

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
96 (3), pp. 172-187, 2023

The Metropolitan Bishop of Oradea from the Second Half of the 17th Century and the First Hierarchy Known by the Name in the Land of Bihor, Metropolitan Bishop Simeon

Ionel CHIRA

Ionel CHIRA
University of Oradea, Romania
Email: popachira@yahoo.com

Abstract

After the Catholic proselytism gradually died out starting in the middle of the 16th century, its place was taken by the Calvinist one, which in turn implied a new action of Magyarization. The Calvinist propaganda used Calvinist preachers, established Romanian-Calvinist Deaneries and, also offered facilities and rewards for Orthodox priests who agreed to convert.

With the Turkish rule over the Oradea citadel installed in the summer of 1660, the Bihor Orthodox believers were no longer subjected to the same intensity of Calvinization and Magyarization pressures. The documents of the time speak in this period about the existence of some Orthodox hierarchs who came to Bihor and who resided in the Velența district of Oradea. Among them, we know by name the

bishops Efreem Veniamin, Petru Hristofor and, starting with this study, Metropolitan Bishop Simeon of the Várad (Oradea) Metropolitan Church.

Keywords

Proselytism, Calvinism, Bihor County, political-social context, Metropolitan Church of Oradea, bishops, Orthodoxy, Catholicism

I. Introduction

From an ecclesiastical perspective, after the abolition of the Catholic Bishopric in 1556, the County of Bihor came under the canonical jurisdiction of the Orthodox Metropolitan Bishops of Alba Iulia, as is clear from the documentary testimonies of the time¹ and from the title of the bishops Ghenadie I,² Gennady II³ and Sava Brancovici⁴.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the bishops of Vad, Teofil, Augustin and Eftimie II also received the title of Oradea⁵. Therefore,

¹ The canonical jurisdiction of Metropolitan Bishop Eftimie, who pastored between the years 1571-1574, extended over the whole of Transylvania, as it results from the notification made in Oradea, on September 12, 1572, by Christofor, the brother of Prince Stefan Bathory. He wrote that *Eftimie* was named “bishop” of the Romanians “from the Land of Transylvania and in parts of the Land of Hungary”, “Ștefan cel Mare, Mihai Viteazul și Mitropolia Ardealului”, in: *Analele Academiei Române, Memoriile Secției Istorice*, II, t. XVII, București, 1904, p. 31.

² In the preface of the *Evanghelia cu Învățătură (Gospel with teaching)*, (Cazania), printed by deacon Coresi in Brașov (1580-1581) he is called the “illuminated Metropolitan Bishop, the great Ghenadie of all the land of Transylvania and Oradea”. Ana DUMITRAN, *Religie ortodoxă - Religie reformată. Ipostaze ale identității confesionale a românilor din Transilvania în secolele XVI-XVII*, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 374.

³ From a “book” of recognition given on December 4, 1628 to the dean Ianas from Hunedoara, his entire title is known: “The Most Reverend Archbishop Chir Ghenadie of the church seat of Balgrad and Vad and Oradea and Satmar and the entire country of Transylvania and the rest”, Timotei CIPARIU, *Acte și fragmente latine și românești pentru istoria Bisericii române mai ales unite*, Blaj, 1855, pp. 253-254.

⁴ On December 28, 1656, he received the diploma of recognition from the Transylvanian Prince Gheorghe Rakoczy II by which he was granted jurisdiction over the proper Transylvania, Severin, Zarand, Bihor and Maramures, T. CIPARIU, *Arhivul pentru filologie și istorie*, Blaj, 1870, pp. 648-650; Vasile MANGRA, *Mitropolitul Sava Brancovici*, Arad, 1906, pp. 51-55.

⁵ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Românești din Transilvania, Banat*,

on February 21, 1615, Gabriel Bethlen ordained *Teofil*, from the Prislop monastery, as bishop of Vad, with jurisdiction also over the county of Bihor and the districts of Bistrița and Gurghiu⁶. His successor was *Augustin*, probably a Moldavian, because he soon retired to Moldova⁷. On June 1, 1623, Prince Gabriel Bethlen (1580-1629) recognized someone named *Eftimie* as bishop of Vad, ordained by his brother Stefan, with jurisdiction over the counties held by Augustin⁸. With this Eftimie, in 1627 the series of bishops of Vad ends, because in the following year the two dioceses - the Metropolitan Church of Balgrad and the Episcopate of Vad - were already merged, which results from the title of *Gennady II*, on December 4, 1628, “archbishop in the church seat of Balgrad and Vad and Oradea and Satmar and the whole country of Transylvania and the others”⁹. We assume that the abolition of the Bishopric of Vad was requested by Bethlen, because the “orthodox” bishops here, who came from Moldavia, were an obstacle to Calvinist proselytism.

