

A HUNGARIAN FRANCISCAN PREACHING IN ROMANIAN. THE ROMANIAN SERMONS OF OLTÍ ISTVÁN, OFM IN HUNGARIAN TRANSLITERATION

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Abstract. Franciscans carried out an important pastoral ministry in the Diocese of Alba Iulia, which included Romanian-speaking communities. A particular example of this ministry is the decades-long preaching of István Olti, OFM, a Hungarian friar, to Romanian believers, in the first half of the 19th century. This essay discusses his unpublished Romanian sermons given in Grădiştea de Munte, Sibişel, Sebeşel and Rodna Veche, preserved in the Franciscan Archives in Cluj. The sermons, entirely inspired by the Bible, are interesting not only as witnesses of the Franciscan ministry to Romanian-speaking communities, but also as examples of religious texts in Romanian, written with Latin characters, a phonetic transcription using Hungarian letters and digraphs, in a (trans)formative period of the Romanian language, when writing and printing used Cyrillic characters.

Keywords: István Olti, OFM, Franciscans, Transylvania, sermons, mission Romanian writing with Hungarian characters, transliteration.

Franciscans played a major role in the life of the Transylvanian Catholic Church. This was the case particularly during and after the Reformation,² but their role endured well into the 19th century and beyond, even following the restoration of the regular ministry of the secular clergy. The survival of small

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² The importance of the pastoral ministry carried out by the Franciscans increased in response to the prohibitions imposed on the Catholic Church during the Reformation, notably the expulsion of the bishop of Transylvania following the Diet of Sebeş [Szászsebes] in 1556 and of the Jesuits by the Diet of Mediaş [Medgyes] in 1588, as well as the restrictions imposed on Catholic religious practice by the Diets of Turda [Torda], 1566 and Bistriţa [Beszterce], 1610.



communities was largely due to their pastoral ministry. A particular example of this ministry is the decades-long preaching of István Olti, OFM (Antal Olti under his civilian name), a Hungarian friar, to Romanian believers, in the first half of the 19th century, witnessed by his sermons preserved in the Franciscan Archives of Transylvania.³ The sermons were written in a (trans)formative period of the Romanian language, when writing (in particular that of ecclesiastic texts) still largely used Cyrillic characters. The sermons of Olti use the Latin alphabet, combined with the phonetic transcription of the Romanian text with Hungarian characters and digraphs. The sermons were preserved at the monastery in Șumuleu Ciuc [Csíksomlyó], then transferred to the Transylvanian Franciscan Collecting Archives in Cluj [Kolozsvár].⁴

In what follows I briefly outline the biography of István Olti against the background of the history of the Franciscans in Transylvania, to explain some geographic and chronological aspects of the ministry of István Olti, OFM. I subsequently turn to the sermons of Fr. Olti written in Romanian. Finally, I summarise the findings and conclusions.

A Franciscan in Transylvania. A short biography of István Olti, OFM

Friars minor in Transylvania were established as an independent custody named after Saint Stephen, King of Hungary, with the apostolic letter *Salvatoris nostri* of Pope Urban VIII on 3 February 1640.⁵ A major role in the independence

³ I thank archivist dr. Xénia Jonica for bringing this material to my attention. Thanks are also due to archivist Anita Vajda (Archives of the Roman Catholic Status, Cluj), for her help with deciphering the manuscripts.

⁴ In this essay I use both the earlier Hungarian and the contemporary, official Romanian names of the localities.

⁵ On the history of the Transylvanian Franciscans: Fortunát BOROS, “A franciskánusok működése Erdélyben”, in *Az erdélyi katolicizmus múltja és jelene*, Dicsőszentmárton: Erzsébet Könyvnyomda, 1925, 477–497 (480–481). For a recent overview of the settlement and ministry of the Franciscans in Hungary and the provinces in the Middle Ages: Ioana-Terezia POP, “The Expansion of the Order of the Friars Minor in the Kingdom of Hungary in 13th and Early 14th Century Through Sources of the Order”, *Philobiblon* 24.2 (2019) 287–309. On the increase in the importance of the Franciscans following the expulsion of the Jesuits from Transylvania: Tamás KRUPPA, “Franciscans or Jesuits: Attempts to Resurrect Catholicism in Transylvania (1589-1592)”, in *Incorrupta monumenta ecclesiam defendunt. Studi offeriti a mons.*

of the Transylvanian Franciscans was played by Kázmér Domokos. He had been sent to Rome by Stefano da Salina⁶ and had been ordained a priest there.⁷ Kázmér became the first *custos* of the Transylvanian friars.⁸

At the General Chapter of Milan in 1729, the Transylvanian Custody was removed from the jurisdiction of the Salvatorian Province and elevated to the rank of independent province.⁹ The 17th and 18th centuries were a period of peace and creation, in which the monasteries that later played an important role in the life of István Olti were founded or returned to the Franciscans: Mikháza [Călugăreni, founded in 1635], Kolozsvár [Cluj, returned in 1724], Szászváros [Orăștie, repossessed in 1728], Szászsebes [Sebeș, established in 1731], and Szamosújvár

Sergio Pagano, prefetto dell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano I/2, edited by Andreas GOTTMANN – Pierantonio PIATTI – Andreas E. REHBERG, Città del Vaticano, 2018, 889–903.

