Maria Mateoniu Micu
The National Romanian Peasant Museum
[mariamateoniu@gmail.com]

The Relationship between Orthodoxy and Politics in Dictatorship and Democracy
The Exemplary Case of Saint Nicholas Monastery (Romania)

Abstract: *The aim of this article is to investigate the relationship between orthodoxy and politics in dictatorship and democracy analyzing in the case study of Saint-Nicolas Monastery (Romania), the place we have carried our field etnlogical research. Mostly coming from rural areas, but choosing an ascetic life by their own free will, the nuns of the monastery does not hesitate to assert a double identity: peasant and orthodox. Family and Orthodoxy shall be lodged in their universe of collective meanings in which daily experience relates to divinity, to the transcendent order. However, what makes this community a case study represents the memory of the experience undergone during Communism.*

The memory of the monastery is as revelatory for the double movement between, on one side, the state policy's seizure over Orthodoxy and, on the other side, its resist in its privat frames. To escape from the increasingly strict control to which the monastery's territory was committed by the authorities, the nuns find refuge in the domestic space.

Keywords: *Romenia; Orthodoxy; communism; trasnition; Saint-Nicolas Monastery.*

Introduction

Orthodoxy is often reproached with passivity and the lack of the apostolic actions. As it has been assumed and experienced by the Romanians, the tradition of Eastern Christianity, many authors considers, does not cause participation but obedience in relation to political power, does not involve belief in something or someone, but submission to an authority.

Orthodox eschatological dimension with its contemplative attitude is more profound than that found in the west spiruality. As Ioan I. Ică very well observed, the traditions of the two branches of Christianity would manifest themselves "as two distinct socio-cultural figures: conservative and defensive, of Platonic, mystical, and Eastern inspira-

tion, oriented towards the transcendent and the atemporal in the Orthodox East; progressive and offensive, of Aristotelian, juridical inspiration, oriented towards the immanent and history in the Catholic West" (Ică, 2002, p. 28).

For Romanians, consider Daniel Barbu, Orthodoxy is not so much a matter of personal faith, but an organic law recalling organization and administration of a social body. Romanian Christianity was understood not so much as a form of faith (*fides*), an individual experience, but rather as a communal law (*lex*) and a moral code of conduct, enforced by the "old and good men" of the villages. In these rural communities, customs and traditions prevailed, while Christian spiritual life was largely reserved for monks (Barbu, 2000, p. 96-98). This type of Orthodoxy, "understood less as a dogmatic heritage and more as an instrument for producing and reproducing communal unity, seems to constitute in modernity a form of social capital for Romanians, characterized by an ethic of political conformity and dependence on authority …" (Ibidem, p. 39).

All these facts led us to question the role that Orthodox monasteries have played in relation to the state and society, as well as to what extent reflections on Orthodoxy as passive and excessively contemplative align with recent historical data. We sought to decipher this issue through research conducted at Saint Nicholas Monastery, a community of nuns in Romania. This research culminated in a doctoral dissertation defended at Laval University in Canada and later in a book published by the same university's press (Mateoniu, 2015).

The memory of the monastery becomes an important source of information regarding the relationship between the nuns, as faithful Orthodox believers, the state and church's authority, and also the other people and God. From this memory, we want to understand how the nuns shall be related to the ecclesial authority, state and society in Communism and Post-communism. Has their vision of the world been in favors of a passive or an active attitude? Does Orthodoxy suppose, as Daniel Barbu claims, to bow in front of authority and rather co-participation, „not to believe in something or in somebody, but simply conform to the opinion of the majority"? (Barbu, 1999, p. 247) To what extent does the monastery exist in a significant memory environment for the relationship of Orthodox religion with politics?

We are aware of the fact that answers to such questions which come from a single survey may imply the risk of applying a particular

reality to the society as a whole. At the same time, just a particular analysis can help us to understand life in its smallest details, lived and narrated by simple persons with no implication in high politic. Our study is even more important as it refers to an Orthodox religion community, being situated, in other words, in the heart of Orthodoxy, which allows us to observe everything from the social and religions frames of the communism experience's memory, the influence of Orthodox knowledge and tradition upon the attitudes and the behaviors of nuns, their relations with laity, with authority, to their relation with the idea of death and sacrifice.

Saint Nicholas Monastery: Location and Importance

The monastery Saint Nicholas is situated in Bucegi Montains and was founded in the middle of the XVIII century. At first, the monastery adopts a cenobitic way of life, and changes later on, in the XIX cemetery, its organization method, remaining until today part of the Orthodox monasteries with a idiorhytmic organization or an "own life".[1] This means a different relationship with ecclesiastical authority, allowing for a relatively autonomous life, with individual expressions of faith being at least as important as collective ones.

