

# A HISTORY OF THE CZECH FLOWER COMMUNION

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## INTRODUCTION:

This paper describes the story of Flower Communion from the beginning up to today. It provides a brief overview of facts concerning Flower Communion as well, in order to offer a basis for eventual further research. Because of their relevance for a global description of Flower Communion's history and principle, other references are also used in this paper, such as an explanation of Čapek's interest in symbolism, his notion of the "living Bible," and so on.

## THE STORY OF FLOWER COMMUNION

The tradition of Flower Communion started in 1923 in the Unitarian Church in Prague.<sup>1</sup> It was the time when the Prague Unitarian congregation was becoming the largest Unitarian church in the world. The founder of the Church was Norbert Fabian Čapek<sup>2</sup> (1870-1942), and the Flower Communion was his contribution as well.

Having a background in both theology and philosophy, Čapek became involved in the religious revival of the Czechoslovak Republic. He published several books and gave hundreds of public lectures. The very core of his teaching was the emphasis on fellowship and conscience. Čapek was convinced of the high potential of humanity's development. Working together as a community in the direction of religious revival and the development of human potentials was the main task and mission of Czech Unitarianism.

Čapek had felt that people in the Church needed a symbolic ritual that would bind them more closely together; however, because most of the Church members had atheist backgrounds, this ritual had to be one that would be accessible to anybody. The differences in people's religious backgrounds should not be an issue; the priority was to emphasize our common identity – our human identity – and the presence of God, who gives life to all of us.

The Flower Communion became this ritual. Čapek introduced this special service to the Church on June 4, 1923. It is possible that Čapek was familiar with or inspired by the "Service for Flower Sunday," the "Flower service," or other similar services of American

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<sup>1</sup> The original name of the Church was "Svobodne Bratrstvi" (Free Brotherhood, and internationally the "Liberal Religious Fellowship"). It was replaced in 1930 by the "Nabozenska Spolecnost Ceskoslovenskych Unitaru" (The Religious Society of Czechoslovak Unitarians).

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced Chah-peck.

Unitarians and other Christians from the 19th and early 20th century.<sup>3</sup> These services, however, lack the main aspect characteristic for Čapek's service – the notion of people's unity symbolized by flowers in one vase or basket. Therefore, the credit for the invention of the Flower Communion as it is known and used today, needs to be given only to Čapek himself. The order of the first Flower Communion service in Čapek's congregation in Prague was as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- \* Prelude (entering the sanctuary, people placed their flowers in the basket)
- \* Reading
- \* Hymn
- \* Čapek's sermon
- \* Interlude (two children from the Sunday School brought the basket with flowers to the platform)
- \* Prayer (following which Čapek walked over to the flowers and with one hand consecrated them)
- \* Hymn (children carried the flowers back to where they originally were)
- \* Postlude (participants slowly left, walking toward and by the basket, each taking a flower)

The first Flower Communion service was received with great appreciation. Čapek's form of a simple and pure ritual was found truly meaningful and powerful and as such, it was accepted by every congregation in the nation. From that time on it has been held every year by all Czech Unitarian communities (except in times of difficulties).

After the Second World War, the Flower Communion also became a commemoration of Čapek's tragic death. Čapek devoted himself completely to the building of the Unitarian church. After the German invasion he had the opportunity to leave the country – he was invited to transfer to ministry in the USA. Čapek however, decided to stay and continue in his ministry in Czechoslovakia. For his ideals he gave his life in the concentration camp in Dachau, in 1942.

The Flower Communion was found meaningful in other countries as well. It was partly because of Čapek well-maintained international connections and his reputation, but also because of the effort of his wife Maja. Maja Čapek<sup>5</sup> (1888-1956) lived in the USA before the First World War, where she met and married Norbert Čapek. She was Čapek's companion in building of the Czech Unitarian Church. She came to the USA again in 1940, and had to stay because of the Second World War. She introduced the Flower Communion to the First Parish Church in Cambridge in 1940, as a "program for both the old and the young, so adapted to carry the message of fidelity and devotion to all united in the fellowship of the church to God, and to symbolize the communion with the brethren abroad."<sup>6</sup>

Another bridge to introducing the Flower Communion abroad was the First

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Unity Festivals* (Chicago: Western Unitarian Sunday School Society, 1884), 9-15; Edward A. Horton, *A Book of Song and Service for Sunday School and Home* (Boston: Unitarian Sunday-School Society, 1895), 42-46.

<sup>4</sup> According to an anonymous pamphlet (available in the library at M/L under the number .C170, Pamphlet File).

<sup>5</sup> Her maiden name was Maja Veronika Oktavec.

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous pamphlet, 9.