II. Calvinist Protestantism in Bihor County

The first phase of Protestantism spread in Bihor through the direct use of the theses of German Protestantism. Among those who supported this process was Gaspar Dragfi who promoted these theses among the great nobles of Transylvania but also in the northern parts of Bihor where, in Salaj, on the valley of Er and Barcău, he had vast possessions. Back in 1545 and 1550, on his estate in Ardud, Dragfi agreed to organize several “Protestant synods” in which the priests of some villages in Bihor also participated¹⁰.

Crișana și Maramures, Deva, Editura Episcopiei Devei și Hunedoarei, 2018, p. 210.

⁶ Nicolae DOBRESCU, *Fragmente privitoare la istoria Bisericii române*, București, 1905, pp. 19-25.

⁷ Nicolae DOBRESCU, *Fragmente privitoare la istoria Bisericii române*, p. 23.

⁸ Nicolae DOBRESCU, *Fragmente privitoare la istoria Bisericii române*, pp. 24-25.

⁹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române 2*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1981, p. 62.

¹⁰ Ana DUMITRAN, Botond GUDOR, Pr. Nicolae DĂNILĂ, *Relații interconfesionale româno maghiare în Transilvania (mijlocul secolului XVI - primele decenii ale secolului XVIII)*, Alba Iulia, 2000, p. 24; Ștefan LUPȘA, “Istoria bisericească a românilor bihoreni (până la 1825)”, I, in: *Monografia almanah a Crișanei*, Oradea, 1935, pp. 18-19.

In Bihor, the Calvinist proselytism acted mainly through the Hungarian superintendency from Debrecen which apparently had some successes, ordaining priests and establishing the Calvinist Archdiocese of Marghita¹¹. The first documented Calvinized priest from Bihor is Achim from Căbești, a participant in the works of the Calvinist “synod”, held against the Unitarians in Oradea, on October 10, 1569¹².

In the year 1608, the priest Mihail from Nimăești (near Beiuș), on January 15, asked prince Sigismund Rakoczy (1544-1608), who was passing through Beiuș, for a diploma of privileges, as a reward for his voluntary attachment to Calvinism. Through the diploma he gave him, the prince ordered that “...all priests who have joined or will join Calvinism have all the rights and exemptions that Calvinist priests of any nationality and especially Hungarian ones have”¹³. He will also order that the Romanian priests “to be allowed everywhere to confess Calvinism”, and the authorities “not to claim any kind of tax from them, not even for the voivode”¹⁴.

The sustained attempts for Calvinization will be accentuated, thus, in 1641 the priest Avram from the village of Burda was ordained by Prince Gheorghe Rakoczy I (1593-1648) “bishop” in Bihor, that is, priest-inspector, in the sense given by the Calvinists to a bishop. The same prince later established, in 1643, the Romanian-Calvin Deanery for Zarand County, based in Ciuci (today Vârfurile), also called the Deanery of Criș, to counteract the powerful metropolitan orthodox center¹⁵ from Ineu¹⁶.

In the middle of the 17th century, another priest named Ioan Siat from Ucuriș appeared as being converted to Calvinism, in the district of

¹¹ Ana DUMITRAN, *Religie ortodoxă - Religie reformată. Ipostaze ale identității profesionale a românilor din Transilvania în secolele XVI-XVII*, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 301.

¹² Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, p. 186.

¹³ Liviu BORCEA “Contribuții la Istoria Orașului Oradea în timpul stăpânirii otomane (1660-1692)”, in: *Almanahul Crisia XI*, Oradea, 1981, p. 110.

¹⁴ Zenovie PĂCLIȘANU, “Câteva date despre preoții româno-calvini”, in: *Cultura creștină*, I, 3, (1911), pp. 71-72; Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii românești din Transilvania, Banat, Crisana și Maramureș*, pp. 177-178; A. DUMITRAN, B. GUDOR, Pr. N. DĂNILĂ, *Relații interconfesionale româno-maghiare în Transilvania*, pp. 121, 301-306; ***, *Monografia Județului Bihor*, Oradea, Editura Arca, 2010, p. 102.

¹⁵ ***, *SZERB SZEKESEGYHAZ A TABANBAN. Az eltunt Racvaros emlekezete*, Budapesti, Történeti Múzeum, Matica Srpska Keptara, Szerb Egyhazi Múzeum, 2019, pp. 46-53.

¹⁶ Liviu BORCEA, *Bihorul medieval*, Oradea, Editura Arca, 2005, p. 189.

Beiuș, who, in exchange for his accession, will receive the ennoblement of himself and his descendants of both sexes and the right to wear armor¹⁷.

It seems that a stronger Calvinist propaganda took place in the northern parts of Bihor County, explained both by the lack of Orthodox priests and by the proximity of this area to Debrecen¹⁸ (where Hungarian Calvinism had its centre of gravity), rightly called “Hungarian Geneva”, due to the benevolent tolerance of the Ottoman rulers¹⁹.

