

GENERATION



GAP

By
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Age, personalities, and loyalties created differences between Fr. Anselm Nagy and the young Cistercians who escaped Hungary in 1956

Editor's note: This is the fourth in an occasional series of stories celebrating the Cistercians' 50 years in Texas.

THE CAR CARRYING FR. ANSELM Nagy turned off of Rome's sunny Piazza del Tempio di Diana and rolled to a halt under the shade of the Cistercian Generalate's front gate house.

By the time the 42-year-old grabbed his hat and coat and made his way into the sunlit courtyard on this April afternoon in 1957, a group had hurried down from their rooms to greet the visitor from America.

These young refugees of the October 1956 Hungarian Revolution — including Br. Roch Kereszty, Br. Matthew Kovacs, Br. Julius Lelóczy, and Br. Denis Farkasfalvy — were just the people Fr. Anselm had come to see.

Officially, Fr. Anselm traveled from Dallas to attend a meeting of the Cistercian Order's *Definitorium* that assembled annually among the blooms of the Roman spring. (Fr. Anselm was making his second appearance at the meeting since being appointed in 1955 as the delegated superior over virtually all of the displaced Hungarian Cistercians.)

But he primarily came to initiate a relationship with the 1956 refugees. Since their escape from Hungary in November, they had become his responsibility and subject to his authority.

While armed with few specifics, Fr. Anselm knew the young monks were studying for their doctorates in Theology. After they completed their studies and were ordained, he expected them to join his new community in Dallas.

This fledgling foundation in Texas had been established in 1955 to provide a home for those Cistercians forced to flee from Soviet-oppressed Hungary. Although this new home lay in America, the expatriated Cistercians were pledged to carry on their vocations as dictated by the Abbey of Zirc (*pronounced Zeertz*), the mother abbey of all Hungarian Cistercians.

The beautiful abbey and its vast operations had been shut down by the Soviets by October 1950, forcing all religious activity underground.

OUT WITH THE BOYS IN 1960 Fr. Anselm Nagy (with the hat and coat), superior of the Our Lady of Dallas monastery, walks in Rome with three young refugees of the 1956 Revolution (left to right): Br. Roch Kereszty, Br. Denis Farkasfalvy, and Br. Julius Lelóczy.



KISS OF PEACE Fr. Anselm Nagy (in the black clergy suit) gives a “kiss of peace” to Br. Matthew Kovacs in the courtyard of the Cistercian General House in Rome in April 1957. Others (l-r) are Br. Denis Farkasfalvy (obscured), Br. Roch Kereszty, Br. Zsombar Pollner, and Fr. Polycarp Zakar.

The two-year-old American incarnation of Zirc in Dallas might struggle, but the monks in Texas were determined to preserve the Cistercian Order’s 800-year-old Hungarian history. Fr. Anselm carried this responsibility with him wherever he went.

By 1957, the odds of its long-term survival appeared unclear.

On the one hand, the community in Dallas numbered 18, and was expected to grow as Hungarian Cistercians continued to assemble there.

The University of Dallas, where nine Cistercians comprised half of the faculty, was nearing the completion of its first school year.

And on March 30 (just weeks before this visit to Rome), construction had begun on the monastery near the university — the first permanent home for the Hungarian Cistercians since leaving their homeland.

Other signals suggested a less sanguine assessment.

None of the Cistercians teaching at UD had rated the title of professor in that first year, even those with doctorates and American teaching experience (e.g., Frs. Damian Szödényi, Ralph March, and Louis Lékai).

University administrators also had relegated the monks to the bottom of the pay scale (where they would remain for two decades).

Fr. Anselm’s negotiations on carving out a piece of land for the Cistercians had progressed about as smoothly as a root canal. Only with the bishop’s intervention had the Cistercians been able to pry 34 acres — 19 of which lay in flood plain — away from the 1,000 acres pledged to the university.

While insignificant in the scheme of UD’s holdings, the 34 acres would provide sufficient space to locate a secondary school adjacent to the monastery.

But there was a catch.

