

# THE ROMANIAN SAINTS

## BETWEEN POPULAR DEVOTION AND POLITICS

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**Abstract:** After the fall of communism, in 1992, the Romanian Orthodox Church made a series of important decisions regarding the promotion of “Romanian” saints, which also included several canonisations. During the last years of the communist regime, the cult of the national saints was used by the church as an argument emphasising the continuous Orthodox presence in Romania and ultimately identifying orthodoxy with the Romanian nation, an idea meant to justify the place of religion within communist society. After the fall of communism, although relieved of any ideological constraints, the church continued to use the same discourse. This led certain authors to interpret the 1992 decisions as being exclusively politically motivated and part of a nationalist-inspired campaign. From an historical perspective, however, this was not the first time the Romanian Orthodox Church had promoted and canonised national saints. A similar initiative occurred in 1950. Ironically, these two actions mark the beginning and the end of over four decades of atheist rule; a period of religious restrictions and persecution against the Romanian Orthodox Church, and other religious denominations. Entering the new millennium, the Orthodox Church intensified the canonisation process. As the religious revival evolves and cults of new popular saints emerge, it is clear that political reasoning is not the sole motivation behind these decisions. Without denying the political implications of the promotion and canonisation of national saints, this article focuses on the role played by the religious experiences of the population.

**Keywords:** Romanian saints, veneration of saints, canonisation, Romanian Orthodox Church, urban religion.

### Introduction

After the fall of communism, in 1992, the Romanian Orthodox Church made a series of important decisions regarding the promotion of “Romanian” saints. Among others, this included several canonisations. Although the gesture could at first be interpreted as the result of the new-found religious freedom, a closer look reveals a more complex situation. During the last years of the communist regime, the cult of the national saints was used by the Church as an argument emphasising the continuous Orthodox presence in Romania and ultimately identifying orthodoxy with the Romanian nation; an idea meant to justify the place of religion within communist society. After the fall of communism, although relieved of any ideological constraints, the Church continued to use the same discourse. This led certain authors to interpret the 1992 decisions as being exclusively politically motivated and part of a nationalist-inspired campaign.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> STAN – TURCESCU 2010. 112.

From a historical perspective, however, this was not the first time the Romanian Orthodox Church had promoted and canonised national saints. A similar initiative had already been taken in 1950. Ironically, these two actions mark the beginning and the end of over four decades of atheist rule; a period of religious restrictions and persecution against the Romanian Orthodox Church, as well as against other religious denominations. Entering the new millennium, the Orthodox Church continued and even intensified the canonisation process. As the religious revival further evolves and the cults of new popular saints emerge, it has become clear that political reasoning is not the sole motivation behind these decisions. Whilst not denying the political implications of the Church's actions, the focus of this article is on the role played by the religious experiences of the population.

In Romania, saints are frequently invoked by the population. Their relics are increasingly sought after and their celebrations occasion impressive pilgrimages each year. The demand for saints is stronger than ever, a fact that is reflected by the canonisation process. After carefully considering the particular historical context in which the first canonisations were made, closer attention is given to the understanding attributed to "Romanian" saints. Two cases of popular saints (the "prison saints" and Ilie Lăcătuşul), awaiting official recognition, are further examined. Finally, some canonical aspects are discussed, followed by an overview of the latest canonisation which occurred in Romania.

## **The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Cult of the National Saints**

On 28 February 1950, during one of its working sessions, the Holy Synod, the highest canonical authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church, adopted some unprecedented decisions.<sup>1</sup> It was first decided that the cults of six saints<sup>2</sup> should be generalised to the entire Romanian church. Previously canonised by other Orthodox churches or patriarchates, these saints were greatly venerated among the local population, as their relics had been in the country for several centuries. Secondly, it was decided to generalise the cult of Ioan the Wallach, a saint of Romanian origin, previously canonised by the patriarchate of Constantinople. Finally, the decision was also made to locally canonise eight new saints,<sup>3</sup> who had distinguished themselves through their pious works in Romania. These were the first formal canonisations undertaken by the local church in over four centuries<sup>4</sup> and the first ever by the autocephalous Romanian Orthodox Church. Given the

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1 B.O.R. 1950. 298-299.

2 Parascheva of Iași, Ioan the New of Suceava, Filofteia of Curtea de Argeș, Dimitrie the New of Basarabia, Grigore of Decapolis and Nicodim the Holy of Tismana.

3 Ilie Iorest and Sava Brancovici, metropolitans of Transylvania, Visarion Sarai, Sofronie of Cioara, Nicolae Oprea, Calinic of Cernica and Iosif the New of Partoș. The eighth saint, Ioan of Râșca and Secu will, however, never be proclaimed; the canonisation decision, in his case, was to be renewed in 2008.

4 Patriarch Nifon of Constantinople was the first saint canonised by the Metropolitanate of Wallachia, in 1517.

difficult political circumstances, these actions are a good illustration of the manner in which the church continued to carry out its canonical duties under the self-declared atheist regime.

