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The Religious Freedom of the Orthodox Romanians in Banat during the Great War

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Abstract:

The proposed study is a sequence of history that talks about the religious freedom of Romanians in Banat during the First World War. Three distinct periods are identified in the religious and national expression of Romanians. The first refers to the first two years of the conflagration, when the Romanians from Banat fought in a war that was not theirs. Priests or believers who dared to make statements against the official position of the state, or to act in support of peace suffered arrests and torture. Another stage was marked with Romania's entry into the war. The difficulties intensified, the soul of the Romanians was put to the test and those who showed up to join the brothers from across the Carpathians were sent to the camps and even killed. The expression of the desire for national unity that happened in Alba Iulia on December 1, 1918 did not solve the problems of the people of Banat either. They also went through a period of suppression of freedoms during the Serbian occupation, which ended in early August 1919.

Keywords:

Banat, freedom, religion, faith, the Great War, national emancipation

I. Introduction

As has been shown over time, religious freedom is not only closely linked to the social mentality, laws and political spirit of the time. We must show from the beginning that for the Romanians from Banat the First World

War meant a period of intensification of the desires for national freedom, and this national trend was not to the liking of the authorities. As spiritual leaders of the communities, the confessional priests and teachers were often at the forefront of the emancipation actions supported by the Romanian population, which is why they were generally considered as opponents of the political leadership in Budapest.

For these reasons, a large part of the churches of Banat were deprived of pastors, many priests from Banat being mobilized on the front (mainly those in the border areas)¹. In addition to the priests, all confessional teachers fit for war were mobilized on the front, with most of the Church's schools remaining in the care of retired teachers and parish priests, often elderly and sick. To these are added the requisitioning of food, household goods and, for the needs of the army, even the requisitioning of church bells. Under these conditions, the dissatisfaction of the population intensified and the desire for national freedom increased, especially since the Romanians had to fight in a war that was not theirs².

II. Religious persecution in the first two years of the Great War

The struggle of Banat priests and believers in matters of national success is best highlighted by the repressive measures taken by the authorities in some parishes. During the war, the persecution of priests and all those who showed Romanian feelings was unprecedented. In order to protect the population from the "subversive elements", many Romanian priests and leaders were arrested or interned in camps³. Another significant part of the priests and teachers were forcibly kept at home⁴.

Immediately after the start of the war, at the end of July 1914, the priests Antonie Miloşescu from Ogradena Veche, Mihail Costescu from Eşelniţa, Constantin Dure from Orşova and Coriolan Buracu from Mehadia were

¹ Prot. dr. Marcu BĂNESCU, "Graniţa bănăţeană şi unirea din 1918", in: *Mitropolia Banatului*, XXVIII (1978) 10-12, p. 600.

² See Daniel ALIC, *Eparhia Caransebeşului în perioada păstoririi episcopului Miron Cristea (1910-1919). Biserică şi societate*, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană/ Editura Episcopiei Caransebeşului, Cluj Napoca, 2013, pp. 323-328.

³ Ioan CLOPOŢEL, *Revoluţia din 1918 şi unirea Ardealului cu România*, Cluj, 1925, pp. 65-81.

⁴ Ioan MUNTEANU, Vasile Mircea ZABERCA, Mariana SÂRBU, *Banatul şi Marea Unire. 1918*, Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, Timişoara, 1992, pp. 79-86.

arrested and taken to the Caransebes Court for the “crime of agitation”⁵. In order not to leave the parishes without a priest, Bishop Miron Cristea, the one who pastored in Caransebeș during the difficult period of the war, delegated the neighboring priests as parish administrators⁶. The priests were released following the pardon decision given by the emperor of Vienna on November 8, 1914, a decision that came through the Caransebeș Consistory⁷.

