

SAINT MARGARET OF HUNGARY: THE SAINT OF PENANCE, SERVICE TO AND LOVE OF THE HOMELAND

20TH CENTURY INTERPRETATIONS OF SAINT MARGARET

Abstract: The process of canonisation of Saint Margaret of Hungary lasted 700 years. It began immediately after her death (18 January 1270) but it was not until 23 July 1943 that it was successfully concluded. What was the secret of the success of the procedure in the 20th century? It was due in part to the well prepared and developed cult in Hungary that won the backing of the whole of Catholic society and actors in political life, supported by the achievements of scholarship (history, art history, literary studies, archaeology) and by works of the arts (literature, painting, sculpture). People in the 20th century saw parallels in the historical context: Margaret lived in 13th century Hungary when the country destroyed by the Mongol invasion (1241-1242) had to be rebuilt, while after the defeat in the 1st World War the country dismembered by the Treaty of Trianon had to be rebuilt. This called for a spiritual revival, and the figure and life of Margaret served as a good example for that. She became the saint of penance, service to and love of the homeland. However, her well prepared and structured cult that found links to current social problems was unable to flourish because a few months after the celebration of her canonisation the front of the Second World War reached Hungary, followed by the Soviet occupation and then, from 1948, by communism. The impetus with which the cult was being built faltered and was broken. Margaret's canonisation was successful in the first half of the 20th century because the example of her life had meaning for the time.

Keywords: Saint Margaret of Hungary, role of scholarship and the arts in creating a cult, social problems in the 13th and 20th centuries, penance, achieving peace, sacrifice

Saint Margaret of Hungary, the seventh child of Hungarian king Béla IV and Byzantine princess Maria Laskarina was born on 27 January 1242, at the time of the Mongol invasion and became an example of self-discipline, penance and love. She brought about peace between her father and her brother Stephen, heir to the throne. In their desperate situation her parents dedicated her to God for the rescue of the country. Margaret was sent to the Dominican convent on the Isle of Rabbits and was brought up there from childhood. Several attempts were made to arrange a marriage for her, but she refused. She died at an early age in the con-

vent on 18 January 1270 and was buried there. This is why 18 January was chosen as her feast day. Her grave on the island was undisturbed until 1541. When the Turks occupied Buda, the country's capital, her relics were taken to Pozsony (now Bratislava, Slovakia).

The wish for her canonisation was first expressed after her death because of the miracles that occurred at her grave. Investigations were conducted, and the records sent to Rome in 1275.¹ However, Innocent V declared them incomplete. New investigations were made in 1276. The records were sent to Avignon, but no action was taken. Attempts were made to hasten the process in 1340 by Caroberto, then a century later by King Matthias – without success. It was not until 1638 that the Dominican Order revived the procedure, but by then a new case had to be launched. In this way the canonisation process was started again and again but always came to a halt.²

But despite the protracted and unsuccessful procedure, Margaret continued to be revered in the Dominican Order. In 1789 Pope Pius VI authorised her veneration and her feast in Transylvania and several other church dioceses. It was not until 23 July 1943 that the canonisation procedure was successfully concluded.³

The question inevitably arises: what was the reason for the seven centuries of failure and what social, political and church political factors contributed to its success in the 20th century?

The reasons for the success of the renewed procedure in the 20th century can be clearly seen through an examination of the different stages and focal points of the process. In the early 20th century it was not principally persons inside the church who cultivated the veneration of Margaret, rather it was sensitivity of the period of the Hungarian millennium (1896) towards the glorious Hungarian past and in general towards key turning points in the history of the Hungarian nation that fed into the veneration of – as she was then – Blessed Margaret. Literature at the turn of the 19th to 20th century surrounded and even obscured the figure of Margaret with “charm, moonlight, romance”. The picture formed of the saint in the late 19th century was a romantic one, full of decorative sentimentality.⁴ This is also true of the novel by Géza Gárdonyi, *Isten rabjai* [Slaves of God] published in 1907. Nevertheless, that stylised image meant the most in that period.⁵ In the early 20th century scholarly research had not yet examined 13th century religiosity and so it appeared rather foreign to people of the time. But by the time János Kodolányi wrote his novel *Boldog Margit* [Blessed Margaret] in the 1930s many things were seen more clearly. Historians (Elemér Mályusz) and literary historians threw light on the so-called Gothic trend in mediaeval religiosity spread by the Franciscans

1 ÉRSZEGI 1983.

