



REMEMBERING THE LAST CATHOLIC CORONATION

The “Holy Crown of Hungary” inspired a millennium of monarchs from St. Stephen in 1000 A.D. to the 20th century’s Blessed Karl

BY CATHY PEARSON

hand were many members of the royal family, including King Karl’s oldest son and heir, Dr. Otto von Habsburg, the family’s present-day patriarch and legendary European statesman. Now 94, he is in all probability the only living witness of what took place inside the Matthias Church on December 30, 1916, when, as the four-year-old crown prince, he watched the ceremony from a balcony overlooking the sanctuary where his father was crowned, and where he himself would sit as an honored guest at the 2006 event.

Hungary’s royal coronation combined ancient religious and civil traditions, the



Many kings and queens have assumed their offices over the past century, but Hungary’s last king — Károly IV, now honored by the Church as Blessed Karl of Austria — was the last ruling monarch of a great nation, or any nation, to be crowned king in a truly Catholic ceremony dating from ancient times, and intended to confer on the king solemn responsibilities before God along with the grace to fulfill them.

On December 30, 2006, Hungarians marked the 90th anniversary of that momentous event in 1916, gathering in Budapest’s historic Church of Our Lady (usually called the “Coronation Church,” or the “Matthias Church” after its royal builder) for a commemorative Mass organized by the King Karl Prayer League, the Hungarian branch of the group promoting Karl’s canonization.

Celebrating the Mass was Bishop József Tempfli of Nagyvárad, Romania, an area that was part of Hungary in Karl’s time. (In the tragic aftermath of World War I, the Habsburg monarchy collapsed, King Karl was sent into exile — where he

Above, Emperor Karl taking the oath as king of Hungary (left), and (right) with Queen Zita and Crown Prince Otto. Below, Archduke Otto von Habsburg (left), following the memorial Mass, with Canon László Gyürky of St. Elisabeth Church in Körmend, diocese of Szombathely, and Bishop József Tempfli of Nagyvárad in Transylvania. Imitating Karl’s humility, the King Karl Prayer League — *Károly Király Imaliga* — skipped an elaborate celebration, instead sending gifts to the St. Vincent Charitable Foundation in Körmend and to a church needing renovations in Transylvania



died a saintly death in 1922 — and the onerous Treaty of Trianon reduced Hungary to less than half its former size.)

As at the actual event in 1916, the glorious sounds of Liszt’s Coronation Mass and the colorful array of traditional military uniforms added to the solemnity. A relic of Blessed Karl was venerated. On

former from as far back as the crowning of Charlemagne in 800. Hungary’s unique ceremonies involved three distinct parts: first, the Mass, which included a pre-coronation oath and the actual crowning; next, a civil ceremony with a second oath, conducted in the public square outside the church at the foot of the Holy Trinity Monument (as in many European cities, this had been erected in thanksgiving for delivery from the plague); and, finally, a uniquely Hungarian ceremony in another square in front of the palace. There, an artificial hill had been constructed of soil brought in from the four corners of Hungary, and the newly-crowned king was required to charge up the hill on a galloping white horse and point his sword in all four directions, symbolizing his readiness to defend the entire country.

Karl’s wife, Empress Zita, had a special role in the ceremony as the new queen of Hungary, and often spoke of it in later years. “The thing that impressed both of us most about the whole ceremony was the moving liturgical side,” she said, “especially the oath that the king

took at the altar before his anointing — to preserve justice for all and strive for peace. This sacred pledge... was exactly the political program he wanted to carry out from the throne. We both felt this so strongly that hardly any words were necessary between us.” (Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Last Habsburg*, Weybright & Talley, New York, 1968)

In a 1976 article for the 60th anniversary, Dr. Maria Holbacher described the Catholic significance of what took place: “Through the sacred ceremony, liturgically a series of sacramentals, the ruler becomes in fact what the expression ‘by God’s grace’ signifies, in the sense that he becomes endowed with divine grace, a specific grace for his high office, in order to rule the peoples entrusted to him in peace and well-being toward their salvation. The coronation ceremony was built into the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass; it had resemblances to the solemn professions, the priest, abbot, and bishop consecrations, at which the candidate prostrates himself and over him the Litany of the

Saints is prayed. The ceremony of coronation was celebrated by the Primate of Hungary, the Archbishop of Gran (Esztergom). In a long prayer, he recites to the candidate for crowning, who is about to receive the holy oil and royal insignia, all his duties, quoting them individually. From this it becomes clear that an ethical obligation and moral standard of this measure is one so high that it exceeds the powers of men and only with the help of God is to be mastered.”

