the victorious Allied powers: “The negotiators took no notice whatsoever of either the map nor any of the rest of the excellent Hungarian scientific data.”¹⁸ Many Hungarians today point to this story as evidence that international negotiators rudely disregarded their concerns and even discounted, demeaned, and disempowered them. Szatmári’s story turns the tables on this narrative that so-often reminds Hungarians of their impotence on the world stage. Unlike the tragic Hungarian heroes of the post-War peace conference, Szatmári is able to successfully mobilize evidence testifying to Hungarians’ presence in Romania. By recounting a story that follows the path of a well-known model only to result in an unexpectedly positive outcome, Szatmári’s account of Radio Maria Transylvania’s origin is an example of what Michael Jackson calls storytelling as “mastery play.” Mastery play is a typical response to traumatic experiences, Jackson writes, in which the authors of games—like the authors of stories—“rework and remodel subject-object relations in ways that subtly alter the balance between actor and acted upon.”¹⁹ Szatmári’s story ultimately makes himself, as a representative of the Transylvanian Hungarian national minority, into an effective player in the World Family of Radio Maria’s bureaucratic decision-making. By doing so, he strikes a subtle and negative contrast between the Catholic Church and the secular international community that moved on from

16 Törke, “A ‘vörös térkép’ árnyékában.”

17 Törke, “A ‘vörös térkép’ árnyékában.”

18 Törke, “A ‘vörös térkép’ árnyékában.”

19 Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling*, 16.

the post-War peace negotiations to form the League of Nations, an organization whose descendants are today's United Nations and the European Union. If these organizations ignored and forgot Hungarians' representatives, the Catholic Church will pay attention to Szatmári and Radio Maria Transylvania.

PETITIONARY PRAYER AND THE HUNGARIAN CULTURAL REVIVAL

Bourgeois European populations have long sought to prevent the public airing of private familial conflicts, resentments, and disagreements—an inclination rooted in the early modern establishment of hegemonic distinctions between self-controlled bourgeois and libertine aristocratic and working-class populations.²⁰ Today, the movement to revive traditional Hungarian culture in Transylvania—a movement driven largely by bourgeois cultural activists and intellectuals—takes the lead in popularizing and authorizing these overlapping discourses about class, family, and public/private spaces. In the Ciuc Valley, grade-school teachers were some of the most avid consumers and producers of traditional Hungarian culture. Educators were often eager to teach me about traditional “local idioms” (*tajszavak*), but their definitions often revealed more about themselves than the world they were trying to describe. During one conversation with a group of teachers, they tried to illustrate the definition of an obscure rural Hungarian slang term I had just heard: *bütürmec*. They laughed together as they explained that this derogatory word—the equivalent of “crude” (*durva*)—could be used to describe a drunken village man who stands around watching his children fight in the street while others look on. In addition to this word's meaning, two other things came across via this vivid illustration. First, these urban bourgeois intellectuals' interest in reviving Hungarian traditional culture served to distinguish themselves from the libertine rural working classes. Second, my friends also seemed to harbor a profound fear of admitting that they had experienced or one day might have to experience something like this.

More than just a subject for joking, elites sought to actively discipline others to keep familial discord private through their various leadership activities as organizers of traditional cultural festivals and programs. No experience illustrated this

20 Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 44.

disciplinary activity more clearly than an exchange between family members I observed one evening as I accompanied a village group to the valley's carnival celebration (*farsang temetés*), a highlight of the annual government-sponsored festival cycle. The group's leader was a high school art teacher in the Ciuc Valley's largest city. Although the teacher began the bus ride home by taking over the bus driver's microphone and leading us in prayer, he spent the rest of the trip standing in the aisle leading traditional folk songs on his violin. At various points, a young man, big and burly in his late teens, stopped by my seat to make conversation and offer swigs of plum brandy while also trying to persuade me, and anyone else who would listen, to get off the bus early for a party he had heard something about. During one of his visits to my seat, I learned that his younger brother and mother were also on the bus, while his father was at home, but was only in Transylvania for a short time while he waited for word from an acquaintance about a construction job in Hungary.

Twenty minutes later, when we arrived at the village where the party was taking place, the young man turned aggressive as his mother and younger brother followed him off the bus, urging him to continue home. At one point, he had his younger brother in a headlock and struck him while the mother and others were shouting, "Stop! Stop!" At various times, people called to the art teacher for help, but he remained in the back of the bus. Either he did not hear them or he did not want to, because he continued playing music and did not acknowledge these hails. Finally, after about fifteen minutes, the mother and younger brother gave up and we pulled away, leaving the young man to attend the party. The younger brother and mother remained visibly upset for the rest of the ride home, involved in quiet conversations about what had transpired on the side of the road.

