

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
87 (2), pp. 129-138, 2021

The Contribution of Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu to the Canonization of the Romanian Saints

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Abstract

Over time, Romanian Christianity has treasured many faces of chosen people, placed in the aura of holiness. The monastic tradition, the truly Christian life of the communities and the history with its turbulent periods have crystallized in the piety of the people many names of fathers, martyrs and confessors. Became autocephalous in 1885, the Romanian Church had several attempts to canonize its saints at the end of the 19th century. But the first official canonization of Romanian saints took place only in 1955, during the communist regime, through the care of the patriarch Justinian Marina (1948-1977). In conditions of religious freedom, the largest action of canonization of the Romanian saints took place in 1992, and the Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu substantially contributed to this endeavor. Through the efforts of documentation of this great hierarch, 19 Romanian saints were placed in the synaxarion and the cult was generalized for other 38 proto-Romanian or foreign saints, honored by other Churches, but who had links of mission, preaching or martyrdom with the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space.

Keywords

Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu, Romanian saints, canonization, Romanian Orthodox Church, religious freedom

In the life of the Church, the saints had and have a special role. The Christian religion, and especially the Orthodox Church, honors those who have manifested a clean, godly life, and who have sometimes demonstrated their religious identity through the sacrifice of life.

From a catechism reason we could speak of saints, placing them in distinct categories, according to the living and the graces they acquired through their lives. Thus, by the nature of their mission we honor the apostles, martyrs, God-bearing fathers, hierarchs, confessors, prophets, etc., and according to the geography and history they transgressed, we honor the saints of the apostolic age, the fathers of the times of ecumenical synods, the Cappadocian saints, Antiochians, Westerners, those who fill the pages of the Patericon and the saints of the local Churches.

For the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Romanian saints are the guarantor of Christian continuity in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space. It is also one of the reasons why the Romanian people love their saints. They are the ones who talk about the bimillennial Christianity of the Romanians, the ones who built the monasteries and built the piety and the faith. Whether they were of Romanian descent or whether they had joints on Romanian soil, the saints of our nation must be properly revered¹. Under the specific conditions of the historical context, over the centuries, the Romanian Orthodox people have developed an authentic and natural piety for a large number of saints who have lived or had connections with their history. But the first official canonization of Romanian saints was made in the years 1955-1956, after long waits and efforts by the Church authorities. The following canonizations of saints were made by the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church only in 2003, then the practice of canonization was more frequent².

By taking care of the worthy patriarch Justinian, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church made the *first canonizations of saints*³ in year 1955, on the basis of a Synodal Decision of February 28th 1950⁴. Then

¹ Pr. Dumitru RADU, "Sfânt și sfințenie la români", in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CX (1992) 7-10, pp. 29-48.

² The years in which canonizations of Romanian saints were made after 2003 are: 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2016 and 2017. Complete list: <https://doxologia.ro/vietile-sfintilor/sinaxar/toti-sfintii-romani-din-calendarul-bisericii-ortodoxe-romane>.

³ Pr. Ene BRANIȘTE, Ecaterina BRANIȘTE, *Dicționar enciclopedic de cunoștințe religioase*, Editura Diecezană, Caransebeș, 2001, p. 86.

⁴ Pr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 1997, p. 515.

the most important Romanian saints were passed among the saints: Calinic of Cernica, Bishop of Râmnic (April 11), Confessors Ilie Iorest and Sava Brancovici (April 24), Joseph the New of Partoș Monastery, Metropolitan of Timișoara (September 15), Confessors Visarion Sarai and Sofronie from Cioara and martyr Nicolae Oprea from Săliște (October 21). At the same time, it was decided that the saints whose relics are found in our country should be honored throughout the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Due to the anti-Christian communist persecution, after this year it was no longer possible to make canonizations in the Romanian Orthodoxy. The religious freedom brought by 1990 reopened the issue of the canonization of other Romanian saints, revered by popular piety for their holy and righteous life. In order to fulfill these requirements of the Church, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church entrusted Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu of Oltenia, a hierarch and scholar who loves culture and history. The concerns of Metropolitan Nestor were oriented towards the space of the Romanian ecclesiastical history and towards the Christian beginnings of the Romanians. His work demonstrates these inclinations: *Primele scrieri patristice în literatura noastră, secolele IV – XVI, Studii de teologie istorică, Sf. Ierarh Petru Movilă, Aeticus și Histicus, Despre pătimirea Sfinților Epictet și Astion* etc⁵. A study dedicated to Bishop Melchisedec Ștefănescu and entitled *Episcopul Melchisedec Ștefănescu despre sfinții români* demonstrates the old preoccupations of the Romanian hierarchs to pass among the saints the Romanian religious personalities⁶.

