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**The Suffering of Orthodox Clergy in
Romania during the Communist
Dictatorship**

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The Suffering of Orthodox Clergy in Romania during the Communist Dictatorship

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Abstract

During 1944-1989, in Romania, the communist state unleashed a true persecution against the Romanian Orthodox Church. The political authorities from Bucharest, lead by Petru Groza and then Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, tried to diminish the influence and role of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Romanian society, severely punishing those hierarchs and priests who ventured to stand up against all sort of abuses and injustice committed by the communist state.

Although in 1964 it was given the decree of amnesty of political prisoners, the terror did not come to an end. Even after this year we find various cases in which people (among which priests) were pursued, persecuted, investigated, tortured, imprisoned and even killed, for 'being guilty' of insubordination of the regime. Nicolae Ceaușescu decided that the religious and political trials should no longer take place, but all the persons who were arrested for their faith to be framed-up common law trials: those who preached Christ too assiduously were convicted for instigation against the communist regime; those who gave Bibles to the believers were convicted for contraband and so on. After 1989, when the totalitarian regime was eradicated, the researchers could made public the crimes committed in the name of an ideology. Regarding the number and name of the priests who were imprisoned during this period, the Romanian Orthodox Church is far from managing to turn to advantage the various documentary testimonies: memoirism, prison journals, verse volumes and so on and to create a complex picture of the ecclesiastical elite decapitation.

Unfortunately, time is like an erosion element of erosion over information, degrading them, dispersing them, making them completely disappear in the end. The documents get wet, burn or are stolen and those who have memories, get old and die. For this reason, we can say that today's theologians and historians should discover all those who, during the communist regime, because of their religious and moral convictions, have suffered in the prisons and labor camps from all over the country. The errors arising during the previous investigations must be removed, so that the truth and justice to win.

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Preliminary considerations on the State – Church relation during communism

Along with the emergence of the communist regimes in human history, atheism (the atheist principle) becomes a state religion served by individuals 'able' to commit any crime. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 shall officially bring communism to the world's political scene. There is only one step until its spread around the world. At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union obtains the status of 'great power'. Thus, after 1945, by the force of arms and raising a small segment of the population against the majority, dozens of countries are thoroughly occupied one by one: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany, China, Cuba and other countries in Asia, Africa and South America. Morally and materially supported by the Soviet Union, this minority has terrorized and even exterminated a great part of the majority population. Not only have been confiscated the land and production means, but also the individual, judgement and even faith. The places of worship have been demolished, and the believers and their pastors have been thrown into prison, tortured and killed. Religion becomes one of the greatest enemies of the new regime¹. The events in inter-war Russia have followed this scenario, when the Bolshevik revolution has unleashed a 'real frenzy of violence and crime, to which all real and imaginary opponents of the new regime have fallen a victim'². The Russian Orthodox Church³ has immediately reacted and in accordance with its mission, from the moral point of view censuring all the aspects of social-political and economical life of the people whom it serves⁴.

However, the situation of the Russian Orthodox Church was very difficult. In a pastoral dated January 19th, 1918, the new patriarch Tikhon said: 'The Holy Church of Christ from the Russian lands is passing these days through difficult times. The broad and hidden enemies of the Truth of Christ started to persecute Him, spreading wickedness, hatred and killing enmity of the brothers instead of Christian love'⁵. As a result of this attitude, Lenin made The Decree on the Separation of Church and State, any interference of the ecclesiastical authority in the development of subsequent political activities becoming illegal⁶. Furthermore, in the years that followed, the Church has become itself a victim of physical and moral terror unleashed by the Bolsheviks. This cruel persecution did not stop for half a century, period when the Bolsheviks had achieved the aimed purpose – to subdue the Russian

¹ Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, *The situation of Romanian Orthodox Church under the communist regime*, in "Libertatea", New York, year V, no. 45-46, April-May, 1986, p. 8.

