

Good evening, everyone!

Greetings to everyone present and interested in the launch of the book *Bánáti katolikus templomok - Banater katolische Kirchen* ("Catholic churches in Banat").

I would like to first thank Mr. Andras Barat, historian, who shared his realistic, insightful opinion about the book. I also thank the Cultural Association „Egység“ and the German Association Kikinda for their efforts to organize this book launch. Since the book got published in two languages, Hungarian, and German, I also thank Marta Istvan for her translation of the original Hungarian text into German. My intention with the German text of the book is to make it accessible to German-speaking individuals whose home was once in Banat and whose churches once stood here.

Now I would like to say a few words about some facts that the reader will not find written in the book.

Although the book was published in 2013, the idea about it was born in 2008. At that time there was talk at the Catholic parish about taking photographs of the churches. I started my travels to nearby villages and towns on a small scooter. In the following two years, I dared to travel in the same manner all the way to Vršac [city in South East Banat]. Having learned from these travel experiences, in 2011 I travelled by car to Bela Crkva [town in South East Banat] and surrounding areas.

The result of my travels are photographs of 77 Catholic churches and a somewhat larger number of photographs of Orthodox churches, taken between 2008 and 2011.

Once I had the photographs of the churches, the question was what to do next. Slowly it became clear to me that they could be made into common good in the form of a book. After many consultations and brainstorming sessions the book format with five chapters got finalized. Why exactly five chapters? Because this was the only way to construct what I wanted to communicate about this one topic: the churches.

The history of our Christianity and our churches reaches back to the times of our king Saint Stephen. This time period is approximately 1,000 years or 18 to 20 generations old. Jozsef Botka, retired rector, summarized this long epoch in the book. In this introductory part he talks about the beginnings of our Christianity, about the often sad faith of our churches and monasteries, about the persecution of the Christians, about the pivotal events of the last 150 years and about the current circumstances. I added a few maps to his text, and this became the first chapter.

In the second, the largest chapter I present the photographs and a brief history of the Catholic churches in Banat. The churches are sorted by region in the order of the three diaconates of Banat (churches of the Eastern, Central, and the Southern diaconate). For easier orientation, I have provided tables at the beginning of the chapter with references to page numbers and geographic names in Hungarian and Serbian (or German). Where this information was available, I have also indicated the year when the church was built and when it was consecrated. I have also provided a shorter or longer history of the church. The sources of the information vary (a

local history of the town or village, church documents, the Wikipedia); there is always a possibility of errors having occurred.

Among the churches included in the book, seven are in dire shape. This is not the result of negligence by the church authorities – their efforts are visible in the good condition of all the other churches. The causes are multi-layered and worrisome, and in the third chapter of the book the reader will find a few thoughts about them. My personal goal with this presentation is to draw this sad situation to the attention of the public, of competent associations and maybe of the relevant authorities. Our national, linguistic, and religious differences cannot result in our neglecting our common cultural heritage.

The fourth chapter talks about church ruins. It was a long and difficult task to collect the photographs and the information about these churches that vanished 60 to 70 years ago. Please read this chapter carefully! The time period when these churches were destroyed is between 1945 and 1955, and it happened because they were the places of worship of people who belonged to another nation. In this chapter one can also find a map that shows the geographic location of these churches. This chapter highlights the destructive results of hatred and serves as a reminder of the individuals – or their descendants – who once lived among us.

I felt that I had to commemorate the Church of Arača. This is the topic of the fifth and last chapter of the book. The almost thousand-year old ruins of this beautiful church-monastery are located in the plains between Milosevo [town in Northern Banat] and Novi Bečeј [city in Northern Banat]. It served as a monastery, a church, and a fortress against enslavers; it was plundered, torched, and re-built; it changed ownership, then it got abandoned. But even today, in its state of demolition, it advertises the enormous fortitude and culture that emanates from our Christianity. I have visited the ruins many times, and each time I had the feeling that it entices me. It lures me maybe because my presence will make it easier for it to endure its solitude. I have numerous photographs about the Church of Arača, but I put only a few into the book. The brief historical essay by Zoltán Csömöré provides a beautiful description of its history.

And at the end, what the reader cannot find in the book and may ask: what is the message of this book, what is the deeper meaning that it tries to convey to the world? I cannot provide a simple answer to this question, but I will try.

The king of the Hungarians, Saint Stephen, and his father Géza, Grand Prince of the Hungarians, lived 1,000 and 1,050 years ago, respectively. During their time the Hungarians accepted Christianity. They invited literate priests and clergymen into their country. Then already they built churches and monasteries where they taught reading and writing, and promoted new cultures, trades, and world views. With this came economic development. During the following centuries, numerous churches, monasteries, and schools were built. However, this historical era has its own shadows during which the people and their material and spiritual culture endured destruction and ravages. Just think of the barbarian invasions, epidemics, floods, the Ottoman reign that lasted a few centuries. Having survived all this, the people re-built their churches, schools and homes. The stormy events of the most recent 150 years brought additional suffering. The war of 1848, the First World War, the changing borders, the Second World War, the changes of ideologies, then the time of destroying the churches – and now the consequences of

the most recent wars in our regions. Despite all of this, our heritage of Saint Stephen, our Christianity and our churches still exist. I remember the wonderful verses of Sandor Remenyik, a Transylvanian poet, of which I quote:

“Don’t abandon the church,
The church and the school”

I could not express better the message of my book *Bánáti katolikus templomok - Banater katolische Kirchen* than the above quote. Let’s not abandon our heritage, our churches, and our Christianity.

Thank you very much for your patience!

Tibor Banski
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