The Orșova area, located on the border of the empire with Romania, was considered a “war zone” and closely monitored by the Hungarian authorities. Therefore, not only the priests suffered, but also the faithful who were considered good Romanians. Besides priest Constantin Dure, in Orșova were also arrested: teacher Eftimie Jianu, lawyers dr. Ioan Popovici and dr. Arsenie Micu, merchants Gheorghe Iovanovici (arrested along with his wife and son), Gheorghe Mioc and Dimitrie Oprean, the leader of the land book from Orșova, Fabio Bojincă, Traian Miclea - the *Albina* bank’s accountant from the town, and the colonel in reserve Pavel Novacovici⁸.

Among the arrests in the summer of 1914 was the general Nicolae Cena from Mehadia, called by the contemporaries the *Daco-Roman*, for his Romanian feelings manifested in his entire military activity. Being a general, he was exiled to Vienna, where, as a reward for the humiliation done by the Hungarians, the emperor wanted to offer him a noble title, but he refused, saying that the title of *Romanian* was enough⁹.

Priest Antonie Miloșescu was arrested again on September 24, 1916, by order of Navy Lieutenant Henrich Andraș, commander of a guard ship patrolling the Danube. According to the report written by the gendarmerie platoon leader Bella Gabor, the priest was arrested together with Ioan Dobromirescu, the mayor of the locality and other believers, because they gathered in a public place “in a striking way and spoke Romanian, stating that our redemption comes, and when it comes, we will show who we are”¹⁰.

⁵ Archive of the Diocese of Caransebeș (A.E.C.), *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 284/1914, no. 4897/15 iulie 1914.

⁶ Daniel ALIC, “Aspecte din activitatea misionară și pastorală a parohiilor de pe clisura Dunării în perioada episcopului Miron Cristea (1910-1919)”, in: *Mehedinți, istorie, cultură și spiritualitate*, Editura Didahia, Drobeta Turnu Severin, 2008, p. 382.

⁷ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 284/1914, no. 4897/15 iulie 1914.

⁸ Constantin JUAN-PETROI, *Biserica cu hramul “Sfântul Nicolae” (cel Sărac) din Orșova*, Editura Didahia, Drobeta Turnu Severin, 2008, p. 48.

⁹ Prot. dr. Marcu BĂNESCU, *Granița bănățeană ...*, p. 601.

¹⁰ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc(III)*, file 284/1914, no. 49/January 3 1917.

The accusations were “agreement with the enemy, or at least a common feeling with the enemy”¹¹. At the trial filed at the Military Tribunal in Timișoara, lieutenant Henrich Andraș declared that, although he does not speak Romanian, he understands the language, and one of those arrested stated that “our Romanian brothers will come to the Danube and then we will show what we know”¹². Following the investigation, only the priest Antonie Milosescu was sent to the Sopron camp, the others being released. The trial of the priest took place on January 10, 1917, and the decision of the court was to release the priest. After the trial, he could not return to the parish, the house where he lived being occupied by the military.¹³ In a letter addressed to the Consistory of Caransebeș, the priest Antonie Miloșescu shows that the real reason for his imprisonment in Caransebeș and Szeged was the pastoral zeal he showed towards the faithful in all respects, both ecclesiastically and especially nationally.¹⁴

Another community on the Danube gorge, an area under maximum protection from the authorities, was disrupted in its Church activity. Because the Hungarian authorities could not find fault with the priest Iacob Drăgulescu from Plavișevița, they petitioned Metropolitan Ioan Meșianu, that he does not help needy families after the war and behaves badly with the faithful.¹⁵ The real reasons are shown by the priest in a report submitted to the Diocesan Consistory in which he describes the situation of his parish following the armed conflicts. Several young civilians were shot dead, and frightened believers retreated to their mountain dwellings. For this situation, the priest was accused of not advising the faithful to remain calm.¹⁶

Priest Cornel Ștefan from Oravița and priest Valeriu Dabiciu from Cacova received the same treatment. On July 26, 1914, they were arrested and charged with espionage in favor of Romania. After their trial in Timisoara and Szeged, they were released only at the end of 1914.¹⁷

On August 15, 1915, Emanuil Ciuleiu, the priest from Ciuchici, was accused by the communal mayor of Biserica Albă that, at the mobilization

¹¹ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc(III)*, file 284/1914, no. 49/ January 3 1917.

