

# THE SPIRITUAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT OF THE CISTERCIAN ORDER IN HUNGARY

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## Origins of the Hungarian Cistercians

Hungary was a century old when in 1098 the Cistercian order came to be: it owes, therefore, neither her historic existence nor Christianity to the Cistercians. Unlike the Benedictines who witnessed the birth of the nation and were first to bring the pagan Hungarians to the baptismal font, the Cistercian stepped into the stream of the spiritual and intellectual life of the young nation in order to respond to the call King Béla III extended to the Order in the second half of the twelfth century. Béla III, anxious to renew the profession of faith in his kingdom, wanted to reaffirm the allegiance of Hungary to the West. If, however, on the day of his coronation he had taken the whole country into the orbit of Byzantium where he had been raised and educated, he would have surprised no one. But against all odds, once he became a king, without betraying his former masters, he made an unexpected move and turned to France for moral and political support. He underlined his determination, first of all, with his marriages: after the death of his first wife, Anne de Chatillon, he married Princess Margaret, the sister of King Philippe II Augustus. Both marriages of Béla III, without doubt, were motivated by politics; history, however, when serving political interests, also promotes cultural causes. The second marriage of Béla III created between France and Hungary political, cultural, and economic relations in which the cultural impact of the political move proved to be the longest lasting. By pure coincidence, therefore, France shared, with Hungary the first phase of her cultural and spiritual splendor. In 1172, when Béla III was crowned king of Hungary, France was under the spell of her Cistercian enthusiasm; Béla III became king just nineteen years after the death of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. At the end of the twelfth century, French spirituality, civilization, culture were essentially Cistercian: Cistercians were heard even at the University of Paris. And that was the face of the "West" that the French Cistercians were going to make known to Hungary.

### Cistercians in France

The Cistercian Order was born out of a spiritual reform intended as a return to the purity and discipline of the Rule of Saint Benedict. The reformers were to implement the "Ora et Labora" in a Christ-like spirit. They intended to put an end to the trend that Cluny established, which was characterized by complacency and a general worldly spirit of the members. After some initial difficulties, Citeaux (and soon after, Clairvaux, Morimond, La Ferté, and Pontigny) began to attract the best of the youth of France, and so the Order in France assumed a spiritual leadership, which transformed the intellectual, political, and even economic life of the country. Beginning with the last decades of the twelfth century, France and the Cistercian Order constituted an intimate union. The genius of Saint Bernard dominated the political, theological, social scene of the West: he preached the second Crusade, challenged Abélard in public debates at the University of Paris, promoted the liberation of the serfs, defended the freedom of the Church at large and, when signs of anti-semitism arose the cause of the Jews. The Cistercians were among the first to establish a "Collegium" (Bernardinum) next to the University of Paris to foster the higher education of their members. The "Marian Theology" of Saint Bernard greatly influenced the spirit of the court literature. It should also be recalled that in the great century of the French Classicism, all roads of France ran through Port-Royal, a Cistercian convent which was strong enough later to shelter Jansenism and Jansenists, to influence great geniuses like Pascal and Racine, to involve Kings and Ministers in the long-lasting quarrel, and to keep the religious conscience of the whole country attached to Christian values. But the movement – one might remark parenthetically – had also caused an immense spiritual crisis, a burden for the conscience of official politics. To end this struggle, in 1711 Louis XIV ordered the whole convent to be demolished. At the same time, however, thanks to the courage and enthusiasm of Abbé Rancé, another Cistercian reform in 1700 gave birth to the Trappist Order. The Jansenism which was born outside of the orthodox Christian Theology vanished with time, while the "Strict Observance" of the Trappists remained faithful to the contemplative spirit of the Church. It was this aspect of the contemplative life that attracted the heart of Chateaubriand to Abbé Rancé.<sup>1</sup> This long battle around Port-Royal involved the whole of France. Royer-Collard, a nineteenth century politician used to say, "Qui ne connaît pas Port-Royal, ne connaît pas l'humanité" ("He who does not know Port-Royal does not know humanity").<sup>2</sup> Taking into account all the possible major ramifications of the story of Port-Royal, one cannot help stating that the convent stood for the microcosm of the universe in one of the most splendid centuries of French history.

### The tragic past of the Cistercian Order in Hungary

The history of the Cistercians in Hungary never reached the heights and depths exercised by the influence of the Cistercians in France. While France had, at one time, over four hundred Cistercian monasteries – it sounds almost unbelievable! – the highest number of Abbeys in Hungary only reached twenty.<sup>3</sup> The cynics might add that there was no Hungarian Saint Bernard, but one must always remember that people like Saint Bernard are not of everyday occurrence.