² Dorin Oancea, *Romanian Orthodox Church in relation to the communist regime in Romania*, in "Revista Teologică", year VII (79), 1997, no. 4, p. 40.

³ For an overview of the situation of the Russian Orthodox Church it is required to see the paper of prof. Gerd Stricken, *Die Orthodoxe Kirche in Russland. Dokumente ihrer Geschichte (860 – 1980)*, The Chapter *Die Russische Orthodoxe Kirche in Sowjetstaat (seit 1917)*. There are presented here all the issues of the relations between Church and State in Russia from 1917, until 1980 – 1981.

⁴ Dorin Oancea, *art. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵ Gerd Stricken, *op. cit.* p. 646, apud Dorin Oancea, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁶ Mihail Polsky, *Les nouveaux martyrs de la terre russe*, Edition Ressiack, 1976, p. 60 – 78.

Orthodox Church and implicitly any resistance or opposition to the absolutist regime. The statistics is eloquent: in 1914, in Russia there were 76,080 places of worship (54174 churches, 23953 chapels and 953 monasteries). In 1965, there were also 7,000 churches and 17 monasteries. And in order to conclude with the statistics, let's mention one fact: in 1922, within a single episcopacy, 2621 secular priests, 1962 monks and nuns and 3477 brothers and sisters were killed¹.

In Romania, the act of August 23rd 1944² shall bring to power the Communist Party. The short-term governments of the generals Constantin Sănătescu and Nicolae Rădescu shall come to an end on March 6th, 1945, when the pressures made by Andrey Vyshinsky, the Soviet Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (the deputy of Vyacheslav Molotov), on King Michael shall lead to the imposition of Petru Groza in the position of Prime Minister. He quickly turned the country towards communism. On March 23rd, he shall give the law on the purge of state administration. On March 30th of the same year, it is created the prisoners camp of Caracal. The Marshal Ion Antonescu was trialled and executed in June 1946. It followed the enactment of a new electoral law and the dissolution of the Parliament, all in order to prepare the elections that would give the Communist Party 90% of the votes, of course, with the 'aid' of the Soviet Army³. On December 30th, 1947, Michael I signed the act of abdication, the same day being proclaimed the Romanian People's Republic. In 1948, *Securitatea*⁴ (Romanian secret police) was established, whose power shall rise again, reaching to have no limits⁵. Thus it shall be above the law, shall be afraid of nothing and shall not hesitate to commit any abuse, judging according to its considerations, while the military courts shall execute the orders⁶. In a very very short time, in our country shall start the persecutions against Church and its servants. Everything was done under the careful 'guidance' of the authorities in Moscow, of the atheist regime established there in 1917, regime that hated any kind of faith and meant to exterminate priests.

The question is - what caused this immeasurable hatred? The fact that some priests were members of traditional parties? It's very unlikely. Closer to the truth there is the hidden wish of the Communist Party that the Church to remain without spiritual pastors, and Romanians to be easier to control and maintained in obedience regarding the new ruling class⁷. Under these circumstances, it became clear that the Church had to carry out its activity and mission at any cost, no matter the social, political and economic conditions, even if it should

¹ *Ibidem*.

² Romania turns against Germany, becoming from an ally, the opponent of Hitler. At the same time it also becomes an ally of the Soviet Union, entering into Moscow's sphere of influence.

³ Sergiu Grossu, *The Ordeal of Christian Romania*, Bucharest, 1992, p. 335.

⁴ Repression authority, secret police, the specific structure of totalitarian regimes.

⁵ Valeriu Gabriel Bassa, *Teachers of theology, priests and Orthodox theologian students in communist prisons*, in „Revista Teologică”, year XI (83), no. 3 July – September, 2001, p. 35-36.

⁶ Sergiu Grossu, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁷ Mihai Rădulescu, *Burning pile*, Bucharest, 1993, p. 45.

abandon the social and political involvement, both concerning the Deaconry, and the censoring the moral behaviour, of authority and society as a whole¹.