When I related this incident to other acquaintances, they agreed that the art teacher's behavior had been consistent with his belief in keeping family problems private. I never met this family again, and thus have no way of knowing if the mother ever called on the Virgin Mary for help in moments when, as hard as she might try and as much as others might ask her to, circumstances prevented her from abiding by the dictum that such problems be kept in the family. But when I heard women

call in to Radio Maria and describe situations like this one—families stressed by labor migration, alcohol consumption, and aggression—I often thought back to that night beside the bus, and wondered if she was one of these women who were asking Virgin Mary to help them inhabit a lifeworld in which they were forced to publicly air familial conflicts.

RADIO MARIA TRANSYLVANIA'S PRAYERS BEYOND THE MODERN PILGRIM

The first thing that becomes clear, on reviewing petitions published through Radio Maria, is that anthropologists' efforts to erect a distinction between "religious" and "secular" pilgrims, no matter how much "epistemological clarity" it provides for researchers, is an artificial construction that has little bearing on the practice of Radio Maria Transylvania's listeners.²¹ For some scholars, secular travelers are defined by their preference for handwriting anonymous notes in shrine "intention books." Religious pilgrims, in contrast, extravagantly narrate their experiences and relationships with divine beings.²² The problem with mapping anonymity and performance onto the categories of secular and religious is that anonymity is first a pragmatic and situated tool by which people intersubjectively construct lives and worlds before it is an abstract scholarly category. Participants in Transylvania Radio Maria's prayer request program often insist on voiding their anonymity by announcing their identities and their hometowns on the air. For instance, during the February 25, 2011 prayer request program, "Renáta Mihály from [Csík]szereda [Ro.: Miercurea Ciuc]" offered a prayer for, among other people, "My dead father; for myself so that I can keep to a good path; [and] for my mother's health so that she can take care of the family."²³ Devotees frequently name deceased friends and relatives on whose behalf they are offering prayers, much like surviving family members announce the anniversaries of relatives' deaths in newspapers.²⁴ When

21 Peter Jan Margry, ed. *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World New Itineraries into the Sacred* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 30, <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089640116>.

22 Margry, *Shrines and Pilgrimage*, 25-6; Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*.

23 For other examples of remembering the dead in this way, see the prayer from "A Mother from Csík [Ro.: Ciuc]," on February 15, 2014 for "my deceased love." Teréza Srepler, on February 16, 2014, names in her prayers for the dead, "József Orosz, his son Géza, and Pál Srepler."

24 See also, Szilvia Lukács, February 24, 2014, from Csíkdánfalva (Ro.: Dănești).

devotees provide the full names of those on whose behalf they are praying, they are also inviting listeners to pray for these devotees in need.²⁵ The Virgin Mary's petitioners are especially keen to name friends and family members who have been hospitalized, often as a way to help the ill feel less isolated and alone. On March 21, 2014, Valéria Szőcs asks for prayers for Klára Bogos who had recently been hospitalized, and requests that other devotees also pray for her recovery.²⁶ Sándor Csegöldi, from Marosludás (Ro.: Luduș) prays: "For my dear wife's improvement. She is sick and tied to her bed. Please say a prayer together so that she will recover her ability to speak and to be relieved of her suffering."²⁷

Not only are devotees willing to shed their anonymity when they pray, whether they call, email, or text message, they are hardly the isolated individuals that appear in the typical scholarly accounts of "modern" European pilgrimage. Devotees often speak directly to the specific people they are praying for since they expect that these people are listening to Radio Maria Transylvania and praying to the Virgin Mary at that moment. A caller on January 6, 2011 asks the Virgin Mary to "hear my daughter Erzsike's prayers. Please, I ask you, Virgin Mother, change her family situation. We, the listeners of Radio Maria, will be praying together with my daughter." Ibolya writes in an email on January 13, 2011 asking Mary to support "those who are praying for me." It is especially typical for mothers and daughters to exchange prayers back and forth through Mary, as in the case of a caller on January 13, 2011 who announces, "I would like to greet my mother with all my prayers, Beáta Gulyás, who is listening to Radio Maria at this moment. From her

25 See also, Gabriella Ferenczi from Csíkszereda (Ro.: Miercurea Ciuc), March 7, 2014, who offers a prayer for the members of her Rosary group and her grandmother.

