Presenting the travelling altar of Emperor Joseph II, the Hat King

Pannonhalma, 15 November 2024

It was a cold and bright winter day on 14 January 1994, the first time I visited Pannonhalma. My travelling companion was Zoltán Balog, a Reformed pastor. We arrived there to plan a conference on "Church and Modern Society" in the context of the forthcoming parliamentary elections. We aimed to clarify the relationship between the state and religious communities, historical churches and political parties in a way that would allow for a genuine dialogue between the participants. Paul Zulehner, the renowned Catholic sociologist of religion, and Niklaus Peter, the Swiss Reformed theologian and curator of the legacy of Karl Barth, have already said yes; Otto Graf Lambsdorff, a legendary figure of the German liberals was the highest-ranking active political guest, also in his capacity as a member of the Synod of German Evangelicals. We had come to Pannonhalma because we wanted to share our plans with Archabbot Astrik and invite him personally to what we considered to be an important meeting.

The Archabbot welcomed us cordially, although he began, seemingly, with an apology: *"Forgive me for only being able to offer you a seat among furniture less than two hundred years old, but as you may know, Joseph II took the older pieces."* We were aware that the Hat King had removed the furnishings when he dissolved the monastic orders, nevertheless, no one in the reception room, however fond of antique furniture they might be, could feel any lack of it. However, it was clear from Archabbot Astrid's remarks, especially in the light of the conference's theme, that the Benedictine community was at least cautious in its relations with the state authorities.

Over the past eight hundred years, there must have been countless opportunities to benefit from this experience. The traumas of the 20th century may be remembered well even by those present here, if not personally, then through the stories of their parents and grandparents. On this occasion, however, we are turning towards the middle of the 18th century, when, during the reign of Maria Theresa, the empire managed to stabilise the state organisation and avoid major losses, even if negotiations with the European monarchies posed many difficulties. The 1741 Diet of Bratislava holds a prominent place in our national historical consciousness, where the Queen, dressed in mourning, with the barely six months old Joseph in her arms, asks the Hungarian orders for their backing, to which they respond with *"Vitam et sanguinem pro rege nostro!" – "Our lives and blood for our King!"* avowing their enthusiastic support.

Despite her aversion to the ideas of the emerging age of Enlightenment, the influence of the Catholic Church had already been curtailed by Maria Theresa in several areas where it was acting at the expense of the state. She was a profoundly religious, resolute, strong-minded Monarch, and heartily contemptuous of Protestantism, a conviction reinforced by her intense dislike of King Frederick II of Prussia.

"There was only one person who dared to raise his voice and was bold enough not to be silent about his opposing views: the son of Maria Theresa, the Emperor, the future successor", writes

Elemér Mályusz in his immense monograph on the Edict of Toleration, published in 1939, and goes on to explain: *"Joseph loved his mother; not only with a filial affection but also with admiration that made the years of his youth, the tale of saving the Habsburg dynasty, a deeply engraved memory in his soul, which reflected the outstanding qualities of the Queen at every turn. He too was imbued with an awareness of his responsibility and vocation to the community of the state, although he was convinced that his duties as monarch required a different approach to the administration of religious affairs from that of his mother. He outlined his views clearly to his mother as early as 1765, when he proclaimed that in matters of faith and morals, persecution or violence would not convert anyone because these require inner conviction [...]. What the twenty-five-year-old Joseph then expressed in such definite words remained his conviction to the end. He also believed in the rightness of his principles, and he did so with a perseverance no less than that of Maria Theresa. He was only willing to forsake them on one condition: if someone would prove him wrong in his position. Yet he did not impose his views on his mother, observing her religious policy for fifteen years, albeit with inner discontent but without aggressiveness. His almost childlike attachment to and respect for his mother's principles and convictions restrained him from criticism. Maria Theresa had seen her son's advance; but from his sarcastic remarks and demeanour, she would have preferred to conclude that his ideas and beliefs had been formulated only through reading and the influence of more liberal intellectual associations and that it was all a matter of deportment. She regarded Joseph's behaviour as a flaunting of his distaste for old habits and the clergy, an expression of his frivolous moral views. This filled her with concern for the future but also with confidence that her son, if persuaded, would see the error of his ways and change."*

In this particular document dating back to December 1765, only a few months after becoming his mother's co-regent, the argument he would make twenty years later in relation to the actual ban remained largely the same: the public use of the monastic orders' property, the abolition of their autonomy, the ruthless enforcement of the principle of social utility.