¹² A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc(III)*, file 284/1914, no. 49/ January 3 1917.

¹³ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc(III)*, file 284/1914, no. 49/ January 3 1917.

¹⁴ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc(III)*, file 284/1914, no. 80/ January 5 1917.

¹⁵ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 292/1914, no. 8159/December 21 1914.

¹⁶ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 292/1914, no. 160/ January 9 1915.

¹⁷ A.E.C., *Fond Școlar (IV)*, file 72/1913, no. 8299/December 24 1914.

for the war, he told the people of the parish to go to Romania together, and then “to return and fight against the Hungarians”¹⁸. The priest asked the bishop to intervene with the state authorities not to be imprisoned, the accusations being unfounded. However, he was imprisoned on September 1, 1915, and on December 22, the same year, his wife, Livia Ciuleiu, asked the bishop to appoint him parish administrator in a totally Romanian village, beyond the border. Following the decision to appoint him to the parish of Iam, the chief military prosecutor released him, and on January 11, 1917, in a letter of thanks to the bishop, priest Emanuil Ciulei said that the united priest from Ciuchici contributed to his arrest, angry that he opposed the attempts of union which he initiated in Ciuchici.¹⁹

In a report to Bishop Miron Cristea, on September 11, 1916, the archpriest Andrei Ghidiu of Caransebeș pointed out that the priest Romul Jurchescu from Peștere was arrested by four soldiers and taken to the Lugoj prison. The reason for the arrest was that of agitation against the state and the possession of compromising letters, in which he mentioned the unity of the Romanian people and language.²⁰ A search of the priest’s house was carried out, and the letters sent by the parish soldiers on the front, in which they requested information about their families, were considered acts of espionage. Passages from letters were biased as acts of rebellion against the Hungarian state and acts of pro-Romanian faith. The cult books printed in Romania were also confiscated, and the poems of Octavian Goga, in the school library, were forbidden to be read to children. The priest was also accused of links with ASTRA, that in 1914 saved the local confessional school from being abolished. Following the Lugoj investigation, Romul Jurchescu was sent to the military prosecutor’s office in Szeged, where he was charged with espionage and sentenced to prison. He was released on January 4, 1918.²¹ After the end of the detention, in an address to the archpriest Andrei Ghidiu, Miron Cristea writes that he took note of the release of the priest Romul Jurchescu of Peștere from the camp and that he came to his parents from Ruginosu. Thus, the priest was assigned to teach classes temporarily at the school in Peștere where he was not a teacher.²²

¹⁸ AEC, *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 284/1914, no. 2232/April 20 1915.

¹⁹ AEC, *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 284/1914, no. 2232/April 20 1915.

²⁰ AEC, *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 284/1914, no. 4958/September 12 1917.

²¹ AEC, *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 136/1916, no. 1971/March 24 1918.

²² Serviciul Județean al Arhivelor Naționale Caraș-Severin (S.J.A.N. Caraș-Severin), *Fond Protopiatul Ortodox Român Caransebeș*, file 2/1918, page 1.

On April 4, 1916, Costescu Gheorghe the priest from Racovița was arrested. He was accused by witnesses that, at a meeting in front of the church where he was priest, he urged people not to pay taxes to the Hungarian state, to show disobedience to Hungarian laws prohibiting Romanians from their basic rights and to wait for Romania to enter in the war and get rid of Hungarian rule. The accusations turned out to be unfounded, set up by the teacher from the local state school, Antoniu Peia, who was previously a confessional teacher. The priest was found guilty only of the fact that, being greeted by the students at the school in Hungarian, he asked them to greet him in Romanian because they are Romanian. He received eight months in prison for this statement, but the Consistory of Caransebeș refused to start a priestly disciplinary investigation, because there were no real charges.²³

Priest George Costescu from Racovița was arrested on March 21, 1916 and taken to the royal prosecutor's office in Timișoara. The reason for the arrest was that in the school year 1915/1916 he said to the students from the village, who greeted him in Hungarian, "you are not Hungarians, but Romanians and I am Romanian, so do not greet me in Hungarian, but in Romanian"²⁴.