26 March 10, 2014. See also Erzsébet Benkő's prayer for her children, "Piroskáért, Mancika és Nándor, for their health and peace," from Görgényüvegcsűr (Ro.: Glăjărie), March 17, 2014. Devotees will give their own names if they feel they are the ones in need of Mary's help. Anna Bugja from Csíkszereda (Ro.: Miercurea Ciuc) wrote in to the web site on February 22, 2014 to "offer this reading for myself." Births are also joyous occasions on which devotees often offered prayers in their own names. Mónika Keresztes from Csíkmenaság (Armășeni) gave thanks to Mary for, "last but not least our soon to be arriving child with which the Virgin Mother and God blessed us."

27 July 13, 2014.

daughter Erzsike in Csik [Ro.: Ciuc].”²⁸ Mary’s devotees often expect that their acquaintances, friends, and neighbors will recognize their voice when they call to offer their petitions to Mary, even when they do not name themselves. One devotee told me that her goddaughter recognized her voice when she called the radio station while her husband was having surgery and began praying right then and then. These new forms of religious practice at the Csíksomlyó pilgrimage site are not so much a vehicle for modern individuals to be left alone in order to find meaning in their lives, but rather the prayer requests establish ties of reciprocity and systems of favors and debts that endure and bind devotees to each other and Mary over time.²⁹

This sense that devotees are bound together with Mary through long-term reciprocal exchanges of prayers and intercessions is especially clear when they choose or feel obliged to remain anonymous, since many expressed the conviction that Mary already knows their needs, desires, and problems. “A Listener” from Balán (Ro.: Bălan) begins her petition on February 20, 2014 by addressing Mary: “My dear Virgin Mother, you already know what kinds of problems I’m struggling with, take me into your grace and give back my soul’s peace.” This conviction is helpful when devotees are struggling with a difficulty that is especially shameful or embarrassing, allowing them to anonymously ask for help without having to unduly discomfit themselves when greater harm might come from such disclosure. Far from pilgrims who are surreptitious or silent because they are ashamed to talk about the “religious dimension,” what comes across from reading such prayers is devotees’ pragmatic oscillation between concealment and revelation effected within the context of intersubjective relationships with divine and human counterparts.

28 Devotees expect and know that people will be praying for them and thus involved in events in their lives. They often send serial prayer requests: Mária in Switzerland offers this urgent prayer on July 17, 2014: “I would like to prayers tomorrow for my sister-in-law for the Virgin Mother to help her and that her operation should be successful.” The next day she writes, this time in all capital letters, “I would like to this current Rosary for my sister-in-law who is being operated right at this moment. I ask for the Virgin Mother’s help.”

29 Margry, *Shrines and Pilgrimage*, 22.

GENDER, WORK AND ILLNESS IN PRAYERS TO THE VIRGIN MARY

It is a commonplace observation among scholars of gender in Eastern Europe that religious groups have led the charge for a “re-traditionalization” of gender after the fall of socialism.³⁰ Transylvanian Hungarian Catholic writers deploy the Virgin Mary to send the same messages as religious elites elsewhere in the region. For instance, they often say that women are betraying the nation by refusing to bear more children and that women should leave the workplace to focus on motherhood.³¹ While it may be true that Radio Maria Transylvania’s listeners do not directly confront, contradict, or question these messages, looking for such a categorically oppositional stance—often referred to as “resistance” to religious elites’ power—can actually obscure a nuanced and sensitive understanding of how devotees use prayers to draw unexpected conclusions and create subtle but significant distinctions. Devotees’ prayers about work help illustrate this point. The Virgin Mary’s female devotees ask for help for their husbands and sons as they search for local jobs, often in the hopes of avoiding labor migration that could disrupt family

30 Anya Bernstein, *Religious Bodies Politic: Rituals of Sovereignty in Buryat Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 99, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226072692.001.0001>.

