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Religious life in Northern Dobrogea (1878-1918)

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
1. The Lower Danube Diocese and the Deanery of Tulcea	15
1.1. Lower Danube Bishops	18
1.1.1. Bishop Melchisedec Ștefănescu.....	20
1.1.2. Bishop Iosif Gheorghian	26
1.1.3. Bishop Partenie Clinceni.....	29
1.1.4. Bishop Pimen Georgescu	35
1.1.5. Bishop Nifon Niculescu	40
1.2. The Diocese Chancellery	46
1.3. Spiritual an appellatory consistory	55
1.4. Tulcea Deanery.....	59
1.4.1. Archpriest Gh. Rășcanu	59
1.4.2. Archpriest Nicolae Gheorghiu	65
1.4.3. Archpriest Ioan Grigorescu.....	68
1.4.4. Archpriest Gh. V. Niculescu	70
1.4.5. Archpriest Emanoil Bogatu.....	73
1.5. Parishes of the Tulcea Deanery	76
2. Churces, cemiteries and trustees of the Nothern-Dobrogea churces.....	89
2.1. Founders, craftsmen and churches	89
2.2. The church festivals.....	105
2.3. Equipping churches with religious books and religious objects	120
2.4. Painters, sculptors and iconographic material	142
2.5. Cemiteries.....	152
2.6. Church trustees	161
2.6.1. The problem of laymen clergy of the church trustees.....	162
2.6.2. The laws of laymen clergy of the church trustees from 1893 and 1906.....	166
2.6.3. Parishes income and expenditure	173
3. Aspects of the religious feeling	184
3.1. Church attendance by the faithful.....	184
3.2. Religious instruction of the laity	190
3.3. Prescribed religion – lived religion	215
3.4. Fasting	224
3.5. Sacraments.....	229

3.5.1.	Sacrament of Baptism and the anointing with the Holy Chrism	230
3.5.2.	Sacrament of Confession and the Sacrament of Communion.....	238
3.5.3.	Sacrament of Marriage and civil marriage.....	244
3.5.4.	Sacrament of Priesthood	263
3.5.5.	Sacrament of Holy Unction	269
3.6.	Popular piety - cult icons and places of pilgrimage	270
4.	The priest and the Christian community	276
4.1.	Servants of the church altars in 1880	276
4.2.	Intellectual formation of priests in North Dobrogea	294
4.3.	The image of the priest in communities of North Dobrogea.....	318
4.4.	Church lands and revenues	330
4.5.	Priests, monks and church singers during World War I.....	354
4.5.1.	Years before Romania entered the war	354
4.5.2.	Temporary occupation of enemy troops	364
4.5.3.	Priests and church singers in retreat.....	373
5.	Monasteries of Northern Dobrogea	379
5.1.	Cocoş Monastery	379
5.1.1.	Short history	379
5.1.2.	Hieromonks of the Cocoş monastery, parish ministers of the diocese	398
5.1.3.	Housekeeping of Cocoş Monastery (1904-1916)	406
5.2.	Celic Dere Monastery.....	427
5.2.1.	Short history	427
5.2.2.	Spiritual elders and ministers monastery altars.....	439
5.2.3.	Tichileşti Hermitage.....	445
5.2.4.	Nuns occupations and the schools from Celic	447
5.3.	Saunu Hermitage	456
	Conclusions	464
	References	472
I.	Unpublished sources.....	472
II.	Published sources	475
III.	Press.....	478
IV.	Books, studies, articles	481

List of abbreviations.....	496
List of Figures	497

Volume 2. APPENDIX

Appendix Nr. 1. Churches and priests from Tulcea Deanery (1878-1918).....	2
Appendix Nr. 2. The names of localities in Tulcea county over time	146
Appendix Nr. 3. General Statistics of the clergy of the deanery Tulcea May 3, 1880 .	149
Appendix Nr. 4. Urban and rural parishes of Tulcea Deanery in 1888	156
Appendix Nr. 5. Urban and rural parishes of Tulcea Deanery in 1900	157
Appendix Nr. 6. Urban and rural parishes of Tulcea Deanery in 1909	166
Appendix Nr. 7. Urban and rural parishes of Tulcea Deanery in 1910	173
Map of Tulcea County (1928).....	174

Keywords: churches in Northern Dobrogea, church attendance, patrons, the image of the priest, religious instruction, pilgrimage places, Cocoş monastery, Celic monastery, Saunu monastery, Tulcea deanery, lived religion, sacraments, religious feeling.