Also the priest Costescu, during 1915, in front of the town hall from Racovița, told the population gathered there that only Romania can help us and, therefore, when the Romanians arrive, we must join them. He also urged the parents of the pupils not to send their children to the state school, because they were subject to denationalization. He objected to the authorities when his name was written with the letter "K", declaring himself a "nationalist"²⁵. For all this, on July 17, 1916 the priest George Costescu was sentenced to 8 months in prison and ordered to pay 278 crowns court costs.

Priests also expressed opposition to the Hungarian Government through the help they gave to some Romanians to move to Romania. That was the case of the priests Martin Vernichescu from Vârciorova and Damian Popescu from Ofcea. The priest Martin Vernichescu was arrested on July 20, 1915, on the grounds that he had urged Romanian soldiers who had taken a military oath, to flee to Romania, and he showed them the hidden

²³ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 3957/1914, no. 80/July 1 1917.

²⁴ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 3957/1914, no. 80/ July 1 1917.

²⁵ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 3957/1914, no. 80/ July 1 1917.

roads through the mountains to those who wanted to cross the border. Along with him and on the same charge, they arrested Ioan Borlovan, railway worker from Lugoj, Iuliu Stroia and Ioan Albulescu, also from Lugoj. The priest was imprisoned in Szeged, but it was not until June 17, 1917, that the diocese was notified that the priest would be detained throughout the war. Bishop Miron Cristea intervened for the release of priest Vernichescu, but his intervention was not successful. In order not to hinder the priest's family, the Consistory of Caransebeș donated 200 crowns to the priest's wife, to support the children at school.²⁶

The priest Gheorghe Tătucu from Iablanița also had a remarkable activity on a national level. Before the war, "he took an active part in almost all the struggles aimed at claiming the national rights of Romanians, being pursued by the Hungarian authorities, who often took him to political trials"²⁷. He was also involved in the unmasking of Hungarian political actions aimed at a more pronounced control of the state over the Wealth Community of Caransebeș²⁸. In 1914, he took refuge with his wife in Romania, being declared a spy by the Hungarian authorities, and the gendarmes from Iablanița were ordered to shoot him when he returned to the village.

A disciplinary trial was instituted to the Gheorghe Tătucu from Iablanița on February 29, 1916, in which he was charged with unjustified leaving the office, and the parish was declared vacant. He asked for a month's leave on June 24, 1914 and left for Romania. Although he presented medical certificates, the Consistory, at the request of the state bodies, interrupted the priestly office of the priest and on February 29, 1916, indicted him²⁹. The punishment was a ban on holding another priestly position in the Metropolitanate, taking into account the serious circumstances of the war³⁰.

In Romania, together with other representatives of the Romanians from Banat who took refuge from the Hungarian persecution: Sever Bocu, Cassian R. Munteanu and priest Iuliu Musta from Glimboca³¹, Gheorghe

²⁶ Preot Gheorghe NAGHI, "Preoții din Banat în evenimentele anilor 1914-1918", in: *Mitropolia Banatului*, XXVIII (1978) 10-12, p. 604.

²⁷ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 249/1914, no. 366/February 22 1920.

²⁸ Dr. Antoniu MARCHESCU, *Grănicerii bănățeni și Comunitatea de Avere*, ediția a II-a, Editura Mirton, Timișoara, 2006, pp. 406-413.

²⁹ Arhivele Naționale ale României (A.N.R.), *Fond Miron Cristea*, file 1, page 135.

³⁰ A.N.R., *Fond Miron Cristea*, file 1, page 136.

