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The “Active Resistance” of the Church in the Communist Era

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Abstract

People forget too easily that during the communist totalitarian regime, the faithful of the Church in Romania stood firmly against the enslavement of the society, and the Church was an oasis of freedom and truth. Their strong faith and the courage to confess Christ have embodied “the active resistance of the Church” (His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel, Speech at *The Sunday of the Romanian Migrants*, 20th August 2017)¹. The Church has repeatedly urged the faithful to repentance for their past infidelities. We believe the Church is holy, but there are sinful men inside her. And we should reject the desire to identify us with sinless people only, because in the Church there is no angelic de facto category. How could the Church exclude sinful people from her community? Christ was incarnated, died, and was resurrected for their salvation. We must therefore learn to live a genuine repentance with sincerity. By practicing it, we confess our own individual sins towards the others and even God to all of them. Then we must avoid the arrogant attitude of being the judges of past generations who lived in different ages and in other social-political contexts. It takes a humble sincerity not to deny the sins of the past, but also not to inadvertently launch allegations without real evidence, and without taking into account the

¹ See *Actul Solemn Comemorativ*: “Let us learn from the example of the confessors from the communist period, that love which comes from the faith in Christ is stronger than the fear of death”, October 27, 2017, from the Palace of the Romanian Patriarchate.

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different conditions and interrelationships of that time. The things that existed during communism and the active resistance of the Church from this period must be seen as a great reminder of the importance of our fidelity to God and of our collective and personal consciousness.

Keywords

The commemorative year, Patriarch Justinian, Patriarch Daniel, Ilarion V. Felea, confessors, truth, repentance

I. For a common understanding of the past

The records kept in the archives of Securitate reveal a part of the vast areas of enslavement and neutralization the Romanian society was kept in through the security services of the totalitarian state. However, “these” are not the complete and unique records of past times ... In addition to the unfortunate evil connected with the functioning of the investigation and compulsion apparatus, we have witnessed the attitude of a great multitude of people, including people of the Church, who resisted the evil with determination of and did not obey. *The bright faces of those who have stood against the propagation and infiltration of the atheistic ideology in the country shine to us in the 2017 Commemorative year. Some of them confessed Orthodoxy even at the price of their life.* Frequently, such attitudes, often heroic, have no written documentation². Dumitru Stăniloae, Bartolomeu Anania, Sofian Boghiu, Ioan Hornea, Ilarion V. Felea, Nicodim Mândiță, Arsenie Papacioc, Arsenie Boca, Nicolae Bordașiu are just a few examples of Orthodox confessors during the communist regime.

Patriarch Justinian “tried to defend the Church from the systematic blows of political power with great courage and balance, diplomacy and tenacity, choosing the path of a hard resistance sometimes camouflaged under a «favourable» speech for the communist leaders. Patriarch Justinian made great efforts to ensure the continuity of liturgical life and the Church as an institution so that the latter can still serve and enlighten

² The manifestations made in the Romanian Patriarchate during the 2017 commemorative year showed that the testimony and fidelity of the Orthodox defenders during the communist era deserves recognition from the people, because we have built our faith thanks to them. Such people of the Church were numerous, even very numerous.

a people oppressed by the political regime”³, said His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of Romania.

The Church is not afraid of the truth, because she believes in the word of Jesus, that only truth frees. The Church is also not afraid of a correct “lustration” if this term describes the confrontation with a painful truth that leads to cleansing and reconciliation. For two thousand years, the Church has resisted evil in an evangelical way that does not destroy the dignity of the other⁴. The truth about sin must lead the Christian to the personal recognition of guilt, to repentance, to the confession of guilt - even to public confession, if necessary, and then to atonement and reparation. We cannot deviate from this evangelical way of confronting evil. On the contrary, there is no place in the Church for revenge, and humiliation of a person, even if he is a sinful man. The Church of Christ is a community of reconciliation, forgiveness and mercy. There is room in it for every sinner who wants to return as Peter, and wishes to serve the cause of the Gospel, despite his weakness⁵.

³ *Autumn Missionary Pastoral Conference* from November 6th 2017, the Patriarchal Palace.

⁴ We think about the question of reproaching Christians for their mistakes, present to Christians writers from different ages. One of the most representative examples is the book *Liber asceticus*, by St. Maximus the Confessor: PL 90,912-956.

