

WRITTEN REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS¹

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Abstract: In recent years the attention of a number of observers has been drawn to an increasingly popular, entirely informal prayer practice in written form. More and more books, visitors' books and guestbooks are appearing at our shrines for visitors to record requests, prayers and declarations of gratitude, and their pages are filled with individual prayers. They are unusual because they allow us to observe a special communication situation, the written representation of an informal, non-normalised, oral manifestation. The writing often objectifies and even ritualises this special act of prayer. The guestbooks of shrines and parish churches offer everyone access to a forum for these exceptional occasions. In this article I would like to present such guestbooks, collected at Hungarian shrines, and the conclusions drawn from their comparative analysis.

Keywords: guestbooks, pilgrimage, prayers, written representation, communication

When a believer visits a shrine, he or she is guided principally by the desire to experience the transcendent and to make contact with it. One of the most ancient ways in which this contact is manifested, found in practically all religions, is prayer. Many researchers have examined prayers from many angles, mainly in their oral form or formal expressions recorded in writing. However, in recent years the attention of a number of observers has been drawn to an increasingly popular, entirely informal prayer practice in written form. More and more books, visitors' books and guestbooks are appearing at our shrines for visitors to record requests, prayers and declarations of gratitude, and their pages are filled with individual prayers. They are unusual because they allow us to observe a special communication situation, the written representation of an informal, non-formalised, oral manifestation. The writing often objectifies and even ritualises this special act of prayer. The guestbooks of shrines and parish churches offer everyone access to a forum for these exceptional occasions. In this article I would like to present

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such guestbooks, collected at Hungarian shrines, and the conclusions drawn from their comparative analysis.²

It is only in the last few decades that the analysis of the guestbooks placed in sacred spaces has appeared in ethnological research, mainly in the German-speaking territories.³ These are reports of a quantitative nature based on these sources and the texts are also the basis for the interpretations. The considerations of ethnology of religion, sociology of religion, psychology, theology and communication theory appear in their system of criteria. This, too, indicates the interdisciplinary nature of research and study of the theme.

I find it odd that, apart from the thematic sections, no attention has been given anywhere in these studies to what a key role is played in these guestbooks by the close intertwining of sacral and profane writing traditions and behaviour patterns. In my opinion this is one of the main characteristics of the guestbooks of these shrines. The very fact that these books are placed in shrines illustrates this intertwining: we are more accustomed to finding guestbooks in museums and at exhibitions where we can record our visit and enter observations on what we have seen.

Letter writing often comes to mind as we read the entries. This is especially so in places where slips of paper are placed on the altar or in the collection box in the absence of a book. Indeed, there are shrines where these prayers to God or the Virgin Mary are sent by mail, in classical stamped and addressed envelopes.⁴ In places these are mentioned as autograph books, and in fact they do include drawings, topoi and verses reminiscent of autograph books, something that is also far from sacrality. On the other hand, they also contain the brief schematic prayers familiar from the tablets of gratitude seen on the walls of churches. There are also prayers familiar from the song and prayer books of shrines, in places also stories of recoveries reminiscent of accounts of miracles, and lines of thanks citing the texts of votive tablets. The picture that emerges from all this is one of people's everyday struggles, the typical problems and anxieties of today's world.

² The results presented here have been preceded by years of research work. I studied guestbooks and prayer slips at five Hungarian shrines (Máriapócs, Máriagyűd, Mátraverebély-Szentkút, Máriakálnok, Egyházasbást-Vecseklő / Nová Bašta-Večelkov). Máriapócs has the longest traditions of keeping and placing guestbooks. The shrine has books dating back to 1900, but for many years entries were made only by persons invited to write in them. It is only since the 1980s that they have been accessible to everyone. In Máriakálnok the custom was only short-lived; such books were placed in the shrine only from 1947 to 1952. In the other three shrines this devotional practice is found only from the 1990s. I registered and analysed close to 10,000 entries in these sources. I reported on the results of the analysis in 2009 in my doctoral thesis: *"Against forgetting ..." Comparative analysis of guestbooks from shrines in Hungary*. At present the dissertation can be read in the library of the Department of Ethnology of ELTE, and it is being prepared for publication.

