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### **A Visit from Francis Dávid**

Good morning! Thank you for inviting me here to speak with you. In American Unitarian Universalist circles, you know me as “Francis David.” But in Hungarian, my name is Dávid Ferencz. I was a preacher and bishop in Transylvania, and I am the person most responsible for establishing Unitarianism in that land, where it exists to this day, some 450 years later.

When you hear Transylvania spoken of, you probably think mostly of vampires. But there is much more to Transylvania than that! As the name suggests, it sits at a crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, and it has repeatedly been overrun by different conquerors and rulers over the centuries. The Romans conquered it in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century of the common era. Today’s nation of Romania, of which Transylvania is now a part, takes its name from the Roman conquest. Subsequently, the land was overrun by various armies that Western Europeans called “barbarians,” primarily the Goths and the Huns. Legend has it that when Attila’s Huns retreated from their wars in Western Europe, some of them settled in the foothills of Transylvania. They were known as “Szekeleys,” and their descendants form the bulk of present-day Transylvanian Unitarians. The Szekeleys are related to the Magyars, another group of invaders, who eventually settled in Hungary. They shared a common language, which would eventually become Hungarian. At various times, Transylvania was under the rule of the Ottoman Turks, and up until the First World War, it was a part of Hungary.

Transylvania is a beautiful land, bounded by the snow-capped Carpathian Mountains to the North and other mountain ranges to the south. It is a heavily forested land, with grand and beautiful scenery. Today, its inhabitants live and farm much as they did 450 years ago, in small villages, working cooperatively. Some of your Unitarian Universalist congregations have partner churches in Transylvania, located in villages that are mostly, or entirely, Unitarian.

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So how did Unitarianism come to grow in Transylvania, and what was my role in all that? Let me tell you that story. I was born in 1510 in Kolozsvar, which has served for many centuries as the cultural center of Transylvania. (Transylvanians still know it as Kolozsvar, but the majority Romanians now call it Kluj.) This was, of course, a time of great intellectual and religious ferment. Europe had been under the Roman Catholic church, but the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, when I lived, was the time of the Reformation, in which people began to break away from the rule of the church. It was also, of course, the beginning of what is now known as “the Enlightenment.” Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenburg in 1517, while I was in my childhood. Michael Servetus and John Calvin were born at almost exactly the same time I was. Servetus published his famous book, “On the Errors of the Trinity,” in 1531, and he was burned at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva in 1553 for having dared to attempt to debate Calvin on the subject of the Trinity.

After my education to become a Catholic priest, I served as rector of a church school, and a few more years as a parish priest. But the winds of reformation thinking were blowing through the land, and my own restless mind continued to question

religious teachings. I was influenced by the writings of Servetus and Erasmus. Many local priests were beginning to accept protestant teachings, and in 1555, I became a Lutheran. I was called to be minister of the great church in Kolozsvár, and I would remain there for the rest of my life, even though I would continue to change in my thinking and my denominational affiliations. I soon became bishop for all Transylvanian Lutherans. There was constant debate among the various religious groups, and I debated fervently against the Calvinists about the meaning of the communion ritual. These theological questions were of utmost importance to me; I was forever open to new ideas, and eventually I became convinced that the Calvinist position was correct. I resigned as Lutheran bishop and soon became a leader among the Reformed Church of the Calvinists..

Transylvania was unique in its acceptance of religious diversity during this period. Remember that people were being tortured and killed all over Europe for challenging established doctrine, whether Protestant or Catholic. Yet, in Transylvania, in 1557, a royal edict guaranteed tolerance to Lutherans and to Catholics. At this time, Transylvania was ruled by a young king, John Sigismund. I came to his attention and to that of his court physician, who had Unitarian leanings. I was appointed as preacher to the royal court and as bishop of the Reformed Church. I was at the height of my influence – I was well-versed in scripture and able to win any debate with other clerics. Soon, the king issued another edict of toleration, this time extending guarantees to the Calvinists.

Even as I attained these victories, I continued to explore philosophy and theology; I continued to examine questions of doctrine; and I continued to try to puzzle out the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Most Christians of this time worshipped -- and prayed to -- Jesus Christ. How, I wondered, could there be more than one god-head? I was well-versed in the Bible, and I knew that the concept of the Trinity was nowhere found in scripture. And so, I began to preach against the Trinitarian doctrine. I argued that God must be one, and this would become the slogan of our Unitarian movement -- in Hungarian, "Egy az Isten," (*Edge Oz Eeshten*) mean, literally, "God is One." Well, of course these ideas were not well-received by the other religious groups. The king believed that religious disputes should be aired in public debates, and many of these were held over the next few years. I was busy writing, and preaching, and engaging in these public disputations. Despite the fervor of my Unitarian thinking, I always advocated strict freedom of conscience. We Unitarians never tried to establish supremacy for our beliefs, but merely acceptance of our right to hold them and to preach them. In 1568, I wrote the following to King John Sigismund:

There is no greater piece of folly than to try to exercise power over conscience and soul, both of which are subject only to their creator.

