

Romanian Identity

The Orthodox Church Approach for the Linguistic, Religious and National Rights of Romanians in Transylvania (1800-1925)

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Abstract: In Transylvania, the beginning of the modern ages continued to be marked by the Romanians' interest for their national and religious rights. Here we could mention only rare cases of benefic decisions of the state in favour of the Orthodox Church, as it was more of a silent fight, with dramatic accents. On the occasion of the Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia, the Romanian historical confessions were represented at the highest level. We also remark the fact that all the ecclesiastic-jurisdictional differences and animosities disappeared before the national interest, especially the sincere desire to observe the national will being of first importance.

Keywords: schools; social rights; diplomacy; social conditions

In 1809, after a forced vacancy of almost 16 years, it was finally approved the election of a Romanian bishop. By the decision of the Electoral Synod, the seat was occupied by Vasile Moga, former priest from Arad.

He was appointed officially and installed on the 29th of June 1811. Ever since his appointment, there were imposed some very difficult and humiliating conditions through 19 patented points, according to the amplified model of 1762, from the times of bishop Dionisie Novacovici. Practically he was reminded that he had been appointed due to the "special favour" of the emperor and his prerogatives and initiatives were strictly limited, especially those of national and confessional nature. According to the law, they did not have the right to oppose the Uniate propaganda, they did not benefit from any right concerning the canonic share of agricultural or forest lands as the clergymen of other recognized confessions did, and he could not ask from authorities any kind of material aids or exemptions. The only concession was the exemption from the poll tax. He suffered various baffles from the important people of Sibiu, and he had to intervene up to the Court of Vienna in order to ratify the sale agreement for the headquarters in Sibiu (1819).

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Just like his homologues in the other Romanian principalities, he was concerned with continuing and creating new schools in the Romanian language. At the school in Sibiu he brought Gheorghe Lazar to teach. Unfortunately he was on divergent positions most of the time, which led to the definitive departure of Lazar in 1815 to Brasov and then to Bucharest. At Sibiu, future priests were also trained as teachers for the Romanians. He also supported there several young men to study abroad.

He inclined with great attention and dedication towards the Romanian elementary schools, striving continuously to increase the training level of teachers and pupils. That fact disturbed so much the authorities that in 1838 the Government removed them from under the supervision of bishop Vasile, passing them under the supervision of the inspectorate of the Magyar Romanian-Catholic bishop. He printed, with a lot of difficulty and obstacles, several religious books, sermons and Christian literature and ABC books.

His pastoral letters comprise several guidelines of ritual and administrative nature or for strengthening the moral life of priests and believers. He asked for the increase in the charity work of Church through special donations, purchase of medicines which were to be distributed free of charge to the people in need. Regarding the church assets, contrary to the guidelines imposed at appointment, he advised that the assets of parishes should be enlarged by acquisition of lands or real estate properties to be used by priests or communities. He introduced, for internal use, vital records similar to those used in the Principalities.

At political and national level, he carried out an intense activity in very unfavourable conditions, often disguised under the image of improving the situation of the Church. He asked through several memoires that the Romanian parishes could be entitled to canonic portions, the priests could be exempt from taxes and could receive aids from the chancelleries of towns.

Together with his Greek-Catholic homologue, Ioan Lemeni of Blaj, he militated for the convocation of the Transylvanian diet and for the introduction of social rights, the acknowledgment of the equality of Romanians with the other nations from Transylvania. Unfortunately, all the approaches and memoires sent in several stages by the two hierarchs (1834, 1837, 1842) hit a malevolent wall raised by the Magyar and Transylvanian Saxon deputies. (Păcurariu, 1992, pp. 64 – 74)

Once with the Revolution of 1848, radical changes of the perception upon Church occurred in entire Europe, not only at political level but also in the whole society. The Enlightenment and then the movements of social-political and religious emancipation brought a sudden change with respect to religion and the ecclesial institutions. The Romanian Principalities were not kept away from that tendency either.

