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**MONASTERY NICULA IN THE „SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY” OF THE  
ROMANIAN PEOPLE. THE PILGRIMAGE FROM THE FEAST OF THE  
ADORMITION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD - A TIME OF SPIRITUAL  
FULLFILMENT AND A HORIZONT OF ORTHODOX PASTORATION**

**PHD THESIS SUMMARY**

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## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	5
<b>PRELIMINARY</b>	
1. Methodology of research.....	9
1.1. Scientific objectives assumed in the research.....	10
1.2. Motivation of choosing the research theme.....	11
2. Topic of the theme.....	14
<b>CHAPTER I . BELIEVE AS A CULTURE IN BIBLICAL HISTORY</b>	
I.1. Pilgrimage in the Old Testament.....	18
I.1.1.Abraham - spiritual father and typological model of pilgrims.....	18
I.1.1.1. Call of Abraham.....	20
I.1.1.2. Pilgrimage to the heights of Moria.....	22
I.1.2. Exodus - the experience of purifying pilgrimage.....	26
I.2. Pilgrimage in the New Testament.....	34
I.2.1. Luke the Evangelist – pilgrim on the royal path of the Gospel.....	34
I.2.1.1 The "Pilgrimage" of Christ in the History of the World in the Gospel of Luke....	39
I.2.2. The Apostle Paul - a promoter of Christian missionary journeys.....	44
I.2.2.1.Conversation and pilgrimages of the Apostle Paul in Jerusalem.....	47
I.3. Pilgrimage to the Primary Church.....	51
I.3.1.The journey of the Eger to the Holy Places - faith and godliness.....	60
<b>CHAPTER II. THE HELP OF HERITAGE FROM NICULA</b>	
II.1. Hodighitria from Nicula - the miracle-working icon.....	66
II.1.1.Nicula in the horizon of Romanian geography.....	66
II.1.2.Political and Confessional Context in Middle Age Transylvania.....	71
II.1.3. Priest Luke - the creator of Nicula's Hodighitra icon.....	91

II.1.4. History of the Niculean icon.....	94
II.2. The Genesis of the Nicula Pilgrimage.....	117
II.3. Nicula - artistic center of iconography on glass.....	130
II.3.1. Hydate Xylogravure.....	146
<b>CHAPTER III. THE PILGRIMAGE OF NICULA IN THE HISTORY OF TRANSILVANIA</b>	
III.1. Document memory.....	150
III.2. The interwar period.....	162
III.3. The era of the communist regime.....	173
III.3.1. The international context.....	173
III.3.2. The country under the pressure of communist ideology.....	175
III.3.3. Nicula Monastery, in the context of Romanian monasticism.....	178
III.3.4. Ion Apostle Popescu - pilgrim and pilgrim guide.....	183
III.4. Pilgrimage to Nicula after 1989.....	187
III.4.1. Metropolitan Bartholomew - the pilgrim and exponent of the Nicula Monastery.....	190
III.4.2. Pilgrims of eternity - John Alexander and Vasile Avram.....	191
<b>CHAPTER IV. MONASTERY NICULA IN THE MEMORIAL OF THE ROMANIAN PEOPLE</b>	
IV.1. Tradition and spiritual rebirth at Nicula.....	196
IV.1.1. The pilgrimage of Nicula - Luminous expressions of Christian godliness.....	201
IV.1.2. The habit of circulating the relic church on the knee.....	204
IV.1.3 Characteristics of monastic life at Nicula.....	205
<b>CHAPTER V. THE DELAY OF BELIEVE THROUGH SPIRITUAL TRIPS AT NICULA</b>	
V.1. Nicula - topos of Christian conversion and initiation.....	209
V.1.1. Perception of pilgrims on niculeane spirituality.....	211
V.1.2. The spiritual use of the pilgrimage to Nicula.....	215

V.1.3.Reclaim, prayer and communion through the pilgrimage.....	216
V.2. The mystical Christian pilgrimage from Nicula.....	221
V.2.1. Need for Initial Travel at Nicula Monastery.....	222
V.2.2. The Holiness of Holiness - the anticipatory element of the pilgrimage.....	224
V.2.3. Niculean pilgrimage - image and expression of Jewish Christianity.....	226
V.2.4. Call of Faith.....	228
V.2.5. The most important pilgrims.....	232
<b>CHAPTER VI. AESTHETICS AND CULTURE IN NICULIAN FELERINE.....</b>	<b>237</b>
VI.1. Aesthetic side.....	237
VI.2. Hearing side.....	238
VI.3. Nicula Monastery a true professorship.....	241
VI.4. Colloquia from Nicula.....	242
<b>IN CONCLUSION: HAMAM AND THE FELICINE FROM THIS NICULA.....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>PHOTO APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>269</b>
<b>SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>281</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>STATEMENT.....</b>	<b>284</b>
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE.....</b>	<b>285</b>

