



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Newsletter of February 5, 2010,  
Feast of Saint Agatha

**Dears Friends,**

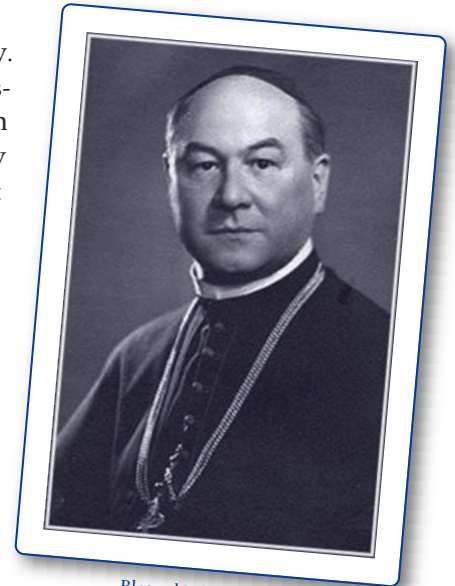
**S**PRING 1944. All of Central Europe was occupied by Nazi Germany. Putting pressure on the Hungarian government, Hitler secured the passage of a decree that forced the Jews of that country to live in ghettos, in preparation for their ultimate deportation. On Pentecost, during a homily given in the presence of civil authorities, a bishop reacted in these words: "Anyone who renounces the commandment of charity that is the foundation of Christianity, and claims that there are men and races that one must hate; anyone who maintains that the blacks and the Jews can be oppressed—that person, even if he claims to be a Christian, must be considered a pagan. ... If he takes part in or encourages such activities, he commits mortal sin and cannot receive absolution unless he makes reparation." At the same time, the prelate wrote a letter to the Minister of the Interior to remind him of his duties before God. The official responded with a threat of internment, to which the bishop simply answered: "I am ready." Who was this courageous witness to JESUS CHRIST?

***"I will play you such beautiful things"***

**V**ilmos (William) Apor was born on February 29, 1892 in Ségesvár, Transylvania (in Hungary at that time, now in Romania). The family numbered nine children, of whom four would die in infancy. Vilmos was the seventh child. His father, Baron Apor, an eminent lawyer from an illustrious family, was named secretary of state by Emperor Franz Joseph in 1895. He moved to Vienna with his family, but died in 1898 at the age of forty-seven. Little Vilmos, dismayed at seeing his mother cry, told her tenderly: "Mama, I am learning the violin—I will play you such beautiful things that you will forget Papa's death." The widow raised her children strictly, very attentive to their religious education. Vilmos was a good student at his Jesuit school. His classmates appreciated him for his affable though determined disposition. If he sometimes became heated in discussions, he never failed to ask forgiveness of those whom he had offended.

From childhood Vilmos had heard God's call: he was going to be a priest. At the end of 1909, he was accepted by his relative, the bishop of Győr, as a seminarian for this diocese in northwest Hungary. After earning a doctorate in theology from a Jesuit college, he was ordained a priest on August 24, 1915. It was wartime—his eldest brother was then at the front, while his mother and sisters were caring for the wounded.

After following his bishop, who had been transferred to the diocese of Nagyvárad (now Oradea) in Transylvania, in southeast Hungary, Vilmos was



Blessed Vilmos Apor

appointed vicar of Gyula. Initially serving as a Red Cross chaplain on various fronts during the second part of the war, he returned to Gyula at the beginning of 1919, this time as a parish priest. He would remain in this town for twenty-five years. If not a dazzling preacher, Father Apor touched his faithful with the strength of conviction that came from his deep faith. His charity in the confessional won all hearts over to him. The young priest's arrival coincided with a difficult period—the Austro-Hungarian military defeat was followed by Béla Kun's brief but violent Communist dictatorship. The revolutionary committee decreed the suppression of religious instruction. Vilmos organized a protest in front of the town hall and forced the committee to withdraw this measure. Then Hungary was occupied by Romania. In order to intimidate the population, the military command took hostages among Hungarian officers. Father Apor ultimately went all the way to Bucharest to obtain an order for these hostages to be freed, through the intercession of Queen Mary of Romania.

