

# ORDER OF KING SAINT STEPHEN

## HISTORY

### I. The Foundational Work of King Saint Stephen

At the turn of the first Christian millennium, Christians in the Holy Land suffered persecution, the destruction of churches, and the rise of Islamic fanaticism. This turbulent period concluded in 1017 with the restoration of religious freedom, allowing exiled Christians to return, rebuild churches, and establish hospices and pilgrim hostels. This era thus marks the emergence of the Christian chivalric orders. In the 1020s, the first pilgrim hospice was founded in Jerusalem in honor of Saint John the Baptist, giving rise to the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. In 1027, reconstruction began on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, laying the foundation for the Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

Among the leading European figures supporting this movement was Saint Stephen, King of the Hungarians. His contributions are attested by legend, documentation, and historical research. As early as 1018, he opened and secured the pilgrimage route through Hungary toward Jerusalem. In Esztergom, he established a hospice and hospital, while abroad he founded four pilgrim hospices - in Rome, Ravenna, Jerusalem, and Constantinople - each associated with monastic communities. According to Abbot Odilo of Cluny, pilgrims praised the King's efforts during his lifetime. These institutions flourished, as confirmed by the Greater Legend composed for Stephen's canonization under King Saint Ladislaus.

Stephen actively supported the establishment and operation of foreign religious foundations within Hungary, promoting cooperation between Hungarian and foreign institutions, many of which later evolved into chivalric orders. This model remains instructive for contemporary Europe and Hungary, both of which now require re-evangelization.

Particular attention must be given to the double cross, venerated by both King Stephen and his son, Prince Saint Emeric. Chronicles and surviving insignia attest to its significance. In 1152, Russian chroniclers recorded that King Géza II wore a double cross containing a relic of the True Cross, said to have originated from King Stephen. This symbol reflects Stephen's enduring ties to the Holy Land and the Christian East.

### II. *Cruciferi Sancti Stephani Regis* – The Stephanites

By the early twelfth century, monastic communities within pilgrim hospices had grown strong and had begun to transform into chivalric orders. The mid-twelfth century saw the emergence of the Hospitallers, the Templars, the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Order of Saint Abraham of Hebron - all characterized by a dual *hospitalis et militaris* vocation.

The Stephanite hospices founded by King Stephen also developed robust monastic communities. A document from 1135 records that a Hungarian pilgrim woman named Petronilla donated two houses in Jerusalem for Hungarian pilgrims, witnessed by the local

Hospitaller magister. This suggests continuity between the original foundations and the emerging Stephanite Order, as well as cooperation with the Hospitallers.

Between 1150 and 1160, under Archbishop Lucas of Esztergom, King Géza II elevated these communities to the status of a religious order: the *Cruciferi Sancti Stephani Regis*. Its motherhouse was the Jerusalem hospice founded by King Stephen, which included the Church of the Blessed Virgin and the Church of King Saint Stephen. The Order's rule (*Regula Sancti Augustini*) was approved by Pope Alexander III with the assistance of Cardinal Manfred (*legatus a latere*). Its Hungarian center was located in Esztergom and the nearby Szentkirály hospice, which recent research confirms was Stephanite rather than Hospitaller.

In the year of Jerusalem's fall, 1187, His Holiness Pope Urban III issued a papal bull (*Religiosa loca...*) formally recognizing the Order. From that time onward, the seat of the *Cruciferi Sancti Stephani Regis* was established in Esztergom and at the nearby hospice of Szentkirály, known as the Saint Stephen House of Esztergom. The original papal bull has survived the storms of history and is preserved today in the Primate's Archives of Esztergom.

This bull was confirmed in 1262 by Pope Urban IV.

The Order was dedicated both to charitable service and the defense of Christianity and the Hungarian realm. The *Liber Censuum* of 1192 lists three Hungarian institutions under papal authority: the Hospitaller hospice of Székesfehérvár, the Stephanite hospice of Esztergom, and the French abbey of Somogyvár. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Hungarian hospice continued to operate in Acre until 1291. While the Hospitallers relocated to Rhodes, Malta, and Rome, the Stephanites re-centered their activities in Esztergom. The Order flourished, expanded its filial houses, and concentrated its mission within Hungary. Known houses included Buda-Felhévíz and Karcsa, where the church remains standing.

The Order's role as a *locus credibilis authenticus* is evidenced by its preservation of one of the seven authenticated copies of the Golden Bull and by King Andrew II's vow renewal in the Stephanite church of Esztergom.

The Stephanites participated in the Battle of Muhi in 1241, suffering severe losses. The Mongol invasion devastated the Hungarian provinces of the Hospitallers and Templars and likely inflicted even greater damage on the Stephanites. Although some historians claim that the Order ceased to exist thereafter, archival sources confirm its activity until 1439. Its operations were ultimately interrupted by the Ottoman conquest.