Just like a village, having the church in the middle of it, with the houses spread around, the Saint Nicholas monastery was lived, during our field research, by 60 nuns. Each house guested a spiritual family composed by two, three or four nuns, having acertain autonomy in the ecclesiastical authority. Benefiting from the right of minimum property, the nuns administer their goods individually, the role of the tutelary authority, especially the prioress's, being to take care of the overall cult welfare and to manage the shared property of the monastery, pretty reduced as a result of the collectivization of agriculture during communism.

The institution of the abbey has the main role of overseeing Christian practices, managing the monastery, and maintaining connections with the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church, with parishioners, and with tourists, the monastery being not only a place of worship but also a tourist destination.

The monastery maintains, in this direction, a paradoxical relation with the society, of complementarity and distinction, at the same time.

[1] It is known that in the orient Christianity there are three types of monasteries: monasterie with shared life (everybody lives together), monasteries having an idiorhytmic organization and hermitages (see P. Tomáš Špidlík, 1997, p. 7).

Monachos comes from *monos*, which means both "unique" and "alone." In other words, withdrawn into the wilderness, in solitude, and united with oneself and with God. Monastic life means more than just belonging to a community, even if it is a particular one with a collective role; it is a personal choice within the framework of Christian faith. Not everyone reaches, and especially not everyone remains in the monastery, the nuns were keen to tell us, but only those called to follow the path of holiness. "To have a calling" or "to feel the calling" is one of the conditions of monastic life, and striving for holiness means living the paradox of seeking God in solitude while also maintaining a constant relationship with others. In short, the search for God in the case of Romanian monasteries did not mean closing the doors to the world, but rather living paradoxically, with the world and outside the world. In constant expectation, Orthodox monasteries remain open to pilgrims and parishioners. Through its specific ideorhythmic organization, Saint Nicholas Monastery is all the more oriented toward maintaining these connections, implicitly with the peasant environment from which the nuns come.

The monastery has created its own tradition, but according to the Orthodox tradition of the laity, the monastic community emerging from the society and continuing to maintain live interactions with it. Orthodoxy and family are the fundamental frames of monastic memory (for the traditional memory frames, see Halbwachs, 1952), the nuns transposing in the familial and religious Orthodox frames their collective universe of significations in which daily experiences regard divinity and the celestial world which transcends them.

Even so, what makes from the monastic community an exemplary case is the experience lived in communism, whose theory makes family and Orthodoxy more than simple "traditional memory frames". For the monastery, but also for the whole of Romanian society, family and religion transform into refuge places where traditional values withdraw from ideology in order to rediscover by the society (Mateoniu, 2015; 2016). This was my hypothesis of research. The nuns shared their experiences of living under communism from a spontaneous inner need, but also from a desire to transmit this experience to the world, to serve and be useful in defining collective identity.

The purpose of the undergone research in the monastery was to observe the manner in which the nuns have reacted to the state and the Orthodox Church's policy, as derived from the community memory, the monastery being a micro-unit compared to the society. To reach this

purpose we have used an established methodology, both in anthropology and history, supposing the balance of the research's attention between the local and global structures, with the purpose of simultaneously observing in the analytical and interpretation process (See Geertz, 1986, p. 88). In other words, we were not interested in producing a detailed monograph of the monastery, but rather in understanding the complex relationship between religion and politics, as it emerges on the smaller scale of a religious community and through "grassroots" research, close to the people.

In order to be successful, we have gone a long way, with the field research having been done for more than for years in a row, between 1999 and 2004. During the field research I have used the method of free discussion in order to avoid the communication gridlocks. At the end of the field I had 20 recorder discussions, as well as copies after most of the documents in the monastery's archives. Both interviews and archives documents have been analyzed and interpreted with no difference, based on the same procedures. The two types of sources were perceived as testimonies, rich in data and interpretations, referring with no doubt to a reality, as a transfigured reality.

Starting from oral memory and archival sources, we were able to reconstruct the recent history of the monastery, which revolves around Decree No. 410 of 1959, based on which some of the nuns were forced by the communist regime to renounce monastic life. The persecutions from the end of the 50s have profoundly marked the religions life from Romania. The nuns' memories from Saint Nicholas concentrate on this moment of crunch which has become a starting point of their collective identity (Mateoniu, 2009). But in order to understand local history and memory, it is first important to highlight the general context of the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the state in the modern and contemporary periods, as this relationship has, in one form or another, impacted the internal dynamics of the monastery.

The relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the state
The role assigned to orthodox monasteries
The revolutionaries of 1848 set the Romanian Principalities on the path to modernity by applying the principles of secularism following the French model – through the secularization of monastic estates and other institutional measures – which led to the subordination of the Church to the state. But while in the West, the Catholic Church, having

gone through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, preserved its program as a universal church, in the East, churches became "statized," and Orthodoxy was "nationalized" (Manolescu, 2011, p. 361). Church revenues were gradually taken over by the state, which also intervened in ecclesiastical organization. The attainment of autocephaly by the Romanian Orthodox Church after the unification of the Romanian Principalities did not put an end to state interference in church affairs. On the contrary, the state established rules for the recruitment of priests, the election of hierarchs, and dictated church operations based on bureaucratic principles (Conovici, 2011, p. 384).

