

The liturgical Cult of Hungarian Saints and the Sacred Congregation of Rites (1600-1700)



While the vitality of Hungarian Christianity in its first centuries is attested by a series of saints, often canonized shortly after their death,

this vitality completely disappeared from the Catholicism of the Early Modern Age, organized on the basis of the deliberations of the Council of Trent. In the age of Catholic confessionalization, between ca. 1540-1770 so far as Europe is concerned, not a single Hungarian saint was canonized in Rome. During this almost one and a half century St. Peter's successors did not raise to the altar not only contemporaries but anybody from Hungary, from earlier times either. In this brief overview I will attempt to find an answer to the question why this was so. The reasons can be sketched on the level of general tendencies as well as in particular cases.

First of all, we need to pay attention to well-known differences between the cults of saints in the Middle Ages and in the Early Modern Age. As opposed to the complicated and confused practice of the Middle Ages, after the Council of Trent, just as liturgy, doctrine and church administration, the veneration of saints was also centralized and made uniform by the papacy. In previous centuries the veneration of saints was a spontaneous, mostly local, and at times, perhaps, even unfounded practice. After the protestant Reformation, under the influence of vigorous Protestant criticism, the popes exhibited extraordinary caution in this question. Decision making was totally centralized in Rome; local cults which could not be satisfactorily confirmed were banned; criteria for establishing saintliness were precisely fixed; a thorough examination of every detail was prescribed. The canonization procedure could only be instituted by the Holy See, while the bishop responsible for the area only had the right to request it. After 1588 arrangements for the canonization of saints fell within the exclusive competence of a Roman dicastery, the *Sacra Rituum Congregatio*. The regulations grew stricter and stricter,

and became stable only in the middle of the 18th century, under the pontificate of Benedict XIV (1740-1758).

The effects of the centralization process were felt in several ways. One of its most significant consequences was a decrease in the number of canonizations. Between 1540 and 1770 only 27 contemporary men and 5 women were canonized and 6 persons beatified. Of these, only 14 were performed in the 17th century. 22 of the 38 saints and beatified persons were Italians or Spaniards, and those who were raised to the altar in the 17th century were all, with the exception of St. Francis de Sales, born on the Italian or the Iberian Peninsula, the strongholds of Catholic revival. They all belonged to the clergy, two-thirds of them being regulars, more than half of them members of the orders of the Catholic revival: Jesuits, Capuchins, Theatines, Oratorians, Piarists etc.

The body of data is revealing in many respects. In part it proves that the institutions that were able to satisfy the strict requirements were mostly those with an appropriate organizational, intellectual and financial background: religious orders, the Roman Curia and the Spanish monarchy. The political motivation in the background can be easily seen. The joint canonization of St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis Xavier and St. Teresa of Avila on 15 March 1622, at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, was intended to represent the unity of Catholicism: the greatness and saintliness of the Spanish on the one hand, and the commitment of Pope Gregory XV (1621-1623) towards them on the other.

If we look at the ideals represented by contemporary saints of the Catholic revival, we see that they mostly included the founders of new orders, reformers of old orders, some mystics, representatives of the Catholic reformer prelate ideal, and missionaries who compensated Catholicism for the loss of territories to Protestantism by acquiring new areas overseas. There was only one martyr among them: the Observant Franciscan Giovanni da Prado, murdered by the Muslims in 1631. The conspicuous lack of martyrs is explained by two reasons. The Catholicism of the Early Modern Age – in contrast with the legitimization of Ancient Christianity – looked upon itself as militant and victorious. According to the Jesuit martyrology of 1675, 304 members of the order had been killed by this time for their faith. The sacralization of this sort of “crushing” dominance of the Jesus Society could simply not be allowed by the church administration.

It is not a surprise then that with regard to the only canonization attempt made by the Hungarian “Counter-Reformation” movement in the case of the martyrs of Kassa, the deliberation of the Sacred Congregation of

Rites was confined to a laconic entry saying that no resolution was deemed necessary (*sacrae... congregationi nil placuit pro nunc definire* – reads the register volume of 1629). The initiation of the beatification procedure and the preceding public *veneratio* of the relics of the two Jesuits and the canon of Esztergom was requested by Péter Pázmány, archbishop of Esztergom (1616-1637) in September 1628. As the ordinary responsible for the area, he attached to the request the protocol of the witness examinations that were carried out by his order. Both the preliminary venerations and the examinations made on purely local initiative were such circumstances that were not welcome in Rome at the time, and their banning had been instituted in several phases by the middle of the century.

