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PhD THESIS

THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND POLITICS
DURING COMMUNISM: DYNAMICS OF THE PARISH AND
MONASTIC RELIGIOUS LIFE IN NORTHWEST
TRANSYLVANIA FROM 1948 TO 1989

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Summary

Contents

Introduction.....	2
Historiography	3
1. The Orthodox Churches from Eastern Europe under the Communist Regime	14
1.1. The Orthodox Church and its relationship with the state: Historic landmarks.....	14
1.2. Church and Communism	19
1.3. Communist doctrine and Religion	21
1.4. The Orthodox Churches from Eastern Europe and the Communist Regimes	26
1.4.1. The Orthodox Church in the USSR	26
1.4.2. The Serbian Orthodox Church	35
1.4.3. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church	37
1.4.4. The Albanian Orthodox Church	39
1.4.5. The Georgian Orthodox Church	40
1.4.6. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church	42
1.4.7. The Belarusian Orthodox Church	43
1.4.8. The Polish Orthodox Church	45
1.4.9. The Orthodox Church from The Republic of Moldavia	46
1.4.10. The Orthodox Church from the Baltic Countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania)	48
1.4.11. The Orthodox Church from the Czech Republic and Slovakia(former Czechslovakia)	48
1.4.12. The Romanian Orthodox Church.....	49
2. Monastic life in the Romanian Orthodox Eparchy Eparhia of Vadu, Feleac and Cluj during the Communist Regime.....	101
2.1. The Episcopacy of Vadu, Feleac and Cluj- brief historic presentation	101
2.2. Monastic life in the Archiepiscopacy of Vadu, Feleac and Cluj during the Communist Regime.....	121
2.2.1. “Saint Ana” Monastery Rohia	126
2.2.2. Nicula Monastery in the years 1948-1989	179
3. Parish life	190
3.1. Priest, parish, pastorate, mission in the local community throughout the Communist period	193
3.2. The Sermon and Catechesis in defending the right faith	203
3.3. The Orthodox Church and the Army of the Lord	210
3.4. Integration of the former Greek-Catholic churches in the organization of the Romanian Orthodox Church	213
3.5. The permanent preparation of priests	225
3.6. The priest and the local political power.....	231
3.7. Political topics in the clerical discourse.....	242
3.8. The construction of churches during the Communist Regime. Case studies: the Letca, Rodna, Runcu Salvei, Telcișor, Filpișul Mare parishes.....	262
Conclusions.....	289
Bibliography	294

Both Church and faith experienced, in the 20th century, oppression from a series of political regimes that saw in this institution an enemy, and in believers, foes of the new order. In this political context, many clergy and laity were persecuted and liturgical and pastoral life was restricted or prohibited. In Romania as well, after the Communist regime had come to power church life suffered, some of the clergy and laity being arrested, others monitored by the Secret Police (Securitate). Religion was banned from schools, many properties of the Church were confiscated and the activity of the Church was reduced only to officiating the church service. After 1948 The Romanian Orthodox Church was affected by this political context and had to find new methods to fulfill its mission of preaching the Gospel. After the fall of the Communist regime at the end of 1989, a series of research papers dedicated to the ecclesial life of the period appeared. This PhD thesis is also concerned with the recent history of the Church. As one can deduce from the title: *The Romanian Orthodox Church and politics during Communism: dynamics of the parish and monastic religious life in Northwest Transylvania from 1948 to 1989*, the thesis focuses on aspects concerned with how the parish and monastic life was conducted during the Communist regime. As far as the geographical area is concerned, we researched some monasteries (Rohia and Nicula) and some parishes from northwest Transylvania.

This thesis does not claim to be exhaustive, but shows only a fragment of life that can be taken as a paradigm for this region and beyond. An important role is that of the case studies which illustrate how some parishes and monasteries worked. The first chapter is a brief presentation of the history of the Churches in Eastern Europe during the Communist period. The second chapter is dedicated to the monastic life of the Diocese of Vad, Feleac and Cluj where two of the major monasteries in Transylvania, but also in the country, functioned: "Saint Ana" in Rohia and the Monastery of Nicula. These monastic hearths were places sought by the faithful for prayer and meditation. Rohia monastery was also a magnet for intellectuals. It is today famous for the fact that here the writer and former political prisoner Nicu Steinhardt became monk Nicolae and the poet Ioan Alexandru, who often visited it, found it to be a favorable place to meet God and Poetry. Although it is a monastery founded relatively recently - in 1923- it had a special role in the history of the Transylvanian Orthodox Church of the last century. Nicula Monastery has an even more complex history, being older and with a controversial history because of the existing, still unresolved, confessional disputes. Nicula is

known for its miraculous icon due to which many believers came - and still continue to come - to this place, especially on August 15, the celebration of its titular saint. That is why we focused on a few moments from the life of this monastery during the Communist regime, a place which was sought by Christians at that time.

The last chapter of the book is dedicated to the parish life during the Communist regime. Based on documentary sources, we revealed the relationship between priests and local authorities, the obstacles posed by the latter, the pastoral methods used by priests, as well as presenting several cases when new places of worship were built.