Despite the importance of the moment, there was no particular display to mark the event. Three days earlier, Patriarch Justinian (1948-1964), had taken the opportunity presented by the Romanian Patriarchate's twenty-fifth anniversary to announce the forthcoming decisions.<sup>5</sup> His speech for the occasion is a perfect illustration of the discursive strategy he adopted during the first period of the communist regime.<sup>6</sup> Addressing the officials, he emphasised the way in which the Orthodox Church has always served the people, by which he meant the oppressed. Thus, the national saints were pictured as sacrificing themselves for the well-being of the Romanian people. This fact alone entitled them to receive proper recognition. Prince Brâncoveanu of Wallachia, for instance (accused of treason and finally executed by the Turks along with his four sons and his servant) was described as having fought to liberate the Romanian people from the Turks, with the support of the "great Russian people", while the saints of Transylvania were described as fighting against the "Catholic oppressors". The accent is on the saints' life work, any reference to their working miracles, although essential from a canonical perspective, is ignored.

Inside of the church, the times were not propitious for celebration. The solemn proclamations were postponed to a later date, which also meant that they did not come into effect right away. An informative note from the secret police, dating to March 1950, provides a description of the atmosphere inside the Holy Synod during these events: "A heavy atmosphere reigned over all the sessions. No signs of festivity were in evidence. Hierarchs, clerics and lay people all gave the impression of an unspoken, but real fear of expressing any thoughts or wishes."<sup>7</sup> The tension anticipated the massive arrests that followed, but also reflected the on-going conflict between the newly elected Patriarch and the Ministry of the Cults, the political exponent. Complicated manoeuvres came into play as each side struggled to impose their candidates in key church positions, including inside the patriarchate.<sup>8</sup> On a larger scale, the relation with the Russian church also became tense. There were rumours concerning the possible dissolution of the Romanian patriarchate and the Romanian church being brought under the jurisdiction of the Russian church.<sup>9</sup> Under these conditions, the stakes concerning the adopted decisions appeared to double: the position of the Romanian Orthodox Church was being consolidated both internally (in its rapport with the communist regime, but mainly with its own subjects, which it was encouraging and strengthening in times of need) and externally (in its rapport with the other Orthodox churches, mainly the Russian church). In other words, the national saints reaffirmed its autocephaly. Therefore, it is no accident that the solemn

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5 B.O.R. 1950. 170-172.

6 See ENACHE & PETCU 2009. 55.

7 PĂIUȘAN – CIUCEANU 2001. 184, doc. 93.

8 ENACHE – PETCU 2009. 129.

9 ENACHE – PETCU 2009. 195; MARTIRI 2007. 27.

proclamations, which finally took place in 1955, coincided with the seventieth anniversary of the Romanian church's autocephaly. The proclamation of Iosif the New of Partoș was delayed until September the following year, when the three-hundredth anniversary of his death was celebrated.<sup>10</sup>

Given that the events occurred under the communist regime, the scale of the 1955 religious festivities is surprising in hindsight. A long series of special religious services, public ceremonies and processions took place in several major cities throughout the country (Bucharest, Iași, Curtea de Argeș, Râmnicul Vâlcea, Craiova, Alba Iulia, etc.), during the last three weeks of October, when most of the saints were celebrated. In addition to local political officials, a dozen representatives of other Orthodox churches (the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Russian, Bulgarian and Greek churches), were also present. What stands out, even from the censured chronicle of the event,<sup>11</sup> is the massive attendance of the population.

Although adopted and proclaimed, the 1950s decisions did not fully come into effect, and there are some inconsistencies. The names of the new saints were, for instance, not mentioned in the religious calendar until 1991.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, one saint, Ioan of Râșca and Secu, remained unproclaimed until 2008.

The issue of the national saints resurfaced a few decades later, around the one-hundred-year anniversary of autocephaly of the church (1985). By that time, communism had entered the nationalist phase (so-called national communism) and the church had, once again, adapted its discourse to the new political ideology. National saints were now used as arguments supporting the idea of continuity of the Orthodox faith within Romanian territories, while this Orthodoxy was presented as the unifying factor for the nation since its very beginnings.<sup>13</sup> A good illustration of this view is a collection of hagiographies, entitled "Romanian saints and protectors of the ancestral law."<sup>14</sup> The volume, the first one dedicated to national saints, was designed as an alternative to the official version of national history. Designated with carefully-chosen words in the 1950s ("saints with relics in our country", "saints of Romanian lineage", "saints of Romania", etc.), national saints were now, for the first time, reunited under the name of "Romanian saints". Considering the choice of saints (nearly half of them had not been canonised at that time), it becomes obvious that the publication was anticipating a new official recognition of saints. In the introduction, the moment is presented as propitious for such a decision, despite the atheist ideology promoted by the communist regime: "The first canonisations of Romanian saints have only recently become possible (...) since our democratic state now guarantees full freedom of belief and the liberty of religious expression."<sup>15</sup>

10 B.O.R. 1956b. 893-937.

11 B.O.R. 1955. 992-1243; 1956a. 28-50.

12 B.O.R. 1990. 192-193.

13 See ENACHE – PETCU 2009. 55-66.

14 PATRIARHIA 1987.

15 PATRIARHIA 1987. 14.

During 1989, discussions regarding the national saints intensified in the Holy Synod.<sup>16</sup> Although few preliminary decisions were made (such as the creation of a special commission charged with the various issues relating to the national saints), most were reiterated and came into effect later, after the political changes of December.<sup>17</sup>