The testimonies handed in did not stand the test of expert inspection, instituted by the congregation on 27 January 1629, under the supervision of Cardinal Carlo Pio di Savoia. Pázmány himself clearly saw the inadequacy of the evidence presented, and in his justification he referred to the fact that the majority of the witnesses resided in Transylvania and were thus unavailable. This difficulty could have been eliminated with time, though, as in the 1630s Pázmány had particularly good relations with the prince of Transylvania. The problem was that Prince Gábor Bethlen (1613-1629) was succeeded by György Rákóczi (1630-1648), whose men had been responsible for the events of 1619 in the city of Kassa. This may be seen as the reason why Pázmány was unable to take any further steps in the martyrs' case. And the fact that they were finally raised to the altar only in the 20th century was a consequence of the general tendencies sketched above. Similar reasons explain the halting of the canonization of György Csepelényi, a Paulist martyr, initiated by György Fenessy, bishop of Eger (1686-1699) in 1689, with the difference that in his case the deadlock has proved permanent to this day.

The characteristics of the liturgical centralization and uniformity of the church after Trent can also be traced in Hungary in areas other than contemporary canonizations. The key chapter in Hungary's joining of the globalization of church service and the veneration of saints was the introduction of the Roman rite. This initiative, also hallmarked by Pázmány's name, passed through the intricate system of curial offices in a notably short period of just two years. The *officia* of the Hungarian saints' feasts attached to the new rite was thoroughly scrutinized by a committee of three cardinals in the Sacred Congregation of Rites, including the later Pope Innocent X (1644-1655). The swiftness of the process, taking place in 1630-1631, was due to a conformity of interests. The Holy See wanted to create a globally uniform image, while the Hungarians wanted – to the greatest sorrow of liturgy historians – to eliminate the problems concerning the modernization of the ritual of Esztergom, the continued use of which was permitted by the regulations. Naturally, the rapid establishment of the legal framework did not mean that the change of rites in fact took place with such speed. Even according to the canonical visitation reports of the second half of the 17th

century, several parish churches did not at all have the Roman missal and breviary.

The global uniformization of liturgy that arose as a result of apostolic missions and colonization offered further opportunities for the national churches. From this time on the endeavour to include in the Roman liturgical calendar the feasts of canonized saints with only local cults had become common practice, in order to ensure their global veneration. As early as 1625 the Hungarian ecclesiastical and secular estates launched a joint action, supported by the monarch, Ferdinand II (1619-1637) to obtain this privilege for King St. Stephen (1001-1038), founder of the Hungarian State. The cardinals of the Sacred Congregation of Rites however, at their meeting held on 31 January 1626, decided without any particular explanation that the question was not timely. Four years later the former papal nuncio in Vienna, Cardinal Giovanni Baptista Pallotto called the fulfilment of the request impossible, and Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644) in his breve of 15 March 1631 straightly denied it. Rome's unfavourable attitude can be understood. Similar request were submitted by the dozen, and the hardly reviving Hungarian Catholicism could not provide satisfactory reasons for the timeliness of the change.

It is all the more surprising that in his breve of 17 January 1632 the pope notified Pázmány of a revision of his standpoint, and authorized him to present his favourable decision to the Catholic estates of the country. The only feasible explanation for Rome's attitude and the fact that St. Stephen's feast eventually did not get included in the Roman calendar must be sought in the field of politics. In the second half of 1631, the Habsburgs opened a vigorous offensive in order to obtain significant financial support from the Holy See in their struggle against the Protestants of the empire and the Swedes. The unexpected fulfilment of the liturgical request, which was supported by Ferdinand II, may have been a gesture of reconciliation towards the Habsburgs, to smooth the diplomatic frictions that arose because of Rome's denial of the Habsburg need for help. But to no avail, as the escalation of the Habsburg-Barberini confrontation would just begin, and this was also the turbulent time when Pázmány was sent to Rome as ambassador. Thus the failure to implement the decision was also politically motivated. The improvised nature of the Pope's change of standpoint is highlighted by the fact the Congregation of Rites concerned did not at all discuss the matter this time.