However, despite these secularization measures, individuals' accession to citizenship did not occur through distancing from religion but rather through its inclusion in the national program (Manolescu, op. cit., p. 363). The modern state did not treat the Romanian Orthodox Church "as an intermediary and autonomous body of society, as happened in some Catholic countries, but rather as a (semi-)state organism with its own rules of operation" (Conovici, op. cit., p. 385). The Church not only adapted to this statist regime but also sought to use it to its advantage, strengthening its position as a moral authority. This status persisted even during the communist period, despite the atheist doctrine, restrictions, and persecutions.

In the terms of an organic nationalism theorized since the 19th century, the Orthodox Church hierarchy justified its compromise with the communist state by advancing the Byzantine principle of "symphony" between Church and State, understood as a form of cooperation. In reality, this symphony, which was meant to be based on the Byzantine principle of dyarchy, had the state as the sole conductor (Conovici, 2011, p. 392). The Church justified its acceptance of subordination as the only way to preserve ritual, liturgy, and places of worship.

It is undeniable that religious services were monitored and controlled, some priests were arrested along with inconvenient believers, Christian icons and symbols were removed from schools, certain religious institutions were shut down, and Christian faith, in general, was forced to retreat into the private sphere. Churches and monasteries thus became secluded environments – much like the catacombs during the pagan persecutions – where Orthodox tradition was preserved and perpetuated.

From the very beginning, the regime adopted a dual strategy: on the one hand, attracting new supporters to the Marxist ideology from among the population, including clergy and parishioners; on the other

hand, persecuting elements deemed resistant or hostile to the new direction. Recognizing the importance of the Romanian Orthodox Church among the masses – not as a political power, but as a moral authority – the goal pursued by the communist leaders was not so much the destruction of the Church, but rather its subordination to their own interests. It is no coincidence that the first communist government after 1944, led by Petru Groza, included a Ministry of Religious Affairs headed by a priest – Constantin Burducea – precisely in order to attract the masses and persuade them to abandon their old political sympathies and support the new "democratic" (pro-communist) parties that already held control of the state (Enache, Petcu, op. cit., p. 25).

Alongside efforts to attract priests and the general population, abuses were carried out from the very beginning against all those who, in one way or another, opposed the process of communization. Starting as early as October 1944, Law no. 486 was implemented, referring to the "cleansing of the public administration" of officials who had held a "shameful position, had served foreign interests, or had been active in one of the paramilitary political organizations, such as the Legionary, Fascist, or Hitlerist movements, or who had served the purposes of certain dictatorial organizations" (Vasile, 2005, pp. 44–45). Under this law, a large number of priests, as well as Christian intellectuals, were removed from universities and major academic and cultural institutions. Several priests deemed "fascists" were imprisoned in camps at Slobozia, Caracal, Lugoj, and Târgu-Jiu (Ibidem, p. 64). The abuses against the clergy and believers were so severe that Patriarch Nicodim Munteanu himself requested the Ministry of Religious Affairs to intervene for the release of those arrested. The only response received was a promise to release the detainees, along with the creation of a special commission by the Ministry to handle the "just" and "lawful" purging of the clergy.

By Decree No. 177 of August 4, 1948, regarding the general regime of religious denominations, the distinction between "historical denominations" and "associations" was eliminated. The only condition imposed on any religious denomination in order to operate was obtaining official recognition from the Great National Assembly. This recognition could be withdrawn at any time "for well-founded reasons." According to Article 6 of the decree, "religious denominations are free to organize themselves and may operate freely if their practices and rituals do not contravene the Constitution, public security, public order, or

good morals" (Enache, Petcu, op. cit., p. 26). Although the law appeared to be democratic, it left ample room for abuses of power by secular institutions (Ibidem, p. 30). The state exercised direct control over religious denominations, with the Ministry of Religious Affairs becoming the main institution of oversight and control. In practice, the law served as a façade for attacks against religion.

The autonomy desired by the high-ranking hierarchs was systematically counteracted through the intervention of repressive and intelligence organs (later the Securitate) in the debates of the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, with the aim of transforming it into an institution subservient to the regime. All methods were employed, from blackmail to provoking conflicts among the synodal hierarchs. An example of aggressive police intervention in Church affairs was the case of the Metropolitan of Moldavia, Irineu Mihălcescu, who was the rightful successor to the patriarchal throne. Metropolitan Irineu was effectively forced to resign (Vasile, op. cit., p. 136), and in the vacant position, Justinian Marina was appointed in 1948.