The civil ceremony, too, was not about pageantry for its own sake but about the serious duties of government.

The Hungarian civil constitution required the king to be formally crowned before he could assume his official duties (unlike in Austria, where all imperial powers had passed to Karl automatically



upon the death of Franz Joseph).

Though wartime austerity might have inclined Karl to postpone this celebration, the war itself urgently required the decision-making authority the coronation would convey.

Even then, Karl cancelled the festive reception that ordinarily would have followed at the royal

palace, ordering the dishes prepared for the coronation dinner to be sent instead to military hospitals.

King Karl took very seriously the duties imposed by both oaths, to which he added his own promise to work for an honorable end to the war as quickly as possible. His sworn duties as a Catholic monarch also included the protection and defense of the Church, reflecting not only a traditional role of the Habsburg emperors but also the most ancient traditions of

INTERVIEW

“THE KING SUBMITS HIMSELF TO THE HOLY CROWN”

For three years, **Gusztáv Hittig**, a Hungarian businessman who heads the Hungarian branch of the “Emperor Karl Prayer League,” has toiled to restore his countrymen’s collective memory of their last king. The December 30 anniversary Mass was the latest event Hittig has organized in Hungary to mark significant dates and places in the life of Blessed Karl. Inside the Vatican talked to him about the legacy of King Karl in Hungary today.



What does the example of a monarch like Blessed Karl mean to democratic societies in the modern world?

GUSZTÁV HITTIG: Now the reform of public health and social welfare play a great part in the European countries’ life. King Karl was the first to establish a Ministry of Health and a Ministry of Social Welfare. This is an excellent message to the people of our time. We think

that because the world and technology have accelerated so much, we are living a new age – and behold, we have important unanswered questions for 90 to 100 years.

I’m sure history books in Cold War days didn’t have much good to say about Karl. Do Hungarians know about him?

HITTIG: The majority of Hungarians do not know the country’s history well. They think the last king was Franz Joseph and the next historical person was Governor Miklós Horthy. We know that this governor gave the order to shoot at the king in Budaörs – he betrayed him – and that later because of his policies thousands of Hungarian soldiers died at the time of World War II. But public opinion is strange; now it remembers only the relative eco-

nom expansion. The majority of people think in like manner about Kadar’s era; they have forgotten the executions, the imprisonments, after the revolution in 1956.

It seems most of the people welcomed Karl when he tried to return in 1921, and the actions of only a few prevented it.

HITTIG: The people and the soldiers have related wonderful memories of their meetings with the king. Even the train engineer had lyrical memories of the returning king. But the greed for power of Governor Horthy was stronger than the will of the people, and the contemporary nobility was divided.

King Karl, a peacemaker, was also a career soldier and a wartime leader. What can statesmen and military people in today’s war-torn world learn from this saint in uniform?

HITTIG: It’s an interesting question. Brig. Norbert Fürstenhofer, the new leader of the Emperor Karl Prayer League, is an active military man in Austria. He does everything possible to help today’s soldiers get to know about the army in the age of the king, and its ideal for a soldier.

In the Habsburg era, Hungarians had mixed views about their country being part of a larger grouping of nations. Now there is quite a bit of enthusiasm about being part of the European Union. Can this be seen, in some way, as a vindication of the multi-national ideal of the Dual Monarchy?

HITTIG: Hungarians can’t get out of their mind the loss of half of Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon. In our times, the country is forming a rounded whole again as opportunities to cooperate more closely in the European Union with Slovakia, Romania, and Slovenia bring together the peoples who made up Hungary in King Karl’s time. We – all the peoples of the former monarchy – must coordinate our economic and cultural efforts to utilize our

Hungarian kings. This was not understood primarily as assistance in the political or military realm, though history sometimes required these. Rather, it was the obligation of a father to care for the spiritual as well as temporal welfare of his people, establishing justice, assisting the poor, and supporting the Church's evangelizing work. Indeed, it was not only for his just rule but also for his holy life and his zeal as a Christian missionary that King Stephen I, already the ruling prince of the Magyars, was invited by Pope Sylvester II to assume the office of a Christian king. And it was for those reasons that St. Stephen, raised to the altar as Hungary's patron saint, came to be known as the Apostolic King (a title later formally conferred on his successors).

