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PHD THESIS ABSTRACT

*CONFESSORS AND MARTYRS OF THE
COMMUNIST PRISONS IN ROMANIA, WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DOBROGEA*

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1. Argument and framework objectives of the work

The times in which we live, without advancing the idea of apocalyptic spiritual crises sustained by some radical tendencies, are times of challenge to the consciousness of Christian and national identity and belonging. For this reason, without a critical note of subjectivity, we consider that the transition, which in our opinion has not yet been completed, from communism to the freedom of democracy, represents a test of conscience for every Romanian who experienced the totalitarian regime until 1989, the test of being tributary to predecessors who, fighting for the cause of freedom of religious expression, proved to be references for the continuity and strengthening of the Christian-national identity. The social-political transition, even if it now encompasses a series of neo-Marxist ideologies publicly defined as anti-Christian, brings the memory of the past to the fore in a pressing way. Today's freedom, which combines all the social aspects of a Romanian, is the consequence of the struggle to the point of sacrifice, martyrdom, of those who understood Orthodox Christianity in its authentic, Christic nature.

We are not wrong if we say that all those who suffered in prisons as opponents of the atheistic and anti-social communist regime are true "heroes" of the faith who understood the true dimension of the confession of Christ in the face of the communist bloc: human integrity, freedom of social expression, prosperity and cultural development, humanization to the extent of holiness.

Within this broad, multidimensional spectrum, our research set out in this PhD thesis aims, as a framework objective, to highlight the muceny in communist prisons as an exercise in remembering and raising awareness of cardinal human values. The specific objectives of our research are the following: (a) the historical-religious presentation of the condition of the Romanian Orthodox Church during the period of atheistic communism; (b) bringing to the foreground the context of suffering experienced by Romanian priests and intellectuals, focusing more on the phenomenology of their experience; (c) dating and detailing the brutal and aggressive

forms applied by the communists in order to stifle Christian effervescence; (d) problematizing the possibilities and conditions of canonization of those who suffered for the confession of Christ.

The brutal violation of basic democratic rights and freedoms in the name of the "class struggle" specific to the "dictatorship of the proletariat" overshadowed and covered up the achievements of the Romanian people as a whole and not of a regime of persecution by definition. Many took part in the "blessings" of communism, but many more shared the drama of millions of foreigners in their own country; some directly opposed it, others waited for the dawn of freedom. In the face of the refusal of collectivisation and the surrender of quotas to the state, the resistance of the army in the mountains (there were more than 200 partisan nuclei, the best known being the Ogoranu and Arnăuțoiu groups in the Southern Carpathians) or the workers' protests (the miners' strikes in the Valea Jiului in 1972 and 1977), the Securitate responded with harsh reprisals: torture, investigations and political frame-ups. For example, in the much-publicised trial of the "White Guard" organisation in Hunedoara in 1958 - a real set-up - harsh verdicts were handed down: 5 death sentences, 47 life sentences, 4 life sentences to hard labour and 17 sentences of between 3 and 25 years in prison. Communist courts, following sham trials, filled the prisons and labour extermination camps with innocent people. Lay people and clergy were arrested, interrogated and sentenced; some of them were released in 1964, others rest as martyrs in unknown graves scattered throughout the Romanian gulag.

2. Relevance of the topic

What we have set out to do in this doctoral thesis is to explore the dramatic, but edifying, experience of some "men" of the Church, who, by the example of their testimony, represent living consciences for present generations, if, of course, they still recognise their Christian and national roots. We say this because, with regret, we can observe that in 21st century Europe, if in public discourse you mention respect for national values, which culturally and identifiably edify Romanianess, you are labelled as a fundamentalist, cut off from the progressive and integral spirit of the European "community". There is already an aggressive trend to override belonging to Christian and national values by neo-Marxist ideologies that intend to relativize and erase the

past. The secularized logic of today's world states the morally and religiously flattened state of the meaningless edifice without human and religious substance.

As a Christian, I propose to make a minimal contribution to the actualization of the lived experiences of Christian martyrs persecuted in the most abominable ways simply because their own religious and intellectual convictions were in radical contradiction to the principles of atheistic communism.

Once Romania joined the European Union, new challenges arose: the issue of homosexuality, families torn apart because one member works abroad, drugs, prostitution, Romanian immigrant communities without religious assistance. The Church must respond to all these challenges according to Revelation and the teachings of the Holy Fathers. If in the period referred to above there was only one great enemy of the Church, nowadays the challenges are multiple. If in the past the only way to fight was silent and spiritual resistance, today all the constituent elements of the Church must be involved. Involving priests in social work was forbidden in the past; today, this kind of activity is increasingly necessary.