31 Gal and Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 28-33; Brubaker, et. al, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*, 297-300. See also Michelle Rivkin-Fish, “From ‘Demographic Crisis’ to Dying Nation: The Politics of Language and Reproduction in Russia,” in *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth Century Russian Culture*, eds. Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 151-73. Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 139-142. An article in *Sunday* provides the occasion for a priest to comment on the special responsibility that mothers have to Transylvanian Hungarians: “The most painful point of the Hungarian folk is that they are not bearing children, the blessing of children, so much anymore....I wanted mothers to sense how responsible they are for the nation....” The article appears in the May 11, 2011 edition of *Sunday*. Father Dénes Incze uses his weekly column on morality in the February 26, 2012 edition of the Catholic weekly magazine *Sunday* to cajole his female readers to have more children by quoting a common saying: “One is none. Two are few. Our people will only begin to multiply at three.”

routines and reciprocities.³² In these cases, women pray also for their husbands and sons to be spared from workplaces that maim and leave bodies broken and wounded. For instance, I. Balog, on February 18, 2014, asks that her son Norbert, find a “well-paying, accident-free job.”³³ When young men find work abroad, women do not ask that they come home or blame them for leaving. Rather, they pray that Mary remain with them and protect them from harm. Marika from the Gyergyó (Ro.: Gheorgeni) valley asks for a prayer for “my children who are working in foreign countries...Protect their everyday activities with your mantle, Mary.”³⁴ Finally, Emese, writing from London on April 6, 2014, offers that day’s Rosary to the Virgin Mother, “For our health and that we have work.” Whereas Csaba Bőjte and other elites use petitions to Mary to reprimand female devotees when they ask for help so that their male relatives find employment, women like Emese turn the idiom of the devotion to their own uses, sidestepping Bőjte’s efforts to turn them into reviled examples of disordered desire and improperly dependent relationships with the saints. Their prayers to Mary allow them to become one of a large group of women who struggle with the same reality of poverty, joblessness, insecurity, and loneliness. Women praying to Mary for their distant loved ones or giving thanks for their own jobs while living abroad become agents of mutual

- 32 For examples of devotees praying for men to find jobs, see Melinda, February 13, 2014: “And for the Virgin Mother, help us all and my husband to succeed in finding a job.” “An anxious mother” from Márosvásárhely (Ro.: Târgu Mureș), February 20, 2014: “I ask for a prayer for my son who is in big trouble because he is without work. Please, God, help him to find work.” János from Székelyudvarhely (Ro.: Odorheiu Secuiesc) asks God to help him “find a job during these difficult times.” March 18, 2014.
- 33 “I. Balog” is given as the residence for this entry, with the name, “A Mother.” However, since I. Balog does not correspond to a place name in Transylvania, but rather resembles a common name, I have included it as the devotees’ identifying information. February 18, 2014.
- 34 February 15, 2014. See also Babi from Csík (Ro.: Ciuc) writing on June 6, 2014: “I offer all my prayers today for pilgrimage, for the Pope, for my children living abroad, for their spiritual and physical wholeness...Jesus and the Virgin Mother of Csíksomlyó and every saint of God please come to our aid!” On February 17, 2014, “Listener” from the Sepsiszentgyörgy (Ro.: Sfântu Gheorghe) offers that day’s Rosary to Mary so that she will “protect my little son who is far away at work.” Erzsébet from Csík (Ro.: Ciuc) asks for a prayer for her grandson, “Who is working abroad and struggling with many problems. Virgin Mother, help him!” February 24, 2014. An anonymous devotee from Márosvásárhely (Ro.: Târgu Mureș) writes, “I would like to give thanks for the grace that my son has arrived in a distant country. Continue to help him make a life for himself where there is faith.” March 3, 2014. Ildikó from Gyergyóditró (Ro.: Ditrău) asks for prayers “for my husband working abroad.” March 27, 2014.

understanding and laudable champions of an institution—Radio Maria Transylvania—that has the support of the Catholic Church’s hierarchy in Rome.

What becomes clear from reading devotees’ petitions is that there are distinct differences in the way devotees and elites engage with the Virgin Mary, with the result that anthropologists ought to use caution when assuming that religion contributes to “re-traditionalized” gender messages after socialism.³⁵ Where Catholic elites hold up Mary as the ideal woman and use this idealized picture to request that women give up jobs to have more children, female and male devotees often ask Mary to help female kin find work. On November 24, 2013, Eva Lukács from Temesvár (Ro.: Timișoară) asks Mary for an “appropriate workplace for my daughter.”³⁶ Edit from Csíkszentkirály (Ro.: Sâncrăieni) asks Mary to ensure that she safely delivers her first child and that, afterwards, she is able to “keep my job.”³⁷ On February 25, 2014, Zsolt from Miercurea Ciuc asks Mary to help his wife successfully complete an “entrance examination for a job.” Finally, Mary is petitioned not just for any kind of work, but she is asked to provide quality employment, as in the case of Mária, writing on March 17, 2014, who asks for “a good job for my daughter.” Petitioning Mary for a daughter, sister, mother, or wife to find quality work helps devotees avoid the moral approbation of Catholic elites.

