

The Holy Priest Martyr Hilarion Felea as a Defender of the True Faith

We are in a year in which we celebrate a century of patriarchy in the Romanian Orthodox Church and in which we commemorate those of our people who in the 20th century confessed Christ despite the oppressive communist regime, some of them even giving their lives for Christ. One such martyr was the last rector of the Theological Academy of Arad, Father Hilarion V. Felea.

Among the multiple dimensions of his life and personality, I would stop at that of apologist, defender of the true faith, through words - from the theology chair and from the pulpit of the historic Cathedral of Arad, through writing - in his books and with deeds, through his entire pastoral-missionary activity, regardless of where he served, whether in Valea Bradului, or in Arad at the parishes in Şega or at the historic Cathedral of Arad.

The Holy Priest Martyr Hilarion Felea confessed Christ in a very complex interwar period, in which we witness multiple political, social, cultural and religious transformations that society would go through during that period, the claims of supremacy of autonomous science and technologies, the emergence and manifestation of totalitarian ideologies: Nazism and communism, the entry into the country's religious arena of neo-Protestant groups, the Concordat with the Vatican in 1929, very favorable to the Catholic side, the beginnings of ecumenical dialogue at the international level, the beginning of the process of secularization and desacralization of society, but also the religious indifferentism that represented an effect of secularization and desacralization. Now, all of these meant so many challenges for Orthodoxy, which had to offer its own response.

Thus, the Apologetics of the Holy Priest Martyr Hilarion Felea, which he presents in works such as *The Religion of Culture* and *The Religion of Love*, but also in other works, studies and articles, has the following coordinates: The concept of religion; The relationship between Theology and culture; The relationship between Theology and science; between Orthodoxy and society and also the relationship between Orthodoxy and the nation.

At the heart of Father Felea's apologetics lies **the concept of religion**, which is identified with Christianity. He does not deny the existence or role of other religions, but demonstrates the authenticity, truthfulness and superiority of Christianity and offers us a definition of religion: "religion is the filial communion of holy love between God and man, lived within the heart and manifested externally through faith, worship, virtues and good deeds". Father Felea made it clear that the human being is not complete, is not whole, unless he has all the senses, including the religious sense, actualized. A man without the religious sense is the same as "a blind man, a deaf man, a mute man; an unsuccessful, incomplete, abnormal man". In the last chapter of the work *The Religion of Love*, the VIIth, entitled *Christianity*, in the subchapter: *Christianity and other religions*, Father Felea makes an apology for the comparative method and shows the importance of its application in studying the religions of the world, moreover, its indispensable character and makes an analysis of the great current religions, from the perspective of the dogmatist, in which he impresses with his preparation in the field of the History of religions and the theological evaluation he makes of each religion.

The relationship between **religion and culture** is expressed by the Holy Priest Martyr Hilarion Felea through the relationship between religion and the various forms of culture: religion and morality, art, science, philosophy, sports, progress. The central idea is that: the Christian religion has a central role in European culture and that the Orthodox Church represents the generating center of culture in the history of the Romanian people. Religion is the unifying force that "polarizes and crystallizes around its principles and altars all the works and manifestations of the human soul. There is a science, a philosophy, a morality, a pedagogy, an aesthetics, a

Christian psychology, all in the broad spirit of the Gospel”. Culture and religion are assumed and unified as an existential and experimental way in human life. Christianity is the religion of human culture and it is also the future of human culture. In this context, Father Felea presents the role of the Orthodox Church in Romanian culture and the role of Christianity in European culture, initiating a polemic with the culture that wants to be autonomous.

Regarding the relationship between **Theology and science**, Father Felea drew attention to the imbalance between technological progress and the spiritual regression of humanity. He wanted to demonstrate to atheists and evolutionists that man and the cosmos follow a plan and have a purpose, that all of these have a Creator who is present and works through the laws of the universe. His cosmology and anthropology are a plea against chance and chaos, for law, order, universal harmony, reason and spirit. By delving into the mysteries of the universe or of mineral bodies, of plant, animal and human life, he sought to emphasize the existence and presence of God and divine providence, which represents the force of his apology. Against materialistic evolutionism, of the natural impulse towards the mechanical organization of matter, he showed that it is not the work that creates the artist, but the artist that creates the work, it is not biology that creates life, but life that creates biology and the Spirit that creates everything. The conclusion was: “neither chance, as materialists say, nor nature, as evolutionists say, nor matter, as both assert, created the laws, plans, forms, and bodies that we encounter in the world from the stars to the atom, but the supreme and sovereign Spirit, whom we call God”.

Orthodoxy and society. After the First World War, theologians were challenged to show what the role of Orthodoxy is in the new socio-political and cultural context of a unified Romania. On the religious level, we witness the affirmation of the identity of Christian confessions and Churches, the invasion of sects and the initiation of ecumenical dialogue. The Orthodox Church was accused of being inactive, numb, without missionary spirit, without socio-cultural influence and was called to affirm its role in the new European context. Father Felea responds to this challenge through a theological reflection on the state of Romania in

the interwar period, considering that Christ can inspire the new social and economic organization of Romania. Economic reforms need the Christian faith inspiring balance and social equity.

Starting with the 19th century, the Orthodox Church organized the Christian life of the parish based on the awareness of the unity between the **Church and the nation**, a sentiment promoted in popular schools, in the publications of the time, in sermons and conferences. The results could be seen in the achievement of national unity on December 1, 1918. Bishop Grigorie Comșa – the missionary bishop – launched a fight against the sectarian danger, which struck at the very foundation of the unity of the Church-Nation, and Father Hilarion Felea entered this fight in a missionary spirit, coordinating the publication *Calea Mântuirii* from 1935, writing brochures in defense of the faith such as: *Critica ereziei baptiste* (1937) in which he dismantled the proselytizing methods, actions and arguments of the Baptists, who were then expanding. Another significant contribution to the expression of the unity between the Church and the nation is identified in the work *Selected Icons from the Life of Orthodoxy*, in which he shows the contribution of the Orthodox Church to the affirmation of the Romanian people, but also the connection between the Church and the nation throughout history, in the context of political, social, and religious vicissitudes. Father Felea describes Orthodoxy as a Church of the nation, a Church that lives “in solidarity with the heavens above and the people below,” a Church that rejoices and grieves with the people and invites to love Orthodoxy until death, until the sacrifice of life, until martyrdom – statements that will not remain just at this stage of theoretical formulations, but in his case will become reality.

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