The Orthodox Church brings a new spiritual experience to a Western society oriented towards material goods, based on the martyrdom of people who suffered during the communist period. Their faith and spiritual struggle proved that humanity aims at unity in Christ; but this unity, as a spiritual experience, is above material goods; this experience must start from this world. The martyrs of the communist period gave us examples that understanding and living in the unity of Christ is possible even in this world. It is within this precious experience that our faith contributes to the maintenance of Christian civilization in today's Europe.

3. Structure of the PhD thesis

The thesis is structured in five chapters. The first chapter - MEMORY OF A TIME OF SUFFERING: COMMUNISM AND THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH - includes the following themes: the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet-Communist monopoly; the rest of the Orthodox world and atheist communism; political resistance: Spirituality as a form of anti-Sovietism; The Serbian Orthodox Church - from uncertainties to identity coherence; Post-communist Orthodoxy; A

historiography of communism in Romania; A clash of opposites: the Romanian Orthodox Church versus atheist communist ideology (1945-1964).

Chapter II - FROM THE IDEOLOGICAL RESETTING OF THE NEW MAN TO THE MEASURE OF HOLINESS IN MUCENICITY proposes a framework presentation of the way in which the resetting of man was applied in the communist logic, a method applied in certain prisons in Romania. Also here we have synthetically presented the Burning Bush movement as a catalyst of emerging spirituality in those sad times. Last but not least, I presented the trends of the destruction of church life at institutional and parish level: persecution, censorship, deprivation of religious freedom during the communist period.

Chapter III - TESTIMONIES OF SUFFERERS IN COMMUNIST PRISON - and Chapter IV - CHURCH AND CULTURAL PERSONALITIES WHO SUFFERED IN THE CONCENTRATION GULAGS IN DOBROGE are intended to be a presentation of the harsh experiences in communist prisons, supported by testimonies.

Chapter V - CANONIZATION OF COMMUNIST DUMMINERS: FROM MYTHOLOGIZATION TO NECESSITY problematizes an aspect still held back in the attention of the Orthodox Church. The following sub-themes are framed here: the veneration of saints - a catalyst for religious sentiment and national belonging, the communist regime and attempts to change the memory of the Church, prison experiences and the creation of confessors' covens.

The repression of the Church was an essential element in the imposition of the Soviet model in Romania. In 1948, the adoption of the Law on Religious Denominations allowed the Communist Party to take control of the largest Orthodox community outside the Soviet Union. This law established state control over episcopal appointments, ensured strong Communist Party representation in the Holy Synod and imposed a new status for the Romanian Orthodox Church, centralising its administration under the patriarch. All church property was nationalised and the United Church was forcibly united with the Orthodox Church by Decree 358/1948. The spiritual leaders of the Jewish community and the various Protestant churches were imprisoned or exiled, while Orthodox and United priests and bishops who refused to collaborate became one of the largest groups of political prisoners.

Following the 1956 Hungarian uprising, a new period of terror began when Decree No. 318/1958, defining new offences punishable by death, was passed to prevent any similar uprising in Romania. By Decree No. 410/1959, Orthodox

monasteries and monastic seminaries were closed, and most monks and nuns aged 60 or younger were forced to leave the monasteries and find lay jobs.

In 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu was elected leader of the Romanian Communist Party. At first, there were signs of liberalisation in domestic politics. Ceaușescu soon won international respect when he recognised the state of Israel and refused to support the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Rather than affirming Romanian identity, Ceaușescu's anti-Soviet nationalism fuelled an ideology of self-glorification that in later years developed into a neo-Stalinist cult of personality and a new kind of nepotistic despotism. Although he tolerated the majority Romanian Orthodox Church as the 'national' church, Ceaușescu ensured that it was systematically infiltrated by the secretaries to serve his anti-Russian agenda.

Provided they were loyal to the regime, Orthodox Church leaders avoided the worst persecution and created an impressive "show" in ecumenical forums, presenting government policies as more liberal than they actually were. This involved a certain degree of basic compromise, which was concealed by the large number of foreign church leaders with whom Romanians came into contact. The Romanian Orthodox Church joined the WCC (World Council of Churches) in 1961 and soon became by far the most ecumenical of all the Orthodox churches. Behind the scenes, however, there has been a sometimes brutal persecution of the faithful. Petre Tuțea, for example, spent 30 years as a prisoner and another 28 years under house arrest at the hands of the secret police, the Securitate. None of this hidden history has been found in the ecumenical forums where Romanian church leaders have played leading roles. It was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the overthrow of Ceaușescu in 1989 that the true experience of the Romanian Orthodox under communism began to emerge.

