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**IMAGE OF THE ETHNIC RELIGIOUS MINORITIES REFLECTED IN THE  
ORTHODOX PAROCHIAL ARCHIVES OF BUCHAREST DURING THE  
INTER-WAR PERIOD**

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*Abstract: The archives of the Orthodox parishes constitute a historical source not used yet. Deposited most times in inadequate conditions, the parochial documents were lost, especially the old ones, or degraded, so that today they can be used only with great difficulty. The most interesting documents of these archives are the reports drafted by the servant priests. Most times these ones notice the changes occurred in the life of the parish, the decisions taken at certain times concerning the goods of the church, renovations, and the changes the places of worship or various other buildings they owned passed through. Yet, the parochial documents can give some precious information on the data related to the ethnic composition of the parishes or to the religious minorities.*

*I focused in my study on the research of the archives of a few Orthodox parishes close to today's Bucharest, where the ethnic and religious diversity was greater. I succeeded in studying the archives of the parishes of New Delea, Old Delea and "Hagiu"- Hala Traian, parishes with a population Orthodox in its majority, but submitted to slight changes through the settling of the Jews, Germans, and Bulgarians, in their territory. The data gathered from these archives are concise, but they help us form an image on the way in which the priests perceived the ethnic and religious diversity of their parishes and of Romania during the inter-war period.*

**Keywords: Orthodox parishes, inter-war period, ethnic diversity, religious diversity, priest**

The parochial archives do not represent sources of information for historians, because it is hard for researchers to find new things there. Yet, browsing the documents drafted in the parochial offices during the inter-war period can show us at least the atmosphere of time. We can learn from these documents, especially from the reports concluded by the parochial councils, what the life of the parishes of Bucharest was like during the inter-war period and how the community of the time could understand the political changes in the Romanian society. The world of the inter-war Bucharest was not alien to what religious experience meant, to the participation as much as possible in the liturgical life and particular prayer. The parochial archives show the community was somehow afraid of the ethnic and religious diversity, a phenomenon that characterised the ethnic and social structure in a series of Orthodox parishes. The presence of the Jews, Gypsies, and Adventists is mentioned in the documents of these Orthodox parishes.

During the inter-war period an intelligentsia is raising in the Romanian society who cultivates the values of Christianity. Religion is not seen only as a phenomenon, as a form of expressing the national identity, but also as a way of life. This state of mind is manifested in all the structures of the Romanian society, of the intellectual elites too, not only of the peasantry who

after the World War I started to have a remarkable social role as a result of the universal vote and of the agrarian reform. This is the atmosphere of real ideological changes in which the Legionary Movement appears in the political and social life<sup>1</sup>. The collaboration between the Legionary Movement and the Orthodox clergy cannot be denied. A series of remarkable priests have become legionary members seeing Corneliu Zelea Codreanu as a charismatic leader, able to determine the “revolutionary” youth to adopt an eschatological view of the Romanian state, within the great effort “to change the face of Romania”. The interference of the political ideologies with the Christian doctrine becomes an attraction for the Romanian young people wishing changes in the political and economical life of a state with great human and economical potential. The Legionary Movement provides the youth the illusion that soon they will live in a modern country, similar to Germany or Italy.

The legionary propaganda used all the means of seduction to include the clergy among its members. In the legionary ideology the priest represents a symbol, he is deified, is Romanian and nationalist, and he belongs both to this world and to eternity. The Orthodox priest and the Romanian peasant express the sacredness of the nation. The Romanian peasant had become the symbol of heroism, faith and purity of the entire nation, an icon that had to be reached by all the sons of the people. A new conception appears now according to which the participation of the priests in the political life brings about the cleansing, the deification of the entire society.

Yet, not very few voices asked the priests not to involve in politics. Many priests did not consider their active participation in politics was normal. The priests’ political options were diverse, because a rather big number of priests sympathised with the historical political parties. The cooption of the priests in the Legionary Movement was caused not so much by a political programme as especially by the language used that was abounding in religious terms and respect for faith,<sup>2</sup> a fact flattering for the pride of many priests, especially at the cities, where they came in touch with the first signs of a more and more secularised society, indifferent to the religious message. The Legionary Movement seemed to think, at the suggestion of Codreanu, to form a special group of priests used to renew the Church. In Codreanu’s opinion, the priests were the representatives of God on the earth called to the Legion to take it to the ways of faith. Although in full legionary swing, a series of theologians can show – because they knew the legionary ideology – what the role of the priest in society is, where he is called to celebrate the Holy Sacraments and guide the faithful on the way of salvation, as well as inside the Legion, where he can be only a father confessor.