³¹ Horia MUSTA, *Neamul Mustonilor în Banat*, Editura Marineasa, Timișoara, 2009, p.

Tătucu and deacon dr. Avram Imbroane carried out an intense activity for Romania's entry into the War against the Central Powers. In fact, many of the Banat refugees from Romania were sentenced to death by the court in Cluj, for supporting the idea of national unity of Romanians³². In 1919, priest Tătucu returned to Iablanița and asked the Consistory to reinvest him in the position of priest. Because he left without announcing, the Consistory delegated Archpriest Andrei Ghidiu to make an investigation in the village, an investigation which revealed that the priest's life was in danger, due to his national activity. Consequently, he was reappointed as the priest of Iablanița.³³

III. Stoppages of religious manifestation after Romania's entry into the war

After Romania entered the war, together with the allied powers, the persecution against priests and those who expressed their national desires intensified. The imprisoned priests were no longer released at the request of the bishops, the answer being invariable: "the request for the release of the Romanian Orthodox priests, after the declaration of war by Romania, cannot be satisfied"³⁴.

The series of arrests of priests and believers continued. Cioroian Ștefan, Orthodox archpriest in Comloș, Timiș County, was denounced in the autumn of 1916 to the Hungarian military and administrative authorities for being a paid spy from Bucharest. Likewise, the archpriest's wife was denounced as a spy. They were arrested, although there was no evidence, and after their release they were constantly monitored by several gendarmes³⁵.

The priest Aureliu Maghețiu from Toager was also arrested on September 8, 1916, and on February 20, 1917, he was sentenced to 5 years

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³² Ion POPESCU-PUȚURI, Augustin DEAC, Gheorghe UNC, *Unirea Transilvaniei cu România. 1918*, Editura Politică, București, 1978, p. 394.

³³ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 249/1914, no. 366/February 22 1920.

³⁴ Preot Gheorghe NAGHI, "Preoții din Banat...", p. 606.

³⁵ Sebastian STANCA, *Contribuția preoșimii române din Ardeal la Războiul pentru Intregirea neamului (1916-1919)*, ediție, studiu introductiv, note și indici de Mihai-Octavian GROZA, Mircea-Gheorghe ABRUDAN, Editura Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei/ Editura Argonaut, Deva/Cluj-Napoca, 2015, p. 195.

in prison and 10 years of loss of service and public rights. The accusations were related to a speech he gave in his home, in which he explained to the people gathered there that the Romanians in the empire cannot fight in any form with the Romanian soldiers. The same priest, as school principal, demanded that the Hungarian language in the confessional school be made only in form, and that the Hungarian songs be replaced with Romanian religious songs. The diocese was forced by the authorities to file a Church lawsuit against him, after which the priest lost his post. He was released in October 1918, and on November 1, 1918 he resumed his priesthood in Toager³⁶.

The priest Alexandru Atnagea from Vrani, was arrested following the complaint made by the doctor of the Iam network, Redely Mano, before whom, on December 6, 1916, he expressed his support for Romania. He was sentenced to 6 months in prison, to pay the costs and his property was seized³⁷.

Mitariu Ioan, Orthodox priest in Opațița, Timiș County was detained by local gendarmes after the outbreak of war on the grounds that, in a sermon held before the locals immediately after the mobilization, he encouraged everyone to fight “when they see the flag fluttering”, which was interpreted by the Hungarian authorities as an affront to the address of the Hungarian state. A fost arestat și internat la Deta și la Biserica Albă³⁸.

During the years 1916-1919, Tieran Petru, Orthodox priest in Bucovăț, near Timișoara, was under constant surveillance at home, unable to leave the locality without prior approval from the civil authorities, and he was forbidden to leave the house before 7 am and after 7 pm. During the Serbian military occupation of Banat, he was accused of Romanian nationalist propaganda for contributing to the establishment of the Romanian National Guard and participating in the Great National Assembly in Alba-Iulia, thus being forced to take refuge in order not to be deported to Albania. During the refuge, his house and property were devastated³⁹.