2 BÓLE 1944. 5-15.

3 BÓLE 1944. 15-59.

4 RÓNAY 1971. 317.

5 RÓNAY 1971. 316-319.

and Dominicans, and their legends were published and analysed.⁶ What was still a curiosity for Gárdonyi at the beginning of the century was taken for granted by János Kodolányi. As a result, Kodolányi presented not an idealised picture but the world of penance in the life of the convent: Margaret, doing penance as the rebel of poverty. However, her protest against her royal descent was not a manifestation of the general spirit of the age but the conscious acceptance of the poverty of the gospels.⁷

Without giving further details, it can be said that there have been poems, novels, plays, statues and paintings on the life of Margaret revered as blessed. In 1942 there was also a film, based on the novel by Gárdonyi. Churches dedicated to her cult were also built.

Beginning in the 1910s archaeologists excavated the ruins of the convent on Margaret Island and in 1937 found Margaret's grave. Newspaper items about the works of literature and reports on the excavations not only kept interest in the figure of Margaret alive but also strengthened it. From the late 1920s the radio also joined in the campaign – through Dominican preachers, particularly the radio sermons of the postulator, the Dominican Kornél Bóle. As a consequence, images and statues of Margaret appeared in churches, schools, convents and monasteries. Stamps, postcards, small sacred images, information booklets and small medallions with her image to be worn as necklaces were sold. With the support of the Hungarian Catholic Women's League, Saint Margaret circles for girls were formed in Catholic girls' schools and then in wider circles. From the 1910s pilgrimages for girls were regularly held to Margaret Island in May.

Not only the Dominicans but also other orders (especially Franciscans and Benedictines) spread the cult. Veneration of Margaret strengthened markedly in the 1920s as the Hungarian Catholic church prepared for the 900th anniversary in 1930 of the death of Saint Emmerich. The Dominican order, as well as the church and society in general anticipated that Margaret would be canonised in the Saint Emmerich anniversary year. In 1930 Serédi Jusztinián, cardinal-primate and archbishop of Esztergom appointed Kornél Bóle to act as postulate in the canonisation procedure; Bóle had by then been devoting diligent attention for a decade to the cult of one of the order's great figures. Although the Saint Emmerich year ended without the successful conclusion of the canonisation procedure, the social background of the cult of Margaret grew ever wider.

1938 brought further heightened anticipation when the Hungarian Catholic church remembered Saint Stephen, the country's first and holy king, on the 900th anniversary of his death. The message of that anniversary was reinforced by the Eucharistic World Congress held in Budapest at that time. That was the

6 LOVAS 1916, 1939, 1942, MÁLYUSZ 1933.

7 RÓNAY 1971. 319. Because of its archaising language the novel is not an easy read. And according to Rónay, János Kodolányi was unable to reach up to the heights "where the soul conducts a dialogue with God without witnesses" [...] However, it is true that holiness, as the supernatural connection of the soul with God [...] is not a collection of novels." Rónay 1971, 319.

“Hungarian holy year”.⁸ The Hungarian church and the postulator took advantage of the occasion of the presence in Hungary of many foreign church dignitaries, asking them to sign a declaration in support of Margaret.⁹ But 1938 passed too without the expected announcement. But there was still hope: they were preparing for the 700th anniversary of the birth of Margaret.