- ⁶ István KEUL notes that Salina was probably of Bosnian origin (Stjepan Tuzlanski), from the town of Tuzla (the Latin *Salinae*); sources render his name as Stefano de Salina, Stephanus de Salinis or Stefano a Salina. *Early Modern Religious Communities in East-Central Europe: Ethnic Diversity, Denominational Plurality, and Corporative Politics in the Principality of Transylvania (1526–1691)* (Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 143), Leiden: Brill, 2009, 211, n. 56. In Hungarian works he is mentioned as Szalinai István.
- ⁷ József GYÖRGY, *A ferencrendiek élete és működése Erdélyben*, Cluj–Kolozsvár: Szent Bonaventura Könyvnyomda, 1930, 80; BOROS, “A franciskánusok”, 487; Fortunát BOROS, *Az erdélyi ferencrendiek*, Kolozsvár: Szent Bonaventura Könyvnyomda, 1927, 75.
- ⁸ Kázmér Damokos (Domokos), OFM (1606–1677), collaborator of Stefano da Salina, was the head of the Bosnian Franciscan mission in Transylvania, then guardian of the Transylvanian Franciscan Custody (1654–1662). Appointed titular bishop of Corona by Pope Clement IX, he was ordained in 1668 by Cardinal Giulio Spinola. He functioned as apostolic vicar of the Diocese of Transylvania. He had a significant contribution to the organisation and renewal of the diocese and of the Franciscan order in Transylvania. In 1674 he held a synod in Csíksomlyó (Sumuleu-Ciuc). GALLA Ferenc, *Ferences misszionáriusok Magyarországon: a Királyságban és Erdélyben a 17–18. században* (Collectana Vaticanea Hungariae 2), ed. FAZEKAS István, Budapest – Rome: Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem – Gondolat, 2005, 203–208, 211, 227–234, 236–240; JAKUBINYI György, *Katolikus, erdélyi protestáns és izraelita vallási archontológia*, Gyulafehérvár: Gloria, 2004, 28; VICZIÁN János, “Damokos Kázmér”, in DIÓS István, VICZIÁN János (ed.), *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon 2*, Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1993, 515.
- ⁹ GYÖRGY, *A ferencrendiek élete és működése Erdélyben*, 100–101; BOROS, “A franciskánusok”, 491.

[Gherla, founded in 1744]. The Province flourished at the end of the 18th century, with a total of 354 monks in 23 monasteries.

Franciscan priests were actively engaged in preaching and the pastoral care of the inhabitants of the localities neighbouring their monastery. This included the villages with a majority Romanian population, on occasion with some other ethnic groups, in Southern and Northern Transylvania (in today's Alba, Hunedoara, Sibiu and Bistrița-Năsăud county). The Franciscan Chapter committed to the pastoral care of the Romanian communities, appointing Romanian native speakers or friars with a good command of the language, in addition to Hungarian and German-speaking ones.¹⁰ István Olti, OFM was one such priest who has spent several years ministering in Romanian communities.

In what follows I briefly present the biography of István Olti, OFM, to highlight his ministry to Romanian communities. I compiled the biographical data from two sources: the book of József György, *A ferencrendiek élete és működése Erdélyben* [The Life and Work of the Franciscans in Transylvania], published in 1930 in Cluj [Kolozsvár], and the essay of Leonard Pap, OFM, who discovered the sermons of Olti in Șumuleu Ciuc [Csíksomlyó] in July 1988 and drafted a one-page inventory. The latter also includes a short biography with the places of István Olti's ministry. Fr. Pap indicates that he used the manuscript collection *Capitulumok* [Chapters] edited by József György.¹¹

Antal Olti was born in Csíkmadéfalva [Siculeni] on 2 February 1787. He entered the Franciscan Order at the age of twenty and studied at the Franciscan monastery of Csíksomlyó [Șumuleu Ciuc]. He pursued theological studies in Vajdahunyad [Hunedoara], which provided theological formation for Franciscan friars, subsequently in Szászváros [Orăștie], Kolozsvár [Cluj] and Nagyszeben [Sibiu]. He took the habit on 8 September 1807, changing his first name from Antal to István. He was ordained a priest on 19 September 1810.¹² The surviving biographical records do not indicate the place of his investiture nor that of his ordination.