But with all these pressures, except for a few priests who seem to have embraced Calvinism only to appease the anger of the Calvinists against the Orthodox Church, the great mass of the population did not renounce their ancestral religion. The high hierarchs of the Romanian Church also had this dignified attitude in front of the Calvinization plans²⁰.

III. Conquest of Oradea by the Turks

The Calvinist proselytism did not manage to achieve deep and lasting conquests among the Romanians, but only to emphasize more the national character of Orthodoxy, as a result it will gradually die out. The conquest of Oradea by the Turks in the middle of the 17th century will also contribute to this. Thus, on July 13, 1660, the Turkish forces arrived in Oradea, setting up in battle formations around the citadel. The total of the Ottoman forces amounted to about 45,000 men, and that of the defenders to 850, of whom few were skilled in the use of weapons.

Exhausted by the constant attacks and the diseases that decimated them, lacking supplies, and ammunition, on August 27, 1660, the approximately 300 defenders who remained alive surrendered the citadel to Ali Pasha²¹.

¹⁷ Ștefan LUPȘA, “Istoria bisericească a românilor bihoreni”, p. 19; ***, *Monografia Județului Bihor*, p. 102.

¹⁸ Mathias BERNATH, *Habsburgii și începuturile formării națiunii române*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura DACIA, 1994, p. 95.

¹⁹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, p. 186.

²⁰ Ștefan LUPȘA, *Istoria bisericească a românilor bihoreni*, p. 20.

²¹ Janos SZALARDI, *Siralmas magyar kronikaja*, Bdp. 1980, p. 591; ***, *Călători străini despre țările române*, VI, Bucharest, p. 666; Liviu BORCEA, “Contribuții la istoria Orașului Oradea în timpul stăpânirii otomane (1660-1692)”, p. 108; Liviu BORCEA, “Un document inedit despre căderea Oradiei în mana turcilor”, in: *Almanahul Crisia*, XI, Oradea, 1976, pp. 207-208.

It seems that, shortly after the entry of the Turkish troops into the Oradea Citadel, an Orthodox bishop sent by the Patriarch of Constantinople also arrived²². His existence was mentioned in a 1664 letter from the Calvinist Synod of Csátar to the Calvinist Archpriest of Mandok²³. Unfortunately, the document does not specify the name of the bishop, but only calls him *rác* *vladika* (*Serbian bishop*) and shows that he had the right to visit villages, collect taxes and issue fines.²⁴ Some historians, such as Mircea Păcurariu, associate (identify) him with bishop Ștefan who resided in Ineu-Lipova with jurisdiction over the Arad area²⁵.

Calvinist documents speak of Orthodox bishops coming to Bihar with letters from the Patriarch of Constantinople²⁶. It is probably about itinerant bishops (Periodeuts)²⁷, institution that functioned for a long time during the beginning of the Byzantine Empire²⁸. Therefore, these bishops had spiritual authority to undertake canonical visits, examine and punish bigamous priests, remarried priests and those who transgress Christian conduct. Such visits are mentioned around Aleșd, Pomezueu and Beiuș. The Calvinist leaders complained that a Romanian bishop came to Chișlaz “after the war with the Turks” and punished and beat the priests who converted to Calvinism²⁹.

Together with the Ottomans, in 1660 more and more Orthodox believers appeared in the citadel of Oradea, especially merchants and

²² Liviu BORCEA, “Contribuții la istoria Orașului Oradea în timpul stăpânirii otomane (1660-1692)”, p. 173.

²³ Florian DUDAȘ, Constantin BUTIȘCĂ, Pr. Cosmin PINTEA, *Vechea catedrală a Bihorului. Biserica din Velența Orăzii*, Oradea, Editura Breviss, 2004, p. 18.

²⁴ Elek FENYES, *Magyarország geographiai szótára*, IV, 41, Pesta, 1851, pp. 262-266.

²⁵ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii românești din Transilvania*, p. 176; Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, pp. 186-187; Pavel CHERESCU, “Viața bisericească a românilor ortodocși din Bihar. Repere istorice”, in: *Orizonturi Teologice*, 3-4, 2005, p. 52.

²⁶ It is about a letter from the Calvinist synod held in Cetariu, on November 6, 1664, to the superintendent from Debrecen, in: Ștefan LUPȘA, “Istoria bisericească a românilor bihoreni”, pp. 16-18.

²⁷ M. GEORGIȚĂ, “Aspecte ale raportului dintre Biserica calvină și cea ortodoxă din Ardeal în a doua jumătate a secolului al XVII-lea”, in: *Analele Universității din Oradea*, Istorie-Arheologie, tom XVI, 2006, volume XVI, 2006, pp. 17-18.

²⁸ Liviu BORCEA, *Bihorul medieval*, p. 190.