On 20 June 1992, after long and careful deliberation, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, gathered in solemn session, adopted several decisions referring to the national saints.<sup>18</sup> Opening the meeting, Patriarch Teoctist deplored the forty-five years of dictatorship and atheism, which had repressed people's need to venerate their saints. It was this need that the forthcoming decisions, by far the most extensive ever taken, were to address. The first decision concerned the canonisation, with generalised veneration, of nineteen Romanian saints.<sup>19</sup> The second decision concerned the cult of the seven saints canonised locally in 1950. Given their increasing veneration, it was decided that they should be generally canonised for the entire Romanian church. The cults of another thirty-seven saints previously canonised and venerated by other Orthodox churches were also generalised. Whether or not of Romanian origins, these saints had preached and/or suffered martyrdom in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic region. Furthermore, in order to celebrate "all known and unknown saints of our lineage", it was decided that the second Sunday after Pentecost (i.e. the Sunday following the feast of All Saints) would become the Sunday of the Romanian Saints.

The long series of public proclamations<sup>20</sup> began the following day (All Saints Sunday), in Bucharest and continued, after a week (during the first Sunday of the Romanian Saints), in Alba Iulia - historical, the town of unification. Dozens of other proclamations followed all over the country, until the end of 1993, in what could be regarded as a religious revival tour. From a different perspective, these events also contributed to the Orthodox Church's return into public space and, furthermore, provided it with the opportunity to play the role of pacifier in the national reconciliation process: "(...) leaving aside any worry or concern for the tumult of life, numerous representatives of public, cultural, political and social life joined hands around the ancestral altar (...)"<sup>21</sup>

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16 See B.O.R. 1989a. 179-180; 1989b. 199-201.

17 It was decided, for instance, that as of 1991 the second Sunday after Pentecost would be marked as the Sunday of the Romanian Saints: B.O.R. 1989a. 179-180. This decision was later reiterated and came into effect in 1992. The saints from 1950 (both generalised and locally canonised) would be included in the 1991 calendar, together with others: B.O.R. 1990. 192-193. However, the generalisation of the 1950 locally canonised saints was decided in 1992.

18 B.O.R. 1992a. 163-176; 1992b. 3-22.

19 Ioan of Prislop, Antonie of Iezerul-Vâlcea, Daniil Sihastrul, Gherman of Dobrogea, Ioan of Neamț (Hozevitul, after the Hozeva desert), Teodora of Sihla, Ioan of Galeș, Moise Măcinic of Sibiel, Antim Ivireanul (the Iberian), Iosif of Maramureș, Ghelasie of Râmeț, Leontie of Rădăuți, Ștefan the Great, and Constantin Brâncoveanu, together with his four sons and his servant.

20 B.O.R. 1992b. 49-234.

21 B.O.R. 1992b. 54.

## Current Romanian Saints

Since entering the new millennium, the canonisation process has accelerated. New saints have been acknowledged almost yearly: two in 2003<sup>22</sup>, four in 2005<sup>23</sup>, one in 2006<sup>24</sup>, five in 2007<sup>25</sup>, thirteen in 2008<sup>26</sup>, one in 2010<sup>27</sup> and two in 2011.<sup>28</sup> Since 1992, the canonisation procedure has been simplified and the two-stage process (local and generalised veneration) has been reduced to a single generalised veneration.

The 2013 Orthodox calendar edited by the Archdiocese of Bucharest (which also serves as the official calendar of the Romanian church) mentions 106 Romanian saints; their names, printed in blue ink and bold fonts, stand out.<sup>29</sup> This number represents over ten per cent of the total of 1039 saints.<sup>30</sup> Although one might expect most Romanian saints to have been canonised by the local Romanian church, closer investigation reveals that this is the case for only half of them (fifty-five cases). The rest are either saints from the first centuries (whose names were mentioned in the acts of martyrs),<sup>31</sup> or saints who have been canonised by other Orthodox churches.

The Romanian saints are celebrated throughout the liturgical year. (Fig. 1)

22 Vasile of Poiana Mărului and Teodosie of Brazi: B.O.R. 2003a.

23 Onufrie of Sihăstria Voronei: B.O.R. 2005; Gheorghe of Cernica: B.O.R. 2006a; Metropolitan Grigore Dascălul: B.O.R. 2006b; and Dosoftei: B.O.R. 2006a.

24 Pahomie of Gledin: B.O.R. 2007a.

25 Atanasie Todoran of Bichigiu, Vasile of Mocod, Grigore of Zagra, Vasile of Telciu - the so-called saints of Năsăud: B.O.R. 2008a; and Metropolitan Varlaam: B.O.R. 2007b.

26 Ioan of Râșca and Secu, Rafael and Partenie of Old Agapia, Iosif of Văratice, Simeon and Amfilohie of Pângărați, Chiriac of Tazlău, Iosif and Chiriac of Bisericiani - the so-called saints of Neamț: B.O.R. 2008a; Prince Neagoe Basarab, Metropolitan Iachint, Ioanichie the New of Muscel: B.O.R. 2009; and Dionisie Exiguus: B.O.R. 2008b, 2009.