The places of István Olti's pastoral ministry and his tasks can be reconstructed based on data provided by József György and the date of the sermons. Following

¹⁰ BOROS, *Az erdélyi ferencrendiek élete és működése Erdélyben*, 192.

¹¹ The material concerning István Olti can be found in the Transylvanian Franciscan Collecting Archives in Cluj (henceforward TFCAC), under the Provincial's documents / Legacy: 3 / István Olti, box 1. The researched material is in a small unnumbered file.

¹² GYÖRGY, *Az erdélyi ferencrendiek élete és működése Erdélyben*, 533.

his ordination, Olti spent a year in Kolozsvár [Cluj] and one in [Nagyszeben] Sibiu as *pater studens*. For a while, he spent every year in a different monastery. His position in Mikháza [Călugăreni] is unknown. Between 1813 and 1814 he taught in Hátszeg [Hațeg].¹³

In 1814 he was in Szászváros [Orăștie], until 1816, but his position unknown. The sermon in Romanian dated 1816 may be related to his ministry here, because in the second half of the year he was already in Szárhegy [Lăzarea], a Hungarian-speaking village (it is highly unlikely that he would have preached a sermon in Romanian there).

From 1818 István Olti was in Kolozsvár [Cluj]. He was subsequently appointed again for two years to Mikháza [Călugăreni]. In this period he regularly celebrated mass in the family chapel of the castle of Count József Petky in Marosszentgyörgy [Sângeorgiu de Mureș].

Olti returned to Szászváros [Orăștie] in 1820, where he spent three years, up to 1823. From there he visited the small community in Sebeshely [Sebeșel], some 40 km to the East, and Ósebeshely [Sibișel], 11 km South from Szászváros, known for its glass- and metalworks.

Between 1823–1824 he served in Szamosújvár [Gherla]. (The Franciscans were admitted here in 1743, and their church was completed in 1757 with the support of Armenian donors.¹⁴) The friars of this monastery provided pastoral care to the dispersed Catholics of the neighbouring areas. (In 1830 they preached and celebrated the sacraments in more than seventeen places.) While based in Szamosújvár [Gherla], he also ministered to the community in Óradna [Rodna Veche], a mining town, with a mixed – Romanian, Hungarian, German, Roma, Armenian population and some other ethnic groups (Czechs, Slovaks, Polish,

¹³ Fr. Olti started to teach in 1814 in the school built from the donation of Transylvanian Bishop József Mártonffi (14865 Forints [Frt]), next to the episcopal residence. His starting salary was 120 Frt, later raised to 200, and from 1887 to 300 Frt. Initially there was only one classroom. Starting with 1867 the school also used one of the rooms of the episcopal residence for a monthly rent of 5 Frt and taught older children as well. GYÖRGY, *A ferencrendiek élete és működése Erdélyben*, 235.

¹⁴ Bálint Kovács, “A ferencesek és örmények kapcsolatai Erdélyben, a XVIII. században”, in *Nyolcszáz esztendő a ferences rend: Tanulmányok a rend lelkiségéről, történeti hivatásáról és kulturális–művészeti szerepéről*, II., ed. Norbert S. MEDGYESSY, István ÖTVÖS and Sándor ÖZE, Budapest: Írott Szó Alapítvány–Magyar Napló, 2013, 282–291 (284).

Ukrainians).¹⁵ Olti also appears as a resident priest in the Franciscan register of Óradna [Rodna Veche] in 1823.¹⁶

After his ministry in Szamosújvár [Gherla] and Óradna [Rodna Veche], Olti returned to Szászváros [Orăștie] in 1824, where he remained for thirty-two years. During this period he regularly celebrated mass and preached in Sebeshely [Sebeșel].¹⁷ He died here on 12 June 1856.

István Olti's sermons in Romanian

Most of the Romanian sermons can be linked to Olti's ministry in Szászváros [Orăștie], from where he provided for the spiritual needs of the neighbouring communities. From his first term we have a sermon delivered in Grediste [Grădiștea de Munte] (1814), from the second term one given in Ósebeshely [Sibișel] (1821) and one in Sebeshely [Sebeșel] (1823), and from his final period, eleven more homilies delivered in Sebeshely [Sebeșel]. From the period spent in Szamosújvár [Gherla] / Óradna [Rodna Veche] seven sermons have been preserved.¹⁸

The collection also includes a sermon apparently preached in Királybánya [Baia Craiului] in 1802, but since István Olti was ordained a priest only in 1810, his authorship can be excluded. Fr. Leonard Pap, OFM attributes the sermon to Fr Lajos Csoboth.¹⁹ The place and time of the delivery of the sermons written for the feast of St Peter and St Paul and for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost are not indicated (I will not discuss them here).

