

# Celebration of the Cistercian Founders

Szent István Gimnázium, Székesfehérvár | Friday, January 23, 2026

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## Celebrating the living

1. Today we celebrate the founders of the Cistercian Order. But I hope you will see that this is not an exercise in remembering the “good old times” long gone. The Church does not celebrate feast days like a secular government laying a wreath at the tomb of a dead person. We believe that what we celebrate is *alive*. The saints are alive and they intercede for us. And by the power of God, the love for Jesus that inspired their work on earth still has effects in our world. Even if it can sometimes seem hard to see, the Cistercian saints are moving among us still.

2. You know the Cistercian Order was once hundreds of monasteries with tens of thousands of men and women all over the world. And you know that many things have happened over the last centuries that have weakened the Order almost everywhere, including in Hungary. Outside of Vietnam, today I do not know any Cistercian monastery that has well over 100 monks – and that used to be such an ordinary thing in the Middle Ages.

3. Nevertheless, I insist that our celebration today is not an exercise in medieval nostalgia. Today, our celebration recalls the Cistercian Order like an ancient root hidden beneath the frosty ground of our modern winter – what is visible on the surface can seem almost dead, but what lies beneath the ground is alive ... and waiting. And in God’s time this root will energize new branches, flowers and fruit in our world. Just wait. And search your own hearts. For some of these flowers and fruits might be rising in you.

## But what is this root?

4. The Cistercian founders and their followers wanted to be faithful to *The Rule of St. Benedict* as they interpreted it in the light of their times. For them, the monastic life involved a search for greater balance between work and prayer, and for greater poverty or simplicity in material goods, art and spirituality. Above all, it involved recentering their lives on charity. The first constitution of the Cistercian Order is in fact known as the “Charter of Charity” (*carta caritatis*), because it sought to establish loving relationships between monasteries defined by equality, mutual accountability and the pursuit of a common ideal. And St. Bernard, one of the greatest saints to express the Cistercian ideal, wrote many works about the spiritual life as an ever-greater charity – as an ever-deepening self-knowledge and intimacy with God, and as an ever-expanding compassion for all men and women as beloved brothers and sisters.

5. The Cistercian founders wanted to listen to God speaking to them in their own age. They did not want to copy and paste rules from the past and live their monastic lives mechanically. They were Catholics, and they were followers of St. Benedict, and so obviously they inherited a life with substance and content. But Catholic faith and monastic life are not static lines on a page that can be photocopied. Catholic faith and monastic life are living things that grow and blossom in sometimes surprising ways without betraying their identity. The Cistercian founders saw in their own hearts a thirst for conversion and renewal that corresponded

to the thirst in their contemporaries. They were courageous and creative, but they did not set out to found a “religious order” – such a concept did not even exist until thousands of men and women wanted to join them, and they needed a structure to organize everyone in such a way as to keep charity as their ultimate rule. No, in the beginning it was very simple: a small group of human beings just wanted to follow God in community, in shared work, study and prayer, in asceticism and in friendship. They simply wanted “to put nothing before Christ” and therefore they arranged everything in their lives around the truth and love of God (cf. RB 72:11). It was very simple at the beginning in 1098, when St. Robert and 21 friends set out. It remains just as simple today over 900 years later.

6. We are also in an age that is waiting for renewal. Sometimes it baffles me that monasteries are not overflowing, given our thirst today for meaning and purpose, for love and community, for wisdom and conviction. The monastic way of life is as old and as beautiful as Christianity, or – as St. Luke describes in *Acts of the Apostles* – when men and women first decided to hold all things in common and distribute their possessions according to each person’s need (Acts 2:44-45; cf. 4:32-35); when they gathered daily in the temple to pray together, and in their homes to share meals (2:46); when they wanted to have “one heart and mind” in Christ (4:32), and so they fervently celebrated together the Eucharist – the “breaking of the bread” and “prayers” (2:42) – and devoted themselves “to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life” (2:42). All monastic founders, just like the Cistercians, root their lives in this beautiful image of the early Church described by St. Luke in *Acts of the Apostles*.

7. But while I am sometimes baffled that monasteries are not overflowing, at other times I understand only too well the rhythms of history – and how easy it is for institutions and external forms to grow stale, like dead branches no longer channeling sap from the root. This can happen to us personally, whenever our words and habits no longer correspond to the embers of our faith; and so it can happen to a religious order. And, of course, it can also happen that great saints and branches of an Order in full vigor and heavy with fruit can be foolishly and tragically cut – and just like in the Congregation of Zirc 75 years ago, during the communist persecution, great harvests can be cruelly severed and thrown to the ground to rot.

8. But if institutions and exterior forms grow stale, then God in his mercy will prune away the dead branches to make space for the root to send life into new limbs. And if beautiful fruits are tragically left to rot on the ground, their seeds will sink into the soil and one day sprout again. Tertullian famously said, “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church” – if a Christian surrenders his life for Jesus, for the Love that rules all things, his courageous witness can provoke countless men and women to the faith that leads to new and everlasting life. In a similar way, the sufferings of Cistercians like Fr. János Brenner and so many others – cut off in the prime of their lives and at the zenith of the Congregation of Zirc – can inspire a renewal greater than anything we dare even to imagine.

9. For while branches may die, the human heart will never cease to desire what the monastic life holds out: union with God and in him with all men and women. Already under Communism, just after the strong branches were severed, men and women began to live together secretly for love of God and neighbor. Timár Monika, ‘Sigmund Lóránt and many others – some of whom are still alive today in your country and in mine<sup>1</sup> – wore no habits and enjoyed no gothic cloisters. But they did the essential: they searched for God; they loved God and neighbor;

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<sup>1</sup> I think in particular of people like Sr. Zsuzsa of Kismaros, Fr. Előd of Zirc and Fr. Julius of Dallas.

they worked, studied, prayed and joyfully held all things in common; they celebrated the Eucharist and held to the teachings of the apostles. If under such circumstances they could hear the monastic call and find the courage to follow it, surely it is still possible today, if God so wills.