In spite of the obvious differences between Cistercians in France and in Hungary, the Hungarian Cistercians symbolize in many ways the tragic destiny of the country. The Tartar invasion in the early thirteenth century devastated the country and wiped out the Cistercians; the Turkish occupation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries left the country in ruins and the Cistercian abbeys empty. In 1950, Communism suppressed once more the whole Order. The success of its restoration, which has recently begun, will follow the rhythm of the renewal of the country. “Renaissance” being the mutual aim of the country as well as of the Order, they seem to share both the joy of the present renewal and the hope in which they savor an even more prosperous future which will be built on sound moral principles.

### Facing a difficult future

What could, what should, and what will Cistercians contribute to the new moral order of Hungary? Just a few years after the fall of Communism, crossing the country from west to east and from south to north, one cannot help hearing the voices of the demon of pessimism: a generation of forty-five years lost faith both in God and man. Indeed, the greatest damage Communism inflicted on Hungary was not its “Socialism,” nor, for that matter, “Communism,” but the fruits thereof, a “practical materialism” that a whole generation had first to swallow, then practice because it was the only thing they had learned. One can suspect that “practical materialism” was not quite the dream of the Party – or was it? – but “ideological materialism,” when it reached the level of the everyday life tended to lose its ideological impact and settled down with a stupefying materialism. Whatever the case may have been, ideological materialism left people empty-handed.

Being aware of some of the problems resulting from the spiritual and moral decadence of a substantial part of today's Hungarian society, one cannot help having mixed emotions. Ultimately, the question is not one of pessimism or

optimism – these are just words. To change the course of things and events, people in all walks of life will have to unite their strengths and dare to face the future, which fortunately looks much more promising than one might have thought ten or fifteen years ago. If things have been dismantled in the recent past, there must be a way to rebuild them. For beyond the disgrace of these past years, some values survived, and they live on in a dormant state, waiting for encouragement to return in full strength in order to make life meaningful again. Obviously, one cannot dream of anything like returning to the past: things of the past are dead, but the spirit of a nation is not a thing. It is – according to the meaning of the Latin word – its breath, its soul. The redemption by Christ, as always, starts anew with every single soul that comes into this world.

All Cistercians remember, some with a blush, the famous little essay of Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, called *A Pilis hegyén* (“On the Mount of Pilis,” 1927).<sup>4</sup> It will not be without interest to recall some of the major ideas which constitute the heart of the study. Prohászka was stunned that, while Cistercian historians at the beginning of the twentieth century were eager to uncover a part of their long and glorious past—insisting perhaps too much on fights, court citations, business transactions, financial quarrels – they seldom thought of what Pilis used to be, for what its ruins speak. At first, one has the impression that Prohászka lets his poetic inspiration lead him astray and turns him into a sentimental preacher whose soul is haunted by the silence, which replaced the antiphons, that the Cistercians sung so beautifully under the humble arches of their primitive gothic church. That is only a part of the truth. Prohászka the poet allows himself the delight of dreaming and visualizing the attitude of the monks of Clairvaux. And here Prohászka cites the story of the memorable visit of Pope Innocent II to Clairvaux in France. The simplicity and humility of the monks who passed in front of the visiting Pope without noticing his presence in the monastery made him shed sincere tears. Here in Pilis, Prohászka says, things happened in the same sublime manner: the supernatural and the natural coexisted here, too. He further reminds his readers that Pilis had become the permanent home for people like Gertrude of Meran who was buried in Pilis; Saint Elizabeth, while visiting Hungary with her husband in 1222, came to visit her mother’s tomb in Pilis, as so many other people of blessed memory: Blessed Margit, Kinga, Jolánta, and King Louis the Great. Beyond all that, Prohászka is anxious that we become aware of another dimension of the Cistercian tradition; the tradition of mysticism. The silent region – the forest, the valleys, the meadows, the mountains – witnessed the passing through of “the lights and shadows of thirteenth century mysticism,” that form of divine love in which the monks explicated and interpreted the

redemption of the human race by Christ. Ultimately, what the Cistercians brought into the Hungary of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was what Prohászka calls, "the great unconscious realism" the desire of which had no other ambition than "to live," "to believe," "to love," "to walk toward eternal happiness," and "to know". What we like to consider in history as the first "Renaissance" in the West, turned out to be a second birth for Hungary: everything that was great in this Renaissance of the West was introduced into Hungary by the Cistercians.