²⁹ Nicolae FIRU, *Biserica ortodoxă din Bihar în luptă cu Unirea (1700-1750)*, Caransebeș, 1913, p. 33.

officials who worked and lived in the south of the Danube for the benefit and proximity of the Turks. Besides, the chronicler Evlia Celebia specified this fact, showing that Oradea, recently conquered, was initially populated by inhabitants coming from Rumelia (Balkans)³⁰. Among them will have been, probably, also those who once formed the garrison of the citadel. This is the only way to explain the appearance of an Orthodox neighbourhood in the suburb of Oradea. They also owned a church built with the approval of the Turks in exchange for some material benefits in the future Orthodox neighbourhood of Velența³¹.

IV. Metropolitan Bishop Simeon

Thus, according to historical sources³², after these lands fell into the hands of the Turks in 1660, Oradea became the centre of Serbian Orthodox authority, at the expense of the Metropolitan Church of Jenö (Ineu)³³.

Following the research, Father Gheorghe Lițiu believes that during the Turkish rule in Velența there was already a church, since, in 1671, a believer from the Trifa-Gavrus family, a family domiciled in Velența, bought a *Slavonic Gospel* for the church here, printed in 1665 in Lvov. Florian Dudas claims, however, that in reality, the book was bought in 1671 in Lemberg to be donated in Maramureș, but it arrived in Oradea after 1700³⁴.

³⁰ ***, *Călători străini despre țările române*, p. 518.

³¹ Florian DUDAȘ, *Vechea catedrală a Bihorului. Biserica din Velența Orăzii*, pp. 33, 59, 159, 263.

³² ***, *SZERB SZEKESEGYHAZ A TABANBAN. Az eltunt Racvaros emlekezete*, Budapesti, Történeti Múzeum, Matica Srpska Keptara, Szerb Egyhazi Múzeum, 2019, pp. 53-54.

³³ ***, *SZERB SZEKESEGYHAZ A TABANBAN*, p. 46; Paraskevas KONORTAS, *Relations financières entre le patriarcat orthodoxe de Constantinople et la Sublime Porte (1453 - fin du XVI siècle)*, in: *Le patriarcat oecuménique de Constantinople aux XIV-XVI siècles: rupture et continuité. Actes du colloque international*, Rome, 5-6-7 décembre 2005, Paris, 2007, Dossiers Byzantins 7, pp. 299-318; Tom PAPADEMETRIOU, *Render unto the Sultan. Power, Authority, and the Greek Orthodox Church in the Early Ottoman Centuries*, Oxford, 2015; Halil INALCIK, *The Satus of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch under the Ottomans*, Turcica, 1991, pp. 21-23, pp. 407-430.

³⁴ ***, *Din activitatea bisericească a Episcopiei Ortodoxe Române în ultimii 200 de ani*, Editura Episcopia Ortodoxă Română Oradea, Oradea, 1984, p. 94.

This church in Velența is also registered in the *Schematism of the Bishopric of Karlovci for the year 1667*³⁵.

Here, in the second decade of the 17th century, was the headquarters of a metropolitan church³⁶. A bishop's chest from 1674 that served to transport bishop's vestments, covered in deerskin and the yellow silk antimis stand as testimony. It belonged to a hierarch residing in Velența and was used by him during canonical visits and priestly services in the parishes under his jurisdiction. The so-called *Cash Register (of accounts)* in which the revenues and expenses of the residence from Velența are recorded, speaks much more clearly about this headquarters. According to this cash register, for the year 1691, the following expenses are recorded at the archbishop's house: 18 craitari for the lattice at the gate of the "residence", 6 craitari for a cart with thorns needed for the fence of the "residence" and 3 florins *for the bridge of His Majesty*³⁷.

Here, in 1692, the Austrians will find the Orthodox bishop surrounded by his believers³⁸, as the Latin bishop Forgach mentioned in his register that when Oradea was conquered by the Habsburgs "they were not Catholics, but only schismatics, and with the help of these warriors they drove out the Turks from the citadel and its lands"³⁹.

If until now the first bishop known by name in the documents of the time, in the political-social context created after the abolition of the Turkish pashalik from Oradea by the Habsburg troops in 1692, when it is remembered that in Oradea the representatives of the Habsburg crown did not have found no Catholic bishop, only a schismatic (orthodox) one⁴⁰, with this study the data of this problem changes radically. In this regard, the Serbian researcher Šuletić Nebojša C., in his study entitled "Data on the documents of the Archdiocese of Pec and the Deanery of Ohrid in the revenue book of the office of the church mucats (VOA, KK 2542-33)",

³⁵ ***, *SZERB SZEKESEGYHAZ A TABANBAN*, p. 53.

³⁶ ***, *SZERB SZEKESEGYHAZ A TABANBAN*, p. 52.