Devotees often turn to Mary with their worries about relatives suffering from addiction to alcohol, giving voice to concerns that the Transylvanian Archdiocese does not dedicate significant resources and priests rarely speak about from the pulpit. Although alcoholism can be a shameful experience for family members and something that many of my acquaintances tried to keep from me, Radio Maria’s

35 Bernstein 2013; Dunn 2004; Krassimira Daskalova, Caroline Tomic, Karl Kaser, and Filip Radunovic, eds. *Gendering Post-Socialist Transition: Studies of Changing Perspectives* (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2012).

36 February 14, 2014.

37 See also the prayer from Julia in Csíkszereda (Ro.: Miercurea Ciuc) on February 26, 2014: “I beg you, my Virgin Mother, help against wicked and bad people and allow me to keep my job. Give me patience and health in these difficult times. Keep away everything bad. Thank you.” “A Listener,” writes, “I ask a prayer for health, peace, and so that my mother will find a better job. Thank you very much.” March 4, 2014. Zsuzsa from Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc) asks Mary to “sustain my job” on March 9, 2014. Kinga from Sepsiszentgyörgy (Ro.: Sfântu Gheorghe) asks for help in “finding a workplace” on March 11, 2014.

listeners often provide significant identifying information in their prayers, thus suggesting that they want their relatives who have this disease to be publicly recognized. A devotee who identifies herself as Éva Karda from the village of Csíkszentdomokos (Ro.: Sân Dominic) asks Radio Maria's listeners to pray "for my husband to be freed from drink and for my entire family."³⁸ The prevalence of prayers dealing with a father-in-law, uncle, or cousin's alcoholism indicates not only the way in which illness brings together extended families in the Ciuc valley, but also the way in which the corrosive effects of illness radiate outwards through these same networks. On March 24, 2014, an anonymous devotee, most likely a young man, asks for a prayer for "my girlfriend's father who is an alcoholic. I ask you, Lord, help him free himself from the temptation of drink."

Mary is frequently asked to help relatives confined to hospitals by illness, and the ways in which devotees call on Mary in such settings provide an alternative intersubjective account of religious change in a global setting. Prayers publicized through Radio Maria also deal with hospitals and healing, with devotees often petitioning for help to avoid such institutions or for strength to persevere during extended treatments. On February 18, 2014, Mónika from Brassó (Ro.: Braşov) asks Mary to ensure that her daughter, Emőke, "does not to go back into the hospital again."³⁹ "A Five Year-Old Girl," who did not provide a residence, asked on February 19, 2014, "Please, I ask everyone to pray a little bit for my mother, that her eye heals with medicine and that they don't need to operate on her." Prayers for safe and healthy births are a recurring concern for devotees.⁴⁰ Mary often mediates between medical professionals and devotees, deviating the power of the former when it seems that treatments are exacerbating an illness. "I am Piroska Szabó

38 See also Veronika from Kézdivásárhely (Ro.: Târgi Secuiesc) who asks God to "heal my sibling from the slavery to drink and to return to a good path." February 19, 2014.

39 For other prayers on behalf of the sick, see "A Listener," from Sepsiszentgyörgy (Ro.: Sfântu Gheorghe), February 17, 2014: "I would like to offer this week's worth of Rosaries and Masses for my sick husband, so that the Virgin Mother heals him. Thank you."

40 On February 19, 2014, "An Everyday Listener" from Csíkszereda (Ro.: Miercurea Ciuc) offers Rosaries for "my soon to be born child."

from Csíkszereda (Ro.: Miercurea Ciuc),” one devotee introduces herself on July 12, 2014,

I would like to ask for a prayer for my healing [*gyógyulásom*] because I have had muscle weakness for seven years and this most recent moment has not been the best due to some strong medications and bad thoughts. Even my eyelids have begun to droop. Recently I have been well and then suddenly I was again attacked by bad forces and I’m not well. I’m asking for this prayer for my release [*szabadulás*] and for my brain to be cleansed.