⁵ The commemorative year can serve to the more intense experience of the special grace of confessing Orthodoxy, and to the knowledge and purification of memory. It is not just about the historical institution, nor about the spiritual communion of the hearts illuminated by faith. The Church is always understood as the community of the baptized people, inseparably visible and working in history under the leadership of the shepherds and unified in the depth of His Mystery by the work of the life-giving Spirit; that is the Church who is the successor of the Incarnate Word Mystery. For, as nature assumed by the Divine Word serves Him as a living instrument of salvation indissolubly united to Christ, likewise the social body of the Church is in the service of the Spirit of Christ Who gives it life for the growth of His Body (Eph. 4, 16). This Church, which includes her sons from the past, as well as those from the present in a true and profound communion, is the only mother in grace who assumes the height of her deeds, but also the burden of the mistakes from the past, in order to purify the memory and to live the renewal of heart and life according to the Lord’s will. The Church can do this because Jesus Christ, whose mystical body is extended in history, is the Church, and He took over all the sins of the world once and for. The ultimate goal of any possible action of “memory purification” made by the faithful is to glorify God, because living the obedience to the divine truth and its exigencies leads to confess the mercy and eternal justice of the Lord along with our mistakes. Confessing the sins helped and illuminated by the faith in the truth that makes us free and saves us be-

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The communist era should be examined under the light of Church teachings both theological and pastoral and "the common understanding of the past is necessary for building a common future" (The European Parliament). Our purpose is not to give examples or to condemn persons or to give names; we just want to remember the principles that always and everywhere link together the faithful of Christ who belong to His Church. Therefore there is a tie between us too, the people of the present because God's teachings refer to every faithful. The Christian values should help the persons who are interested in their own evaluation and the way the others see them. We want to call on everyone to enter the path of truth in their own and others' judgment, for that is what the situation demands, and what society expects. The simple assessment of the facts does not mean to give anyone a sentence. On the contrary, it is a call to repentance. However, it is not possible to solve difficult problems without such an assessment. Numerous hierarchs, religious professors, students, monks, Christian intellectual and over 1,800 Orthodox priests were arrested and investigated, sent to prison, or to forced work at the Danube-Black Sea Channel, some even deported to Siberia, and most of the time for totally unfounded allegations, because they were considered dangerous for the new state political regime. His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel outlined:

"The firmness and dignity of the Christian confessors who followed Jesus Christ the Saviour even into the Communist prisons by fulfilling His command to forgive their persecutors, urge us to confess and defend our Orthodox faith in any time and situation"⁶.

Thus confessing and defending the faith by some people influences the others to become better; nevertheless sin itself does not have only an exclusively individual relevance, because it presses and opposes resistance on the path of salvation to all, and in this sense truly touches the Church in its entirety, through the variety of times and places. This conviction leads

comes confession of the praise brought to God, the Only One to hear us admitting our transgressions from the past and present in order to let us be reconciled by God and with God in Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world and to make us able to forgive all the persons who transgressed us. This remittance of forgiveness is particularly significant if we think about the numerous persecutions against the Christians along history.

⁶ The speech of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox, at the International Congress of Theology "*Viața Bisericii Ortodoxe în timpul comunismului – persecuție, rezistență și mărturisire*", October 23-29 2017, the Patriarchal Palace.

the Holy Fathers to resolute statements like the following belonging to St. Ambrose: “Let us be very careful that our fall does not become a wound for the Church”⁷. Therefore, though she is holy by her incorporation into Christ the Lord, our Church does not cease to repent and always recognizes the sinful sons as her own, before God and before the people in history, today, as well as yesterday.

II. Description of the situation

The times we are talking about were characterized as being of persecution for the Church. At that time the married clergymen and the monks, the brothers and sisters of the monasteries, were subject of great interest for the communist authorities. So there were times when God was waiting for a clear and real testimony, as faith requires in times of persecution. It must be clearly stated that at that time each member of the clergy was kept under a certain observation by the authorities to a greater or lesser extent. The overwhelming majority of the clergy have shown themselves to be worthy ministers of Christ, often paying dearly for it. Some of the persecuted ones even paid with their lives. Their testimony and fidelity deserve recognition from the people, because they were the foundation of our faith. Such people of the Church were numerous, even very numerous. Therefore for them we want to bring doxology to God Who is glorified in Trinity and Unity.