The university had not made full payment on their 1,000 acres, and so was unable to transfer title for the 34 acres. The Cistercians would have to finance the construction of the monastery without the use of the 34 acres as collateral.

UPON GREETING FR. ANSELM IN THE COURTYARD, the young brothers eagerly drank in every detail of their new superior’s

appearance, words, and demeanor.

“He looked very distinguished,” Fr. Julius Lelóczy recalled recently, “quite different from us.”

Despite the grueling transatlantic flight, Fr. Anselm appeared dapper in the crisp black suit of the American clergy (which the brothers had never seen before). His finely combed gray hair was slicked back, emphasizing his forehead and horn-rimmed glasses.

Delicate features, impeccable manners, and a quiet, calm voice oozed an aristocratic air.

“He gave us the impression of a world traveler,” added Fr. Julius. Naturally, the twenty-somethings thought Fr. Anselm quite old.

Fr. Anselm delivered a handshake, a formal “kiss of peace,” and a few words to each brother in the courtyard, his coat still draped over his arm, his hat in hand.

“I understand you are a law student,” Fr. Anselm said to Br. Denis Farkasfalvy. “Perhaps you will one day study canon law.” He smiled and turned to the next brother without waiting for a reply.

Fr. Anselm had not had time to read the biographical statements each brother had been asked to prepare for him. Otherwise, he would have known that Farkasfalvy detested studying the “systematized lies and hypocrisy” of Soviet law. Law school had simply served as his cover, or day job, as he studied for the priesthood (and a way to avoid military service).

After dinner, Fr. Anselm gathered the young brothers in his room at the General House.

“Don’t be afraid of America,” he began. “I need you in America.”

Fr. Anselm continued to speak but the words that followed were lost on his audience. The minds of the young monks had begun to wander back to Hungary and to their former superior and novice master, Fr. Lawrence Sigmond.

Br. Roch could still smell the stench of the old heater in Fr. Law-

rence's tiny, claustrophobic room on a chilling day in November 1956. There at a small table next to his bed, the novice master calmly and delicately broached the conclusion of Br. Roch's life in his beloved Hungary.

"There is a chance for you to go to Rome now," Fr. Lawrence said, emphasizing this window might shut quickly. Br. Roch stared at him in disbelief.

"But I would like to stay in Hungary," pleaded Br. Roch, who had just completed his stint with the Hungarian People's Army.

"Even if the situation was normal," Fr. Lawrence nodded knowingly, "I would send you to Rome."

Br. Roch had attended the Cistercian school in Budapest (until the Cistercians were banned from teaching there in 1948) and became a brother in 1951. The two knew each other well.

"I want you to be a theologian," Fr. Lawrence explained.

"My mother won't want to let me go," complained Br. Roch, who was living at home with his father, mother, and sister.

"I will talk to her," Fr. Lawrence assured him.

Fr. Lawrence, whose "day job" was translating technical texts from Russian into Hungarian, visited the Kereszty home and compassionately explained to Br. Roch's mother the extraordinary opportunity that lay before her son.

In light of the many sacrifices made and the dangers faced by this saintly man on behalf of her son, she found it impossible to refuse.

With his mother's approval, Fr. Lawrence instructed Br. Roch, "Tell them in Rome that you are there to study theology and that you will return to Hungary after you've completed your studies and the Soviets have left." Then he added, "Don't go to America."

As Fr. Anselm continued to share details of America and the Dallas foundation, thoughts of Fr. Lawrence and his instructions continued to fill the minds of the young monks.

For them, the underground vicar embodied the flickering flame of Zirc.

SOVIET AIRCRAFT, SNIPER FIRE, AND EXPLODING bombs sounded all too frequently in Budapest between December 1944 and February 1945. Hungary had tried its best to stay out of the hostilities of World War II, but now, as the Soviets chased the Nazis back toward Germany, Budapest stood in the way.

The Siege of Budapest (December 29, 1944 – February 13, 1945) became known as one of the bloodiest sieges of World War II. When the Soviets cut the German Army off at Budapest, Adolph Hitler declared it a Fortress City, sacrificing the Hungarian capital in an

attempt to slow the Soviet advance towards Vienna and Berlin.