27 Irodion of Lainici: B.O.R. 2011.

28 Metropolitan Andrei Șaguna and Simion Ștefan: B.O.R. 2011.

29 There are four exceptions to this, which are printed in red, due to their importance: Saint Calinic of Cernica, Saint Parascheva of Iași, Saint Dimitrie the New, protector of Bucharest, and Saint Filoftea of Curtea de Argeș. These are the most venerated local saints, whose full-body relics attract thousands of pilgrims each year.

30 I have only considered saints who are mentioned by name, without taking into account more general denominations of saints, such as e.g. the forty holy martyrs of Sevastia or the 14,000 child saints killed under Herod's orders.

31 See STAN 1950. 261-268.

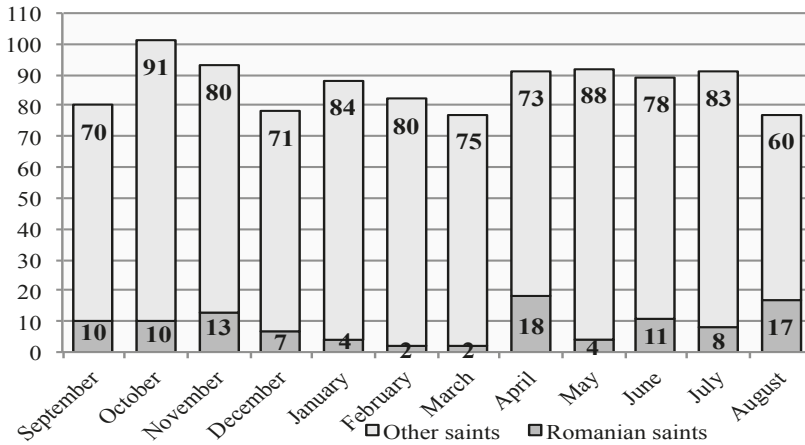


Fig. 1. The distribution of saints' days (Romanian and others) throughout the liturgical year, according to the 2013 Christian Orthodox calendar, published by the Archdiocese of Bucharest.

The main occupation or social background of the Romanian saints include: hierarchs; monks; nuns and hermits; priests and deacons; local princes or princely family members; but also common people, simply devotees. (Fig. 2)

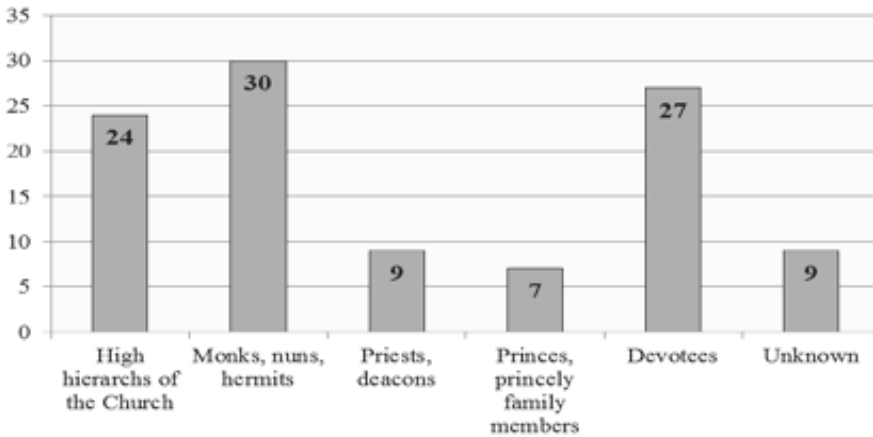


Fig. 2. Breakdown of Romanian saints' backgrounds and occupations, according to the 2013 Christian Orthodox calendar, published by the Archdiocese of Bucharest.

Their age varies from very young (e.g. Ioan the Wallach, killed by the Turks at the age of eighteen, or the young Filofteia, killed by her father's hand), to very old (e.g. Tănase Todoran of Bichigiu, head of a Romanian rebellion against the Habsburg authorities in Transylvania, sentenced to death at the venerable age of 104).



In terms of gender representation, the female saints are poorly represented, as there are only four to celebrate. Nevertheless, two of them (Parascheva of Iași and Filofteia of Curtea de Argeș) are among the most venerated saints in Romania.

Many Romanian saints were persecuted, or killed because of their faith. Nearly half of them were martyred (fifty-two cases). Most of these saints lived during the third and the fourth centuries, when they fell victim to the Roman persecutions. (Fig. 3) Almost as many lived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when they were either persecuted by the Turks (in Moldavia and Wallachia), or by the Austrian authorities (in Transylvania). Only five saints belong to the nineteenth century.

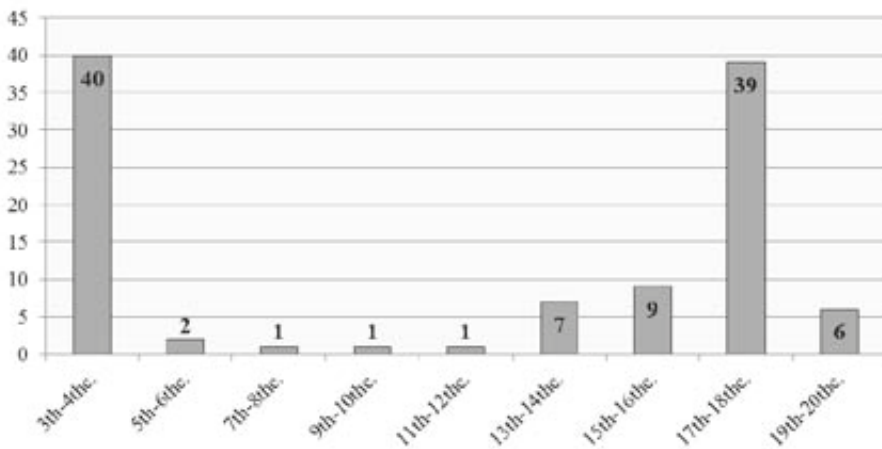


Fig. 3. The times to which the Romanian saints belong, according to the 2013 Christian Orthodox calendar, published by the Archdiocese of Bucharest.

