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**The Problem of Roman Catholic diasporas in  
Transylvania in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Case Study in Bistrița-  
Năsăud County**

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History of the Church seems to confirm Christ's prophecy: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15, 20) In the entire history of the Church we can barely find at least a lifetime in which the church and the fold have not been persecuted and harassed. The repeated pursuit and ravages, however, regularly lead to rejuvenation, purification, revitalisation. After the communist era, new, free times followed for the church and the faithful. But the danger does not always threaten from the outside. As my research shows, the birth-death rate of the last decades shows alarming numbers, thus, the diaspora communities are less threatened by external factors, and more by the lack of vitality and the motivation to live.

My thesis mainly analyses the history and story of the Hungarian Catholic diaspora living in the Bistrița area. The difference between the two terms can be explained by the difference between the objectively written history that is a part of the master narrative of the historiography, and the private story of the community unknown to history books or told differently by these. Pierre Nora also reflects upon this dichotomy: „On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory – unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, (...) and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces.” Hence, I consider the everyday-life of the diaspora community, their specific problems and attitudes toward the external problems to be stories. The processes written, sometimes created by an external authority for this community are considered history. I analyze a part of the Transylvanian Hungarian Catholic diaspora community's history that represents the effects of the great historical events leading to diasporisation.

In order to present the Transylvanian Hungarian Catholic diaspora community, I have mainly used documents of records: Domus Historia collections (Nușeni, Cristeștii Ciceului, Vița – Reformed and Roman-Catholic), church records (Arhiva Arhiepiscopală din Alba Iulia, Arhiva Generală Episcopală din Cluj-Napoca) and state archives (of Bistrița-Năsăud county, Batthyaneum). The novelty in my approach to these sources consisted in the fact that the writers and the former researchers did not pay attention to the special events, the cause/effect relations in these documents, causes that lead to diasporisation, and not even to the interesting, sometimes particular moments of the diaspora existence. I have also used the monographic works and studies about the history of this area, in order to see how the great historical events have affected the local community. I have tried to consider the unlimited

amount of bibliography about the diaspora term, but I have been forced by the limitations of the thesis to select. Since my paper was not meant to start a theoretic discussion, but to present empirical researches, I have included „innocent” definitions of the term, definitions with as little political and theological overtone as possible.

In the first chapter, I try to define the term in order to specify the direction followed in mapping the bibliographic sources. Nowadays, the prototypical use of the term *diaspora* is related to the Hungarian ethnic diaspora, even though being originally used by ecclesiastic terminology. The theological interpretation has proved to be necessary, since it had showed me a fold of meaning left out by the secular interpretations: namely, that living in diaspora is not only a hardship, but also an opportunity. My hypothesis is based on this premise: the external hardships, persecution, economic and political obstructions have not caused the devastation of diasporas on the long run, but in many cases, they have caused religious revitalisation.

In my first chapter, I go through different definitions of the term, as used in Catholic and Protestant theology, and in other social sciences, after which I compare religious and ethnic diasporas. I describe the diaspora in accordance with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, after which I research the formation and forms of diaspora. At the end, I also analyse the relationship between education and diasporas, and the ethnical and religious problems of the diasporas.

In the analysis of the term *diaspora*, its etymology and contemporary use is absolutely relevant. Due to its biblical origins, it is strongly related to the religiousness of the community, and also, to the social aspects of religiousness. The various political and sociological interpretations through time are all related to this religious origin. As Bodó Barna points out in his study *Jövőtervezés és bűnbánat*, when we approach the problem of diasporas from a moral standpoint, we instantly liquidate the scientific difference that would help us point out the most problematic synapses of the question. By toning down the moral background, I have had the opportunity to recognize that the identity of individuals and communities is an entity with many components: ethnical, linguistic, religious, local, and in order to attempt to fix the problem, one must consider all these aspects.

Considering the practical uses and origins of the term is essential, because it nuances the interpretation, and it also defines different areas of implication in an interdisciplinary approach. Understanding the connection between diasporisation and the ethnical, linguistic,

religious and local aspects of the individual's identity is important in order to recognize the different institutions' area of implication. This explains why the Church's immanent task is the pastoral activity and its responsibility is the strengthening of the identity. Knowing the original meaning of the term, it is somehow soothing that the diaspora existence does not only imply loss, but also the possibility of disseminating minority values,

The local component of the identity justifies the regional research of the diaspora phenomenon, since, as I have pointed out before, the different social-historical, economic, political, educational, religious processes have different influences upon the local community and the tendencies of diasporisation.