In Transylvania, Andrei Saguna (24 Jan./5 Feb. 1848) was acknowledged as a Romanian bishop. For the first time, at appointment, there were not imposed the

humiliating conditions which had been imposed to the predecessors. One of the first courageous gestures of the new hierarch was even his own attendance to the Assembly of Blaj on the 3rd of May 1848, next to the united bishop Ioan Lemeni. There he presented himself before the Romanian nation as an exponent of nationalism and Orthodoxy. *“Naturally, the bishops said what they had to say: that they were brothers”*. (Iorga, 1989, p. 421)

Afterwards, taking advantage of an ascendant he had at the Imperial Court and not willing to witness any bloodshed, he chose the diplomatic way to solve the conflict and he asked at Innsbruck a *“hearing in personal name to tell the emperor some very interesting things: that the treasure of the Romanians is their nationality and language, that, according to the new measures, the Romanians do not have anymore the Romanian character, that he does not represent his nation anymore, which is an outrageous injustice and total murder of the national political existence, that the Romanian language is respected only to the point that it is not extirpated (...), that not only from a constitutional point of view but also from the way constitution is observed, through the electoral law, they are hit in the most sensitive way. The Romanians who are always poor can always be hit by the electoral tax, being asked to prove that they have a fortune in order to take part in the political life. As a matter of fact, the Saxons of Transylvania are in a minority of 22 in the decisive diet, and the Romanians are absent completely. (...) He wants that this new diet has national representatives freely elected.”* (Iorga, 1989, pp. 420 - 421)

The answer of the Imperial Chancellery was: *“Your nationality shall be insured through a special law. There shall be built national schools, there shall be taken care that your church is equal to the other churches – but of course according to the law – the Romanians shall be accepted in functions.”* (Iorga, 1989, p. 430)

During the 25 years of pastorate as a bishop, he always led those who militated for the national, cultural and religious rights, obtaining important results at all levels. As a good administrator, he initiated and promoted, in his quality of bishop, the elaboration of the Organic Statute of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Transylvania (ratified by the authorities on the 28th of May 1869) – stage preceding the reestablishment of the Metropolitan Church of Transylvania on 12/24 December 1864. The regulations of Saguna, unique at that moment in the entire Orthodox area, were at the foundation of the new statutes of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1925, 1948 and at present.

After World War I, the old dream of all Romanians finally fulfilled: the Great Union. However, the Kingdom of Romania could be complete only after gathering all Romanians under the same civilian, legislative and religious authority. The Church militated for this fact through its representatives. The sufferance of Romanians during World War I had not been in vain. On 18/31 October 1918, the

Romanian National Council was established with its declared purpose to hurry up the approaches for the union of Transylvania with Romania. Since the beginning, the church had been represented by Vasile Goldis, the secretary of the Consistory of the episcopacy of Arad. Immediately after the formation of the national guards, many clergymen of all ranks got involved in the local organization of the respective guards and supported at all levels the meetings, signature collections and conferences which asked insistently for the union. Among the personalities who took part and got involved actively, we mention bishop of Caransebes and the future first metropolitan and patriarch, Miron Cristea, the theology professors Silviu Dragomir and Nicolae Balan (future metropolitan of Transylvania) from Sibiu and Petru Barbu from Oradea, the rural secretary and future bishop Aurelian (Andrei) Magieru, vicar Andrei Papp from Arad, and many others. The theological publications or those printed by the Church were also involved in the propaganda. The unionist articles appeared in the Romanian Telegraph from Sibiu – the oldest and longest Romanian theological publication, in “The Diocese Newspaper” from Caransebes, in “Union” from Blaj, in “Church and School” from Arad or in “People’s Journal” from Sibiu. The Great National Assembly or Meeting from Alba Iulia was imagined and recommended to Vasile Goldis by Nicolae Balan.

The Romanian clergymen assumed the role of diplomatic negotiators in the name of the Transylvanian population. Professor Nicolae Balan was part of the delegation which, in November 1918, presented in Iasi, to the commanders and politicians present there during their withdrawal, the legitimate grievance of the Transylvanian people to unite with the mother country. They were also presented to and negotiated inclusively with the ambassadors of France, England and the United States. (Păcurariu, 1992, Vol. III, p. 383)

The two churches, Orthodox and united, sent the most important of their leaders and exponents: “*the 5 acting bishops, 4 vicars, 10 delegates of the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic consistories, 129 deans, one delegate for each theological-pedagogical institute and two representatives of the students from each Theological Institute*” (Păcurariu, 1992, Vol III, p. 384). In addition, they were joined by an impressive number of clergymen, teachers from the confessional schools and delegates of all the parishes in Transylvania who were to support through their presence the unification approach.