The initiative was 40 years later embraced by György Szelepcshény, archbishop of Esztergom (1666-1685). On behalf of the primate, the Paulist János Vanoicz, a well-known figure in mission historical research, tried already in 1671 to enlist the support of the German cardinal protector, Friedrich von Hessen Darmstadt: "I have visited Cardinal Landgravius, and His Majesty the Cardinal eagerly awaits the letters about St. Stephen's feast..." he wrote to the primate on 14 February. The official procedure at the Sacred Congregation of Rites was reinitiated by Szelepcshény only in 1679. The congregation did not make any comment on his petition,

but in Hungary the new initiative was greeted with great expectations. At least, this is what we can infer from a letter written to Nagyszombat on 26 August 1679 by the Jesuit father confessor János Klobusiczky, who followed the developments of the case in Rome. The decision that extended the cult of the sacred king to the whole catholic world, made by Pope Innocent XI (1676-1689) after the reoccupation of Buda from the Turks and being still in effect, was directly based on the reinitiation of the request by Szelepchény.

The third consequence of the liturgical centralization after the *Tridentinum*, beside a decrease in the number of canonizations and the globalization of the cults of saints, was the settling of the status of mediaeval local cults, having only partial or uncertain papal approval. This phenomenon, involving several national churches, has one known Hungarian example. The steps taken between 1639-1643 in the interest of the canonization of St. Margaret of the House of Árpád († 1270), finally raised to the altar only in the 20th century, had all the chance to become a success story for the Catholic confession in Hungary. This joint action of the Hungarian episcopate, the Dominican Order, the Habsburg Dynasty and the government was coordinated by Antonio Sartori, an Italian member of the German province of the Dominican Order. He organized the witness examinations of 1641 in Pozsony and raised funds for the procedure: the costs were divided equally between the Hungarian Royal Chamber of Pozsony and the Hungarian bishops.

Their aims were twofold. On the one hand, they wanted to extend the liturgical commemoration, of which only the Hungarian Dominican province had authorization to hold, to the area of the whole country, and on the other hand they wanted to achieve a subsequent canonization of the saint. Sartori looked after the case in Rome personally. Despite the active support of the imperial diplomacy and the carefully prepared documentation – to which the recently found material of the witness examination closed in 1276 was also attached – the cardinals of the Sacred Congregation of Rites decided at their meeting held on 19 July 1642 that the virgin's feast could not be celebrated outside of the Dominican province. The primary reason was that the only thing that was not presented was the papal authorization for the partial cult – although it had in fact been granted by Pope Pius II (1458-1464). At the same time, the congregation was willing to exceptionally overlook the current practice of the veneration of the virgin in the country.

Sartori had to initiate a brand new procedure in the interest of her canonization. Within a year, he managed to collect all the documents and necessary permits from the congregation and from other curial offices to have renewed witness examinations held with apostolic authorization (*auctoritate apostolica*) in Hungary. But these never happened. Sartori was relocated by his order to Augsburg, and the Hungarian hierarchy's energies were occupied in trying to repel the 1644 attack of György Rákóczi I, Prince of Transylvania. The Dominican friar tried to revive the case in 1647 but without success. In

his letter of 2 May, written in Augsburg, he asked György Lippay, archbishop of Esztergom (1642-1666), to forward to him the references of his activities as case administrator, deposited with the archbishop among the documents of the case. These references were written for him by the leaders of the Habsburg diplomatic mission in Rome and by the secretary of the Congregation of the Index. Sartori also called attention to the importance of having the case continued while the witnesses of the 1641 examinations were alive. However, the archbishop could not fulfil his request, as the documentation got lost in the chaos of the Transylvanian attack.

Thus, in spite of the wide-ranging cooperation and the initiation of the canonization process in Rome, the beatification attempt in the middle of the 17th century proved unsuccessful, primarily as a result of organizational problems. The financial difficulties also had a considerable role. Sartori, practically left on his own in Rome in 1642-1643, was forced to fare on less than a quarter of the budget originally planned, a mere 300 imperial thalers, payed in advance by the Chamber of Pozsony. The further 3000 golds that he regarded necessary for a successful completion of the canonization process, covering the fees of advocates and experts and the costs of preparing second copies etc., may have seemed unbelievably high for the Hungarian hierarchy, which was on unfriendly terms with the Curia due to having to pay various bull fees and *servitia*. They were partly unable and partly unwilling to satisfy the strict and expensive requirements set by Rome as a precondition for the canonization.

St. Margaret was finally canonized, just as the martyrs of Kassa, in the 20th century, as mentioned above. This, and the series of canonizations at the turn of the millenium (László Batthyány-Strattmann, Zoltán Meszlényi, Sára Salkaházi, Tódor Romzsa, Charles IV, János Scheffler, Szilárd Bogdánffy), opened a new era in the chain of the Hungarian blessed and saints. An evaluation of this era, however, will be the task of future historians.

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