

## Laudation

on the occasion of bestowing the  
JUSTITIA REGNORUM FUNDAMENTUM AWARD  
on

Parish priest

JÓZSEF LANKÓ

József Lankó was born in Kurd, in county Tolna, in Hungary. The local parish priest recommended that the cognitively gifted boy, who has been an altar boy since he was young and “who always hung around in the environs of the church”, should continue his studies after the local primary school in a church high school. The bishop of Pécs, József Cserháti, encouraged him to choose the Franciscan grammar school in Esztergom. The experience gained here determined his approach and his subsequent career fundamentally.

He decided to choose the priesthood in the last year of the grammar school, therefore, after his high school graduation, he immediately sought entry into the seminary of the diocese of Pécs, however, the bishop allowed him to continue his studies in the Budapest Academy of Theology due to his good academic results. In the faculty of theology, a company was soon formed, whose members were intensively interested in innovations, learning about all branches of church life, for instance, the “bokor” (bush) base communities as well as the “underground life of the church”. József Lankó left Budapest with the belief to build a church, mainly through small communities.

In 1980, he was ordained by the bishop of Pécs, but, he had already travelled through the diocese by motorbike in the preceding year in order to see where there was a great need for a chaplain. Finally, József Lankó began his ministry in Siklós, where he did his pastoral ministry beside the old chaplain, helping him with the nine, mostly extremely disadvantaged, villages in addition to the town. This period was the period of experimentation: he had tried several methods with enthusiasm and love on the path to the children’s soul so successfully that in the following year he also gave religious instruction to an adult group in the parish. The work with this community means a very influential experience in his life: “...they were more than thirty, among them illiterate old women as well, many of them did not understand Hungarian, either. I had to find a way of how the Gospel becomes absorbable and good news for them.”

In 1987, after seven years of service as a chaplain, he was placed to the parish of Nagyharsány, then in August 1989, he could move to Alsószentmárton, with 1.200 inhabitants, 3 kilometres from the Croatian border. Since he became one of the promoters of the pastoration movement from the second half of the 1980s, in June 1990, the bishop Mihály Mayer appointed him for the priest responsible for the Roma people of the parish.

József Lankó, as he says, “came with the trouble in the region”. When he got to Siklós, almost everybody went to work within a hundred kilometre radius. Roma and non-Roma people met each other every day, new family relationships were formed, the workers also got ahead financially. Just after had moved to Alsószentmárton, in 1990, the state employment jobs ceased after each other, as a consequence of which the local Roma people became unemployed in a number never seen before.

Nevertheless, the uncertain social and economic circumstances did not discourage the priest; they rather gave him new strength and sense to his mission. He talked about this in an interview as follows: “Most of my colleague priests have never had the opportunity to start spreading the Gospel simultaneously as the local church begins to build. In addition, doing all this in another culture, as Jesus preached to the poor. Accidentally, I just chose that for my slogan, “...to proclaim good news to the poor...(Luke 4:18), yet I had no idea then about that I was going to be placed here.”

His pastoral ministry is also determined by this slogan and spirituality. Ministering to a community living almost entirely in extreme poverty, the majority of them being Roma and assisting them socially went hand in hand. In addition to preserving individuals' dignity and contributing to form personal life path, József Lankó always paid particular attention to community building as well.

In addition to his daily pastoral work, he took part in establishing the Gandhi Roma Grammar School, then, in 1996, together with Tibor Derdák sociologist and the priest of the Bishopric of Paderborn responsible for the Roma, he established the Collegium Martineum Dormitory for Gifted High School Students. The institution situated in Mánfa near Pécs was one of those few institutions that assisted children suffering from multiple disadvantages, mainly of Roma origin, in receiving quality high school education and high school graduation. The principle of the institution was to ensure that student living in dormitory go on with their high school education not entirely in minority classes, but they should graduate from high schools under integrated educational conditions. Owing to the lack of adequate funding, after twelve years, in 2007, the institution was closed.

St. Martin Caritas Foundation was established in the spring of 2000 with the mission to ensure an institutional background to the social, charity and community development activities that had worked successfully for years, and to extend its programs to other settlements of the South Baranya County with multiple disadvantages, mostly inhabited by Roma people, expanding and enhancing these programs. Their programs were organised around three regional centres: Alsószentmárton, Kóros, Gilvánfa. In addition to the services and programmes in certain villages, several programme elements are operated that go beyond the borders of certain sub-regions, for example the mobile legal aid services are used by several neighbouring settlements as well.

In addition to this, seven years ago, St. Martin Caritas Foundation could build one of the finest public educational institutions of Baranya County, St Martin Kindergarten, capable of receiving almost 100 children, from EU funds. The institution maintained by the Catholic Church, with its pedagogical methods, concept and communication with the families has a unique integrationist and community developing impact in the settlement as well as in the region. In addition, the Foundation also maintains study halls in Alsószentmárton, Kóros, Adorjás, Magyarmecske, Gilvánfa and family day care in Old and Nagyfalu.

In connection with the operation of the institutions, József Lankó said in an interview: “A kindergarten and an after school centre cannot be operated by commands. They work well only if everybody considers it his own business and understands what is going on in the others.”

The priest also helps the needy with food distribution through the Foundation. For almost twenty years, “Providence's Kitchen” was operated in the parish, however, in recent years,

they also managed to equip a professionally run kitchen in the community centre built ten years ago. It is cooked here for a hundred kindergarten students and ninety old people of three villages and the food is delivered to Old and Nagyfalú. The financial resources for the missionary work are given by the aid organisation of the German Catholic Church, Renovabis, and the St Pius parish of Witten where also an association was established, whose essential objective is to help the work in Alsószentmárton. In addition to the modest tender opportunities, it is of significant help that the new management of the diocese also puts great emphasis on the pastoration work.

In addition to their personal appreciation, with the *Justitia Regnorum* award, the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights and the Deputy-Commissioner responsible for the rights of national minorities living in Hungary would also like to recognise the tireless and dedicated work of several decades that József Lankó, chaplain in Alsószentmárton, has been doing in the interest of those living in extreme poverty, among them a great number of our Roma compatriots.

Budapest, 4 July 2014