A particularly interesting case is that of the priest Bărbulescu Moise from Chevereșul-Mare. At the beginning, between October 9, 1909 and April 1919, he served at Herneacova, in Timiș-Torontal County, where he

³⁶ A.E.C., *Fond Bisericesc (III)*, file 284/1914, no. 6151/ Novembre 1 1918.

³⁷ Pr. Constantin TRAIN, “Preotul Alexandru Atnagea, un martir al cauzei românești”, in: *Mitropolia Banatului*, XVIII (1968) 4-6, p. 318-319.

³⁸ Sebastian STANCA, *Contributia preoțimii române ...*, p. 207.

³⁹ Sebastian STANCA, *Contributia preoțimii române ...*, p. 223.

organized for the first time the Romanian parish and school and led the difficult process of hierarchical separation from Serbs. He was one of the priests participating in the summer courses at Vălenii de Munte. He was detained in Veperd, August 29, 1916 - April 15, 1917⁴⁰. In 1919 he was elected priest in Chevereșul Mare, in Timiș County. He recalled the period of the Great War:

“At the outbreak of the war, in 1914, I was placed under police surveillance, and when the Romanians came into action, in 1916, I was detained and interned in the camp in Sopron, until 1917. In 1917 I was sent home, to the parish, so that until the end of the war I was still under the supervision of the police”⁴¹.

Another Orthodox shepherd who was oppressed for his religious and national activity was Clecan Gheorghe, priest in Stamora, Timiș County, who between August 1916 and September 1917 was interned in Beregsău-Mare and kept under the supervision of local, military and civilian authorities. So was the priest Nicolae Vulpe from Jadani (1876-1951), who was interned in Sopron from September 1916 until May 1917. In the autumn of 1918, he asserted himself as the leader of the Romanian National Guard in Jadani and participated in the Great National Assembly in Alba-Iulia as a delegate of the Orțișoara electoral circle. The priest Ioanes Teodor from Bencecul Român was interned by Hungarians in the locality Lok, Sopron County, between September 6, 1916 and April 14, 1917, and by the Serbs, in Belinț and Timișoara⁴².

Mihuța Petre, Orthodox priest in Beba-Veche, Timiș County was also actively involved in the national movement of Romanians in Banat, which is why he was imprisoned together with Vasile Lucaci, for two months in 1907, in Szeged. In 1916 he was hospitalized in Șopron together with his brother, doctor Alexandru Mihuța, professor in Arad. In the autumn of 1918, he was tried and sentenced to death by the Hungarian revolutionary army, but escaped by taking refuge in Deva⁴³.

⁴⁰ Sebastian STANCA, *Contributia preoțimii române ...*, p. 223.

⁴¹ Ion POPESCU-PUȚURI, Augustin DEAC, Gheorghe UNC, *Unirea Transilvaniei cu România...*, pp. 317-318.

⁴² Ion POPESCU-PUȚURI, Augustin DEAC, Gheorghe UNC, *Unirea Transilvaniei cu România...*, pp. 323-324

⁴³ Ion POPESCU-PUȚURI, Augustin DEAC, Gheorghe UNC, *Unirea Transilvaniei cu România...*, p. 315.

Not only priests but also confessional teachers have been accused by the authorities of “national unrest”. On November 16, 1916, Bishop Miron Cristea was notified by the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction in Budapest that the teacher Ion Vidu from the confessional school in Lugoj had been detained⁴⁴.

The reasons for detention were membership in The “*Oltul*” *Cultural Circle* from România, society that is not under the control of the Hungarian Government and the possession of books that promote the unity of all Romanians. Following the search of the teacher’s home, correspondence was found with the conductor of *The Singing and Music Association of Turnu Severin* and with other people in Romania. All these were considered subversive actions against the Hungarian state⁴⁵.