Under communism, all forms of religion were programmatically rejected as philosophically incompatible with Marx's dialectical materialism. Lenin and Stalin put into practice the classical Marxist formula, which derives religious alienation from the more basic economic and social alienation, and consequently turns the struggle against religion into a struggle against the unequal social system. One important phenomenon was that of so-called re-education, or 'brainwashing', as it was called in the West. In Romania, the architects of re-education sought to eliminate religion, especially the majority Christian faith, and traditional Romanian culture, especially among the younger generation. National consciousness was to be subordinated to communist ideology. Psychological engineering aimed to change human nature by erasing what

Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, designates as the image of God in the human person and replacing this image with the Marxist-Leninist ideal of an atomised, isolated individual who energetically adheres to the totalitarian 'party'.

In communist ideology and practice, the tendency to self-identify as something entirely "new" and salvific has been frequently observed. The realisation of this identity begins forcibly with a reinvention of history, then with the construction of a new society, with a new economic system, and for this new society, a "new man", for "it was impossible to conceive of a communist world populated by disguised bourgeois"; the alternative produced, however, was "an individual devoid of individualism". The creation of the 'new man' proved to be the greatest problem of communism, as the attempts at 're-education' were to show: 'In order to rebuild the economic and social systems, it was sufficient to dismantle the old structures. But how to proceed to destroy the human spirit and replace it with a different one? What would be the formula of this different human being?"

Boia's detailed analysis is most illuminating in interpreting Marxist-Leninist theory as it was applied during the Communist period in Romania. He also provides information about the inventor of the original model that was tested and improved in Pitesti. Boia's work did not intend to include those who, in Nicholl's words, "live ... by a presence they call Spirit or Holy Spirit," or to answer the question, "What exactly is it that the martyr witnesses?" . Nor does Boia raise the nature and question of evil addressed by Yannaras (2012). However, these dimensions appear in the accounts of those who endured Pitesti and other prisons and form an important background for what will be written below, because an important part - perhaps the most important for the new regime - of the "formula" for the "new man" was the absolute necessity to destroy the faith in God of every victim. The human spirit living by the presence of the Holy Spirit "must be destroyed, because it cannot be subdued... 're-education' is the demonization of man, the mutilation of the spirit, the killing of God, the mechanization of consciousness, the annihilation of personality, the destruction of freedom, absolute slavery, remote control of the psyche, reflex conditioning of the mind."

Communist ideology regarded religious belief as a matter of education, for which "re-education" was therefore necessary. When this could not be achieved by conviction, it had to be attempted by force. The "re-education" of the students at Pitesti was the most profound attempt to create the "new man". The prison in Pitesti was described as a virtual "laboratory" in which a group of inmates, led by Eugen Turcanu,

all carefully recruited in the Suceava prison as suitable for the task, were allowed to "re-educate" their fellow inmates and thus find out how much more human beings could endure. Others, however, do not interpret the Pitesti experiment as a scientific experiment with a definite political purpose: they see it in eschatological terms, as a "showing" (to use Nicholl's term) of the war between good and evil, between angels of light and angels of darkness. Attempts at re-education have been abandoned since May 1951, for reasons still unclear, although different interpretations of events are beginning to be offered. By then, groups of "re-educated" prisoners had been transferred to other prisons and labour camps, and Gherla had (since autumn 1950) become the re-education centre.

As Yannaras observed, when the "extreme peaks of atrocities" were repeated, "with each repetition, the original pattern was surpassed". The original model brought to Romania in 1944 was constructed by Anton Semenovich Makarenko (1888-1939), a Soviet pedagogue specialising in juvenile delinquency, whom I have mentioned. His methods, later mirrored in Pitesti, involved the rehabilitation of young delinquents, with the 'help' of older ones who were themselves re-educated. Makarenko worked with his subjects in colonies. Between 1927 and 1935, he perfected his methods, modelling the new man he wished to create on his own idealised image of the Czechoslovak officers with whom he associated. Makarenko realised the power of the 'collective' to 'adapt' behaviour, putting his most recalcitrant students in the collective dormitory for a night and reporting excellent results and tame behaviour by morning. At Pitesti, Makarenko's vision was taken to a whole new level, in that the prisoners were physically and psychologically tortured and in the end result that, along with their torturers, the hapless victims were presented, in a demonstrative process, as the original perpetrators of the whole scheme.

