

SEATING ORDER IN THE CHURCH AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION IN SLOVAKIA¹

Seating order at the public events (social gatherings, amusements, church services, etc.) is one of the external reflections of social differentiation of inhabitants in the Slovak localities. More advantageous and prominent seats were occupied by people who were esteemed for their property, education, prestige or function they fulfilled in the parish. Poor people, immigrants, physically or socially handicapped and other for various reasons socially disparaged people occupied less advantageous seats further out from the centre of happening. In this paper we will pay attention to the seating order in the church.²

In Slovakia the period and method of stone church construction is related to the adoption of Christianity and its propagation from upper strata to peasant inhabitants. Since the 9th century at first princely, lords' or monastery churches were built. According to the edict of the Hungarian King Stephen I. (1000–1038), 10 villages (*villae*) should jointly build a church and support the priest. The first large communal churches had been built in the early 12–13th centuries and majority of churches in Slovakia was built until the 18th century.

Churches, as meeting places for worshippers and as few suitable spaces, served also for judicial and profane convocations, for elections to the municipal councils and inauguration to secular functions. Fortified churches, which during wartimes provided the people refuge and protection and were used as military fortresses, are also well-known.

Churches were built on the central site in the parish, lengthwise in the east-west direction (later and particularly in towns this requirement was dropped for space reasons). Ground plan of a church was divided into a sanctuary to which a room for the priest was affiliated (*presbytery*) and a nave (*basilica*) assigned for the worshippers. The nave could be later enlarged by further naves or chapels. Since the early Middle Ages lofts for higher social strata were built that promoted the issue of spatial closeness to the altar, as well as to God (the more in the front or the higher a man is, the closer to the altar or God he is). In gothic municipal temples the lords and very often also the town councillors moved into the enlarged *presbytery* and the male or boys choirs occupied the released lofts.

At first people used to stand only in churches, however, since the 15th century there are records that firm benches were installed in the nave (*Bardejov*, *Levoča*). Mainly in suburban and protestant churches, where rich donators contributed to the

¹ This paper is based on the results of research realized in connection with preparation of the *Ethnographic Atlas of Slovakia*, and which were evaluated in the study of Z. Apáthyová – Rusnákóvá. The paper also comprises examples from my own research in the suburban villages of Bratislava and Gemer that document the state of art in the first half of 20th century.

² Under seating order in the church we understand the division of the church space and its utilization for sitting or standing by the church service participants.

construction and furnishing of churches, donators assumed the right to sit on places they "bought" and which were considered heritable.

In village churches primarily anthropological aspect was applied in the seating order. In general, the space was divided according to the relevancy to genders into male (to the east, i.e. closer to the sanctuary and altar) and into female (to the west, i.e. to the entrance of the church). In places where this division was not applied, the nave (or naves) of the church was divided into the right, male side that was considered positive, and into left, female side that was considered negative. Also vertical division was applied dividing the church into male upper part of the church, assigned mainly for men of young and mature age and into female lower part of the church, assigned for women and partly for old men. Dividing the church space into the front space, closer to the altar and used by men and into the back space, more distant (or vice versa) is exceptional.

Second anthropological aspect applied in the seating order was the principle of age. In Catholic churches the youngest children and pupils used to stand closest to the altar. This was based on practical reasons – they could be attended by the adults and priests during the divine services, as well as on the Christian symbolism about the closeness of children to God.

When growing older, the individuals with the whole group of the same age moved into rear parts of the church, while they were strictly maintaining the principle of different sexes and segregated seating/standing of men and women. When they reached full age, their positioning in the community of worshippers was influenced also by other aspects. It was their marital status, social rank and prestige, which resulted from their economic status, from fulfilment of certain functions in the community or from a prestigious job, etc.

Small girls and boys used to stand separately in front of the altar and after they were admitted among the mature youth (or after finishing school), according to the spatial possibilities in the church, they were moved further in the rear part of the church, or they exchanged the occupied sides. By that was the change of their status among the young people made more visible in the local community. If there was a chorus loft in a church, the boys after being admitted among lads were placed there. They were sitting/standing either alone in a group next to the married men, or opposite to them. Most frequently a rule to provide them a place which would enable a good view of mature girls was respected.

Maidens used to stand in rows arranged according to age from the youngest to the oldest. An unmarried young woman went after several years to stand/sit with married women or to the rear part of the church. She wrapped a scarf around her head, however, she remained to wear a free braid of hair without a bonnet. A bachelor used to stay longer among lads and after several years he was sometimes even their representative – the leading bachelor of lads as one of the most experienced. When he was forty or fifty he went to sit among men.

Before the wedding of an engaged couple and during the public banns in the church various customs were applied. These were mainly related to the fiancée and the fiancé. The fiancé usually having special signs on his garment (e.g. feathers). The fiancée had also certain signs on her garment and a special head decoration (crown, garlands). The engaged couple sometimes missed out the first of the three prescribed

banns, sometimes they left out all of them. Future bride could have an important place among maidens of her age or stood in front of the altar, or she could stand symbolically on the borderline between maidens and young women or she as first in front of the maidens. It reflected a symbolic esteem of the future mother, who should ensure continuation of the clan.