The 1920 Treaty of Trianon split up Hungary, and Transylvania was returned to Romanian control. Gyula remained Hungarian, but became a border region, which led to its economic decline. Bishop Ottokár Proháska urged the population to deep conversion, reminding them of the glorious Catholic past of the country of Saint Stephen (997-1038), the first "Apostolic King" of Hungary—to a large extent this call was heard. Vilmos Apor applied himself enthusiastically to this religious and social revival. In 1921, he established Catholic

Action in his parish, to work toward the Christianization of families and society. In 1922 a popular mission was held. Gyula's parish priest was at his parishioners' disposal until very late in the evening; to his mother, who advised him to take care of himself, he replied, "I cannot send the faithful away just when they may have the greatest need for me." His generosity was limitless—he went so far as to give to the needy his most indispensable items of clothing (shoes, for example). They called him the "Pastor of the Poor." He loved to minister to youth, whom he won over with his infectious enthusiasm, and to the handicapped. He was often seen celebrating Mass in rest homes for the elderly. But the effort closest to his heart was a home he had established for orphans.

All these activities did not keep Father Apor from giving first place to his spiritual life. He was often seen praying in the Cathedral, and yearly he made an Ignatian retreat with the Jesuits. Careful to live his priestly celibacy in an exemplary manner, he battled sensual impulses with prayer, penance, temperance in eating, and healthy physical activity. He was kind but reserved with women.

### **Bishop in the midst of war**

In May 1938, an International Eucharistic Congress was held in Budapest, presided over by Pope Pius XI's Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII. The political situation was ominous—Hitler had just annexed Austria and the Nazi threat hung over neighboring Hungary. More than two million copies of Pius XI's encyclicals on the burning questions of the day (*Mit Brennender Sorge* and *Divini Redemptoris*, 1938) against National Socialism and Communism were published in Hungarian. Vilmos Apor was called to work with the government in counteracting the penetration of Nazi ideology. In January 1941, Pope Pius XII named him bishop of Győr. The episcopal consecration took place in Gyula, as his parishioners had vociferously demanded. Someone who was there related his impressions: "When the new bishop had received the miter and cross and blessed the assembly, I noticed with astonishment how completely his face and entire physical appearance had been transformed—he was as if transfigured. One could visibly observe in him the grace of apostolic succession." The prelate chose as his motto "Crux firmat mitem, mitigat fortem" (the cross makes the gentle strong, and the strong gentle). Noting that his priests were having difficulty trusting their new shepherd, he greeted them warmly and every day held open table at lunch, a novel practice at the time. He helped them in every possible way. This paternal kindness did not keep him from being demanding, especially with regard to the manner in which the Mass and Divine Office were celebrated. Bishop Apor kept a close eye on the formation and conduct of his seminarians. He received the faithful with untiring patience, and often assisted them out of his own personal resources—even alcoholics and the notoriously lazy were not turned away.

The bishop of Győr knew the Church's social doctrine, notably expounded by Pius XI in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). He was aware that Hungary was behind in the area of social protection. Hungarian bishops at that time held large estates—Bishop Apor hoped to bring about agrarian reform. But the ongoing war would not allow him to bring this plan to completion. He tried at least to do his best in being a fair master to the farmers who worked the episcopal land. The bishop suffered greatly when he saw workers won over by Socialist ideology and distance themselves from the Church. He took advantage of every opportunity to meet with them and, under the mandate of the Hungarian episcopate, led organizations of young Christian workers.

Vilmos Apor had taken on his duties as bishop in the midst of war. After having attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Third Reich tried to drag Hungary into its mad endeavor. For a long time, the Hungarian leadership had managed to keep the Germans at bay. In August 1943, the bishop of Győr became the president of the "Catholic Social Movement", established by distinguished persons who wanted to create the conditions for a Hungarian Christian renaissance after the war. They held out hoping that America would save their country from falling under the yoke of Communism. Following the German occupation of Hungary (March 19, 1944), Anglo-Saxon air power bombed the cities. On April 13, a bombardment on Győr destroyed the principal factory, leaving 564 dead and 1,100 wounded. The city would be bombed twenty-four more times before the end of the war. The bishop worked to comfort and assist the population.

### **The day of reckoning will come**

In June 1944, the deportation of Hungarian Jews to the German concentration camps began. The bishop sought to help the victims by sending them food and clothing, and he asked to visit them—his request was denied. He then sent Hitler a telegram in these words: "The divine commandments apply equally to the Führer. The time will come where he will have to account to God and to the world for his actions." This admonition was to remind the dictator of the unavoidable nature of the Last Judgment, at which time each person's eternal fate will be determined. JESUS CHRIST warned us of this: *Those who have done good shall rise to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation* (Jn. 5:29). ... *And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life* (Mt. 25:46).