The act of Union started, as it was normal if we take into account the role of the Church in the Transylvanian Romanian society and not only, with the solemn service of the Holy Mass and Te-Deum (as a Grace service) by each of the two churches. The Constituent National Assembly also comprised two bishops, Ioan Papp from Arad and Dimitrie Radu from Oradea. The fraternal embrace between the Bishop of Caransebes, Miron Cristea, and the united bishop of Gherla, Iuliu Hossu, immediately after the solemn proclamation of Union, remained in the

collective memory as a sign of reciprocal respect and tribute to the secular fight of all Romanians, irrespective of confession, for national emancipation.

It followed the natural unification process of the ecclesial authority. It was very delicate as it dealt with totally different traditions and customs. In Transylvania, it was established the best system of strictly ecclesial organization, based on the Organic Statute of metropolitan Andrei Saguna which stipulated total autonomy of the ecclesial institution from the state, lack of involvement of politics into the Church matters and the traditional-canonc synodic principle with jointly proportional representation of clergymen (1/3) and laymen (2/3), fact which protected it from the absolutist-monarchist tendencies of hierarchs. However, the laws of Saguna faced the incomprehensible opposition of the hierarchs and politicians from the Kingdom, tributary to the policies of absolutist Slavic-Tsarist origin and statism from the Kingdom and Bucovina (unfortunate inheritance of more than 140 years of Austrian domination).

Nevertheless, with patience and perseverance, important steps were made. On the 29th of April 1919, the two Transylvanian Orthodox bishops, Miron Elie Cristea from Caransebes and Ioan Papp from Arad, were accepted as members with full rights in the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Then, on 17/30 December 1919, they met in joint session and they decided to prepare the future statute of the Romanian Church based on the regulations of Saguna. During the next two days, events of major importance happened: bishop Miron Elie Cristea was elected as first metropolitan in order to occupy the vacant place after the resignation of Conon Aramescu-Donici and he was invested officially. During year 1920, it was drafted "the law on the organization of the independent Romanian Orthodox Church". The final decision concerning this material belonged, according to the Transylvanian model, to the Holy Synod and not to the Parliament, in order to avoid any political interference. The final form was written in March 1925 and the Law and Organization Statute of the Romanian Orthodox Church were voted in the Legislative Chambers.

The new political and social conditions had created the premises for raising the Romanian Orthodox Church to the rank of Patriarchate. During the previous years, more local Orthodox Churches had emancipated from under the jurisdictional authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate from Constantinople: the Patriarchate of Moscow (1917) and the Patriarchate of Serbia (1920), the later with only 7 million believers.

From a numerical point of view, the Orthodox believers from the Kingdom of Romania (more than 14 million) exceeded a lot the ones in the Patriarchate of Serbia or the already historical Apostolic Patriarchates of Alexandria (Egypt), Antiohia (Syria) or Jerusalem (Palestine).

From an organizational-administrative point of view, the Romanian Orthodox Church comprised 5 metropolitan churches and 18 dioceses, the theological higher education benefited from the contribution of three Faculties of Theology (Bucharest and Chernivtsi and Chisinau), five Academies (Cluj, Sibiu, Arad, Caransebes and Oradea) and several seminars with 8 classes for training all categories of staff coming from the laic environment and also from the monastic one.

The prestige of the Romanian Orthodoxy faced a visible increase. The Romanian older and younger churchmen contributed essentially to the development of theology as a scientific branch, more and more foreigners came to finish their education in the specialty schools in there, and the contacts with Universities and Churches from abroad were more numerous.

These were only part of the motivations for which more voices in the Church and also in the laic and political life uttered the idea of raising the rank of the old Church. The well-known religious historian, priest Gheorghe Ciuhandru (23 Apr. 1875 - 29 Apr. 1947), (Braniște, 1985, p. 30) member of the Romanian Academy (30 May 1946) militated for years for this desideratum.

Following the debates, the Holy Synod voted in unanimity for raising the Romanian Orthodox Church to the rank of Patriarchate. The document was solemnly read by bishop Vartolomeu Stanescu from Ramnicului-Noul Severin who mentioned: *“the Romanian people establishes from now on, through its own political and ecclesiastic sovereignty, the Patriarchate for the Romanian Orthodox Church, acknowledging to the metropolitan of Bucharest the title of Patriarchate of Romania, replacing the title of first metropolitan of Romania”* (Păcurariu, 1992, Vol III, pp. 412 - 413). The first patriarch of our country was to become an exemplary hierarch, a tenacious fighter for the ancestral faith, an exquisite scholar and administrator, Miron Elie Cristea.