The only twentieth century Romanian saint is Ioan Iacob of Neamț (also called Hozevitul, after the Hozeva desert), a monk who spent half his life in the Holy Land. Born in a Moldavian village in 1913, he grew up as an orphan, before joining the monastic community of Neamț. Soon after taking the habit (1936), he went on a journey to the Holy Land, where he remained. He died in 1960, in a cave in the Hozeva desert, after spending the last eight years of his life secluded from the world. The discovery of his incorrupt body in 1980 was immediately considered a sign of sainthood by the monks from the nearby monastery of Saint George, who transported the newly found relics, in procession, to their monastery. Informed of the matter, and after further investigation, the Romanian Orthodox Church finally canonised Ioan Iacob, in 1992. But this decision seems to have led the church into an impasse, since it opened the door for the canonisation of other twentieth century saints. Patriarch Teoctist (1986-2007)



was later to deplore it, considering it hasty.<sup>32</sup> As the pressure for recognition of those having suffered in communist prisons is today rapidly rising, the concern of the late patriarch is better to be understood.

## The Saints of the Communist Prisons

While academic research into communist repression (including against the clergy and ecclesiastical officials) slowly advances and new documents from the archives of the former secret police are brought to light, a parallel, religious literature on “prison saints” is flourishing. In 2008, a campaign called “From prisons to synaxarions” was initiated by a group of “Christian intellectuals”, led by the publisher Danion Vasile.<sup>33</sup> The campaign benefitted from the blessing given by Justin Pârvu (1919-2013), a religious authority figure and survivor of the communist prisons. Its main purpose was to “present the lives and teachings of the prison saints from under communist persecution”.<sup>34</sup> So far, its results have been visible mainly in the form of publications, conferences and debates held in various cities. Two volumes in particular<sup>35</sup> bring together the main contributions on the topic (interviews, testimonies, public discourse, etc.). They gather opinions and testimonies of religious authority figures (some of which are also survivors of the communist prisons) and include accounts of presumed miracles and prayers. As with the campaign in general, the aim of these publications is two-fold: to provide evidence in favour of the formal canonisation of those having suffered in communist prisons, and to promote their cult within the population. Concerning the latter aspect, readers are encouraged to pray to the awaiting saints using the special petition prayers (*acatist*) to be found at the end of the volumes. Three legitimisation strategies are being used in favour of canonisation: the first consists of accumulating the testimonies of religious authorities, especially those who are also survivors of the communist prisons i.e., eye-witness testimonies from well-respected sources; the second brings in the testimonies of other-worldly figures to sustain the cause of the awaiting saints, for example formally recognised saints advise devotees to pray to the saint from their prisons;<sup>36</sup> the third consists of legitimising the victims of the communist prisons through the miracles they have reportedly accomplished during their lifetime, and more importantly after their death, through their remains. Thus, the strategies employed implicitly contribute to what Patrick Geary calls “the social construction of relics’ value”,<sup>37</sup> as

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32 VASILE 2013. 44

33 Director of the Aeropag Publishing House (which specialises in religious books), he is also known as the editor of several volumes on Saint Nektarios’s miracles in Romania.

34 <http://www.sfintii-inchisorilor.ro/argument/> (accessed 01.09.2013).

35 VOICILĂ 2011 and VASILE 2013.

36 See the vision of Saint Nektarios: VOICILĂ 2011. 15-19.

37 GEARY 1986. 174-181.

the remains of former victims of the communist prisons have gradually started to be prized as the remains of saints.

In 1999, a monument was finished, dedicated to the communist victims of Aiud, one of the most feared communist prisons. (Fig. 4) During the construction, unidentified human remains were discovered. Symbolically, they were placed in an ossuary, situated under the altar of the chapel, inside the monument.

A special icon, dedicated to the “saints of the prisons” was placed next to the ossuary. (Fig. 5) While devotees from all over Romania go to Aiud to pray at the newly found relics, some of the bones have already been given away to various applicants. Today they are exhibited to the public in numerous religious establishments in the country, or abroad (Jerusalem, Mount Athos, Italy, etc.); occasionally they are used in what is called “spiritual therapy” (*terapie duhovnicească*), alternative healing therapy, used in desperate cases for which classical medicine has no solutions.<sup>38</sup>

In the social and cultural transition<sup>39</sup> undergone by the remains from Aiud, which led to them being considered saints’ remains, another decisive moment is that of “the miracle of Iași”. Receiving a piece of the remains, Danion Vasile, the initiator of the “From prisons to synaxarions” campaign, started to carry it with him around the country and exhibit it during his conferences. It was during a particular conference held in Iași, on 19 March 2009, in front of a large audience, that holy oil started to come out of the bone and an unearthly fragrance filled the hall. The miracle was witnessed by many of the participants, who took pictures and even captured it on film.<sup>40</sup> From this moment on, testimonies of miracles started to appear. Vasile’s own account of the event, described as the starting moment of a long series of miracles (ten more are mentioned) is particularly interesting.<sup>41</sup> One year later, a re-enactment of the first miracle, on the same date and at the same place, reinforced the fame of the “travelling” relics.