The spiritual legacy of the Hungarian monarchy, however, goes even deeper than the level of pro-Christian public policies. Blessed Karl felt deeply his

"We Karl... swear by the living God, the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints of God, that we will preserve... the liberty, the privileges, and the laws of the country's people. We will protect the country's statutes, constitution, and territorial integrity... with the help of God and all His saints"

The crown of St. Stephen, first king of Hungary

vocation to serve his countrymen, not just in his public duties, but by giving them the example of a virtuous life, showing the love and forgiveness of a father, and offering his own prayers and sacrifices for their salvation — a service he could continue even in exile.

In this, his life mirrored his sainted predecessors on the Hungarian throne — Queen Elizabeth in her compassion for the poor, or King László in his desire to expiate for the sins of the people, or King Stephen himself, who had written to his son St. Imre that he must be merciful, patient, strong, humble, moderate, gentle,

honorable and chaste, because these virtues are "the jewels that make up the crown, and without them no one is fit to rule."

For Hungarians, the exalted obligations of the king are symbolized above all in the crown itself. The "Holy Crown of St. Stephen" — so named both because it was sent by Pope Sylvester in the name of the Church, and because of the saints who have worn it — has come to represent not only the monarch but also the nation itself and its noblest ideals.

Displayed now in the Hall of Parliament — a place of honor, if perhaps one less exalted than that of a worthy head — it continues, like Karl himself, to remind all persons in authority that power is not a perk but a mandate for self-sacrifice. ●

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advantageous geopolitical position. The positive political changes — open borders, cooperation between governments, etc. — give the people the chance to restore through cultural and economic interaction some of the unity that was lost to political boundaries. But unfortunately, the present internal situation in Hungary is not favorable to this effort.

Blessed Karl was a fervent Catholic, and at the same time his government practiced tolerance toward all religions and was in a military alliance with Islamic Turkey. What can King Karl tell us about balancing Catholic identity and Christian openness to others in today's Europe?

HITTIG: My grandfather was the secular president of our parish. I was often taken to the ceremonies of the other denominations and I became acquainted with Presbyterianism, Calvinism, Judaism, etc. Religion teachers should do it the same way — organize visits to the other denominations. This must begin early so tolerance becomes the rule among young people. Unfortunately now there is also the influence of the extreme right in Europe, and it hasn't had a beneficial effect on tolerance.

The Catholic Church has been a major player in Hungary's history. How is the Church regarded by Hungarians today?

HITTIG: After 1989, the Church's properties, schools, hospitals, etc. were restored and are operating, but the Church lacks money to finance its tasks and institutions. It is in need of help from the government, but Hungary's left-leaning government and conservative opposition are so deeply divided — they aren't even speaking to each other and have taken to the streets — they can't even deal with the country's pressing economic and social problems. Neither side is focusing on the Church's problems. We must ask Blessed Karl to intercede on behalf of my country in this difficult situation.

How can the Church best lead the people toward the holy lives and just society Blessed Karl would wish for them?

HITTIG: I think that is a useful thing to meditate on, to pray, to ask God's ideas before or after Holy Mass. Unfortunately, for some the church became a sight-seeing point in the cities; people don't have time to meditate, to pray. In spite of this fact, there are hopeful signs. A new church has been built in Hungary — a church in honor of Blessed Karl in Ajka.

Blessed Karl was rare among modern statesmen in being so dedicated to serving his people's spiritual as well as temporal welfare, not only politically but also through prayer and expiation. But this image of a holy king is deeply rooted in Hungarian history, is it not?

HITTIG: I think it is because the king serves the crown. In Hungary this is the Holy Crown that our first king, St. Stephen, received from the Pope. This crown guarantees the continuity of the state, and the king submits himself to the Holy Crown. I think that's why there have been so many kings who were blessed and saints in our unique kingdom — because serving the crown is more important than the name of the royal family or the king. But let us be realists; not every one of our kings was saintly.

What is the relationship between Dr. Otto von Habsburg — who as crown-prince watched the coronation from the church balcony 90 years ago — and the Hungarian people?

HITTIG: The Hungarian people respect and entertain a sincere affection for Archduke Otto. He is a great honor to Hungary, and is accepted by both sides of the otherwise deeply-divided political spectrum. Because of his experience in Europe, from the days of monarchy to the present development of the European Union, his insights and advice are important for Hungarians.

The sister of my grandfather was a nun. Sister Melissa lived in the king's court and she taught little Otto the Hungarian language and religion. Archduke Otto can pray in Hungarian excellently, and seeing that one can pray well only in his native language, I think he is an Hungarian archduke. ●