³⁷ ***, *Monografia Județului Bihor*, 2010, p.103.

³⁸ Liviu BORCEA, "Contribuții la istoria Orașului Oradea în timpul stăpânirii otomane (1660-1692)", pp. 112-118.

³⁹ Ioan GUDEA, "Din istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române din Bihor", in: *Mitropolia Ardealului*, 1-2, 1978, p. 270.

⁴⁰ Ioan GUDEA, "Din istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române din Bihor", p. 270.

published in *Serbian studies*, 1, (2010), pp. 177-193⁴¹, records the list of the Serbian metropolitan churches in Hungary based on the *Registers of the church chancellery from Istanbul according to the year 1692*. These Registers translated from Turkish into Serbian and then into Hungarian, are published in the work *SZERB SZEKESEGYHAZ A TABANBAN. Az eltunt Racvaros emlekezete*, Budapesti Történeti Múzeum, Matica Srpska Keptara, Szerb Egyhazi Múzeum, Budapesti, 2019, pp. 52-54. In the enumeration of these metropolitan churches, there is also the *Metropolitan Church of Várad (Oradea)* which was archpastored between the years 1673-1692 by *Metropolitan Bishop Simeon*. So, the first hierarch known by name in these lands was *Metropolitan Bishop Simeon* who served as archpastor on the church seat of the *Metropolitan Church of Várad (Oradea)* for 19 years. The comparison of the names of these metropolitan churches shows the fact that some of them merged, as a result, metropolitan churches such as Modava és Orsova, Lippa-Giula, Belgrád-Szerém, Pozsega és Zachasna, Temesvár-Becskekerek-Ceanád, appear as a single ecclesiastical entity. The *Metropolitan Church of Várad (Oradea)* archpastored by *Metropolitan Bishop Simeon* remained independent alongside the Metropolitan Churches of Szeged, Buda, Szigetvár and paid the Ottoman Sublime Porte a peskes of 3,000 akcse annually.

The multitude of the peskes is an obvious indicator of the importance of the metropolitan church seat. Some metropolitan church seats such as Belgrade-Szerem (1,800 akcse), Lippa-Gyula (1,800 akcse), Buda (2,000 akcse) and Szeged (800 akcse), were subjected to a lower financial burden, while Szigetvár (4,500 akcse) and Varád (3,000 akcse), were considered important metropolitan church seats, as a result the peskes increased exponentially. Thus, the Metropolies of Szigetvár and Varád (independent) paid the largest peskes of all metropolitan churches, except for the Temesvár-Becskekerek-Ceanád Metropolitan Church (5,000 akcse), which was formed by the merger of the three church administrative units, even before 1640⁴².

⁴¹ Шулетић, Небојша С.: Подаци о бератима архијереја Пећке и Охридске архиепископије у дефтеру прихода канцеларије црквених муката (BOA, KK 2542- 33). Српске студије, 1, 2010, pp. 177-193.

⁴² ***, *SZERB SZEKESEGYHAZ A TABANBAN*, pp. 53, 46.

METROPÓLIA	METROPOLITA	PESKES
Belgrád–Szerém	Pajsije (1679–1692–)	1800 akcse
Buda város	—	2000 akcse
Lippa–Gyula (kadılık)	Isaija (1682–1692–)	1800 akcse
Modava és Orsova	Antim (1657–1692–)	3000 akcse
Pozsega és Začasna	Vasilije (1669–1692–)	1440 akcse
Szeged	Jeftimije (1679–1692–)	800 akcse
Szigetvár	—	4500 akcse
Temesvár–Beckerek–Csanád	Mihajlo (1679–1692–)	5000 akcse
Várad	Simeon (1673–1692–)	3000 akcse

Therefore, the discovery of the *bishop's chest* from the year 1674, the *Cash Register* with the incomes and expenses related to the year 1691 and the *Registers of the church chancellery in Istanbul according to the year 1692*, entitle us to claim with certainty that in Oradea, having his residence in Velența, Metropolitan Bishop Simeon of the Metropolitan Church of Várad (Oradea) carried out his the archpastoral activity of between the years 1673-1692.

If the historian Ioan Lupas in his work entitled, *Church History of Romanians of Bihor*, states that the first Orthodox bishops known by name in Bihor were *Efrem Benjamin* and *Petru Hristofor*⁴³ and now through the discovery of these records from the *Registers of the church chancellery in Istanbul*, taken over by Serbian researchers and translated into Hungarian, it can be argued historically that the first hierarch from the land of Bihor known by the name is **Metropolitan Bishop Simeon**.

⁴³ Ioan LUPAȘ, *Istoria bisericească a românilor ardeleni*, Sibiu, Editura Tiparul tipografiei arhiepiscopale, 1918, p. 30.