¹⁵ *History of Mineral Exploration in Hungary Until 1945*, edited by G. CSÍKY and Gy. VITÁLIS, transl. E. Dudich, G. Szurovy, Budapest: Hungarian Geological Institute – Hungarian Geological Society, 1989, 17–18, 22; Mircea MUREȘIANU, “Language and Discourse Geodemographic Influence on the Dialectical Local Vocabulary in the Geographical Space of Rodna, Bistrița-Năsăud County”, *Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity* 3 (2014) 78–86.

¹⁶ GYÖRGY, *A ferencrendiek élete ée működése Erdélyben*, 426.

¹⁷ TFCAC, Olti István, box 1.

¹⁸ The legacy of István Olti, OFM, is found in the Transylvanian Franciscan Collecting Archives in Cluj. Handwritten sermons, written on separate sheets. The pages are not numbered. With two exceptions, most sermons mention the occasion. (TFCAC, Provincial's Documents: Legacy: 3. Olti István, box 1.)

¹⁹ Comment by Pap Leonárd OFM, TFCAC, Olti István, box 1.

The sermons discussed here were written in Romanian. What makes them special is the fact that they use the Latin alphabet and a Hungarian spelling. Olti employed a phonetic transcription of Romanian words, of special Romanian phonemes, using specific Hungarian characters and digraphs.²⁰ This particularity has to do with the fact that until 1830 Romanian writing and printing, including Bible editions, widely used the Cyrillic, not the Latin alphabet. In the 19th century, Ienăchiță Văcărescu, Toader Școleriu, Ion Budai-Deleanu and Ion Heliade Rădulescu simplified the Cyrillic alphabet, producing a transitional, mixed, Cyrillic and Latin orthography. The Latin alphabet was officially introduced in Transylvania and Bucovina between 1860 and 1862.²¹ This means that Olti's ministry coincided with a formative period of the Romanian language and spelling. His sermons are therefore not only witnesses of the pastoral ministry carried out by Hungarian friars to Romanian communities; they are also interesting as contributions to the production of Romanian writing using Latin characters.

István Olti's command of Romanian is not perfect; he must have learned the language by ear. His style is simple, suited for his audience, which probably consisted of less educated, lower status people. These were workers at the glassworks in Ósebeshely [Sibișel] and the mines in Óradna [Rodna Veche], and their families. The audience was either entirely Romanian (probably the case in Sebeshely [Sebeșel], or ethnically mixed, with Romanian probably being the common language.

Biblical quotations occasionally correspond to the Romanian Bible translation, the Blaj Bible from 1795,²² but most often they differ from it, being probably translations of the author from Hungarian. Olti often quotes the Bible from memory.

²⁰ To make it clearer, the Romanian Blaj Bible was printed with Cyrillic characters. A transcription with Latin characters renders Luke 10,42a as "Mariia partea cea bună și-au ales". Olti renders the verse as: "Mária pártye tsel buna szau alész".

²¹ Flora ȘUTEU, "Introducere în studiul ortografiei românești actuale", in *Sinteze de limba română*, edited by Theodor HRISTEA, București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1981, 86–98. Romanian Bible translations and religious books printed in Transylvania under the Calvinist princes in the 17th century still used the Cyrillic alphabet. KEUL, *Early Modern Religious Communities*, 193–194.

²² The translation by Samuil Micu used on the first Romanian Bible edition, the so-called Bucharest or Șerban Cantacuzino Bible from 1688. On Romanian Bible translations: Eugen MUNTEANU, "A Brief History of the Romanian Biblical Tradition", in *Biblicum Jassyense. Romanian Review for Biblical Philology and Hermeneutics* 3 (2012) 5–55.

Most sermons name the Sundays and feast days for which they were written as well as the biblical pericopes. Otherwise, I have identified the pericopes that were difficult to read in the manuscript using the Hungarian-Latin Missal.²³ The name of the Sundays and feast days follows the liturgical designations of the time.

In what follows I offer a summary of the sermons, followed by some observations.

I will discuss the sermons in chronological order, grouped by the locations of Olti's ministry involving preaching in Romanian, delivered in Grediste [Grădiștea de Munte], Ósebeshely [Sibișel], Sebeshely [Sebeșel] and Óradna [Rodna Veche].

The sermons follow a pattern. The prescript names the Sunday or feast day, the place and year of delivery. The text starts with a bible verse (usually a marked quotation), mostly from the Gospels (but also from other New Testament books). The verse is explained, applied to the occasion, and illuminated with other biblical (New or Old Testament) verses. In some cases, the author also invokes other authorities (Augustine, Gregory the Great). The biblical text is applied to the faithful and used to exhort and admonish.

