

New Holy Martyrs and Confessors in Our Church

In the context of the centenary of the Romanian Patriarchate, in 2025, on February 4th, the Holy Synod of our Church canonized 16 new saints, priests, professors of theology and great spiritual leaders, who died a martyr's death or confessed their faith in God with strength and courage in the difficult times of the communist period. As stated in the Synodal Tomos of Canonization,

“these beloved of God had a life crowned with prayer, fasting, repentance, humility and love, reaching perfection. Some of them paid with their lives for their confession of faith, being crowned with glorious martyrdom crowns. Others lived a continuous bloodless martyrdom, enduring imprisonment, torture and countless humiliations, and after their release they were still persecuted by the godless ones. But neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor lack of clothing, nor danger, separated them from the love of Christ, in all these showing themselves more than conquerors through Christ, who loved them (Romans 8, 35-37)”.

According to the same Tomos, the canonization of these saints was made “following the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church, seeking the spiritual benefit of the faithful Romanian people”, so that they “will be counted among the saints of the Church and will be commemorated with songs of praise on their feast days”, and “will be inscribed in the Synaxarion, in the books of worship, as well as in the calendar of the Romanian Orthodox Church”. It is also ordered in the same document that

“the services and lives of these saints should be printed, their icons should be painted, which should be received with all piety by the faithful Christians, and their faces should be painted in an appropriate place, alongside the other saints of the Romanian nation, in the churches that will be built from the foundation or will be painted from now on. And, so that the piety of the faithful Christians may increase through the honoring and calling upon these saints in prayer... they should also be protectors of new or renewed churches.”

The canonization of new saints in an autocephalous Church, with their subsequent inclusion in the General Synaxarion of the Universal Church, represents, first of all, a work of spiritual enrichment of the faithful, who from now on will benefit from the intercession of new saints and the example of their lives. On the other hand, the canonization of new saints in a national Church confirms and strengthens the catholicity of the Universal Church, in which an autocephalous Church makes its presence felt, as a living member of the Body of Christ - the Church, and the Universal Church is enriched, grows and increases continuously from the experience of the life of holiness that unfolds within each local Church. Last but not least, the canonization of new saints enriches the life and liturgical manifestation of the Church, in the sense that the new services of national saints enriches the liturgical treasury, the service books thus emphasizing and reinforcing the fact that liturgical life is not static, but dynamic, aiming to elevate the faithful of the Church to the measures of immortalization and sanctification of each one's personal life.

Only God glorifies His saints, according to the word of Holy Scripture: “God is wonderful in His saints” (Psalm 67, 36). The saints, through their life and confession, are “the household of God” and “friends of the Bridegroom”.

By canonization, the Church does nothing but ascertain, recognize and declare, that is, confess the holiness of one of her sons, who was glorified by the Lord with the power of holiness. Therefore, *“canonization has an*

obviously declarative character, and not a constitutive one"¹. Therefore, the work of canonization of new saints is not an independent action of the Holy Synod of a local Church, but only the recognition and officialization by it of the piety established in the people towards a certain saint, because the initiative for placing a Christian among the company of saints has always been the action of the faithful people. The church authority has only the role of supervising and avoiding mistakes that could be made by the faithful in evaluating the holiness of the life of a Christian who has departed into eternity. Therefore, the Church has never sought to impose the cult of any saint, but has only confirmed a Tradition of holiness, established among the faithful people. The Church, through its Holy Synod, takes note of the request of its believers regarding the canonization of a saint or a group of saints, based on the maturing of the conviction that he or she is part of the company of saints and chosen ones of God. Several proofs brought by the Church regarding the sanctity of his or her life contribute to the proclamation of the sanctity of a believer of the Church: *martyrdom*, that is, his or her mortification for his or her unwavering faith in Christ, *the fearless confession of the true faith in the face of any temptation or threat*, even if such an attitude may entail the death of the person concerned, *the holy life and the purity* of the one proposed for canonization, as well as *the miracles that he performed*, either in earthly life or after death². In addition to the arguments invoked above regarding the confirmation of the sanctity of the life of a Christian of the Church, *the incorruptibility of the body after death* is also considered a sign of sanctity, although this argument is not a mandatory condition for the canonization of a saint. After analyzing all these arguments in favor of the sanctity of the life of a person, the Church analyzes the substantive conditions regarding the proclamation of a canonization. These are: *the undoubted orthodoxy of the faith of the one proposed for canonization and his glorification by God through: the power to suffer martyrdom for the true faith; the power to face any dangers or mortifications, for the confession of the true faith, until death; the power to dedicate one's life to a chosen spiritual and moral experience; the power*