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church reached the same conclusion two decades ago. This explains why in 1922, the Patriarch Tikhon, who was under house arrest in a monastery, sent to Lenin a letter in which he self-blamed for the fact that he didn't understand the profound humanistic meaning of the Bolshevik revolution; The Church was ready to support all the constructive efforts of the new authority². As a direct consequence of this letter, the scope and intensity of the persecutions were restricted³.

The social-political circumstances were also new for the Romanian Orthodox Church. Along history, the Romanian Orthodox Church had no longer confronted with such a hostile social and political partner. But it had the opportunity to learn some lessons from the experience of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Patriarch Nicodim, the Primate of Romanian Orthodox Church from those times, had completed his theological training at the Academy in Kiev⁴, and this fact shall make him to keep the connections with the Russian Church in future, being well acquainted with it, implicitly of the conflict between it and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, with all its consequences. This information was drawn by the patriarch from various written Russian testimonies, that were dissembled more or less, and which ended to be known by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

But the most precious and important source of information was the Romanian priests and believers, who had already been through the horrors of social, political and religious communist persecutions during the time when Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina had been torn from the body of the country (1940 – 1941).

The mission of a delegation of the Metropolis of Transylvania in Transnistria also provided valuable information, after its return under Romanian administration (1941).

All these direct and indirect information on the situation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet state put the Romanian Orthodox Church in a position to knowingly choose between two options: either the open fight against the new communist system and the attempt to fully meet its mission, or to renounce some of its special missions and the acceptance of a state interference in its administrative life.

If the first option, that would lead to an open conflict with the new authorities, doubtlessly the state winning the case. The result would have been that not even the gracing mission of the Church would not have been carried out, since the holy places would become either cinema halls or warehouses of the Agricultural Production Cooperatives. And we have the example of the Orthodox Church in Albania and Russia.

¹ Dorin Oancea, *art. cit.*, p. 42.

² Gerd Stricken, *op. cit.*, p. 620, apud Dorin Oancea, *art. cit.*, p. 43.

³ Dorin Oancea, *art. cit.*, p. 43.

⁴ Mircea Păcurariu, *The History of Romanian Orthodox Church*, ed. a II-a, vol. III, p. 429.

If the second option, a shred of hope gleamed, because the Church would be able to carry out further its gracing mission, shall be able to train and ordain the priests that it needed, would be able to give them the books and necessary articles for worship, enough monasteries of nuns and monks would remain open in order to be maintained the continuity of this vital part of Orthodox life, thus ensuring also the continuity of the episcopacy¹.

That is why it was necessary to choose the second option, but partially, and we'll see how.

Officially, the Church had chosen the possibility to continue its gracing work among believers and to waive any comments on the events taking place in the country, with the horrors that happened inside the country and outside the communist prisons (waiving the social mission). Instead, the State authority had undertaken not to prejudice in any way the fundamental requirements of the Church, mentioned above. As an abstract, we can say that, in order to carry out its gracing mission, the Church was obliged to take no action against the economic, social and political decisions of the communist state.

However, it was difficult for the Church to stay indifferent seeing hundreds and thousands of political trials, terrible prisons and labour camps, thousands of peasants thrown in prison because they refused collectivization. But it took no official attitude because that would have endangered its existence, but chose to fight so that it could carry out its gracing mission, without taking unnecessary risks. It formally accepted the second option, but in reality, tens of bishops and thousands of priests were struggling either with the word from the pulpit, or with the weapons in the mountains, along with other Romanians, against the communist absolutism (we mention here the fact that, during 1948-1965, a significant number of Romanians dared to confront the communist state going to the mountains, becoming outlaws, as their ancestors once had done. For 15-16 years, real fights among them and *Securitate* took place²).

Thenceforth, we'll try to understand why there was such a large number of Orthodox priests who have suffered in communist prisons, showing both the reasons invoked by *Securitate* for their arrest and the punishments imposed by this odious institution to the servants of the Holy Shrine.

