

Melina Rokai  
University of Belgrade  
Ph.D. Student  
melinarokai85@hotmail.com

Original scientific paper  
received: 15<sup>th</sup> June 2011  
accepted: 1<sup>st</sup> October 2011

## POVERTY AND THE FRANCISCAN ORDER IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

**Abstract:** The founders of the Franciscan order prescribed complete, absolute poverty for their followers through norms that regulated their way of life. Regulations included the prohibition of possession of personal property and acquisition of resources for living through begging. In southeastern Europe, Hungary and within the Balkan Peninsula, the regulation could not be applied because of inadequate circulation of money. Thus, rulers and feudal lords gave them small land holdings, so that they possessed serfs, led property and inheritance disputes, subsequently turning into the ruling landowning class, with all the consequences of the status. Such deformation of the Franciscan rule of poverty in southeastern Europe astonished contemporaries from developed urban areas of the Mediterranean and Western Europe. This phenomenon, however, with the consent of the supreme ecclesiastical and secular authorities survived until well into the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** the Franciscan Order, the rule of poverty, Southeast Europe, the Balkans, Hungary, mendicant orders, Order of St. Clare, the Franciscans missionaries.

In all religions and ideologies the question of the relationship of the faithful with material goods, their use, possession, or relinquishment was imposed. The Christian churches have found a solution to this issue in the teachings of Jesus Christ, the gospel. They have allowed their members to choose poverty both as individuals and as organized groups. This second form consisted of monastic orders. The first monastic orders (Benedictines, Cistercians) in the western Catholic Church consisted of individuals who have personally vowed poverty, but the monastic community as an institution was rich thanks to the gifts of its founders and its ability to economize. From the second decade of the thirteenth century under the influence of heretical movements (Waldenses and Catharism) new forms of understanding poverty have occurred within the Church, the so-called mendicant orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans.

The founders of the Franciscan order, St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and his compatriot and spiritual friend, St. Clare (1193-1253) prescribed in their regulations absolute poverty as the mode of life of their followers, which included absolute prohibition of possession of personal property and ordered the only mode of earning their

income was by begging the minimum resources for daily life, which were essential to survive for a day. The founders of both branches, the male (order of Friars Minor - Ordo Fratrum Minorum) and female Franciscan line, Order of St. Clare originated from the economically advanced Italy, where until the thirteenth century, the commodity-money relations had developed to the extent that earning and living by begging was possible. Members of the Order of St. Francis wanted this way of life to spread outside Italy, the cradle of this order.<sup>1</sup>

Their followers were soon divided. The most radical rejected any form of property, claiming that the apostles did not have any either, were these private or shared material possessions. They called for it referring to the Bible and apostolic poverty. Their supporters wanted to extend their learning to the entire church and clergy. In 1312 at the Council of Vienne in the south of France, (which some mistakenly translated into Serbian as a council in Vienna-Austria) their teaching was rejected, as their opponents proved on the basis of the Gospel that Judas, who betrayed Jesus Christ, had been the treasurer of the apostles, from which it logically followed that they had the the treasury.<sup>2</sup> That assembly was attended by some members of the clergy from Southeast Europe. Of them by name could be mentioned Bishop of Zagreb (St.) dominican monk Augustin Kazotic.<sup>3</sup>

However, in principle, the Franciscans were still prohibited from owning any property, even a monastery, while the only allowed mode of earning their income was by begging the minimum resources for daily life. Over time, Franciscans divided over the issue. Milder branch allowed the establishment of permanent habitats (convents), after which they were called Conventual. The stricter branch which kept more austere regulations to be kept on poverty, called themselves Observants. Their dispute lasted till the late Middle Ages, ending up in a complete separation of the two branches, i.e. in the transformation in two independent orders with separate infrastructure and organization.

