

Krisztina FRAUHAMMER

## Desires and Appeals attached to a Pilgrimage Feast The Visitors Book of Alsóváros

A few years ago while doing research on the miraculous chapel and the pilgrimage connected to it in my home village in Máriakálnok, I came across an interesting source, a book entitled 'Emlékkönyv' (Album). The pages were full of requests – often quite concrete ones –, expressions of gratitude, personal and honest prayers.

My tutor, Gábor Barna drew my attention to similar sources found in the village of Vecseklő, in the Chapel of Básti-hill, which unfortunately vanished during the years.<sup>1</sup> He considered this an entirely new kind of source in religious ethnological researches. Afterwards I started to look for similar customs and surprisingly I discovered many examples of devotion, among others in the Franciscan church of Szeged-Alsóváros.

It turned out that the practice of putting out a note-book for the believers' prayers and requests in shrines devoted to Blessed Mary or in other churches has been generally known in Hungary, in several European countries, also outside Europe. In some pilgrimage places lacking note-books believers wrote on pieces of wood, wall, furniture or at the back of the altar.

This source group has been noticed as well recently in European ethnological research, but the researches have been carried out separately, usually concentrating solely on the material at a particular place. A systematising and summarising work has not yet appeared. I was the first to make an attempt to introduce in Hungarian scientific literature the newly discovered source type together with the description of pilgrimage connected to the chapel of Máriakálnok. On the basis of the collected data the whole phenomenon can not be described, only certain details: the motives for visiting the shrine, the catchment area, the intensity of pilgrimages during a certain period – a year, a month –, the grouping of the pilgrims according to their age, sex, social status. However, with the help of this information we can reveal the motivation behind pilgrimages more thoroughly. As there are a number of Guestbooks in Hungary, we can make a comparison of them.

---

1 BARNÁ, Gábor: *Búcsújáróhely a Básti hegyben*. In: UJVÁRY, Z. (ed.): *Gömör néprajza I.* (Debrecen, 1985) 163–177.

Joining the pilgrimage researches of the Department of Ethnology of Szeged I had the opportunity to investigate the guestbook of the Franciscan church in Szeged-Alsóváros. This work concentrates solely on the notes written on the feast days in 1997, so it does not contain the processing of the entire material. However with my work I intend to enrich the description of this church feast.

### HUNGARIAN AND EUROPEAN PARALLELS

The works published so far on this topic have already mentioned several examples of books with different titles, or other substituting methods. The sources are originated mostly from the second half of the century, and can still be found in churches. Lacking a comprehensive and systematising research we are unable to give a complete report on the so far discovered sources.

In the case of Hungary we can only give the list of those shrines where these kind of books are known. The oldest is from Máriakálnok, where a book was used until 1947-52, when for unknown reasons it was taken away, and so the tradition was broken. The note-book in the pilgrimage place of Mátraverebély-Szentkút was available for the believers only for a short period. The note-book was hung out by the sacristan, Ms Júlia Petrus, in order to prevent the believers writing their names with knives or pencils on the side of the small niche covering the sculpture of Blessed Mary. The believers coming to the image of Virgin Mary and the spring intended to record their visit in this way.<sup>2</sup>

Recently similar books have been put out for the pilgrims in Csíksomlyón, Máriapócsón, Máriagyűdön and the pilgrimage church of Szeged.<sup>3</sup>

In England and Germany these kinds of books have been in general use. In England they were called Intercessions Book, while in Germany Fürbittenbuch or Anliegebuch was the name. Sabine Wienker-Piepho investigating the guestbooks of German motorways notices that in the places lacking a guestbook the believers write on cigarette paper or postcards available in the church and place them on the altar. The author explains this initiative of the visitors as a certain desire to make public their intimate problems and joys.<sup>4</sup>

The same phenomenon was experienced in Holy Well, Wales. In the summer of 1992 the priest of Saint Trillo chapel found a piece of paper with a handwritten prayer. He was touched by the text, so he left it there. Later he found several more and placed them on the altar. Without the priest encouraging the believers, new

---

2 *ibid.* 163-177.

3 Information by Gábor Barna.

4 WIENKER-PIEPHO, Sabine: *Medieval Traditions and Modern Storytelling in Motorway-church Manuscripts*. In: RÖHRICH, L. - WIENKER-PIEPHO, S. (eds.): *Storytelling in Contemporary Societies*. (Freiburg, 1989) 122.

prayers appeared written on many different kinds of paper, such as hotel bills, receipts, tram tickets, calendar pages etc. This example also proves that this habit developed spontaneously and the believers encouraged each other unknowingly.<sup>5</sup> This case is especially noteworthy as we can rarely follow the formation of a custom from the first steps.