Grediste [Grădiștea de Munte]

5th Sunday after Pentecost, 1814

The sermon quotes and comments Matt 5,22 (“anyone who is angry with a brother will answer for it before the court”), pleading for the importance of forgiveness. In the introduction, Olti illustrates the impact of anger with a striking example. The wrathful man sits in a wolf-drawn wagon, with a whip in his hand, and an iron hat on his head. Anger strips a man of his inner self, his vision is blurred, he no longer knows right from wrong, he behaves as if he were rabid. Anger is contrasted with neighbourly love: God teaches us to love and forgive one another. The need for forgiveness is underscored with an unmarked reference to St Augustine, who warns believers that a Christian who asks God for forgiveness but refuses to forgive the offender is insolent and shameless. If we forgive those who sin against us, God will also forgive our sins at the judgment. Let us be merciful to those who sin against us, and God will be merciful to us at the last judgment.

²³ The Missal was translated into Hungarian Xavér by Ferenc Szunyogh, OSB. *Magyar-latín misszálé az év minden napjára a római misekönyv szerint*, trans. Xavér Ferenc SZUNYOGH, Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1944. I follow here the second edition of the Missal, published in 1944. For the name of the Sundays and feasts I follow the pre-Vatican II structure of the liturgical year, its order and designations.

Ósebeshely [Sibişel] (1821)

Assumption Day

The sermon develops Luke 10,42, on Mary having chosen the better part, based on the name association. He evokes and compares the end of the earthly journey of Mary with that of Samuel. As Israel wept at the death of the prophet Samuel (an unmarked reference to 1 Sam 25,1), believers weep because their greatest intercessor, Mary, has died. Yet, with a rhetorical question he underscores the difference: “But what am I saying, did she die? She is not dead, but alive, by God.” This great feast invites rejoicing, because Mary has ascended to heaven and heavens have welcomed her. Mary has chosen the better part, and she will never lose it. She embodies before the audience the virtues of purity and humility. This is the better part, which every Christian must choose.

Sebeshely [Sebeşel] (1823)

Pentecost

The homily builds on Acts 1,8 (“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria”). He sets as an example the courage and faith of the apostles who dared to speak of the crucified and risen Jesus. He praises the courage of Peter, who confronts the Jewish authorities (“this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law”, Acts 2,23). This is the kind of courageous witness God expects of Christians. A witness of love, justice, forgiveness, humility, sacrifice. These are the virtues that set Christians apart from the Gentiles, and the Holy Spirit descends to teach us how to practice them.

Rodna Veche [Óradna] (1823–1824)

1823, Second Sunday of Lent

The sermon highlights the conclusion of the pericope of the transfiguration: “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matt 17,4). Those who sin every day cannot

reach the bliss of which St Paul wrote: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2,9). The topic of sin evokes the simile about the sick needing a physician (Matt 9,12-13par.). The healthy person does not need medicine, but a sick person does. Similarly, the soul, the sinner needs the forgiveness of sins. Those who repent wholeheartedly partake in the mercy of God. The good deeds of the sinner are in vain; they are useless for salvation. If a sick man heeds to the advice of the physician, the sinner should also listen to the word of the priest. Repentance is the door to eternal life.

1823, Third Sunday of Advent

Toward the end of Advent, the sermon evokes John the Baptist pointing at Jesus (“John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know’”; John 1,26). John the Baptist, he argues, accused his contemporaries of being blind for not recognising the Messiah. There are many today who do not recognise Jesus and do not want to be saved from their sins. The wickedness of the heart is the source of all sin. He pinpoints ignorance as the reason why many do not recognise Jesus, and do not believe that He is the eternal Son of the Father. However, ignorance is no excuse. Sinners have no part in eternal bliss. The parable of the rich man and of the poor Lazarus warns us that God has to be recognised in this life (Luke 16,29-31).

1824, Second Sunday of Lent

This beautiful, carefully drafted homily builds on the introductory verse of the pericope of the transfiguration (“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves”; Matt 17,1), focusing on the hope of eternal life. Transfiguration reveals the divine mystery in Jesus. It is a confirmation of the disciples who will face the horror of Jesus’ death on the cross. Referring to Matt 13,43, he shows that the transfiguration of Jesus is also a promise for the future (“the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father”). Again, he invokes the words of St Paul: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2,9). He adduces several more biblical passages

that point to the beauty of eternal happiness: Matt 6,20 (“store up for yourselves treasures in heaven”), Rev 21,4 (“he will wipe every tear from their eyes”). Believers, persuaded by this vision, should say with Peter: “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matt 17,4). The preacher concludes with the confession of Job: “I know that my Redeemer lives” (Job 19,25).

