

# Traditional Homage to St. Appolonia in the Franciscan Order of the Province of St. Cyril and Methodius

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## Summary

*The object of the study was to investigate where and in what way iconography and homage to St. Appolonia, patron saint of the dental profession, can be found in the Franciscan province of St. Cyril and Methodius.*

*The study included 30 monasteries and counties and data were collected by means of a questionnaire, electronic communication and the exhibition "Peace and Goodwill" in Zagreb. The material was analysed in tables and by photo-documentation. Nine altar statues and one altar painting of St. Appolonia are situated in 9 (30%) of the Franciscan churches investigated. The churches are mainly situated in north-west Croatia, which is a result of the socio-political and organisational influence of Central Europe in these areas. Iconographically the figures of St. Appolonia conform to the distinctive iconography of the Roman Catholic Church and include an element of local influence. The sculptures are made in wood, polychromed and gold plated. They range in height from 100 to 184 cm. A painting, oil on canvas, measures 254 x 142 cm. All the figures of St. Appolonia are on altars, indicating that the saint is very highly revered and homage to her is permanently firmly established in the spiritual tradition of the Franciscan Order.*

**Key words:** *St. Appolonia, Franciscan Order, Croatia.*

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## Introduction

Franciscans arrived in these areas after the Cistercians. However, following the beliefs of St. Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226) they did not receive property but were supported by charity. They are preachers, continually on the move and deeply pen-

etrating into every pore of the living environment in which they operate (1,2).

In our spiritual tradition the Franciscan Order has always shared the fate of its people and throughout the stormy events of human destiny it was very close to the people. Cardinal Franjo Kuharić remarked that there is possibly no nation that so

deeply accepted homage to St. Francis and his followers than the Croatian nation (3). Archbishop Josip Bozanić observed that the Franciscan movement has been deeply rooted for almost eight centuries of Franciscan presence in north Croatia and neighbouring regions where Croats live. In continental Croatia the province of St. Cyril and Methodius encompassed an area from the Sava river to the Drava river and from north Dalmatia to the Danube, and also included monasteries in East Srijem, Bačka and in Bosnia & Herzegovina (Fig. 1). Up until 1990 today's monasteries in the Franciscan province of St. Cyril and Methodius belonged to three Franciscan provinces: Croatian-Kranjska Holy Cross, St. Ladislav and St. John of Kapistran, which was reflected in the trends of Baroque sculpting and choice of sculptors (5). As Croatia was socio-politically and organisationally connected with central Europe, the choice of saints represented in their sanctuaries also resembled those in other regions of central Europe (6). This also included homage to the St. Appolonia, advocate and patron saint of people suffering from toothache, and today of dentists and the dental profession (7,8).

### Objective and method

The object of this study was to ascertain where and in what way iconography and homage to St. Appolonia can be found in the Franciscan province of St. Cyril and Methodius. According to the directory of the Croatian Franciscan province of St. Cyril and Methodius which was prepared by Friar Žarko Broz (9). The study included 30 monasteries and counties in Croatia. Unfortunately, monasteries outside Croatia, (Bač, Novi Sad, Subotica, Zemun) were not included in this study.

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire via electronic communication and material exhibited at the exhibition "Peace and Goodwill" in Klovic's Court from 12 January to 23 April 2000.

### Results of the study

It was established that statues of St. Appolonia can be found in 9 (30%) out of 30 sanctuaries (churches, monasteries) in the Franciscan province

of St. Cyril and Methodius. Apart from a statue there is also a painting, oil on canvas, in Kloštar Ivanić. In 21 (70%) of the locations there are no statues or paintings of the Saint (Bjelovar, Čakovec, Ćuntić, Đurđevac, Đurđenovac, Ilok, Karlovac, Koprivnica, Osijek-Jug, Osijek-Tvrđa, Požega, Rijeka-Trsat, Slavonski Brod, Šaregrad, Špišić Bukovica, Vukovar, Vukovar-Borovo Naselje, Zagreb-Kaptol, Zagreb-Kozari Bok, Zagreb-Siget, Zagreb). The statues are mainly situated in north-west Croatia, which was spiritually and politically-organisationally connected with central Europe (Table 1) where St. Appolonia is particularly revered. The figures of St. Appolonia were produced by Franciscan artists, following the tradition of Roman Catholic iconography, occasionally giving the sculptures the specific characteristic of local artistic expression. The statues were produced in wood, polychromed and generally gold plated. They ranged in height from 100 to 184 cm, and the majority originated from the 18th century, with just one from the 20th century (Krapina). The statues are situated on side altars, apart from in Cernik where the figure of St. Appolonia is on the main altar of St. Peter, among other sculptures (Figs. 2-7). There are no figures of St. Appolonia in the newly built churches.