"The Last Judgment will reveal that God's justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by His creatures and that God's love is stronger than death" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1040).

In October 1944, Hitler imposed on Hungary a puppet regime led by Szálazy. Soon the cardinal-primate Serédi strongly reproached Szálazy for his policy of persecuting the Jews. Pope Pius XII's apostolic nuncio to

Hungary, Bishop Rotta, in collaboration with four ambassadors from neutral powers (Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, and Portugal) managed to save the lives of many Jews. For his part, Bishop Apor hid a number of Jews in his bishop's palace and in the space under the roof of the cathedral. One of them, whom no one in Győr had dared take in, would later tell of the cordial welcome he received from the bishop, and of the bishop's personal efforts to find him a safer hiding place in Budapest.

On October 31, 1944, Bishop Mindszenty, the bishop of Veszprém, composed a petition to Szálazy imploring him to lay down arms, in order to avoid the occupation and pillage of the eastern part of the country by the Red Army. Signed by Bishop Apor, this petition had no response other than the arrest of Bishop Mindszenty. At Christmas, the Soviets reached Esztergom, the religious capital of Hungary. During this first offensive by the Red Army, Bishop Apor was able to observe the sort of liberation that awaited the Hungarians—everywhere there were reports of pillages, massacres, and rapes. In March 1945, the German line of defense collapsed, and the Russians made a rush for Győr. Terrible street fighting took place in the town. On March 28, Holy Wednesday, the cathedral tower that had been in flames collapsed, setting the entire building on fire. The bishop had withdrawn to his residence, spared by the bombings, where he harbored a great number of refugees. In the huge cellar were hidden some one hundred women who were afraid of being raped.

### **Do not remain impassive**

**S**exual violence against women is unfortunately neither a recent evil nor a crime that belongs to a bygone past. In his *Letter to Women* of June 29, 1995, Pope John Paul II wrote (no. 5): "How can we not mention the long and degrading history, albeit often an 'underground' history, of violence against women in the area of sexuality? ... We cannot remain indifferent and resigned before this phenomenon. The time has come to condemn vigorously the types of sexual violence which frequently have women for their object and to pass laws which effectively defend them from such violence. Nor can we fail, in the name of the respect due to the human person, to condemn the widespread hedonistic and commercial culture which encourages the systematic exploitation of sexuality and corrupts even very young girls into turning their bodies into merchandise."

Determined to make any sacrifice to protect against brutal force the chastity and honor of the women taking refuge in his home, Bishop Apor calmly waited for the Soviet soldiers. Wednesday evening, the first ones burst into the bishop's palace, yelling and brandishing machine guns. He held out to them watches and other objects intended to appease them. Throughout the night, he refused to go rest, saying, "I must stay here in case something happens." The next day, he celebrated Mass in the

cellar where the women were taking refuge. New soldiers were constantly arriving, stealing and beating the refugees. A soldier enjoined the bishop to allow access to the cellar. When he refused, another shouted to his friend, "Give him some bullets in the belly!" Nevertheless, Vilmos did not budge. He spent a second sleepless night on guard—the night from Holy Thursday to Good Friday—and read the story of the Passion to the faithful.

On Friday, Bishop Apor sent two priests to ask the Soviet commander for his protection over the people taking refuge in the bishop's palace. An officer cynically told them that the Russian "partisans" had the right to do what they wanted. Around 7 o'clock in the evening, a group of drunk soldiers arrived, led by a major—who had already come that very morning to spy. Feigning friendliness, the sub-officer demanded that the young women, who at that time were in the middle of making a soup for the poor, be handed over to him, "to peel some potatoes and do some odd sewing jobs". He then entered the cellar with some soldiers, and the bishop hurried after them. He promised the major, who repeated his demand, that he would send a group of volunteers, men and older women, to respond to his requisition.

### **"Uncle Vilmos ... Help!"**

**B**ut the discussion became heated, and as the soldiers became more and more imperious, the bishop was unshakable in refusing to let the young women go—he knew all too well what fate would await them. The major, beside himself with rage, seized the bishop. He grabbed his pistol, but did not dare to fire it. Bishop Apor took advantage of his hesitation to push him out of the cellar, and then stationed himself in front of the entrance. At this moment, he heard cries of panic: "Uncle Vilmos... help!..." The soldiers who had stayed below were about to carry off the young women. Bishop Apor rushed into the cellar, followed by his nephew, two priests, and the major. With no concern for his own safety, the bishop shouted to the brutish soldiers: "Outside! Outside!" upon which, beside himself, the major, or one of his men, fired. The bishop was struck by three bullets—one only went through his clothes, the second grazed his forehead, and the third went deep into his stomach. His 17-year-old nephew Sándor Pálffy, who had tried to shield his uncle with his own body, was also wounded. Fearing punishment from their supervisors, the soldiers hastily left the bishop's palace.