1824, Fourth Sunday of Lent

The sermon builds on John 6,11: “Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated”. This verse taken from the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves has clear eucharistic overtones. Therefore the preacher turns to the institution and the worship of the Eucharist and to Holy Communion. “He who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me” (John 6,57). Those who take Holy Communion unworthily are crucifying Jesus again, sinning against the body and blood of the Lord (1 Cor 11,27). The unworthy Christian who takes communion is a murderer. Christians always have the opportunity to be purified in confession. Those who take communion unworthily are under judgment. The strong words are not meant to frighten the hearers, but the preacher does not succeed to encourage them either.

1824, Sixth Sunday after Easter

The homily explains John 16,2 (“They will put you out of the synagogues”). The author blames the Jews for having rejected Jesus and claims that God has punished them for it. Yet, he extends the warning to Christians, who may also expect punishment as sinners. Harsh and frightening warnings are taken from the Book of Isaiah and from Deuteronomy to describe the eternal damnation of the sinners: “their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh” (Isa 66,24); “The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind” (Deut 28,28). Sin blinds the person, who can no longer see the consequences of sin. Not only Jews, but also many Christians have been blinded by sin. Believers should pray the Lord to enlighten their eyes and preserve them from blindness.

1824, Quinquagesima Sunday

The sermon for the last Sunday before Lent starts from the dialogue between Jesus and the blind man of Jericho (“What do you want me to do for you? Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”, Luke 18,41). The author explains the importance and meaning of the forty days of fasting. The blind man wants to see, asking Jesus that he may see. Fasting is a commandment of the Church, but it must be taken seriously. It is not just a matter of not eating meat, but of avoiding mortal sins. A series of scriptural arguments on discipleship follow, emphasising that being a disciple of Jesus required taking up the cross (Matt 10,38). “Whoever listens to you listens to me” (Luke 10,16). Therefore, we must ask Jesus for light, as the blind man did, so that we too may see.

1824, Trinity Sunday

The sermon starts from the Great Commission in Matt 28,19 (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”). It is not an abstract teaching on the Trinitarian doctrine but rather an elaborate teaching on baptism, with the ethical paraenesis ensuing from it. The preacher explains the significance of the feast, – a reminder of the greatest mystery of Christianity: the triune God. The Great Commission links belief in the Holy Trinity to baptism. Scriptures give precious promises related to baptism: we are made friends of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1,4), we may call God Abba, Father (Rom 8,15), and we put on Christ (Rom 13,14). We must therefore die to sin in order to live for God.

*Sebeshely [Sebeşel] (1828–1837)*1828, 19th Sunday after Pentecost

The homily discusses Matt 22,5 (“they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business”). Actualising the parable of the great banquet, he applies the invitation extended by the king to that of God, who calls the faithful to Mass through the ministry of priests. Olti repeats one of his favourite themes: the hardened hearts fail to hear the divine call. As a consequence, sin follows on

sin. Refusal to heed God's call is the beginning of sin. The insight is confirmed by a reference to Deuteronomy: "Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today" (8,11). Those who fail to listen to the word of God cannot expect God to hear their prayer. The preacher pleads with his audience to strive to avoid deliberate sin.

1828, 21st Sunday after Pentecost

The explanation of the parable of the wicked servant (Matt 18,23-35), set in the *ecclesiastical sermon*, focuses again on the theme of forgiveness as reciprocation of divine mercy ("I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me", 18,32). Divine forgiveness is conditional on our willingness to forgive (Matt 5,23-24). The love of God is set as an example for believers. Olti associates the theme of forgiveness with the new commandment of self-sacrificing love, that comes up repeatedly in the Johannine literature ("We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another," 1 John 3,16; "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another", John 13,34). The sermon stands out by the fact that it regularly marks the scriptural quotations used to underscore the message.

1828, All Saints' Day

The main verse is taken from Matt 5,12. "Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven". This is a carefully crafted sermon with many scriptural examples, also quoting St. Bernard and St. Anselm. The author explains why the saints are blessed and rejoice. This does not come from earthly belongings, since Solomon had everything, yet he proclaims, that "all is vanity" (Eccl 1,1). Joy comes from God. Psalm 84,4 teaches "Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise". This bliss is evoked with words of Paul: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2,9) and of Psalm 36 (the fountain of eternal life is in heaven; and in the light of God we find the light of life).

