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Being the Guest of Our Lady in Szeged

The ancient hearth of the religious folklife in Szeged is the church devoted to Our Lady of the Snow in Alsóváros together with the cloister built around it, which has been radiating its light and warmth already for centuries not only to the citizens of Szeged but also to other Catholic regions.*

The Franciscans played a significant role already in the medieval life of the town. Their present church, one of the most beautiful examples of Hungarian church architecture, was built at the end of the 15th century. The town was soon to be destroyed by pagans, though its position was rather fortunate compared to other occupied territories, as it paid taxes directly to the sultan. Though it was not due to this situation, that Szeged survived the period of occupation, but to the protection of Our Lady, which maintained the continuity of Hungarian life and Roman Catholic faith in Szeged already for a thousand years.

The Franciscans of Szeged carried out an important national mission. The Turks were known to tolerate only the poor and humble sons of Saint Francis among the believers. The cloister of Szeged was the centre of a huge missionary field expanded to the territory of Southern Hungary. Its influence was universal. The monks of the cloister in Szeged obtained a passport valid throughout the whole empire. The diocese of Csongrád survived, but the believers scattered throughout the diocese were guided by the guardian of Szeged as a generalis vicarius. Beside Szeged the Franciscans were responsible for the religious life of another 14 settlements within the occupied territory. The believers of Szeged were led by the licentiates or 'semi-priests', the famous lay apostles of the era of occupation, who were usually the superiors of the fraternity of Saint Francis as well and who were directed from the cloister of Szeged. The local spiritual heritage of the observants, *Saint James of Marchia* and *Saint John of Capistran* was flourishing in the community of Szeged at that time. Its roots are hallowed by the blood of martyrs. The soul of Szeged might have been the happiest in those apocalyptic days: far from the world, far from the temptations of perfect rejoicing, taking on generous suffering.

* This essay was first published in 1944 in the book "Being the Guest of Our Lady".

The cult of pilgrimages was flourishing already in the 17th century. In Baroque times the church and the miraculous picture of Our Lady performed a new mission. In the 18th century and beginning of the following century the surviving population of Szeged resettled in more than fifty ravaged villages in the south. These emigrated groups still remained under the spiritual influence of the mother-town, under the protection of *Auxiliatrix Szegediensis*. The church feast gained a new significance: it meant not only a pilgrimage trip, i.e. an occasion for penitence and atonement, but also returning home. They returned to their common past, the ancient unity of the fate of Szeged, into the mystical community of blood and faith. This cult played an important role in the inhabitants of Southern Hungary remaining Hungarian and Catholic.

The third great effect of the cult during the 19th century came about at the same time as the formation of the world of farms around Szeged: the Franciscans from Alsóváros were the first to start pastoral work on the farms. The church feast was a holiday for the population living on farms, though new parishes were founded on the territory. They also came back for the feast, and at the same time visited their families and frequented the family graves situated in the Alsóváros cemetery.

Unfortunately, this wonderful ancient cult seems to be on the decline at the moment. Szeged became a big city. Many new settlers, who immigrated into Szeged did not adapt to the religious atmosphere of the city. Even the local people adjusted themselves to these newcomers, not to their own pious ancestors. The shrine enraptured the whole community of Szeged, both the poor and the happy alike. Nowadays mainly peasants pay their respects to Our Lady. Perhaps due to local pastoral work not taking the opportunities offered by the church, the sacral symbol of the city. However, where would we need the sacred ecstasy and festival food of the pilgrimage more than in the phalanstery of the big city living on a perpetual weekday full of pessimism, narrow-minded common sense, poverty and hopelessness? When should we plant the real values of life into the hearts of people, if not in our rootless age, when people live for the moment.

The cult of the *Lady Dressed in the Sun* has come to the fourth phase of its conquest in Szeged in spite of the spirit of the age and unfavourable environment. Here, in the shadow of Our Lady of Szeged was once born the *idea of Szeged*, which signifies the universal revival and metaphysical flourishing of our nation on the basis of Hungarian Catholicism, which in public life was regretfully used as political prejudice. However, when Szeged has found itself the church became an ideal of Dante: inspiration and obligation. From this mystical wellspring originates the work of Lajos Kálmány, the ascetic painting of Lajos Károlyi, the poetry of Gyula Juhász expressing the incomparable Catholicism of Szeged. These works reflect the eternal Szeged: Catholicism and Hungarian nation, collectively as well as individually, their whole ritual rooted in the love of Virgin Mary, in the enchantment of a peculiar Hungarian platonism.