In 1944, Pitesti was already home to a group of pupils and students imprisoned under the Antonescu regime, including Ioan Ianolide and Valeriu Gafencu, many of whom were members of the Brotherhood of the Cross (FDC), the youth organisation of the Legionary Movement. They were too young to have held any political office before their arrest; in 1949, they were no more than about 30 years old and had been joined by a group arrested in 1948, including Constantin Oprişan, the national leader of the FDC. The school-age prisoners were transferred to Trăguşor before re-education began. The FDC prisoners were a particular challenge for Țurcanu and his team. They combined a strong Orthodox Christian faith with a love of their country; they were disciplined in

the practice of prayer, confession, Bible study and had a strong ethic of mutual aid - 'legionary assistance', as it was derisively called by some of the prisoners. Pitesti provided the best possible means of testing the Makarenko method: there was a perfect control group, including some of the most talented and religious students in Romania. There were also possibilities, never repeatable elsewhere, to combine all the predispositions necessary for "success": terror, isolation, surprise and lack of responsibility.

How was this to be done? The Soviet pedagogue Anton Makarenko, in his pedagogical poem *The Road to Life*, completed in 1935, devised a method of re-education through violence and intimidation for homeless children and juvenile offenders. His aim was to impose a new personality based on the values of dialectical materialism, which regarded material existence as the determinant of human consciousness. One expression used by prisoners to describe this ideal of the communist individual was *homo sovieticus*; by this they meant a stale, spiritually dead humanity in which personality had been destroyed in favour of collective identity.

Makarenko's method was also used in Soviet labour camps on prisoners of war, who later formed the vanguard of the Red Army when it invaded Eastern Europe from 1944. These included Romanians who were repatriated at the end of the war and then used within the Romanian prison system to inflict sustained physical and psychological torture on their fellow prisoners. Torture and terror were used to "unmask" the person and reveal the "beast within" - the person's supposed real identity - which eventually led to the forced rejection of God and country, the denunciation of family and friends, and the confession of crimes that had never been committed. This process of extorting false confessions was later extended when re-educated victims were used as ideological contaminants within society. People also had to accept the assertion of Soviet 'superiority' over Western capitalism and the idea that every member of the Soviet working class could and should become a model of Soviet humanity and culture.

This Soviet-inspired programme of 're-education and demasculination' was carried out between 1949 and 1952 (starting in Suceava, then in the prisons of Piteşti, Ocnele Mari, Târgşor, Gherla and Târgu Ocna) and between 1960 and 1964 (in Aiud, Gherla and Botoşani). The experiment was also carried out on the canal built by political prisoners, which linked the Danube to the Black Sea, and in the sanatorium at Targu Ocna, where seriously ill prisoners were held. Almost entirely ignored by the

Western media, this programme was supervised from Moscow by Beria and Stalin himself.

The re-education experiment in Romania took place in two stages: the first, between 1949 and 1952, when tens of thousands of young people who refused to submit to the Soviet occupation and ideology were imprisoned; the second, between 1960 and 1964, when a general amnesty was granted to political dissidents following the withdrawal of the Red Army in 1958. These two phases were different in at least two respects. The first was aimed at re-educating the younger generation (mainly students and pupils accused either of belonging to anti-communist and pro-monarchist organisations or of being "enemies of the working class") and bringing them into the fold of communism. The second was aimed at mature people who had usually spent at least a decade in political prison. Victims of the second stage no longer had to be brainwashed (unlike the young people subjected to the first stage), but 'persuaded' by more subtle methods to cooperate with the communist state. However, these methods still involved configuration in fixed conditions and deprivation of the basic necessities of life, along with poisoning and TB infection, which appears to have been deliberate.

The programme of re-education and de-masking was a carefully designed system to depersonalize what the Romanian Christian dissident Petre Tuțea described as the 'primordial mask' of humanity, which cannot be erased but only damaged, and the 'divine mask', which can only be recovered by the actual 'de-masking' of the individual vocation. Contrary to Makarenko's theories, some prisoners experienced the divine presence in a way that transfigured them. Some discovered their mission by embodying the narrative of Christ in their own lives. Their individual experiences, illustrated in works of art, personal relationships or silence in prayer, were understood by them as a witness to the Incarnation. These little-known testimonies are part of a vast martyrology of the 20th century.

4. Methodological tools used

Given that the topic involves a bivalent approach, i.e. historical and descriptive, for a better congruence of our research we used historical and analytical methods. Also, since our analyses also imply theological expositions, we also used the systematic method, which facilitated us to specify some points of hermeneutics of religious

experience and the meaning of testimony. The literature used in the argumentation is mainly in Romanian, but we have also used books/studies in English.