A similar process can be observed in the pilgrimage church of Altötting, in Germany. The believers pray or express their gratitude on slips of paper, letters, even in letters sent by post at the grave of Saint Conrad of Parzham. Letters arrive from all over the world also to the grave of Saint Anthony of Padua and to Lourdes. Walter Heim listed in 1961 forty more places where this custom is alive.<sup>6</sup>

Herbert Nikitsch met this phenomenon in seven churches of Wien. Recently in three of them instead of the note-book, post-boxes are put out for sake of discretion. In his paper he claims that the emergence of this new custom is not in connection with the particular saint of the church but rather with the liturgical changes of II. Vatican Council.<sup>7</sup> This was the time when the tradition of the Church Fathers, the prayers of the faithful was revived. As a result the current requests of the community could become included in the holy mass.<sup>8</sup> This decree of 1970 made the parish community of Gumpendorf put out a book so that the believers could express their own personal prayers. Here the custom has been continuous since 1977.<sup>9</sup>

Further examples of this devotion can be observed in Mariazell (Austria) and Eszék (Croatia).<sup>10</sup>

This form of piety can be compared to the expressions of gratitude found in religious papers. These can be considered as a further variant of the genre developing as result of official organisational work. Similar texts can be read in the issues of the Messenger of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which was published between 1861-1944 in sixty countries, twelve times a year. Each issue contains 20-30 texts written according to the same pattern.<sup>11</sup> In England it is still possible to publish such kind of expressions of thanks on official forms.<sup>12</sup>

5 HULSE, Gray Tristan: *A modern votive deposit at a north Welsh Holy Well*. Folklore 1995. 34.

6 HEDM, Walter: *Briefe zum Himmel. Die Grabbriefe an Mutter M. Theresia Scherer in Ingenbohl*. Beitrag zur religiösen Volkskunde der Gegenwart. In: Schriften der Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, 40. (Basel, 1961) 13.

7 NIKITSCH, Herbert: *Schreiben und Glauben. Anliegenbücher als Beispiel moderner Volksreligiosität*. In: EBERHART, H. – HÖRANDER, E. – PÖTTLER, B. (hrsg.): *Volksfrömmigkeit*. (Wien, 1990.) 194.

8 About this decree of the II. Vatican Council see in greater detail: *Konstitúció a Szent Liturgiáról 'Sacrosanctum Concilium'*. In: CSERHÁTI J.–FABIÁN Á. (eds.): *A 2. Vatikáni Zsinat tanítása*. (Bp., 1986) 92–128.

9 NIKITSCH *ibid.* 192.

10 PONISCH, Gabriele: *Bitte um weiteres Glück! Anliegenbücher als Möglichkeit zeitgenössischer Devotion*. In: *Schatz und Schicksal*. (Wien, 1996) 261–273.; ČAPO ZMEGAČ, Jasna: *„Mother help me get a good mark in history“*. *Ethnological Analysis of Wall Inscriptions in the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Osijek (Croatia)*. *Ethnologia Europaea* 1994, 67–76.

11 Information by Bertalan Pusztai.

12 HULSE *ibid.* 35.

On the basis of collected examples we can conclude that this is a relatively new independent genre, which has become general and is at present flourishing in so many different forms.

### DEFINITION OF GENRE

The commonly accepted definition of the genre has not yet been given, though several attempts have been made. Researchers compare the investigated sources to other semifolklor genres.

In Máriakálnok the note-book put out in the church is called Album, in fact showing similarities to the already studied genre of albums. In both cases there is a desire recording the requests for posterity. However, the inscriptions in an album are to help the person to reflect on the purpose of life, happiness, and love. In the other kind of guestbook<sup>13</sup> the personal connection with the saint is stressed by means of writing.

Sabine Wienker-Piepho draws a parallel between guestbooks and miracle-books.<sup>14</sup> She defines the former as a modern outward form of the latter, as in a guestbook there are also records of miracles and prayers answered, though in a much shorter and more individual form than in a miracle story.<sup>15</sup>

There are several similarities also with graffiti. We know them already from early Christian times also in religious places, such as in old Christian catacombs or in medieval French and Spanish pilgrimage places, e.g. in the church of Monte Gargano.<sup>16</sup>

However, as Jasna Čapo Zmegač claims in her paper about wall inscriptions in Eszék, these kind of graffiti are not usual. Though written on walls they are public and anonymous. They are not for an anonymous public, but to a particular person: Virgin Mary. Besides as opposed to graffiti they are not motivated by rebellious behaviour, either vandalism, or as a reaction of prohibiting the expression of public opinion. Another basic difference is in the topic, as the inscriptions on the wall in churches are always religious.<sup>17</sup>