In the period following the unification of Dobrogea with Țara until the First World War, the whole land between the Danube and the Sea lives intensely in a fast pace, moment by moment, the process of deep changes required by both the measures taken to integrate the province in the Romanian state, and also by the requirements of modernization. It's a hectic time fueled by the winds of change, when the old world sets and a new one is reborn, when the law is struggling with old habits and the true religion uproots pagan tradition, when appropriate.

The first chapter briefly introduces the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Lower Danube Diocese and the most important administrative steps it went through. Given the important role of bishops in the religious life of a diocese, I presented briefly the duties of these bishops and the canon imposed by the divine right and I brought into light both the personality of the bishops who shepherded the diocese of Lower Danube in the studied period, and their notable achievements. From researching archival documents I reconstituted the composition of the Chancelleries in the Lower Danube Diocese and the duties of each

function separately. Following the model of other dioceses in the country, moving Dobrogea under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Lower Danube Diocese, in the two counties of Tulcea and Constanța a deanery was established headed by one archpriest helped in administration matters by a sub-archpriest, both appointed by the bishop of the place in agreement with the Minister of Religious Affairs. Due to the fact that the image of these archpriests of Tulcea is lesser known based on archival documents and legal provisions and regulations in different time periods, I highlighted the complexity of their work in overseeing the parishes in the county, their personality and notable accomplishments. Particular attention was paid to the study of the parishes of Tulcea, being the center of the local religious life, the territory within which its parishioners lived their everyday life with its most significant events. I followed from the beginning, step by step, the transition from traditional church organization in which each Christian community had its church and its priest, to the parish constituency system in which several churches formed together a parish under the authority of a parish priest.

The radiography of the sacred space of the church in Northern Dobrogea taken in the second chapter of this paper allowed us to penetrate the world of itinerant craftsmen, construction entrepreneurs and local craftsmen. Church founders were mostly ordinary people who, for example, remembering the poor widow parable joined their efforts and raised for glory the holy places. Mentioned with praise in church services and invoked in the prayers of Christians, the saints have always occupied an important place in the religious life of the community. Choosing the patron saint was often done based on his virtues and his sacrifice, but sometimes, as shown in section 2.2 of the paper, the choice of the saint had a hidden motive linked to certain events that marked the community. The patronage celebration remains even today the most popular of holidays around which the Christian life is ordered. Celebrated annually, these celebrations of collective piety keep alive the link with the Christian tradition, the ancestors of the village and the history of the place, which facilitates starting from a known event, regressive research of the past.

Equipping churches in Northern Dobrogea with objects of worship, liturgical vestments and holy books needed for religious services, as I found out, was done in time with humility and piety. Live books illustrate the many moral facts to be followed by Christians on the way of salvation, their icons and notes tell us of the histories experienced by the community, the pious Christians, with their joys and tragedies that are in part mentioned in this paper. Also in the second chapter, I compiled a short history of the North Dobrogea cemeteries, sacred sites for Christians, highlighting the changes that they have undergone while under the pressure of

sanitary regulations. Studying accounting documents found in a few rural parishes, gave me the opportunity to present the evolution of the legal framework for the trustees of the church, of how some of them were effectively formed and operated, with site specific issues, but also with the possibility of recreating glimpses of the religious life of the communities.

In the early twentieth century decline of religious fervor was evident. I tried to answer the question that many priests were posing in those days "that is really the cause?" in a separate section allocated to religious sentiment (Chapter 3). I have shown that on one hand, the sermons were not always uplifting, the songs failed to move hearts, services were too long, and on the other hand, the teachers didn't bring the students to the church, innkeepers closed their establishments on Sunday only formally while the priests were preaching in church and local authorities were not a good Christian example for the villagers. Regarding building religious sentiment I concluded that the church through its ministry, as far as the times will permit, will be actively involved, either by preaching moral parables in the pulpit or by guiding the first steps of children in primary school to the true faith. But first notions of religion and the first prayers were taught to children in their homes, by their mothers. In the same chapter, by highlighting the polarity of prescribed religion and religion lived, I have concluded that they are two distinct forms of culture to be seen as a gift given by creation to people and community. Also in this chapter, I showed the role, the place and importance of the seven sacraments through which the grace of God was called upon, both in religious life and in the family and social life of Christians. The relations, rich in spiritual meanings, which are established in this way from birth and baptism, to the last communion and unction reveal the essential aspects of religious sentiment which require contemplation, reverence and respect. Studying this chapter will introduce the reader into a world unique and singular, a world of religious feelings and at the same time a world of rituals and prayers, whose meaning is inexhaustible.