V. Bishop Ephrem Veniamin

With the reorganization of the dioceses of the Habsburg Empire in 1695, the Serbian patriarch Arsenije III Čarnojević ordained Bishop *Efrem Veniamin (Banianin)* to the episcopal seat based in Oradea⁴⁴. In this situation, Bishop Efrem is the successor of Metropolitan Bishop Simeon, and this reality is also attested by the *Leopoldine Diploma* of March 4, 1695, which, in addition to considering the *Illyrian privileges*⁴⁵ and the organization of the Serbian hierarchy in Hungary, also confirms⁴⁶ *Bishop Ephrem of Oradea and Agria*⁴⁷ based in Velența, among seven other bishops. In 1692, the Roman Catholic Bishopric of Oradea (abolished after 1556) was re-established, the first bishop being Augustin Benkovits, but with very few believers, as most had converted to Calvinism. *Bishop Efrem* pastored here until, due to the Catholic proselytism supported by the Imperial Court, which, starting in September 1700, decided that the Romanians from Bihor, either unitarian or schismatic, should be placed under the jurisdiction of the Catholic bishop Augustin Benkovits⁴⁸. At the same time, due to the strong pressure exerted by the Roman Catholic Church through the person of Cardinal Kolonici de Ezstergom, *Bishop Efrem Veniamin*, who apparently lived mostly in Buda, was forced either to go to Ramnic to

⁴⁴ Ștefan LUPȘA, "Fost-a Efrem Banianin episcop al Orăzii?" in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 5-6, 1935, pp. 260-262; Ștefan LUPȘA, "Efrem Banianin episcop titular al Orăzii, 1695-1698", in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 11-12, 1936, pp. 756-757; Marius EPPPEL, *Drumul către episcopie*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Presa Universitară Clujană, 2011, p. 4.

⁴⁵ Exempting Serbs from paying the tithes to the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴⁶ Timișoara-Ienopole-Lipova (Isaia Diacovici), to Karlstadt, to Seghedin, to Buda, to Mohaci, to Vârset and to Oradea (Efrem Beniamin). These 7 bishops were subject to the patriarch Arsenie III Cernoevici, who established his residence at Crusodol (Sirmium), then at Sântandrei (near Buda). By the same imperial rescript, the town of Oradea was divided into three parts: Oradea (subject to the Catholic Capitol of the citadel), Oradea-Olosig and Oradea-Velența (subject to the Roman Catholic Bishopric of Oradea) - C. BUTIȘCĂ, F. DUDAȘ, C. PINTEA, *Vechea catedrală ortodoxă a Bihorului-Biserica din Velența Orăzii*, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁷ Nicolae FIRU, *Monografia Bisericii Sfintei Adormiri (Biserica cu Lună din Oradea)*, Oradea, Editura Diocesan, 1934, p. 18; Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, pp. 523, 525.

⁴⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, p. 526.

bishop Antim Ivireanul, and therefrom in Constantinople⁴⁹, or to convert to the Uniatism and to become a vicar for the unitarian Serbs in Hungary. The patriarch dismissed him as hierarch⁵⁰, and the Orthodox Bishopric of Oradea remained vacant⁵¹.

VI. Bishop Peter Christopher

The next Orthodox bishop mentioned in the documents is *Petru Hristofor*⁵² who came to Oradea in 1708 with letters of recommendation from Bishop Antim Ivireanul. Between the years 1708-1712, he carried out an activity of de-Calvinization and de-Catholicization of the parishes in the Beiuș area that suffered the most from proselytizing campaigns⁵³.

He is also mentioned in a letter from 1752 written by the priest Ioan Pop from Nermis (near Beliu) who noted that he “was ordained in Oradea by Bishop Petru Hristofor, 40 years ago”⁵⁴. It seems that *Petru Hristofor* was a Macedonian-Romanian of the Kristoff family from Oradea, a family that would also give birth to one of the founders of the future *Church with the Moon*, Mihail Kristoff. The support given to *Petru Hristofor* by Antim Ivireanul is proven by the fact that in 1711 the people of Beiuș asked the Catholic vicar Kébel Mihály, who was doing unionist propaganda here, to show them “a letter from the Metropolitan Bishop of Muntenia, Afatim, because otherwise they do not recognize him as a vicar”⁵⁵.

The church life of the inhabitants of Bihor County did not particularly concern the Turks during their domination, the Christians being left “to

⁴⁹ Florian DUDAȘ, “Dezrobirea religioasă a românilor din Bihor în sec XVIII”, in: *Vechea catedrală ortodoxă a Bihorului – Biserica din Velența Orășii*, Oradea, Editura Brevis, 2004, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, p. 526.

⁵¹ Marius EPEL, *Drumul către episcopie*, p. 4.

⁵² Ștefan LUPȘA, “Istoria bisericească a românilor bihoreni”, pp. 49-50.

