

## Function Oriented Iconography in Cultural Context. A Case Study

The Baroque refectory of the Benedictine Archabbey of **Pannonhalma** (Saint Martin's Hill, Northwestern Hungary) was designed by a Carmelite monk, Atanáz Witwer. The harmony and rhythm of his design comes from the symmetry and monumentality of architecture, painting and of plastic art. David Antonio Fossati painted the frescos. The commissioner was archabbot Benedek Sajgó, a strong personality of his age. The refectory was completed in 1737.<sup>1</sup>

I am going to offer a cognitive and social interpretation of the frescos of the refectory. *Cognitive interpretation* here means the consideration of the function of a refectory, as well as general human attitudes and behaviour. *Social interpretation* here means the consideration of chronologically and geographically varied cultural contexts. I shall turn, first of all, to the cultural context in which the refectory was built, at the climax of the Hungarian Baroque period. Then the consideration of the cultural context should be followed in which this analysis takes place, namely, the international conference in Szeged, in 1993. And, last but not least, the cultural context of the Holy Rule, which was written in 529 A.D. by Saint Benedict, the founder of the first Western religious order. In addition, we shall take into account the history of the Church and the Benedictine Order between 529 and 1737.

The spaciousness of the refectory can be said to be symbolic. About 120 people can have dinner in it comfortably, though it was built for about 20 monks only. The size thus indicates how gorgeous the Baroque way of thinking was. Yet this is only one aspect of the phenomenon. The other is that Saint Benedict appreciated two main types of monks: those who live in solitude (*anachoretæ*, i.e. hermits) and those who live

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in a monastery (*coenobitæ*). He preferred the latter (*fortissimum genus*) for the community of brethren (cf. *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, Chapter i.)<sup>2</sup>. This community was an ideal and yet functioning democracy. This democracy included the free election of the head of the community, the abbot, yet after the election every monk had to obey him and he in turn was obliged to listen to the advice of the monks. It was based on unrestricted membership without any distinction of servant and lord, after joining education became compulsory. Besides obedience, asceticism meant a permanent improving of individual morals (*conversio morum*) and collective property, not simply poverty. The monastery was thus the continuation of the freely undertaken communism of the Early Church. Therefore apart from work, monastic life was concentrated in the oratory, the place of liturgy (cf. *leitourgia*, public service, *leitōs*, public work (!—*ergon*); and in the refectory of the monastery. Consequently the refectory was not exclusively the place of eating and drinking. The refectory—one could say—was as sacred as the oratory and therefore later it was as decorated as the oratory or the church. The monks had to listen to religious readings during the meals, and the punishment of excommunication meant an expulsion both from the communion of the oratory and from that of the refectory (*ab oratorio et à mensa*, *Regula* xlv, 1-2. Cf. also Ch. xliii). The above-mentioned facts explain the selection of topic, size, order and system of frescos as well as the decoration in the refectory.

The lowest and biggest six frescos on the walls are about eating and drinking. They were chosen mainly from the Bible. The fresco at one end of the refectory where the abbot sits shows Christ on the Cross (Fresco No.1 in my numbering here). Christ is offered a sponge, that is soaked in sour and bitter drink (Matthew 27:48; Mark 15:36; John 19:28-30). The writing above this fresco: *Dederunt in escam meam fel et in siti mea potaverunt me aceto*, "They put poison in my food and gave me vinegar when I was thirsty" (Psalm 69, transl. of The New English Bible). A snake, which is the common Christian symbol of the devil is at the bottom of the cross, together with a skull. The snake refers to the Biblical story of the original sin committed by our ancestors in Paradise, the skull refers to the legend that Christ was crucified where Adam, the first man, was buried. Thus both are common symbols of the Christian teaching that what was lost by Adam's sin was regained by the death of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> N.B.: every politician should read this Rule and pass an exam on it before doing politics.

Going clockwise, the next fresco (No.2) shows the temptation of Christ in the desert. Eating nothing for forty days, Christ was famished. The devil told him to cause a stone to become bread. Christ quoted the Scriptures, saying that "Man cannot live on bread alone" (Luke 4:1-4 etc.). The writing above this fresco: *Prima Gulæ fugienda tibi tentatio semper*, "You should always banish the first temptation of gluttony". The belt of the typical (medieval) monster-like devil with horns etc. is a snake, again the most common symbol of the devil.

Fresco No.3 shows the prophet Daniel, thrown into the lions' pit, yet not eaten by the lions, and not starved of hunger, because an angel took the prophet Habakkuk by the forelock and put him into the pit so that he was able to give him food (Daniel 14:27-38). The writing: *Daniel serve Dei, tolle prandium, quod misit tibi Deus*, "Daniel, servant of God, take the food that God sent you" (Daniel 14:36).