**KEY WORDS:** pilgrimage, monastery, spirituality, pastoral, feast, miracle, witness, spiritual, Christian

## ABSTRACT

In the modern conception, it can be observed that tradition is no longer a reference criterion in determining the authenticity of a phenomenon for the "erudite critical eye", but it can constitute the essence from which the patrimony-memory is reidentified and redefined as accurately as left by our forefathers and remembered from generation to generation. As Paul Ricoeur rightly states, *the Christian is the man who lives in the ambiguity of profane history, but with the precious treasure of a holy history whose <<sense>> he foresees, and with the suggestions of a personal history in which he discerns the connection between guilt and salvation.*<sup>1</sup>

For the researcher who honestly reports to the horizon of historical truth and the consequences of his statements, writing about Nicula is not an easy thing to do. In the absence of the erudite literary antecedent as a competent foundation, the difficulty in the current state of research lies precisely in finding the true spiritual horizon in which the Nicula monastery is projected and, of course, in expressing this spiritual horizon in the common vocabulary. Of course, such an understanding emerges at the end of complex experiences that are related to the memory of the heart and express itself discreetly.

Nicula is a unique spiritual concept, still insufficiently put into light and assumed. But that is what encourages the study! For the persevering scientist who wishes to understand this concept more fully, another effort is required, whose first demand is prayer. It, prayer, is the impulse for an authentic spiritual knowledge, whose expression, at its highest stage, becomes active beyond the threshold of formal prayer.<sup>2</sup> Such knowledge mediates the familiarization and closeness of Niculean sacrament according to the biblical instruction: "ask thy father, and he will shew thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee." (Deuteronomy 32: 7).

Starting from this scriptural passage, I consider it appropriate to refer here to a confession of the scholar Mircea Eliade: I am not trying, said the great scholar, "to deny that the religious phenomenon can be approached from different angles, but before all, it must be considered in itself, in what it has irreducible

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Istorie și adevăr*, trad. rom. E. Niculescu, Edit. Anastasia, București, 1996, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Antonie Plămădeală, *Tradiție și Libertate în Spiritualitatea Ortodoxă*, Edit. Reîntregirea, Alba-Iulia, 2004, p. 236.

and original. The task is not easy. For it is, if not to define the religious phenomenon, at least to circumscribe it and to place it in the whole of the other preoccupations of the spirit."<sup>3</sup>

From an ethnic point of view, the perspective of this study is to converge, to an updated conceptualization according to the current principles of inter-confessional relations. The hermeneutic method will ultimately be an irenic one without revolving tendencies triggered by meschine interests, with political or propaganda purposes, which activate the resorts of the hatred and lead to division. If, at Nicula, the historical time can be recalibrated by the spiritual one, then traumatic historical experiences must be overcome to make room for an authentic spiritual identity, that is, less tributary to ideological prejudices and ideologies that do not permit the honest understanding and honest assumption of the true dimension of Niculean sacredness. In other words, the present work is intended to be a theological initiative of initiation in the horizon of knowledge and communion, avoiding the distortion or circumvention of the truth, overcoming those confessional barriers that, over time, have divided and left deep wounds in the collective memory which has been reported to this sacred place in the heart of Transylvania.

It should be noted that the spiritual nucleus formed at Nicula has proved to be an important factor in the coagulation of the spiritual life of the Romanian people. By a careful remembrance of different historical moments and events, or a serious comparison between the past and the present, a major differentiation can be seen between the exigencies of the Niculean spiritual registry of the times gone by and the exposure, often violent, with the excess of the present, characterized by a radical redefinition by eliminating with respect to the transcendental perspective. This has somehow forced Nicula's community to update its potential response against the challenges of the present history. It is known that *only the well-anchored in faith will find it, sailing on the ship of salvation, the harbor of tranquility and eternal rest*<sup>4</sup>. It is, in fact, an act having as a reference the protection and preservation of the Orthodox spiritual patrimony against the siege of post-modern culture and religious syncretism, which is more and more insistent in the secularized society.

Over time, Nicula was a blessed topos that made the hearts of the Romanians vibrate; it was a remarkable spiritual landmark for the Romanian Transylvania. This hearth of Orthodox spirituality has survived many historical terrors, whose apogee was reached through the 18th-century political and confessional earthquakes, when it was unjustly subdued and subjugated to the political-religious order of that time. This was the age of the fall of the monastery in its natural spiritual sphere, being subordinated to

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<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, trad. rom. M. Noica, Edit. Humanitas, București, 2013, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Dragoș Mârșanu, „Studiu introductiv” la, Epifanie al Salaminei, *Ancoratus*, trad. rom. O. Coman, Edit. Polirom, Iași, 2007, p. 17.

a totalitarian power, hostile to our people, which made a goal of the spiritual division of the Transylvanian Romanians in order to dominate them.