First, I analyse the local component. In the first chapter, I briefly present moments from the history of several localities (Vița, Bistrița, Beclean, Uriu, Reteag, Nușeni, Rodna, Năsăud, Teaca and Matei), considered relevant in the diasporisation of the Roman Catholic community. The history of the Roman Catholic parishes seems to be characterized by different trials. These localities often have a long history (according to Zsigmond Gusztáv, priest of Vița, this village was first mentioned in 1315), due to which they have practically lived through every peev of the history: the attacks of the Tatars and the Turks, the Reformation, the anti-clerical secularized spirit's manifestations. The churches in these localities bare not only the traces of the different artistic periods, but also the marks of the regime changes. Cristeștii Ciceului is one of the oldest localities of the region, it has fallen victim to many devastating attacks. Many have left it broken: Giorgio Basta's soldiers in 1602, Ali's Turkish army in 1661, Count Tiege's people in 1704, the Tatars in 1717. These have all taken toll on the inhabitants, which were often taken prisoners or killed, then replaced by Romanians. Strugureni, a prospering Catholic community under Gabriel Bethlen has turned Protestant in 1644, and even though 83 people intended to become Catholics in 1889, the strong Protestant propaganda had stopped them. Hence, not one Catholic was left by the 1800s.

The history of the localities points out the place with a strong enough religious identity to survive the demolition of the holy places. The communities that in spite of the unfavourable conditions have repeatedly reinvented themselves bare the vitality necessary to survive living in the diaspora.

I consider the places (the villages, churches, important buildings) to be monuments to the community, since their presence or lack are marks of history's course: the church that has

hosted many religions, or has been burned down by Tatars, the mansion sold by its benevolent owner in order to build a church to the community, the forests that hid those running away from oppression. These places are also milestones of the revitalisation struggle. The churches are sacred places of the constant endeavour to keep the religious identity in spite of the hardships. This is why, my second chapter presents the important scenes of the processes.

The constant adversities have caused loss of number, but also spiritual demoralisation in the area. Naturally, the community needed leaders that, despite the natural and artificial disasters were able to encourage the community to keep the identity. The Tatar, Turkish attacks, the foreign sovereignty, the dictatorial authority, the harsh taxes have all contributed to the constant discontentment, the existential insecurity. These factors have all contributed to the forsaking of religion and nation. The Reformation has also influenced the internal and material „possessions” of the community: some localities have lost their churches (either due to a systematic military destruction or repossession to the Protestant community), we could hardly find at least one settlement that has never had converted from one confession to another at some point.

The Catholic Revival, however, is a sign of the will to live on. This statement is legit, even though occasionally, recatholisation was only possible after some financial contribution (as bishop Fogarasy did). The contribution from enthusiastic and loyal noblemen and ecclesiastic people is always positive: they have stepped in in order to keep the community’s faith, offering their personal material and spiritual possessions when needed.

The second part of the second chapter sketches the change of the region’s population from the antiquity: the apparition and disappearance of a community, its replacement with another community. I attempt to prove that this area has, from the antiquity, lived in the dichotomy of diasporisation and revitalisation.

In order to see the peripheral effect of the great historical changes on the region, I present some moments from the history that have contributed to the formation of the diaspora. I separately present the beneficent activity of bishops, noblemen, priests and fold trying to revert or stop this process. I also mention political circumstances that represented the context for the Catholic flourishing. Bishop Fogarasy Mihály is one of the people whose activity lead to a wave of conversion to Catholicism in 1870. The activity of similar people proves that in spite of the demoralising circumstances, the community can survive under apt leaders.

The second half on the 19<sup>th</sup> century shows signs of intensive secularization due to the empirical positivism in science, where the only relevant basis of knowledge is experience, even though a constitutive part of religious experience starts over the experience. The press contributed significantly to the dissemination of these tenets, which ultimately lead to the shrinking of the religious communities and the lack of priests. In these circumstances, the religious leaders have considered serious implication. Fogarasy Mihály, in his letter from 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1875 addressed the fold to assist the pastoral activity.

At the turn of the millennium, the most defining political influence was the colonisation. The relocations, initiated by the minister of agriculture, Darányi Ignác, were strictly supervised by the state through the 1894-Law's fifth article. Due to this process, new settlements were founded, and colonists were relocated to old settlements. The religious composition of the settlements was considered while relocating people: Roman Catholics were sent to Roman Catholic communities, Protestants to Protestant ones.