During certain campaigns that aim the public revealing of the way a weak person acted, at the same time and in the name of the truth it should be made known the testimony of the priests who, despite many trials and general pressures, remained faithful and devoted to God, to the conscience of sacerdotal vocation and to the Church of Christ. The remembrance of the witnesses, confessors and martyrs of those times and the appreciation of their deeds is necessary for the weighing of the whole situation, as it existed then. It is a strict duty that belongs to every Diocese in the country. Each Diocese has its confessors, and the filed documents provide a lot of thematic material of the events, necessary to fully show their heroism. The faithful, i.e. the people of God, expect the Church to bring the life of these

⁷ Sf. Ambrozie al Milanului, *De virginitate* 8,48: *PL* 16,278D: “Caveamus igitur, ne lapsus noster vulnus Ecclesiae fiat”.

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witnesses of faith to light. It is the Church task and one of the most important dimensions of her proclamation of the kingdom of God on earth. The 2017 Commemorative Year helps us pastorally to the testimony that the Church gives in this way to the God of love and to His truth that frees and saves us. It starts from the experience she has lived and still lives about Him in history, and from the service she carries in this way regarding mankind, by helping it to overcome the present difficulties. In the contemporary context, Christians need to humble themselves in the presence of the Lord and to inquire themselves about their responsibilities to the hardships of our time, and consequently to contribute to their overcoming in obedience to the glory of the saving truth.

Between consensus and discomfort, there is a need for reflection that clarifies the reasons, conditions, and exact configuration of the events related to the past mistakes. The one who has sinned is alone with his error before God, with his repentance and confidence. No one else can repent in his place or ask for forgiveness in his name. Therefore, sin is always something personal, even if it hurts the whole Church, who, being represented by the priest as confessor of the Sacrament of Repentance, is the sacramental mediator of grace that reconciles with God. Blessed Augustine makes the following remark⁸: "In her totality, the Church says: Forgive us our trespasses!" By making the "assessment" of the Christian behaviour during the communist period, we should remember that God alone knows all the circumstances and reasons why some persons made compromises, and only Christ the Lord, can judge them righteously. Not even they can do it by themselves, because the personal-psychological and communitarian-sociological criteria they were guided by are one thing, and the rigorous objective criteria they have to evaluate their behaviour to, the informative activity and the facts of "today" when there is no external pressure, are a different thing. God expects from each of them to individually assume the responsibility for the way they behaved.

The Church too becomes a mother in history through the living and the working Word of God, because by preaching and baptism she gives birth to the conceived sons of the Holy Spirit to a new and immortal life, who are born of God and within God. For example through his words,

⁸ Fericitul Augustin, *Sermo* 181,5,7: *PL* 38,982.

Augustine speaks from this historic tradition, which has these ideas as an echo: “The Church, this holy mother worthy of worship, is like Mary: she gives birth and is a virgin. You were born from her, and she also begets Christ: because you are the members of Christ”⁹. Saint Cyprian of Carthage clearly states: “You cannot have God for your Father if you do not have the Church for your mother”¹⁰. And St. Paulinus of Nola sings the maternity of the Church this way: “She receives the seed of the eternal Word like a mother; she carries the people into her bosom and brings them to light”¹¹.

According to this vision, the Church is continuously accomplished and fulfilled by communication and work of the Holy Spirit from one believer to another as a space of faith and holiness in the church communion, in the unanimity that prays, in solidarity to the other’s Cross, and in the common social witness. In the power of this vital communication, every baptized person can be considered the son of the Church at the same time, since he is born in it for the divine life but also as a living member of the mother Church, because through faith and love he cooperates to the birth of new sons for God: and the greater his holiness is and the more burning the effort to communicate to others the gift received is, the more a living member of the Mother Church he is. On the other hand, he who has separated from the baptized Church with his heart because of sin does not cease to be her son: he will always be able to come back to the sources of grace and to remove the burden of consciousness which makes it strike the whole community of the Mother Church by his mistake. In her turn, and as a true mother, she is harmed by the sin of her contemporary sons, just like yesterday, but she always continue to love them, as she takes over the burden of their mistakes at any time: in this situation, the Church appears to the Holy Fathers as the mother of pain, not only because of the external persecution, but also because of treason, bankruptcy, rotten compromises, delays and contamination of her sons.

⁹ Fericitul Augustin, *Sermo 25,8*: PL 46,938: “Mater ista sancta, honorata, Mariae similis, et parit et Virgo est. Ex illa nati estis et Christum parit: nam membra Christi estis”.