From a simple priest, Marina became the head of the Romanian Orthodox Church following the highly suspicious death of his predecessor. His rapid rise, thanks to his connections with the leaders of the communist movement, led his opponents to nickname him the "Red Patriarch". The image of a patriarch subservient to the regime was reinforced by his numerous public statements and speeches, in which he advocated for the Church's adaptation to the new framework of "people's democracy". Despite this, archival data highlight his undeniable qualities as a leader and strategist. The documents show that the patriarch was constantly monitored by the Securitate and often came into conflict with political authorities, especially when defending opponents of the regime.

In his work *Social Apostolate*, Justinian Marina advocates for the adaptation of believers to the conditions imposed by the new government, attempting to establish and explain the social principles of the Church. This written work by the patriarch aimed to show that the Romanian Orthodox Church was trying to establish a *modus vivendi* with the state, while also revealing the social mission of Romanian Orthodoxy beyond the framework of strictly political relations. The patriarch thus offered a discourse desired by the political authorities – a theoretical justification of the Church's subordination to the state and, at the same time, a theoretical framework reaffirming the "eternal values of

the Christian faith, so that they remain constantly present in the consciousness of priests and believers" (Enache, Petcu, op. cit., p. 68). The patriarch's entire discourse alternates between giving the communist leaders what they expected to hear and a concern to preserve intact the tradition of the Orthodox Church, its rituals, sacraments, and the faith in that tradition.

Among the measures taken by the state against religion with some of the most significant consequences for society were the prohibition of religious education in public schools and the transfer of the Church's last agricultural properties into state possession. The 1948 Constitution stipulated in Article 27 that "no denomination, congregation, or religious community could open or maintain elementary schools or colleges, but only special schools for training clergy personnel, while primary and general schools were to be controlled by the state" (Vasile, op. cit., p. 217).

Decree No. 175 of 1948, regarding education reform, laid the foundations for "realistic-scientific" education. All confessional and private schools were nationalized, and these new rules aimed at removing religion from education were accompanied by ostentatious measures such as the destruction of crosses and wayside shrines in front of schools, the ceremonial removal of icons from classrooms, and the prohibition for teachers and students to recite the opening prayer at the beginning of classes. In several localities, parents protested against these measures by refusing to send their children to school (Ibidem, pp. 217–219).

These unexpected reactions alerted the authorities, who became much more cautious, refining their methods of action against religion. Even the communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej noted that the teachers and priests in the villages were, for the most part, hostile to the regime and to the secularization measures in education: "The vast majority of peasants, 79% of the country's population, 12 million people, are believers, and we cannot, overnight, turn them into materialists. By the measures taken, we have given ammunition to the Church, which will strengthen its position among the rural population" (Ibidem, p. 2019). The regime was thus forced to take into account the influence the Orthodox Church held at the popular level, preferring to instrumentalize the Church in the process of building a new society and the "new man."

Patriarch Justinian Marina was also fully aware of the impact of Orthodoxy on society and relied on this undeniable truth in his negotiations with the communist leaders. In an effort to mitigate the secularization and nationalization measures in education, the patriarch laid the foundations for a reform of theological education, which was directly coordinated by the Synod of the Church rather than by the state. The Synod determined the curricula for theological schools and appointed priest-professors, who were entrusted with a dual mission: to teach and to conduct religious services. There were three types of theological schools: ecclesiastical schools for cantors, theological seminaries, and university-level theological institutes (Păcurariu, 1997, pp. 505–506).

This reform initiated by Patriarch Justinian was important for both the Church and the faithful. The theological education of that time, as well as the publications issued by the Romanian Orthodox Church, were noted and praised even by prominent figures from abroad (Enache, Petcu, p. 110). The reform was based on the patriarch's conviction that the Church's only chance of survival – and of maintaining contact with the people – was through the education of the clergy, both priests and monks. In parallel with the secularization of education, the state also took harsh measures against private property. The collectivization of agriculture affected the Romanian Orthodox Church as well, especially the monastic communities that still owned agricultural land. As a result, the Church was left without property and became increasingly economically dependent on the state.

The issue of livelihood sources became increasingly urgent, especially for Orthodox monasteries, which, deprived of land, were at risk of closure. For the monasteries, Justinian Marina developed a new Regulation for Organization and Functioning, whereby monks and nuns were required to combine their life of prayer with the practice of various crafts, such as icon painting, carpet and textile weaving, embroidery, metalwork, and others. Patriarch Justinian Marina's ability to negotiate with the state granted the Church a certain degree of autonomy, at least until the mid-1950s. After 1955, however, the patriarch's influence diminished drastically, particularly as the activity of the Securitate increasingly focused on religious matters, including the surveillance of priests and even the patriarch himself. Repressive measures also targeted monasteries, which came to be perceived as major threats to the regime. A wave of coercive actions struck Orthodoxy, especially Orthodox monasticism, in the context of Khrushchev's proposed de-Stalinization.

