

PILGRIM BAPTISM

An Initiation Rite in the Hungarian Catholic Paraliturgy

Pilgrimage is still one of the most important parts of Catholic religious life in Hungary. It exists in Roman Catholic and in Orthodox practice but is not found in Protestant communities even if some of their meetings are called “pilgrimage” or originally based on Catholic pilgrim celebrations. The main features of today’s pilgrimage practice developed in the 17th-18th centuries, during the period of Hungarian Baroque, when the Catholic church and religious life were renewed and reorganized. This was the era when most of the Hungarian pilgrimage places were formed and shrines were built. On the other hand, the period of enlightenment in the 18th century divided the society in the matter of pilgrimage as well. The upper classes, including the majority of the clergy abandoned it, so the pilgrimage gradually became part of folk religious practice. The turn of this century and the 20th century brought some changes in this area. Pilgrimage started to become part of the particular mission of the pastorate.¹ As the Baroque relied on medieval precedents, many ancient or archaic elements can be found in the practice of pilgrimage, such as respects of relics² and the cult of Eucharistic shrines like Garamszentbenedek (Hronský Svätý Benadik, today in Slovakia). Some earlier types of worship of the Virgin Mary still exist: *Mulier amicta Sole* (Women clothed with the Sun), *Maria ad Nives* (Our Lady of the Snows) and *Mater Dolorosa*.

However there are numerous elements of pilgrimage which seem to be archaic but their origin and history is unknown to us. As important symbols, the elements of nature in the cult, the cult of stones, trees and water belong to this group.³ The peculiar custom of pilgrimage baptism, which is first mentioned in sources of the last century, is connected to the cult of sacred wells and springs.

This custom is what I would like to describe and explain in my short paper by not only summarizing the literature but also drawing on the results of my own fieldwork and investigations.

The essence of pilgrim baptism is that the child, youngster or more rarely adult who visits the place of pilgrimage for the first time is baptised with the water of a sacred well or spring by other pilgrims who have already been at the site many times. This custom varied and varies in different places of pilgrimage. It is even known by national minorities living in Hungary. There are some places

1 See: SZÁNTÓ 1985. 591, BANGÓ 1978. 37, 45, BARNÁ 1990., BARNÁ 1991. On the Baroque period see: JÁNOSI 1935.

2 E. G. TÜSKÉS – KNAPP 1987.

3 On the role of objects of nature and phenomena of nature see: BANGÓ 1978. *passim*

of pilgrimage where this custom disappeared before World War II, but in others it still exists. However it is not known by every pilgrim group who visits the same shrine. Being together they can observe the practice of pilgrim baptism but it is not known why they do not adopt it.

At Csatári-puszta in Zala County, adult pilgrims who had visited the pilgrimage place a number of times chose “godchildren” from among the children making their first pilgrimage. A godparent could choose more than one child. They went to the sacred well, drew a cross with the sacred water on the eyes and forehead of the chosen children and said the Credo, the apostolic confession of faith, together. The child baptised on its first pilgrimage was given the name of the godparent in the pilgrim baptism. The god-parents bought a gift of honey-cake and *márc*, a drink very popular in that region, as a gift for their new pilgrim godchild.⁴

The custom of pilgrim baptism has also been practised since the mid-19th century in Csátka, a place of pilgrimage in Fejér County, ever since pilgrimages were first made here. Recollections and written records show that many of the German and Slovak people living in the area made pilgrimages to this place and still do so today. The pilgrim baptism takes place after arrival at the site and a short introductory prayer. Here, the baptism is performed by the leader of the pilgrimage. The child making the first pilgrimage kneels before the leader who places his hands on the child’s head and asks:

“Do you vow to be a very faithful, dear child of the Virgin Mary every day of your life?”

“I do.”