Ever since the time of Patriarch Justinian, the hierarch Nestor, then vicar-bishop, was elected by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, a member of the Commission for further research, documentation and proposal of new canonizations. After 1989, the Holy Synod, at the initiative of Patriarch Teoctist Arăpașu, established a working group in this regard, consisting of members of the Synodal Commission for Doctrine, Religious Life and Monasteries and members of the Synodal Canonical-Legal Commission and for Discipline. This joint commission chaired by Metropolitan Nestor of Oltenia aimed to investigate and study the possibilities of canonizing some Romanian saints and establishing the

⁵ See Pr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Dicționarul teologilor români*, Ediția a III-a, Editura Andreiană, Sibiu, 1996, p. 701-703.

⁶ † Nestor VORNICESCU, “Episcopul Melchisedec Ștefănescu despre sfinții români”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CX (1992) 1-3, pp.125-130.

celebration of the Sunday of the Romanian Saints. In this capacity, he was very concerned about the good progress of the research in the entrusted issue. A close friend of Bishop Nestor recorded:

“Hardly could anyone resist the pace and work of the Metropolitan. White nights in compiling documentation, dark days that he could not find out what he wanted, time for corrections and indications for others, additions and clarifications. God, what a will! with all the suffering, especially lately, because of the accident, but also because of the seen and unseen enemies. In fact, the heart gave way, the eyes closed and the hands froze in the research laboratory in the perspective of sanctifying the founder - martyr Mihai Viteazul and leader Tudor Vladmirescu”⁷.

After the preliminary research of this commission, extended during the years 1990 and 1991, and which addressed the historical, canonical and liturgical aspects in connection with the procedure of canonization of saints and the way of inscription in the Church calendar and worship books, a list of personalities was drafted on whom to focus the research of specialists.

Based on the data and materials developed in 1991, the Holy Synod established the Special Commission for the Canonization of Romanian Saints, composed of 10 members of the Holy Synod, chaired by Metropolitan Nestor of Oltenia, completed with numerous specialists and researchers: theologians, historians, people of art, clergymen.

This commission deepened the preliminary works carried out during the years 1990-1991, studying the lives of the spiritual personalities of the Romanian Orthodoxy whose honor entered the piety of the Romanian people, finalizing the proposals of services, synaxarion, troparion, kontakion or akathist in order to submit them to the Holy Synod for examination.

Thus, in 1991 and in the first half of 1992, based on the methodologies established previously and the recommendations made by the Holy Synod during this period, as well as based on the suggestions and proposals made by the Diocesan Centers, the Church press began to publish numerous materials in connection with the saints to be canonized. It highlighted their

⁷ Diac. Petru DAVID, “Mitropolitul Nestor al Olteniei”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CXX (2002) 1-6, p. 277.

contribution to the development and building of the religious life of the Romanian people, the sanctity of their lives, the veneration as saints they already enjoyed in the piety of the righteous people, documented during their lifetime or after moving to the Lord.

As a natural conclusion of this meticulous study and investigation (approx. 2000 pages), noting the advanced stage of the steps of the Special Commission for the Canonization of Romanian Saints, in January 1992 the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church delimited the priorities that should guide the work of the Commission. in order to properly complete the preparatory acts for the canonization of the Romanian saints, namely:

- “– Establishment and registration in the calendar of the Romanian Orthodox Church of the Sunday of the Romanian Saints;
- The generalization, in the entire Romanian Orthodox Church and the inscription in the calendars of all the dioceses, at the established dates, of the cult of the Romanian saints, who lived, preached and suffered martyrdom for the right faith in the Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic space and from other nations, who have preached and been martyred in our parts, and who are already honored by other Churches and inscribed in their calendars;
- The veneration in the entire Romanian Orthodox Church, by the generalization of the cult and the inscription in the calendars of all the dioceses, in the days that were established, of the saints with local honor, canonized by the Holy Synod in the years 1950-1955;
- The proclamation of the canonization of some saints among the sons of the Romanian nation, with honor in the entire Romanian Orthodox Church and the inscription in the church calendar on the appointed days”⁸.

With these clarifications made by the Holy Synod, the Special Commission for the Canonization of Romanian Saints met, then, in March, April and June 1992 at the headquarters of the Synodal Chancellery in

⁸ Pr. Augustin RUSU, “Proclamarea solemnă a hotărârilor Sfântului Sinod al B.O.R. la biserica Sf. Spiridon Nou din București, 21 iunie 1992”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CX (1992) 7-10, pp. 51-52.

Bucharest where, together with a small group of specialists⁹ proceeded to the final drafting of the working documents to be submitted to the Holy Synod for approval: the Synodal Act of the Romanian Orthodox Church on the canonization of some Romanian saints, the Tomos of canonization, the synaxarion, troparion, kontakion.