The investigated sources can also be compared to the votive plaques, though they are solely to express gratitude in a written form.<sup>18</sup> These have been appearing

---

13 The definition of memorybook, memorial verses see: KESZEG, Vilmos: *A folklór határán*. (Bukarest, 1991) 132.

14 WIENKER-PIEPHO *ibid.* 122.

15 About miracles: TŰSKÉS, Gábor – KNAPP, Éva: *Egy feltáratlan forráscsoport: barokk kori mirákulumos könyvek magyarországi búcsújáráshelyekről*. Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények 1985. 90-100.

16 HEIM *ibid.* 12.

17 HEIM *ibid.* 12.

18 About votive pictures see: BÁLINT, Sándor: *Sacra Hungaria. Tanulmányok a magyar vallásos népelet köréből*. (Kassa, 1943); HÖFER J. – RAHNER, K. (hrsg.): *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche X*. (Freiburg, 1965) 896-898.; *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie 4*. (Freiburg, 1990) 272-274. I thank Gábor Barna for the data provided.

under the pictures of the panels since the 16th century. By the 19th century only the inscriptions remained on the votive panels made from wood or marble.<sup>19</sup> This can still be seen in many churches today.

Beside Walter Heim from Switzerland Tristan Gray Hulse also considers letters addressed to God, to saints as the main antecedents of this genre.<sup>20</sup> This kind of letter was generally known in the Middle ages. A story from the biography of a Dominican, Saint Vencelas supports this theory. The monk was called to the bedside of an immoral girl who was just dying. Vencelas prayed to the Holy trinity and wrote the text down on a piece of paper which he folded up and threw into the air. The letter flew away. According to the biography recorded the Holy Trinity answered immediately in a letter written with gold in order to guarantee forgiveness to the woman.<sup>21</sup> The author publishing the story considers it as a biography-motive, though for us it indicates that writing letters to God was a general habit. This genre was flourishing during the Middle-Ages. The believers placed their letters addressed to a saint on the graves or in boxes put out in towns dedicated to that particular saint. A nice relic and at the same time a proof of this tradition is a picture in the church of Seppach, Bavaria. The painting from 1770-1771 depicts believers asking for help. They are handing pieces of papers to an angel, who is taking them to Saint Joseph, who is finally passing them on to Little Jesus. He fulfils the wishes and the angel takes the pieces of paper back to the believers gathered in prayer.<sup>22</sup>

A similar case is known in connection with the rabbi of Nagykálló. Sándor Scheiber publishes the legend about him. The rabbi died in 1821 and his grave is visited on the anniversary of his funeral. Also his memory haunts: 'In the cemetery under a big round red stone rests the singing caddik. At the bottom of the grave there is a small box which leads under the ground. Sulem says a silent prayer and places a piece of paper into the small box with his wishes on it.'<sup>23</sup>

However, the practice of writing letters became widespread only in the 19th century, parallel to the spreading of literacy. This was the time when the first examples of cheap printed pious literature appeared. This helped the habit of letter writing to survive and in different places it has been alive ever since.<sup>24</sup>

It seems that people centuries ago believed that writing could be a means of being in contact with the other world, even more effectively than through oral prayers.

19 In the case of Hungary it is not only the question of reducing the practice, but there are also historical reasons at the background. The Josephinian spirit of the 19th century did not tolerate these pictures in the churches, moreover they were destroyed in most places. BALINT, Sándor - BARNA, Gábor: *Búcsújáró magyarok*. (Bp., 1994) 237.

20 HEIM *ibid.* 13-21., HULSE *ibid.* 34-36.

21 HULSE *ibid.* 35.

22 HEIM *ibid.* 14-15.

23 About the rabbi and his legend see: SCHEIBER, Sándor: *Folklor és tárgytörténet*. (Bp., 1996) 1231-1239.

24 HELSE *ibid.* 35.

Thus the newly discovered genre is not unprecedented, but is part of a long process, which according to Walter Heim can be called folk written piety.<sup>25</sup> Modern forms of this piety are the books which are called Fürbittenbuch in Germany and Intercessions Books in England. Lacking a standard Hungarian term I call these kind of books Guestbooks. On the basis of the research carried out so far we can point out the following common features of the genre:

1. These books can be found mainly in shrines devoted to Virgin Mary or other saints, rarely in other churches, frequently in Roman Catholic communities, sometimes also in other congregations (Lutheran church).
2. The messages are written in a note-book, on paper, on the walls or on the benches.
3. They are addressed mainly to Blessed Mary, to a saint or to Jesus himself.
4. They contain wishes (both general and concrete ones) and expressions of gratitude after having their prayers answered.
5. The topic of the messages are influenced by the age and the sex of the writers, also by the historic situation.
6. They are spontaneous expressions being in most of the cases individual. Sometimes the writer quotes form literary works, church hymns, prayers or memorial verses.
7. Anonymous inscriptions are frequent, thus they are informal and intimate.

#### ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THE INSCRIPTIONS OF THE GUESTBOOK IN ALSÓVÁROS

The evaluation of the data and the inscriptions of a guestbook can throw light upon significant facts. Namely the different motives which make the pilgrims visit a shrine can be revealed. The investigation of these can be difficult through interviews, as these are mainly personal, and are difficult to talk about. In a broader context a book like this can reflect the piety of a certain age. The inscriptions can reflect historical and political events of local or greater importance, can show also the social customs and mentality of an age. The significant problems of the age can also be outlined. Observing the changes over a longer period, in time can be traced back.

##### *The writers of the inscriptions*

Most of the inscriptions are anonymous, thus the writers are difficult to identify. Only 47 wishes or thanks are signed by a full name, out of which 5 are illegible. In 39 cases there are not any names below the texts. In 22 cases either the first

---

25 HEIM *ibid.* 10.

name or surname is signed, in 10 cases only the initials are given. In 6 cases the writers are identified only by their professions (e.g. a mother).

Anonymity ensures discretion for the writer, thus they can express their wishes or gratitude without fear or inhibition. Alongside with intimacy the possibility of publicity is provided as well. Anonymity is especially important in a lively parish community defending the writers from the curiosity of closer acquaintances.

The writers of the texts are mainly women. 45 were written by women, while only 11 by men. In the rest of the cases the sex of the writer can not be decided. This tendency can be noticed in connection with other sources as well. In Jasna Čapo Zmegač's opinion this is due to the dominance of women in popular religion.<sup>26</sup>

As for the age of the writers we can rely only on the content of the texts. There are no direct references. There are a lot of requests about the family and children: *'I pray for the well-being of my children forever.'*<sup>27</sup> These inscriptions are surely from parents or from grandparents. There are fewer demands in connection with youth (love, education, exams etc.).

Specifying the social status of the pilgrims is not possible as their profession is rarely indicated. In the cases examined we found only two examples where the profession of the writer was given, they were both cantors.

Similarly we do not have information about the pilgrims' place of origin in order to draw the catchment area of the shrine. On the basis of broader sampling this could be possible. However, we should notice one peculiar fact. In the guestbook four inscriptions can be read by visitors from abroad. Three of them are Hungarians now living abroad, in the USA, Australia and Germany. Thus tourists visiting the homeland can provide a possibility for pilgrimage, perhaps coming to the shrine which they visited a long time ago.

### *Stylistic and formal features*

The prayers are of varying lengths. Usually they are short, consisting of only 6-7 lines. Their tone and phrasing is similar to that of the prayers of the faithful. Sometimes they are exactly the same: *'For the unity of Christians! Pray for us!'*<sup>28</sup> In this respect the guestbook of Alsóváros is rather different from other examples. They are more personal and direct, while this one is rather reserved. A possible reason for this could be the fact that the requests of the book from the Franciscan church are brought to Lord Jesus during the offering in a mass. They are not read out like the prayers of the faithful but put next to the wine and bread symbolically.

26 ČAPO ZMEGAČ *ibid.* 70.

27 Guestbook, 5. inscription

28 Guestbook, 17. inscription

This tradition can motivate the believers to express their own requests similarly to the prayers of the faithful.

All the studied texts with one exception were written in prose lacking all stylistic features. The only exception is a verse, presumably composed by the writer:

*Why so many wounded people  
Oh, my dear Lord?  
Everyday leaving my home  
I thank You, Lord  
You give me strength and health  
Never leaving me alone  
Please, my Jesus, heal all the sick children.*<sup>29</sup>

#### *Classification of the inscriptions according to topics*

The inscriptions of the guestbook can be divided into three basic groups: requests, thanks and other texts ( e.g. only a name, illegible, etc.). In some cases there are several requests or thanks within one inscription. I regarded them as separate requests. Thus most of the texts, 73% are requests, 15% express gratitude and 12% are other kind of texts. The dominance of the requests is obvious. This can be explained by the general human behaviour. Namely, in extreme life situations religious feelings become stronger and people turn towards God, or a saint of the church asking for help. When everything goes right in our lives, we easily forget about expressing our gratitude or thanks.