The third chapter briefly presents some of the major historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have selected these events according to their echo in the diaspora communities, as seen in written or oral sources, while considering how the changes have sifted through the diaspora community. The selection includes the first and second World War, the Agrarian reforms, the Treaty of Trianon and the Second Vienna Award, and some aspects of the communist era: the activity of the Securitate, nationalisation, collectivisation and the anti-communist movements, and also, natural disasters. I analysed these factors' immediate and long-term consequences in the life of the diaspora. The repeated trials of the century have led to a serious demoralisation of the diaspora community, which, once again, called for the implication of strong and unfaltering leaders, like bishop Márton Áron. The bishop paid special attention to the problems of the diaspora, and he struggled on both personal and administrative levels to ease the charges pressing on the community.

The treaty of Trianon and the second Vienna Award both urged the diocese to rearrange its internal structure. The conflicts of the first half of the century have practically opened the gates to communism and the losses caused by it: nationalisation and the undermining of the Church. In spite of the constant abuses of power, the community stood strong, even though the anti-communist intentions of the resolute youth in 1948 and 1956 have been crushed.

My thesis focuses on the documents from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period was especially relevant, since the formerly spontaneous diasporisation became a tendency. These

liminal situations illustrate best the community's intentions about its own fate. In this chapter, I examine how the fold practiced religion in a period of conscious secularisation, celebrations and religious life. I present some institutionalised endeavours in order to stop or reverse diasporisation. I emphasize the activity of the Diaspora Care Office of Cluj-Napoca, led by dr. Dávid László, a dedicated and active prophet of the diaspora care.

The political, social and economic status of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not favour religiousness. The Diaspora Care office undertook the organisation of compensatory programs: summer schools with religious education, summer camps to Hungary, military missions. Dr. Dávid László contributed to the case of the diaspora not only through active work, but also on a theoretical level. His scientific works, though unpublished, show his dedication to the case, and also a kind of acumen about the problems. In the fifth chapter I present six of his unpublished works that had contributed to keeping the diaspora problem on the surface, and ultimately, paving the way toward solution: *Talking about diasporas is fashionable today (Szórványoról beszélni ma divat.)*, *Diasporas in Transylvania (Szórványok Erdélyben)*, *New situations – new tasks (Új helyzetek – új feladatok)*, *Problems of the diaspora, seen as problems of the internal mission (Szórványkérdés, mint bel-missziós probléma)*, *Lecture at the Szent László Company's assembly (Előadás a Szent László Társulat közgyűlésén)*, *Lecture about the diaspora (Előadás a szórványról)*. All his works passionately address the audience to contribute spiritually, but are also highly informative. The professor was the writer of the first detailed description of the Bistrița area.

In the appendix, I present the list of those who participated to the summer camps. I attach the vitality statistics of the region: the birth-death rates, and also, important correspondence about the problems of diasporas.

My hypothesis could be briefly worded as such: the process of diasporisation, but also, the stopping and preventing of diasporisation is a common task of the fold. The data I have gathered show that the true will to keep the religious identity can help both the pastor and the faithful community get over the towering obstacles between them and practicing faith. But the opposite is also true: the unilateral will of either parts is insufficient to replace common work. Hence, the diaspora existence is a task, on one hand: a task for the pastor to undertake spiritual and physical obstacles to serve those in need, but also, a task for the fold to be patient and keep the faith until the arrival of such a priest. On the other hand, it is an opportunity and a promise, since God scattered the Jewish people to be cleansed from their sins. Thus, diaspora can be a source of accession.

As a poetic conclusion, and also as a motto for the Transylvanian diasporas, I could quote Vörösmarty Mihály: „*Megfogyva bár, de törve nem, / Él nemzet e hazán.*” („*Though depleted, but not broken / The nation lives on this homeland.*” *Appeal*, transl. Kirkconnell, Watson)

My hypothesis has been confirmed by the extension of the term diaspora from merely the actual political-sociological use to the original, biblical meaning. In my first chapter, I have tried to avoid the ideological undertone of the definitions. The Holy Scripture proved through several loci that scattering the Jewish was intended to be cleansing, the trial served the revitalisation of the community: punishment was for their own good, since it lead them back on God’s path: “Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.” (Ezekiel 11:16)

Examining the documents of the diaspora, it has been partially reassuring that the communities, or at least their pastors, have never lost sight of the problem of diasporas, and have constantly searched for solutions. The presence of enthusiastic youth is also a good sign: the ones present at both celebrations and religious education. However, according to Dávid László, the diaspora care is not only the task of children. The entire global Hungarian Catholic Community needs to contribute in order not to lose any more members and to strengthen the community. Diaspora existence is the shared task of the Church and the fold, of all who take responsibility for spiritual life (in an ideal case, politicians, too). The preservation of religious and ethnical identity is a hallmark, contribution to the community’s purgation.