Unitarian Church in Brooklyn, which had a direct connection with Czechoslovakia because one of the members, Charlotte Garrigue, married Tomas Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. The Brooklyn Unitarians decided to hold Flower Communion first in 1948. Karel Haspl, Čapek's successor, wrote to John H. Lathrop, the minister of the First Church in 1948:<sup>7</sup>

You do not know how happy we all are to learn that you plan to have a Flower Communion Service on June 6, for on that day we also shall hold our service, and it will be the 26th anniversary of the first service [Flower Communion] held here in Prague by Dr. Čapek. . . . Dr. Čapek realized the need for symbolism in religion, but felt keenly a need for new symbols. . . . flowers, the gift of God; there has never been war or oppression made with flowers. We give them to the bride and to our dead; we give them whenever we wish to express love and sympathy. . . . We shall be thinking of you . . . on June 6.

The Flower Communion eventually became commonly used in various forms and with diverse accents in the USA, England, Canada, and other countries. In order to find what is or is supposed to be a connecting tie, Čapek's original form of the Flower Communion needs to be examined.

The tradition of Flower Communion had its roots in Čapek's ideal of harmony among people – learning “the great art of living” and living together in their fellowships; fellowships are seen, in this regard, “as the same thing for a city as conscience is for a person.”<sup>8</sup> Regularly held Flower Communions directly dealt with the standard and ideal of behavior and mutual relationships, as it was taught by Čapek (and later other ministers) in his sermons. Thus, the Flower Communion was one of the characteristic and crucial components of Čapek's mission and cannot be observed separately from the main focus of Čapek's theological system.

In his works Čapek often balances the movement's presupposed identity between reaction against conservative tendencies and an independent action. The theological treatment and explanation of the purpose of the Church's existence was defined very much in terms of the description, “what we do NOT believe.” One of the basic problems was, as in the cases of other similar movements, how to define the movement's identity if its ideological foundation is supposed to be pluralism, and the freedom of an individual's reasoning and reflecting is guaranteed.

Čapek, nevertheless, defines the theology of the Church: God is both transcendent and immanent; God is manifested in human practical activity, especially if one knows how to keep one's good mood and optimism. God works through people's understanding of their total responsibility and awareness of the necessity of their practical deeds toward the development and improvement of themselves and their world. It is necessary for each individual to be fully responsible for his or her life instead of searching for an external determining authority. One must consider one's own situation in order to learn how to live a healthy life in both religious and psychological terms. Also, one needs to consider the broader situation of humanity with a view toward the continuous improvement of society's living conditions through social changes. People are responsible for their environment and even for the whole of creation and nature.

The main task and purpose of the Flower Communion was to sustain Čapek's

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in: Olive Hoogenboom, *The First Unitarian Church of Brooklyn: One Hundred Fifty Years* (New York: The First Unitarian Church, 1987), 238.

<sup>8</sup> From the diary of N.F. Čapek.

theology. Čapek offers his own explanation:<sup>9</sup>

We have chosen flowers, nature's most tender, common, and beautiful gift, as our symbol and sacrament.

A flower is divine. You cannot create it whatever effort you make. [You] can create only a dead forgery without fragrance and life, nothing more.

What is supposed to be expressed in our . . . symbol, our sacrament?

1. Each of us is symbolized in a flower.
2. Flowers together in a vase symbolize fellowship, our commonality.
3. The way how we brought and carried away the flowers symbolizes voluntarism, freedom.
4. When you leave this meeting, in peace and without rush, each of you take a blossom out of the bunch of flowers without choosing as a sign that [you] do not pick who [you] want to accept as brother and sister.

We strive to create an atmosphere that is positive to spiritual growth. Any who would come for different purpose would feel that [this place] is not their home; they would be like a faded flower that nobody wants.

The last words about the "faded flower" seem somewhat contradictory to the whole point of the Flower Communion's message. If Čapek's comment is further developed, it implies that the participants "do not pick" who is going to be their brother and sister, as long as these potential brothers and sisters possess certain characteristics, such as in this case an interest in "spiritual growth." This contrast well illustrates Čapek's system which, on one hand, was generously tolerant and, on the other hand, tolerant only to the individuals who accepted Čapek's progressive teaching based on his proclamation of harmony of religion with science.

Nevertheless, at other places it seems to be clear that the ideal is really a pure unity (or a spiritual unity) of all, without further discussion. For instance, the hymn "Kvetinova" (The flower song), written by Čapek specially for the occasion of Flower Communion, stresses an uncompromised equality of people, both participating members of the Church and all others. All of the people's diversity, symbolized in the flowers' dissimilarity, is just another necessary part of their equality:<sup>10</sup>

(1) I see myself in you, God's blossom, when my spirit plunges into your being. [You are] specially free, freely special; [you are] your maker's living poem.