Meanwhile, the Franciscan order spread throughout the known world. Poverty and their way of earning the minimum resources for daily life allowed the Franciscans enormous mobility even for nowadays, let alone the Middle Ages. Their organization extended through southeastern Europe, including the Greek islands under the rule of Venice. This order appeared on the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea during the life of St. Francis, first in Dalmatia Zadar, Split and Dubrovnik. In today's Montenegrin coast they settled in Bar and Kotor. The Franciscans used to leave from the Adriatic coast for religious and diplomatic mission throughout Asia, some of them reaching even China.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richers William Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (1970); Joseph H. Lynch: *The Medieval Church: a brief history*, 1992; McManners John: *The Oxford illustrated history of Christianity*, Oxford, 1990; Lainati Chiara Augusta, *Santa Chiara d' Assisi , Cenni biografici de S. Agnese d' Assisi, Assisi (Assisi Szent Klára, Assisi Szt. Ágnes életrajzi adalékaival)*, Fordította Tüzkő Lajos, Novi Sad, 1990, 1-136; Szántó Konrád, *Ferencesek*, Kristó Gyula-Engel Pál-Makk Ferenc, Korai magyar történeti lexikon (9-14. század), Budapest, 1994, 218-219, (passim: KMTL).

<sup>2</sup> Delijež Loran, *Templari*, Beograd, 1993; Le Roa Ladiri, *Montaju oksitansko selo od 1294. do 1324.* Sremski Karlovci-Noví Sad, 1991, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Tóth László, *Tanulmányok a szegénységi vita forrásainak történetéhez XXII. János pápa korában*, Budapest, 1934.

Giovanni Piano Carpini, the Archbishop of Antivari (Bar, Montenegro) visited the court of the Mongol Khan in Karakorum, which was described in his diary.<sup>4</sup>

The economic development of cities of the Eastern Adriatic coast was similar to the progress in Italy, and as the Franciscans settled in urban centers of the area, the manner of earning for the living was similar in both areas. For their spiritual activity Franciscan order typically used a church out of use, which they would mend such was the case with the of church St. Damian in Assisi, the so called Portiuncula. In the beginning, for permanent residence (monasteries) were chosen modest, often dilapidated buildings in the cities. Due to their accessibility, neglected appearance and modest behavior the Franciscans differed greatly from the distinguished look of rich dignitaries. Therefore, immediately after their settlement in urban areas, the lower strata of the population diverted its attention to them. As a consequence of this attention, the Franciscans brought upon themselves the envy of the local clergy.

Clergy in the Middle Ages, lived from the church dozen, which the believers were paying. At the time of Franciscans this payment was performed in cash in the urban areas and in-kind in the rural parts. Majority of believers hated this duty, which was to be carried out strictly every year. Therefore, the elimination of church dozen occupied an important if not the first place in the base of all movements for the reformation, whether they were heretical in nature or were occurring within the church. Part of the population, nevertheless, was willing to give financial support to mendicant order in the form of charity of the unspecified amount. Recognizing the significance of the Franciscans who by example propagated most effectively the beauty of poverty, the feudal lords accepted them not only because of their serfs but as their confessors, to sooth their own conscience. The feudal lords settled the Franciscans on their estates by ceding them their religious sites or building them the new ones on their property. In their rivalry local clergy initially achieved only so much that they were excluded from participation in its regular income, did not get a share from the church dozen and were not allowed to perform lucrative religious rites.

In Western Europe and the Mediterranean, Franciscans settled primarily in urban areas. Therefore, the French historians (George Duby, Jacques Le Goff, etc.) have seen the existance of the Franciscan order as one of the criteria for urban character of a medieval settlement. The Franciscans in the eastern Adriatic coast, as well as in Italy, were living on handouts, paid in cash.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the Coast where there were urban centers, like in the rest of the Mediterranean, in first half of the thirteenth century the Franciscans began to settle in Hungary and continental Croatia. They originally settled in major cities of this countries, such as Buda, Esztergom, Zagreb. One of the principal patrons of the Franciscans in Hungary was the king Bela IV. He, his wife, the Byzantine Princess Maria Laskaris and their younger son, Bela was buried in the Franciscan church in Esztergom in 1270. Consequently, this was a cause for a dispute with the Franciscan Archbishop of Esztergom, who wanted their bodies transferred to his cathedral.