Chronic and recurrent illnesses like the one Piroska is suffering from are Mary’s purview, and thus this petition is also example of the way the Mother of God is often present amid devotees’ deepest despair, loneliness, and isolation.

When death is inevitable, Mary helps devotees face this reality while still maintaining hope for diminished suffering. On March 26, 2014, Julia from Sepsiszentgyörgy (Ro.: Sfântu Gheorghe) offers a prayer for her father, “Whose tumor was discovered just recently and day by day is getting worse. I ask, dear Lord, be kind and don’t make him suffer but rather call him to you as soon as possible.” And after a loved one’s passing, Mary is given thanks for reducing the agony of a death that could have been much worse: “I have recently asked multiple times for prayers for my grandparents in their suffering,” a devotee named Anna writes on March 23, 2014, “I would like to thank everyone and the dear Lord, because they both passed after a relatively short period of suffering.”

First, it is difficult to argue that the public profile of the Szekler Transylvanian Hungarian minority is comparable to a “fortress” in light of the publicly circulating prayers offered by many devotees who live abroad. In the six-month span from January to June 2014, devotees offered prayers to Mary from Israel, Austria, Holland, Denmark, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, England, the United States, Canada, Ireland, Italy, Germany, and the generic “Across the Ocean,” (*tengerentúl*). But beyond their far-flung places of residence, what comes across powerfully on reading these prayers is the way in which Mary is invoked: Mary is most often asked by her devotees to *heal*. Listing her residence as Switzerland, Emese offers a Rosary to the

Virgin Mother of Csíksomlyó, “for the healing of my one-year old son, for the health of my loved ones, and for myself.”⁴¹ On February 28, 2014, Judit Merket, writing from Holland, offers her gratitude to Mary for answering her prayer: “I would like to offer this Rosary out of gratitude for the grace I have received, for my children, for my husband’s mother, sibling, and his family. For the healing of two illnesses.”

As these prayers also suggest, Mary is instrumental in helping families lessen the pain of distance and mend the relational bonds that are often stretched to the breaking point by separation. Mary provides this kind of healing by keeping distant relatives present in the lives of devotees: “I would like to offer this Rosary for my family, my husband Ervin, my mother, my bother István, [and] my husband’s parents and siblings,” writes Emese from London, “I ask you, Virgin Mother, to give health and peace to our family.”⁴² And because sudden health crises put even greater stress on familial relationships, these are often the moments when Mary is called upon for help: András in Germany offers this petition on May 5, 2014: “I would like to offer the following prayer for my family. May the good Lord give health and endurance while I am far away from them and please let my wife’s medical tests be successful.” On June 5, 2014, “Gerti” in Germany names “my dear aunt Anna who was always helping so many people” and asks the Virgin Mother of Csíksomlyó to intervene in her healing after “yesterday’s serious accident.”

Although the prayers of parents who are residing in Transylvania often express a sense of sadness when they see their children changing into people they do not recognize, the prayers of parents who have moved to Hungary or further abroad

41 April 10, 2014.

42 The date for this prayer is April 7, 2014. See also Erzsike writing from Germany, March 27, 2014: “Thanks be to my Virgin Mother! For the fulfillment of my petition!!! I continue to ask my Virgin Mother to intercede with the Holy Son and to bring our petitions before him. Protect my children, parents, us, and my siblings from sickness and trouble. May there always be love and understanding between us. May we be able to help and love each other with pure hearts! Thank you, my dear Virgin Mother, for your intercession. We feel your power very much and that you are beside us. Thank you very much!!!” K. Z. writes from Italy on May 2, 2014: “I thank you. I thank you for everything, our good Father. I ask you to forgive our sins and help us day by day to be better. Thank you for letting me reach this year and continue to give my life meaning. Help me keep to the true and the good and defeat my temptations.”

sometimes convey a sense that their children's transformation under the influence of these places is an even greater betrayal and rejection. Anna Ázbe, writes from Sándorfalva in Hungary on July 4, 2014, "Dear Virgin Mother, I ask that you return all three of my adult children and my grandchildren to the true religious path, because I raised them to be religious but unfortunately the contemporary world has ruined them." "A Listener" from Germany asks for Mary's help and protection so that, "with the help of my prayers, my child will be able to change and live a life pleasing to God."⁴³