In parallel with the recommendations of the Holy Synod, the diocesan centers completed the painting of the icons of the saints proposed for canonization.

On June 2, 1992, under the presidency of Patriarch Teoctist, the meeting of the Permanent National Council of the Church took place, during which the festivities of the solemn proclamation of the canonization of some Romanian saints were established, festivities that were to take place in Bucharest on Sunday, June 21, 1992.

At the same time finding that all the preparatory acts for the canonization of the Romanian saints were completed, the Patriarch convened the Holy Synod in the working meeting, at the patriarchal residence in Bucharest, on May 19, 1992, and a Special Commission for the Canonization of Romanian Saints with the support of the specialized staff of the Chancellery of the Holy Synod.

Following a thorough examination of the issues on the agenda and bringing, where necessary, the words of correction, the Holy Synod adopted the following decisions:

1. Canonization of a number of 19 Romanian saints, with honor in the entire Romanian Orthodox Church, and their registration in the Church calendar.
2. The generalization of the cult of the seven Romanian saints canonized in the years 1950-1955 and their inscription in the calendars of all the dioceses at the established dates.
3. The inscription in the calendar of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the generalization of the cult of a number of 38 saints, also honored by other Churches and who lived, preached and suffered martyrdom for the right faith in the Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic

⁹ Small group consisting of: Vicar Bishop Ioachim Vasluianu; Rev. Prof. Dumitru Radu from the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest; Rev. Constantin Pârnu, administrative vicar at the Chancellery of the Holy Synod; Rev. Augustin Rusu, the secretary of the Chancellery of the Holy Synod; Prof. Gheorghe Vasilescu, historian, and for the psaltic singing part prof. Sebastian Barbu Bucur and Rev. Constantin Drăgușin, composer and conductor of the Patriarchal Choir.

space and saints of other nations who preached and were martyred in our parts.

4. The establishment of the Sunday of the Romanian Saints and its inscription in the church calendar, every year, on the second Sunday after the Pentecost, when they will be counted with the saints and all known and unknown saints of the Romanian nation will be honored according to the special service¹⁰.

In connection with this decision were examined and approved: the tomos for the institution of this feast, the synaxarion, the troparion and the kontakion of the day.

During the same meeting of the Holy Synod it was finalized, approved and signed *The Synodal Act of the Romanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church for the Canonization of Some Romanian Saints*, which records the decisions of the Holy Synod about this event and announces to the other Orthodox Church about the Romanian saints.

The Holy Synod approved the icons of the 19 canonized Romanian saints, as well as the icon of the Sunday of the Romanian Saints, executed by the well-known iconic painters by taking care of the diocesan centers.

All Saints' Sunday on 1992, which was celebrated on June 21, was for the entire Christian and Romanian breath within the Romanian Orthodox Church an occasion of great celebration and spiritual uplift, occasioned by the religious festivities of solemn proclamation of the canonization of Romanian saints as the Holy Synod had decided at its working meeting on June 19, 1992¹¹.

The joy of the fruits of canonization could be seen in the years 1992-1993, when, although he was in the council, he knelt at the tomb of Voivode Stephen the Great and holy and said: "Lord, I have been delivered from torment, to see Stephen with all the saints"¹². Metropolitan Nestor also proposed to the Holy Synod that the icons of the canonized be painted by Archimandrite Sophian, the then abbot of the Holy Monastery of Antim. The hierarch of Oltenia anticipated the painting of the Romanian

¹⁰ Pr. Augustin RUSU, "Proclamarea solemnă...", CX (1992) 7-10, pp. 52-53.

¹¹ The journal *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CX (1992) 7-10 is entirely dedicated to the canonization of Romanian saints since 1992. The publication contains the decisions taken in the solemn meeting of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the synodal act on the canonization of Romanian saints and the solemn religious festivities occasioned by these canonizations. See in detail.

¹² Diac. Petru DAVID, "Mitropolitul Nestor al Olteniei", p. 277.

saints in the iconographic hermeneia of the Romanian Church. Thus, the Brâncoveni Saints are painted before canonization at the Jitianu Monastery, and the Holy Martyrs from Niculițel are painted in different churches from Oltenia¹³.

Through the care and effort of Metropolitan Nestor, the 1992 Synod canonized local and other saints who lived, preached and suffered martyrdom on the proto-Romanian and Romanian land or in other lands, as well as their inscription in the synaxarion and calendar of our Church. These were:

1. Venerable Germanus of Dobrogea;
2. Ghelasie of Râmeț Monastery, Archbishop of Transylvania;
3. Leontie, Bishop of Rădăuți;
4. Venerable Daniel the Hermit;
5. Stephen the Great of Moldavia;
6. Venerable John the New of Prislop Monastery;
7. Venerable Theodora from Carpathia, of Sihla;
8. Martyrs Brâncoveni: Constantin, Stephen, Radu, and Mathew and counselor Ianache;
9. Hieromartyr Antim the Ivirian;
10. Joseph the Confessor, Bishop of Maramureș;
11. Priest-Confessor John of Galeș;
12. Priest-Confessor Moses Măcinic of Sibiel;
13. Venerable Anthony of Iezeru Monastery;
14. Venerable John Iacob the Romanian (the Hozevite)¹⁴.