In 1942 the anniversary brought back impetus to both scholarly and literary life. A novel by Lajos Harsányi was published,¹⁰ a film was made on the basis of Gárdonyi’s book,¹¹ and a whole series of works of art celebrated the anniversary.¹² A monthly publication was launched to spread veneration of Margaret.¹³ In 1942 the 700th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Margaret was celebrated by a country at war. The world had by then been wracked by war for years and the situation was regarded as “a threat similar to or even greater than the Mongol invasion”. And those times called for sacrifice for the homeland “for the future of our nation and our country”.¹⁴

Actio Catholica was established in 1932 and soon launched various campaigns that reached the whole of Catholic society: devotions, a eucharistic movement and masses were organised to support the canonisation of Margaret. Documents on the practice of virtues¹⁵ and millions of petitions calling for the canonisation were presented in 57 large volumes to the Holy Father by the postulator, the Dominican Kornél Bőle.

The persistent campaign was finally crowned with success: on 23 July 1943, when there was already fighting in Rome, Pope Pius XII signed the bull of canonisation. National celebrations were held between 16-18 January 1944 and all Catholic churches were required to participate.

Interpretations of Margaret in the first half of the 20th century – 20th century social background of the canonisation

Summing up the above chronological survey it can be said that repeated urgings for the canonisation of Margaret as well as historical, literary historical and archaeological research began again in the 1910s, but it was only from the 1920s that they became increasingly intensive. Behind this, at the turn of the 1910s to 1920s was the view of contemporaries who saw the situation of that time as comparable to the period of the Mongol invasion: the country lay in ruins after the

8 CSÍKY 2012.

9 MESZLÉNYI 1944. 228. Among others, J. Adeodatus Piazza Cardinal-Patriarch of Venice, Alexander Kokowski Cardinal-Archbishop of Warsaw, Johannes Casado Apostolic Vicariate of Thai-Binh, Augustin F. Leynaud Archbishop of Algiers, John Cicognani Apostolic Delegate Washington, Martin Gillet OP General Rome.

10 HARSÁNYI, Lajos: *Égi s földi szerelem*. [Heavenly and Earthly Love] Budapest, 1941.

11 In 1942, on the 700th anniversary of the birth of Margaret. Director: Ágoston Pacséry.

12 János Zakariás compiled the relevant sources. Zakariás 2007.

13 SCHIPEK 1914.

14 BŐLE 1944. 243.

15 BŐLE 1944. 45.

world war, it had been dismembered by an unjust peace dictate, and in 1919 the Republic of Soviets, the first communist dictatorship caused enormous physical and spiritual destruction. The country was divided in spirit. Contemporaries, especially opinion-setting churchmen and intellectuals, stressed “the alarming similarity between 1241 and the 1940s”.¹⁶

In this situation there was a need for fixed points, for an example, an ideal to which people could refer, someone people – especially the young – could follow. Margaret seemed a suitable choice for this, she too lived in a country in ruins, she did penance, created peace in her family and sacrificed herself for her country and her people. She died young in consistent, self-sacrificing penance.

She could be an example in all the problems of the time: the country was in ruins – it had to be rebuilt; God punished us for our sins – penance was needed; the country was divided – social cohesion had to be achieved in the interest of the nation; individual sacrifices had to be made for the community and the nation, the homeland needed our love. According to church leaders of the time, Margaret could be an example for the young in all those ways. The “undertaking of atonement renewed the moral force of the nation” and showed that “only faithful and unwavering service to God could be really valuable service to the nation”. Seeing the high level of social activity, the bishops gave their support to the cause. The monastic orders, first of all naturally the Dominicans, but also the Franciscans and Benedictines, as well as the Catholic bishops, the entire scientific and arts worlds joined forces in the 1930s for the success of the cause.

But before we begin reorganising the country we need to change ourselves – contemporaries pointed out: to renew, do penance, and pray “to omnipotent God and beseech the saints to intercede”.¹⁷ And in these efforts the “tiny”, but “heroic” Hungary needs examples to follow. They found a suitable example in the person of Margaret. The updated idea of Hungary as a protective shield for Europe grew in emphasis: “Our country was forced to take up arms against Mongols, Turks and bolshevism and defended Europe with its own body. [... In the course of its history] it gave not only heroes to the nation but also saints to the Church.”¹⁸ Bishops and priests made rousing speeches in which the figure of Margaret was held up as an example of “encouragement”, “national self-esteem”, a “sublime example”, a “holy maiden”, of “self-denial” a “mystic” example of “love”, “her life was a sacrifice for the homeland”, and through her figure a “holy family”, the Arpadians appear, and more widely “the big holy family of Hungarians, and around them an entire holy country”.

