

The Servite Order – Servants of Mary

To better understand the specific religious furnishings in Konojedy, one should first get familiar with the mendicant order of the Servants of Mary, or Servites, whose liturgy influenced the nature and iconography of movable items in Konojedy. The Servites are little known in the public consciousness, which may be due to the small number of monasteries founded in the Czech lands in the past. Also, following the Josephine reforms, only few sources remained to form a comprehensive picture of the Order in our territory. The absence of sources may account for the lack of studies on the Servites in academic literature.

Brief History of the Servite Order

The Servite Order or, Servants of Mary, was established in the 2nd quarter of the 13th century. Written records mentioning the Order in this period are permits for its first founding members. The permit was issued by Ardingo, Bishop of Florence, to a group of lay men who wanted to pursue a monastic life of poverty. They were to live only on donations and alms they received in various towns. The bishop also allowed the Order to use land on Monte Senario, a site of their first monastery. This period was particularly favorable to the establishment of many other religious orders, yet the lifestyle of mendicant orders (e.g., Servites, Eremites of St. Augustine, Carmelites, etc.) stood apart from that of other existing orders in that some of their friars were not secluded in monasteries but lived as hermits and focused on contemplation. The Servites adopted the Rule of St. Augustine, added several new vows that fit in with their constitutions and agreed that they would not own any private property. In 1256 Pope Alexander IV issued a bull (*Deo Grata*) whereby the Servites of Monte Senario were received under the protection of the Holy See. After the Second Council of Lyon, the existence of the Order was in doubt because – following a high number of complaints – orders established after 1215 were instructed to disband. Thanks to the diplomatic maneuvering of Philip Benizi, this danger was averted and the Servite Order continued its work. The crisis had a considerable impact on the Order, for instance, the vow of collective poverty was no longer as important as in the early years of its existence. The Servites gradually expanded from the Italian peninsula to Germany, France and Spain and in the 14th century, in part thanks to Emperor Charles IV's encouragement, they built monasteries in Bohemia, Hungary, Austria, Poland and in present-day Belgium.

The ongoing Reformation in the mid-16th century had an adverse effect on the Servites as they lost many of their monasteries and several provinces in the Holy Roman Empire. The Order returned to Central Europe in the first quarter of the 17th century, mainly thanks to the efforts of Archduchess of Austria, Anna Caterina Gonzaga, who had contacts to the Habsburgs and she was related to Pope Paul V. The Order kept on growing and in the mid-18th century, 225 Servite monasteries housed over 2700 members. Yet other turbulent events continued to affect the existence of the Servites. Decrees suppressing the Servites were issued in France and Spain and the French Revolution further crippled its work in the country. Reforms introduced by Joseph II led to the closure of many monasteries in Central

Europe. By 1850, there were only 64 Servite monasteries and 600 friars. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Order has been on the rise again and new provinces have been established in North America. The world wars had little impact on the development of the Order and in 1968, its constitution was revised to reflect the changes issued by the Second Vatican Council. Today the Servants of Mary are active in some 30 countries across the world.

The Servite Order in Czech Lands

The Servites came to Bohemia in 1360 thanks to support from Charles IV and they were initially based at the monastery Na Slupi in Prague. With the dissolution of the monastery during the Hussite wars, the Order left the region. The Servites flourished in the Czech Lands in the 17th and 18th century again with the rise of the Habsburg monarchy. In 1626 they were invited to Prague by Ferdinand II who donated land on White Mountain, a site of symbolic significance after the victory over the Protestant alliance, for a new Servite monastery. The Servites later dropped this plan, perhaps due to the lack of water or potential threat from the approaching Swedish army and in 1627 they settled at the convent near the St. Michael's Church in Prague's Old Town. In 1666, friars returned to the monastery Na Slupi and the Order also completed a monastery in Rabštejn nad Střelou. The Servite Order kept expanding, establishing new monasteries in Jaroměřice nad Rokytinou (1675), Nové Hrady (1677), Králíky (1696, a notable pilgrimage site, the monastery was dissolved in 1883 for lack of friars), Veselí nad Moravou (1714) and Konojedy (1746, the largest Servite monastery in the country; after its conversion from a chateau, the monastery also included the former chateau garden and thanks to its ample space it housed an ascetic school founded by the Swéerts-Sporcks originally at the convent Na Slupi . During its brief existence, the monastery was the most important center of the province). Dissolution of monasteries that took place during the reign of Joseph II affected all of the above monasteries, with the exception of the convents in Králíky and Nové Hrady. The latter was used by the Servites until 2005. In conclusion, it should be noted that the former Servite convents are generally not in a very good condition, save for the convent in Nové Hrady and for the recently renovated Konojedy convent.

Description of the Servite Order

Servites belong among mendicant orders that follow the Rule of St. Augustine. Their symbol consists of letter M, in reference to the Servite devotion to the Virgin Mary. The top of the letter ends with an ornate crown as the Virgin Mary is considered the queen of her servants – Servites. Around the stem of letter M, the interwoven letter S refers to the Order itself.

According to their founding narrative, the Servite religious attire was handed to them by the Virgin Mary herself. It consists of a black tunic with a cowl, leather belt and

scapular. Black color represents humility of the Virgin Mary and her pain and suffering during Christ's passion.

The Order is divided into provinces that are managed by the Prior Provincial. The main representative of the Order is the Prior General. The Servite Order also includes a so-called Second Order for Servite nuns and the Third Order for lay men who try to live in accordance with Servite vows.

Servites observe a number of liturgical services in the course of the year. With respect to Marian devotion, the most important are the Marian Feast Days, with the most significant one being the day of Our Lady of Sorrows that falls on the third Sunday in September. Servite churches are also traditionally devoted to the Virgin Mary. Yet they did not only express devotion to the Virgin Mary but later also to other related saints. The Servite iconography often revolves around the number seven (7 sorrows of the Virgin Mary, 7 founding members of the Servite Order, etc.) that symbolizes completion and perfection. Every church and its main altar was to be devoted to the Virgin Mary, unless requested otherwise by the church sponsor. Other altars commonly depict Marian images, saints, etc. If a saint had no altar that could be used to serve a mass on that saint's holy day, an image of the saint would be placed on the main altar instead. In the Czech province, the founding members of the Servite Order were especially observed in Konojedy (as gratitude of the founders, Anna Katharina and Franz Karl Swéerts-Sporck for the healing of their son Johann Kristian). That is perhaps why the Servite calendar lists February 11 as the central feast day of the monastery to commemorate the seven founding members of the Servite church. Also, in keeping with tradition, the Konojedy church is dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, yet with an emphasis on the joint dedication to the Seven Founders, which reveals deeply personal reasons on the part of the Swéerts-Sporcks. In addition to the Virgin Mary and the Seven Founders (Buonfiglio dei Monaldi, Bonajuncta Manetti, Benedetto dell'Antella, Bartolomeus of the Amidei, Hugh Lippi-Uguccioni, Sostene di Sostegno, and Alexius Falconieri), notable figures revered by the Servites include St. Philip Benizi (Benitius), St. Peregrine Laziosi, St. Juliana Falconieri and also Blessed Jan Angelo, Joachim of Siena, Thomas Corsini from Orvieto and others.

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