### **The role of the Cistercians in the rebirth**

What role then could history assign to the Cistercians in this new Renaissance at the end of the twentieth century? Or what role should Cistercians assume? In the "Ancien Régime," Cistercians prospered as most of the other religious Orders, but the Cistercian Order was different from the Jesuits, as were the Jesuits from the Benedictines. Orders are different by the very nature of their traditions and constitutions, each responding to a particular expectation or need of a particular segment of the society or epoch. Without wanting to make value judgements or comparisons between life-styles and methods in teaching of different teaching Orders, I will try to list some of those characteristics which made Cistercian education unique and "Cistercian." These qualities, I believe, if rediscovered and implemented, will greatly enhance the spiritual and moral rebirth of Hungary.

Let us first recall that the real impact the Cistercians had on Hungarian society was pedagogical and educational, without their ever having sacrificed the nature of their Order or denying the place of the soul in their adventure. I would, therefore, state, first of all, that the most eminent quality of Cistercian education was its "Frenchness," its orderliness. One can feel from the very inception of the Order how much Cistercian monks cultivated the idea of orderliness. In the language of religious spirituality, the opposite of orderliness is what we call "riches," "idleness," "inactivity," "the excessive cult of the self." The foundation of the Cistercian Order resembles a revolution that a group of monks mounted against Cluny where the religious led a life of peaceful apathy. The French mentality which animates the Cistercians appears in many ways. It created Classicism, and highlighted its spirit in the creation of Versailles, Classical literature; then Jansenism, Pascal, and his concept of "Three Orders," "Trappistism"; it had also inspired Calvinism and the philosophy of Descartes, together with the Rationalism of the eighteenth century.

### The relevance of the Cistercian teaching

The hearty words and sincere concern of Bishop Prohászka, notwithstanding, the spiritual and intellectual life of the Cistercians in Hungary reached heights in our century that no other historical age would surpass. Although the split of the Order into "Strict" and "Common" Observances – which finally created two independent Orders ("Trappists" and "Cistercians") – gave an edge to the "contemplative" Trappists, and thus made it possible for them to enjoy recognition and prestige for some time; the "active" Cistercians, being involved in teaching and ministry, honored both monastic discipline and "contemplation". In assuming "modern" activities, the Cistercians have essentially translated the concept of "Labora" (Work) to a ministry in which they explicated the message of Christ and the beauty of knowing and art to several generations of young people.

Most Hungarians agree today that the nation has to be re-educated in many ways, without implying that the country is uneducated, or that its education was neglected during the decades of Communist rule. As a matter of fact, many disciplines had been taught with outstanding results; there are in Hungary certainly many well-filled ("stuffed") heads ("des têtes bien pleines"), but could we say in good conscience that those heads are also well made ("bien faites")?<sup>5</sup> At this point I will return to Pascal who received his education at the school of Port-Royal. His teaching about the "Three Orders" also explains the essence of Cistercian pedagogy. What we had practiced in our schools for two centuries may yet prove to be the right thing for our future teaching. In the "Three Orders" of values, respect for the body, love for the spirit (l'esprit), and absolute dedication to the Order of Charity was taught. All schools and teachers can reach the first two orders, that of the body and of the spirit: they only require time and knowing. The third "Order," the Order of the Supernatural can only be taught by living in it. The real problem is not a question of academics, we can teach any subject with great success. In the very name of academic freedom, we should let the soul speak of its own life, existence, and yearnings. And that is a question of Charity: the totality of the human being cannot be waived. "Practical materialism" may be counterbalanced by poverty; misery by generosity and justice; anxiety, hopelessness and despair call for joy, confidence and the open skies of the Charity of God. Being and life, although constantly under threat of time and death, may be savored and enjoyed only when they have been promoted into the high regions of Charity, the order of God.

A few years back, a historian, specializing in Cistercian history, stated that the Cistercians were the first "capitalists" of the West. His statement greatly

surprises; however, one could respond, not without a certain sense of humor, that, "Yes, but *the first successful capitalists*": long before the Cistercians came to be the Benedictines had already practiced the same economic system. The Cistercians, however, followed orderliness which lasted for centuries. And even when the economic system perished, the consciousness of the orderliness survived.