⁵³ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii românești din Transilvania, Banat, Crișana și Maramureș până în 1918*, p. 245.

⁵⁴ Constantin BUTIȘCĂ, Florian DUDAȘ, Cosmin PINTEA, *Vechea catedrală ortodoxă a Bihorului – Biserica din Velența Orășii*, p. 19.

⁵⁵ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, Galați, Editura Episcopia Dunării de Jos, 1996, p. 303.

judge according to their ordinances” and “to live according to their old customs with two demands, namely, to give their taxes on time and not to rebel”⁵⁶.

VII. Habsburg rule and Catholic proselytism

After the expulsion of the Turks from the western part of Transylvania (The Partium), therefore implicitly from Bihor, starting in 1692, the land of Oradea came under the Habsburg rule. In these circumstances it is also triggered a strong action of Catholic proselytism. On November 24, 1693, through an imperial rescript, Emperor Leopold I returned to the re-established Roman Catholic Bishopric of Oradea all the assets that the Calvinists had expropriated⁵⁷. Consequently, in 1701, the Viennese Court abolished the old Orthodox Metropolitan Church of Transylvania with its residence in Alba Iulia and established a bishopric under the patronage of Rome, which was subordinated to the archbishop of Esztergom (Strigoniu)⁵⁸.

Deprived of their own church hierarchy, the Orthodox Romanians were guided to the recently restored and long existing (under the Turks) Serbian hierarchy, led by their great patriarch Arsenije III Čarnojević. He, as well as his descendants, was confirmed by the Court the right to pastor over all the Orthodox in the Empire⁵⁹.

In December 1702, Count Emerik Csáki, who also held the position of “fișpan” (prefect) of the county, followed as Catholic bishop in Oradea. He soon became bishop of Eger (Agria), then of Kalocsa and cardinal. He left Mihail Kebell as vicar in Oradea, to work for the transition of the Romanians to the union with the Church of Rome⁶⁰. The beginning of the

⁵⁶ Liviu BORCEA, “Contribuții la istoria Orașului Oradea în timpul stăpânirii otomane (1660-1692)”, pp. 122-118.

⁵⁷ Liviu BORCEA, Gheorghe GORUN, *Istoria orașului Oradea*, Editura Arca, Oradea, 2009, p. 215.

⁵⁸ Drago NJEGOVAN, Miodrag MILIN, “Mitropolia de la Karlowitz și relațiile sârbo-române din cuprinsul Monarhiei habzburgice”, *AB, ARCHEOLOGY – HISTORY*, XXIII, 2015, p. 424.

⁵⁹ Ljubivoje CEROVIC, *Sârbii din România*, Timișoara, 2000, pp. 45-47.

⁶⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii românești din Transilvania, Banat, Crișana și Maramureș până în 1918*, p. 304.

rebellion led by Francisc Rákóczi (the curuts' rebellion) in 1703 greatly diminished the propaganda for the union in Bihar⁶¹.

After the unsuccessful beginnings of the Unitarian movement due to the opposition of the majority of Romanians to join the Church of Rome, after the death of Emperor Leopold I (1705) and Cardinal Kolonich de Esztergom (1707), the pressure in favour of the Uniatism diminished. In the meantime, the Serbs consolidated their status as their own hierarchy, their privileges were confirmed, so they could represent a viable hope of support for the Orthodox Romanians as well⁶².

Vikentie Jovanović, bishop of Arad, Oradea Mare and Ineu (1726-1731), of the most exposed lands of Zărand, Biharia and Hălmagiu, as well as his successor Antonović (1731-1748)⁶³, filed a consistent opposition against the Uniatism.

According to the Imperial Diploma that granted the *Illyrian privileges* to the Serbs, they extended their religious jurisdiction over Bihar as well, through the Metropolitan Church of Karlovci and the Bishopric of Arad (since 1712 the descendants of Patriarch Arsenije III Čarnojević⁶⁴ are ordained either archbishops, or metropolitan bishops, and they established their headquarters in Karlovci, a city in Serbia, today Sremski Karlovci, which thus became the largest ecclesiastical and cultural centre of the Serbs in the Habsburg Empire)⁶⁵. After 1712, more than two centuries⁶⁶, until 1920, the Serbian hierarchs religiously ruled Bihar County through a vicar

⁶¹ Florian DUDAȘ, "The religious disenfranchisement of Romanians from Bihar in the 18th century", in: *The Old Orthodox Cathedral of Bihar-Church of Velenta Orășii*, Oradea, 2004, p. 58.

⁶² Drago NJEGOVAN and Miodrag MILIN, "Mitropolia de la Karlowitz și relațiile sârbo-române din cuprinsul Monarhiei habzburgice", p. 424.

⁶³ Ljubivoje CEROVIC, *Serbs from Romania*, 45-47; NJEGOVAN and MILIN, "Mitropolia de la Karlowitz și relațiile sârbo-române din cuprinsul Monarhiei habzburgice", p. 424.