³ Main works examining this special form of sacral communication: PONISCH, Gabriele: *"Danke! Thank you! Merci!" Die Pilgerbücher der Wallfahrtskirche Mariatrost bei Graz*. Grazer Beiträge zur Europäischen Ethnologie Bd. 9. Frankfurt am Main 2001; HERBERICH-MARX, Genevieve: *Evolution d'une sensibilité religieuse. Témoignages scriptuaires et iconographiques de pèlerinages alsaciens*. Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1991; ISTVÁN, Anikó: *"Most segits meg Mária ..." A futásfalvi Sarlós Boldogasszony-napi búcsú szöveggyűjteménye* ["Help me now Mary..."] Repertory of texts from the Feast of the Visitation at Futásfalva/Alungeni]. Kriza Könyvek 20. Kriza János Néprajzi Társaság, Cluj 2003. HEIM 1961; KROMER 1996; SCHMIED 1997.

⁴ In his book the Swiss ethnologist Walter Heim lists 45 shrines to which the faithful regularly send letters to the local saint. They include the grave of Mother Maria Theresia Scherer in Ingenbohl (Switzerland) that he analysed, as well as the widely known shrines of Lourdes, Fatima and Saint Anthony of Padua. For more details, see: HEIM 1961: 15–20.

An examination of the precedents and the related genres confirmed this close intertwining. I found what appeared to be close similarities between the inscriptions on votive tablets, tablets of gratitude and on walls in sacred spaces, letters written to saints, manuscript and printed records of miracles, and declarations of gratitude and the genre of printed prayer cards. It is principally the longing for a miracle and the reporting on the occurrence of a miracle that links these written manifestations.

As I have already indicated, sources far from religious use can also be regarded as having similarities to the guestbooks kept in shrines, such as guest books kept in museums, restaurants, hotels and elsewhere, and autograph books. They all serve as a place where people who have stepped out of their accustomed, everyday environment and entered a special situation or place can record their feelings and impressions. At the same time we can also witness a new kind of ritualised behaviour in these books. Each entry is at the same time a special written act expressing gratitude. These functions can also be identified in the shrine guestbooks.⁵ The context in which the entries are made naturally plays a determining role. By applying the well known formal structure, everyone writes texts in the books that follow the same pattern. This gives the best explanation for the distinctive character of sacral guestbooks.

Parallel with these genre precedents, the appearance of digital literacy can also be observed in sources of this nature.⁶ With the spread of the internet it became possible for the places of communication with the transcendent to step beyond the frames of reality. Virtual cult places, prayer forums and community websites are becoming increasingly popular. They offer entirely new forms and possibilities for experiencing and manifesting individual religiosity and thereby open new perspectives, among others, in the practice of prayer. We can witness the emergence here of very individual, very eclectic devotional techniques. We often find elements taken from traditional religiosity, as well as such modern themes as a mixture of self-portrayal and self-fulfilment in cases even with the emphasis on the latter. In this way the longing for miracles has been replaced by the sharing of individual emotions with others. What we are seeing is a unique coexistence of tradition and innovation.⁷

In many cases the church itself is the main multiplier of these websites, as well as of the books placed in churches. Together with traditions and the innovative elements, this is the third factor that plays a role in the emergence and continuous shaping of this distinctive prayer practice. However, these three elements (traditions, innovative elements, the church as an institution) are not given the same emphasis everywhere. As the custom becomes increasingly remote from the tradition of pilgrimage, the traditional elements weaken and are replaced by new ones. The guestbooks placed in a virtual space mentioned in the previous paragraph are evidences of this process.

It is also important to note that the written recording of individual prayers and their publication is not an exclusively Catholic Christian phenomenon. The practice is also found

⁵ For more details on guestbooks of a profane nature, see BARNA 2003: 29–42.

⁶ A few internet church guestbooks: <http://www.benedikterinnen-osnabrueck.de/page8.html>; <http://www.sankt-petrus-heede.de>; <http://sankt-gertrud.de>; <http://www.erzbistum-freiburg.de/gebetsanliegen>, accessed on September 15, 2010.