The persecution of Orthodox monasteries culminated in the purging of some monks and nuns at the end of the 1950s. Monasteries were perceived by the communist state's surveillance and control organs not as isolated from the world, but as actively engaged with it. Remote monasteries, particularly those hidden in the mountains, were closely watched by the Securitate, as they were suspected of providing support to anti-communist partisan groups (Enache, Petcu, op. cit., p. 22-37).

The response of the communist authorities was proportional to the importance that Orthodox monasteries held among the faithful, especially those who were marginalized or even persecuted. While the patriarch fell into disgrace – being increasingly accused of having a "mystical spirit" – the monasteries were subjected to a wave of persecution that reached its peak at the end of 1959. On October 28, 1959, Decree 410 was issued, which stipulated the abolition of certain monasteries, along with a drastic reduction in the number of monks and nuns allowed to remain in the others.

According to the Decree, a total of 1492 monks and nuns were to be removed from the monasteries. Following intervention by the church hierarchy, the number of those excluded was reduced to 1200. The number of those forced to leave was smaller, due to the interpretation of the law in favor of the monastic personnel (Enache, Petcu, op. cit., p. 60–61). The Decree was interpreted in such a way that sick individuals and those who had completed studies in monastic schools were allowed to remain in the monasteries, with religious studies being equated to the seven years of mandatory primary education.

The Implementation of Decree No. 410 at the Saint Nicholas Monastery

The decree appears in the context of the soviet army's retreat from the country, the repressive measures taken against the Christians having the meaning not only to put aside any form of resistance to the regime, but also to prove Moscow that the communist leaders won't give up the revolutionary vigilance (Ibidem, p. 189).

However, in the Saint Nicholas monastery the crisis has begun many years before, the Decree representing the summit of a pretty long and difficult period. The political and economic constraints increase, having the role to push the community towards the margin, to determine the nuns to accept that they are unable to adapt by themselves to the exigencies of the new system. In 1958, the monastery's workshops (a carpet workshop and a paper-bag confection workshop) are closed by

force, with no right to appeal. The only means of living is land work. Only that, having suddenly become indispensable, the monastery's harvest property proves insufficient to assure the products needed for the community, and in addition the monastery is obliged to deliver to the state a tribute from its harvest products.[2] The community lives, for a long period of time, whit fear of losing its harvest properties. Moreover, this actually happens immediately after the promulgation of Decree, the departure of a part of the nuns being one of the pretexts to rob the monastery of its grounds, at the same time witch the collectivization of agriculture. As a result, the monastery is left, after 1962, for a long period of time, without any source of living, excepting the state pensions of old nuns.

Going back to the events which preceded the decree, in March 1959, as an outcome of the new Regulation for the organization and function of the monasteries, 14 sisters and 5 nuns, from the 120 persons who composed the community, are forced to leave the monastery.[3]

The nuns would leave based on the decision made on December 15, 1958, by the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, under pressure from the Department of Cults, to remove minors and staff who had not completed elementary school, as well as immoral individuals and those hostile to the regime, from the monasteries (Enache, Petcu, op. cit., p. 56).

With the exclusion of young candidate girls to the monastic life, the "gates" of the monastery are closed: the community no longer has the right to accomplish the ritual of entering the monastic life. Without the institution of apprentices, the nuns begin to live in fear of the abolition of the monastery.

In January 1960, the monastery's council requires the nuns to fill in the "personal files", which comprised, among age, provenience, schooling level and health condition, also information about the nuns's implication in politics and experiences of foreign travelling.[4]

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[2] Cf Monastry's Archive, File nr. 14, *Surorile de mănăstire. Registrele matricole, 1954-1958,* inv. No. 338/1960.

[3] Cf Monastry's Archive, File nr. 14, *Surorile de mănăstire. Registrele matricole, 1954-1958,* inv. No. 338/1960.

[4] Monastry's Archive, The files of the personel from the Saint Nicholas monastery, inv. No. 345/1960, f. 113.

Starting from the personal files, the nuns from the Saint Nicholas monastery were divided into four categories regarding age, health condition, studies and income (Mateoniu, 2010, p. 16-18). The selection endangered the sick nuns under 50 who hadn't followed the courses of the monastic school for exclusion, and they were considered able to work outside the monastery.

The last nuns, who refused to leave voluntarily, would be forcibly placed into security vehicles and transported under escort to their native villages. They would later be integrated into the socialist economy and forced to renounce their monastic vows. After the wave of persecution passed, some of them would return to the monastery after years of living outside it. These are the nuns who mainly recount the moment of leaving the monastery; the life lived at a distance, but also the moment of their return. The return to the monastery happens at the call of Patriarch Justinian Marina, who, although marginalized by the regime, tries to act in the direction of saving the Orthodox Church. Simply ignored by the governmental and control bodies during the enforcement of the Decree, the action being carried out by the Department of Cults within the government, the Patriarch later manages to alleviate the effects of the repressive measures.