The Cistercian school, church, parishes, study house, and residences in Budapest survived, having suffered relatively minor damage. But 80 percent of Budapest's buildings were destroyed, leaving the city with ruins and debris in its streets and the citizens without running water, electricity, or heat for months.

While many hoped that life eventually would return to normal and the Soviets would tire of Hungary, history would show that the country in 1945 remained floating near the top of a long and suffocating downward spiral.



UNDERGROUND VICAR
Fr. Lawrence Sigmond, novice master and vicar of the abbot of Zirc, played a dangerous game with the Soviet regime to safeguard his seminarians.

(Over the first three decades of the century, the Cistercians' work at their urban schools, located far from the abbey in Zirc, had diminished their monastic life.)

After the death of Abbot Adolf Werner in 1938, the beloved 44-year-old Fr. Wendelin would, as abbot, enthusiastically and prudently lead the 200+ Hungarian Cistercians toward this goal.

The order's "gentleman priests," who had enjoyed a highly visible social profile through their urban schools, would under the new abbot renew their commitment to community prayer life.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS AFTER THE WAR, as the Soviets worked to consolidate and organize their power, the Cistercian Order in Hungary carried on, albeit with less pomp and circumstance.

Abbot Wendelin Endrédy instructed two priests to leave Hungary in 1945. Fr. Anselm left first on an apparent assignment to continue his studies in Rome. But after Fr. Raymund Molnár joined him in Rome months later, the two traveled to America, to the small Cistercian monastery called Spring Bank in Okauchee, Wisconsin. They served as the scouts for a possible foundation for the Hungarian Cistercians in the Free World.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet-installed government confiscated property, including the Cistercian Order's 40,000-acre estate, which had financed the vast operations of the Order (from churches and parishes to schools and missions).

The days of Zirc as a freely operating institution were numbered.

Providentially, the Hungarian Cistercians already had begun to undergo internal changes that would strengthen their ability and their resolve to resist the Soviet onslaught.

A Visitation of the Holy See in 1937-38 had prompted new constitutions and a new order of liturgy. Subsequently, liturgical monasticism (e.g., community prayer) became an increasingly emphasized part of the Cistercians' daily lives.



The Cistercian schools remained open. The number of novices in the Order even grew after 1945.

But, all the while, the vise was tightening. The year of 1947 brought the nationalization of all the banks, mines, and major factories. Systematically, the Soviets were determined to shred, blast, and upend the flourishing Hungarian social order of the thirties.

Next, the Soviets took aim at Hungary's religious foundations.

In May of 1948, the Soviets banned the Cistercians from teaching in their schools. They began to arrest priests (including Fr. Thomas Fehér, who taught geography in Dallas until 1976) on false, often absurd, charges.

At this point, Abbot Wendelin began to direct additional priests — including Fr. Damian Szödényi, Fr. Louis Lékai, Fr. George Ferenczy, Fr. Odo Egres, and Fr. Lambert Simon — to leave the country.

Only an international uproar provoked by the arrest of Hungary's Cardinal Mindszenty in December of 1948 briefly slowed the pace of Soviet oppression. This cooling-off period gave Abbot Wendelin about 20 more months to salvage what he could. He did so without concern for his own safety and well-being.

The Soviet machinery of secret police, spies, and informants began to succeed in forcing Hungary's most talented and industrious citizens to flee or to comply (at least superficially).

As 1949 drew to a close, the state nationalized all the privately owned stores, even the smallest ones.

"Anyone who operated a business that employed even just one worker," recalled Fr. Julius, whose family owned several pastry shops, "was classified as an 'oppressor of the working class.'" The Soviets would make life miserable for such "bourgeois exploiters."

Hungary's social order disappeared into the shadows if it survived at all. The iron curtain had turned most of Hungary a bleak and lifeless gray.

In August 1950, the Soviets decreed that all religious orders were to be suppressed.

