

ÁGOSTON FAITH'S COLLECTION OF ANECDOTES ENTITLED TRIFLES FROM THE LIVES OF THE MEMBERS OF THE PREMONSTRATENSIAN CANONS OF JASOV (ROŽŇAVA, 1919)¹

ZBIERKA ANEKDOT ÁGOSTONA FAITHA ZO ŽIVOTA
PREMONŠTRÁTSKYCH KANONIKOV V JASOVE

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Abstract

The collection of anecdotes by Ágoston Faith, a Premonstratensian priest, canon, and teacher, was completed in 1919 and survived in typewritten form in the Premonstratensian library in Jasov (Jászóvár) until it was transferred to the Slovak National Library in Martin in the 1950's. Faith's work as a teacher has long been remembered, but his mixed-subject notes commemorating contemporary living and deceased members of the order have not been researched so far. Half of the stories are about living and half about deceased members (out of the 96 persons given separate chap-

ters, 48 are living, 48 are deceased) of the order that were not included in official biographies. The stories were collected from the order's oral tradition, written sources and fellow members.

The purpose of the collection of stories, typed in alphabetical order of the persons' surnames on 187 horizontal A5 sheets, is presumably to preserve the memory of the members of the Order's institutions that broke up into three countries – Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Hungary. The canonical order was still unified at that time, in 1919, and was led by Menyhért Takács from Jasov. During a difficult time for the or-

¹ FAITH, Ágoston. *Apróságok a jászóvári premontrei kanonokrend tagjainak életéből* [Little things from the life of the members of the Premonstratensian monastery of Jasov]. Rozsnyó [Rožňava], 1919. Inv. nr. JAS663. – I would like to thank Ágnes Kovács (Gödöllő Premonstratensian Abbey Archives) for her comments and additions to the first version of the study.

der, Faith recognised the importance of the genre, namely that humour was one of the most suitable tools for enduring oppressive circumstances. In 1916, the number of members of the order was 120, in January 1919 it was 105, and in May 1919 it was 104. The typescript was reproduced by Farkas Kovács. Apart from the copy in the Slovak National Library, Martin, no other copy is known today. The aim of my study is to analyse the collection based on folklore and lifestyle aspects (monastic life, church service, teaching, entertainment, food, the role of books, cultural and linguistic differences).

Keywords: Premonstratensian, anecdote, Jasov, books, lifestyle, Ágoston Faith

Abstrakt

Zbierka anekdot od Ágostona Faitha, premonštrátskeho kňaza, kanonika a učiteľa, bola dokončená v roku 1919 a zachovala sa v podobe strojopisu v premonštrátskej knižnici v Jasove. Odtiaľ bola v 50. rokoch 20. storočia presunutá do Slovenskej národnej knižnice v Martine. Faithova pedagogická činnosť je dlhodobo známa, jeho tematicky rôznorodé poznámky zachytávajúce súčasných i zosnulých členov rádu však dosiaľ neboli predmetom výskumu. Polovica príbehov sa týka žijúcich a polovica zosnulých členov (z 96 osôb, ktorým sú venované samostatné kapitoly, je 48 žijúcich a 48 zosnulých), ktorí neboli zahrnutí do oficiálnych biografii. Príbehy boli zhromaždené z ústnej tradície rádu, z písomných prameňov a od spolubratov.

Cieľom tejto zbierky, napísanej na 187 vodorovných listoch formátu A5 a zoradenej abecedne podľa priezvisk osôb, bolo pravdepodobne uchovať pamäť na členov inštitúcií rádu, ktoré sa roz-

padli do troch štátov – Československa, Rumunska a Maďarska. V tom čase, roku 1919, bol kanonický rád ešte jednotný a viedol ho Menyhért Takács z Jasova. V náročnom období pre rád Faith rozpoznal význam tohto žánru a pochopil, že humor je jedným z najvhodnejších prostriedkov na zvládanie útlaku. V roku 1916 mal rád 120 členov, v januári 1919 ich bolo 105 a v máji 1919 už 104. Strojopis prepísal Farkas Kovács. Okrem exemplára uloženého v Slovenskej národnej knižnici v Martine nie je dnes známa žiadna ďalšia kópia.