The intervention of the state in the life of the monastery shocks the community. Retrospectively, looking back from the present upon the life stories, the Decree represents a rupture in time, which created the conditions as the base from which the local universe has to reorganize. It disturbs at first the life pf the community, causing a loss of the sense of existence from within the monastery, becoming late, trough memory, a place of production of sense (instead of resignification). The event represents, in front of anything else, a temporal threshold, becoming in time a place where all the values of the monastic community concentrate.

The reconfiguration of the monastery after the Decree

After crisis, the monastery's perimeter starts to be even more drastically controlled by the state agents. Wishing to escape this control, the nuns try to face the political pressures finding refuge more and more in the domestic space of their houses. This process manifests along a few decades, while the nuns try to preserve their right to property and work within the monastery. They send numerous petitions to the government and to the Patriarchy. Due to these repeated petitions, the patriarch Justinian Marina interferes personally in 1962 to help the nuns

keep their last properties, after the end of the collectivization of harvest, when the monastery loses most of its harvest properties. The community eventually manages to keep a few "eyes" of field (as the nuns call them), situated in the near, and for them the nuns have to carry a true war with the Forestry which for a period effectively occupies not only the lands around the monastery but also the premises.

After 1964, major changes appear both at level of state policy and the level of Romanian Orthodox Church's policy. In 1965, the patriarch Justinian initiates a site for the restauration of the monastery, this date being considered by a part of the nuns (especially by those who remained in the monastery after the Decree) as a moment of refoundation, of return to normality after the crisis.

Ceaușescu would continue the policy of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej from the latter's final years, replacing the faithful alignment with the Soviet Union with an exaltation of national values and the gradual development of the dictator's personality cult. While in the 1950s Orthodox monasteries had been seen as places of refuge for opponents of communism, starting in the 1960s the regime began to perceive them as sites with economic and identity-related potential, as well as for heritage preservation. Not only would the regime abandon its previous goal of restricting and closing them, but it would also contribute to their restoration in order to use them in the process of legitimization through a constant return to ancient, ancestral origins.

The site changes the appearance of the monastery. The enclosure is remade; the houses' frontages are restored in such a manner to emphasize their rustic, authentic character. The site brought electricity and running water into the monastery, and each house incorporated a bathroom. In other words, the site brings modernity to the monastery, conserving at the same time the elements considered to be archaic and authentic.

In 1979, upon the completion of the construction works, the monastery grounds were consolidated and modernized, comprising 25 renovated houses connected to running water and electricity, a guesthouse (*arhondaric*), another building intended for the retreat and rest of high-ranking patriarchal hierarchs, and a museum containing religious and folk objects.

The rebuilding of the monastery's territory after 1965 explains very well the process of the political power's usage of Orthodoxy in such a way that it would contribute to the remodeling of national iden-

tity within the nationalism promoted by Nicolae Ceaușescu. The hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church accept the policy of the state which has as a purpose the transformation of Orthodox churches in patrimonial places. However, while for the state the religious heritage was meant to legitimize the nationalist utopia and contribute to the development of the tourism industry, for the hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the process of turning places of worship into heritage sites represented the only viable solution for overcoming the economic crisis faced by religious communities. If we take into account the fact that the monastery's workshops were abusively closed and that of the harvest property was seized by the state, the valorization of the heritage and the openness to the religious mass tourism becomes the only source of subsistence for the nuns at Saint Nicholas.

Once restored, the monastery would come increasingly under state control, just as Orthodoxy itself would be increasingly instrumentalized by the regime. The Romanian Orthodox Church became more and more subordinated to the Party-State, with any potential opposition from the clergy being forcefully neutralized or suppressed through networks of complicity. Monasteries came to be perceived more and more as places preserving an Orthodox tradition placed in the service of nationalist ideology. In 1974, the Romanian Orthodox Church was included in the Front of Democracy and Socialist Unity (FDUS), which was strictly controlled by the Communist Party (Ică Jr., 2002, p. 538). The clergy were co-opted into campaigns aimed at convincing peasants to give up their properties and join agricultural cooperatives. Priests were active in "struggle for peace" organizations, which served purely propagandistic roles against an imagined external enemy. Iustin Moisescu, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church between 1977 and 1986, presided over international peace struggle conferences held in Bucharest in 1981, 1984, and 1985 (Ibidem).