The leader of the pilgrimage then makes a sign of the cross on the pilgrim’s forehead with water from the sacred well and says:

“If you do all this, you will win salvation!”⁵

Máriagyűd was one of the biggest places of pilgrimage in Southern Transdanubia and, before for First World War, of Slavonia across the River Drava. This is still the case even today. Very large numbers of Hungarians, Germans and Croatians living in the region still make pilgrimages here on Mary days and at Whitsun.⁶ When the church was last painted, a line of the Mary hymn in each of these languages was painted on the wall. The Gyűd sacred well is found at some distance from the church, on the part of the vineyard hill known as Csukma. The cult of this well fell into oblivion in the past decades and it is visited by only a very few people now. There was a time, however, when the crowd at the Gyűd feast represented one of the biggest markets for Siklós pottery, buying vessels in which they took home the Gyűd sacred water. Pilgrims on their first visit to Máriagyűd were baptised with the water of this well. In contrast with the practice in Zala, it was the custom here for the godparent to be chosen and frequently the child’s parents were asked to perform this task. The child bent over and the

4 BALDASZTI, József, manuscript collection.

5 PERESZLÉNYI 1941. 258 VAJKAI 1940.

6 BARNÁ 1988.

godmother baptised it by drawing a cross on its forehead with the sacred water, saying:

"I baptise you with this sacred water and call you my own goddaughter (or godson)."

She then bought a gift at the feast fair for the child. This meant that a child in the Siklós district could have had or may have today, a *christening godmother*, a *confirmation godmother* and a *Gyűd godmother*. It also meant that henceforth the godmother played a role in the life of her godchild. She took a small gift to the child's wedding. The greater burdens of the wedding were covered by the other two godmothers.

The custom of pilgrim baptism was also practised in other places of pilgrimage in Transdanubia: at Búcsúszentlászló, Sümeg (County Zala) and Vasvár (County Vas). The baptisms took place in Búcsúszentlászló on the feast day of the Virgin Mary (September 12) and in Segesd (County Somogy) on the birthday of the Virgin Mary (September 8). In the case of some villages making pilgrimages here, a person making the *first pilgrimage* asked an elder companion to perform the pilgrim baptism, while in other settlements it was the elder person who chose a child to be baptised. There were also villages – such as Nemesgulács in Zala County – where people of around the same age entered into a pilgrim baptism relationship with each other.⁷ People in a number of settlements in Zala and Vas counties recounted that they chose a pilgrim godparent at each of the places of pilgrimage they visited. A child could have as many as 8–10 godparents. They addressed each other as *pilgrim godmother* and *pilgrim goddaughter*.⁸

In Segesd the chosen godmother performed this paraliturgical devotion at the stoup of the church. She made a sign of the cross on the child's forehead and later bought a gift. The pilgrim baptism brought previously unrelated people into a spiritual relationship that was taken seriously. Here too, gifts were bought for the godchild. These godparents were and still are invited to weddings and it was not unusual for them to be called on to act as best man.⁹ It is of special note that in Segesd the baptism takes place at the stoup, despite the fact that there is a sacred well at this pilgrimage place. Such baptisms were much more frequent here in the first half of the 20th century. In the Segesd district only baptism of girls was mentioned. However, more thorough field research will probably show that the custom applied to boys as well. Croatians in the district of Somogyszéptál and Buzsák used the terms *Segesd godmother* and *Segesd goddaughter*.

The act performed at the Vasvár sacred well was called *bathing* and the chosen godmother was known as the *bathing godmother*. Here, the woman requested for this role washed the face of the child making its first pilgrimage in water from the sacred well and then drew a sign of the cross on the child's forehead. From then on they preserved the spiritual relationship. In cases where the child had not yet been confirmed, the *bathing godmother* was generally asked to be the confirmation

⁷ LÉVAINÉ 1963. 237.

⁸ GÖNCZI 1914. 130.

⁹ LÉVAINÉ 1963. 237.

godmother too.¹⁰ The people of Bata refer to those who have taken part in the pilgrim baptism as *bathed godmother* and *bathed goddaughter*.¹¹ In Kaposszekcső the name was *bathing godmother*.¹² In Kányavár (Zala County) girls baptised in this way were crowned with a wreath of flowers and a nosegay was made for boys. Young people from this village too could be baptised in a number of pilgrimage places in the district: at Vasvár, Búcsúszentlászló, Sümeg, at Csatári-pusztá already mentioned, or at Bistrice, a more distant place of pilgrimage in Croatia.¹³

The pilgrims of Attala (Somogy County) also called the pilgrim baptism *bathing*: they practised it at Andocs (Somogy County). According to the local custom, the parents of a child on its first pilgrimage asked an older person who then customarily also became the confirmation godmother of her *Andocs godson* or *goddaughter*.¹⁴ People from Andocs recounted that if persons the same age bathed each other at the pump in the street in front of the pilgrimage church, they became each other's *koma* (a term used for godfather or pal) and from then on addressed each other by the intimate term *kóma*.¹⁵

