

# “Mother help me get a good mark in history”

## Ethnological Analysis of Wall Inscriptions in the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Osijek (Croatia)

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The author proposes to analyze messages (prayers) addressed to the Virgin Mary. They are written on the walls of the chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes, which is located in the church of St. Peter and Paul in Osijek (eastern Croatia). The appropriate genre into which these messages can be ranged is discussed and a proposition is reached that they cannot be considered *graffiti*. In the analysis the author compares them to similar messages found at yet another Croatian church and at a church in Alsace, France. The conclusions are reached regarding the age and gender of the authors, the themes and beneficiaries of the prayers, the appellation of the Virgin, and the relationship that the authors establish with her.

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A reader might wonder at the title and the subtitle of this text and ask her/himself what kind of a wall inscription is it by which a good mark in history is prayed for, what mother is that? I shall first attempt to make these questions clear. Then I shall present some theoretical assumptions and methodological problems involved in the analysis of data, and finally, the results of the analysis.

Messages addressed to the Virgin, the Mother of God, found in the chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes in the church of St. Peter and Paul in Osijek (eastern Croatia), are the basis for this research. They are written on chapel walls, usually with a ball point pen, in capital or small letters. They cover seven walls of the octagonal chapel (the eighth is the entrance), and extend outside the chapel on the walls to the left and to the right of the entrance. They fill up wall surfaces from the bottom to about two meters' height. Tablets with thanksgivings and requests graved in stone ornate cha-

pel walls, but written messages do not respect them: they appear between and next to them, but also on them, one upon the other, making it sometimes difficult, even impossible, to uncover overlayed messages.

It was not possible to find out when this practice began. The oldest recovered message is from 1972 and represents the minimal lower border of the inception of the writing of wall messages. All inscriptions are addressed to the Virgin or to God, either in the form of a request and/or a thanksgiving. By their content they are a manifestation of popular religiosity, and as a subject of research are related to studying pilgrimages, vows, votive objects or, more generally, relationships that people maintain with saint or divine persons.

### Graffiti or public prayers?

Wall inscriptions in Osijek present a rare combination of, on the one hand, a special form of



Fig. 1. The chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes, the church of St. Peter and Paul, Osijek.

expression – a public wall inscription or *graffiti*, and, on the other hand, religious content that is most commonly unrelated to this form. There seems to be no general agreement upon the definition of graffiti. Various definitions usually emphasize only one of their characteristics, assuming that it is the most prominent one. For example, some distinguish them solely according to their formal characteristics as inscriptions and drawings on walls (Lalić 1991: 29–30). The inscriptions from Osijek conform to that criterion.

Other definitions stress the trespassing of a prohibition as a constitutive element in the definition of graffiti. That constituent is in close connection with the definition of graffiti as an act of vandalism (Gamboni 1988: 213, Lalić 1991: 30). The condemnation of graffiti leads to their destruction, in some cases even to persecution of their authors (Billeter 1988). Wall inscriptions from Osijek again conform to this

criterion. According to the church staff they damage the church walls and, both by their content and by their positioning, they disturb the sanctity of the place. Therefore, they are regularly wiped out. That is a never ending process, because new authors fill up (imperfectly) erased surfaces, or overwrite existing messages. With several older, still partly visible layers, the walls of the chapel have become a contemporary version of a palimpsest.

However, the Osijek inscriptions are not, like graffiti, a form of public communication practiced by individuals who cannot communicate in a usual and socially accepted way (Lalić 1991: 32, Skasa-Weiss 1988: 208). Namely, the Osijek inscriptions are not addressed to unknown receivers. Although they might reach unknown public – visitors of the church – they aim at being received by a specific receiver – the Virgin.

None of the above mentioned writers has discussed wall inscriptions inside a church as a case of graffiti. However, sacral spaces have frequently represented beloved surfaces for writing various messages. Croatia is no exception to this. Glagolitic<sup>1</sup> inscriptions were written in secular but even more in sacral spaces, especially in the north coastal Croatia during a long period of time between the 10th and 18th centuries<sup>2</sup> (Fučić 1982). Closer in time, we can find inscriptions inside churches and on small sacral objects in the northwestern and eastern Croatia (Horvat 1956, 1975). They probably belong to the 18th century and might represent magic signs for protection or ritual prayers for success in hunting (ibid.).