(The decree gave Abbot Wendelin little choice but to approve a final escape attempt. Twenty-one Cistercians — two priests and 19

REMEMBERING OLD TIMES Fr. Roch Kereszty, Fr. Denis Farkasfalvy, and Fr. Julius Leloczky hold the three volumes of the diary they kept of their days studying in Rome and traveling around Europe between 1956 and 1961.

seminarians — crossed the heavily guarded border and into Austria's Soviet zone. There, eight were apprehended, returned to Hungary, and imprisoned. Thirteen made it to Vienna and eventually to Rome. Of these, ten ended up in America; seven in Texas.)

On October 22, 1950, the Abbey of Zirc was emptied and locked. One week later, the abbot was arrested, interrogated, and tortured. The abbot would remain imprisoned for six years, until freed by the Freedom Fighters in 1956.

BY 1955, THE CISTERCIANS WHO LEFT HUNGARY in 1950 or before found themselves in America as directed by the Cistercian Order in Rome. This collection of individuals differed in age, talents, and personalities, as any group of Americans might.

But they also shared a great deal. They felt the pain of having seen Hungary destroyed by the Nazis and Soviets in 1944 and 1945. They witnessed (depending on the year of their departure) the devastating impact of the Soviet's tightening totalitarian grip.

They groped to stabilize their lives after suddenly leaving families, friends, and home. They waited as the Cistercian Order in Rome waded through a power vacuum (caused by two ill abbot generals), which delayed a decision on the destination for the Hungarians.

They suffered through the first few years of the new Cistercian Abbot General who, without knowing the true character of the Hungarian Cistercians, tried to impose a contemplative and agricultural lifestyle upon them.

Once in America, each struggled — as all immigrants must — to assimilate into a strange culture and to learn a new language.

Even those who had arrived in America in the forties — including Fr. Anselm, Fr. Louis, Fr. Damian, and others — had experienced uneven success.

Each progressed as their personalities and abilities dictated.

Fr. Anselm, a theologian and “numbers man,” quickly took to American thinking on business and fund raising. He excelled in finance but lacked social and language skills.

Fr. Louis, a talented teacher and student of history, possessed a steely determination to become proficient in the English language — he refused to speak Hungarian for the most part — a challenge he had underestimated.

The enthusiastic Fr. Damian, whose artistic talents had yet to emerge, possessed social skills that helped him acclimate quickly (with some help from his sister who lived in America).

Other Cistercians — who had arrived more recently and spent much of their time with other Hungarians at Spring Bank — had hardly even begun the process of assimilation.

This diverse group ranged in ages from their twenties to their forties. Many had been taught by “gentleman priests” in the thirties. “Gentleman priests” had directed many of their formations as brothers. Others, since the apostolic visitation of 1938, had undergone a formation shaped by the spirit of the reform movement.

Despite their varied backgrounds and perspectives, the Hungarian Cistercians had pursued a life as dictated by the reform movement — a triple vocation as priests, monks, and teachers — since the early forties. They remained dedicated to this ideal in Texas.

“My intention is that you transplant the vocation of the Hungarian Cistercians ... so that it may take root in American soil,” Abbot Wendelin had written to his American members in 1948. “Not for a minute should you forget the *finis specialis* (special purpose) of our congregation, which consists of an educational apostolate.”

With a piece of land for the monastery that was close to the university and large enough to accommodate a future prep school, the Cistercians could practice their lifestyle in a way that was never possible in Hungary (where the Abbey of Zirc was located far from its urban schools).

Although lively debates on many subjects would ensue, the newly immigrated Cistercian monks now enjoyed the freedom to pursue their mission. They were determined to make the most of it.

ON OCTOBER 8, 1950, A 14-YEAR-OLD oblate named Miklós Farkasfalvy beheld an eerie glimpse of the Cistercians at their magnificent abbey in the mountainous village of Zirc. He had come with his fellow oblates from the Benedictine school in Pannonhalma to receive his habit.

The imposing baroque structure, once the home of a hundred or more monks plus staff and novices, echoed with emptiness. Only Abbot Wendelin along with his secretly appointed vicar Fr. Lawrence, some coworkers, and 27 novices remained.