---

<sup>4</sup> Oreb Marin, *Ivan Karpin, «Povijest Mongola koje nazivamo i Tatarima»*, Starine, Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 56, 1975, 37-107.

<sup>5</sup> Jurić Frano, *Franjevački samostan u Dubrovačkoj Rijeci*, Zagreb, 1916.

From their monastery in Hungary, the Franciscans sent missionaries to christianize population of Hungary and the Balkan Peninsula in Bosnia, Wallachia and Bulgaria. Since these actions also represented the expansion of the authorities of the Hungarian Crown in these areas, Hungarian kings supported the Franciscans. One of the first Franciscan missions was among the Cumans, who had fled before the Mongols. The Franciscans had begun their missionary work among them before 1241, first in the Plain in Wallachia (now Romania), and then continued it after the Cumans relocated to Hungary.<sup>6</sup>

Similar was the case in Bosnia, where, due to the resistance of the local population to pay church tithes, the regular hierarchy of the Catholic Church could not survive. In order to transform the local population into a parish community, the Bosnian Franciscan vicariate was founded in 1334 to take care of the spiritual needs of Catholic believers here. Franciscan monasteries on the territory of Bosnia were created in Visoko, Olovo, Kreševo, Fojnica and others. These were not sufficient to carry out pastor's activities effectively. As a result of the lack of its own facilities and in order to more easily communicate with the believers, numbers of Bosnian Franciscans lived and dined in private buildings, along with the families of believers. The papal inquisitor, Franciscan Jacobus of Marchia, who visited Bosnia before its fall to the Ottomans was scandalized by such behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

After the Turkish conquest of Bosnia in 1463, the sultans granted them privileges (Fermans) which allowed the further activity of the Franciscans. The Franciscans, however, had frequent clashes with the local Muslim population, which led to the church authorities allowing them to disguise themselves in Turkish costume and grow the mustache. The believers even called them "ujaci" (uncles, mothers brothers) in order to hide them under false pretenses as cousins. This name of the Bosnian Franciscans is used today also.

In Hungary as in the interior of the Balkan Peninsula their rule to live on begging could not be implemented due to poor circulation of money. Cumans and other herder peoples gave the Franciscans charity in the form of animals and their products. This custom was held in Hungary, and in neighboring areas to the present day. Moreover, Hungarian rulers and feudal lords, granted each branch of the Franciscans, male and female with small land possessions and lent their income from the regal rights, in addition to founded religious sites, churches and monasteries. Affection of the late members of the Arpad dynasty, for the Franciscans, was retained by their heirs to the Hungarian throne from the house of Anjou.

In the fourteenth century the greatest patron of the Franciscan Order in Hungary was Queen Elizabeth of the Polish Piast dynasty, who was wife of a Hungarian king Charles I Robert from the house of Anjou, and the mother of Louis I. Louis I was named

---

<sup>6</sup> Karácsonyi János, *Szt. Ferencz rendjének története Magyarországon 1711-ig*, I-II, Budapest, 1922-1924; Fügedi Erik, *Kolduló barátok, polgárok, nemesek*, Budapest, 1981, KMTL, 218-219.