The "Byzantine symphony" between politics and religion, always invoked by the clergy and defenders of the majority Church in Romania, transformed into total control of the Church by the state. In the name of nationalism, the high hierarchs of the Church accepted to fulfill the role of propaganda for the regime. Thus, in the second half of the 1980s, many places of worship were destroyed as a result of the state's rural and urban systematization policies, without encountering even minimal resistance from the high hierarchs or society. Any possible opposition was completely annihilated, highlighting both the "ambiguity

at the level of theological thought and moral philosophy" and the "absence of an articulated civil society in modern Romania […]" (Ibidem).

Faced with this relentless crushing force, the nuns of Saint Nicholas Monastery were forced to adapt to the new conditions, but without abandoning their convictions or giving up their free will.

The meaning of the memory of Saint Nicholas Monastery
The context of the changes after 1989

The reality of monastery is as revelatory as it can be for this double movement between, in side, the state policy's seizure over Orthodoxy and, on the other side, its refuge in its traditions frames. The monastic territory builds according to the official policy of the Church and of the state, to value the ecclesiastical heritage, a process of patromonialization to which the nuns have adapted in time. At the same time, to escape from the increasingly strict control to which the monastery's territory was committed by the authorities, the nuns find refuge in the domestic space. The living memory is practically the antidote pf the collective body to the oblivion tendency and to a „museification" proposed by the state as a sole solution for survival.

The nuns refuse to be viewed as victims of history and they share the most difficult moment of their lives. The brutal intervention of the state turns, through memory, into a failed attempt to disturb the divine order. The reaction to the crisis provoked by the regime became an example of survival, a life lesson, as well as positively particularizing the nuns' experiences.

Aware that the terrestrial sphere doesn't exist outside divine economy, the nuns are waiting for the miracles that God doesn't hold up to make. The probe of this divine economy's manifestation is actually solving the crisis and continuing the religious life inside the monastery. At the same time, the contemplative and eschatological vision of the nuns (the understanding of divine presence in everything that surrounds) doesn't oppose the active life they have always showed. The way in which the monastery reacted to oppose the abuses coming from outside, from the secular power, show the nuns' capacity to stand on their grounds and fight against the abuses. The temporal dimension of their life can be eventually found between the awaiting for the ultimate judgment of God and the concrete action in present, to be inside and outside the world at the same time, to live as strangers to this world while expecting the divine providence and at the same time to respond to the challenges of the present times.

The nuns shared with us their oral memorial during a period still highly conflicted across society, marked by the political power's tendency to conceal the traumas of communism. Against the backdrop of the Balkan war and the conflictual situations in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, authors such as Samuel Huntington considered Orthodoxy to be the deep cause of these conflicts, which were not so much political as religious in origin. In the author's opinion, Orthodoxy represents the foundation of a distinct civilization that separates the boundary of democratic Europe from the non-democratic one, along the line drawn by the Great Schism between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Although contested, this theory was embraced by various authors who would continue to explain the relationship between religions and democracy through the demarcation of civilizational boundaries. In line with Huntington, Olivier Gillet, for example, analyzing the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the communist state, considering exclusively the public discourse of church hierarchs and the actions reflected in the press of the time, states that Orthodoxy is a hindrance to democratization (Gillet, 1997).

Certainly, by claiming itself as the "true faith," Orthodoxy seems to have opted for prioritizing the preservation of tradition, an effort perceived as immobility and a refusal to engage in dialogue with modernity. However, as Anca Manolescu pointed out, Orthodoxy has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to adapt to political and social changes (Manolescu, op. cit., p. 365). It is true that this adaptation occurs slowly and through cautious steps, with "the style" of Orthodoxy, as the author calls it, being different from that of Catholicism or Protestantism. Participation in modernity and, more recently, in democracy, is manifested through a unifying and conservative discourse, avoiding opposition to politics or public debates on diversity. It is more a matter of the pace of adaptation than a planned action to slow down the democratic process.

One issue remains that the Romanian Orthodox Church has not critically examined its collaboration with the communist regime, which maintains a state of tension in society, deceiving the expectations of a significant portion of the population, especially the intellectuals. However, a formal indictment regarding what happened during the communist regime has not taken place in Romanian society. The transition from communism to democracy has been more than tumultuous, marked by numerous political and social conflicts, the repeated arrival of miners in Bucharest at the call of the post-communist power, and the violent repression of the opposition. The alternative to power from the

second tier of the communist nomenclature will materialize belatedly, following violent clashes. As for the average person, the concern for the next day, in the context of major economic instability, will prove to be much stronger than removing the ghosts of the past and cleansing institutions of the old regime's flaws.

In this context, the "return to faith" after the rupture will occur, expressed both through unconditional belonging to the Romanian Orthodox Church and through various individual manifestations of public expression of faith, such as the construction of churches and monasteries, entry into monastic life, and pilgrimages to the relics of saints. In this effervescence of the 1990s, in the search for the sacred, the Orthodox Church will strengthen its position as a moral authority and as a guarantor of social unity and stability. The Church's fragile involvement in debates regarding the recent past, acknowledging its own collaboration with the regime, as well as its involvement in catechizing the masses in the spirit of the Gospel, will lead a part of civil society to transform criticism into direct attack. Once Romania enters the European Union, the Orthodox Church will make efforts to accept interfaith dialogue, develop its own educational and social assistance programs, but without giving up its role as a moral authority for all, for the entire nation.