The research topic is related to the parish and monastic life in northwest Transylvania. To showcase some of the realities of the studied period we used as sources both publications of the time and interviews that we conducted with monks, bishops and churchgoers. The magazines we researched include *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, *Renașterea*, *Revista Teologică*, *Viața ilustrată*, *Tribuna Ardealului*. A major source in reconstructing the ecclesiastical history of the period is represented by the interviews with witnesses of the events of the Communist era. We used such oral accounts in this thesis. Some of these interviews have been published in the volumes *Convorbiri despre N. Steinhardt I, II* (Ed. Eikon, 2010; 2012) and the dialogues with His Holiness Justinian Chira have been published under the title “*Am ascultat de porunca Bisericii*”. *Arhiepiscopul Justinian Chira în dialog cu Călin Emilian Cira*, (Ed. Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2012.). Our belief is that they help for a better understanding of the personality of father Nicolae Steinhardt and also of the church life.

Other interviews have been published in magazines. These include: *O frază dacă o scrii de la tine, cu o frază înmulțești tezaurul unui popor, al unui neam. Interviu cu Înaltpreasfințitul Justinian Chira realizat de Călin Emilian Cira in Tabor*, Year VII, No.7, July 2013; *Topa Mică- satul lui Ioan Alexandru. Mărturii culese de Călin Emilian Cira in Tabor*, Year IV, no.11, February 2011; “*Ioan Alexandru a fost un apostol al Ortodoxiei*” interview with Sever Ursu by Călin Emilian Cira in *Tabor*, Year IV, Nr.11, February 2011 and others are unpublished, like the interview with Octavian Gherman, son of the founder of the monastery Rohia - priest Nicolae Gherman - and former political prisoner who spoke to us about the founder and builder of the monastery on Vine Hill; sister Ecaterina Ghiran, who told us her experience of convent life during the Communist period and how her life, and the lives of other monks, were affected by the Decree 410, and deacon Ilarion Mureșan who talked

about monastic life at the Nicula Monastery; father Giurgiuca Gabriel who managed to build a church in Codor, father Ioan Mureșan Danilă who built a new church in Letca, father Roșca Teodor who managed to build a church and a parish house in Filpișul Mare. We also conducted an interview with Livia Baba – daughter of father Contra Peter from Runcu Salvei – which includes information about her father, founder of the local parish church in which he served. Also about the church in Runcu Salvei we received information from Cilicia Leon, a churchgoer involved in the parish life.

Archival sources were also used in this thesis. We researched, at the archives of the National Council for Studying the *Securitate* Archives, documents about priests Ion Bunea and Liviu Galaction Munteanu who were arrested after drawing up a catechetical program, and the file of Father Serafim Man, former abbot of the Rohia monastery. We used documents from the Romanian Orthodox Archpriestship of Năsăud, a fund which is still under construction. Here we found acts emitted by the Romanian Patriarchate, the Diocese Vad, Feleac and Cluj and the subordinate parishes. Based on these documents, we tried to present the parish life, how the priests related to the state, the pastoral work in these parishes, the relationship with the other cults, the integration of former Greek Catholic parishes in the organization of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, entitled *The Orthodox Churches from Eastern Europe under the Communist Regime*, is an overview of how the Church related with the State. It also contains a brief history of the Churches during the Communist regimes in the Soviet Union, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the former Czechoslovakia and Romania. We insisted on the Romanian Orthodox Church ecclesial life because the present doctoral thesis is concerned with the monastic and parish life in an area located in Transylvania and which is canonically and jurisdictionally included in this Church. Chapter II, *Monastic life in the Romanian Orthodox Eparchy of Vad, Feleac and Cluj during the Communist Regime*, is dedicated to ecclesial life of this diocese. Here we made a brief historical overview of this diocese from the beginning until the fall of Communism. The following two subchapters are one on Rohia monastery and the other dedicated to Nicula monastery. Here we presented life at these two monastic hearts with an emphasis on what happened during the Communist period.

The last chapter - *Parish Life* - includes some aspects of how pastoral work was carried out in those times. The topics treated in the subsections describe how the liturgical and pastoral life were affected by the new political context, how the priests had to instruct churchgoers on issues related to agriculture and the agricultural campaign and urge them to join the associations and Collective Agricultural Association; peasants and other members of the “working class” were forced to work on holidays and on Sundays and priests in their sermons had to speak to the churchgoers about the “Colorado beetle eradication”, about fulfilling the quotas and the payment of the “self-imposition” tax, about the fight for peace and the friendship with the Soviet Union. We also presented the way the Church was affected by the regime by property confiscation and by the arrest of members of the clergy. Despite all these problems, priests were concerned with catechizing the faithful, with helping and serving. A subchapter was dedicated to the integration of former Greek Catholic parishes, after the dissolution of this Church in 1948, within the Romanian Orthodox Church's organizational framework. Building new churches was difficult and required a lot of energy and patience because of the political context. Despite the existing difficulties, in some places it was possible to build new places of worship, exemplified in this work by showing how in the parishes Letca, Rodna, Runcu Salvei, Codor, Filpiș new churches were built, as well as a chapel in Telcișor.

The thesis discusses fragments from the life of the Church, at the monastic and parish levels, from an era when faith could be exercised only in secret. The road to the place of worship and prayer was not closed but the cunning and harsh methods of the political regime constituted an invisible but felt barrier that did everything in its power to close it. Lie and blackmail, intimidation and denouncement were just some of the elements deployed by the political power that sowed fear and thereby suppressed liberty. Despite all odds, the Church made it through and fulfilled its service. Although sometimes compromises were necessary, the Church's faithful servants did not let themselves be overwhelmed by the difficulties thrown on them by an atheist regime and at no moment were they removed from the Truth.

keywords: Romanian Orthodox Church, Transylvania, parish, monastery, communism