1829, Sexagesima Sunday

“Some fell among thorns” (Luke 8,7). The sermon focuses on the parable of the sower (Luke 8,4-15), adducing further New Testament quotes to explain the failure of some of the seeds to produce a crop, whereas others fall into good ground and bear fruit. He invokes the allegorical interpretation of the parable, read in the light of Matt 13,37 (the sower is Christ), combined with Luke 8,11 (the seed is the word of God). The good soil is the good heart, enriched by the word of God (8,15). Scriptural passages are adduced to further explain how the word of God gives eternal life (John 6,68) and makes the heart rich. Woe to the unfruitful seed – those who come to church just to be seen, not to hear the word of God, and to the rich, “for the root of all evil is the lust for money” (1 Tim 6,10). The preacher asks that the hearts of the hearers be a fertile soil into which the word of God falls. It seems that the good priest became thirsty while writing the sermon, as after the Amen he noted in Romanian, in Hungarian script: “O kupe de vin”, “a cup of wine”.

1829, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

A meticulously crafted sermon elaborates on Luke 13,14 (“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day”), to plead for the observance and sanctification of the feasts and Sundays. He invokes scriptural arguments to highlight that God is Lord over all, and Sunday is his day. He combines Deut 5,14 (the seventh day is a day of rest to the Lord your God), with Matt 16,26 (“what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?”), to argue against working on Sunday for earthly gain. Many Christians do not observe the Sunday, begrudging the feast from God, like Judas begrudged the precious oil that Mary used to anoint Jesus’ head (John 12,5). This selfishness keeps many from attending Sunday Mass, spending their time playing cards and going to the pub. He quotes St Gregory the Great, that refraining from work enriches our souls with the fear of God. He calls the faithful to observe the feasts of the Lord.

1830, Good Friday

The sermon explains John 19,17: “carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha”. He

envisions Jesus as the high priest who offers his sacrifice on the cross (an allusion to Hebrews, which Olti assigns to Paul). Jesus sacrificed himself out of love, for us, because of our sins. Blessed is the High Priest (*“Blagoszlovit jeszte Preotul tsel máre”*). Jesus suffered Judas’ betrayal but reproached him for his deed, while calling him a friend. Contemplating the sacrifice of Jesus evokes compassion, but emotions are not sufficient. Sinners should bear in mind the fate that awaits them at the last judgment. The hearts of those who are not moved to mercy by Jesus’ suffering are hardened. But mourning for Jesus is not enough: on the way of the cross he warned the women that they should weep for themselves and for their children (Luke 23,28). The hearts of stone must be transformed,

1831, New Year’s Day

The sermon focuses on baptism, evoking the voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3,15). In baptism we are children of God (he adds here John 1,12 (“to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God”). The Holy Spirit descends on the baptised and in the power of the Spirit the works of the flesh can be overcome. Repentance, the silence of the Holy Mass, humility help Christians become true children of God.

1832, Third Sunday after Easter

The sermon anticipates the sorrow caused by the departure of Christ, based on John 16,20-22. Olti quotes the first verse (“Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy”). The apostles are sad because of Jesus’ departure, but their sadness turns to joy knowing that he will return. He evokes a number of biblical characters who have shed tears. Peter has wept and so did Mary Magdalene. David has wept for his son Absalom. Jeremiah has wept for Jerusalem. Suffering is part of the Christian life. Jesus warns that whoever wants to follow him must take up the cross. The Bible teaches however that sorrow will come to an end. The Egyptian captivity was followed by deliverance. The time of suffering is short, life is short, but God promises joy that no one can take away.

1832, Fourth Sunday of Advent

This very short, perhaps unfinished homily focuses on the times that preceded the coming of Christ, based on Luke 3,4 (“The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight’”, a quote from Isaiah 40,3). Advent reminds believers of the time that anticipated the coming of Christ, and it is also a time of preparation for the second coming of Jesus and for his birth. We must be ready, celebrate nativity with joy and gladness.

1837, New Year’s Day

“God is not of the dead, but of the living, for to him all live” (Lk 20,38). This beautifully crafted sermon with many Bible quotations, illuminates the significance of the first day of the year. This is the feast of the name of Jesus, the eight day of Christmas on which the liturgy also commemorates the circumcision of Jesus. New Year’s Day is also an occasion for thanksgiving. Happy is the one who can be grateful. Anna, the mother of Samuel, gave thanks for the birth of her child, Job accepted both the good and the bad from God’s hand. Believers should enter the new year with the help and blessing of God.

Summary

Franciscan friars in 19th century Transylvania have crossed ethnic boundaries, providing spiritual guidance and support to the various indigenous ethnic groups, as well to newly settled Catholics. This study shows how István Olti, a Hungarian friar born in the Szeklerland, has preached over many years in Romanian communities.