### Discussion

Toothache is a very painful experience that has beset mankind from time immemorial and has been described in many medical reports of different civilisations (10). Long ago the extraction of a tooth was the main therapeutic method for freeing man of toothache. It was a painful procedure and, like the toothache itself, was well known by the population, regardless of social rank. Thus extraction of teeth, apart from therapy, also became an act of repression and punishment for people who found themselves opposing those who were masters of the life and death of their subjects or enemies. During the history of Christianity the infidel Romans were known to have carried out terrible persecution of the first followers of the Christian religion. According to the Archbishop of Alexandria, St. Dion, an old woman called Appolonia experienced such an unhappy fate in the year 249, during the rule of Emperor Phillip in Alexandria (7,8).

She found herself in the midst of a conflict, resulting in tyranny, during which many Christians lost their lives. After being tortured by blows to her face and her teeth extracted with pincers, she threw herself into the flames at the stake, which had been prepared for her. The pain she suffered was placed on a pedestal of suffering and death of a martyr, and thus St. Appolonia became a symbol of suffering and the patron saint of all those seeking consolation and advocacy before God for their distress because of toothache. For this reason in artistic and sculptural presentations of her figure her left hand is prominent, in which she holds pincers with an extracted tooth. In her right hand she holds a palm branch, as a symbol of an irreproachable life and apostolic work, worthy of respect and admiration (8). Homage to St. Appolonia first spread to the East and later to the West, and many churches and chapels were built in Europe in honour of the martyr of Alexandria (7,11). In this area her cult of knowledge spread from the 15th century, first in Istria, where there are frescoes with her figure from that period. The first written tribute to St. Appolonia as the patron saint of toothache appears in Croatian-Glagolitic dental text from 1528, known as "Žgombić's Anthology" (12).

The statues of St. Appolonia in Franciscan iconography conform to the customary iconography of the Roman Catholic Church, and are the result of the artistic creativity of Franciscans, whose order was acknowledged for its artistic and cultural activity. In their creativity the Franciscans formed a model for local artistic expression in wood (6). The magnificence or humility of a certain image was, to a certain extent, a reflection of the economic situation in the area in which the figure was created, and also later for restoration work. Apart from the sanctuaries of the Franciscan order paintings and sculptures of St. Appolonia can also be found in churches belonging to other orders. For example, in Zagreb there are paintings of St. Appolonia in the churches St. John and St. Catherine (Jesuitic Order), in Čakovac in the church of St. George and a statue in the Lepoglava monastery (Paulist Order) (13).

The presence of St. Appolonia in Franciscan sanctuaries (monasteries, churches) is a sign of the strong social and political influence in those regions. This is reflected in the fact that the majority of sculptures and painting of St. Appolonia are situated

in sanctuaries in north-west Croatia which, up until 1900, belonged to the provinces of the Holy Cross and St. Ladislav, and were thus geographically closest to central Europe.

The fact that there are almost no figures of St. Appolonia in churches built during this century indicates that the founders of the sanctuaries and the people today have no need of spiritual support to solve the problem of toothache and similar disorders. Such problems are today solved by a dental service which has at its disposal effective therapeutic possibilities. However, St. Appolonia is still known as the patron saint of dentists and the dental profession, which does not consider that it is omnipotent, and consequently there is an occasional need for spiritual support in today's totally materialistic world. Today, St. Appolonia is referred to in the teaching of the history of dental medicine, cited in professional literature and presented in the form of slides or souvenirs at professional and scientific meetings as a symbol of spirituality, historical traditionalism or souvenir exoticism, which is characteristic of society today. Nine sculptures and one painting in Franciscan churches of the province of St. Cyril and Methodius are situated on the side altars, and one on the main altar, which indicates that homage to St. Appolonia is permanently rooted in the spiritual tradition of the Franciscan Order.

## Conclusion

The figures of St. Appolonia in the form of altar sculptures and a painting found in ten (30%) of the Franciscan churches in the province of St. Cyril and Methodius indicate that homage to St. Appolonia is permanently rooted in the spiritual tradition of the Franciscan Order. This is a result of the geopolitical and spiritual connection with central Europe, where St. Appolonia is very highly revered. This is substantiated by the fact that the majority of the sculptures and painting are situated in the sanctuaries of north-west Croatia, which up until 1990 belonged to the provinces of the Holy Cross and St. Ladislav, geographically the closest to central Europe. Artistically they conform to the Baroque art of Roman Catholic Europe, incorporating local elements in the creation of their artistic expression.