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***Monsignor Octavian Bârlea  
or Another face of the Romanian United  
Church 1946-1978***

**OVERVIEW**

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I have structured the thesis in six chapters. In the first chapter I have attempted to set a few biographical references and to identify some of the formative itineraries completed by Msgr. Bârlea. I have presented his home village, his family and the first school years (1913-1930). I have paused on the seven years spent in Blaj as a student at the Theological Academy, as a pedagogue at the 'Bishop Vancea' boarding school and as a secretary *ad interim* at the Metropolitan Chancellery (1930-1937). Without a doubt, the places and the people he had met during this period have had their influence in shaping his personality. The decisive period, I believe to have been the next seven years (1938 – 1945), spent in Rome. He actually confesses this in his *Autobiography*, published in 1993. The influence of his professors Severien Salaville, Martin Jugie, Georg Hofman, Joseph Gill or Wilhelm de Vries had decisively put a mark on the historical and theological itinerary of the future prelate. The first two had guided him through the theological years at *Propaganda fide* (1937 – 1943) and towards choosing the subject of his first doctoral thesis, *De Confessione orthodoxa Petri Mohilae*. The others had guided him throughout the years of History studies at the Pontifical

Oriental Institute and had helped him choose the subject for his second doctoral thesis, *Ex historia romena: Joannes Bob, Episcopus Fagarasiensis (1783 - 1830)*.

The title I have chosen for Chapter II is '*De la carte la fapte*' [From book to action]. The title, not only that reiterates an expression used in his *Autobiography*, but it is also relevant for the actions undertaken in Germany and Austria, between the years 1945 – 1952. During these years, out of Msgr. Bârlea's historical and theological abstract studies, practical research had emerged. The period I have shown here is the least known of His Holiness's work. Although he had written only a few short articles in *Îndreptar* [Directory] and the chapter on *Biserica Română Unit între cele două războaie mondiale* [The Romanian United Church in between the two world wars] included in the volume *Biserica Română Unit. Două sute cincizeci de ani de istorie* [The Romanian United Church. Two hundred fifty years of History], this period had been spiritually bountiful, because it had made possible the embodiment of theology, due to the direct confrontation of the reality of the Romanian refugees. I have presented it through the posture of 'man of all' – expression used in his *Autobiography*. This posture hadn't been externalised only on a caritative field, but it had also passed onto a cultural and spiritual domain, through the publishing of the periodical *Îndreptar* and the publishing of the prayer book *Rânduială creştinească*. The guidance received from his professors back in Rome had been enriched by the influence of Gheorghe Racoveanu. The publication *Îndreptar* and the prayer compendium *Rânduială creştinească* are mainly a display of the friendship between Msgr. Bârlea and the former editor of *Cuvântul* [The Word].

The period between 1952 – 1968 has been highlighted in Chapter III. This period, ecclesiastically speaking, had been a difficult one, both for Msgr. Bârlea himself and for the Romanian United Church in exile. In spite of the fact that His Holiness had received the titles of *Monsignore* and *Cameriere segreto di Sua Santità* and that the Romanian United Church (R.U.C.) in exile had received an Apostolic Visitor, ranked as Bishop, in 1960, the dream of having in 'the free world' a true bishopric, headed by a bishop, couldn't be fulfilled. The wandering of His Holiness from Paris to Rome, and from Rome to Munich had been primarily due to this failure. The four sessions of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) had also taken place within the period I have presented here. The changes introduced by this Council in the Catholic Church had caused a *sense of crisis* for the Romanian United Church in exile. But, from a scientific point of view, the period between 1952 and 1968 had been particularly prosperous. In this period the *Homage to the Schools of Blaj (1754 – 1954)* had been published in Paris; in between these years the two volumes *Recueil Cardinal Eugène Tisserant. <<Ab Oriente et Occidente>>* had been printed in Louvain; also, the important

research *Die Union der Rumänen* (1697 – 1701) had been issued and in this period *The Romanian Academic Society* had been founded in Rome. Also, around this time, Msgr. Bârlea had conducted important research in the History Archives in Wien, Rome or Paris. Although he hasn't written, *Biserica r s ritean la încruci area imperiilor în secolul al XVIII-lea* [The Eastern Church at the Empire's crossing in the XVIII century], promised to Cardinal Tisserant, the research undertaken now had proven decisive for future studies.