Please note that, in order to fully understand the situation of the Romanian Orthodox Church and its servants under the communist regime, first it should be made a careful and thorough analysis of the organization and functioning of *Securitate*³. Also for the Romanian Orthodox Church (as well as

¹ Dorin Oancea, *art. cit.*, p. 43.

² Florica Dobre, "*Gangs, bandits and heroes*". *The resistance groups in the mountains and Securitatea (1948-1968)*, București, 2003.

³ Lately, several valuable works on the subject have been published. We mention here: Ernest Volkman, *Espionage*, Bucharest, 1998; Romanian Intelligence Service, *Security White Paper*, 4 vol., Bucharest, 1994-1997; Marius Oprea, *Banality of evil. A history of Security in Documents. 1949-1989*, Iași, 2002; Florica Dobre, Florian Banu, Camelia Duiică, Silviu Moldovan, Liviu Țăranu (editors), *Security Forces (1949-1989)*, Bucharest, 2004; Nicolae Henegariu, Silvia Colfescu (coordinators), *Memorial of pain. Documents of rehabilitation in the prisons of Pitești and Gherla*, Bucharest, 1995; Ioan Opreș, *Historians and Security*,

for all institutions of the communist era) the history of this repressive authority is of special importance. Securitate is 'responsible' for the sufferings and persecutions endured by thousands of servants of the Romanian Orthodox Church from 1945-1989, as 'beyond the state and out of the facades of the apparent power, in a labyrinth of multiplied positions, in all changes of authority and in the chaos of inefficiency, the country's centre of power lies: over-efficient and over-competent services of secret police'¹.

The accusations of Securitate to arrest the orthodox priests

As mentioned above, seeing the suffering of a whole nation, the Church, by its priests and servants, could not stay indifferent. Very often, the priests of the villages where it was 'implemented' the collectivization caused and led small riots against the communists. Others peacefully refused collectivization, but provided an example for the other peasants from the villages to do the same thing. There were lots of peasants who dared to criticize the local political authorities for the abuses committed against their believers. Those who weren't able to endure humiliation went to the mountains and, with guns in their hands, as their ancestors had once done, tried to change the fate of the nation, even risking their lives. Almost all who were caught by *Securitate* were executed on the spot or in prisons. Even more priests secretly helped the fighters in the mountains with food, clothing or advice and suggestions that comfort their soul.

Securitate also invoked other crimes that would have allegedly been committed by the priests. Such a crime was that of being a member or simply an adept of any of the Romanian traditional parties: the Liberal Party, National Peasants' Party or Social Democratic Party.

A particular situation was represented by the clergy, who was the adept of the legionary movement (Iron Guard), as it was also called the Legionary Party (a party with a doctrine resembling to the Nazi Party in Germany). Using this pretext, *Securitate* pursued, persecuted, arrested and even killed many Orthodox priests. The accusation of belonging to the Iron Guard was an accusation frequently used by *Securitate* to imprison the ones considered a threat to the new system. Very often, the local political authorities (upstarts, then having the power) tried to get rid of those whom they hated for various reasons, accusing them of being legionary adepts. Also, the priests were not absolved of such situations. A simple denunciation was enough for one person to be arrested and investigated by *Securitate*.

Some clarifications must be also made here. We can not deny that there were priests, who were adepts of the group of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, but they did that at the beginning of the Iron Guard, which promised them order and justice instead of the existing disorder in the country. Because of the

Bucharest, 2004; Florian Banu, Teodor Bărbulescu, Camelia Ivan Duică and Liviu Țăranu (coordinator Florica Dobre), *Security, Structures, frames, objectives and methods*, 2 vol., Bucharest, 2006.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Bucharest, 1994, p. 545.

killings and destructions committed by them, they denied them and left the structure of the organization.