All were packing. The Soviet regime had dictated that the Cistercians vacate the premises by the following week, October 15. Still, the community of nearly 40 gathered four times a day for the divine office (i.e., community prayers) and twice for common meals.

“The abbot received us briefly,” Abbot Denis later recalled in a

memoir, “and the next day in a very small private ceremony, Fr. Lawrence put on us the grey habits of the oblates which we wore for less than 24 hours.”

According to custom, the youngest — Miklós — received his habit last. It would be 40 years before another would receive a habit in Zirc.

Despite the gloomy circumstances, Abbot Denis later wrote that “there was still an incomprehensibly happy atmosphere, translucent with a spiritual awareness of God’s presence, a spirit of exuberance and youth.”

“Fr. Lawrence appeared to me as the Gate Keeper of God’s Garden,” he recalled in his memoir, “Fr. Balint (who supervised this group of oblates) as my guardian angel, Abbot Wendelin as the Great Master of the Mysteries. And the rest of us loving brothers were involved in the most beautiful enterprise: monastic life in the service of an oppressed and persecuted church.”

ON A SUNDAY IN AUGUST 1953,

Gyula Lelóczy introduced himself to a gentleman dressed in a white suit near a statue of Beethoven in a Budapest park. The meeting had been orchestrated after Lelóczy had declared his intentions to become a Cistercian.

For three hours on a park bench, the gentleman in the white suit, Fr. Lawrence Sigmond, learned about the young man’s calling and described the difficult life of an underground seminarian.

Undeterred, Lelóczy began his postulancy the following week, attending novice classes every Sunday in a detached home in Buda, where a family with one son in the Cistercian Order had rented a spare room to two young men (who became Lelóczy’s novice mates).

“It was like a regular school,” recalled Fr. Julius recently. “One priest taught us the Psalms and the Bible, one taught the history of the Cistercian Order, and another provided spiritual instruction.”

On weekdays, Lelóczy lived the life of a university student. This served as his cover. On Sundays, he would tell his aunt and uncle, with whom he lived in Budapest, that he was studying at the university library.

“I dreamed of a Benedictine way of life so that I could stay in the same place (as opposed to a diocesan priest),” Fr. Julius reflected. “But the monastery and community life were only a dream for us.”

While Fr. Lawrence may not have known what he was training these young men for, he maintained a strict novitiate: no movies or novels. On the streets, they were not even to look at shop windows or advertisements. Each was expected to meditate, read spiritual texts, and keep a journal.

On Feb. 22, 1954, within the confines of their small “classroom,” seven young men received their religious names, a white scapular, and the all-white habit of the Cistercians during a Mass celebrated by Fr. Placid Csizmazia (Fr. Lawrence was absent).

“We only were allowed to wear our habit in that room on that day,” remembered Fr. Julius.

Another important precaution was taken — each religious name was revealed only to the recipient. No one but the Cistercian fathers leading the novitiate would know their religious names, safeguarding identities in case their signed pledges were discovered.

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— Fr. Roch Kereszty,
on life as an underground seminarian

“We knew very little about the organization that Fr. Lawrence was running,” recalled Fr. Julius. “He did not want us to have too much information that could endanger the others.”

All together, there were four cells of novices and brothers studying for the priesthood in 1956, adding up to between 15 and 18 young men.

While the young men may not have known each other, they all knew and loved Fr. Lawrence for his spiritual guidance, his personal love for them, and his belief in their futures.

Life for this 47-year-old consisted of one cat-and-mouse game after another with the persistent, if not totally competent, Soviet security forces. He went to extraordinary lengths to avoid having his secret work threaten any of those around him.

“Fr. Lawrence,” said Fr. Roch recently, “risked his life daily on our behalf.”

“We only risked a year or two in jail,” he added.

“When you are young,” insisted Fr. Roch, “you enjoy going against the stated order of things. We enjoyed adventure, especially for the sake of Christ.”