Chapter IV presents the Romanian Academic Society (R.A.S.). Founded in Rome, in 1957, the R.A.S. had been, without a doubt, the most important cultural forum of the Romanian exile. As proof stand the three volumes of *Acta Philosophica et Theologica*, the eleven volumes of *Acta Historica*, the six volumes of *Acta Philologica* and the five volumes of *Acta Scientiarum Socialium*. To these will later be added the 27 editions of *Revista Scriitorilor Români* [The Romanian writers' paper] and the studies published in *Collana di studi e saggi*. This brings to more than 60 volumes. No other cultural institution in the former exile had reached such a performance. Its founder's intentions had been for R.A.S. to become not only a form of 'cultural resistance' against the communist regime in Romania, but also a meeting point for the two Romanian churches in order to restore full communion. According to Msgr. Bârlea, meeting on cultural grounds would have prepared the meeting on the theological ground. Vatican II had strengthened his conviction.

The year 1968 had brought a change in the life of Msgr. Bârlea. As he was about to obtain the title of *Doctor habilitatus* to enter professor at the University of Munich, he had unexpectedly been summoned in Rome as Director of the Romanian Section of Vatican Radio. The reasons for this change remain largely unclear. Based on scarce and fragmentary information available, the belief is that it had to do with what some historians had called Vatican's *Ostpolitik* [Vatican's Eastern Politics]. The period between 1968 – 1973 spent by Msgr. Bârlea in Rome as Director of the Romanian section of Vatican Radio had fallen during the pontificate of Paul VI. Are the years following Vatican II, when the boat of the Catholic Church had dangerously rocked about in all directions. *Ostpolitik* vatican is a consequence of this situation. Therefore, many historians had highlighted its 'limits'. They are best seen in R.U.C.'s situation, both the one back in the country and in exile. For R.U.C. in exile, Vatican's Eastern Politics breaking points have been at least 2: 1. It had led to the extinction of R.A.S. and 2. It had led to significant divergences within the group of the Romanian United priests. Subsequently, differences had been extended between Romanian United priests in the country and in exile. If today some bishops and priests express reluctance towards Msgr. Bârlea's work and personality, it is due to that.

In the last chapter I have presented His Holiness activity as Apostolic Visitor for the United Romanians in the U.S.A (1973 – 1977). It is the period over which most questions float. Many of them had to remain unanswered. His activity has been analysed from a missionary and cultural point of view. The fruits of his pastoral-missionary activity had been seen only in 1982 – 1983 – hence, during John Paul II's pontificate – by appointment and consecration of Louis Vasile Puca as Apostolic Exarch for the United Romanians in the U.S. In 1973 the first Visitor Apostolic canonical position had been quite unclear. The cultural activity had consisted in funding R.A.A. (Romanian – American Academy) in 1975 and the publishing of the bilingual (Romanian – English) volume *România si Românii* [Romania and Romanians]. The activity in the U.S. had been substantially completed with his visit to Romania, in March, 1977.

I have analysed the whole activity in the U.S.A. not only in the terms of ANCSSA (Archive of the National Council for the Study of Security Archives) documents, but also in terms of *Ostpolitik* vatican. We believe that this perspective has been necessary. It brings into question once again the risks of being a 'man of all', a posture embraced by Msgr. Bârlea along his lifetime activity. Seen only through the ANCSSA documents' perspective, Msgr. Bârlea appears as a 'political collaborator' and a 'traitor to the cause of the Greek-Catholic'. But viewed in the light of The Eastern Politics of the Vatican, he appears as a warrior priest for recovering a 'vital space, enough if not satisfactory' for his Church under persecution. We must admit that the first version had been shared by many Romanian united bishops and priests before and after 1989. We call but for the second. However, until we will obtain access to documentation sources, both possibilities remain open.

Throughout the thesis I have used the terms 'Romanian United Church' and 'united', and not the terms 'Greek-Catholic Church' and 'Greek-Catholics'. I have done this out of two reasons. Firstly, because of the fact that Msgr. Bârlea, not only that he had never used the terms of 'Greek-Catholic Church' and 'Greek-Catholic', but he had also raised awareness on the necessity of an urgent redefinition. Secondly, for the fact that the terms 'Romanian United Church' and 'united' express better the way in which His Holiness understood the unification, rite, tradition, the national question, the ecumenical dialogue, the relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, the relationship with the Orthodox Church, shortly, the place and the purpose of R.U.C. in the new ecclesiastical placement set by the last Council. Having in mind the challenges caused by this important ecclesiastic event in many Greek-Catholics's minds, we are obliged to at least ask ourselves whether wouldn't it be better for Msgr. Bârlea's suggestion to be analysed more vividly.

Opting for the terms ‘Romanian United Church’ and ‘united’ also sheds light on the dissertation’s title. It is a reference to the article published in no. 51-52 of the newspaper *Perspective* [Perspectives], titled ‘*Spre o nouă față a Bisericii Române Unite*’ [Towards a new face of the Romanian United Church], but it also points out the historical and ecumenical vision of His Holiness regarding R.U.C. which was slightly different than the one of the majority of the Romanian United priests in exile. The famous distinction between ‘The First Union’ and ‘The Second Union’ actually sustains the search for *another face* of the Romanian United Church.