¹⁰ Sf. Ciprian al Cartaginei, *De Ecclesiae Catholicae unitate 6*: CCL 3,253: “Habere iam non potest Deum Patrem qui Ecclesiam non habet matrem”. The same Cyprian states elsewhere: “Ut habere quis possit Deum Patrem, habeat ante Ecclesiam matrem” (*Epist. 74,7*: CCL3C,572). And Augustine: “Tenete ergo, carissimi, tenete omnes unanimiter Deum Patrem, et matrem Ecclesiam” (*In Ps 88, Sermo 2,14*: CCL 39,1244).

¹¹ Sf. Paulin de Nola, *Carmen 25,171-172*: CSEL 30,243: “Inde manet mater aeterni semine verbi concipiens populos et pariter pariens”.

*The "Active Resistance" of the Church in the Communist Era***III. Bodrog Monastery at 840 years and the remembrance of Patriarch Justinian's visit**

The most remarkable memory the people from Arad had about Patriarch Justinian Marina is his visit from 1967, occasioned by the sanctification of the Church on Eminescu Street, a great Orthodox event that happened in full communism. On that occasion, the citizens witnessed a Byzantine procession in its entire splendour, led by an Orthodox patriarch, which our city experienced only in 2008, during the time of His Eminence Archbishop Timotei, at the consecration of the Holy Trinity Cathedral at Podgoria by His Beatitude Patriarch Daniel.

After the act of sanctification of the Church on Eminescu Street, made by three bright figures of the Romanian Orthodox Church: Patriarch Justinian, Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu and Bishop Teoctist Arăpasu, together with the distinguished abbot of Bodrog Monastery, Archim. Timotei Iftime, the people from Arad also joined Patriarch Justinian in large numbers in his pastoral journey through the Episcopate of Arad, Hălmăgiu and Hunedoara.

Thus, it is a well-known fact that Patriarch Justinian also visited Hodos-Bodrog Monastery, the oldest and most important hearth of monasticism in Arad. Of course, a patriarch who loved the House of the Lord, as written in the new inscription of the Church from Radu Voda Monastery in Bucharest, where he sleeps his eternal sleep, could not neglect this much-tried daughter of the Church, Hodos-Bodrog Monastery. This was documented at 1177, but it was built long before, and passed through several crucifixions and renewals. The "Monastery of the Greeks" on the Lower Mureş valley has overcome the clashing with the Stalinist communism, survived the temptations and continued its journey as a boat of resurrection on the path of salvation, especially under the providential care of Archimandrite Timotei Iftime, a son of Moldova and of Sihastria Neamţului Monastery.

The media photos from the 60s reveal us Patriarch Justinian amazed by the beauty of the main church of Hodos Bodrog Monastery. We see Bishop Teoctist satisfied with the survival of the Monastery, which was fundamentally due to him, especially after the authorities tried to implement the odious Decree no. 410 from 1959. We can also see the legendary abbot Timotei and his community.

We considered it appropriate to evoke the visit of Patriarch Justinian, especially because this year we discreetly and liturgically celebrate 840 years since the attestation of the monastery of our heart. We still glorify and thank God for all the forefathers who have firmly stood against old or new historical and political trials without hesitation, and we mention abbot Policarp with gratitude (later bishop of the Romanians in America, and exiled in Alba-Iulia during communism), abbot Timotei (who guided the community of Bodrog during the communist persecution and who, as a reward for his good oikonomy of the Lord's House, awaits his resurrection in the Hierarchs Tombs of the Monastery), bishop Teoctist (later Patriarch of Romania), metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu (for a period bishop of Arad and then Metropolitan of Banat for 52 years) and Patriarch Justinian, fearless defender of the Romanian Orthodox Church, believing that all of them fought the good fight and contributed to the good restoration of Hodos-Bodrog Monastery.

IV. Father Ilarion V. Felea, a life of confession

Father Ilarion V. Felea is one of the confessors of Christian faith and one of the *defenders of Orthodoxy during communism*, who knew to assume the Gospel in situations of hostility and persecution. These confessors, particularly those who have faced the prison trial like Father Ilarion, are an eloquent sign which we are called to contemplate and imitate. They show us the vitality of the Church and they are a light for the Church and for mankind, because they have made the light of Christ shine in the dark. But they also shine as a sign of hope for the path of unity, knowing that their blood is also the blood life of unity for the Church. As well, they tell us that martyrdom is the perfect incarnation of the Gospel of salvation. Rev. Prof. Ilarion V. Felea proclaimed this Gospel as priest and theologian, but also confessed and defended Orthodoxy with his own life, as he died at Aiud on September 18, 1961.