János Bárh reports on a special form of pilgrim baptism from Andocs, a renowned place of pilgrimage in Somogy County.¹⁶ This was a collective pilgrim baptism in form and was practised at Andocs only by pilgrims from Kalocsa. No parallel has been found, either in Andocs or in other places of pilgrimage. The people of Kalocsa call the pilgrim baptism *bérmálás* (*confirmation*). Men generally asked a man and women another woman during their pilgrimage made on foot from Kalocsa to Andocs. When they arrived at Andocs, those wishing to be baptised stood in a semicircle at the spring behind the church the people they had asked to act as godparents stood behind them and placed their right hands on the shoulders of their godchildren. The other pilgrims stood a little further away, observing the event. After singing their special song for this occasion, the leader of the pilgrimage drew a glass of water and sprinkled a cross on the face of each person in turn, pausing each time to say:

"May the entire Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, bless you."

Some reminiscences speak of a baptism where the leader of the pilgrimage used a leafy twig to sprinkle water from the sacred well on those on their first pilgrimage who were being baptised. After the baptism the new pilgrims received a pilgrimage souvenir of some kind. The event also resulted in the establishment of a new, fictive kinship.

The custom of pilgrim baptism was also known in the practice of many of the pilgrim groups visiting Máriaradna (now Radna, Romania) on the Maros River, the biggest place of pilgrimage in the south-east region of the Great Plain.

10 MOZSOLICS 1943. *Magyar Néphit Topográfia (Topography of Hungarian Folk Religion)*, Győrvar, collected by SZÉKELY, László

11 Collected by BÁLINT, Sándor, 144–84

12 Collected by BÁLINT, Sándor, 145–84

13 Collected by BÁLINT, Sándor, 47–84

14 Author's own collection from Attala pilgrims, ANDOCS, 1983.

15 Author's own collection, ANDOCS, 1983.

16 BÁRTH 1974.

Although Máriaradna was a common place of pilgrimage for Hungarians, Germans, Romanians, Bunyevci, Catholic Bulgarians and Krassovans living in the region of the Tisza River and in the Banat, a study of the literature and the author's own field research have so far produced only data on the custom of pilgrim baptism among Hungarian pilgrims.

Sándor Bálint also wrote on a number of occasions about the pilgrim baptism among people from Szeged. A young person from Szeged making the first pilgrimage to Máriaradna chose godparents from among the elder pilgrims: the man was called *pilgrim godfather* and the woman *pilgrim godmother*. They baptised the young pilgrims with water from the church well or stoup, or occasionally with water brought from the Maros River. They sprinkled the water on the young pilgrims and said:

"I baptise you. May God bless you and sanctify you, to serve the glory of Jesus Christ and the honour of the Virgin Mary!"

The people of Szeged called this event the *Radna baptism*. At one time, before the First World War, this was just as widespread among the people of Szeged as the *Szentkút baptism* associated with the former Ferencszállás (now Petőfiszállás-Szentkút) was after the First World War.¹⁷ Although the borders drawn at Trianon cut Szeged off from its traditionally most important place of pilgrimage, the custom of pilgrim baptism lived on, attached to another place of pilgrimage. People of Szeged report on a special variant of the Radna baptism from the end of the last century. While the source does not specifically say so, it is possible that the description presents a kind of parody of the pilgrim baptism. According to this, people going to Radna for the first time were formally baptised at the Calvary on top of the hill at Öthalom in Arad County, one of the traditional resting places of pilgrim groups coming from the west. János Varga who recorded the custom was given the name of Habakuk in this mock baptism.¹⁸ The custom of pilgrim baptism at Radna is of special note because there is no sacred well or sacred spring at Máriaradna. At the same time, the pilgrims attributed the power of sacred experience to the water of the Maros, at least at Whitsuntide. Before the First World War, pilgrims from Kunszentmárton going to Radna brought back a bottle of Maros water as holy water and used it at home as holy water. At Tápé the Maros is sometimes called *Radna water* since it has flown past Máriaradna. In Szeged around the turn of the century, elder women went down to the Maros at dawn on Whitsun and the birth of the Virgin Mary to bathe in *Radna water*. The custom was undoubtedly linked with the pilgrimage traditions of those two days.¹⁹

The pilgrim baptism is also found among the customs of the people of Tápé making pilgrimages to Petőfiszállás. Those who went to Szentkút (Sacred Well) for the first time chose a godmother or godfather who performed the baptism

17 BÁLINT no date: 173. BÁLINT 1980. 395–396.

18 No other sources report on this custom. This record is thought to be a parody because, in the same writing, János Varga criticises the pilgrimage as a manifestation of superstitious folk religiosity. VARGA 1872. 367.