The sermons are based on the biblical pericope of the day. The author explains the teaching of the Gospel, reinforcing the message with other biblical passages from the Old and New Testament, through references to prominent biblical characters. His Old Testament favourites are David and Job, but he also frequently invokes the prophets. The reference to further biblical verses, used to illuminate the main pericope, is mostly natural, like the link of various passages dealing with forgiveness, the love commandment or eschatological judgement. On other occasions, the associations are rather free, as in the Ascension sermon, where Luke 10,42 is applied to the Virgin Mary in virtue of the similarity of names.

Olti probably had access to a Romanian Bible, but he often seems to quote the biblical texts from memory. Further research is needed to identify his sources, possibly Hungarian sermons, which he adapted and translated to Romanian.

The sermons do not offer elaborate theological discussions. They are meant to give advice and admonish, applying the scriptural text to the life of the audience. Believers are repeatedly warned against sinning and called to remember that judgement awaits those who fail to repent. The sermons are not usually inspiring; they may even arouse fear in listeners. But exhortations to love God, to practice neighbourly love and forgiveness are also recurrent. Ultimately, the preacher focuses on eternal salvation, motivated by the vision of everlasting bliss: time and again he evokes 1 Cor 2,9, which seems one of his favourite passages (“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”). Strikingly, the sermons are entirely based on the Bible. Occasional quotes from early Christian or medieval authorities only strengthen the biblical message. Olti does not use edifying, pious stories, but simply exposes the teaching of the Gospel. The message of the homilies is mostly general, with occasional references to the communities they address.

Olti is not exempt from preconceptions and problematic views common in his time. Some sermons voice an anti-Jewish sentiment (the Jews did not accept Jesus and encountered divine punishment). On occasion he also expresses a negative view on women (Eve is responsible for the first act of disobedience).

Beyond the pastoral dimension that overcomes ethnic and linguistic barriers, the sermons are particularly interesting as contributions to the development of Romanian writing with Latin characters. The preacher recurs to a phonetic transcription of the Romanian text with Hungarian characters, in a period when writing and printing extensively used Cyrillic characters.

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Medanyia De Sfantă Maria Măre' așezte pe înălțare
Său lăsa în Sebeș Kelly. 1821.

Măria Partice lăsa buna sa aleși lăsa șap. 10. lăsi 21.
 Li si gye imbrăcătare; si gye bulurie pare, se jepte noar. Său gye
 adesti, Dăvare lărmăsi si brădyim; ke gye au plimle Cambrim lăsi
 Israelul, pentru Mordya Prototulij Samuil; ke saun luat quella
 omni, Dăvare lor, si Dăvare lor; sū tūl māj mōstare, Sre tri:
 gye ke plimleu, si ke anam noj pestelosi; ke gye lăsi māj mōst
 ore a mōstare parlmjōdare; si mājle murim, se luat gye la noj: Dăre
 se si jeju, ke au mōst? se si jeju? se plimleu, ke ke mōst amam?
 Sū au mōst lăsi doarme. Doarme pe bōmōre mōstare, Sre lăsi gye
 noj la Sere lăsi si atōo purură si jeju gye, ke se se bōre
 pentru noj. Dăvare lăsi dăre, si jare lăsi Sre lăsi; ke Maria lăsi
 lăsi lăsi lăsi vāleap lăsi, Sre dūp la Dumnyedeu, se mōst
 mōstare Sre lăsi, sū rugă lăsi Sre, se mōstare. Sre pemur
 si Sre lăsi, la Sre lăsi mōstare, si se lăsi Sre lăsi, gye
 Maria lăsi gye lăsi, sū mōstare Sre lăsi in Sre lăsi, gye
 lăsi Sre lăsi, gye mōstare Sre lăsi, gye mōstare Sre lăsi, gye
 Sre lăsi in Sre lăsi, in Sre lăsi, in Sre lăsi, in Sre lăsi:
 mōstare dăre Sre lăsi: ke Maria partice lăsi buna sa așezte
 mōstare lăsi, lăsi mōstare Sre lăsi: mōstare lăsi mōstare Sre lăsi
 ke adoga lăsi, in Sre lăsi gye lăsi Sre lăsi Sre lăsi Sre lăsi si
 Mājle lăsi, si Dumnyedeu ke si. Sre dūp viătra lăsi, in lăsi
 mōstare Sre lăsi, mōstare Sre lăsi gye lăsi lăsi Sre lăsi, si gye:
 lăsi lăsi lăsi lăsi lăsi. Dăre dăre in lăsi Sre lăsi lăsi
 la partice buna sa așezte, ke mōstare lăsi gye lăsi: lăsi
 lăsi lăsi in lăsi Sre lăsi lăsi mōstare, adoga, sū mōstare
 lăsi adoga; gye lăsi Sre lăsi mōstare lăsi Am mōstare.

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