A doctor at the scene observed that an operation would be necessary to remove the bullet. When Bishop Apor was asked if he was in pain, he very calmly replied, "I thank Jesus for allowing me to suffer on Good Friday." The ambulance that took him to the hospital was stopped by Russian soldiers who, hoping for plunder, climbed in and beat the wounded man's face with their flashlights. The bishop looked at them with gentleness and blessed them. After the operation, a semi-conscious Vilmos Apor

cried out several times: "Yes! Yes! Yes!..." A little later he confided to his sister Gizella that at the moment he had been frightened by the cross that awaited him, and that these "yesses" were his expressing his acceptance of sufferings and death, out of love for God. The next day, a priest came to visit him and assured him that none of the women hiding in the bishop's palace had been raped. Filled with joy, the bishop smiled and murmured, "It was worth the trouble... I thank God for accepting my sacrifice!" The bishop's chancellor, who had gone to file a complaint with the Soviet authorities, was turned away with indifference. He would soon learn of many atrocities committed by the Red Army soldiers, all of which were covered up by their officers. But he would note that heaven's protection had been extended over those for whom Bishop Apor had willingly risked his life.

"It was worth the trouble..." In a speech on February 9, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI confirmed that protecting the dignity of women against behavior that reduces them to objects is "worth the trouble": "There are places and cultures where women are discriminated against or undervalued for the sole fact of being women, where recourse is made even to religious arguments and family, social and cultural pressure in order to maintain the inequality of the sexes, where acts of violence are consummated in regard to women, making them the object of mistreatment and of exploitation in advertising and in the consumer and entertainment industry. Faced with such grave and persistent phenomena the Christian commitment appears all the more urgent so that everywhere it may promote a culture that recognizes the dignity that belongs to women, in law and in concrete reality."

### **Martyrdom, his own Passover**

Yet the prelate's pain became unbearable. It was all he could do to murmur, "I offer my sufferings for my faithful." Easter morning, he received Communion. Toward evening, his blood pressure dropped and his

doctor diagnosed peritonitis. The dying man confessed and received Extreme Unction. He managed to say, "I greet my priests. May they remain faithful to the Church and proclaim the Gospel with courage...!" He then forgave his murderers and offered his life in reparation for his homeland. Vilmos Apor rendered his soul to God on Easter Monday, April 2, 1945, at one o'clock in the morning. On November 9, 1997, Pope John Paul II raised him to the honor of the altar and eulogized him in these words: "In the image of the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (cf. Jn 10:11), the new blessed lived his fidelity to the paschal mystery, ultimately making the supreme sacrifice of his own life. His murder occurred precisely on Good Friday: he was shot to death while defending his flock. Through his martyrdom he thus experienced his own Passover, passing from the heroic witness of love for Christ and of solidarity with his brothers and sisters to the crown of glory promised to faithful servants. ... May it encourage believers to follow Christ in their lives without hesitation. This is the holiness to which all the baptized are called!"

The bishop-martyr's funeral was celebrated at the bishop's palace at the altar dedicated to MARY, "Patroness of Hungary". He was quietly buried in the Carmelites' chapel. There were plans to transfer his mortal remains to the Cathedral after its restoration in 1948—the tomb for the bishop had been finished—but the Communist government forbade it. It was not until 1986 that the remains could be transferred.

On May 11, 2007, Benedict XVI said, "The world needs transparent lives, clear souls, pure minds that refuse to be perceived as mere objects of pleasure. It is necessary to oppose those elements of the media that ridicule the sanctity of marriage and virginity before marriage. In our day, Our Lady has been given to us as the best defense against the evils that afflict modern life; Marian devotion is the sure guarantee of Her maternal protection and safeguard in the hour of temptation."

Let us ask God, through the intercession of MARY, the ever-Virgin Mother, and of Blessed Vilmos Apor, for the grace to value properly the virtue of chastity, and to be ready to make any sacrifice to defend it in ourselves and in others.

Dom Antoine Marie  
— o.s.b.

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.