Exceeding those pressing times, the spiritual life of the Nicula monastery re-entered its normal course, living today more tranquil times, in which it can fulfill its specific pastoral-missionary role. However, it can be said that the monastery of Nicula is like a heart that beats powerfully in the breast of Transylvania, experiencing intensely every "hour" of Orthodox spirituality fulfillment on these ancient Romanian lands.

The growing accentuation of Nicula's spirituality is the result of a long-standing historical labor, when the lack of veracity of the message transmitted by her to the world led to a totally obscure presence in the Romanian spiritual and cultural landscape. Recent historical events have brought Nicula back to the center of Romanian spirituality, and the monastery has become a remarkable nucleus of activating the faith toward which more and more Christians go, because, as the Psalmist says, "for there the LORD commanded the blessing, *even life for evermore.*"(Psalm 133: 3). It is understood that this fact obliges the monastic community of Nicula to be a true spiritual beacon to bear the light of Orthodox spirituality for the souls of believers who ascend the "Tabor of Transylvania", full of hope, of faith and of love. As Father Dumitru Stăniloae rightly said, *true communion develops only through an involved understanding and attention directed at the other people and the world as a unitary ensemble, seen as a work of God*<sup>5</sup>.

The Monastery Nicula today faces two great requirements of the modern world: its commitments to solving the social problems of believers or social deaconry, and on the other hand fulfilling the spiritual or communion with God needs of men. "When the balance between these two fundamental dimensions of Christian life is desecrated or unrealized, there is a crisis that can take different and very complex forms, with repercussions both on the internal life of the Church and beyond. In fact, the commandment of love for God and for the neighbour - fundamental to Christianity - is not an alternative among many, but it is the fullness of the truth that leads to the perfection of human life."<sup>6</sup>

From another perspective, Nicula's monastic community must be able to provide spiritual assistance at a higher intellectual and cultural level to meet the demands of believers who put deeper existential problems. As a result, study and spiritual living must be basic elements in this missionary service. Proclaiming the teaching of Christ implies a better mastery of the art of eloquence, but also a rich culture, based on a genuine spiritual experience. There is no doubt about the major educational role of the

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă I*, Edit. IBMBOR, București, 1978, p. 401.

<sup>6</sup> Patriarhul Daniel, *Teologie și spiritualitate*, Edit. Basilica, București, 2010, p.14.

monastery, nowadays it is a spiritual-cultural environment favorable to meditation and asceticism, an environment of philanthropy and Christian education, a place of holiness through which the Divine Grace flows. It is understood that the true vocation of Nicula Monastery should be to confess Christ by the Holy Spirit (cf. I Cor 12, 3). The full activation of the Comforter's energies is the ultimate proof of Jesus Christ in front of the world (cf. John 15, 26) and, implicitly, of every believer, His primary attribute being sacred sanctification and collaboration with the human. "The contemporary man, even when he can not express himself, expects the Church to reveal externally what is inside, that is, the divine-human communion. The attitude of the shepherds towards their flock [...], and every aspect of the life of the Church must reveal its truth. When the truth of the Church is not expressed through its life, it will not convince the world."<sup>7</sup>

As a preliminary observation, I would emphasize the fact that I was inspired by the systematic discovery of niches, traditions and pilgrimages, local habits and the special pastoral role they all have in knowing the treasures of the Orthodox faith in a world which is spiritually alienated. Although these values are lost in the darkness of history, fewer and fewer Christians today take account of them. Paradoxically, there is a need to explain the mysteries of faith and to "spiritualize" personal life according to each one's own pleasure and not according to the teaching of the Holy Fathers. In other words, movements of "personal spirituality" or "individual fulfillment" appear today for which the Church, "or its theology as an overall orientation, does not matter or matter a little. A ritualistic spirituality brought to the extreme gives birth to a psychological individualism in which the believer tries to live the feeling of being fully and personally involved in the act of faith."<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenology of the Feast of Nicula is a complex one, due to its scope, but also to the spiritual, social and economic implications it implies. It is a popular movement profoundly anchored in the Orthodox spirituality, involving both public and church institutions, in close cooperation with the good conduct of the event. The complexity of life situations found in the symbolism of this particular event is due first of all to the age of cultic and cultural practices in the Niculean tradition. The old folk traditions are taken over and transmitted today by the central media due to the spectacularity of the "pages of stories". Among the members of the public institutions actively engaged in its performance are the doctors, gendarmes, policemen, nurses, volunteers etc. All of them spend the whole period of the feast, ensuring that the multitude of pilgrims have access to the services specific to such situations. And the press is careful to report their presence and actions, such as the gendarmes' activity and their interaction with the crowd of

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<sup>7</sup> Gheorghios Kapsanis, *Probleme de eclesiologie și pastorație*, trad. Rom. N. Deicu, Edit. Anestis, București, 2015, p.30.