Fresco No.4 shows the banquet of king Belteshazzar before his murder with the writing that appeared mysteriously on the wall: *Mene, tekel, phares*, i.e. "numbered, weight, divisions" (or Persians), "God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end, you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting, and your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Daniel 5:25-31). The writing: *Eadem nocte interfectus est Balthasar Rex Chaldeus*, "That very night Beltishazzar king of the Chaldaeans was slain" (Daniel 5:30).

Fresco No.5 shows the birthday banquet of king Herod (*Fig. 1*), when he gave the head of John the Baptist to the daughter of Herodias on a dish for her beautiful dance (Matthew 14:1-12). The writing above the fresco is a quotation from the Church Father Saint Ambrose: *Hæc crudelitati ferculum debebatur, quo insatiata epulis feritas vesceretur* (Liber tertius de Virginitate), "A dish was destined to such cruelty, a dish with which the cruelty is fed that is unsatiated by banquets".

The meal of the last fresco (No.6), which is on the left of fresco No.1 (Christ on the cross), is not from the Bible but from the life of Saint Benedict written by Pope Gregory the Great (*Dialogorum Gregorii Papae libri quatuor de miraculis patrum italicorum*. Liber secundus. De vita et miraculis venerabilis Benedicti abbatis, iii.4.23-35). It depicts an episode in which evil monks wanted to poison Saint Benedict. He blessed the poisonous wine with the sign of cross as he was wont to do and the chalice broke into pieces. Here the devil jumped out of the chalice in the shape of a snake. The writing: *Circumveniamus virum iustum quoniam contrarius est operibus nostris*, "Let us lay a trap for the just man; he stands in our way, a check to us at every turn" (Wisdom of Solomon 2:12). It is also interesting to mention that the usual Christian symbol of devil as snake can be found in three frescos beside one

another, i.e. in fresco No. 6 (on the left) as mentioned above, in fresco No.1 (in the middle) under the cross of Christ, and in fresco No.2, (on the right) tempting Christ in the desert.

Summing up what has been said, the meals represented here are not at all peaceful ones, though such topics could have been selected, enough to mention the wedding in Cana-in-Galilee. The painting of the last supper that was usual in the refectory of a monastery is missing here. The moral teachings for the monks are obvious: Do not enjoy your food or drink etc., as in today's slogan advertising health-food and healthy life: "We dig our tombs with our teeth". The meals are also connected with death. Saint Benedict in his Rule reminded monks of death several times (Prol. 34,96,124, 2:29,89, 6:13, 7:75,102, 7:12), especially that monks had to have death before their eyes suspiciously every day, like Jews had to have the ten commandments before their eyes (*Mortem cotidie ante oculos suspectam habere*. Regula 4:53. Cf. also Deuteronomy 4:8, 6:6-9 etc.). The frescos fulfil the didactic function of *exempla* of (medieval) sermons (cf. Arasse 1976, 60-62). The frescos also follow the medieval way of teaching by pictures and the medieval morality plays by showing how cruel human beings are—as we shall see here later—in contrast to saints and heavenly beings. This is the lowest level in space and in the hierarchy of the world and values. The fresco of Saint Benedict and the bad monks shows that the monks were eating fish and crayfish, which meant that they kept fasting. Having such a dish in twentieth century Hungary is no longer a sign of keeping fast but rather one of luxury. This fact shows how interpretation of the same fact changes according to the changing of social and economic context. An old monk in the archabbey, who was young at the turn of this century, responded to this change and criticized the church law ironically when he told me in the 1960's that he longed for Friday and Lent because he liked fish.

The second level consists of smaller frescos at the height of the upper line of the frescos of meals. The four evangelists are in the four corners of the refectory with their well known symbols (with pens and books, Saint John with the eagle, etc.). They symbolize the divine wisdom upon which the Rule of Saint Benedict relied. Also at this height on the sides of the window-niches there are emblematic frescos completed with inscriptions. They all advertise the importance of one thought of Saint Benedict, i.e. the strength of monastic community. Some examples: how safe life is in the monastery (deers keeping each other's heads above water while swimming across a river—*tutum iter unanimitis*, "unanimous journey is secure"); and how dangerous free life is outside the monastery (a bird in a cage, a bird of prey outside—*claustrum esse securum*,



To sum up: the frescos of the Baroque refectory of the Benedictine Archabbey of **Pannonhalma** overwhelmed the monks with constant warnings and thus they fulfilled the functions of today's mass media. One main function was to mar the monks' joys of freedom and of food by pouring pictures of deterrence on them. The other main function of the refectory was to open up vistas that the life in the monastery, so to say the life in that small independent country, ensured.

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