In 2004, on the initiative of Justin Pârvu, who insisted on preserving the religious significance of the place,<sup>42</sup> a hermitage was opened at the Aiud monument.<sup>43</sup> In 2012, once again with his blessing, the construction of a second monastery dedicated to the “saints of the prisons” started in Galeșu (the location of one of the Danube canal labour camps). In an interview, the local archbishop expressed the hope that this would contribute to the growth of the cult dedicated to the communist victims, and that it would lead to the discovery of new relics.<sup>44</sup>

38 See the testimony of Pr. Dr. Mihai Valică: VOICILĂ 2011. 15-17.

39 GEARY 1986. 177.

40 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkzunqoMfTQ>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPKhExlj-og>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg9cFgNZueI>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sftlDPIdmYw>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMbGwyIhkqQ>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC7sHUUVG4Q> (accessed 16.03.2013).

41 VOICILĂ 2011. 95-107.

42 See <http://www.razbointrucuvant.ro/recomandari/2009/05/14/mahnirea-parintelui-justin/> (accessed 13.03.2013).

43 <http://www.calvarulaiudului.ro/> (accessed 01.09.2013).

44 TĂRZIU 2012. 42.

Although the aforementioned volumes generally argue that all those who suffered in prisons should be declared saints, few individuals are proposed. Among them are former members of the Legionary Movement.<sup>45</sup> While references to their lives usually summarise the time they spent in prison (religious behaviour, physical endurance, self-sacrifice etc.), little if anything is said about their earlier Legion activities. When this question does arise, however (e.g. in interviews), the standard response is that their political affiliation should not stand against a potential canonisation, as this would constitute discrimination. Placing their Legion past under a veil of silence is not surprising, considering that several of the religious authorities whose testimonies are brought to sustain their cause are themselves former members of the Legion (including even Justin Pârvu). But there are also publications in which more radical voices bring back the Legion argument, even proposing that the new saints should be called the “Legionary Saints”.<sup>46</sup> This brings us to a grey area of the recent Romanian past. How many legionaries were imprisoned or died in the communist prisons remains today unknown; it remains equally unknown how many members of the clergy suffered the same fate. Separating the two matters proves difficult, as affiliation with the Legion was a common accusation brought against priests in the 1950s, whether or not there were grounds for believing this to be the case. Moreover, studies on the religious aspects of the legionary ideology (e.g. the martyr vocation) have so far been scant. These aspects only illustrate the difficulty of the task faced by the church; a heavy responsibility, which partly explains its reserve.

Several requests concerning canonisation have been addressed to the Holy Synod, demanding preliminary investigations to start in the case of communist victims. The church has so far reacted with restraint. As time goes by, the reactions in favour of the canonisations intensify. The impatience has become tangible and critics of the ecclesiastical officials are being heard. The example of the Russian church, which has already canonised over 1700 victims of communist repression, is often cited as an example to be followed.

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45 The Legion of Archangel Michael, also called the Legionary Movement, was a far-right movement which became active in Romania between 1927 and the early part of the Second World War. In 1930, the Iron Guard was created as a paramilitary, political branch of the Legion, meant to stop communist expansion. In power for a short period of time (September 1940 – January 1941), the Legion initiated a campaign of political assassinations and pogroms, mainly against the Jewish population. What distinguished the Legion from other European fascist movements was its particular ideology, combining elements of Orthodox Christianity with its political doctrine, a fact that led many intellectuals and priests to join in. The founder and charismatic leader of the Legion was, until his assassination in 1938, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a religious mystic who promoted national Orthodoxism and aimed to achieve the spiritual resurrection of the nation. He also endorsed a particular understanding of death, in relation to self-sacrifice and martyrhood, choosing as a symbol of the Legion what he called the cross of the Archangel Michael; a triple cross, suggesting prison bars.

46 SEICHE 2010. 8.

## Father Ilie Lăcătușul, the Popular Saint

Among the saints from the prisons, Ilie Lăcătușul is a particular figure. A priest and survivor of the communist prisons, he began to be venerated as a saint following the discovery of his incorrupt body in 1998. Exhibited to the public around the same time as the relics from Aiud, it continues to have a great impact on people, being a constant source of miracles.