"The impatient mind" is the title of the chapter on Emperor Joseph II of Emil Niedershauser's book, *A Habsburgok. Egy európai jelenség* [The Habsburgs. A European Phenomenon], co-authored with Imre Gonda. The impatience of the mind, paradoxically, for Hungarian Protestants—including my own church, the Lutherans—created the Edict of Toleration, which is based on the same state-interested rationality that was already mentioned in connection with the ban on monastic orders. According to Joseph II, *"Diversity of religions is dangerous to the state only if it gives rise to fanaticism, inequality and partisanship, which can be avoided by treating all denominations on a completely equal footing".* It was this conviction that guided him in the drafting of the Edict of Toleration.

Elemér Mályusz summarises the difference between mother and son, Maria Theresa and Joseph II: *"The divide that separates her from Maria Theresa is not the opposition of the believer and the unbeliever. Joseph was far from the scepticism of the philosophers of the 17th century. It was not piety that he lacked, but rather the blind zeal, for he had nothing to veil his eyes; therefore, he recognised the disadvantages of clerical interference in the management of the fate of the state."*

Maria Theresa was visibly occupied with her son's religiosity and relationship with God and the Church. One's faith, whether as an emperor or a person of any rank or title, is always

a profound secret. The forms and gestures of faith may vary greatly, but one thing is certain: for a Christian, the fact of salvation, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the firm foundation of their faith. In the relationship between God and humankind, the Word made flesh, the infant of Bethlehem, assumes a central position.

But why are we talking about this?

The object next to me, a more than 200-year-old artefact consisting of three parts, is Joseph II's travelling altar. We have no definite records, but there is reason to believe he received it from his mother in his teens. The altar came to Hungary with the heritage of Otto von Habsburg. I am now presenting it to the monastic community on behalf of the family and the Otto von Habsburg Foundation, requesting it to be made available for viewing by anyone interested.

The silver relief of the central image portrays the Angelic Greeting, and the upper frieze is unfortunately missing. To the right and left of it are two small putto figures with lilies. The reliquary bears the inscription "S. Bonifatii M". As this is the central element, it presumably contains the relic of a significant saint, whom we have identified with the martyred bishop St Boniface. Boniface was born Winfrid around 672, in the Wessex province of Britain. He was ordained a priest at the age of thirty. In 718, he went to Rome, where he was welcomed by Pope Gregory II and sent on his way a year later—when he assumed the name Boniface. On 30 November 722, he was consecrated missionary bishop for Germania. The German bishoprics he founded continue to function in a virtually unchanged structure to this day. He is the apostle of Germania, the patron saint of Germany, who was murdered by the Frisians in the town of Dokkum on 5 June 754.

It is assumed that the left wing's depiction of the Nativity of Christ in the stable at Bethlehem is a replica, and there was once a silver relief here. The reliquary bears the inscription "Benigni M", which probably contains a relic associated with Saint Benignus of Dijon. Tradition considers the martyred bishop, who lived in the 3rd century, to be the first Christian priest to serve in a city, Dijon. The other reliquary is engraved with the inscription "Marcelliani M", which is believed to hold the relics of Marcellianus, a martyr of the persecution of Christians under Diocletian. On the lower reliquary is the inscription "S. Austeri M", which may contain the remains of the Roman senator St. Asterius, martyred at Caesarea.

On the right wing is an image of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, which does not appear to be original either. On the left side, the reliquary is inscribed "Quirini M", presumably with the relics of Saint Quirinius in it, who was martyred in Savaria, now Szombathely, where he was buried following his death, and his relics were taken to Rome. After the foundation of the Diocese of Szombathely in 1777, they were returned to the Bishop's Palace of Szombathely through the intercession of Maria Theresa. The right side of the reliquary bears the inscription "Alepanti", which has yet to be deciphered.

Joseph II travelled extensively throughout his life, spending about a quarter of his reign in a chariot, far from his home in Vienna, following the example of King Frederick II of Prussia and Tsar Peter I of Russia. In terms of distance covered, he could have circumnavigated the globe about one and a half times. In addition to his impatient mind, his restless heart and

curiosity drove him to gain experience in disguise, presenting himself abroad as the Count of Falkenstein. He visited every corner of his empire, as well as France, Italy, Spain, and even Moscow and the Crimean peninsula in Russia. He gathered information, mingled with the people, and then wrote official reports—and letters to his mother and Chancellor Kaunitz—about his impressions and encounters.

The altar that accompanied him on these journeys was a sacred instrument essential for the quietening that followed or preceded the hustle and bustle of the day. Not a backdrop, not some pious gesture, but a personal object in which maternal exhortations were as much a part as theological and historical messages. The praying person expresses gratitude and pleads. The particular blend of joy over good things and the fears and desires expressed in supplication is the distinctive character of every Christian person. This could not have been otherwise in the case of Joseph II.

