

## SEARCHING FOR GOD, OURSELVES – OR OUTING TO NATURE, ESCAPING FROM SOMEWHERE, FINDING REFUGE SOMEWHERE?

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**Absztrakt:** In Hungary in the last 20–30 years the traditional mass pilgrimages, mainly by bus, organised by parishes within village or town frames have almost disappeared. A special form of pilgrimage can now be observed: pilgrimages made on foot by small groups from narrower social, age or occupational groups. The recent paper examines two of these pilgrimages and groups, on the basis of interviews conducted with the leaders and written sources. The first one is a youth pilgrimage and is organised and led by Franciscans between August 15–20. The other pilgrimage on foot is organised by a group of highly qualified, middle-aged Budapest intellectuals. They do not reach the goal by walking continuously but in stages of 18–25 km covered on every second Saturday of the month. Pilgrimage on foot brings together people. Self-restraint plays a big role in the Franciscan youth pilgrimage. Community building is important for both groups. These pilgrimages can become the most important compensative rites of man today.

**Keywords:** pilgrimages on foot, youth, intellectuals, compensation

In Hungary in the last 20–30 years the forms of the practice of religion have undergone great change. This change has also reached the places of pilgrimage and pilgrimages. In some places of pilgrimage (Szeged-Alsóváros, Andocs) there has been a dramatic decline in the number of visitors, even on the main feast days.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere this decline has not been seen (Mátraverebély, Máriapócs).<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the 1990s a national place of pilgrimage of the Hungarian people arose in Transylvania, in Csíksomlyó (Șumuleu). This can also be regarded as the symbolical spiritual unification of the Hungarian people divided by the peace dictated at Trianon. The number of visitors defies imagination: at Whitsun more than 300,000 people take part in the feast. And not only Catholics, but Protestants as well: what was once a Catholic feast has become a national celebration and the place a national place of pilgrimage.<sup>3</sup>

It is another sign of change that from the early 1990s when the political change made this possible (the collapse of socialism), travel offices have opened in Hungary with the aim of organising pilgrimages to Hungarian and foreign shrines.<sup>4</sup> Hungarian researchers are now studying the offices and the pilgrimages they organise. The

<sup>1</sup> BARNA–PUSZTAI 1999.

<sup>2</sup> BARNA 1990.

<sup>3</sup> BARNA 1996.

<sup>4</sup> PUSZTAI 2004.

traditional mass pilgrimages, mainly by bus, organised by parishes within village or town frames have almost disappeared. A special form of pilgrimage can now be observed: pilgrimages made on foot by small groups from narrower social, age or occupational groups.

Here<sup>5</sup> I shall examine two of these pilgrimages and groups, on the basis of interviews conducted with the leaders and written sources (printed materials, programmes, etc.). One is organised and led by Franciscans between August 15–20. The participants are from secondary schools and their monastery in Esztergom and the destination is a place of pilgrimage (Mátraverebély), cared for by Franciscans. Consequently, this is a pilgrimage of young people closely linked to the Franciscan order; the participants are aged 15–30 years, but the majority are around 20 and of both genders. The Franciscans participating are also young. I shall call this the Franciscan youth pilgrimage.

The other pilgrimage on foot is organised by a group of highly qualified, middle-aged (around 50) Budapest intellectuals. It differs greatly in form from the previous pilgrimage as they do not reach the goal by walking continuously but in stages of 18–25 km covered on every second Saturday of the month.

The Franciscans approach the place of pilgrimage by the shortest route, linking places of natural, historical and literary interest and even the people of settlements on the route into the pilgrimage. The group of Budapest intellectuals does not choose the shortest route but instead attempts to visit all the (important) church, historical, literary, artistic, industrial history and natural sights in the vicinity of the pilgrimage route and to collect all the information they can about the region and its people.

In this short paper which is based on interviews conducted in 2004 I shall seek an answer first of all to the question of what the motivations and aims behind the unusual pilgrimages on foot are. What is it that attracts the members of the group year after year and month after month, and what keeps the group together? Can this also be regarded as a form of religious practice? What characteristics does it have?

## THE FRANCISCAN YOUTH PILGRIMAGE FROM ESZTERGOM TO MÁTRAVEREBÉLY–SZENTKÚT

They have been making this pilgrimage since 1994. The model was the Warsaw–Częstochowa youth pilgrimage on foot which was held during the period of socialism too. Young Hungarian Franciscans also took part in it. However, in the early 1990s they tried to substitute it with a similar pilgrimage in Hungary. The Szentkút (Sacred Well) monastery in Mátraverebély was returned to the Franciscan order. The Franciscans wanted to give new life to the earlier emptied forms, the spiritual retreats and pilgrimages. The Polish example appeared to be a suitable model. People feel

<sup>5</sup> As paper delivered at the SIEF Congress, April 2004 in Marseille.

the need 1. to take part in religious retreats, 2. to withdraw from the world for a few days, to be silent and pray.