Ilie Lăcătușul was born into a poor rural family from Vâlcea County, in 1909. After completing his education at the Theological Seminary in Râmnicul Vâlcea, and later, at the Theological Faculty in Bucharest, he became a priest (1934) and was assigned to a parish in Olt County. During the massive repressive measures taken against the clergy in 1952, he was arrested and sent to the Galeșu labour camp, to work on the Canal.<sup>47</sup> The accusations against him included: his former affiliation with the Legion Movement and his missionary work in Bessarabia and Transnistria during the war (1942-1943). He was released in 1954, only to be arrested again in 1959. This time he was sent to Periprava labour camp, in the Danube Delta. Finally released in 1964, he returned to serve as a country priest in Teleorman, and later in Giurgiu County. In 1978 he retired and moved to Bucharest, to be closer to his only daughter. When he died, on 22 July 1983, his body was buried in a modest cemetery, on the outskirts of the city. On 29 September 1998, his wife died and, when the grave was opened for the second time, the body of Father Ilie was found to be incorrupt. The fact was immediately presumed to be a miracle. Subsequently, a few days later, the family informed the Archdiocese of Bucharest about the discovery, asking for the start of the canonisation procedure. A second such request was addressed to the Holy Synod in June 1999.<sup>48</sup> Signed by the representatives of several civic and religious associations, it was personally given to the late patriarch Teoctist by Danion Vasile. According to the latter,<sup>49</sup> the patriarch recommended patience, as did the subsequent formal answer to the request.<sup>50</sup> In the meantime, several special religious services were performed at the grave of Ilie Lăcătușul, to release the soul of the deceased, thus eliminating the possibility that a curse or capital sins were hindering the body from decomposing.<sup>51</sup> Finally, in 2000, the Patriarchate allowed the family to open the grave to the general public. A few months later, the Commission of canonical research examined the body for the first time.

47 Construction of the Danube-Black Sea canal started in 1949 and ended in 1955. Intended as a short cut to and from the Black sea, it soon became one of the most feared labour camps under communism. Hundreds of people, many from the Romanian inter-war elite, ended their lives working on it.

48 VOICILĂ 2012. 24-26.

49 VASILE 2013. 43-45.

50 VOICILĂ 2012. 27-28.

51 See STAN 1950. 265-266.

The cult of Ilie Lăcătușul has not ceased to grow in the past few years, mainly due to publications<sup>52</sup> and online sources.<sup>53</sup> At least 600 people attended his celebration in 2013. Some had travelled considerable distances, coming all the way from Moldavia. People waited for up to five hours in the hot summer sun and temperatures of over forty degrees Celsius to enter the two-cubic-meter tomb (Fig.6) and touch the wonder-making relics.

Each year, monks from Petru Vodă monastery, in Moldavia, come to officiate at the commemoration ceremony (*parastas*). Until recently, they were accompanied by their prior, Justin Pârveu. As a former prison companion of Ilie Lăcătușul (they served four years together in Periprava), Pârveu had made the promotion of the cult a personal cause. It was he who gave the account of the miracle accomplished by Ilie Lăcătușul during their imprisonment and it is at his monastery that the special prayers of Ilie Lăcătușul were created and the first icon painted. Thus, Petru Vodă monastery is an important point of origin of the cult of Ilie Lăcătușul.

The most important factor in the promotion of the cult is, however, Ilie Lăcătușul himself. His incorrupt body is unique in Romania, where most relics are merely small bodily fragments. Only a few full-body relics of saints exist in Romania, but these relics are nothing more than bones. Seeing, but also touching the mummified body (Fig.9) has a deep effect on people, who are under the impression of being in the presence of a living person. In most of the miracle accounts, the testifiers mention seeing the body of the late priest looking at them, feeling warm, moving and even talking to them. From this perspective, Ilie Lăcătușul is the best illustration of the way devotees currently relate to relics in Romania.

Both cases presented so far, the saints of the prisons and Ilie Lăcătușul, are credited with irrefutable proof in support of a potential canonisation: the martyrhood<sup>54</sup> in the case of the first and the incorrupt body<sup>55</sup> in the case of the second. However, when and if canonisation will occur depends entirely upon the church authorities. In the meantime, they continue to be venerated as saints by the Romanian faithful.

## The Romanian Saints, Some Considerations

Romania entered the new millennium as one of the most religious countries in Europe.<sup>56</sup> This situation is not only the result of the 1989 political change, but is in fact due to a combination of factors, the most relevant being: the accelerated social change associated with rising existential insecurity; low human capital; and

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52 VOICILĂ 2011. 50-78; VOICILĂ 2012; PĂRINTELE ILIE 2013.

53 <http://www.parinteleilielacatusu.blogspot.ro>, <http://www.razbointrucuvant.ro/2012/07/21/parintele-ilie-lacatusu-inchinare-moaste/>, <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/parinti/parintele-ilie-lacatusu-118559.html>, <https://www.facebook.com/IlieLacatusu.SfantMarturisitor> (accessed 01.09.2013).

54 STAN 1950. 264; STAN 1968. 362.

55 STAN 1950. 265-266.

56 VOICU 2007.

the religious monopoly of the Orthodox church. As this religious revival evolves, people turn increasingly towards the other-worldly, seeking help, guidance and support. The cult of the dead, among which the saints are exceptional figures, is an essential component of the current lived Orthodoxy. This is especially true within the urban environment where it provides a means of coping with the everyday life difficulties of an increasingly changing society. Paradoxically, the situation is in many aspects very similar to the one described by Martin Stringer<sup>57</sup> for desecularised English society. As in England, most people in Romania do not think in “terms of systematic beliefs or systems of theology”.<sup>58</sup> This allows them to behave as good Orthodox devotees, when attending church, while at the same time adhering to various folk practices and beliefs, resorting to witches or even fortune tellers. Their religion is a coping religion, a religion that enables them “to cope with the stresses and strains of life as they live it”.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, however, it is also provides them with answers or miraculous solutions for the various problems they are confronted with on a daily basis.

