Columns
Religious Life



In 2023, Sr. Emanujila Vishka, far right, visited the Basilian Hungarian community in Mariapocs for the first time. There she met Sr. Imre Margit Agota, second from left, then 91, in person. Years earlier, Agota had intervened and helped Vishka find a place to stay when her travel plans were disrupted. (Courtesy of Emanujila Vishka)



by Emanujila Vishka

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During the Great Lent in the Byzantine rite, during vespers, we have readings from the Book of Genesis that offer sacred narrations for us to reflect on and long lists of generations that resemble a coded language. Though it may seem rather boring to the inexperienced, it can nevertheless be unpacked to reveal a series of life-changing stories that might lead a reader on an unexpected journey. Like every religious order or congregation, the Basilian Sisters also have their "genealogies" or other lists of sisters' names. One of the most common lists of Basilian Sisters would be a directory/catalog of the order. There one can find some basic data and contact information that we use from time to time when looking for an address or some additional information about a community or sister.

For me, however, a directory is something that saved me from an uncertain night on the streets of Budapest (Hungary) 15 years ago. It imprinted in my memory the voice of a Basilian sister who, as I later discovered, was a "shield of faith" for Hungarian Christians under communist rule.

Fifteen years ago, I was traveling from Zagreb (Croatia), where I lived, to Lviv (Ukraine) to visit my family. The distance between the two cities is more than 1,000 miles, and I was traveling by train. My plan was to go to Budapest and catch a train that was supposed to take me to Lviv. Before my trip, just in case, I copied some contact information from our directory and saved some phone numbers of religious communities in Budapest.

Our train from Zagreb to Budapest departed late, but I had almost two hours to catch the next one, so I stayed calm, enjoying the company of a Hungarian girl who was studying in Budapest and spoke English fluently. Passing by Lake Balaton, one of the largest lakes in Central Europe, our train stopped now and then to take passengers to their destinations, moving in a gracious, slow manner that made me more and more anxious, as we were already an hour behind schedule. By the time we were two hours behind schedule, I was collaborating with a Hungarian student, calling communities in Budapest to ask if I could stay overnight. According to my calculations our train would reach Budapest Deli Station about 11 p.m. and my train to Ukraine would have already departed from Budapest Keleti Station, with the next one scheduled only for the morning.



Basilian sisters live in this monastery in Mariapocs, Hungary. (Courtesy of Emanujila Vishka)

Basilian sisters did not live in Budapest. but in Mariapocs, home to the famous and highly visited national shrine and pilgrimage place, which is 140 miles east, so I began calling sisters from other congregations that lived in Budapest. The first community we called was situated not far from the train station. Unfortunately, the sisters refused to accept me. They had never met me and 11 p.m. was too late for them. The other community we called was hesitant. They did not believe that I was a member of a religious community.

As we continued calling, my list dwindled and I could not find a place to stay. It was already getting late and my Hungarian angel was already tired from all those negotiations by phone. Suddenly, it struck me that I could have proof that I was truly a sister. We called our Basilian sisters in Mariapocs; for the first time in my life, I

heard the kind voice of Sr. Imre Margit Agota. My helper explained my situation and asked her if she would testify that I am a Basilian sister.

Agota had never heard of me either, so she took our directory and gave me a short quiz. "Dear child, what province are you from? And who is your provincial superior? And your name is? OK, great, please tell me the date of your birth. When did you enter the community?" With the help of our young translator, I passed my quiz with an A+. The girl gave Agota the phone numbers of sisters in Budapest, and within five minutes, one community called back to inform me that I could come to them. It was like magic, and our directory played a significant role in this matter. We arrived to Budapest very late. Just before midnight, I was at the front door of the house of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Charity.



Basilian sisters pray with residents of St. Macrina Nursing Home in Mariapocs, Hungary. Sr. Imre Margit Agota started the home in 1993, after decades of defending her faith during the communist persecution. (Courtesy of Emanujila Vishka)

Well, this night I was grateful to God, the Hungarian girl, Agota and the sisters who received me in their dormitory for high school students. I was also grateful for our directory. In 2023, more than 10 years later, I visited our Hungarian community in Mariapocs for the first time. Agota was still there, having just turned 91. It was an extremely touching meeting for me and I was so happy to be able to express my gratitude to her in person.

The encounter was also deeply emotional because I had researched the sister whose voice on the phone had impressed me so much. It turned out that she was a person who had faithfully testified to her faith during the communist persecution. On Feb. 22, 2022, Agota received the Shield of Faith Award in Budapest. The award was given on the occasion of the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Communism (Feb. 25) and recognized living church people who had remained steadfast to their faith even during the communist dictatorship. Then, on Nov. 30, 2023, she received a double award: the Hungaria Golden Cross of Merit from the president of Hungary and the Commemorative Medal of Mariapocs from the mayor of the municipality.

What makes Agota's life so valuable? Imre Margit Agota was born in 1932 in Hajdúdorog, Hungary, to a simple Greek Catholic family as the fourth child. She lost her mother when she was 7 years old. Her father later remarried a widow who, as a young girl, desired to be an Ursuline sister, but was not allowed by her parents. When she was only 14 years old, Ágota joined the Basilian Sisters in Máriapóc who were taking care of children like her. At 17 she became a candidate and then, secretly began her novitiate. She graduated in 1953 and obtained a degree in mathematics and physics. The Hungarian police tried to recruit her so she would report on sisters but she refused to do so, and her long years of solitude began. Away from her monastic community, she received a teaching position in school and taught until she retired in 1988. Over the decades, she was constantly made to feel like a barely tolerated person at school. Agota made her secret perpetual vows in 1968, followed by interrogations by the local police.

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Sister lived alone until 1989. When the regime changed in 1990, she sewed her monastic habit and then moved to the monastery in Máriapóc which was returned to the community that same year. In 1993, she initiated the St. Macrina Nursing

Home for 25 elderly women. Now, after some enlargements to the buildings, it houses 40 residents. Sister served as a directress of this nursing home for decades, and after retiring from this position, she continued to offer spiritual care for the residents. I witnessed myself how the staff of the nursing home and all residents refer to Agota as their spiritual mother. When they were bringing her from the hospital during our visit, the staff and many residents were waiting for her at the front door of the nursing home. It was the most emotional welcome home that I have ever experienced.

When I finally had the chance to talk with Agota, eager to thank her for her kind assistance 15 years ago, I realized that her English proficiency was not enough for us to communicate effectively. As I tried to explain the reason for my gratitude, emotions overwhelmed me, and tears just rolled down my cheeks, further confusing my explanation. I believe she may have forgotten the story, but the Lord granted me this wonderful opportunity to embrace my benefactor. How truly wonderful it was.

So, when I look at the list of names in our directory today, it is like a big choir of voices, each with its own unique story behind. These pages, along with so many other directories of religious women congregations, serve as pieces of a magnificent symbol of divine charity for those in need.