This point of view found sympathy with the King. In the City of Torda, at a legislative session, or Diet, I made a strong plea for religious toleration. The painting reproduced on the cover of your order of service depicts the scene at the Diet of Torda. In response, to my argument, the King issued an edict strengthening his earlier proclamations of religious tolerance. This new edict reaffirmed

That in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well and good, if not, no one

shall compel them, for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep the preacher they prefer. . . . and no one shall be made to suffer on account of his religion, . . .

This edict is the Magna Carta of religion in Transylvania, and it deserves to be remembered as a golden moment in Unitarian history. During the same period, the inquisition was killing thousands to try to crush Protestantism in Spain and Italy; People were being put to death for their beliefs in the Netherlands and in France. And for another 40 years, deniers of the Trinity would be burned alive in England.

Shortly after this edict, hoping to put an end to the controversy over the Trinity, the king convened a religious synod in the great hall of the palace. For ten days, before a throng of nobles and ministers, we debated. I, of course took the Unitarian side against the Calvinists and Lutherans. There was no formal decision, but I feel it is safe to say that the debate was widely regarded as a total victory for the Unitarians. When I returned home to Kolozsvár, news of the victory had preceded me, and I was greeted by cheering throngs. The crowds forced me to stop, and I climbed on top of a boulder and began to preach to them about Unitarian thinking. They received this word with great enthusiasm, and soon they carried me on their shoulders to the church, where I went on with my sermon. (You can still see that boulder, I am told, now located in the vestry of the church in Kolozsvár). From that day on, the entire population of Kolozsvár became Unitarians, or so it is said. At any rate, Kolozsvár would remain a Unitarian city for many years. And in this same year, 1568, I became a bishop for the third time, this time of the Unitarian churches, of which there were soon more than 300. At this time the king also openly accepted the Unitarian faith, the first and only instance in history of a Unitarian king on the throne and a Unitarian government in power.

Still, however, we insisted on equal rights and privileges for all. In 1571, the king established equality of the four major religions – Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, and Unitarian. Unfortunately, the very day after issuing this edict, King John Sigismund was killed in a hunting accident at the age of 30. And that would prove to be the high water mark for Unitarianism. From then on, Unitarianism would be persecuted and attacked once again, even though it would survive and flourish for another 450 years -- and counting. The new prince was a Catholic and he was determined to check the spread of Unitarianism. He brought the Jesuits back into the country to restore religious order. Many influential people tried to get me to keep quiet on this point to avoid prosecution. But I could not. For me it was a matter of conscience. I was old and weak by this point, but I was not about to change my preaching in order to save myself. My very last sermon was given at the church in Kolozsvár in 1579. In it, I warned the people about the repression that was coming, and I defended Unitarian doctrine fiercely. I declared that worshipping Christ was no better than worshipping the Virgin Mary and the saints. "Whatever the world may say," I concluded, "it must some time become clear that God is but one."

The prince had me arrested and tried. I was found guilty and I was sentenced to be imprisoned in the castle at Deva. Today, visitors can climb a mountain trail to what remains of the Castle, and they can see the drafty, lonely cell in which I was imprisoned. My health was poor, and I did not survive long in these conditions.

**[PAUSE]**

And so ends the story of my struggles, but perhaps not the questions. Today, you have a relative degree of religious freedom, and certainly no one in America is subject to being persecuted and imprisoned for his or her beliefs. So what was it that motivated those of us who were willing to die for our beliefs during these turbulent years? I spent my life searching out the meaning and purpose of things. The changes in my beliefs were simply phases in my theological growth and development, always moving in a consistent direction. And I was not a person who could believe one thing in my heart, but keep silent about it in the pulpit. I knew that I had to be faithful to the truth as I saw it; I had to be faithful to my own beliefs. And my beliefs were such that I would feel very much at home among you today. I believed in using my power of reason to analyze religious doctrine, and I was always open to amending my beliefs when I was persuaded by a new perspective.

Your own Universalist, Olympia Brown, one of the first women to be ordained in America, once wrote:

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith,  
which has placed before us the highest ideals.

“Stand by this faith” – Yes! A Unitarian movement had begun. After our doctrinal debates, more and more Transylvanians became Unitarians. And within a few years, there were more than 300 Unitarian ministers, serving congregations throughout Transylvania. Stand by this faith – yes! We had started something important – we had struggled for religious tolerance in a time of great ferment. And we had demonstrated the importance of free and open discussion of religious ideas. As I once wrote:

In this world, there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation.

We do not need to think alike to love alike.

Remember the words of Conrad Wright, which accompanied our chalice lighting. Our congregations are bound together not by a common belief, but by a covenant to walk together into the mysteries,

- Respecting diversity,
- Learning from each other,
- And vigorously discussing the issues that confront us.

You, here in America, are the heirs of this great tradition of free-thinking and religious tolerance. As we did 450 years ago, you honor the worth and dignity of every person, even as you respect the web of interdependence that binds us together in community.

In our movement, we have the strength to transform lives; to spread a ministry based on compassion and love. Together, we have the strength to change the world! Stand by your faith! Stand by your community, support it, build it, cherish it!