The setting up of the royal dictatorship in February 1938 brings about a major change in the king’s attitude towards the Orthodox Church, suggesting her to play an important role in the Romanian society. King Charles II is aware of the danger of an open collaboration between the Orthodox Church and the Legionary Movement, less probable, but a real danger for

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<sup>1</sup> See Armin Heinen, *Legiunea „Arhanghelului Mihail” – mișcare socială și organizație politică. O contribuție la problema fascismului internațional*, translated by Cornelia and Delia Eșianu, edition II, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006; Mihai Chioveanu, „Arhanghelul acestei lumi. Legionarismul ca religie politică”, in *Studia politica*, vol. VII, no. 3, 2007, p. 555- 582.

<sup>2</sup> Mirel Bănică, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română, stat și societate în anii '30*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 146.

monarchy. The Church, in her turn, was really attached to the King<sup>3</sup>. The King needed the Church for his governing, as it was the only national institution not affected by the political trends that confused the young society who was searching for new ways of manifestation. In order to show that the Church was near the King, Charles II appointed patriarch Miron Cristea Prime Minister for political reasons. All the Orthodox publications started a campaign designed to promote the image of the King around whom all the Romanians were called to gather. The symphony between King and Patriarch remembered the old agreement between the Romanian princes and metropolitans. This was the last major involvement of the Orthodox Church in the Romanian political life.

After the dictatorship of King Charles II was instituted, the state authorities adopted a large plan of repression against the Legionary Movement. The first targets were the legionary leaders, among whom a series of priests. Certainly, the Orthodox Church and the Romanian state collaborated, but with no principles. There were no limits till where the state could interfere in the life of the church, or till where the Church could support the state. This ambiguous situation favoured certain political circles to interfere in the life of the Church and certain clergy to take active part in party politics. The interference of the state in the religious life has become a reality in the inter-war Romania.

There were priests who did not agree with the direct involvement of patriarch Miron Cristea in the political life. The legionary priests attacked rather hard the gesture of the patriarch to accept the invitation of King Charles II to take over the formal leadership of the government. The Holy Synod, in its turn, was accused to have taken anti-legionary measures, such as the one of October 1935, by which the legionaries were forbidden to raise churches or road side shrines, although certain bishops had encouraged these initiatives. The patriarch was also criticised for having forbidden the remembrance of Mota and Marin, the two legionaries considered martyrs, who had died in the war of Spain. Besides, it was allowed to arrest the legionary priests at Easter time, in 1938. Neither the King, the declared adversary of the legionaries could avoid criticism. The Legionary Movement was going to remove the old society and install a new world. This is why it was easy for the idealism of the movement to attract intellectuals. It was just this idealism that brought about violence. A series of Orthodox priests of the inter-war period considered the Legionary Movement different from all the other nationalist movements, because it was structured on the Christian teaching and wished to achieve genuine Christianity, designed to save and resurrect the Nation in the Kingdom of God<sup>4</sup>. Mircea Eliade said about this movement: *“If, as said, Nazi is based on race and fascism on State, then the legionary Movement is entitled to affirm itself as the only Christian mystic movement, a spiritual revolution, ascetic and manly, as the history of Europe has never met before”*<sup>5</sup>. The future metropolitan Nicolae Colan said: *“the Legionary Movement is the most martyred nationalist movement of Europe, as well as the deepest rooted in the Christian spirit”*<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> See Ilarion Țiu, *Mișcarea Legionară după Corneliu Codreanu. Dictatura Regală (februarie 1938-septembrie 1940). Mecanisme de schimburi de generație*, Vremea Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Moise, *Mișcarea Legionară și credința strămoșească*, Majadahonda Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Flor Strejnicu, *Creștinismul Mișcării Legionare*, Imago Publishing House, Sibiu, 2001, pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

The political situation of Romania changed after the abdication of King Charles II. From the moment he took over the power, although he had accepted to govern together with the legionaries, general Ion Antonescu, a supporter of discipline not only in the army but also in society, was aware after the first months that he would not be able to remain near the Iron Guard, which was leading chaotically and tried to impose itself through brutality and violence. The removal of the Iron Guard after the rebellion of January 1941 meant the falling out of grace of the majority of the legionary priests, many of them having been imprisoned or deported and forbidden to involve in the political life<sup>7</sup>. During the Antonescu regime the renting of real estate property and conclusion of contracts or other affairs with the Jews were forbidden. The churches were asked to annul all the renting contracts signed with Jews<sup>8</sup>. General Ion Antonescu confessed in an open letter addressed to the nation that he wanted to collaborate with the Orthodox Church for the moral revival of the nation<sup>9</sup>. When referring to the Church, the general said: “... *Today’s Romanian State has great faith in the Church of the nation so that it does not doubt at all that she will form her own best norms for a very intense pastoral activity very useful for our nation whom nobody loves better than she does...*”<sup>10</sup>. The Orthodox clergy wanted in their turn a good collaboration with the state: “... *unless there are clergy aware of their role and appreciated by the Leader of the State, the necessary equilibrium will never be achieved today, when communism undermines the foundation of the state*”<sup>11</sup>.