Also, at the proposal of Metropolitan Nestor, in the Romanian Orthodox Church calendar were included a number of saints honored by other Churches, but who had links of mission, preaching or martyrdom with the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space:

1. Martyrs Claudiu, Castor, Sempronian, and Nicostrat, Feast day on November 9;
2. Venerable Paisios Velicikovski of Neamț. Feast day on November 15;
3. Martyr Dassie, Feast day on November 20;

¹³ Diac. Petru DAVID, "Mitropolitul Nestor al Olteniei", p. 277

¹⁴ List provided by Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu in: *Canonizarea unor sfinți români*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 1992, p. 88.

4. Martyr Hermes, Feast day on December 31;
5. Venerable Antipa of Calapodești, Feast day on January 10;
6. Martyrs Ermil and Stratonice, Feast day on January 13;
7. Bretranion, Bishop of Tomis, feast day on January 25;
8. Venerable John Cassian the Romanian. Feast day on February 29 on leap year and February 28 on other years;
9. Martyrs Montanus and Maxima, Feast day on March 26;
10. Hieromartyr Irineu, Bishop of Sirmium, feast day on April 6;
11. Martyr Sava of Buzău (the Goth), Feast day on April 12;
12. Theotim, Bishop of Tomis, feast day on April 20;
13. Martyrs Pasicrat and Valentin, Feast day on April 24;
14. Martyr Iuliu Veteranul, Feast day on May 27;
15. Martyrs Zotice, Atal, Camasis, and Filip of Niculițel, Feast day on June 4;
16. Martyr Nicandru and Marcian, Feast day on June 8;
17. Niphon, Patriarch of Constantinople feast day on August 11;
18. Martyr Isihie, Feast day on June 15;
19. Niceta, Bishop of Remesiana, feast day on June 24;
20. Martyr John the New of Suceava, Feast day on June 2;
21. Martyrs Epictet and Astion, Feast day on July 8;
22. Martyr Emilian of Durostor, Feast day on July 18;
23. Martyrs Donat the deacon, Romul the priest, Silvan the deacon and Venust, Feast day on August 21;
24. Martyr Lup, Feast day on August 23¹⁵.

The Holy Synod also decided to draw up synaxarion, troparion and kontakion in honor of the saints who do not have these hymns in the worship books, and to proclaim the generalization of the worship of these saints by the same synodal act, with the proclamation of other Romanian saints canonized by the Holy Synod, on June 19, 1992.

In the same meeting of the Holy Synod Metropolitan Nestor of Oltenia, president of the Synodal Commission for the Canonization of Romanian Saints, delivered a report on the proposal to establish and proclaim the *Sunday of Romanian Saints*, known and unknown, which only God recorded in the book of his chosen. The establishment of this *Sunday of the*

¹⁵ The canonization decision was taken at the meeting of the Holy Synod of June 19-20, 1992, pursuant to no. 3844 / 1992. Cf. *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CX (1992) 4-6, pp. 173-174.

Romanian Saints was motivated as an act of restoration of the spiritual and religious values of the Romanian Orthodox Church, with important spiritual, missionary and pastoral meanings. The Commission for the Canonization of Romanian Saints debated Metropolitan Vornicescu's proposal and proposed to the Holy Synod the establishment and proclamation of the *Sunday of Romanian Saints*.

The Holy Synod decided that this holiday should be inscribed in the calendar of the Romanian Church and should be celebrated every year, on the second Sunday after Pentecost. At the same time, the icon of the Romanian saints and the elaboration of the service and the akathist of the Romanian saints were approved, a service that was composed by the care of a group of specialists, teachers and priests. The proclamation of this Sunday was made in the same synodal act as that of the canonized Romanian saints.¹⁶

The great desire of the last years of the life of Metropolitan Nestor of Oltenia was to introduce among the Romanian saints the voivode Mihai Viteazu († 1601) and the leader of the Revolution of 1821, Tudor Vladimirescu († 1821). This thought was extinguished with the flame of the life of the Oltenian metropolitan and, perhaps, after new discoveries of historians, the conditions required by the Church will be fulfilled, and this will be possible.

¹⁶ "Hotărârea Sfântului Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române din 19-20 iunie 1992 (Temei 952 / 1992)", in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CX (1992) 4-6, pp. 174-175.