**"The heart has its reasons..."**

After this parenthetical remark I should dwell briefly on a somewhat different matter, which pertains to the essence of our Cistercian teaching. If implemented, it will enhance our endeavor in building a brighter future for Hungary. It has already been pointed out how much the affective life of the country has suffered during the past decades, and how much its decayed state is evidenced in the society of the post-Communist regime.<sup>6</sup> The remark of Saint Augustine, that "Non movetur anima pedibus sed affectibus" ("The soul does not walk on feet but on affections")<sup>7</sup> sums up the state of the matter; for if the social life of the whole country was programmed in such a way that the voice of the soul was not honored, the programming also meant silencing the voice of sentiments and affections. (With its thesis of "class struggle," Marxism, when reaching the individual, preaches hatred.) Liberation, therefore, should be extended also to affections. Love lives on affections, and so does justice. And I would even venture to state that knowledge, research, and science live on enthusiasm and affections which lend meaning to all human endeavors. What saves the world from the philosophy of "WHAT'S THE USE OF IT?" is the affective dimension of our heart and love. In the vein of the same thought, and in order to challenge our intelligence that it should listen to the voice of the heart, we might recall Pascal's well known sentence, i.e., "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point" ("The heart has its reasons that the reason does not know at all").<sup>8</sup>

One of the great values that we Cistercians inherited from Saint Bernard and which shaped and keeps on shaping our lives is the prominent role of the Virgin Mary in the life of the Church and the spiritual growth of the individual Christian. By sensitizing the world about this matter, Saint Bernard transformed the cult of the woman which had become a fashion in court literature just about the time he began his public career. The sublime femininity became the source of salvation both in a religious sense and in its social connotation. By upgrading the affective life of his century, Saint Bernard was able to turn the excesses of court literature toward a more aesthetically oriented art, while,

at the same time, he also slowed down the advancement of Abélard's rationalism. It seems that the Cistercian alumni in Hungary, after having experienced the "other life-style," remember what they had received with their education, and they deplore what they see now in the life of their own children and grand-children. The spiritual and affective needs of Hungary may not differ very much from the needs of the rest of the world, but if Hungary was able to hold high the mirror in which the world contemplates the heroism of freedom, she may also take a leading role in matters pertaining to our affective life. It would be a mistake to let people think that the damage done is limited to religion; everyone should understand that a whole generation has been washed out (Egy egész nemzedéket kilúgoztak. – On a lessivé toute une génération.) There is no time to be cynical about this. We should perhaps re-invent the language of the heart: COR LOQUITUR AD COR ("The heart speaks to the heart").

### Conclusion

The Cistercian Order is not the microcosm of Hungary; it does not hold the key to the secrets of the moral, spiritual, or intellectual problems of the country, but it does symbolize whatever the country can and should do in order to assure its survival. The members of the Order would like to be optimistic; they embrace new programs; re-establish "gimnáziums" in Eger, Budapest, Baja, Pécs, Székesfehérvár. But they cannot help raising the question: With whom can we implement all these ideas of renewal? The number of vocations does not disappoint the optimist; however, no one dares call it an abundance. Yet, the future is not going to be built with purely human efforts. Everything is grace, the Scripture says (Rom. IV, 16). Everything is grace, Bernanos repeats in his novel, called *The Diary of a Country Priest*.<sup>9</sup> To conclude then, let us recall the words of Father Teilhard de Chardin. He put his prayer and future confidence into the frame of his scientific "formula"; he says: "For having gone to heaven, after you descended all the way to hell, you have so much filled the Universe in all directions, Jesus, that from now on, we find ourselves in the blessed impossibility of escaping from you."<sup>10</sup>



## Notes

1. Cf. Chateaubriand, René-François de, *Vie de Rancé*, édition critique avec une introduction, des notices, des variantes et des notes par Fernand Letessier, 2 vols (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1955).
2. Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal*, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade". 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1952) I, 105.
3. Cf. Lékai, Louis, *The Cistercians. Ideals and Reality* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, [1989]), in chapters XIV, XV, and XVI.
4. Prohászka, Ottokár, "A Pilis hegyén," in *Modern Katolicizmus. Válogatás Prohászka műveiből*. Szerkesztette: Koncz Lajos (Budapest: Az Apostoli Szentzsék Könyvkiadója, 1990) 228–238.
5. Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de, *Essais*, Livre I, Essai XXVI.
6. Andrásfalvi, Bertalan, "Európaiság, mint művelődési forma," in *Keresztények és a szabadság*, 34. Magyar Pax romana Kongresszus. 1992. április 20–26. Lillafüred (Róma: Katolikus Szemle, 1992) 15–18.
7. S. Augustinus, *Tract. 48 in Joannem*.
8. Blaise, Pascal, *Pensées*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade" (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 1221.
9. Bernanos, Georges, *Journal d'un Curé de campagne* (Paris: Plon, 1936) 366.
10. Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *Le milieu divin* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957) 156.