I propose that inscriptions on the inner walls of the church of St. Peter and Paul in Osijek, although they have some of the most prominent characteristics of graffiti – they are written on the walls, in a public sphere, they result in transgression leading to attempts of the church staff to destroy them, they are anonymous – are still not graffiti.<sup>3</sup> They cannot be considered graffiti for various reasons: first, their receiver is not meant to be an anonymous mass of people living in a big city; second, their messages do not primarily result from an opposition and wish to transgress an interdiction nor from a communication deficit

(impossibility of public expression in society); and last but not least, by their contents they are not graffiti. The inscriptions from Osijek are prayers (requests and thanksgivings) of individuals to the Virgin for her interference into their lives. Therefore, in spite of their form, they belong to the same genre as pilgrims' prayers which are found in various pilgrimage churches.

## Wall inscriptions as texts

Before embarking on the analysis of texts, it is appropriate to comment shortly on the creation of wall inscriptions and my interpretation of them. It is argued that this study carries the double mark of fictionality – one can be found already at the level of data, and one at the level of their interpretation and analysis.

Prayers aim at communication with the divine with the intention of asking or thanking for a grace, but they also convey a certain understanding of the world of the author, i. e. they can be used as material for research into a person's comprehension of the world and of his/her place in it, specifically with regards to the relationship between a person and divine beings. In that short text, the author reveals his/her thoughts through a certain form – a prayer – which is a certain genre with its conventions of expression. As a conventional type of discourse it influences the communication between an individual and a divine being (cf. Velčić 1991). By its conventions, a prayer mediates human experience and gives it form. Therefore, the object of analysis and interpretation is not just human life but also (or even more) a text about it, a text which, using the conventions of a specific genre, turns a personal discourse into a non-personal, generalized expression, into a sort of fiction. In other words, in the analysis to follow, we shall not reach human lives directly, but indirectly through texts.

The interpretation of data and the writing of a scientific text also involve fictionalization. Ethnology/cultural anthropology has only recently begun to question systematically the processes of interpretation and of writing up

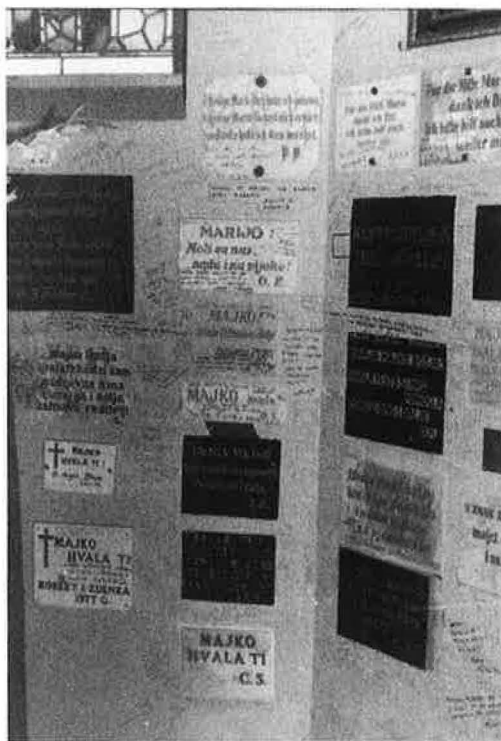


Fig. 2. Hand written messages alternate with graved stone tablets. Both contain a message for the Virgin.

ethnographies. It is posited by one of the proponents of new ethnography that this relatively late questioning "reflects the persistence of an ideology claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience" (Clifford 1986: 2). By this ideology the interpretation of culture and the writing about it have been reduced to method: it has been thought that if a researcher disposes with good fieldwork notes and knows how to draw accurate maps, s/he can without difficulties write up the results of the research (ibid.). The critics of that position focus on the making of ethnographic texts, pointing out to their constructed, artificial nature. They refer to ethnographic texts as to fictions (in the sense of "something made or fashioned"), as to partial cultural and historical truths (ibid.: 6–7).

In this sense, it will be taken that the following analysis and the ensuing text will provide only one among a number of possible interpretations, a partial truth in which reality will be both described and made up.



Fig. 3. A couple of examples of prayers: "Mother defend us from the war and return happiness in my life (first name)", or, "Mother please make that I start dating D.B. soon, and that we love each other for a long time."

## Comments on the method

One thousand wall inscriptions are the basis of the present analysis. This number encompasses perhaps a majority of existing (legible) inscriptions, assuring that we really have a representative sample. The analysis of inscriptions containing the date (16.5% of cases) indicates that in majority they were written between 1987 and October 1992 (when the data were gathered).