The legislative chambers debated the draft in the sessions held on the 12th of February (senate) and the 17th of February (Chamber of Deputies), and the official promulgation took place on the 23rd of February 1925, published in the Official Gazette two days later and promulgated by King Ferdinand.

The acknowledgement was given by the Ecumenical Patriarch Vasile II with number 1579/30 July 1925, and the official investiture was on the 1st of November 1925, at Bucharest, in the presence of all the members of the Holy Synod, numerous state representatives, 21 delegates of the related Orthodox Churches, leaders of the other recognized religions and thousands of believers.

Hence, after the Great Union of 1918, it was felt the need for a new legislation, which would confirm, on the one hand, the integration of the new eparchies in the Romanian Orthodox Church, and on the other hand would clarify several administrative, territorial, jurisdictional, disciplinary and religious matters, not only

for the Orthodox Church, but also for the other religions carrying out their activity on the territory of Great Romania.

Out of a natural necessity, it was born the Law on Religions, adopted on the 22nd of April 1928, and published in the Official Gazette no. 89/2 April 1928. It stipulated that *“the Statute guarantees to all the religions both freedom and protection, as their exercise does not harm the public order, the morality and its organization laws”*. Art. 2 also mentioned: *“The hindrance of the free exercise of any religion shall be punished according to the respective stipulations in the criminal code”* (Official Gazette no. 89/ 2 April 1928). Subsequently, for the support and completion of this law, more legal directives shall be passed along the years, as it follows:

1. Law and Statute on the organization of the Romanian Orthodox Church, 6 May 1925, with the amendments brought to articles 19 and 21 in year 1936;
2. Law on the organization of the military clergymen, published in the Official Gazette no. 627/ 22 March 1937;
3. Regulations on building churches, chapels, bell towers, parish houses, outbuildings, repairs, transformations, etc., for the use of the Romanian Orthodox Church, in the Official Gazette no. 79/ 5 April 1937;
4. Regulations on the election and establishment of representative and executive bodies in the parishes, deaneries and eparchies in the Romanian patriarchate, in the Official Gazette no. 213/ 15 September 1937;

The model that the Romanian Orthodox clergymen would have wanted to be followed was the one belonging to the laws of Saguna who had shown results in Transylvania before the Union. Unfortunately, because this statute would have allowed, in the vision of politicians, for a too great autonomy of the Orthodox Church and it would have allowed for a great opening towards the civil society, it was preferred a synthesis of the two legislations. As a result, the new Law on Religions continued to keep strict control upon the financial resources and upon many decisions which in fact would have belonged to the church, it continued to limit its autonomy in the religious, cultural, patrimonial and even philanthropic area. Neither the old confessional schools from Transylvania remained untouched, as they were dissolved and included, untraditionally, in the network of state education. The great economic crisis from the inter-war period also brought a blow to the clergymen through the establishment by the authorities of the compulsoriness that the Church ensured from its own funds all the things necessary for the exercise of its religious, philanthropic and wage payment activities. This aspect shall be later on easily speculated by the communist authorities.

Among the leaders of the Orthodox Church in the 20th century, probably the most active from a political point of view was Miron Cristea (...) At that time still bishop

of Caransebes, he militated for the union of Transylvania with the Mother Country, being considered, next to the united bishop Iuliu Hossu, one of the artisans of the Great Union of 1918. The fraternal embrace of the two hierarchs has remained memorable, as well as the message sent on that occasion: “*Just as you see us embracing fraternally, so that all the Romanian brothers shall remain embraced forever!*”

According to the legislation during that time, Patriarch Miron was a legal senator in the Parliament of Romania and he ensured the regency between the 20th of July 1927 and the 8th of June 1930, when King Mihai I was a minor. In addition, he was prime-minister between the 1st of February 1938 and the 6th of March 1939. (http://ro.orthodoxwiki.org/Miron_Cristea)

At the end of World War II, the Romanian Orthodox Church was a sovereign, independent institution, very well organized and with a continuously raising prestige, both in the country and abroad. Obviously, we cannot deny the accidents or deviations which were isolated and in any case did not represent the norm.

The Transylvanian priests and hierarchs have always been in the first line of defence of the fundamental rights of Romanians, no matter of confession. The above-mentioned facts are only some of the most important events to which they took part. In fact, the clergymen proved to be just what their mission required: counselors for people, fighters for the legitimate rights, and scholars.

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