<sup>7</sup> Fermentzin Eusebius, *Acta Bosnae, potissimum ecclesiastica, cum insertis editorum documentorum regestis ab anno 925 usque ad annum 1752*, Monumenta spectantia historiam slavorum Meridionalium, 23, Zagrabiae, 1892.

after the uncle of his father Ludovic Anjou, the bishop of Toulouse and a Franciscan, who had renounced the crown of Naples and had been canonized some time before the prince's birth. The newly built Franciscan church in Maros area Lipka, (now in Romania) was dedicated to him. The church in Aracha near Novi Bečej, (today in Serbia), was also given to the Franciscans, having been richly endowed in Elizabeth's will. In addition to the churches of the male branch of the Franciscan order, she founded monastery for the Poor Clares sisters in Old Buda (today part of Hungarian capital Budapest) which was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. She bestowed upon them a place named Sonta near Danube (Sonta, now in Serbia), with the right of collection of taxes from crossing on this river and from fishing in it. Moreover, she gave the nuns a place Martonoš (now in Serbia) on the Tisza River.<sup>8</sup>

Example given by the members of the ruling houses, was followed by the members of aristocratic families. Thus, Palatine Nikola Kont, the founder of Ujlaki (Iločki) family founded a monastery on his lands Ujlak (Ilok now Croatia) and Várpalota (Hungary). John Marot (Morovićki) founded monasteries in Šaregrad (Croatia) and Gyula (Hungary). Franciscan monasteries on their estates were also supplied with fields and vineyards. This was probably one of the reasons for the confrontation that occurred between the Conventual and the Observants over the monasteries in Hungary. Consequently, as in Western Europe, the Franciscan order was also divided in this territory. Acquiring real estate assets, the Franciscans in Hungary, unlike their Western brethren have become part of the ruling, landed class, with all the consequences of that status. The Franciscans also owned serfs, and often attacked neighboring property owners, resulting in lawsuits. The Franciscans, carried out property and inheritance disputes through their representatives. Poor Clares of the Old Buda litigated with neighboring secular and ecclesiastical gentry, family Csáki, Archbishop of Kalocsa and Bacs and others.<sup>9</sup>

During the Ottoman yoke and immediately after the liberation of Hungary from the Turks (1699-1718), the Franciscans were the only priests that existed in this region. They carried out the work of parish priests. As a result, they enjoyed a good reputation not only in the spiritual but also in the social sphere. Franciscan monasteries, as a relatively safe places served as banks even before the establishment of treasuries. In Subotica (Serbia) prior to the establishment of banks in the nineteenth century, inhabitants have kept their money deposited in the local Franciscan monastery.<sup>10</sup> A conflict between Archbishop of Kalocsa and Bacs, Joseph Batthyany and the Franciscans occurred because the Franciscans refused to keep records of the income. It culminated in 1779 with the seizure of their parish in Subotica. Monastery was left to the Franciscans due to their commitment to population and their educational activities.<sup>11</sup> The enlightened absolutist

---

<sup>8</sup> Iványi István, *Bács-Bodrog vármegye földrajzi és történelmi helynévtára*, Szabadka, 1909, II, 171, IV, 1906, 73-74; Рокаи Петер, «Бродови» на Дунаву и притокама на подручју јужне Угарске у средњем веку, Пловидба на Дунаву и његовим притокама кроз векове, Српска академија наука и уметности, Научни скупови, књига, XV, Одељење историјских наука, књига 3, Београд, 1983, 160, 169-170

<sup>9</sup> Рокаи, «Бродови» 160.,

<sup>10</sup> Iványi István, *Szabadka szabad királyi város története*, II, Szabadka, 1892, 240.

<sup>11</sup> Iványi, *Szabadka*, II, 273-281, 372, 464-512.

Joseph II Habsburg abolished the Franciscan church and monastery in Sombor six years later, giving them over to a parish, secular priest. Sombor parish had been since continually alienated from the Franciscans. However, Archbishop of Kalocsa and Bacs, Leopold Arpad Varady, returned them the parish in Subotica in 1922, only so that in 1931, Bishop Lajčo Budanović took it away again. Since then the local Franciscans do not perform parish activities.<sup>12</sup>