Like prayers for the sick, petitions that bind devotees together across national borders speak to the way Mary helps devotees sustain profoundly intimate relationships, which, in this case, is a need made harshly urgent by distance and separation: Judit from Márosvásárhely (Ro.: Târgu Mureș) asks for prayers for the Lakatos family in Toronto to "save their marriage which is in crisis. My dear Virgin Mother and every saint," Judit continues, "be intercessors in heaven and help this marriage heal, since both sides are suffering and their seven year old child is suffering the worst harm."⁴⁴ Labor migration puts distinctive pressures on adult women when they are apart from their children during critical rites of passage. Today, women working abroad ask Mary to be there for their daughters as they give birth for the first time. Ildikó calls on Mary from Israel on July 4, 2014:

I would like to ask for a prayer for well-being and health for my parents, for my three children's health and happiness, for my daughter's soon-to-be-born child, and for my own health and protection, that the Virgin Mother and the good Lord should help and protect us from evil in the midst of this great distance, so that we can meet my parents and children in health and well-being, if the time comes to return home.

43 The date for this prayer is February 17, 2014. See also "A Soul," writing from an unknown location, March 11, 2014: "I ask for intercessory prayers for conversion and proper, good thinking in the lives of my two sons, my daughter, and my grandchildren." Magdi from Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc), March 18, 2014: "I would like to ask a prayer for my cousin Szilveszter and Antal my nephew. My dear Virgin Mother, help them find the right path and give them strength to support life."

44 See also "An Everyday Listener," April 25, 2014, writing from Germany: "I ask with my prayers today for the Virgin Mother's help and protection for a former colleague who is in the Csíkszereda [Miercurea Ciuc] hospital. I ask for her speedy healing and recovery."

As in this prayer, Mary eases the uncertainty of not knowing when or even whether one will return to one's kin. Mary is also there for her devotees as they struggle with needs and desires at the end of their loved ones' lives. The Mother of God takes the place of distant relatives at hospital bedsides, and later tends to the pain of those who cannot attend wakes and funerals. "A Listener" from Germany asks for prayers for her daughter living in Transylvania, "whose little baby died" on March 12, 2014. On March 31, 2014, Margit Urszuly offers this prayer from Sweden:

I ask for prayers for both my godmother's passage into heaven and at the same time for my aunt who is just today making her final journey. Because of the great distance, I cannot be there next to the coffin, but I ask the true God and the Virgin Mother to reward her for everything, for every loving moment of care-taking. May her tired body rest and her soul come before the Savior. May the Lord give solace to her loved ones and wipe away the tears of their pain.⁴⁵

Mary helps her devotees turn departed loved ones into memories of loving-kindness. And she remains beside her devotees when they cannot attend the rites of passage that are so critical to the process of being able to adapt to a changed world after the death of kin.

The act of petitioning a powerful other for help is a central feature of Radio Maria Transylvania's public discourse. The media network's founders and administrators justify their position as representatives of the Transylvanian Hungarian national community by describing their success petitioning powerful Catholic officials on behalf of the national family. Their storytelling is a form of "mastery play" and reverses Hungarian representatives' powerless presence at the post-World War I peace negotiations. The network's Transylvanian founder recounts a similar case in which he needed to persuade bureaucrats about Hungarians' presence in Romania

45 See also Magdolna Fodor's prayer from Sweden, April 6, 2014, "I would like to offer this Rosary for my brother Antal's passage into heaven. May the good Lord give him eternal rest." Terézia György, writing from Ireland, remembers her deceased grandparents in Gyergyóremete (Ro.: Remetea) on March 29, 2014. The Czumbil family in "Freising-Germany" commemorates the death of "our brother-in-law János Bíró, who passed from among us a week ago." May 26, 2014. Dalma writes from Manchester writes on August 7, 2014: "I pray today's Rosary together with Radio Maria for my beloved friend's passage into heaven who died yesterday at 2:30AM after a long suffering. May God give her rest and comfort to her family. I ask the Virgin Mother of Csíksomlyó to offer our sister Katalin into her holy Son's grace."

and their need for a separate Hungarian Catholic media network. Like before, he used statistics and documents to make his case. This time it worked; he won the Vatican's financial support for a Hungarian-language Radio Maria network in Romania. Radio Maria Transylvania's listeners also use the trope of representing the family to a powerful other. They describe various existential experiences of objectification—becoming an object acted upon rather than an author of one's own story—including unemployment, illness, and being apart from family members during important life cycle events. This symbolic device and process of becoming a narrative subject unite the two storytelling styles and lends Radio Maria Transylvania's overall public discourse an overall orientation and existential direction.

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