The altarpieces are iconic moments from the Scriptures, decisive moments of the Incarnation. At the focal point of the central altar's depiction of the Angelic Greeting is the dove, which symbolises the Holy Spirit, whose gentleness and power is the great mystery that each person can experience and articulate in the face of their relationship with God. Beneath the silver relief is the relic of Saint Boniface, who, although fallen victim to the enraged Phrygian pagans, was a missionary and church organiser whose work has had a lasting impact on the spiritual landscape of Europe to this day. His determination and decisiveness are shown by the fact that he began his mission of conversion by felling the sacred oak tree of the Germanic peoples, hence the axe, a common attribute. As Boniface himself writes: *"Let us die for the holy laws of our fathers. Let us be neither dogs that do not bark nor silent onlookers nor paid servants who run away before the wolf. Instead, let us be careful shepherds watching over Christ's flock. Let us preach the whole of God's plan to the powerful and to the humble, to rich and to poor, to men of every rank and age, as far as God gives us the strength, in season and out of season."* However, in addition to his vigorous missionary and organisational activities, he was a devotee of the liberal arts and wrote a grammatical treatise and a treatise on verse. In Benedictine monasteries, he is often depicted as an abbot, a clear sign of his esteem. In the course of his retreats, Joseph was faced with all this—and we can be sure that the fact that the patron saint of Germania repeatedly appeared before him to serve as a measure of his faith and his often ruthless, 'axe-wielding' organisational determination played an important role in shaping his self-image—also as a benefactor, as his name, Boniface, indicates.

The nativity scene of the stable in Bethlehem is a well-known classic with a familiar message: the Saviour is embodied in a tiny baby, around whom shepherds and ordinary people gather, and then even the world's mighty bow down to the ground. But how does a ruler of an empire think of the humility of the three kings? And how did the self-conscious and caring mother, Mary Theresa, regard the scene, seeing in her own son the tiny infant who, if not Saviour, was destined for great deeds, an Emperor, the successor to her work? This is mere speculation, but looking at the right wing, it would be a challenge not to discover a parallel, however profane, between the infant Jesus in the temple and Joseph as a babe-in-arms in the Hungarian Parliament. A mother's exhortation is, therefore, also an encouragement, as the Gospel of Luke says: *"As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"* (Luke 2:23); thus, whatever may happen to you, you can draw strength from your faith, family, and your mother's legacy.

The relic evoking Saint Benignus, the town priest of Dijon, perhaps suggests the importance of service in a civilising Europe, while the remains of Saint Marcellianus and Saint Asterius—the latter being a Roman senator—reveal the sacrifice of a politician unwavering in his faith. The invocation of St Quirinius, martyred in Szombathely, on the altarpiece, which we have discussed as a possible reference to the church presentation and the scene of the Diet, may suggest, in addition to the obligingness and generosity of the offer of *"Our lives and our blood"*, that in the land of Pannonia, my dear son, you can easily fall victim to the wrath of the people; and we have yet to mention the conditions in Hungary.

For all its subtle allusions and historical connotations, Joseph II's travelling triptych conveys a clear, encouraging message: *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."* (Isa 43:1).

We know that Joseph II, on his deathbed, revoked all his decrees except for the emancipation of the serfs and the religious toleration. In the final hours of struggle, reformist determination disappeared, and the stability of the empire and peace became more important.

Otto von Habsburg, whose heart urn rests just a few steps away, learned much about Hungarian history from his Benedictine teachers. Certainly, the turbulent years of the Order's history and the resolute reform plans of his distant relative were not hidden from him, nor were the circumstances of his death. Evaluating the successes or failures of politicians and rulers is a serious academic and historical task, but it also has a transcendent dimension. Otto described the death of his father, the last Austrian Emperor and King of Hungary, in such terms:

"When faced with death, there is no self-deception. One remains alone, and earthly merits no longer matter. When one stands before their Creator, in front of Him, all that matters is the fulfilment of duties and goodwill. God does not ask people to bring Him victory reports. Success is granted by Him. He only expects us to give our utmost.

This lesson has remained with me, in accordance with my father's wishes, as the most valuable experience for the rest of my life. His demise showed me that as long as one's conscience is at peace, one cannot truly fail. And this, after all, is the only real secret to happiness—even here, on earth."

Joseph II's travelling altar is now brought to Mount Saint Martin—at the conclusion of a great journey. Not as compensation for the old furniture taken away, but rather, to be kept in a place where it could help us to understand the relationship between the intentions of the individual and the broader community, including Catholics, Protestants, people of different political and ideological positions, values and interests, all within the context of God's presumed Will. Let the Benedictine community of Pannonhalma be our compass, our trusted guide on our earthly journey, cautioning us all to have patience in case our impatient minds—like Joseph's in his day—should be in too much of a hurry...

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