⁷ For more details on guestbooks in virtual cult places, see: LINGENS 2003. 219–245.

among the Jews,⁸ Orthodox Christians,⁹ Coptic Christians as well as among Muslims¹⁰ and Japanese Shintoists.¹¹ This indicates the universal anthropological nature of this phenomenon spanning religions and cultures. It also shows what a fundamental human demand and desire the written form of communication with the transcendent is.

What conclusions can be drawn from a study of the texts of these books? Even the data of the entries in these books that are being filled ever quicker yield valuable information for research on contemporary pilgrimages. They clearly reflect, for example, the change in visits to the shrines. They show that even today the places of pilgrimage are mainly visited from the end of March to early October. However, there is an important change inasmuch as while earlier the majority of visitors to these places were attracted by feast days, nowadays visits to shrines are not necessarily linked to feasts. It was István Kapin, the parochus at Máriapócs who drew my attention to this: *"I would say that the number of visitors to the classical big feasts is declining. But there is no decrease in the number of visits to the church. People are not so keen now to be part of a crowd of 40,000, they prefer to come at the weekend. On a long weekend, for example, the church is full, with both believers and non-believers. They prefer to come when there are fewer buses, when there is no pushing, they can sit down more peacefully and pray. There is a ceremony then, too, that they can attend."* It is not necessarily only a feast day then that motivates people to visit a shrine; often a visit is simply some form of tourism, a way of spending leisure time. And if a visit is linked to a feast day, there are so many of them throughout the year that this alone ensures a steady stream of visitors.¹² The church officials who care for the shrine also play an important role in these changes; they themselves increasingly recognise the touristic and economic potential of places of pilgrimage and try to take advantage of these demands and opportunities. It is also this aspect of the books that is important for us: they document the visitors, the shrine itself and its life, they give feedback on it, thereby confirming the importance of the role played by the shrine and also advertising it.

An analysis of the data in the texts also leads to other conclusions. They show that the catchment area of the major shrines has been growing and that of the smaller ones shrinking. In addition to the availability of transport, the religious indifference characteristic of the 20th century and the effect of the negative attitude of communism,¹³ we must once again mention

⁸ For more details on Jewish prayer slips (kvitli) see: GLESZER, Norbert: Kvitli, in: BARNÁ, Gábor – MÓD, László – SIMON, András (eds.), *Szent ez a föld. Néprajzi írások az Alföldről*. Szeged: Néprajzi Tanszék, 2005. 146–159.

⁹ I have drawn on the data of Éva Pócs and Dr. Péter Tóth on the subject of the writing of Orthodox Christian prayer slips (zapiski). For more details on the zapiski see: KÖLLNER, Tobias – KOMÁROMI, Tünde – ŁADYKOWSKA, Agata – ŁADYKOWSKA, Detelina Tocheva – ZIGON, Jarret – BENOVSKA-SABKOVA, Milena: Spreading grace in post-Soviet Russia, in: *Anthropology Today* 25, 2009. 16–21.

¹⁰ I wish to thank Irén Lovász for this information.

¹¹ For more details on Shintoist prayer slips (ema) see: SCHMIED, 1997. 99–101.

¹² The feast days of the three major shrines: Máriagyűd – <http://www.bucsujaras.hu/mariagyud/index.html>, Mátraverebély-Szentkút – http://www.szentkut.hu/matraverebely_szentkut_nemzeti_kegyhely, Máriapócs – <http://www.bucsujaras.hu/mariapocs>, accessed on January 21, 2011.

¹³ In her book on the pilgrimage as religious drama, Erika Vass attributes the shrinking catchment area of the lesser known shrines to these factors. VASS 2010: 31.

the role of the church here. My research confirmed that in those shrines where the church personnel embrace and support the pilgrimage traditions, in places even using innovative means (colourful posters advertising the shrine, website, etc.), they are able to ensure the continued attraction of the pilgrimage tradition. I experienced an absence of this attitude in Egyházaskő-Vecseklő, to a lesser extent in Máriakálnok, and found its very active presence in Mátraverebély-Szentkút, Máriagyűd and Máriapócs. Moreover, the bigger shrines are already better known and more popular, and this has been further strengthened by special events (such as the Pope's visit to Máriapócs in August 1991) and the steadily growing presence of the media in recent years (in the case of Mátraverebély-Szentkút and Máriapócs).