*The limits* of the thesis are numerous and obvious, even to a layman. They are due mainly to the documentary resources I have accessed. For instance, in the development of Chapter II, I have not thoroughly analysed the correspondence between Msgr. Bârlea, Gheorghe Racoveanu and Dumitru C. Amzăr, preserved in ACPPR, or the one between His Holiness and Cardinal Alois J. Muench, preserved in the *American Catholic History Research Centre* in Washington. Also, in Chapter VI, I couldn’t access any edition of the journal *Orizont Românesc* [Romanian Horizon], published by Msgr. Bârlea in Los Angeles. The presentation of R.A.A.’s activity is obviously scarce, due to not having had the complete series of ‘R.A.A.’s bulletin’. Still, the reconstruction, as it has been presented, is accurate. Another limitation consists in the lack of critical analysis of Msgr. Bârlea’s writings between 1943 – 1977. Often, these have been only poorly exposed.

The central theme of Msgr. Bârlea’s historical and theological work is, without a doubt, the unification of the Churches, especially the union between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The milestone of the ‘unification thought’ can be found in between the years 1918 – 1937, spent in Romania. But the Romanian political unification performed in 1918 ought to have been completed by a religious one. For some of the Romanian Orthodox hierarchs, this had happened in 1948 by ‘reducing’ the R.U.C. to R.O.C. (the Romanian Orthodox Church) or by ‘ordering’ the United to break from Rome. The initiative is considered ‘a false step’ because it hadn’t led to a religious unification, but to a religious rupture, thus canceling the bridge between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

‘The thought of union’ had deepened during the studies in Rome. The first Doctoral thesis in 1943 - *De confessione orthodoxa Petri Mohilae* - tried to show that through his *Confession* the Archbishop of Kiev hadn’t adopted the resentment of the Greeks against the Catholic Church. In an era of *confessions of faith*, the Romanian hierarch hadn’t accepted the idea of a *confessional Christianity*, but had sought instead to elaborate a synthesis between



East and West. Therefore, this is the main influence of the first Doctoral Thesis over the second one, written in 1945 – *Ioannes Bob, Episcopus Fagarasiensis (1783 – 1830)*. Although the analysis of the long years of ‘shepherd hood’ of the Bishop of F g ra is a balanced one, Msgr. Bârlea is critical towards the bishop’s support for the confessional entailing of the Transylvanian churches. The central chapters of his thesis refer to the leaders of the Transylvanian School, who, in their dispute with the bishop, had rejected precisely this aspect. Certainly, the process of *confessionalism* of the Transylvanian Churches hadn’t started with Ioan Bob. Bârlea’s conclusion drawn in his 1963 study – *Die Union der Rumänen (1697 – 1701)* had a precise moment: the year 1701, when the Archbishop Atanasie had been reconsecrated in Wien by Cardinal Kollonics. This gesture of the Viennese hierarch – under the influence of the Counter-Reformation or Catholic-Reformation – had turned a canonical issue into a dogmatic one. In the 1966 study – *Ostkirchliche Tradition und westlicher Katholizismus* – the liturgical innovation imposed by Atanasie’s successor, Ioan Giurgiu Patachi, had been considered a normal consequence of precisely this. The Romanian priest, converted to the Latin rite and educated in Rome, even though wearing byzantine vestments, had had difficulties understanding the Mass of his own Church. In his years of pastoring, though few, the boundaries between ‘united’ and ‘non-united’ have been highlighted.

The study from 1966 it is, in our opinion, the latest study if the *historian* Octavian Bârlea. Thereafter, His Holiness had become a *circumstantial historian*. His writings had a precise goal: to seek and find a place for the Romanian United Church in the new ecclesiastical environment imposed by the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965), a Council which no longer had talked about *unification* – meaning the return of the different churches in the womb of the Roman Catholic Church – but had started talking about *communion* between churches, carried out in a spirit of equality and profound respect towards the Christian tradition. His desire to find an adequate position for the R.U.C. in the new ecclesiastical establishment, had made him attentive to ‘various ecumenical currents which had appeared lately’ and had caused him to engage in ecumenical dialogue. The way of understanding ecumenism in relation to R.U.C. had been Msgr. Bârlea’s distinctive mark. It had set a difference between him and the other united priests in exile (except, perhaps, Msgr. Ioan Dan and the priests Flaviu Popan and Alexandru Mircea). If, for Bârlea, the ecumenical dialogue had represented a chance for R.U.C. to pursue , for the others it had been problematic.

It cannot be said that this thesis fills a gap in R.U.C.’s historiography. It is not even a complete monograph. It aims to be seen as an invitation to a more profound study of the life

and work of Msgr. Bârlea. Whoever decides to do so, will approach a fascinating man and a fascinating work.