In the first one or two years the participants were mainly secondary school students and teachers of the order from the Franciscan schools in Szentendre and Esztergom. Ten to fifteen Franciscans, including at least five priests, members of other orders and nuns take part wearing the habits of their order. The group numbers around 200 persons in all. Their luggage is taken by truck. There is also a minibus which waits for the procession at certain points to pick up the tired and sick.

The main intention of the pilgrimage is to pray for vocations of priests and monks, in honour of Mary and in memory of Saint Stephen of Hungary, our first king. This is why the date is always fixed: it begins each year on August 15th and ends on the 20th. It is announced on posters, on the Internet and in Catholic papers.

In 1999 a book was published containing the prayers, songs and hymns recommended for the journey up to 2012.<sup>6</sup> The common prayers and the prayer hours held by the members of the order created the demand for this. It also contains much practical advice on walking. It lists the requirements for community living.

The programme for each day's journey is fixed: mass, prayers en route, meditation, rosary, singing, confession, conversation, walking. There is a common programme on the first three evenings. First day: mass, a get-together evening in small groups by regions; second day: quiz; third day: folklore evening with the villagers. The fourth evening is devoted to rest and has no set programme. The day begins with morning mass. There is sufficient free time during the day for conversations and solitude. The route is a sacred way (*via sacra*): prayer at wayside crosses, at statues, in churches and also a way of penitence (*via purgativa*): drinking, smoking and playing tape recorders are forbidden. The route leads through hilly country and passes through few settlements. Accommodation is in tents and in a Franciscan monastery (Szécsény). They sing when they pass through settlements. They carry a processional cross that the girls decorate with a wreath of flowers on the way. This is tied with a ribbon in the Hungarian national colours. They also carry a Hungarian flag. In one of the villages the church bells are rung to greet them. Girls dressed in folk costume welcome the group at the edge of the village. Conversation, attentiveness to others and participation in the collective programmes are recommended. They stop at a ruined castle (Drégely) to recite a ballad by a famous 19th century Hungarian poet, János Arany.

They form close ties with the people of villages on the route: accommodation, meals, programme, conversation, collective liturgy. It is a big event for villages on the route to be able to host the pilgrims. They take cooked food, drinks, coffee and cakes to the walkers on the way. They make preparations in advance. The pilgrims take gifts for the helpers.

Being on the journey and arriving at the different stops are important for those in the group. Sleeping in the Franciscan monastery at Szécsény and arriving at the

<sup>6</sup> VARGA–DOBSZAY–KÁRPÁTI 1999.

destination in Mátraverebély–Szentkút are memorable spiritual experiences. The feast on Saint Stephen's day in Mátraverebély is small, attracting around 5000 people. But they look forward to the arrival of the youth pilgrimage. The renewal of the baptismal vows at the Sacred Well is a special rite. Before arriving at the place of pilgrimage – following the Polish example – a clearing on a hill before the Sacred Well is the place of reconciliation. Everyone asks forgiveness from everyone for hurts on the way. The monks are tossed in the air, again following the Polish example. In the evening in Szentkút mass is held, the tents are erected, the pilgrims wash and then devote the whole night to adoration. This is always part of the programme. Celebration of light, vespers, exposition of the sacrament, Taizé prayer hour. The mass on arrival is said by members of the order officiating at their first mass. This is the highlight. The young people's return to Budapest and their homes is not organised.

### PILGRIMAGE BY INTELLECTUALS IN HONOUR OF MARY

A group of 20–30 middle-aged Budapest intellectuals have been making pilgrimages on foot since autumn 1995 to different Marian places of pilgrimage. They walk only one day every month. A month later they continue from the point where they stopped the previous month. The initiator and leader of the group is a lawyer. They call their activity *sétálvány* (walkage).

Their first walk began on October 14, 1995 and the destination was Máriapócs (Eastern Hungary). They reached the place of pilgrimage by the shortest route (332 km) in a year and a half. The days are spent on steady walking. They spent two days in the place of pilgrimage. The leader of the pilgrimage, a lawyer, had an audio cassette containing poems and information on the Mary of Pócs, as well as music, made in memory of the pilgrimage.

Their second walk began in March 1998 from Budapest to Máriagyúd in Southern Hungary. In planning the walk they took into account what they had learned from the first walk. They included major sights along the Danube on the route to add an intellectual dimension to the walking. They covered the distance of 499 km in 44 sections and arrived in Máriagyúd on December 8, 2002. The leader of the pilgrimage wrote a speech in the name of the Virgin Mother which he had copied and distributed among the participants. The motto of the speech was taken from Cervantes: *The road is better than the inn. It is better to travel than to arrive. And travelling together is the most important.* On the evening of their arrival they held a retreat. The journey ended with a big supper in Villány, the famous wine-growing locality nearby.