<sup>8</sup> Patriarhul Daniel, *Teologie și spiritualitate*, Edit. Basilica, București, 2010, p.16.



people, doctors and health problems of the pilgrims, traders and their profits, the politicians present at the Liturgy, the surrounding wooden churches "Elbows and knees" etc.<sup>9</sup>

Here are some features that can express expressively in just a few words, the chosen place, full of greatness and spiritual pulsation that is the Nicula Monastery. This "bride of Christ" (cf. Apocalypse 21, 9) cleansed in the water of His baptism (cf. Ephesians 5:26), by its presence and work is a living testimony to the authentic Orthodox experience in the heart of Transylvania, to the spirituality of the nation part of the country. Indeed, Nicula is, by excellence, one of the oldest and most important branches of Orthodox spirituality in the Romanian geography, its first documentary attestation being from 1552.

But, beyond the documentary attestation, according to the old tradition preserved in the collective memory of the land, we tend to believe that the existence of this monastic haven had its beginnings somewhere in the 14th-15th centuries. According to some researches made during the interwar period, 1401 may be the first written testimony of the monastery.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is an inscription in the old church of the monastery, which unfortunately can not be verified today, since the wooden edifice fell to a fire in 1973. It is understood that then more evidence and documents were lost great importance for the history of this place of glory of Romanian spirituality. Another testimony, which can no longer be verified today, is the bell cast in 1908 from a much older one, which had the year 1401 engraved.<sup>11</sup>

I feel obliged to state that another purpose of the present research is to propose not just a neutral analysis, but especially a theological reading for studying this sacred space. Beyond the breadth of the bibliographic material consulted, the work is based on solid personal documentation, due of course to my long life (a decade and a half) in the Nicula Monastery. This has particularly facilitated the opening and valorization of the spiritual horizon of the monastery through authentic religious experiences that I experienced here over time.

Having some of the aspects and openings of the present study cleared, as well as an overview of the main theme, I intend to systematize as accesible and thoroughly as possible the Niculean phenomenon. Of course, the approach to this subject requires a complex interdisciplinary study based on theological and historical knowledge, but also of art or literature, to be progressively deepened because it is a vast material

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mihaela-Simona Apostol, *Fenomenul pelerinajului în mass-media după 1989*, Edit. Pro Universitaria, București, 2012, pp. 161-162.

<sup>10</sup> For a better understanding see Atanasie Popa, „Biserici de lemn din Transilvania”, *Revista Institutului Social Banat-Crișana*, iunie – august, 1942, Edit. Institutului Social Banat-Crișana, Timișoara, pp. 22-36.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Șematismul Eparhiei Greco-Catolice Române de Cluj-Gherla pe anul mântuirii 1947*, Tipografia „Diecezană”, Cluj, 1947, p. 94.

that amplifies and reconfigures from one year to another. The practical impossibility of distinguishing the historical truth from the mythological aspect of the folk tradition passed down from the generation to the generation has led me to study this major element of collective memory in the spiritual phenomenon at Nicula with some caution; this in order not to distort the narrative thread of research, although the volume of this tradition is richer than the documentary background of historical nature.

On the other hand, the theological message transmitted through this study is meant to be as correct and as dogmatic as possible, without leaving too much room for unfounded interpretations or entering into contradictory dialogue with those dissatisfied with the current Orthodox heritage. The studied bibliography consists of synthetic studies elaborated by specialists, namely books and articles, which propose a monographic or thematic approach of the subject.

My approach can be both a starting point and an invitation to research for those interested in the true Niculean spirituality. I am aware that a real scientific failure could be achieved if the research were done only in "scientific" terms and motivations, which could ultragise and profane this place; that is, not taking into account the spiritual dimension of the theme, which is the true path for understanding a phenomenon of a religious nature. As Mircea Eliade wrote, "a religious phenomenon will not be revealed as such but considered in its own way, that is, religiously studied. To delimit this phenomenon through physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art etc ... is to betray it; is to let it escape precisely what is unique and irreducible in it, namely its sacred character."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, trad. rom. M. Noica, Edit. Humanitas, București, 2013, p. 15.