The anniversary years of Hungarian saints (1930 – Saint Emmerich, 1938 – Saint Stephen) and the International Eucharistic Congress strengthened the demand for canonisation that was effectively represented in the background by well organised church and social aspirations.¹⁹ The notion of national pride also played

16 BŐLE 1944. 373, 383.

17 BŐLE 1944. 342.

18 BŐLE 1944. 353.

19 CSÍKY 2012.

a big part: to have one more saint for the Arpadian dynasty. And Margaret was a “martyr of Catholic Hungarian patriotism”.²⁰ Moreover, the notion of nation in general was very important at that time: from the end of the 1930s some of the territories the country lost after the First World War were gradually liberated. In 1938 the southern part of historical Upper Hungary where Hungarians were the absolute majority, that had been annexed to Czechoslovakia, was returned to Hungary; Subcarpathia was returned in 1939, Northern Transylvania in 1940 and in the spring of 1941 part of the southern territories that had been annexed to Yugoslavia. All this also strengthened veneration of the Hungarian national saints giving further impetus to the procedure for the canonisation of Margaret.

Margaret, the penitent – together with others (István Kaszap, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux) – also became an intercessor for soldiers fighting in the war. She was the patron of Budapest that was suffering from bombing raids. Amidst the difficulties of the war and the approaching front it became easier to fully appreciate and understand Margaret’s sacrifice of her life.

The church prepared with care for the national celebration of the canonisation on 16, 17 and 18 January 1944. The conference of bishops set out the compulsory frame of the celebrations and requested that they remain within church frames, but that great attention should be paid to the outer trappings and symbols of the occasion. Nevertheless, in addition to the church events, a few “social” events were also organised, among others in the Academy of Music with the best musicians of the time performing works by leading composers,²¹ in Kolozsvár (Cluj) in the National Theatre.²² In Pozsony (Bratislava), at that time the capital of independent Slovakia, a solemn mass was held in Saint Martin’s cathedral with sermons in Hungarian, German and Slovakian, attended by representatives of the Hungarian embassy, the Slovak government, the Vatican chargé d’affaires and leaders of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.

The press and radio devoted extensive coverage to the central celebrations in Budapest and the events held almost everywhere in the country. They were said “to arouse in us the trust and hope that we will not be destroyed in the present brutal dangers”.²³ The circular letter from the conference of bishops that was read at the celebration also emphasised “the turbulent days of the Second World War, when the lives of peaceful citizens and innocent children are just as much in danger as those of soldiers struggling on the battlefields”.²⁴ The Hungarian bishops held up Saint Margaret as an example for all strata of society: “she will now be the saint and patron of the Hungarian capital forever”²⁵ and the bishop of Veszprém, József Mindszenty added the figure of Saint Margaret to his arms²⁶.

20 BÓLE, 1944. 248.

21 BÓLE 1944. 431.

22 BÓLE 1944. 535.

23 BÓLE 1944. 404.

24 BÓLE 1944. 415.

25 BÓLE 1944. 418, 424.

26 BÓLE 1944. 508.

In this way Margaret became and is still recognised by religious society as the saint of service to and love for the homeland. However, the well prepared and structured cult that found a connection to current social problems was unable to develop fully: a few months after the celebrations of the canonisation the front reached Hungary, followed by Soviet occupation and from 1948 by communism. The great impetus of building the cult faltered and was broken – and this kept the figure of Margaret at the level of the social expectations of the 1940s.

A number of lessons can be drawn from the 20th century canonisation procedure for Margaret of Hungary: on the one hand we see how thorough and broad the preparatory process and movement was, and obviously this would still be the case today. On the other hand, figures whose life was an example that has a message valid for the given age have a chance of being beatified/canonised.

At the same time, it could also be very instructive to examine what the figure of Saint Margaret and the example of her life mean for people today.

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