At the request of the archpriest dr. George Popovici, The diocesan consistory of Caransebeș intervened with the Hungarian Government for the release of the teacher Ion Vidu, a well-known musical personality of the time. The bishop Miron Cristea recommended to the archpriest to insist on the state authorities in Lugoj, so that a similar address is sent to the Ministry of Interior from the local forums⁴⁶. He was released by the decision of the prosecutor’s office on May 2, 1918, and on May 10 he resumed his activity at the school in Lugoj.⁴⁷

The entry into the war of the United States of America, on April 7, 1917, meant a new step towards national freedom for the peoples of the monarchy. U.S. President William Wilson explained that his country’s interest in the war in Europe was to free various nationalities from foreign domination⁴⁸, and his statements spurred a more vigorous resistance movement of Romanians in Transylvania and Banat. After this episode, the fate of the war began to be seen and the desire for freedom and unity of the Romanians was fulfilled by the act of December 1, 1918.

⁴⁴ Ioan MUNTEANU (coordonator), *Făurirea statului național unitar român. Contribuții documentare bănățene (1914-1919)*, București, 1983, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Ioan MUNTEANU (coordonator), *Făurirea statului național unitar român...*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Ioan MUNTEANU (coordonator), *Făurirea statului național unitar român...*, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁷ Ioan MUNTEANU (coordonator), *Făurirea statului național unitar român...*, pp. 34-35.

⁴⁸ Ioan RUSU ABRUDANU, *Patriarhul României Dr. Miron Cristea – Înalt regent*, Editura Napoca Star, Cluj Napoca, 2009, p. 268.

IV. Religious freedom in Banat from the Great Union until the establishment of the Romanian administration.

Romanians could not take control of Banat because the Hungarian Government had peace talks with the Entente, concluding an armistice in this regard. According to this armistice convention signed on November 13, 1918 in Belgrade between the Entente and Hungary, Banat was occupied by Allied troops until the conclusion of the peace conference negotiations⁴⁹. The first armies to arrive in Banat were the Serbs, who, not knowing their status as a force for the maintenance of public order, committed numerous abuses.⁵⁰ The situation remained uncertain in the first half of 1919, as Banat was still a territory under Hungarian administration, but arbitrarily divided by the French and Serbian armies, which had different views on their surveillance mission. On November 14, 1918, the Serbs occupied Timisoara, and the Serbian command took over the military administration of Banat, disbanded the national guards, and later took over the civilian administration. Initially, the Serbs held only the military administration and left the civilian administration in the hands of the Hungarians. Both forms of leadership did not like the Romanians, considering them dangerous⁵¹. Under the new conditions, the Romanian activity was brutally stopped. The road to Alba Iulia was banned by the Serbian army, not all delegates arriving on Liberty Plain on December 1, 1918. Archpriest Ioan Oprea managed to go to Alba Iulia and represented the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Timisoara as legal delegate.⁵² In many cases, Banat leaders had to work in secret in order to mobilize Romanians at election meetings and hand over credential delegates, i.e., powers to vote for the unconditional union of Banat with Romania. After December 1, 1918, the Serbs continued and even intensified their persecutions against Romanians and national organizations. This is presented to the Romanian General Headquarters by Major Alexandru Dumitrescu, on

⁴⁹ Constantin BRĂTESCU, *Biserica strămoșească din Banatul de sud și contribuția sa la făurirea României Mari (1867-1919)*, Editura Dalami, Caransebeș, 2007, p. 25.

⁵⁰ Constantin BRĂTESCU, *Biserica strămoșească din Banatul de sud...*, p. 26.

⁵¹ Radu PĂIUȘAN, *Mișcarea națională din Banat și Marea Unire 1895-1919*, Editura de Vest, Timișoara 1993, p. 136.

⁵² Ioan MUNTEANU, Dumitru TOMONI, Vasile Mircea ZABERCA, *Banatul și Marea Unire. Bănățeni la Alba Iulia*, Editura Partoș, Timișoara 2018, p. 264

December 11, 1918: “In Banat there is now a fierce and similar fight to the one that the Hungarians fought before against the Romanians, there are daily hospitalizations and arrests of Romanians in different localities in Banat...”⁵³.