There were many people in minority in Great Romania, many of them Romanian citizens recently adopted and little integrated. The foreign threatening was real. Hungary wanted Transylvania, Russia had not given up Bessarabia and Bucovina, and Bulgaria wished to get Dobrugea. Maybe the greatest psychosis was raised by the Jewish minority, 4% of the country’s population, who although not very large, was very visible as a distinct minority not integrated yet. The Jews were present especially in the cities, in Bessarabia representing 26,8% of the urban population, and in 23,1% in Moldova. There were many Jewish pupils and students, but the Jewish professors were almost inexistent. In the army, magistrateship and public administration the number of Jews was low. In the rural area the Jewish population was almost inexistent, because they could not buy land. These restrictions obligated them to focus on the economical – financial system and on the liberal jobs: physicians, lawyers and journalists. Close to the World War II, there were 3147 Jewish physicians out of the 8810 ones who were practicing in Romania<sup>12</sup>. A large number of lawyers and journalists were activating too. Because of these jobs they were considered many and the nationalists considered them dangerous when referring to the “monopolising” of the country’s economy and to their influence as opinion formers.

<sup>7</sup> *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, year LIX, no. 1-2, January - February, 1941, p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Archives of the Holy Synod, Holy Synod working sessions, File no 488/1940, p. 227

<sup>9</sup> „Biserica ortodoxă și noul regim”, in *Telegraful Român*, Sibiu, year LXXXVIII, no. 41, 6, October 1940, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Archives of the Holy Synod, working sessions of the Holy Synod, File no. 505/1941, p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Negrea Romeo, *Relațiile Bisericii și stat în timpul Patriarhului Nicodim Munteanu (1939-1948)*, doctorate thesis, Bucharest, 2012, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> Teșu Solomovici, *Istoria evreilor din România*, vol. I, Teșu Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 203; Lucian Boia, *Capcanele Istoriei. Elita intelectuală românească între 1930 și 1950*, ediția II, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012, p. 54.

The Minister for religious affairs and arts sends decree no 42180 of 8 September 1940 to the parishes concerning the forbiddance of all constitutive parts and leadership bodies of the Christian cults of the country to buy religious vestments from the Jewish shops, *kindly asking you to obey*. The trading of these holy objects by the Jews was considered “*a profanation of the altar and of its servants, tolerated too long*”. In order to observe the decree the bishops and even the Ministry of the Interior were asked to engage in the observation of the decree.

There were also cases of conversion of Jews or Protestants to the Orthodox Church. The archives of New Delea parish own a series of applications of some persons of Roman Catholic or Protestant confession to be accepted in the bosom of the Orthodox Church. In August 1900, we have the application of Mrs Anica Bals, living in 157 Labirint St, of Roman Catholic rite who was asking to be allowed to be included in the “*bosom of the Christian Orthodox Church*”. Hierarch Calist Ialomiteanul assigned priest M. Radulescu to celebrate the Holy Unction<sup>13</sup>. Next year Ludmilla Ion Ghota living in 66 Tepes Voda St received the catechisation, after she had received the approval of the Primate Metropolitan, the religious service having been celebrated by the same priest Radulescu<sup>14</sup>. The same procedure had been observed in 1899, by Rudolf Haly, Albertina Bittner, Wilhelm and Heinrich<sup>15</sup>. In 1910, an approval is mentioned for Roza Holmaleh, of Jewish religion, to receive the Baptism, who was named Paulina at baptism, after the name of her Orthodox Godmother<sup>16</sup>. Thus, we have conversions to the Orthodox Church even before the hard years of the persecutions the Jews suffered close to the World War II, when the number of Jews who received the Christian baptism grew, as they declared themselves Orthodox or Roman Catholics not to be deported.