Father Ilarion, the theologian and priest, writer and servant, was convinced that he could not live without Christ and was ready to die for Christ believing that Jesus is the Lord and Saviour of man and that only in Christ man finds the true fullness of life. In this way, according to the apostle Peter's urging, the Orthodox defenders during communism

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showed themselves ready to motivate the hope within them (*1Pt.* 3: 15). Additionally, the defenders of Orthodoxy celebrate the Gospel of salvation, for giving up on their lives is the most complete and magnificent manifestation of that live, holy and acceptable sacrifice to God, which is the true spiritual worship (cf. *Rom.* 12: 1), origin, centre and peak of any Christian service. Finally, they serve the Gospel of salvation, because they express by their sacrifice the love and service of man in the highest way as they demonstrate that obedience to the Gospel generates a moral life and social cohabitation that honours and promotes the freedom of every person.

The commemorative year of the Orthodox defenders during communism is a blessed occasion to gratefully remember the numerous confessors of faith with great emotion. Father Ilarion experienced terrible persecutions in his life, following Christ until the last consequences. The strength to face the painful events that led Father Ilarion to the supreme sacrifice just sprang from the intimate union with Jesus and from his love for Him - as it is the case for any confessor. Today, as well as yesterday, the strength of the Church is not given so much by the organizational capacities that are also necessary: the historical strength of the Church is not there. The power or strength of Father Ilarion was the love of Christ! A strength that sustained him in times of difficulty and inspired his academic, pastoral, cultural and missionary work in Arad.

The memory of Father Ilarion who resisted in faith is a real pledge for becoming of the national Orthodoxy because his blood has not shed in vain, but it is a seed that brings forth the fruits of grace, peace, and fraternal co-operation. In fact, today Romania is a continuous example not only of the rebirth of the Church, but also as peaceful coexistence between different beliefs. Therefore, the Orthodox defenders are not losers, but winners: the omnipotence of God shines in their sacrificial witness, who always comforts His people, opening up new perspectives and hopeful horizons. The heroic example of the Orthodox defenders from the recent past is always a model for us, and an impetus for living an intense Christian life. And this is a treasure we should never forget or scatter. The confession of Father Ilarion is a confident certainty that God does not leave us but He leads us through new ways. Where there is God, there is the future.

When we walk into the Penitentiary in Aiud we remain speechless, and finally there can only be a sad silence - a silence like an inner cry to

God: Why? And in this attitude of silence we deeply bow inside our soul to the endless line of those who have suffered or were killed here and elsewhere. However, this silence becomes a request for forgiveness and reconciliation, a cry to the living God, so He will never let it happen again.

When we enter the Penitentiary in Aiud, we walk like pilgrims. To visit that place and to beseech the grace of reconciliation, it has been and is a duty before the truth and the rights of all who have suffered, and a duty before God. First of all, to beseech it from God, the only One who can open and purify our hearts; then from the people who suffered here, and finally, the grace of reconciliation for all those who suffer in new ways at this time of our history because of the power of hate and violence that hate awakens. All the places where the Orthodox defenders confessed are places of memory, where the past is never just past. These places concern us and show us ways to avoid and to follow; they talk about human pain, and make us see the cynicism of that “ideological power” that treated people as material, and did not recognize them as persons whom the image of God is shining on.

We would be deeply moved in our hearts if we remembered the victims not only in general, but if we saw the faces of all those who ended here in the darkness! We thank Father Ilarion Felea, we thank all those who confessed God because they did not submit to the power of evil and now they stand in front of us like lights in a dark night. We bow our heads with deep respect and gratitude to all who, like the three young men facing the threat of the Babylonian furnace, were able to answer: “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us... But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Dan. 3, 17-18).

Yes, the history of countless human beings is hidden behind the cells. They shake our memory and hearts! They do not want to provoke hatred in us, but show us how horrible the work of hatred is. They want to make our reason recognize evil as evil and to reject it; they want to awaken the courage of good in us, and the resistance to evil. They want to lead us to those feelings that are expressed in Sophocles’ words put on the lips of Antigone in front of the horrors that surround her: “I was born to join in love, not hate”.

Inside the communist prisons and camps humanity walked through a “dark valley”. Therefore, let us pray with the psalmist: “The Lord *is* my

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shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures: he leads me beside the still waters (Ps. 22,1-4.6)". The commemoration of those who confessed and died in the communist prisons is a call to the purification of memory by conversion and repentance, and not by condemnation. It is also a call to the common care and prayer to overcome evil through good in our personal, social, religious and public life.