

# ABBOT DENIS FARKASFALVY

## June 23, 1936 – May 20, 2020

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, one of several of the poet's works that Abbot Denis published in Hungarian translation, praised Orpheus thus: "His heart's a perishable press / of a wine that's eternal for men," and the poet encouraged his own heart in another sonnet, "Whatever pattern you're part of most intrinsically / (even just for a moment in the life of pain), / feel that the whole is meant, the glorious tapestry."



For many, Abbot Denis embodied these words he knew well, bringing forth in us the truth our hearts need and fitting his life and ours into the glorious tapestry.

Abbot Denis (Miklós) Farkasfalvy was born in Hungary on June 23, 1936, in the ancient city of Székesfehérvár, the youngest son of István and Mária Knazoviczky Farkasfalvy (siblings: István, György, Mária). He entered the novitiate of the Cistercian Order in Zirc, Hungary on March 19, 1955 at the age of 18, and persevered in monastic life for 65 years, until his death in Dallas, Texas on May 20, 2020.

Abbot Denis's enchantment with Cistercian life came early. He and his brothers were educated by Cistercians in his home town until their school was suppressed in 1948. He first visited the abbey of Zirc for a large celebration at Easter 1949 when he was not quite 13 years old and the monastery too was already under threat of suppression from the Soviet-backed

government. The experience affected him profoundly and he resolved to become a monk, priest, and teacher like the men he saw there, "A decision I never found reason to question or regret... In some sense those two days shaped the rest of my life," he wrote.

Cistercian schools were closed in Hungary, but the 1000-year-old Benedictine Abbey of Pannonhalma remained open, and Fr. Denis would attend high school there as an "oblate" of Zirc. The strong curriculum, monastic presence, and enchanting church aided his rapid spiritual development. Zirc was officially suppressed on October 15, 1950, but in 1955 Fr. Denis joined the clandestine novitiate operated by the saintly and wise Fr. Lawrence 'Sigmund, vicar for the abbot, who was imprisoned at that time. Fr. Denis pursued his early monastic formation in Budapest, under the cover of being a Law student (the only grade lower than A he received there was a B in the mandatory course on "Marxism and Leninism").

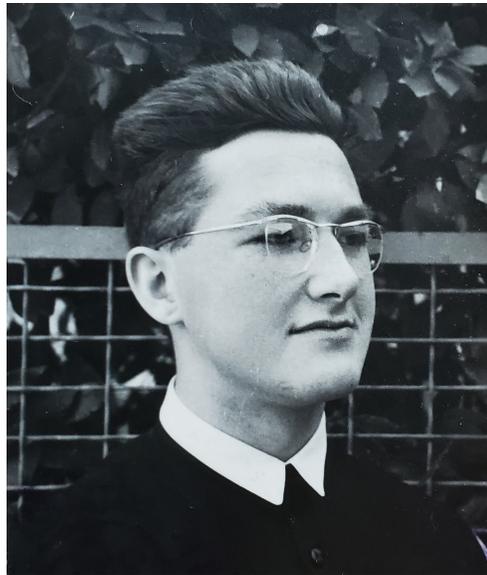
Thus Fr. Denis was on hand during the vast student demonstration of October 1956 that led to the brief downfall of Soviet rule in the country. During that short period, the abbot of

Zirc was released from prison, and with the encouragement of Fr. Lawrence decided to send young monks out of the country, even though their formation was only beginning – he rightly feared they would be denied the opportunity for education and ordination in Hungary. Thus, at the age of 20, shortly after his first vows as a monk, Fr. Denis passed through Austria and found his way with others to Rome. There, from 1956–1962, he completed his theological studies at the Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Anselm.

Fr. Denis was devoted to the work of theology. Later on, he completed another degree, in Sacred Scripture, at the Biblical Institute in Rome (1974–75, 1984–85), though with interruptions because of his immense labors in the school and monastery of Dallas. He became an accomplished theologian, and the life-long work he dedicated to the study of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, of the Virgin Mary, and of Sacred Scripture have left significant marks on Catholic theology. He published many works of theology in both Hungarian and English, and his abilities garnered him the attention of St. John Paul II, who appointed him to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (2003–2013). His translation of the Psalms and hymns for the Roman Breviary in Hungarian are highly regarded. He helped establish the theology curriculum at the Cistercian Preparatory School and taught theology at the University of Dallas in the 1960s, and more fully from 2004 onward. He considered it an important task he shared with other monks to help the new university enter into the great renewal of Catholic theology that came with the Second Vatican Council.