After they got married, the young women took place right behind the maidens: they stood in several rows between the benches or (depending on the size of a church) along the walls. A new young bride stood always on the first place in front of the young women. With each additional wedding and arrival of young women/brides she kept moving more and more backwards until a seat in the bench on the female side of the church was vacant. This usually happened only after the birth of her first or several children.

A single expectant mother was not allowed to stand anymore among the maidens. In localities around Bratislava it used to happen that when her girl-friends noticed her pregnancy they drew back and created in the middle of the church crowd an empty circle. Upon that signal the maiden went to the rear part of the church, to the aspensorium or to some disgraceful place. In some churches the priest told her to do so in front of all worshippers. A lad did not bear the consequences of his unmarried parentage.

Women of full age - housewives and older women - used to sit in benches and as they were growing older, they moved backwards. The oldest women and widows used to sit in the last bench (hence it was called a "widows' bench"). In some localities the widows' place was in the entirely rear part of the church under a staircase leading to the choir loft or among poor women and beggars at the church entrance. Up-keeping of their seating in benches depended on their property and social status.

Interleaving of the age principle with the property status and social prestige can also be observed regarding men. In some localities the first bench in the male part of the church was called the "parish judge's bench" and besides the village head also the municipal officials and notable representatives of the parish (a notary, doctor, teacher, shopkeeper, etc.) used to sit there.

The above mentioned rules are only general and each locality adjusted the seating order according to local situations and to the available space in the church. They referred mainly to the rural environment. They did not apply in localities where the worshippers contributed to purchase of the church inventory and thus had "their own" family benches which were then heritable. This prevailed mainly in Protestant and in Calvinist churches (as well as in town). In some cases neither the segregated seating of males and females nor the age principle were observed, as the first benches were occupied by the oldest worshippers (for all that such bench was called also a "graveyard" bench) and people moved backwards to the youngest ones. It was justified virtually by weaker hearing of the oldest people. In addition, the benches used to be arranged spoke wise towards the pulpit or ceremonial table (in Protestant churches) located in the middle.

People of higher social status used to have special seats. They were situated closer to the altar along the wall according to the lengthwise axis of the church. It used to be a small gallery or a bench for earls, squires or yeomen, sometimes with a shelter and even with doors. Exceptionally it used to be an elevated patronymic bench

at the rows end in the church. On the other hand the poorest people and beggars, regardless of age and sex, had their place located at the church entrance. There the worshippers could present gifts for them and the more merciful ones take some of them home for dinner on greater feast-days. Marginalised members of the local community: physically or mentally impaired and lonely people, shepherds and the poorest ones had their place next to them.

Distinctive places were given to various craftsmen and people with various occupations. In some localities of Gemer a part of the choir-loft was assigned for miners (after decline of this occupation this place was occupied also by various craftsmen). In craft towns the members of the most numerous crafts had reserved "their own" galleries, and where they did not have them, on Patron's day they gathered under their patron's statue.

Similarly, special seats were assigned (benches close to the altar) to the church officials and their family members: parson's mother and cook, wife of the teacher – organist, parish clerk and his wife, church curator and so on. Privileged seats were assigned also to young people, who more than the others participated in dignified and ceremonious course of the church service and church ceremony. So-called "first maidens", who tidied up and decorated the church, stood until their marriage in the first row in front of the others. So-called "first lads", who assisted the priest in church service, stood in the sacristy.

CONCLUSION

There are many variants how to make visible and manifest the local social differentiation at the divine service in churches. They were determined by to socio-economic situation in the respective locality (and the entire society) and last but not least also by the size and spatial division of the church. From the ethnological point of view it is interesting to follow how in the respective localities the basic principles of the seating order were infringed under the influence of proprietary, status, prestige or moral views. However, for such analysis case studies are more suitable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APÁTHYOVÁ – RUSNÁKOVÁ, Zora

1999 Znakový systém – sonda do charakteru ľudovej kultúry (na základe kostolného zasadacieho poriadku). *Etnologické rozpravy 1*. 37–75.

BAGIN, Albin

1977 Kresťanské kostoly a baptistériá. in: *Kresťanská archeológia. Učebné texty. Rímsko-katolícka cyrilometodejská bohoslovecká fakulta v Bratislave*. Trnava– Bratislava.

BOTÍK, Ján – SLAVKOVSKÝ, Peter

1995 *Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska*. vol. 1. Bratislava, VEDA (entry *obec*: Podolák, J., p. 412; entry *kostol*: Komorovský, J. – Halmová, M., pp. 256–257)

ŠKOVIEROVÁ, Zita

2000 Sociálna diferenciacia a život v gemerských lokalitách v prvej polovici 20. storočia. *Národopisný zborník 13*. 36–49.