Based on the information gathered from archives and historical documents in Chapter 4 I expanded on the knowledge of the North Dobrogea church altar servants during the Ottoman rule, who also served after 1878, highlighting their training level, place of birth, how they were ordained, their outstanding achievements in the pastoral community and the development of their professional and family life. In the same chapter, I introduced briefly the history of the development of theological education in the country, syllabuses used and how teaching was done in seminars. I also made a short history of the Ismail seminary of the Lower Danube diocese, which moved in 1878 in Galați, indicating subjects taught over time, seminary professors and graduates who were ordained priests on behalf of Tulcea deanery

churches; I also introduced the measures imposed by the diocesan bishops for continuous improvement of training priests. In terms of intellectual formation, we can conclude that for most priests of the country, their culture sprang more from the verses of religious books rather than books and magazines recommended by the Holy Synod.

Next I observed how the image of the priest was formed in the community, the bishop's normative endeavors and community perceptions about the ministers of the altar. I demonstrated that the eternal conflict between old and young priests could be overcome where both cared for their holy mission, which is to serve inside the church and outside if they are called, to have mercy on the needy from which one cannot ask for a reward and be an example of good behavior for Christians. In this chapter, I presented the land regime in Dobrogea, including those belonging to the church and the sources of income for priests, concluding that the only hope for improving the daily life for the large families of the village priests remained for a long time the working of the land. In the same chapter I unveiled the image of Northern Dobrogea clergy during World War I, which was always among the people either raising prayers in churches to quench the wrath, or offering peace and spiritual solace to those left behind, either raising the morale of the soldiers on the front line or of those who were suffering in campaign hospitals.

In the last chapter, I reconstituted a significant part of the history of monasteries and monastic life in Cocoșu, Saun and Celic, highlighting the important role that these establishments had in Dobrogea Orthodox Christian life, both as a place of prayer and assembly and as a place of learning the truth useful for life and salvation of the soul. Also in this chapter, I showed the distinguished service to the Christian community by hieromonks of monastery Cocoșu, hieromonks which being used to isolate and simple life sometimes served as parish priests in sparse settlements in Dobrogea Plateau or in the isolated delta settlements which were bypassed for years by the parish priests. During the studied period, especially during Pimen and Nifon dioceses, monasteries had notable progress: instead of old churches and hermitages built with lightweight materials, new buildings made of stone and bricks were raised, crop land was expanded, agricultural inventory was developed and modernized, new varieties of plants were introduced as well as vineyards and orchards and the practice of sericulture, schools and workshops were set up, useful not only to monasteries, but also to residents from neighboring villages. Monasteries need to sell surplus agricultural products, and to buy other products needed by the congregation as well as agricultural tools or manpower, placed the North Dobrogea establishments in the economic cycle of the country; creating this way new relationships with the world outside, the world of merchants, craftsmen,

laborers, and civil state; the economic activity in the area was boosted; new avenues of communication were opened that linked monasteries with nearby villages, also facilitating massive forest exploitation etc.

In this doctorate thesis I aimed to highlight and bring to the surface the most important information about religious life in Northern Dobrogea by studying documents found in the archives of the Diocese of Tulcea and the Archdiocese of the Lower Danube from Galați, from the National Archives (Tulcea county) and the archives of the researched parishes; really useful were synodic church documents and monographs written by parish priests, ritual notes on books, icons and other religious objects, texts of ancient holy books found in the researched parish libraries, inscriptions and photos found in the silent world of the cemeteries, less known publications found in Dobrogea libraries, iconographic material etc.

Unlike Dobrogea historical studies and articles published so far, which generally just give us some brief information about religious life in this part of the country, our research sought to outline a comprehensive picture of religious life in Northern Dobrogea. In addition, research has been directed mainly to the rural world, the space where the vast majority lived back then in Tulcea County, while taking into account the classification of the area and life here in a broader context as that of the Lower Danube Diocese and influences coming from the left of the Danube. Moreover, to help with understanding certain topics like the operation, organization and administrative structure of the bishopric and deanery, or how the churches were built and painted after 1878, or the church land regime, in this study we often refer to the legislation in force at the time, and explain how these laws, regulations and provisions were applied. In a mostly illiterate world, as was the rural world of Dobrogea, few are the testimonies of the silent dinners of the congregations, only a few notes in church registers and town hall, on religious objects donated or crosses in cemeteries. From this information, I tried to bring to life the villages in Northern Dobrogea, aiming in this work for both the historical, documentary aspect as well as the anthropological aspects.

The religious life of Christian communities in Northern Dobrogea has many stories waiting to be retrieved from forgotten corners; these are stories without which we cannot fully understand the feelings of those brave Christians, founders of settlements, and founders of churches.

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