The methodology has been worked out using two French analyses (Fainzang 1991, Herberich-Marx 1991). I have combined the methodology proposed by these two authors making adjustments where the data dictated them and where I judged that they would contribute to the analysis. These differences of method account for the incomparability of certain results obtained in the analyses of Croatian and French data.

I shall present some of the analyses of the data from Osijek comparing them to the analysis of prayers from Trsat<sup>4</sup> (Čapo 1992), and to the analysis of prayers left at Thierenbach<sup>5</sup> (Herberich-Marx 1991). All three data sources are from the 1980s, so that they all give information about contemporary manifestations of popular religiosity.

## Analysis and interpretation of data

The inscriptions are in majority anonymous: about a half is unsigned or has only initials. The signed inscriptions do not reveal the identity of the authors: most contain only the first name which does not permit their identification. Women are by far the most frequent writers of messages to the Virgin: for every 100 women there are only 15.3 men. This result confirms that popular religion is to a large extent the domain of women.

The age of the writers of messages could be studied only indirectly, by studying their themes. Namely, the themes such as success at school or at University point without doubt to the age of their writers. Such indications are also contained in the prayers for love, especially of the type "may I please start dating this boy/that girl". If we assume that these messages were written by the persons in their teens and twenties, then it can be posited that at least about a half of the messages were written by a young population – mainly high school and university population.

The messages are in general short. Almost all are written in prose, without any specific stylistic characteristics. Only a few authors have presented their message in verse (either quoting a poem or making it up) or in the form of a customary prayer. Altogether, the mess-



Table 1. Requests by themes.

Theme	#	%
1 .....	309	20.0
2 .....	283	18.3
3 .....	268	17.4
4 .....	206	13.3
5 .....	145	9.4
6 .....	119	7.7
7 .....	101	6.5
8 .....	60	3.9
9 .....	54	3.5
Total .....	1545	100.0

ages are not individualized: due to little variation in form, they exhibit great similarity.

The messages are in most cases requests, thanksgivings or praises (by which respect is paid to the Virgin or her glory is extolled). More than 90% of all messages are requests, either only requests or requests in combination with a thanksgiving or a praise. We also note 20% of thanksgivings either alone or in combination with a request. There are only two messages, which although they do not have a classic form of a vow, contain a request and a pledge that the person will do something in return for the Virgin's help. For example:

"Although I have sometimes been a bit evil, forgive me and give me strength to stand every temptation, and I promise you fidelity."

Next I have analyzed themes of all requests notwithstanding whether they appear alone or in combination with another type of message. In each message there are on the average one and a half themes for which a person prays the Virgin. For the purposes of analysis the themes of requests have been categorized as follows (cf. Čapo 1992):

1. requests referring to everyday activities – school, work, etc.;
2. requests referring to love, marriage, and children;
3. general requests for help and granting of prayers;
4. requests for happiness, satisfaction, peace, understanding etc.;
5. requests for guarding, protection, and the Virgin's constant presence;

6. requests for health;

7. requests for conversion, strong faith, forgiveness or deliverance from sins, also requests for strength, patience, obedience etc.;

8. requests referring to the war in Croatia 1991/1992;

9. other requests encompassing various themes, for example travelling, losing weight, going to the seaside, requests in which existential problems are mentioned as an incentive for prayer (troubles, sorrows, anxieties, sufferings, etc.), etc.

Three most frequent requests directed to the Virgin refer to school, love and general help. About the same number of requests contain these three themes. All other themes, except the one for happiness, appear in less than a tenth of all cases. Most numerous are school-related prayers of which one fifth contain a very concrete request for immediate help:

"Mother of God help me get three<sup>6</sup> in history today. Many thanks."

The second most frequent theme is related to love, mostly to the beginning of a love affair, to settlement of a disagreement between lovers and to the duration of love. Only rarely do these requests refer to marriage or to having children. The use of informal language (slang) is still another point in the argument that we are dealing with a relatively young population:

"Oh blessed Mother, please help me start dating L. (first name)."

In the third most frequent category we find prayers for general, unspecified help. Those requests in which the theme is unspecified because it is believed that the Virgin knows what the request is about, have been added to this group. Requests for happiness and blessing are somewhat more specific than the previous ones. Protection, either in the form "defend me" or "be near me", is searched for all day and night, and everywhere. In the rare cases in which the reason for protection is specified, it is against evil (people) and the satan, i. e. against an abstract danger.