Rev. Hadarag wrote about Jews in a report: “*Besides this sort of people I have a special product of the war in my parish, dangerous and detrimental to the moral and even material state of the local population. There are a few tens of Ukrainian families, especially Jews, who populated the outskirts. They stay all day long without doing anything, especially the women and children, and their men are always out, nobody knows where and for what dubious jobs. They spend huge amounts of money, asking for unreasonable prices for anything and especially for articles of consume, putting up the prices and making the life of all those around hard. The women are lazy, in general, hardly moving in the courtyards of their houses, walking about in groups, and dressed almost always with no moral scruples. These depraved women are a permanent spiritual scandal for everybody, especially for the young people around, tempting to laziness and good living without working*”<sup>17</sup>. Influenced by the nationalist propaganda, the Orthodox clergy saw the Jews in minority as a cause of the turmoil the Romanian society was passing through.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Hagiu” parish numbered over 200 Orthodox families and only two Jewish ones. In 1931, parish priest Grigore Popescu mentioned in a report: “*Hagiu parish with 470 Orthodox families, 245 Jewish, 31 Catholics, 9 Lutherans, 3 Armenians, 2 United, and 2 Adventists suffer from a cultural point of view of the lack of any initiative to idealism, culture, and social solidarity of the classes living here. Taking into*

<sup>13</sup> Archives of New Delea parish, Correspondence file, 1899-1903, p. 9

<sup>14</sup> Archives of New Delea parish, Correspondence file, 1899-1903, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Archives of New Delea parish, Correspondence file, 1899-1903, p. 2, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Archives of New Delea parish, Correspondence file, 1899-1903, p. 16, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Archives of New Delea parish, Correspondence file, 1932.

*account the interest of the Romanians and of Orthodoxy, the lack of this initiative and cultural work, given the great percentage of heterogeneous elements from a national and Orthodox point of view – in proportion of 2/3 compared to the number of the Romanian Orthodox families and of other nations and confessions can be a real danger rather soon*". In 1935, the demographic state of the parish passes through major changes, so that besides the 417 Orthodox families, 327 Jewish ones are registered here. Rev. Grigore N. Popescu mentions in his census some other Catholic, Adventist, Reformed, Calvin and Muslim families. In his book entitled "A part of the city and a holy place of worship, Bucharest, 1935", this priest deplores the fact that the Orthodox families were selling their houses in the parish, Jewish families coming instead, especially because the Jewish district was nearby<sup>18</sup>. The same priest also deplored the lack of religiosity of the Orthodox faithful: "*The religious state of things is much under average. The family life almost does no longer practice some old customs of faith. The Church assistance is required in most families only in extreme cases and imperative needs rather due to the old customs preserved than out of the living conviction of today's families*". The parish documents also include applications of some Jewish people to convert to the Orthodox faith, some of them close to the war time, since they were afraid of deportation. Priest Gheorghe Popescu reported the archpriest in June 1939: "*We inform you that Sunday, 28 May inst., after we have done the proper catechisation, we celebrated the Holy Sacrament for architect Aurel Focsanu and his wife Ortansa, who after passing to Christianity were named Constantine and Constantina. Their godfather was architect Mihai Mihalcea from Bucharest*". The Baptism was not easy to celebrate because their application was not approved for the first time because of administrative reasons.

Neither the Adventists were seen as integrated in the Romanian society, the concern of the Romanian Patriarchate in their case having been obvious. Even during the first years of the World War I they were seen as anti-combatants, as a danger within the huge effort of the Orthodox people. From 1923 – 1925, the House of Prayer and the publishing house of the Adventists were built in Labirint St., named Metropolitan Ghenadie Petrescu before, in "Hagiu" parish<sup>19</sup>. In March 1943, during the war, the parish priest of Hagiu church gave the following explanation while referring to the activity of the Adventists in the parish: "*As for the order of the Ministry for Religious Affairs... we inform you that the Adventists' House of Prayer and their well organized publishing house are situated in 116 Labirint St., within Hagiu parish.*

*Given the new state order we submit, with great respect, to your consideration, the following suggestions:*

- 1. The House of Prayer which is big and spacious to be changed into a seat for Religious Theatre, which has no seat so far, so that we could encourage the young people who proved their capacity and talent. Our Orthodox Church would have one more means of propaganda for her benefit. I mention that the changing of this house of prayer into a theatre hall could be done with no great expenses.*
- 2. The Adventist publishing house located in a separate building in the same courtyard of the House of Prayer to be entrusted to the leadership of the publishing house for church books,*

<sup>18</sup> Grigore N. Popescu, *Un colț de oraș și un sfânt lăcaș din București*, Bucharest, 1935, p.112.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

*either to the Bible Institute, or to appoint a priest competent in the field, to print only books of prayer, small brochures and works for the young priests who need much support for their writing. I think we could set up here the editorial office of a great church newspaper under the direct leadership of the Holy Patriarchate. This publishing house could be entrusted even to "Glasul monahilor" newspaper, till the organization and setting up of the great unique daily publication many priests are thinking of"*<sup>20</sup>.