Cieľom štúdie je analyzovať túto zbierku z hľadiska folklóru a každodenného života (rehoľný život, cirkevná služba, vyučovanie, zábava, stravovanie, úloha kníh, kultúrne a jazykové rozdiely).

Kľúčové slová: premonštráti, anekdoty, Jasov, knihy, životný štýl, Ágoston Faith

Various stories and personal tributes written by members about members of the order have appeared in countless periodical publications on certain anniversaries, retirements and obituaries. The collections of students by teachers Kelemen Ponty and Guidó Steib were published in the volume *My Kidney Laughs* (1998).² In his drama *The Citizens of Košice* (1942), Sándor Márai unveils (at least as he thought) not so subtly a story about the Premonstratensians. Former Premonstratensian student Ambrus Bor wrote about his teachers in cryptic terms in his novel *Unbroken Present* (1986).³ Archival documents also preserve anecdotes, from letters and reports through collections to humorous drawings and Mécs poems (e.g., *Two Nose-Blowing Ascetics*). In the Archives of the Premonstratensian Abbey of Gödöllő, there are one or two personal recollections from monks about members of the order; the largest in terms of length is Aladár Vidákovich's more serious Calendar of the History of the Order. An example of a student caricature is the heroic epic *Bellum Tapiricum* (1942) by Árpád Sármezey (student at the Premonstratensian Gymnasium in Gödöllő).⁴ Their life can be inferred from some of the photographs, as can their meals from the surviving bills.

Faith certainly drew from the order's anecdotes and written sources in the case of stories about members who had died more than a hundred years ago when the collection was created, e.g. András Sauberer and József Mallyó. The collection of anecdotes is an important cultural and historical source about the everyday life and hobbies of the Premonstratensians of Jasov in the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁵ Reading the work and approaching the stories critically is important, even when Faith is reporting on his contemporaries and himself. Most of the stories related to one person, over 20 anecdotes, are about three people – Miksa Kertész, Kelemen Ponty, and Géza Szepesi – about whom countless witty and good-natured sayings circulated among their disciples and fellow monks [1].⁶ The stories are not told in the chronological order of the person's life. The titles of two chapters are not personal names: in the case of "Anonymous", contemporaries certainly knew who it was about, but the person requested anonymity. The chapter "Many" describes the joint case of four precisely named friars. The stories mention numerous other Premonstratensians who did not receive separate chapters.

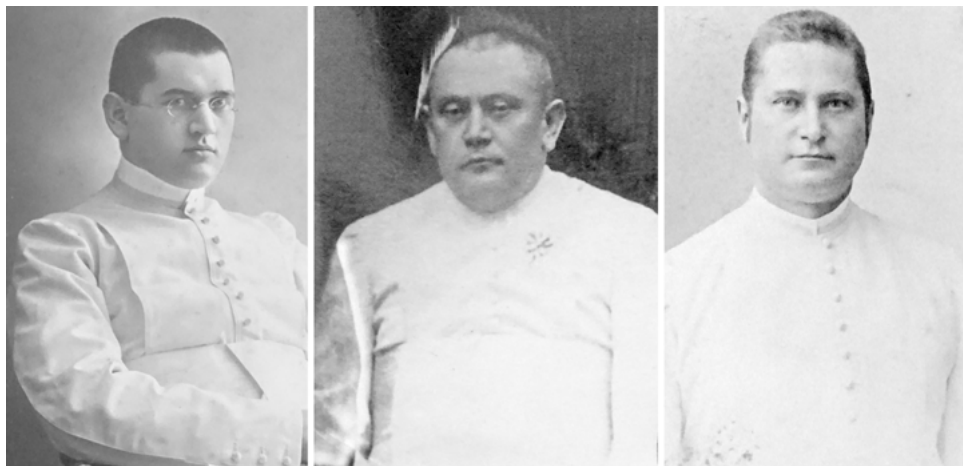
² PÁSZTAI, Ottó, ed. *Röhög a vesém... Derű az iskolapadban* [My Kidney Laughs... Serenity at school]. Oradea: Oradea Premonstratensian Alumni Association, 1998.