The subject of this PhD work was not an easy one to approach, even though today there are many published papers on it. It is difficult due to the fact that, studying the documents and the main contributions of the researchers who discovered and published them, we come to the conclusion that the Romanian Orthodox Church in the period 1945-1964 had somehow a double history. On the one hand there is the official history, which could be discovered by reading the communist media of that time and the church magazines, and on the other hand there is the unofficial history, which comes to light by studying the documents in the archives of the Securitate, the archives of the Communist Party, the archives of the Department of Religious Affairs or the archives of the courts that sentenced anti-communist clerics or laymen to prison or even death. The latest history reveals a tense struggle by Church leaders against Communist interference in the internal affairs of the Church. Parish priests, abbots, abbesses, monks, nuns and lay people fought against communism with all their might. And their strength was the Christian faith, for which communism, its atheistic propaganda, its dictatorship, its contempt for common decency and tradition, was the "red plague". Under pressure from the communist state, the Church had to adapt its practical administrative life. Of course, there were setbacks, but the Orthodox Church never made a policy of compromise, betraying its faith, morals or people.

For the Romanian people, almost half of the 20th century represented an internal and external struggle between preserving identity and faith and adhering to a materialistic and totalitarian system that wanted to wipe out every trace of Christian faith from Romanian soil. The communist regime tried to tear man from his communion with the transcendent, with eternity, with the holiness given by faith in God, in order to subject him to materialistic, ephemeral ideology. The aim was to re-educate the Romanian people in the spirit of the 'new man', i.e. an obedient man, devoid of opinion and initiative, a 'brainwashed' man. The "new man" had to renounce his homeland, his family, in order to worship a regime that would make him happy in the future. The aim was to replace the Christian faith with a materialistic ideology. The communist political agenda called for egalitarianism, the renunciation of private property in favour of the community. What may seem like an ideal way of life was in fact a way for the Communists to gain power and establish a monopoly for a long time. Communism was meant to be, beyond political ideals, a new religion to which all had to bow down, to

prostrate themselves, as the last, only and supreme ideology. The Romanian people did not remain indifferent to this forced imposition of atheistic ideology, but sought to remain dignified and strong in their faith and spiritual identity inherited from their ancestors, even if this meant deprivation of freedom, agony, torture, the break-up of families.

From Nero to Stalin, anti-Christian persecution has made millions of martyrs around the world. The "superiority" of communism, however, lay not only in the fact that it followed the killing of Christians (because killing them freed them from torture and made them martyrs), but in killing the faith itself out of their minds and hearts, to replace it, through terror, with the materialistic abomination of desolation. The plan is applied systematically and over the long term, at the level of the individual and the country thrown for decades into murderous dungeons, shot in the mountains or deported to Siberian death camps, Romanians have suffered for their faith in God and in the Christian destiny of this nation.

Man's spiritual quest, his hunger and thirst for God's righteousness could not be stopped by the promoters of communist ideology, who saw their opponents as heretics, enemies to be destroyed, exterminated, for their refusal to be re-educated in the spirit of the "new man". An entire state apparatus was created to impose the Stalinist system: the political police - the Security Police, the main pawn in the surveillance and fulfilment of the socialist-atheist mission, various informers, instigators and opportunists, who became the shadows of the spies of others: at work, in the family, at school, in the same building, in the church, in the trade union. Party members, brave collaborators of the Romanian socialist state, received privileges for their involvement in the re-education of the people according to the Stalinist model. Those who refused to adhere to principles contrary to national identity were considered 'enemies of the nation', 'bandits', and together with their descendants became second-class citizens, without the rights of free people or intellectual training. They came from all walks of life, whether they were simple peasants who refused to give up their land and farm animals, or bourgeois, labelled 'enemies of the people' and who submitted to imperialist-capitalist ideas. According to the communist political programme, the intelligentsia were to be abolished for their ideas contrary to the ruling party and their sympathy with other political parties, and replaced only by those who obeyed the regime.

A great challenge to the communist regime was the category of church ministers, because they preached the joy of faith in the eternal and living God, and the communists were eager to eliminate any idea of divinity from people's hearts. People's affection for their ancestral heritage led them to resist the red giant that was looming large in Romania. Regardless of the political regime that was installed in Bucharest, the ministers of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as well as those of other faiths and denominations, were always persecuted. The attitude of politicians has varied.

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