⁶⁴ Ljubivoje CEROVIC, *Sârbii din România*, pp. 45-47.

⁶⁵ Emil ROȘESCU, *Fundația Gojdu*, Oradea, 1980, p. 422.

⁶⁶ In the year 1749, when the Romanians, who remained faithful to the ancestral law, firmly preserving the Orthodox faith, submitted countless memorials and complaints, and the Habsburg Court consecrated the Serbian ecclesiarch Dionisie Novacovici as the Orthodox bishop of Buda for the ununited Romanian churches. (Gheorghe CIUHANDU, *Propaganda catolică-maghiară de la Macău în coasta Diecezei ortodoxe a Aradului (1815-1864)*, Arad, 1926, pp. 10-24.

(namestic), an archimandrite or a dean. However, it should be noted that Bihor did not enter the Bishopric of Arad as an annexed territory, but as an independent bishopric, with a vacant church seat, led by the *Diocesan Council (Consistory)*. The headquarters of the Orthodox vicariate of Oradea was in Velența (until 1828) and in Orașul Nou – the New Town (from 1828). The leadership under the Bishopric of Arad opposed the attraction of the Romanian Orthodox believers from Bihor to the union with the Church of Rome⁶⁷.

The first representative of the Bishopric of Arad in Oradea was the dean Ioan, (*prota Ioan*) the central figure of the church life of Oradea and Bihor at the beginning of the 18th century. Until 1724, Arsenie was also vicar in Velența for a while, then he became archimandrite at the Hodos-Bodrog Monastery, but the important documents of the believers from Bihor to the bishop of Arad were still drawn up in the house of the dean Ioan. Arsenie signed himself as *exarch from Oradea Mare*, on a letter addressed to the dean Gheorghe from Căbești, the leader of the resistance against the union in the Beiuș area. After Arsenie's departure from Oradea, the management of the Consistory of Velența remained also in charge of the dean Ioan. In 1713 the dean Ioan refused the unitarian priest László Pál entry into the church in Velența and organized a great popular meeting here which decided that the Romanians should look for an Orthodox bishop, because the Szekler László Pál wants to make them papists. In addition, refusing to pay the tithe in money and products illegally claimed by the Catholic bishop, the Orthodox Romanians from Bihor decided to call here the Serbian bishop from Arad, Ioanichie Martinovici⁶⁸.

Also in the year 1713, on January 3, under the arbitration of the Imperial Court in Vienna, the *Contract was drawn up between the current and future inhabitants of the city of Oradea, between the Romanian, Greek (Macedonian-Romanian), Hungarian and Serbian nations* (contract which stipulated that in matters of faith must be ensured mutual freedom). The contract, read and approved on February 11, 1713, by the entire population of the city and strengthened with the seal of Oradea, is preserved in the

⁶⁷ Constantin BUTIȘCĂ, Florian DUDAȘ, Cosmin PINTEA, *Vechea catedrală ortodoxă a Bihorului - Biserica din Velența Orăzii*, p. 18.

⁶⁸ Maria BERENYI, *Istoria Fundației Gojdu 1870-1952*, Budapest, 1955, p. 128.

book of minutes of the City Council. Here are the most important fragments from the Contract:

“The Hungarians, the Greeks (Macedonian-Romanians), the Serbs and the Romanians of today lived in beautiful harmony with each other, equally bearing all the miseries and public burdens, and for this harmony to be preserved between them also in the future (...) a right acquired in case a misunderstanding would breaks out between them, the following covenant was made: as many times as one would upset the other, or defame his faith or religion, so many times the party that made this act must pay one hundred florins; the churches, schools, parish houses and the inheritances and cattle held by him must be maintained forever as long as the citadel of Oradea and the town belonging to it will be in Christian hands (...) to maintain the beautiful harmony between them half of the Council consisting of those of the Greek (orthodox) religion; (...) the Greeks (the orthodox) may live undisturbed according to their rite and ancient apostolic and ecumenical faith and no one should disturb them in this (...) If ever any emulation or quarrel should arise between the priests, let the inhabitants of our city must always be obliged to favour and defend them”⁶⁹.

Thus, the Serbian bishops from Arad had a significant role in the church life of Bihor County, as through their efforts were prevented all the attempts of the State and Catholic church authorities, especially patronized by the Catholic bishop from Oradea, who was also the county’s “fișpan”, to attract the Romanian believers of these parts to the union with the Church of Rome⁷⁰.

⁶⁹ Maria BERENYI, *Istoria Fundației Gojdu 1870-1952*, p. 275.

⁷⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Mircea PĂCURARIU, *Istoria Bisericii românești din Transilvania, Banat, Crișana și Maramureș până în 1918*, p. 128.