19 BÁLINT 1977. II, 269.

with water from the sacred well and was from then on addressed as *godmother* or *godfather*.²⁰ According to the tradition at Csépa (Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County), all persons without exception on their *first pilgrimage* to Petőfiszállás-Szentkút were baptised. The pilgrims attempted to choose a respected, elder, religious person as godparent. As a result, there are elder women who have several pilgrim goddaughters. Usually they were requested during the journey:

"Would you be my pilgrim godmother?"

It was not fitting to refuse the request. At the sacred well the candidate knelt and was baptised with the water which was considered to have miraculous power. According to the recollections, others stood in the small pool beside the sacred well and a few drops of water were poured on their head from a small mug, with the words:

"I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost your name is Eszter (or some other name)!"

The first pilgrims received a gift of a sacred picture or rosary beads. Pilgrim baptisms were performed during the feast at Petőfiszállás as late as the early 1980s among the people of Csépa.²¹

There are sporadic data on existence of the custom of pilgrim baptism practised in a few other places of pilgrimage in Hungary. All this indicates that the practice is gradually dying out.

At Máriabesnyő, for example, the water of a spring beneath a bridge near the church was used for the pilgrim baptism. According to the description given by Ferenc Schram, young people making their first pilgrimage to Besnyő choose a *pilgrim godmother* before setting out she baptises the candidate with her moist hand. There is no longer a set text for the ceremony and it was practised by the people of only a few villages.²²

The pilgrim baptism is also found at Mátraverebély-Szentkút, one of the biggest places of pilgrimage in Northern Hungary. However, here too, my data indicate the gradual disappearance of the custom. Informants at Gömöralmágy in the Medvesalja district (now Gemerský Jablonec, Slovakia, formerly Gömör County) recounted that when someone first went to Szentkút, she invited a godmother:

"Will you be my Szentkút godmother?"

However, in recent years it happens more and more often here too that the actual act of baptism with the water of the Verebély sacred well does not take place the partners concerned simply buy each other a gift. During the feast they went to confession and communion together. Such a relationship is regarded as a close spiritual kinship. It was and still is regarded as fitting for the godchild to place a wreath on the grave at the death of the *Szentkút godmother*. In Sajópuszpöki too, such relationships were cultivated and it was fitting to invite the Szentkút

20 LELE – WALDMANN 1971. 585.

21 CSETÉNYI, Mihályné, manuscript collection.

22 SCHRAM 1975. 292.

goddaughter to weddings, for example, because she was regarded as being a relative.²³

Further researches can widen our knowledge about known examples by drawing attention to additional details and versions. These are important and necessary since there are numerous open questions related to the custom of pilgrim baptism. We are not sufficiently acquainted with the geographical spread of this custom and its analogies in religious practice of other peoples are not known, there are many possibilities of explaining it as a symbolic act, too.

It is remarkable that the European literature concerning the pilgrimages I know makes no mention of this custom. I can cite only one or two details connected with Mariazell (Austria). It is mentioned in sources writing about Mariazell that by the road of pilgrimage to Mariazell at Türrnitz there is a chapel called *Siebenbründlkapelle* or *Maria Siebenbrunn* (Seven Spring). This is the place where pilgrims going to Mariazell for the first time were sprinkled and so baptised with the water of the marble well in the midst of great cheerfulness.²⁴ The other datum is again from Mariazell, from the Heimatmuseum. In the collection of the museum there is a drawing by F. Henter called *Mariazell Taufe* which means baptism in Mariazell. The picture represents a group of pilgrims as they are walking on a bridge over a stream and a lad who sprinkles them with a wet broom. According to the source this 'baptism' happened at the Styrian border and it was made up by cabmen and common carriers in order to get tips from the passengers. They often 'baptized' people who had not been on Styrian soil previously so as to make them a real Styrian.²⁵