The next most frequent category are the requests for one's own or somebody else's health. Generally, they do not mention a specific illness from which the person praying for help (or in whose behalf it is prayed) suffers. There-

Table 2. Messages according to beneficiary.

Beneficiary	#	%	Others	#	%
Just oneself .....	619	61.9	Parents/brothers .....	132	30.5
Just others .....	132	13.2	Family .....	115	26.6
Oneself+others .....	221	22.1	General .....	90	20.8
No indication .....	28	2.8	Partner .....	55	12.7
			Children .....	20	4.6
			Other .....	21	4.8
Total .....	1000	100.0	Total .....	433 <sup>a</sup>	100.0

fore, they are probably just general expressions of concern for health by people who are not necessarily ill. The requests referring to faith, salvation, finding the right way and living like a Christian account for a relatively small number of cases.

Finally, there are prayers referring to the war in Croatia in 1991/1992, mostly prayers for its end, for peace in Croatia, and for the return of soldiers and refugees:

"Oh, blessed Virgin Mary make that I return to Baranya<sup>7</sup> (name)."

It is possible to study the extent to which people pray only for themselves and/or include other people in their messages. A difference was made between messages in which a person prays for himself/herself and/or for others (entire family, particular members of the family, other relatives, etc.).

About 80% of all messages contain a prayer in behalf of the person who has written it; in only 35% cases do they contain a prayer in behalf of another person. In most cases people pray for members of the family (parents, brothers and sisters), for the family as a unit (without specifying its members<sup>9</sup>), and generally for "us" or for "Croats", "Croatia", for "our village" and alike. The high proportion of the

messages in behalf of parents (and brothers and sisters) and the low proportion of those in behalf of children corroborate the hypothesis brought out on the basis of other analyses that the population writing these messages is young.

The theme of the message is also a function of its beneficiary. The messages in one's own behalf more or less repeat the pattern of themes found in all messages (this is expected because they account for the biggest number of messages). But in the messages in behalf of others, either of the whole family or its members, the pattern of themes changes, with health, general help, protection and happiness taking over from the most frequent themes in all messages (school, love).

The entire dataset exhibits the following pattern of the appellation of the Virgin.

The Virgin is most frequently called "mother"<sup>10</sup>, either only "mother" or "the Mother of God", "Dear Mother" or "Mother Mary". A most noticeable feature of the appellation of the Virgin is the absence of the local denomination (as e.g. "Our Lady of Osijek"). Nor is she ever called "Our Lady of Lourdes". Some people refer to the Virgin as if she were their own mother:

Table 3. Appellation of the Virgin.

Most frequent	#	Noun	#	Adjective	#
Mother of God .....	286	Mother .....	600	"Of God" .....	288
Dear Mother .....	64	Mary .....	120	Dear .....	93
Mother Mary .....	58	Lady .....	27	Saint .....	41
Dear Mother of God....	17	Little mother .....	14	My/our .....	31
		Virgin .....	12	Blessed .....	8
				Superlative .....	9

"Mother thank you for bringing me to the world. My heart lives for your love for me. I return you all with love. Your son (first name)."

Regularly the Virgin is addressed with a familiar and not with a respectful form "you".<sup>11</sup> The concluding words of the messages also point to the familiarity and warmth with which the people address the Virgin, for example: "yours", "always yours", "loves you yours", "thankful", "loyal", "your sweet", "your angel", "your sheep", etc.

In 24 messages another saint or divine person is mentioned besides the Virgin: God, Jesus Christ, St. Leopold Mandić<sup>12</sup>, St. Anthony, etc. People address them either directly or indirectly *via* the Virgin. In 13.6% cases it is only God to whom the message is directed. Notwithstanding the person(s) to whom the message is addressed, all messages have the same form and themes.

### Comparison between prayers in Osijek and elsewhere

A marked difference between messages in Osijek and those found at Trsat (Adriatic coast) concerns the themes of the messages and, closely linked to this feature, the age of the population writing them. It can be argued that the young age of the population who leaves messages in Osijek is a function of the medium in which the messages are written – as wall inscriptions in the chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes. At the same time age has an effect on the themes of messages. In other words, it can be posited that the themes of inscriptions are directly a function of age and indirectly of the medium in which they are written. The themes testify to primary interests of younger people: good results at school and at university, and love (wishes to meet somebody, problems with partners, etc.). Two other main themes, having a somewhat smaller percentage, are more general – search for help and a request for a happier life. Besides the latter two, the majority of cases at Trsat, refer to the general requests for health and protection, neither of which specifies the illness or the danger against which

help is sought. In general, the themes of requests at Trsat are not in direct relation with some concrete problem.