The construction of the Cathedral of the Salvation of the Nation, a project advanced by Patriarch Miron Cristea during the interwar period, resumed in post-communism and recently materialized, will lead to an intense campaign of opposition to the Church. Under the extremely simplistic slogan "We want hospitals, not cathedrals," the necessity of ending state funding for religious cults is proclaimed, perceived as a source of public money waste and also as encouragement for religious dogmatism. Thus, the Church hierarchy will be confronted not only with the ghosts of the past but also with a secular wave, undermining its traditional position in relation to the state and society.

This happens in a delay compared to Western Europe, where Christianity is no longer perceived as opposed to democracy. While specialists in religious studies have spoken about the process of "desecularization" (Peter Berger) and the "deprivatization of religion" (José Casanova) since the 1970s, Orthodoxy is expected not only to be fully autonomous from the state, to retreat into the private sphere, and to "liberate" the public space from what secular civil society considers retrograde and an obstacle to progress.

Dissatisfied with a life reduced to the origin of the immanent order, young people in Western Europe seek closeness to the sacred, but not through the mediation of traditional churches, rather directly, following their own spiritual instincts (Taylor, 2011, p. 146). This phenomenon of "believing without belonging" (Grace Davie) is part of a broader culture driven by an ethics of authenticity, the discovery of one's own fullness and spiritual depth. Following this path of self-discovery, the focus is placed on spirituality and less, or not at all, on institutionalized religion, on the individual and less on the collective (Ibidem, p. 147).

In democratic societies based on differences and pluralism, the retreat of religion into the private sphere seems to be a solution to avoid vexing non-believers. At the same time, paradoxically, it is absurd and profoundly undemocratic to demand that religion no longer manifest itself publicly. The presence of religion in the public sphere is actually based on the acceptance of the plurality of actions and worldviews, which should tend toward consensus regarding the common good.

Observing the religious revival in the West, José Casanova supports the democratic legitimacy of Christian Churches entering the public arena, within civil society, to uphold values that are not opposed to democracy, based on ideas of freedom, human dignity, cohesion, and social solidarity (Casanova, 1994, p. 65). The Romanian Orthodox Church will enter the public arena quite late, remaining to this day more an object of contestation than one of defending its own values. The appearance of its own radio and television stations rather indicates a "segregation" of Christian values in the public space, rather than an intentional and discerning inclusion of Christian values.

Conclusion

"The paradox of Orthodoxy," as Ioan I. Ică tells us, "is that the generous community-based dialogic personalism at the heart of its dogmatic, liturgical, and mystical tradition has failed to become an active ferment in Orthodox societies." Indeed, "this community-based and dialogic personalism should be reactivated..." (Ică, op. cit., p. 44-45).

Human rights, instead of complementing, have rather brutally replaced the Christian idea of human dignity and freedom. These fundamental rights, which are spoken about rather little these days, were interpreted for many years in such a way as to exacerbate differences and lead to conflictual relations between various social groups, rather than fostering cohesion and harmony. In Romanian society, the nostalgia for

the life lived under communism, expressed for years by a significant portion of the population as a response to the current political and especially economic situation is increasingly accompanied by a manifest tendency to return to the personality cult. This trend is undoubtedly fueled by the exaltation of popular pietistic forms, messianic in nature, and the weak distinction between Christian love and idolatry.

In the face of these millenarian manifestations, the case of the Saint Nicholas Monastery offers a completely different example, of resistance to political abuse, discernment, and serenity.

The life experience of the nuns at the Saint Nicholas Monastery, the memory of this place, highlights a case of exemplary Christian attitude in relation to politics. Perhaps it is a case that confirms the rule, or maybe it is, as I stated in my doctoral thesis, an example of the manifestation of Romanian Orthodoxy under political pressure, within its traditional framework of life, less influenced by the current media turmoil. In this cas, Orthodoxy is not as an exclusive contemplative religion, in the way of an exaggerated focus upon the last things and the afterlife. The expectation of God's Kingdom does not mean neglecting the immediate aspects of life, but rather a constant response to the challenges of the present, with faith in divine providence. The memory of the monastery indicates a strong capacity of the nuns to adapt to political changes, but also their struggle and resilience over time. The values shared by the nuns, such as love, faith, hope, freedom, and dignity, represent an undeniable heritage that can be useful to society. However, the transmission of local memory occurs predominantly in traditional frameworks, in the home environment, and exclusively through orality, which unfortunately points to a weak ability of society to absorb and identify with these forms of resilience.

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