³ MÁRAI, Sándor. *A kassai polgárok: dráma* [The Citizens of Košice: Drama]. Budapest: Révai, 1942. BOR, Ambrus. *Szakadatlan jelen* [Unbroken Present]. Budapest: Magvető, 1986.

⁴ SÁRMEZEY Árpád. „Bellum Tapiricum”. In: *A Gödöllői Premontrei Öregdiákok Egyesületének körlevele*. 2013, II. semester, pp. 23 – 28.

⁵ A work of similar genre with church context, e.g. HUCHTHAUSEN, Lajos. *Bilingválizációk: történetek a veszprémi egyházmegye XX. századi életéből* [Stories from the 20th-century life of the diocese of Veszprém]. Balázs KARLINSZKY, ed. Balatonkiliti – Veszprém: Veszprémi Érseki és Főkapitányi Lvt., 2009.

⁶ When Géza Szepesi died, the Košice newspapers wrote: “Uncle Szepesi’ of the Premontreans has died. He was known by this name to his many hundreds of students and the Hungarian society of Košice and Rozsnyó. He was an old-fashioned, original teacher, about whom countless admirable and tasteful sayings circulated among his students.” In: *Az Országos Központi Tanáregyesület Közlönye*. 1 June 1926. Vol. 59, No. 10, pp. 419 – 420.



Pict. 1. Ágoston Faith, Miksa Kertész and Kelemen Ponty.
Photos: Gödöllő Premonstratensian Abbey Archives

1. Priestly service

The priestly ministry of Premonstratensian canons encompasses many areas of church life, including the celebration of Mass, confession, offices, funerals, and the celebration of feasts. They performed their masses with great devotion and precision. Some fathers presented the Holy Mass in a particularly lengthy and deeply felt manner, sometimes taking longer. The daily office played a significant role in the lives of the monks. The faster pace of the recitation of the office did not please all the fathers, and some tried to slow down the prayers. Funeral ceremonies were often performed together with other church figures. According to one anecdote, when Géza Szepesi arrived at Jasov, he had no experience in conducting major funeral ceremonies and stood in the wrong place during the incensatio (incense) at an assisted mass the first time, which he justified by saying that “in his time” one had to stand somewhere else.

2. Entertainment

Recreation played an important role in the daily lives of the Premonstratensian fathers; their entertainment included card games, travelling, jokes and hunting. Klaberjass (also known as Bela, Clob, or Clobyosh), a fast-paced, 2-player trick-taking and melding card game played with a 32-card deck, was a passionate and emotionally charged pastime that often led to violent reactions [2]. During their travels, interesting and sometimes comical incidents happened to them. Jokes were an integral part of community life, and they often found pleasure in teasing each other [3]. Hunting was a serious passion for some fathers, even if it did not always end in success.



Pict. 2. Card-playing Premonstratensian fathers (all three of them are fathers), Bytča.
Photo: Gödöllő Premonstratensian Abbey Archives

Klüberjass and ferbli (a Hungarian card game played by two, three, four or five people with Hungarian cards, the aim of which is to win the pot, either by having a better hand or by forcing an opponent to fold) were particularly popular card games, sometimes causing strong emotional surges. Fidél Szántó, for example, was an enthusiastic player of Klüberjass, and due to his fierce temperament he sometimes had a hard time accepting defeat. When he was paired with a poor card player, the failure made him so angry that he fell to his knees and begged his partner to stop playing: “Tamás, please, by all the saints, don’t be so stubborn!” Szántó not only reacted angrily to defeat, but sometimes had spectacular emotional outbursts. Once he was so outraged by losing a game that he could barely keep himself from throwing a chair out the window. Another father, Imre Fábián, also often complained about the unfortunate card draw: “This miserable card has been going like this for 30 years!”