The third walk began in March 2003, from Budapest to Mariazell. So far they have covered 312 km in 20 sections. This walk covers a long route, carefully planned in content and symbols. They first walked from Budapest to Esztergom. Esztergom is the cradle of Christianity in Hungary. They included Esztergom so that they would arrive in Zell with Mary in their souls. All their walks set out from the Buda cave

chapel of the Hungarian Pauline order. A Pauline father gives a peregrinus (pilgrimage) blessing. The present group has 30 members. Generally 20–25 persons do the walks. This number can be co-ordinated. There is no admission. The participants are highly qualified intellectuals around the age of 50: doctors, lawyers, engineers. They are all friends. The group includes men and women, a number of them married couples. They do not all have the same world view or religion. So far the group has been able to integrate everyone. They are a cheerful company. They celebrate birthdays in round numbers.

The structure of the walk is fixed: they meet on the second Saturday of every month, always at the same time and in the same place in Budapest. From there they drive by car to the point from where they are to continue the walk. In the vicinity of Budapest they travel by bus or train. They leave the cars at the point of departure. At the end of the walk they hire a car and driver to take the four drivers back to the cars. They then come back to pick up the others and the whole group returns home.

A week before each walk all the members of the group receive a letter. This sums up the happenings of the previous walk and sets out the programme for the next one. These letters were published in 2001 in the form of a book. It had chapters on travel plan, sights, practical advice, associations, reflections, recipes. There are also musings on the history of philosophy and on political matters, for the purpose of documentation and remembrance.

The important thing for the members is the walking and time spent together in a pleasant atmosphere. It is one day in the month when they do not have to rush, there are no deadlines, no urgent tasks, no phones, they are independent, in peace and spiritual calm among friends. The religious content is indirect. Everyone knows that they are going to a Marian place of pilgrimage. This is the force that gives them a goal and holds the group together. The only religious character of the journey is that they visit all ecclesiastical institutions – churches and monasteries – on the way. And wherever they see that there is a need, or hear of a noble cause, they give donations. In this way charity is part of the journey. This plays a big psychological role, strengthening solidarity. There is no reference in the book to collective or individual devotions or prayers. But there was in the interview. They stop to say a prayer at wayside crosses. There is always someone and some cause to pray for. If not, they simply say a prayer together. This too strengthens the cohesion of the group.

The journey is also an encounter with history: they evoke the place occupied by the given settlements in Hungarian history, local historical events and memories. Getting to know events of a local nature and local persons in particular enriches their knowledge. Besides seeking out local experts, they also prepare in advance. When visiting churches, castles and artists' studios they encounter art history. Literature is also part of their preparation: the members of the group read extracts from literature associated with the place.

Encounter with themselves: with their abilities, endurance, patience through the tiring walking, their tolerance in the company of others. They consciously seek to be close to nature. They follow a route along field paths, through forests, fields, along embankments and gullies; they use roads only where there is no other alternative.

This makes their walks more attractive and also more difficult. The journey is therefore also an encounter with nature. They go regardless of the weather. The organiser makes a 15-minute film of each walk. The journey means a unity of body and soul, besides the spiritual and intellectual demands culinary pleasures are also important. The walk ends with a supper.

The joy of arrival is incomparable. They have achieved what they undertook, reached the goal, met the Virgin Mother. They take part in a mass.

They also meet at other times besides the monthly walks. At the end of December (in the last two years) they have held an end-of-year meeting in a pilgrimage church outside Budapest where a mass and *Te Deum* are held. They have supper together in a restaurant. On New Year's Eve at dawn the group go out together to a place of pilgrimage in Buda and attend mass there.

The ideas come from a lawyer. He plans the walks and handles the organisation.

The meetings strengthen group cohesion. The letters and publications in a book form have the same effect.<sup>7</sup> They bring the group together virtually, record and make the memories uniform. The collective church attendance at New Year's Eve and the religious content of the major festivals always appears in the letters. The most important thing is the community (even in the Turnerian sense). The group's greatest experience and the strongest cohesive force is the good community which is a pleasure to belong to. This is legitimised by the destination, the Marian place of pilgrimage. The repetition ritualises the contacts, bringing regularity, repetition and security into everyday life. It links the isolated individual into a community and eases the psychological problems caused by alienation.