Apart from the Hungarian pilgrim rites we have data regarding pilgrim baptism only in Maria Bistrica in Croatia and in Mariazell in Austria. So the question arises whether this custom originated in Pannonia and was spread from this region to distant places especially by the influence of Mariazell? This premise is weakened by the circumstance that we have only few data regarding Mariazell. Nevertheless the amount of data from Hungary and the practice of the custom living intensively right up to the present can suggest that this tradition came from Hungary to Bistrica and Mariazell since the pilgrimage of Hungarians to both places was very common.

The important role of pilgrim baptism in the system of fictive kinship can be explained much more easily by the custom. A special relationship is formed by pilgrim baptism, in Hungarian called *komaság*, which is the name of the relationship between the god-parents and the child's parents and naturally the god-child. Participants of this relationship had traditional obligations and rights determined by the norms of the community. Naturally these were and are different

23 Author's own collection

24 GUGITZ 1955. 203–204., SCHMIDT 1975. 65., BEITL 1978. 82. In Hungarian: *Maria-Czelli Liliomok...* 1858. 70.

25 It is published: Gruss aus Mariazell. Mitteilungsblatt der Freunde des Heiligtums Mariazell. Jg. 23. Nr. 46. Weihnacht 1989. 11. This datum I received with thanks from Hans Peter Zelfel, bishop's librarian in Eisenstadt (Austria).

in different settlements. The pilgrim god-parents and god-children had to attend every important event of each other's life, such as wedding and funeral. At some places the pilgrim god-parents automatically became god-parents of confirmee. We have a few sporadic data about obstacles being placed in the way marriages between the family of the baptiser and the family of the baptised because of the close spiritual relationship.²⁶ Consequently pilgrim baptism, by forming a new type of fictive kinship, widens the system of relations which connects the individual to another and the community.

But there is another possibility of interpreting pilgrim baptism. In the practice of pilgrimage places, besides spiritual purifying connected with confession and holy communion, we can find the elements of physical purifying as well, especially at places where sacred wells or springs can be found. Pilgrims can wash their sick bodies with the water of the sacred well. And the sacred water can wash away not only the illness of the body, but dirt of the soul, its sin. So person who goes for the first time to the sacred place can gain a spiritual rebirth through pilgrim baptism. As baptism is rebirth by the sacrament of baptism so the pilgrimage can mean spiritual rebirth by doing penance, repentance and by gaining pilgrim privileges. The Christian spirit is reborn at the shrine. It is possible that the custom of pilgrim baptism is based on medieval liturgical tradition²⁷ though there is not enough data on the basis of the studies of liturgical history to solve this problem.²⁸

Besides being an act of purification and rebirth pilgrim baptism can be considered as a symbolic initiating rite. For a young man who goes on pilgrimage for the first time and visits a certain shrine this first trip can be regarded as the first step in obtaining the religious knowledge (prayers, songs, customs, activities) which he will need later on. This first occasion is made solemn by the act of pilgrim baptism which initiates someone to be a pilgrim. In one or two sporadic sources it is implied that sometimes pilgrim baptism has an important part in initiating customs or traditional rites, rites of passage. According to a one-time tradition in the surroundings of Szeged (South Hungary), only those who had been on pilgrimage to Máriaradna (now in Romania) could get married. And as another example in Zala county (Western Hungary) shows, the wreath and bunch of flowers given to baptised girls and boys remind us of the initiating rite of girls and boy.

According to our knowledge the rite of pilgrim baptism is spread in the Pannonian region and in the Carpathian basin and is known first of all among Hungarians. This rite may have its roots in the Middle Ages, became rich and varied during the Baroque period and it is a living practice of today's pilgrimages.

26 SCHRAM 1968. 97.

27 BÁLINT no date 179.

28 Only here in the footnotes I mention the hypothesis that the origin of pilgrim baptism could be connected to the 16th-17th centuries to the serious lack of priests during the Reformation and the era of Turkish occupation. Perhaps during this period people were baptised their children with the water of springs which were sanctified by apparitions of Mary or other miraculous phenomena. So the custom could be connected to the tradition of licenced people.

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