Chorus: You are the symbol of brotherly beautiful love next to all other blossoms in the timely vase. There are no barriers here, everybody is each others; the harmony of souls unites them in one.

(2) And in every blossom the others are connected; all are dear and holy to all. If I take one I welcome all in it; I count them as related in God's spirit. [Chorus]

(3) Let every blossom be a monument of love; give life to brotherly ties in [Your] mind in order for the fragrance of tenderness [and] impulses from You caresses the soul like the breeze from the sky. [Chorus]

Čapek and later other ministers often contrasted the Flower Communion with rituals practiced by other religions, primarily from the Christian tradition. It is always emphasized that the Flower Communion is supposed to be a modest celebration in which there are not

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<sup>9</sup> N.F. Čapek, "Kvetinova" (The flower celebration), *Cesty a Cile* vol. II, (1924): 99.

<sup>10</sup> *Pisne Nabozenske Spolecnosti Ceskoslovenskych Unitaru* (Hymns of the Religious Society of Czechoslovak Unitarians) (Praha: Nabozenska Spolecnost Ceskoslovenskych Unitaru, 1950), 102.

involved any magic, mysterious, or supernatural powers or beings. Instead, there is a fairly transparent and simple symbol which was developed for a special purpose – to emphasize the need of human mutual understanding, empathy, sharing, and forgiveness. In Čapek's understanding, Christian symbols are supposed only to symbolize the commonality of faith and life. As often, he describes his opinion with somewhat bitter humor:<sup>11</sup>

We did not establish the beautiful symbol of Lord's Supper despite the fact that it has been practiced by all churches except Quakers. [We did not establish it] first because there is different meaning put into it than that was there originally, that is to say, appeasing God by innocently shed blood instead of devoted love and spiritual commonality. Secondly, [we did not establish it] because modern science discovered microbes. It was found out how many thousands [of microbes] are, after several uses, on every centimeter of the edge of the chalice. For that reason many churches introduced individual little cups so that every participant uses one's cup only. However, it is not a symbol of commonality anymore. The Catholic Church established one chalice from which one person drinks on behalf of all. This is certainly more hygienic but it has remained the symbol of a capitalist society where often one enjoys wealth that has been taken from multitudes. Therefore we established the symbol of flowers because under this symbol, as far as we know, blood has never been shed and brothers have not gone to murder their brothers.

Flower Communion is still a religious communion in a real sense, but open to anybody. People are not asked where they come from, what their religious background is. They are asked – they ask themselves – to learn compassion, to share, to forgive. In this principle of emphasized universality of human nature, the Flower Communion touches the same ideal mentioned by Louis Pasteur: "One does not ask of one who suffers: 'What is your country and what is your religion?' One merely says: 'You suffer, this is enough for me, you belong to me and I shall help you'."

It was not only the Flower Communion where the symbol of flowers was used. Flowers became the most widely used symbol of Czech Unitarianism. The natural and mysterious beauty of flowers expresses the Divine creativity and magic process of life from the beginning, through the blossoming, toward the end. The symbol of flowers is also used in the symbol of the Religious Society of Czech Unitarians.

Symbolism has played a very important role in Czech Unitarianism. Čapek and later other ministers were aware of human's need of symbols and other elements of psychological support. However, Čapek proclaimed from the very beginning a simple but strict rule that in the Church no rituals are supposed to be appropriated from other churches or traditions; instead, the Church should sustain "living symbols" – the process of creating, renewing symbols as well as constant replacing of any that became obsolete if it has become obsolete. The Church is supposed to sustain this process of continuous renewal strictly according to members' needs.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The message contained in the basic notion of Flower Communion points directly to the basic character of human nature: people's unique diversity and their unity, since all of them share the common gift of life through the same principle of "creation," and also

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<sup>11</sup> N.F. Čapek, "Obecenství Věry a Života" (Commonality of faith and life), *Cesty a Cile* vol. XV (1937): 33-34.

<sup>12</sup> This is described at many places; see, for instance, my translation of N.F. Čapek, *Nova Brazda* (The new furrow) (Praha: Unitaria, 1925), question 69.

equality before God.

The Flower Communion is used especially because of its emphasis on a non-elitist approach to addressing traditional ideological questions and problems that have to be present in any kind of human society. In Flower Communion the "truth," as a disclosure of reality, is contained and described in a pluralistic way without being discriminating. The Flower Communion's message, because of its simplicity and clarity, is open to reinterpretation and stays rich and colorful.

TEXTS USED:

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