The memoirs of the priest Moise Bărbulescu from Herneacova show that in 1919 he was wanted by the Serbian authorities to be killed because of his national activity, and his house was full of refugees, priests, teachers and peasants around Timișoara, even Archpriest Ioan Oprea from Timisoara being sheltered by him⁵⁴.

In June 1919, Serbian authorities arrested Archpriest Ștefan Cioroian from Comloș, who also had problems with Hungarian rule, accusing him of plotting against Serbian domination. Ulterior, a fost dus la consiliul de război sârbesc din Becicherecul Mare unde a fost maltratat. He was told many times that he has a “chance” to choose between shooting / execution or, in the happiest case, deportation to Albania. During the 10 days he was imprisoned, he was placed near the gendarmes, so as not to escape. In the absence of evidence for the deeds for which he had been arrested, the war council ordered the release of Archpriest Cioroian Ștefan. However, even after his release, he was visited daily by Serbian detectives, who sought to catch him and arrest him again under various pretexts. When the Serbs withdrew, in order not to have problems, he had to flee at night and hide in Timisoara, so as not to be killed⁵⁵.

Archpriest from Ciacova, Ghilezan Augustin (1883-1943), was the president of the Ciacova delegation to the Great National Assembly from Alba-Iulia. Although he had problems after Romania’s entry into the war on the part of the Entente, in the autumn of 1916 when he was placed under the supervision of the Hungarian local police banned from leaving Ciacova, after the occupation of Banat by the Serbian army he was harassed and investigated in the Serbian barracks that he refused to mention the king of Serbia, Peter, at religious services⁵⁶.

All these situations dragged on until the establishment of the Romanian administration in Timișoara and the withdrawal of the Serbian army. In

⁵³ Serviciul Arhive Naționale Istorice Centrale, Fond *Direcția Generală a Poliției și Siguranței Generale*, file 8/1919, page 13.

⁵⁴ Grigore N. POPESCU, *Preoțimea română și întregirea neamului. Temnițe și lagăre*, Tipografia Vremea, București, 1940, p. 317-319.

⁵⁵ Sebastian STANCA, *Contributia preoțimii române ...*, p. 195.

⁵⁶ Sebastian STANCA, *Contributia preoțimii române ...*, 315

Timișoara, the Romanian administration was established only on July 28 by taking over the Prefecture of Timiș-Torontal County by Dr. Aurel Cosma.⁵⁷

V. Conclusions

The facts recorded above, taken from the pages of documents and books, are telling for the role that the Church had in the destiny of the Romanian nation. From its inception, the Christian Church - a divine institution, founded by Jesus Christ the Son of God Himself - has been the guide of believers on the road to salvation. And because, especially in the 19th century, the principle of nationally oriented emancipation has begun to be present in people's thinking, the Church, through its servants, has become the most important cultural establishment for the enlightenment and cultivation of the Romanian nation. There were many historical stages that proved this thesis, the period of the first world conflagration being the time when many Romanians sacrificed their freedom to promote religious and national ideals. Not only the national unity was the motto of the Romanians separated by the Carpathian Mountains and caught up in the unfolding of the Great War, but also the desire to manifest themselves freely in all aspects of life. And because religious expression has always been seen as a sister to religious freedom, the attitude of the Romanians in Banat, under a permanent national siege, was to combine with the faith and the nation, with the confidence that God is the One who can put peoples on the normal path of history.

Both in the period before the Great Union, when Hungarian interests prevailed in Banat, and in the following months of Serbian occupation, the Romanians had only one creed and one struggle: to be free in their country and in their faith. This wish was fulfilled after Banat was taken over by the Romanian administration, even if not in territorial-historical integrity.

⁵⁷ For details, Vasile DUDAȘ, *Aurel Cosma (1867–1931)*, Editura Mirton, Timișoara, 1998.