Pict. 3. Student fun on New Year's Eve, 1917, Jasov.
Photo: Jasov Premonstratensian Abbey Archives

The fathers enjoyed travelling, whether for official or leisure purposes. A good example of this is Kolos Kiss, who travelled to Budapest with his mother for the Millennium Exhibition. On the way, he lay down comfortably in the train compartment, but a Hungarian passenger, who thought he was Jewish by his appearance, tried to wake him up by saying: "Wake that Jew up!" In another case, Lénárt Vizy was travelling to Opatija and wanted to get off at a longer train stop, but he couldn't find his hat. Later it turned out that a fat woman had been riding it the entire way.

The Premonstratensian fathers were famous for cracking jokes and teasing. Bruno Bertrám's joke, based on the idea of Abbot Menyhért Takács, in the role of the abbot of Strahov, was particularly striking [4]. Béla Eródi, as usual, took off his coat at the soup every lunch and got the butler to hang it on the hanger. His companions made a joke of it: during one lunch, everyone put on several coats and took one off with each course, until finally the father looked at the ever-growing pile in confusion. Géza Szepesi, teasing a fellow monk, sent him a huge collar as a gift because he always wore conspicuously high collars. The new novices or the easily joked-about fathers were often the butt of jokes, especially Eródi.



Pict. 4. Menyhért Takács (1897) and Bruno Bertrám.
Photos: Gödöllő Premonstratensian Abbey Archives

Of the fathers, Medárd Szabadka was the most enthusiastic hunter, but due to his clumsiness, he did not have much success. He was feared more by dogs than by game animals because he hit them several times while hunting. On one occasion, for example, he saw some movement in the bushes and thought he saw a fox. He shot triumphantly at it, but was shocked to hear the scream of his own hound.

3. Meals

Some interesting details about the eating habits of the Premonstratensian fathers can be read in *Trifles* [5]. According to a story, József Zavadky, who lived in Lelesz, once received a carrot stew for lunch without sausage, whereupon he asked the head of the house: “Most esteemed head of the house, have you ever had the honour of eating sausage in your life?” The head of the house replied: “Not me, never.” This story indicates that for some fathers, a modest diet was natural, while others preferred substantial meals. Another anecdote also immortalises the passion for food: Miksa Kertész loved grapes so much that when he once received a few beautiful bunches of grapes from an acquaintance, he ate them at dinner while being watched by the envious glances of the others, not wanting to give any to anyone else. A joking comrade used a bowl full of terracotta fruits to trick him. Overall, it seems that the dietary habits of the Premonstratensian fathers varied considerably: some ate modestly and simply, while others enjoyed more refined dishes, especially sausage, marrow, wine and fruits.



Pict. 5. Norbertinum, Budapest.
Photo: Gödöllő Premonstratensian Abbey Archives

4. Books, library, archives

Books played a prominent role in the life and work of the Premonstratensian Fathers, primarily in supporting their spiritual, intellectual and scientific development [6]. When the Premonstratensian order was restored in 1802, one of the important tasks was to recover the books and archives that had been removed in 1787: after the restoration of order, József Mallyó and Ludolf Gedeon were entrusted with the return of the archives which had been taken to Buda and then transferred to the Eger Chapter.

Mallyó is a great scholar and diligent worker of the old days. His memory is vividly preserved among his fellow monks by his written works and his rich collection of medals. Unfortunately, his very interesting notes remained unpublished, although they would have found public interest and appreciation in their time.⁷ He was in contact with the famous historians of his time, who more than once received valuable guidance and reliable data from him. In return, they also supported him in his work and collections. He also exchanged letters with Ferenc Kazinczy. At present, his name is known only from a description of him published by a former Premonstratensian in an older volume of the *Századok* [Centuries].