### III. Hungarian Chivalry

The Hungarian Christian chivalric ideal has served as a national model of conduct since its inception, consistently upheld by the Árpád dynasty. The heroic virtues of knighthood, rooted in ancestral tradition, found their fullest expression in King Saint Stephen and Prince Saint Emeric.

Foremost among Hungarian knights stands King Saint Ladislaus, who championed justice even when it conflicted with formal law, practiced knightly virtues at the highest level, and fulfilled his royal and Christian duties with unwavering commitment. King Géza II regarded him as a model. Ladislaus remains a patron saint of Hungary - *Athleta Patriae* - and is especially venerated by the Pauline Order and by military and frontier clans, particularly in Székelyföld. His cult gained renewed momentum after 1988, and he once again serves as the patron of the Hungarian border guard.

The Árpád dynasty founded only one chivalric order: the Stephanite Order. Later rulers established various chivalric societies, but these lacked full ecclesiastical legitimacy and are therefore to be regarded as secular associations.

### IV. A Time of Renewal

The Hungarian Christian chivalric ideal has been integral to the sovereign Christian Hungarian state since its foundation, with institutional roots laid by King Saint Stephen - even in the Holy Land. This work was continued by Saint Ladislaus and formalized by King Géza II, receiving papal approval from Alexander III. Their charitable and protective mission was later interrupted by pagan invasions both abroad and at home.

Although the Order's name endured during five centuries of lost sovereignty, it lacked the substance defined by the Árpáds; stripped of its *cruciferi* identity, it became largely nominal.

Today, in a time of renewal, the restoration of the Order of King Saint Stephen is essential to Hungary's spiritual and institutional rebirth. Cooperation with other Holy Land-origin orders is natural, just as it was in the beginning. The Order's revival demonstrates the enduring vitality of the Árpád legacy and the strength of Hungarian Christianity.

In addition to its traditional duties, the renewed Order must engage deeply with its own history and spiritual heritage. A key task is to identify the sources of papal approval and reconstruct the Order's historical development through legal-historical analogies and surviving documentation.

The restoration of the Esztergom and Jerusalem Order of King Saint Stephen is a unique undertaking. Only the Archbishop of Esztergom and the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest were in a position to authorize its renewal. On August 20, 1993, the Order resumed its activity within the Archdiocese. Its long-term objective remains the full restoration of its historical papal recognition and ecclesiastical legitimacy.

## LEGAL STATUS AND MISSION OF THE ORDER OF THE CRUCIFERI SANCTI STEPHANI REGIS

The Order of the *Cruciferi Sancti Stephani Regis* functions as a canonical juridical person within the legal framework of the Catholic Church and, by virtue of its ecclesiastical recognition, also holds legal personality under civil law. It is subject to the supreme jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, who serves as its Chief Patron. The Order's historical and spiritual homeland is Hungary, with particular reference to the Archdiocese of Esztergom-Budapest.

In view of the prolonged and involuntary suspension of activities due to circumstances beyond the control of its predecessors, the present Order of Saint Stephen continues the original spirit but does not constitute the legal successor of the former institution.

The Order comprises both Catholic and Protestant chapters. While membership is open to Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran Christians, the leadership is reserved for a Catholic representative. Admission is based on voluntary application and is contingent upon the fulfillment of defined criteria. Members of the Order uphold the values of Christian marriage and personal discipline, both of which are regarded as foundational virtues within its ethical framework.

The principal mission of the Order is to glorify God through the personal witness of its members, the promotion of Christian faith, and dedicated service to the Hungarian nation and to humanity more broadly. In pursuit of this mission, the Order cultivates the Christian virtues of charity and fraternity, engages in works of mercy, and provides assistance to pilgrims, refugees, exiles, the marginalized, and the poor. Particular emphasis is placed on strengthening spiritual resilience and fostering faith in God. Humanitarian aid to victims of natural disasters and armed conflicts also constitutes a significant aspect of its activity.

A distinctive mandate of the Stephanite Order is the preservation and advancement of Hungarian national interests, grounded in Christian ethics and historical tradition. This includes the safeguarding of cultural heritage and focused outreach to Hungarian communities living beyond the borders of Hungary, particularly within the Carpathian Basin.

In addition to its principal presence in Hungary, the Order maintains affiliated branches in Transylvania (present-day Romania), the region historically known as Upper Hungary (Felvidék, now Slovakia), the historically Hungarian Southern Territories (Délvidék, now Serbia), and the United States.

To fulfill its objectives, the Order accepts and administers donations, deploying both spiritual and material resources in the service of faith and in accordance with the knightly virtues that define its ethos. The Order welcomes the support, collaboration, and generosity of all who share its mission and values.

**Contact and Institutional Data of the Order of King Saint Stephen**  
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