## INTERPRETATIONS

These examples are not unique. The Jesuits also organised a Pannonia Sacra pilgrimage in 2000, former students of church secondary schools also made a collective tour, the Greek Catholics lead pilgrimages from a number of places to Máriapócs. The Hungarian Franciscans in Transylvania (Romania) organise a youth pilgrimage on foot from Székelyudvarhely to Csíksomlyó for Porciuncola (August 2). The Cistercians have a half-day pilgrimage on foot to Máriaremete, a place in Budapest. The pilgrimage from Budapest to Márianosztra starts on May 1 and lasts three days. The pilgrimage of the Városmajor parish on foot to Máriaremete revives the men's pilgrimage on foot organised by József Mindszenty in 1947.

The leaders of both groups are of the opinion that their initiative arose from the recognition that the church is unable to find forms that could appeal to people today. It is unable to "sell" the teachings of Jesus Christ. The world is becoming increasingly irreligious, godless and secularised. The traditional forms of pilgrimage feast with banners, singing, confession, and high mass followed by a village-type fair

<sup>7</sup>JÁVOR 1998–2001.

with food stalls no longer attract many people. However, sacred places still exert a strong attraction. People can feel the sacral nature of the place. The friendly circle of people of the same age and interests creates a new frame. Something new is born out of the encounter of the place and the human soul.

According to the leader of the group of Budapest intellectuals, their walk brings together three important areas of human life: theology, philosophy and gastronomy. This is the human “holy trinity”: the unity of soul, spirit and body. The dining table is the greatest community-building force. Self-restraint plays a big role in the Franciscan youth pilgrimage.

The Franciscans depart from the view that life is a pilgrimage, history proceeds towards its fulfilment. The pilgrim church, the pilgrim is on a journey, waiting for fulfilment, for the coming of Christ. The annual pilgrimages express this metaphorically.

The annual or monthly repetition of the journeys brings predictability and order to life. During the five days or the one day life is simplified, becomes slower and quieter. Only the most basic functions remain for days: walking, eating, bathing, prayer. In the case of the Franciscans the religious character is more direct and stronger than in the group of intellectuals. The Franciscan journey is of an ecclesiastical character while that of the Budapest intellectuals is a secular tour. The experience of nature and of creatures also plays a big role in both groups.

Both groups set down the programme and memories of the journey in writing. The church image that emerges from the Franciscans’ book<sup>8</sup> is a conservative one preserving values. Their songs are based on Gregorian chant, not on the popular church music trends currently fashionable, although these are present too in the Taizé songs. In the case of the Budapest group the recording on tape and in printed form of individual memories and reflections strengthens the awareness of belonging together.

Community building is important for both groups but it is of a different character. The isolated individual is linked into a community, the psychological problems caused by alienation are eased. The Franciscan community is large and open. Because of the many members of the order participating the pilgrimage is a “mobile monastery” to which they invite people. Anyone can join in. It is also intertwined with the people of settlements on the route, through the accommodation, meals, programme, conversations and shared liturgy. Friendships and love grow up among the young participants. The Budapest group is a closed one. They have a more indirect contact with the society of the regions they visit. Both groups meet outside the pilgrimage too: the intellectuals gather at the end of the year while the Franciscan youth hold a pilgrimage gathering on the Saturday following Ash Wednesday in a Budapest Franciscan monastery. We see a different interpretation of community in the two groups. In the case of the Franciscans we can speak of salt as an analogy while the other group could be described as a closed, defensive group. But both

<sup>8</sup> VARGA–DOBSZAY–KÁRPÁTI (eds) 1999.

groups can also be regarded as a community in the Turnerian sense. Both forms link the isolated individual into a *community*, easing the psychological problems caused by alienation. The search for historical and literary roots means reinforcement, following an example and model.

The two groups meet present-day Hungarian reality in different ways. The Budapest intellectuals become better acquainted with the rural settlements, the state of nature and nature protection, environmental pollution, construction, public transport, the situation of the gastronomy industry and the public political mood. This does not play a role in the Franciscan youth pilgrimage which always follows the same route.

Although the motivations of the participants cannot be generalised, each of them expresses criticism of his or her given situation and circumstances. In place of the big people's church regarded as homogeneous, they seek a smaller and more transparent group, better meeting their personal needs, where the feeling of homeliness and security can strengthen. They feel the need for the warmth of a transparent and therefore manageable smaller community, where adequate attention is given to the individual as a member of that community. This strengthens their personality and sense of security. After the brainwashing of socialism, recovering the lost/stolen past also plays a big role. Many find the faith of their ancestors as they follow in their footsteps, when they choose to make a pilgrimage on foot singing and praying, when they choose the route most saturated with experiences, historical, religious and natural values and experiences to reach their goal. The essence lies in the journey itself and in the preparation for it, during which man, the creature meets the Creator in history, the arts, in nature and religion. For five days or only one day they construct a counter-world. In this way these pilgrimages can become the most important compensative rites of man today.

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