The library was important to many scientists, historians, and scholar-priests. Kelemen Ponty was highly educated, especially in the field of fiction. He had such a talent for memory that he could accurately remember not only the content of books, but also their publisher, place of publication, year and price. His classes were legendary for being noisy, which is not to say that he was incapable of discipline, but rather that his unique

⁷ TŰSKÉS, Anna. Manuscripts and manuscript entries in the miscellanea collection of the Premonstratensian Abbey's library in Jasov. In: *Kniha* 2024/I. Martin: Slovenská národná knižnica, 2024, pp. 127 – 137.

sense of humour and direct, sometimes rude, but loving communication were his main pedagogical tools. He often called his students “cattle” and “ox,” but these became so commonplace that no one took offence.



Pict. 6. Alfonz Novotny.

Photo: Jasov Premonstratensian Abbey Archives

Another member of the order, Jusztin Wentkó, had a home that functioned as a kind of museum, filled with books and other collections: “You can find a butterfly collection, snails, plants, books and almost unimaginable other things. He also built a greenhouse and a winter frame for his home, in which he cultivates rare vegetation. And he equipped the roof for a sun cure. Although the equipment only consists of a few mats which he wraps himself in and lies down in the sun.”

Due to their outstanding reading and bibliographical knowledge, many of them were excellent high school and university teachers. Religious literature played an important role in their spiritual life and guidance within the community. According to an anecdote, Charles Waczek, who was resentful of his transfer, was advised by his fellow monks to read Thomas a Kempis’ famous work *The Imitation of Christ* in order to calm down and accept his situation.

5. Cultural and linguistic differences: Hungarian–Slovak–Jewish relations

For the Premonstratensians, who promoted the Hungarian language and culture in schools as knowledge serving social advancement, mastering the most perfect Hungarian speech and writing was of fundamental importance. Priests from the Slovak environment strove to learn the Hungarian language, and when they returned to the Slovak environment, encouraged students to learn Hungarian. In the village of Rudnok, for example, Juszti Wentkó wrote Hungarian plays with New Testament themes (The Birth of Jesus, The Wedding at Cana) for performances by students of the Catholic public school.⁸ In 1919, this attitude was considered outdated. Although Hegedüs Anzelm, born Karol Murgaš, came from a predominantly Slovak village and family and learned Hungarian well enough to complete high school in Banská Bystrica, he considered himself wholeheartedly Hungarian. He discovered his Slovak identity when independent Czechoslovakia was proclaimed in 1918. He left the order in 1919 and over the next six years made a significant contribution to the development of Slovak national and cultural life in Košice. He demanded more rights for Slovaks from the Czech authorities, and was therefore exiled to Ružomberok, where he died shortly afterwards in 1925.

Several stories reveal the cultural, linguistic and political relations between Slovaks and Hungarians. One anecdote suggests that the name “tót” was no longer officially used, instead the term “Slovak” was preferred, but the old name continued to survive in the vernacular. This is illustrated by the following passage from Gábor Magyar’s chapter: “From this time now, it will not be allowed to say that a tinker tót (slovenský drotár), but a tinker Slovak.” Another anecdote in Magyar’s chapter is about an elderly gentleman from Rožňava who was once a great Hungarian patriot, but after the war befriended the Czechs in order to get his unmarried daughters married off. This reflects the changing national loyalties during the political realignments after World War I.

The mockery of the Hungarian speech of monks of Slovak and Transylvanian origin is a subject of frequent ridicule. Faith describes Vilmos Bacsó, a university student from Kisvárd, with a “Tirpáci pronunciation”. In the case of Tivadar Bohinszky, from Spišské Ružbachy in Spiš, he notes a change in word order. The author characterises the speech of Boldizsár Beke, who was born in Sânsimion (Romania), with “Szekler rudeness”. All sorts of speech problems (slurred speech, mispronunciation of foreign words, etc.) could become the subject of jokes (Burger, Faith, Fogethon). These stories provide a relevant picture of the given historical period.