Besides information on the intensity of visits to shrines and change in the catchment areas, the books also yield interesting data on the gender, social and age composition of those who write entries. They indicate that women continue to play a prominent role in pilgrimages. The renowned Austrian researcher on the theme, Gabriele Ponisch gives the following explanation for this: "Life falls into the worlds of performance and efficiency, and that of private life, love and the family. In the course of the 19th century the latter became the territory of women. (...) A whole series of researches have shown that women are the more spiritual gender. Over the past decades women have increasingly sought their own forms of spirituality, but it is also women who tend to choose the entirely classical, traditional forms linked to the institutionalised churches. They attend religious services more frequently and, apart from the pilgrimages on foot that require greater physical endurance and fitness, they are almost always in the majority."¹⁴ If we examine the findings of surveys conducted by Hungarian sociology of religion, we find that they reach the same conclusion: "In all age groups and all statuses, women are more religious than men."¹⁵

The books do not reflect a clear social character and it is not possible to decide with certainty on the social status of those who wrote the entries. This indicates that belonging to a certain social stratum does not play a role in writing the prayers, that is, in communication with the transcendent. The depth and nature of the individual's religiosity is a much more important factor. Contrary to the findings of numerous foreign analyses, anonymity is not typical of the texts in the sources I examined. The writers generally reveal their identity by adding their signature, they do not feel the need for the discretion of anonymity. Writing down the name leaves a permanent trace of the person writing an entry and it can also be a sign of open acceptance of faith.

Notwithstanding all these conclusions, I found that the source value of these texts lies primarily in what they say about popular religious practice and in the related special written devotion. Accordingly, the pilgrimage appears here only as the frame and context interpreting this religious practice.

Many conclusions can also be drawn from the content of the entries. The addresses occurring in the prayers indicate the strong presence of the cult of Mary, as well as the underrepresentation of the cult of the saints. Mary appears as mother and intercessor, who helps, consoles, protects and sympathises. The believers have a direct, confidential relationship with her.

¹⁴ PONISCH 2003: 199.

¹⁵ HEGEDŰS 2000: 103.

*"Heavenly virgin flower, my grateful Thanks for my release from Russian captivity. I ask the Queen of Heaven for Life love of work and a pure life. May 7, 1948"*¹⁶

*"Hail Mary, Star of the Sea
Protector of Orphans
refuge of Sinners.
Our sorrowful sigh rises to you
I pray to you
Help to remedy our many troubles
Beautiful flower,
be my Mother
Show me the way.
Give me health
and peace to the world.
Pray for us Immaculate Virgin Mother
Mosonmagyaróvár
1948"*¹⁷

The content elements indicate that this special prayer practice is used principally to record requests. Other forms are preferred for the expression of gratitude (tablets of gratitude, candles, flowers, carpets, jewellery, cash donations). In addition to prayers of request and gratitude, there are many entries of a documentary nature recording the name and date, pointing to the use of the books as classical guestbooks.

*"Dear Blessed Lady
Please help my family, the tiny baby to be born to my son ÁDÁM. My children Kriszti and Gyuri. May they live in happiness and love and mutual understanding throughout their lives. Help me too in my life, guide me on my path, help me in trouble. And I ask for Health for Everyone because that is the greatest Happiness. I thank you and I will not forget your goodness!!!
Name"*¹⁸

*"I really like this church.
It is the most beautiful one I have seen
I hope it stays that way!
Name"*¹⁹

An examination of the themes of the entries shows that there is far less emphasis on the once traditional intentions (incurable bodily harm, natural disaster, war, misfortune,

¹⁶ From the Guestbook at Máriakálnok.

¹⁷ From the Guestbook at Máriakálnok.

¹⁸ A prayer slip from Mátraverebély-Szentkút.

¹⁹ From the Guestbook at Máriagyűd.