¹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Liviu STAN, "Despre canonizarea sfinților în Biserica Ortodoxă. Noțiuni introductive", in: *Ortodoxia*, 1950, nr. 2, p. 271.

² Pr. Prof. Dr. Liviu STAN, "Despre canonizarea sfinților în Biserica Ortodoxă...", p. 264.

*to perform miracles in life or after death and the power to defend and serve with martyrlike devotion the faith and the Orthodox Church*³. The fulfillment of all these conditions leads to *the spread of the fragrance of holiness* and the confirmation by the Church of the spontaneous worship that the faithful bring to the saint or group of saints who will be officially proclaimed. Only after it is ascertained that these requirements have been met, the Holy Synod of a local Church declares the canonization of the respective saint or group of saints. From the moment of the solemn proclamation of the canonization of a saint, his veneration becomes mandatory for the entire autocephalous Church within which the respective saint was proclaimed, the very term canonization, coming from the Greek word κανών, having the meaning of *unit of measure, norm, rule of conduct, law*.

The process of canonization of national saints began in the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1955, continuing after the fall of communism in our country, with the canonizations of saints in 1992 and then with a long series of other solemn proclamations of Romanian saints, proclamations that culminated with the official canonization of the holy confessors, martyrs and great spiritual fathers from the communist period, on February 4th, 2025, in the year of the centenary of the Romanian Patriarchate. *Martyrs* who gave their lives for the confession of faith in Christ in communist prisons were canonized (Holy Priest Martyr Constantin Sârbu, Holy Priest Martyr Liviu Galaction from Cluj, Holy Priest Martyr Ilarion Felea, The Holy Martyr Gherasim of Tismana, the Holy Martyr Visarion of Lainici and the Holy Martyr Iraclius of Basarabia), fearless confessors of the true faith in communist prisons and in freedom (the Holy Priest Confessor Dumitru Stăniloae, the Holy Priest Confessor Ilie Lăcătușu, the Holy Confessor Sofian of Antim and the Holy Confessor Arsenie of Prislop), as well as great spiritual fathers who lived in our monasteries during the same communist period, spiritually guiding monks, but also multitudes of believers (the Holy Saints Paisie and Cleopa of Sihăstria, the Holy Saint Dometius the Merciful of Râmreț, the Holy Saint Seraphim the Patient of

³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Liviu STAN, “Despre canonizarea sfinților în Biserica Ortodoxă...”, pp. 272-273 and Dr. Veaceslav GOREANU, “Canonizarea sfinților în Biserica Ortodoxă”, in: *Ortodoxia*, 2007, nr. 1-2, p. 114.

Sâmbăta de Sus, the Holy Saint Callistratus of Timișeni and Vasiova, Saint Heraclius of Basarabia).

For the Archdiocese of Arad, but especially for the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Arad, the canonization of the Holy Martyr Ilarion Felea, former professor and last rector of the old Theological Academy here, abusively abolished by the communist regime in 1948, is a great gift, but also a challenge. The Holy Martyr Ilarion is a *Gift* for us, in the sense that his prayers and intercessions, which we feel, encourage and support us in the effort to form strong priestly characters, missionaries and confessors of Christ in the complicated context of today's world. Also, the canonization of Saint Ilarion is a great challenge for us, in the sense that we strive to follow his sacrificial testimony and confession and to theologize from the immediate experience of personal living and direct experience with Christ our Lord and not just from a baggage of theological knowledge.

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