The topics of the inscriptions are varied. These can reveal the motives of pilgrims coming to that particular shrine, also the current social problems. As a conclusion the following categories can be established:

#### **Request (number)**

##### **For the family: 42**

- General: 15
- Parents, grandparents for their children: 8
- For the deceased members of a family: 6
- Husband and wife for each other: 4
- For children/offspring: 3
- A child for their parents: 2
- For domestic peace: 1

##### **For health: 18**

- General: 8
- For recovery: 10

---

<sup>29</sup> Guestbook, 30. inscription



**For young people: 1**

**General**

(for peace, love, strength of body and soul): 15

**For religion, piety: 9**

- For strengthening of faith: 2
- For carrying out a mission: 2
- For the conversion of the sinful: 2
- For the unity of Christians: 1
- For remission of sins: 1

**For money: 5**

**For love, companion: 5**

**For homeland, Hungarians: 5**

**For pilgrimage feast**

(for good weather, more participants, organisers): 3

Gratitude (number):

**General: 6**

**For being present: 5**

- For family: 5
- Parent for their child: 2
- For marriage: 2
- For offspring: 1

**For health: 4**

**General: 2**

- For recovery: 2
- For religion, Blessed Mary: 2

**For examination: 1**

As the table shows the majority of the pilgrims' requests for the family: *My dear Virgin Mary, I ask you to help on all the members of my family. Please, be with us and help us to live in peace in the family home. Please, never leave us.*<sup>30</sup> The different versions of this kind of request can be frequently found in the guestbook. These together with the requests for health are also dominant in other studied guestbooks. Their topic is always current and at present all the time.

There are also plenty of prayers without any concrete requests, expressing a general idea sometimes with hidden personal intention: *Virgin Mary, please help me.*<sup>31</sup>

Visiting a shrine is motivated mainly by religious intentions: spiritual renewal, strengthening and purification of the soul, personal penitence etc. This is reflected by the requests in connection with religion, piety.

---

30 Guestbook, 27. inscription

31 Guestbook, 23. inscription

Noteworthy are the prayers asking for money reflecting very exactly the mentality of other age, when material goods are in the centre of our lives: *'Our Virgin Mary, please bless us with health, happiness and a lot of money.'*<sup>32</sup>

Love and looking for a companion is a topic seldom raised, which shows the small number of young believers visiting the shrine.

Also less frequent are the inscriptions about homeland, Hungarian people and youth.

Analysing the texts, one finds another common feature which should be looked at. Most of the believers address their requests or prayers to God, in spite of the fact that it is a shrine devoted to the Virgin Mary. Thus the role of the Blessed Mary as a mediator falls into the background.

In some cases the Franciscan friars are addressed: *'I ask for a mass in the name of Ibolya, who is enticed from her husband, so that she should return to her children and husband. For her health.'*<sup>33</sup> Another time they appear as mediators. Some prayers are written for the believers: *'Let us pray for a priest living in sin, for his health and spiritual peace.'*<sup>34</sup>

#### *The book and the function of the inscriptions*

As the book is placed next to the wine and bread during the offering at a mass, the believers have the possibility to present their own personal requests to God together with the general prayers. These can even be more effective through common praying.

On the other hand it can help the human becoming eternal. This could be the motivation behind the inscriptions on the wall, benches of the shrines, also the names written on trees, on walls of tourist spots, castles. Writing the name and the date in a way makes the inscription consecrated, transcendent through the sacred place.

Beside making the profane transcendent writing can make mortal humans and the subject of the inscriptions eternal. Writing also provides the requests, prayers and thanks with eternity, thus becoming permanent and timeless.

Inscription can be a device for recording the pilgrimage feast as a tourist enterprise. This is especially important in the case of Alsóváros, where the church is a tourist sight at the same time.

The inscriptions can have other functions as well. The pilgrims can get contact with the transcendent through writing, thus the texts can be interpreted as a way up to Heaven.<sup>35</sup> This kind of one-sided communication resembles the process of

---

32 Guestbook, 104. inscription

33 Guestbook, 91. inscription

34 Guestbook, 95. inscription

letter-writing. As we have already stated letters written to God or saints can be considered as antecedents of this genre.

We do not know for certain whether the pilgrims were aware of the above mentioned or only the researchers interpret the phenomena in this way. However, recently more and more similar guestbooks have been put out in different churches being filled with inscriptions. This shows that there is a demand in believers for this modern way of being in contact with God.