AS FR. ANSELM CONCLUDED HIS PITCH to the brothers at the General House in April 1957, he may have believed that their little talk had gone well. He had communicated to the brothers that they were needed in Dallas; they would have a home and a job. They would not have to spend five or more frustrating years searching as Fr. Anselm, Fr. Louis, and other pioneers had.

But with 20 years and lots of history separating them, the brothers viewed things differently.

“We did not realize that Fr. Anselm was in a mode of trying to persuade people to join him,” Abbot Denis said recently in reflecting on the conversation in April 1957. “We did not leave Hungary because *he* had a problem.

“He didn’t seem to care why we left Hungary,” he added.

“It was just too soon for us to begin thinking of such a future,” Abbot Denis emphasized. “We were still grieving about the world we had left behind. We were still traumatized and we needed to be handled with kid gloves.”

Fr. Anselm’s perceived message, “You must go to America, like it or not,” struck a sour note with the instructions delivered by Fr. Lawrence, “Stay in Europe so you might return to Hungary one day.”

“We could not even locate Dallas on a globe in those days,” recalled Abbot Denis.

Most of the brothers studying in Rome had not known each other in Hungary, but their common experiences and new closeness led to fast friendships.

They shared with each other their activities as underground seminarians and their unanimous affection for Fr. Lawrence (and his lieutenants) who represented the martyred Zirc so well.

They knew each other’s sadness in parting from their families, friends, and homes.

Over the next several years, they compiled their experiences

from their four years in Rome into a diary. Capturing tales, photos, and cartoons of youthful exuberance, inside jokes, a summer in Paris, trips to abbeys in the Alps, and a vacation to Venice, the three volumes symbolize the bonds the brothers enjoyed.

Their stance on going to America softened during this time.

The young men had begun looking to the future, and during the early sixties, the future appeared dismal in Hungary and in Europe.

They hoped to preserve a chance to return to Hungary and to Europe; but for now, they accepted America as their next destination. (Fr. Anselm’s stories of the snakes, skunks, and scorpions that plagued the facility did, however, give them pause).

In Dallas, a second wing had been added to the monastery, and a third was contemplated. Fr. Anselm hoped that soon the community might earn recognition as an independent priory or abbey.

In pursuit of this goal, Fr. Anselm asked all Cistercians outside Hungary in 1961 to profess a vow of stability to Dallas (in place of their vow to Zirc). Most did so willingly, although some in Dallas and in Europe preferred to maintain their ties to Zirc.

Towards the young men in Rome, however, Fr. Anselm felt differently. They represented the long-term future of the community and he believed they should pledge their stability to Dallas.

Of the three, Br. Denis most eagerly took exception to Fr. Anselm’s position. The former law student believed stability to be a private matter, one outside the authority of his new superior.

Legalities aside, the issue kicked up a sea of emotions for Br. Denis and his two colleagues.

The brothers were prepared to give themselves to Fr. Anselm and the work in America (which they had never even visited); but, their very identities were tied up in the issue of stability.

Their difficult lives as underground seminarians had been inspired by an imprisoned abbot and nurtured by a vagabond novice master.

They felt they owed their vocations to Abbot Wendelin, Fr. Lawrence, and others of the persecuted church in Hungary who refused to buckle under Soviet oppression.

The brothers wanted to honor these beacons of faith, duty, and defiance that had shaped their values. So at their final vows, they pledged their stability to the Abbey of Zirc.

THE REFUGEES OF 1956 MOVED to Our Lady of Dallas between 1960 and 1964. Many of the differences which first surfaced in the late fifties and early sixties would continue to play a role in the development of the abbey and its prep school for years to come.

This gathering of beleaguered immigrants — each traumatized by his own dark chapter of Hungarian history — could not be expected to live without some difficulties.

But differences failed to distract the Cistercians from the goals inspired by Zirc. In fact, this Hungarian blend of temperaments, talents, and generations would forge on the North Texas prairie a powerful and winning destiny all its own.

One that would have made Abbot Wendelin and Fr. Lawrence proud.

“It was just too soon for us to begin thinking of [America]. We were still grieving about the world we had left behind.”

— Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy,
on the first meeting with Fr. Anselm in 1957