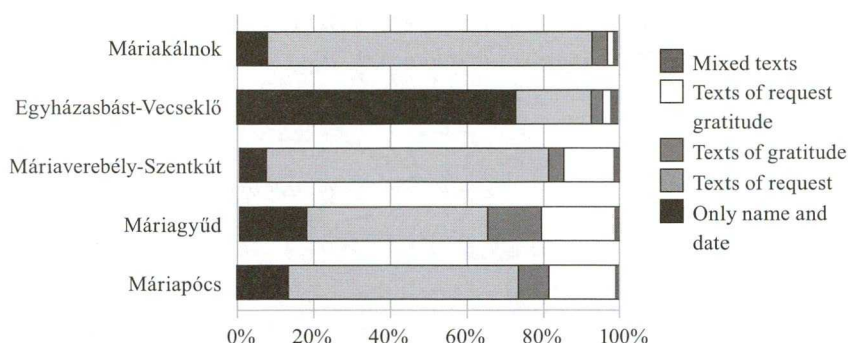


Figure 1. The proportions of different text types in the guestbooks of shrines

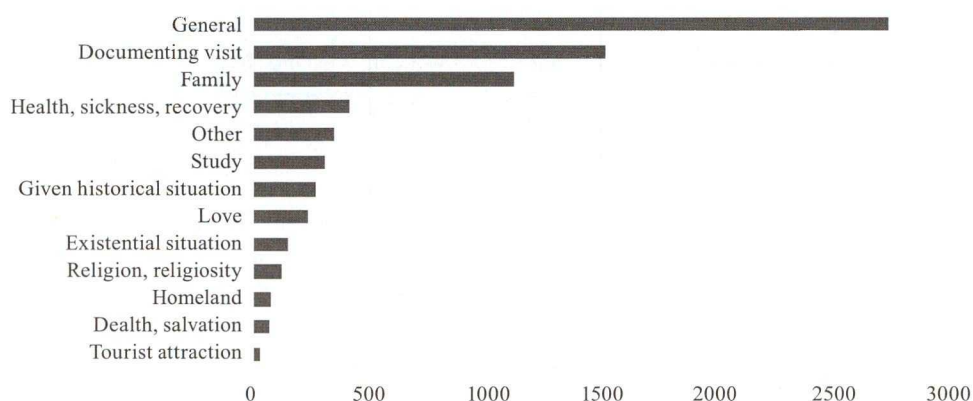


Figure 2. The intentions most frequently occurring in guestbooks, in order of frequency

accident, etc.);²⁰ the main focuses of attention have shifted elsewhere. In general it can be said that there has been an increase in the number of emergency situations in which people turn for help to some form of the transcendent. External, existential emergencies have been replaced by a whole series of everyday problems: unemployment, debt, divorce, study, examination, housing situation, etc. The share of these emergency situations is influenced by the social, economic, cultural and historical situation at any given time, and by the age of the people writing the entries.

The colourful diversity of the themes is also found in the forms of the texts. Besides a very personal, almost friendly tone and choice of words evoking everyday language usage, we find quotations from literature, borrowings from familiar religious texts of official and popular literature, as well as short schematic formulas.

"I am not a regular church-goer; only at Christmas, but sometimes when I feel like it I drop in to the place where I somehow find relief. My father and I visited relatives we haven't seen for forty years and I came here on that occasion!"

²⁰ In his book on pilgrimages in the Baroque age, Gábor Tüskés presents data of contemporary miracles to show the frequency of these intentions. For more details see: TÜSKÉS 1993: 228–246.

I am in the habit of praying and I trust that YOU EXIST! Give health and all good things to everyone and to my relatives and family, to my sisters and my Dad.

Thank you!

Name''

"Oh Mary Mother of God and good Mother to Me too, in Joy and sorrow, Good and bad fate I always sing:

'Hail Virgin Mary'

Máriakálnok

August 16, 1949. ''²¹

"Virgin Mother help us in the future too.

List of names ''²²

Perhaps these few examples are enough to indicate that the diversity of content and form also lead to diversity of style in these texts. Lofty solemnity and the informality of everyday speech are found simultaneously.

To understand the steadily growing popularity of the guestbooks and the prayer practice manifested in them it is important to define the functional role of these books.