Anecdotes about Jews both touch on prejudicial and cultural elements that were common in their own historical contexts, some of them containing anti-Semitic stereotypes or biased comments. In a story related to Lőrinc Tóth, the head of the house of Rožňava, a Franciscan prior, referring to the appearance of an Eastern Orthodox bishop, remarks: “This bishop is suspicious; perhaps some swindling Jew”, to which the bishop, who understands Hungarian, protests vehemently, clearly trying to prove his non-Jewish origin. Among the narratives, there are also stories where Judaism is not an object of ridicule, but simply appears as part of a given situation. The anecdotes reflect

⁸ E.g. Egy magyarosodó község [A village becoming Hungarian]. In: *Felsőmagyarország*. 23 January 1903, Vol. 19, No. 17, p. 4; Műkedvelői előadás [Amateur performance]. In: *Felsőmagyarország*. 9 January 1904, Vol. 20, No. 6, p. 6.

a social milieu in which anti-Semitic stereotypes and prejudices were prevalent and often served as a source of humour. Anti-Jewish remarks were not necessarily motivated by individual hatred, but were part of a broader social discourse.

Several stories evoke social changes during and after World War I, the adaptation of institutions, political instability, and the impact on people's daily lives.⁹ As a result of the war, the church, education and communities in the hinterland all adapted to the new circumstances. Archduke Salvator, who visited the Košice convict building, which was converted into a hospital during the war, was accompanied throughout the building by Géza Szepesi. After the war, Košice, which became part of the newly formed Czechoslovakia, was occupied by the Hungarian Red Army in 1919, and Szepesi came into contact with the supporters of the proletarian dictatorship due to the provision of students.¹⁰ During this, he was captured, which clearly shows the political instability and the rapid change in power relations. For example, at that time, teacher Kamill Kéry tried to bring order to unruly youths at Lake Tapolca in Jasov and got into a physical conflict with them. The youths argued that the area no longer belonged to the Premonstratensians, but to the king, and everyone could do whatever they wanted there.

Conclusion

Ágoston Faith's collection, compiled in 1919, provides even the modern reader with a highly entertaining yet enlightening insight into the lives of the members of the Premonstratensian Order of Canons of Jasov. The picture that emerges from the stories carries several important lessons. Although the Premonstratensian monks lived according to strict rules, their everyday lives were full of peculiar customs and sometimes strange human weaknesses. The collection highlights that the Premonstratensian community functioned not only as a religious order, but also as a kind of family where members mutually supported each other and were also the targets of jokes and pranks. Several anecdotes demonstrate the great emphasis the Premonstratensians placed on knowledge, literacy, and education: they conducted and got their students and novices to conduct in-depth theological, philosophical and linguistic studies. A recurring element is the monks' self-ironic attitude towards their own situation; it was not uncommon for them to make fun of their own mistakes or clumsiness, or at least tolerate it when their fellow monks acted so. Some of the stories deal with the Premonstratensians' relationships with the laity, whether students, noble families, or peasants. The monks' social embeddedness, their role in the community and interactions with the laity are presented in a thought-provoking manner typical of the given historical period.

Overall, Faith's collection of anecdotes is not just an entertaining read, but a valuable contemporary document that provides a glimpse into the unique world of Premonstratensian monastic life, bringing the monks closer to people. In addition to depicting human weaknesses it also carries a deeper message: profession and individual personality are not necessarily in conflict with each other, but on the contrary, they together

⁹ KARA, Anna. Hit és hazafias életösztön Szemelvények a jászóvári premontreiek történetéből (1918 – 1923) [Faith and patriotic instinct: Excerpts from the history of the Premonstreans of Jasov (1918 – 1923)]. In: *Fórum*. 2022, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 65 – 98.

¹⁰ The college was nationalised on July 17, 1919, and there were no students there as it was summer break.

form the mosaic of everyday life within a community. Faith immortalised the events, vocabulary, and habits of the friars' daily lives. By analysing his stories it can be stated that the compilation fits into the series of anecdote collections that flourished from the mid-19th-century onwards. True to the Greek word anecdote meaning "unpublished", Faith did not intend his work to be published; it remained in typescript, but more than a hundred years after its creation, analysis may no longer offend anyone, and it commemorates the lives and work of about a hundred Premonstratensian monks.

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