A frequent accusation to the priests was that of “conspiracy against social order”. Those accused of this crime were considered as 'hostile elements of the popular democratic regime'¹, because they said that the policy of the *Romanian People's Republic* was contrary to the interests of the population. Also a 'conspiracy against the social order' was considered the spread of prohibited publications² or the refuse to denounce the family, relatives or friends suspected of anti-communist actions. All these were 'crimes of high treason' and were punished with many years in prison.

Also, reasons at least bizarre have been invoked. We mention in this category: illegal wearing of an uniform (monks or nuns forcibly got out of monasteries and who did not abandon the reverend), espionage for a foreign power, possession of foreign currency, activities against the working class, sabotage (economic or political), participation to counter-revolutionary organizations or support offered to them, anti-communist activity, anti-democratic attitude, failure to disclose the secret of confession, church building, illegally crossing the border, illegal possession of weapons, war crimes, and so on³.

It must also be recorded the cases of missionary priests who were sent by the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Bessarabia and Bukovina immediately after their return to the motherland (1941). Each in its turn was pursued and arrested by *Securitate* (for various reasons) of course, upon the 'recommendation' of the Soviet NKVD (KGB ancestor). But there were also priests arrested without any reason, just 'for investigations'.

They were kept in prisons for years, without knowing anything about the accusations or charges brought. It was enough that they were priests.

Applied punishments

Regarding the punishments applied to clergy for the above mentioned 'accusations', even from the very beginning it must be mentioned that these punishments are divided into two distinct groups or categories.

First, there are the 'legal' punishments, meaning those provided in the Penal Code or 'with the letter of the law' (also promulgated by the communists). Secondly, there are the 'complementary' punishments, applied after the convicted walked into the communist concentrationary universe. Those who decided and executed these punishments were the commanders and their subordinates from the structures of *Securitate* and those from the Penitentiary Department.

We can say about the legal punishments that these were established based on a trial that most often would take place at one of the regional military courts

¹ Paul Caravia, Virgiliu Constantinescu, Flori Stănescu, *Imprisoned Church. Romania 1944 – 1989*, National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, Bucharest, 1998, p. 251.

² *Ibidem*, p. 250.

³ Valeriu Gabriel Bassa, *art. cit.*, p. 40.

and these punishments were different depending on the seriousness of the accusation made. Those arrested 'for investigations' spent a few months and sometimes years in those communist prisons and camps. Those who 'were guilty' of more serious crimes were convicted to one year up to 10 years in prison. It was the case of those who were guilty of 'conspiracy against social order', illegal wearing of an uniform, espionage, anti-democratic attitude, failure to disclose the secret of confession, building churches without permission, illegally crossing the border, and so on. Those who were found guilty of participation to counter-revolutionary organizations or who offered them support, members or adepts of the traditional political parties or former supporters of the Iron Guard were convicted to 10 up to 25 years of harsh imprisonment or hard labor for life. The last category of punishments included those who were sentenced to death. Here, also, another mention should be made: among them there were many people for whom the punishment was applied without trial. Many of the fighters in the mountains were executed immediately after being caught, without waiting for a trial. However, there were death sentences ruled by military courts and implemented as a result of such judgments. This is the case of the members of the Iron Guard, the anti-communist warriors, those considered the enemies of the people, and so on. We can say that a sentence of 25 years of harsh imprisonment or hard labor for life was the equivalent of a death sentence.

In terms of additional punishments, they were at least as hard as the legal ones. The physical and moral torture up to annihilation, up to the tortures of hell¹, was part of the rehabilitation plan applied to those in prison for political reasons in the 50's and 60's.

Hereinafter, we present the testimony of the Priest George Calciu-Dumitreasa († 2006):

I was isolated for 10, sometimes 15 days in a cell with no windows and air, not wearing my prisoner uniform and having a jacket and a pair of torn trousers, without buttons and a belt (I had to keep my trousers on with my hands) and I was given food every three days. In the evening, a wooden plank was lowered from the wall and it became my bed for seven hours. For the other 18 hours of the day I only had the concrete floor of the cell. After the isolation period I was taken back to my regular cell, and two days later, I was brought back to isolation for another 10 days ... Twice a day I had to go to the shared toilet to pour out the content of the sanitary tube. These two trips were for me the biggest torture of the day. I was used to receive a lot of insults and sometimes the guardian was hitting me. Then, I was drooping the sanitary tube and I was forced to put back into the sanitary tube the content spilled on the floor with my bear hands ... This game of death and rehabilitation lasted more than a hundred days².