#### Sources and Bibliography:

- Delijež, Loran, *Templari*, Beograd, 1993.
- Fermentžin, Eusebius, *Acta Bosnae, potissimum ecclesiastica, cum insertis editorum documentorum regestis ab anno 925 usque ad annum 1752*, Monumenta spectantia historiam slavorum Meridionalium, 23, Zagrabiae, 1892.
- Fügedi, Erik, *Kolduló barátok, polgárok, nemesek*, Budapest, 1981.
- Iványi, István, *Szabadka szabad királyi város története*, II, Szabadka, 1892.
- id. *Bács-Bodrog vármegye földrajzi és történelmi helynévtára*, Szabadka, 1909.
- Jurić, Frano, *Franjevački samostan u Dubrovačkoj Rijeci*, Zagreb, 1916.
- Karácsonyi, János, *Szt. Ferencz rendjének története Magyarországon 1711-ig*, I-II, Budapest, 1922-1924.
- Kristó, Gyula-Engel, Pál-Makk, Ferenc, *Korai magyar történelmi lexikon (9-14. század)*, Budapest, 1994.
- Lainati, Chiara Augusta, *Santa Chiara d' Assisi, Cenni biografici de S. Agnese d' Assisi, Assisi (Assisi Szent Klára, Assisi Szt. Ágnes életrajzi adalékaival)*, Fordította Tűzkő Lajos, Novi Sad, 1990.
- Le Roa, Ladiri Emanuel, *Montaju oksitansko selo od 1294. do 1324*. Sremski Karlovci-Noví Sad, 1991.
- Lynch, Joseph H, *The Medieval Church: a brief history*, Oxford, 1992.
- McManners, John: *The Oxford illustrated history of Christianity*, Oxford, 1990.
- Oreb, Marin, *Ivan Karpin, «Povijest Mongola koje nazivamo i Tatarima»*, Starine, Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 56, 1975, 37-107.
- Richers, William Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1970.
- Рокаи, Петер, «Бродови» на Дунаву и притокама на подручју јужне Угарске у средњем веку, Пловидба на Дунаву и његовим притокама кроз векове, Српска академија наука и уметности, Научни скупови, књига, XV, Одељење историјских наука, књига 3, Београд, 1983, 139-176.
- Schematismus primus Dioecesis Suboticanae ad annum Domini 1968, quod est anno foundationis Dioecesis*, Suboticae, 1968.
- Tóth, László, *Tanulmányok a szegénységi vita forrásainak történetéhez XXII. János pápa korában*, Budapest, 1934.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Schematismus primus Dioecesis Suboticanae ad annum Domini 1968, quod est anno foundationis Dioecesis*, Suboticae, 1968, 50.

MELINA ROKAI

## SIROMAŠTVO I FRANJEVAČKI RED U JUGOISTOČNOJ EVROPI

Rezime

Osnivači franjevačkog reda propisali su potpuno, apsolutno siromaštvo za svoje sledbenike normama koje regulišu njihov način života. Propisi su zabranjivali posedovanja lične imovine i regulisali da jedini vid sticanja sredstava za život bude prosjačenjem. U jugoistočnoj Evropi, Mađarskoj i u okviru Balkanskog poluostrva, ovaj pravilnik je bilo nemoguće primeniti zbog neadekvatnog protoka novca. Kao rezultat takvog ekonomskog stanja, vladari i feudalci su davali Franjevcima omanja imanja. Takva praksa je dovela do situacije da je ovaj monaški red posedovao kmetove, vodio imovinske i ostavinske rasprave, pretvarajući se u vladajuću vlastelinsku klasu, sa svim posledicama tog statusa. Takva deformacija Franjevačkih pravila siromaštva u jugoistočnoj Evropi je zapanjila savremenike razvijenih gradskih sredina Mediterana i zapadne Evrope. Ovaj fenomen je uz saglasnost vrhovne crkvene i svetovne vlasti preživio do duboko u dvadeseti vek.

**Ključne reči:** franjevački red, pravilo siromaštva, Jugoistočna Evropa, Balkan, Ugarska, prosjački redovi, Red Svete Klare, Franjevački misionari.