But compared to his other labors, his work as a theologian was often unnoticed. When Fr. Denis came to Texas in 1962, shortly after his ordination to the priesthood in the monastery of Lilienfeld in Austria on July 9, 1961, he took up residence in Fort Worth, where he served as chaplain to the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur (who helped him learn English) and worked toward an M.S. degree in Mathematics at TCU – for the sake of the newly founded Cistercian Preparatory School. Fr. Denis finished his degree in 1965 and taught Mathematics for more than 40 years, not only as work but as an opportunity to see at least briefly into the soul of almost every student of the school. In this as in so many other regards Fr. Denis showed himself both extraordinarily talented as an individual and yet also deeply dedicated in obedience to the good of the community.

Fr. Denis served as the second headmaster of Cistercian, from 1969–1974 and then 1975–1981, and was the Form Master of various classes, graduating in 1974, 1981, 1982, and 1991. The lasting impact of his work at the school simply cannot be expressed. Although he did not found the school, his brilliant, intense, insightful, and decisive attitude cleared the atmosphere of confusion and allowed him to instill the extraordinarily high ideals he



*Rome, 1957 (age 21)*

and the community envisioned for education. Under his tenure the school first reached its basic plan – not only in the sense of, for example, building a gymnasium and hiring certain excellent teachers who remained for decades, but also in the deeper sense of cultivating what the community of a Form and of the school mean. Not without great difficulty and many obstacles did he lay the groundwork that future headmasters would build on. Fr. Denis knew from experience how important it is to dedicate oneself to the young, and against all odds and with the assistance of many exceptional people in Dallas and elsewhere he brought to completion his predecessors' great struggles to preserve the Hungarian Cistercian tradition in priestly ministry and education.

The monastic community of Dallas elected Fr. Denis as their second abbot on Easter Monday, April 4, 1988; he served for four terms, until his resignation in 2012. When Fr. Denis became abbot, the future of the monastery was still uncertain. Few young men had joined in the preceding decades, and with the reopening of the mother house of Zirc in 1989 it was not clear whether Hungarians would remain here. But Fr. Denis was certain that his role was to build here a lasting home for the vision that had inspired the Hungarian refugees from the beginning. He guided the project of several alumni that completed the basic plan of the monastery by constructing the uniquely beautiful Abbey Church. As the two-ton blocks of limestone were slowly stacked on top of each other, it became clear to all that someone wanted this place to remain.

This new visibility and show of confidence began to bear fruit in the internal renewal of the monastic community. In 2002–3, shortly after the tenth anniversary of the chapel's consecration, a stream of more than a dozen young American vocations began to flow in from the Prep School, the University of Dallas, and elsewhere. Fr. Denis attributed this growth not only to the new willingness on the part of the monks to imagine a brighter future for this place, but also to the heavenly intercession of Fr. Lawrence 'Sigmond and the many sacrifices (even martyrdom) of so many Hungarian monks in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Abbot Denis was able to see through to the larger picture of history and the highest ideals without ceasing to be a man of intense practicality; he did not give himself or others the chance to become dreamy or worry about possible discouragement. In the history of the abbey and school that he wrote the year before his death, he concludes, "The search for excellence must be conducted with inquisitive and self-searching eyes, forbidding any tendency toward extremes.... Equidistant from destructive perfection and a cult of mediocrity, the way of perfection pleasing to God is a *via media* in which humility and love are practiced by imitating Christ." No one who met Fr. Denis was left unimpressed; as was said of St. Bernard, he was *amore terribilis, terrore amabilis*, terrifying in his love, loveable in being terrifying. He was unsparing in his efforts to bring into reality the vision of peace he first had as a young boy visiting Zirc, to transmit and perfect what was best in Hungarian Cistercian life, and to offer himself generously to the many souls who found a father, brother, and friend in him. He became a convincing witness to the truth of Christianity and the beauty of the monastic life. Through him God has undoubtedly left an important mark on the monastery, school, and university, on the whole city of Dallas (he won the Catholic Foundation Award in 2016), on theology throughout the world, on the Church at large, on the history of our whole Order, and on countless individuals.

Fr. Denis is survived by his sister Mária (Marika), to whom he always remained very close, and by nieces and nephews Miklós, István, Margaret, Kinga, and Zsolt. He often visited with his nephew Miklós and eagerly followed his career as a cultural critic.

Fr. Denis died from Covid-19 on May 20, 2020, after long struggling with complications from the many illnesses he suffered, compounded by having contracted the new virus just days before. At home the monks were praying a rosary for his peaceful death, and he was accompanied to the end by monks who could visit him at least through a window at the hospital.

The rosary will be held at 7:30 PM on Sunday, May 24 in the Abbey, and the funeral on Monday, May 25, at 2:00PM, followed by burial in the Abbey's crypt. Because of present circumstances, these liturgies will be closed to public participation but livestreamed for all to view on the CistercianDallasYouTube channel. Details of a gathering in person will be shared later.