A series of parishes of Bucharest had a large number of Gypsy families, with their own traditions and faiths, some of them different from the Romanians in their majority. Marginalized, illiterate and avoided by the tough capitalist society, the Gypsies of Bucharest were living a hard life, so that only those who had a job or were fiddlers lived better. Parish priest Vasile Hadarag of New Delea church wrote a report on this state of things: *"There are also foreigners in this parish. A whole colony of Gypsies should be mentioned first – about 100 families or even more – set up just in the heart of the parish. They live a miserable life, in fact typical to their race. Besides their bad habits they also keep their own language. Stealing is the characteristic of the Gypsy race. Most of them are fiddlers. They live in a revolting promiscuity. A man lives with two, three, or four women almost at the same time, only in different houses, and has children with all of them and takes care of none. It goes without saying that they live in cohabitation (concubinage). They resent any attempt to improve their living. Even if they have the necessary means of living, because some of them have profitable jobs today: masons, shoemakers, tailors which can bring them 2, 3 or 4 hundred lei a day, their living in their houses is miserable. They do not have a proper bed. They sleep on the floor wrapped in a carpet or coat. They eat and drink whatever they earn and they never have what they need. They have a series of religious superstitions, some of them stranger than the others, to which they stick by all means and always seem to be seized by a fear that does not make them any better. They do not fear authorities much. Things can rather be solved with them invoking the fury of God. I succeeded in marrying some of their families in this way. They do not agree to have weddings with little money, because they enjoy days on end at their weddings. The tramps of the waste plots of land, moochers and ruffians of Bucharest are Gypsies. I try to control and bring them to a more human living. Briefly, this race of people can trouble others a lot. They do not come to the church on Sundays or feasts, but only when the dead are remembered, at baptisms and absolutions. They do not have patience to listen to the religious service. At the great feasts, Easter and Christmas, they burst in, cram, do not listen to anything and I am sure they do not benefit of anything, and are always the same. Some of them who go to school while children are used to some order and are a little changed. But they avoid school, just as they avoid church. They respect the priests and try not to offend them. They even support reproach and promise they give up their bad habits, but forget at the same time"*<sup>21</sup>. On 30 March 1932, priest Vasile mentioned in the report sent to the archpriest of District II Bucharest: *"Only the Gypsy families dishonour us. They are lazy and steal"*<sup>22</sup>. The persecutions the Gypsies suffered during the World War II were hard –

<sup>20</sup> Archives of Hagiu parish, Correspondence file, 1943, doc. 6 March 1943.

<sup>21</sup> Archives of New Delea parish, Correspondence file, 1923, doc. 12 Dec.1923.

<sup>22</sup> Archives of New Delea parish, Correspondence file, Report to deanery II Bucharest, 30 March 1932.

applied by Antonescu regime – with deportations to Transnistria where from many of them never returned<sup>23</sup>.

Antonescu regime saw the unity of the state in the unity of the Orthodox Church too, which he considered it was the only one able to do away with the vices of the Romanian society. Thus, general Antonescu was a supporter of the Orthodox Church, even if sometimes he did not avoid criticising the Orthodox clergy. Antonescu also approached the Orthodox Church through the financial aids he offered. The parochial council of Parcul Calarasi church thanked the Marshal for having granted them 1,000,000 lei for the 20 Russian workers prisoners and for having assured them that military lorries would transport the materials and earth resulted during the raising of the great church in Bucharest<sup>24</sup>. This church, traditionally founded by Marshal Ion Antonescu, is neighbouring the parishes of Old Delea, New Delea and Hagiu, a space that the leader of the state wanted to be systematised and bedecked keeping the churches existent as landmarks. New Delea church has also enjoyed the Marshal's attention who donated 100,000 lei for the poor children of this parish to buy them clothes.

The inter-war Romanian society was really afraid of the minorities which they perceived, sometime unjustified, as anti-national, as those who were plotting the division of the people and of the country. The parochial archives show us how the Orthodox priests of the time perceived the ethnic and religious diversity of their parishes, some of them submitted to an intense process of changing that really affected the Orthodox religious life, to the great discontent of the Orthodox who were helpless when faced with these changes.

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<sup>23</sup> See Viorel Achim, *Documente privind deportarea țiganilor în Trasnistria*, vol. I-II, Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> ANIC, PCM fund, Military Office, Ion Antonescu, File no. 406/1943, p. 13.

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