In contradistinction, in Osijek themes are so concrete that the examples are not rare (one fifth of all requests regarding school) in which a person mentions the exact date when the Virgin's help is needed – for example, to meet today a person whom one likes, not to get a bad mark in the test to be written tomorrow, etc. Young people seek concrete help, now and here; not in an unspecified time and place, but today or tomorrow, at school, in the street or at home.

The function of the church of St. Peter and Paul in Osijek might contribute to the concreteness and immediacy of the inscriptions. While at Trsat it could be hypothesized that the motivation of believers to come to Trsat is not a concrete need or thanksgiving but an array of various motives, and that maybe the most frequent incentive to go is that the parish to which the believer belongs organizes a pilgrimage to Trsat (Čapo 1992), a similar inference cannot be made in Osijek. The Osijek church is not a pilgrimage center such as Trsat, but a parish church in the center of Osijek; here people do not come in organized groups, but individually; and, it appears based on this analysis, not with an insufficiently defined motive. Quite on the contrary, it seems that a good number of people visit the church on deliberation, to express a specific, concrete need (i. e. a request prompts them to come to the church). This points both to the presence of the Virgin in the everyday life of people, and to the practice to call upon her when one is in trouble. There is also room for assuming that some people come without a well defined purpose, and that inspired by the walls covered up with messages, they want to leave their trace, maybe out of the same wish and need for a lasting noting down of one's name and exploits that has been attributed to the authors of glagolitic inscriptions (Fučić 1982: 18), or maybe out of a challenge brought about by the writing on a wall: risk of time pressure, secrecy of the act, limitation of the medium (cf. Thévoz 1988: 216 speaking of graffiti), possibly even transgression that the act involves.



The young people who succumb to the challenge of the wall are preoccupied with their own problems – school and love – therefore they mostly pray for themselves, and to a much lesser extent in behalf of other people. At Trsat, where, it has been proposed, people of various ages leave messages, the number of the messages in behalf of other people is double its number in Osijek. The age determines also who these other people are – parents, mother, father, sister, brother, family in general in Osijek; family in general and children at Trsat. It is argued that age differences are at the root of these differences.

There is still another specificity of these messages, which is not a function of the age nor of the medium, but of the actual social and political circumstances during which some messages were written – the war in Croatia 1991/1992. A negligible number of people who left messages at Trsat in 1987 prayed for unknown people, for the wider community in which they lived or for some other community (which at that moment was afflicted by war, hunger, etc.), or for all people in the world. Most people were self-centered and concerned only with their narrowest family and its problems. Based on these findings it has been proposed that the primary reference group of a contemporary (wo)man is in the first place (her) his family. It has been posited that all (her) his interests, wishes and needs are exhausted within that small social group (Čapo 1992). During the period 1991/1992 in which some inscriptions were written the sociopolitical circumstances were drastically changed, and one could not, in spite of one's own preoccupations (and youth which is turned onto itself) be indifferent towards wider community – one's village, town, region, entire Croatia and its inhabitants. The war took on such proportions and brought about such consequences that everybody was affected by it in a direct or indirect way.

Another difference is that the inscriptions in which a person does not address the Virgin but God or another saint are more frequent in Osijek than in Trsat. This is another evidence of the character of these sanctuaries: Trsat is a renowned pilgrimage center with a miraculous

Virgin, and Osijek is a parish church dedicated to St. Peter and Paul in which a person need not address specifically the Mother of God. There seems to be no difference in the addressing of either the Virgin or God: expressions, themes, and forms of familiarity are the same. There is no ground for asserting that God is less attainable and less accessible than the Virgin, or that the believer more willingly and more easily communicates with his intercessor – the Virgin.

The Virgin is called only "mother", or "the Mother of God", and not "the Mother of God of Lourdes" or "of Osijek". She does not have the local denomination because the statue represents the apparition of the Virgin to the little Bernardette at Lourdes, i. e. it has no relation to Osijek, and because, no miraculous event has been linked to the statue since its placing in Osijek at the beginning of this century. The fact that the Virgin is never called "Our Lady of Lourdes" can be explained either as ignorance or failure of the authors of the messages to recognize the iconography of the statue or even, as a successful education of believers in the period after the Council of Vatican in which, in contradistinction to the popular view that saints might have variant forms, the uniqueness of the Virgin has been reasserted (cf. Čapo 1991).