10. For our hearts are no different than those of our ancestors. The only difference, perhaps, is the power and methods of the secularizing forces that would numb our hearts and stifle their deepest desires. So, let us listen once again to St. Benedict's call – to the call that drew the Cistercian founders and their followers everywhere in the world, from Dallas, Texas to here in Hungary – and see if it does not swell in our hearts today. Let us see if his words lead us to rediscover the deepest longing of our hearts.

### **The Call**

11. In the Prologue to his *Rule*, St. Benedict presents the call of God, “the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge” (9). *“Is there anyone here who years for life and desires to see good days?* If you hear this and your answer is ‘I do,’ God then directs these words to you: If you desire true and eternal life, *keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim.* Once you have done this, *my eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen for your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am.*” (15-18). St. Benedict concludes this passage turning to his monks, “What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life.” (19-20).

12. Do you – students and teachers gathered here in celebration of the Cistercian founders – do you too *yearn for life and desire to see good days?* Then let us learn true monastic silence: the asceticism that keeps our tongues free from vicious and deceitful speech. Today every television, phone, and technology refuses to stop making mindless noise. It can be so hard to hear our own hearts, and thus to help them express true thoughts and feelings. But we still have the power to pursue silence, to turn off our “notifications” and reclaim our freedom for thought and prayer. To do this we must first learn to dismiss our interior “notifications” – all those scattered impulses that leave us vulnerable to distraction and concupiscence. With God’s grace, you and I can learn to let our spirits breath again – silence is the oxygen of the soul. Do you long for life? Then learn the silence of prayer. Discover the only true God, who longs to befriend you, to dwell within you to lead you day by day along the way of life.

13. The call of God in *The Rule of St. Benedict* moves from silence to action: *turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim.* Prayer is friendship with God. Prayer is self-discovery: in prayer we learn the unique name God in his love has given each of us. We learn who we are and why our Creator has given us life. We learn our vocations. And like a soldier following his beloved companion into battle, prayer leads us to charge into action – to be with our friend, and to share in the great victory he is about to accomplish. But here too the secularizing forces of our world attempt to stifle the natural movement of our hearts. The world tells us not to charge. It tells us just to spend and consume, to stay in line and passively conform. The world tells us our lives do not matter for anything more than the economic machine. They say we are not names in a community but numbers in a market algorithm. Anyone who dreams of being anything greater is mocked. They say there is no hope for anything greater, because climate change or political demagogues or artificial intelligence or financial insecurity or WHATEVER is going to make it impossible for us to thrive and become heroes. Without hope

we become paralyzed by anxiety, or we retreat to some private consolation in the small worlds of pleasure and indignation.

14. Do not let this happen to you. Students and teachers gathered in celebration of the Cistercian founding, God is REAL and he is GREATER than all. And he is our LIBERATOR. We can act and have an effect in this world. We can become heroes by his gift and tremendous power. When you learn to pray, you will learn to hear his mysterious voice, and it will summon you each moment to something great. In the eyes of the world, it will look like nothing, but the actions God invites you to undertake at every moment are all bricks in the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of love and light that will never fade. Ignore the machine of contemporary alienation and the numbing and homogenizing forces of secularism and consumerism. You were made to be morally excellent, an unimaginably powerful lover of God and neighbor – a creature able to accomplish actions that will ring through all eternity. Each of you is unique. Each of you is called by name for a tremendous destiny. Stay close to prayer and the sacraments, and your action in this world will be heroic.

15. *Ardere et Lucere*. Burn with a true spiritual life – *ardere*. And your life will enlighten the world – *lucere*.

16. All that I have said so far can be true for everyone. But I believe there are some of you for whom these words of God in *The Rule of St. Benedict* will resound in a very special way. For some of you, this desire for life and good days, for the love of God and neighbor – for some of you, this desire will lead to something very particular in our times. Boys and girls of a Cistercian school, sons and daughters of Sts. Robert, Alberic and Stephen, listen to your heart over the coming months and years and see if God is calling you to embrace the Cistercian life. If you hear him, do not be afraid. In the Gospel today, Jesus promises to everyone who sacrifices for his sake “a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.” (Mk 10:30).

17. No matter where God calls us, our life will be filled with joy, if only we have the courage to follow him. And for some of you, I suspect your joy might be to share in the renewal of the Cistercian Order in Hungary and around the world. I suspect there are some among you, in whom God has planted a love of country and Church great enough to give your life to Christ as a monk or nun. That among you there are some who long to live with monastic brothers and sisters and show our divided world the way to unity of heart and mind. That among you are some who deep down desire the secrets of poverty, chastity and obedience that have the power to free us from self-will and egoism. That among you are some who desire to devote their minds to the renewal of Christian education and culture in a world overrun with ideology and superficiality. In short, I suspect there are perhaps some among you for whom the celebration of the Cistercian founders will mean something very deep, and who are on the verge of discovering a desire to follow those saints heroically “to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord” (RB Prologue 3).

18. If so, then I have a few ideas and dreams to share with you – and in different ways those ideas are for everyone who hears the call of God, wherever it is he calls you. But we are out of time today, and so I’ll have to tell you later! In the meantime, dear sons and daughters of the Cistercian saints, let us deepen our prayer and ready ourselves for the life of love. God has something exciting in mind for each and every one of us. We must be ready!