¹ Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, *art. cit.*, p. 31.

² *Ibidem*.

Besides the features mentioned above, there were also special cases, construction of churches, the refusal to cooperate with *Securitatea*, and so on.

Conclusions

During 1944-1989, in Romania, the communist state unleashed a true persecution against the Romanian Orthodox Church. Following the soviet pattern, the political authorities from Bucharest, lead by Petru Groza and then Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, tried to diminish the influence and role of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Romanian society, severely punishing those hierarchs and priests who ventured to stand up against all sort of abuses and injustice committed by the communist state. After 1989, when the totalitarian regime was eradicated, the researchers could made public the crimes committed in the name of an ideology.

In this context, Stalin declared that if five percentages of a country population is imprisoned, the terror would make place and the rest of the population would not have the courage to arise¹.

In Romania, during 45 years of communist dictatorship, this percentage was exceeded, because there were periods when the number of those who were arrested represented almost 11 percentages of the total country population². Almost two millions of people got imprisoned, were in forced labour or concentration camps, house arrest and so on. Almost 200.000 of people were exterminated by torture, hunger, cold and desperation. Hundred of thousands of believers were convicted for their faith, faith that now became a severe crime³.

Although in 1964 it was given the decree of amnesty of political prisoners, the terror did not come to an end. Even after this year we find various cases in which people (among which priests) were pursued, persecuted, investigated, tortured, imprisoned and even killed, for 'being guilty' of insubordination of the regime. Nicolae Ceaușescu decided that the religious and political trials should no longer take place, but all the persons who were arrested for their faith to be framed-up common law trials: those who preached Christ too assiduously were convicted for instigation against the communist regime; those who gave Bibles to the believers were convicted for contraband and so on⁴. Unfortunately, *Securitatea* didn't leave behind too many evidenced about what happened during that period. As it was already mentioned, various researchers revealed information about the name and number of those who were imprisoned or killed by the communist regime. Regarding the number and name of the priests who were imprisoned during this period, the Romanian Orthodox Church is far from managing to turn to advantage the various documentary testimonies: memoirism, prison journals, verse volumes and so on and to create a complex picture of the ecclesiastical elite decapitation.

¹ Sergiu Grossu, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

² Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, *art. cit.*, p. 31.

³ Cicerone Ionițoiu, *Communist terror victims: arrested, tortured, imprisoned, killed, Dictionary letter M*, Bucharest, 2004, p. 5-6.

⁴ Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, *art. cit.*, p. 31.

However, many information were centralized, managing at least to outline a list of the Romanian Orthodox Church' servants, either priests or singers, monarchs, students, and so on. It is not less true that this list also contains a lot of errors: many priests are mentioned as having died in prisons although they managed to survive the torment, many names are incorrectly written, the biographic information is erroneous, and so on. But we have to make another mention: the number of priests, monarchs, church singers and students is, undoubtedly, higher. For reasons easy to understand, a part of those who suffered during 1944-1989, are not mentioned in any official document, *Securitatea* destroying a part of the files of those that were pursued, investigated, tortured and even killed. Time is like an erosion element of erosion over information, degrading them, dispersing them, making them completely disappear in the end. The documents get wet, burn or are stolen and those who have memories, get old and die¹.

As a conclusion, we can say that today's theologians and historians should discover all those who, during the communist regime, because of their religious and moral convictions, have suffered in the prisons and labor camps from all over the country. The errors arising during the previous investigations must be removed, so that the truth and justice to win.

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¹ Cicerone Ionițoiu, *op. cit.* p. 6.

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