The mentioned differences notwithstanding, the messages to the Virgin at Trsat and in Osijek do exhibit some similarities. At both places the relative share of gender among the authors is more or less the same: women, regardless of age, address the Virgin in a far bigger number than men. The Virgin seems to take a prominent place in the life of people visiting these two places. She is their helper, protector, donator, leader, forgiving mother redeemer and savior. People of different ages do not only confide in her, but expect that she will make decisions instead of them and help them resolve difficult situations. Furthermore, sure that the Virgin will gratify their requests, they thank her in advance. Both in Osijek and at Trsat the cases in which a request contains a pledge of some act in exchange for the gratification of the request (a vow) are exceptional.

Finally, the comparison of messages from



two Croatian sanctuaries and from a French one can be summarized as follows. There is a marked difference between the Croatian and French messages in addressing the Virgin: first, in the appellation – “the Mother of God” vs. “Notre-Dame” (“Our Lady”) and “Vierge Miraculeuse” (“Miraculous Virgin”), and second, in the form of addressing (familiar versus respectful “you” form). In all other respects (e. g. themes, beneficiaries, etc.), the messages from Trsat and Thierenbach are more similar than the messages from Osijek and Trsat. The messages at Trsat and Thierenbach exhibit similarities in the form and content of the communication with the divine, in which ethnic and cultural differences between the two countries seem to be overridden by the common features of Roman-Catholic popular religiosity. These features are also present in the form of the Osijek messages, as well as in the idea that a person can pray the Virgin for help, but in most other respects the messages found in Osijek are different. This is attributed above all to the difference in the age structure of the authors of the messages at respective places and to the function of the churches. It is likely that the authors of the messages at both Trsat and Thierenbach are distributed more or less evenly across all age groups.<sup>13</sup> The younger people, who introduce into their messages other interests than the middle aged or older people, predominate in Osijek mostly because the messages are written on the wall, in a medium that, one assumes, is considered inappropriate by the people of middle and older ages. The differences might also result from the function of the church – the sanctuaries at Trsat and Thierenbach are well-known pilgrimage centers dedicated to the Virgin, while the Osijek church is a local church dedicated to St. Peter and Paul and with no pilgrimage tradition in the usual sense. It is only known as such by a certain age group of the inhabitants of Osijek. That makes it such a unique dataset for research.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Glagolitic alphabet is an old Croatian alphabet, used until the 19th century in the coastal Croa-

2. Their contents vary covering a wide range from prayers to comments of social events, notices on epidemics that struck a region, etc.
3. These inscriptions have possibly one more of the features of graffiti. According to Grasskamp (1988: 199) they are magic which manifests itself at the very moment of the writing. To the magic contained in the moment of writing one can add the magic of the inscriptions themselves, if we take them to be a kind of a magical invocation.
4. Trsat is a well known Croatian pilgrimage centre located on the northern Adriatic coast. I have presented the results of the analysis of those prayers at the 11th Mariological Congress held in Huelva, Spain in September 1992 (Čapo 1992).
5. Thierenbach is found in Alsace, France.
6. The grading system ranges from 1 (insufficient) to 5 (excellent).
7. Baranya is the easternmost region of Croatia (between the rivers Danube and Drava). At the moment it is under the Serbian occupation and its Croatian population has been expelled.
8. This number does not correspond to the number of prayers for other people (see the same table), because a message can contain prayers in behalf of more than one person.
9. The messages for the family as a unit and for individual family members have been separately categorized because they seem to be a function of the age of the population who writes them: middle aged and older people make requests in behalf of the family as a unit, and younger ones in behalf of particular family members.
10. Usually written with a capital letter, but frequently the whole message is capitalized.
11. For the second personal pronoun in Singular, Croatian distinguishes between a familiar you form (*du* or *tu* in German and French respectively) and a respectful you form (*Sie* or *Vous* in German and French).
12. The only Croatian saint.
13. To some extent this statement runs contrary to the conclusion of Mme. Herberich-Marx regarding the age of the people visiting Thierenbach.
14. A broader version of this paper will be published in Croatian in the journal *Studia ethnologica croatica* V, 1993.

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