After reading the books and "listening" to their "authors" it became clear that in their function these guestbooks of a sacral nature play a very heterogeneous role:

1. They document the pilgrimage and with it the individual pilgrim, thereby preserving it forever. This use of the books plays a role especially for those who arrive at the shrine as tourists. They generally do not have the skills required for cult practices at the shrine and so use the guestbook in its original function. It is of note that this is the main function of these books also for those who care for the shrine.

2. They provide a special forum for individual, spontaneous prayer. Contact with the transcendent is manifested in them in two ways: in the form of a prayer recorded in writing and in the action of writing and making an entry. Writing, regarded as a special channel of communication in the case of prayers and especially of personal prayers, acquires an important role in both cases. It objectifies the prayer, which is a guarantee of making, maintaining and strengthening contact with the supernatural force. It also fixes and conserves the prayer, that many people associate with greater weight and effectiveness. In this way the writing further strengthens the performative functions that find expression in the oral prayer.

But the act of writing the entry can also have significance. It can become and it seems that it does increasingly become part of the rite of veneration before the devotional statue. The focus here is not on the transmission of information but on the non-textual functions of the texts: making contact, the address, and the act of appeal. Through this the individual initiating the communication undergoes a substantive change and with this the contact has already reached its goal. In this way these texts become autocommunicative.²³

²¹ From the Guestbook at Máriakálnok. The text of the entry is from a popular song.

²² From the 3rd notebook at Egyházásbást-Vecseklő.

²³ LOTMAN 1991.

3. This autocommunicative attitude can also provide an explanation for the therapeutic-type functions of the books. Mention must be made of the effect of spiritual relief, consolation and confirmation that comes from writing entries in these books.

4. The emergence of a virtual community can also be observed in the books; through the words they write down its members become part of a discourse in which they strengthen and encourage each other, thereby also legitimising the shrine and the existence of the special grace that can be experienced there.

5. Among the possible interpretations I have rejected the opinion represented by a number of observers²⁴, namely that the process of secularisation has dereligionised the practice of written devotion presented here. It is a fact that the traditional practices and forms of devotion have changed, but that is a natural concomitant of the continuously changing challenges that arise in human existence. Religion is still one of the most important responses that can be given to the challenges. People today long for miracles, for an explanation of the unexplainable, just as our forefathers did. They develop new rites for which they draw on old traditions but use today's means and forms of expression.

I consider it of particular note that all the above listed functions correspond well to the three main functions of visits to shrines:²⁵

- practical reason: physical-spiritual health – communicating the desire for physical-spiritual recovery,
- spiritual-ascetic reason: to meet God, become a better person, venerate Mary – dimensions of autocommunication, therapeutic effects, becoming a community,
- secular or non-religious motivation: tourism, search for curiosities – use as a profane guestbook.

After taking stock of these characteristics of the guestbooks of a sacral nature I consider that we need to define the written prayers in church guestbooks. We can consider the books as a forum that provides the opportunity for written expression in the sacred place, for communication with the Transcendent. Because this expression is not formalised, either in content, form or style, it results in a distinctive blend of profane and sacred elements. This informality in all aspects also creates the possibility for it to serve not only for the confession of faith but also for other purposes, resulting in a much broader use (recording pilgrims, pilgrimages, prayer manifestation, rite, autocommunication, spiritual consolation, creating a sense of community). It is also due to this very broadly interpreted use that a very wide circle of people can and do make use of this opportunity offered in shrines.

While I examined the characteristics of individual prayer and the ways in which it is modified if it is written down, evidence can already be seen, as I have also indicated, of further changes. These prayers crop up with increasing frequency in electronic media; handwriting is being replaced by electronic writing, real sacred spaces by the world of virtual churches. All these changes point to a possible further direction of change in written prayer and at the same time of research on the subject.

²⁴ KROMER 1996: 95–115, SCHMIED 1997: 134–136; NIKITSCH 1990: 201.

²⁵ Bertalan Pusztai identified these three functions of visits to shrines, based on Giuriati, Myers, Donach and the American Belleville survey by questionnaire. See PUSZTAI 1998: 17.

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