While the social climate continues to deteriorate people tend to reach out to the “non-empirical others”,<sup>60</sup> or the other-worldly others, that they believe could offer them the help and support that they need. The saints are considered to be the most suitable *porte-paroles*, because of their special relation with God. The Romanian faithful develop a special relation with the saints, whom they relate to as a close friend and protector. Not restricted to religious confines, the saint’s presence is experienced as a constant of everyday life. As in the social realm, physical contact with the saints, through their bodily remains, is important and involves all the five senses. Sensory contact with the relics of saints is an important aspect of the veneration of saints in Romania.<sup>61</sup>

The rising cults of the new Romanian saints are among the latest additions to the already increasing Orthodox offer.<sup>62</sup> The cults respond to a deep need within Romanian society, in which people struggle to find new points of reference while adapting to a rapidly changing world.

Not all of the so-called “Romanian” saints are of Romanian origins. Since the creation of the modern Romanian state, nationality has commonly been associated with ethnicity, however, the social reality does not concur with the religious reality, where the nationality of saints follows a different logic. When examining the time period in which they lived, and considering that the earliest documented records of the Romanians dates to the sixteenth century, merely half of the so called “Romanian” saints are actually entitled to be called Romanian. A closer look at the hagiographies reduces the number even further. The saints’ nationality seems in fact to be determined by certain qualities they had during

57 STRINGER 2011.

58 STRINGER 2011. 51.

59 STRINGER 2011. 81.

60 STRINGER 2011.

61 STAHL 2013a.

62 See the ritual multiplication: STAHL – VENBRUX 2011; and the “migration” of new relics from abroad: STAHL 2013b.



their lifetime, but also by qualities acquired after their death. Hence, while some saints are Romanians due to their ethnic origin, i.e. by birth (the so-called German model), others are also considered Romanians, despite their foreign origins, because of the special ties they established with the Romanian world, after their physical death (an adaptation of the French model). This is how a theologian explains this last case: "The fact that these saints do not belong to our people, but are only venerated by it, does not diminish the interest and the significance of their cult. On the contrary, they *have become Romanian saints* [author's emphasis] by the special veneration that is given to them in our land and by the blessing they have brought upon it. They have been and still are of help to Romanian Orthodox devotees who, through their physical and spiritual presence in our country, and more through the miracles that sometimes occur, have confirmation that these saints are dear to the sons of our Church, but also that our devotees are dear to them".<sup>63</sup> In other words, these saints are "grounded [*împământenii*] by popular veneration".<sup>64</sup> The existence of their cults is thus interpreted as approvals, a manifestation of the saints' will to become part of the Romanian nation, but also as a confirmation that they have been accepted. Miracles occurring during the translation of relics are, in this sense, seen as manifestations of the saints' will (e.g. the relics of Saint Dimitrie the New, who "refused" to leave the country during the First World War). Consequently to their integration, the names of the saints are occasionally Romanised (e.g. Saint Dimitrie Basarabov became Dimitrie of Basarabi and, later, Dimitrie the New). Moreover, they sometimes also receive a new place of origin, that of the place where they are most venerated locally (usually the name of the place where their relics are kept). This becomes an addition to their name, e.g. Saint Filofteia of Argeş, in her earthly life, was from Veliko Tarnovo, in Bulgaria. Becoming one with the locals, the saints are sometimes even represented as locals. This is the case of Saint Filofteia who, although originally from Bulgaria, is iconographically represented wearing the local folk costume of Oltenia.

The matter of the Romanian national saints was approached for the first time by Liviu Stan, a specialist in canonical law.<sup>65</sup> According to him, it is not the ethnic origin of saints that is relevant, but the popular devotion manifested towards them. National saints are "saints whose cult arose on the territory of a national, autocephalous Church", either before or after it acquired its autocephaly.<sup>66</sup> The saints may be venerated only by one nation (or people) within an autocephalous church, or they may be venerated in the entire church (general saints), or even in the entire Orthodox world. The saints venerated by Romanians as their own become Romanians by assimilation; the best illustration to this being their visual representation given by the local artists, who often picture them dressed in local folk costumes.

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63 POPESCU 1953. 494.

64 PATRIARHIA 1987. 23.

65 STAN 1945, 1950, 1968.

66 STAN 1950. 277.



Early Christian canonisations were rather spontaneous. The saints were chosen and worshipped by the people, with the assent of the clergy and ecclesiastical officials, who merely surveyed and guided the cult's development. In time, especially after the iconoclastic crisis, the church adopted a more active role, establishing certain rules and regulations, however, without establishing an explicit canonisation procedure. In this matter, as in many others, Orthodox churches today still rely on tradition. Although tradition confers greater liberty, it also implies a greater responsibility for the authorities of the different churches, who also have to watch over the unity of the faith.<sup>67</sup>

According to Orthodox tradition,<sup>68</sup> canonisation does not consist in the creation of a cult, but rather in the formal recognition of a cult that is already established.<sup>69</sup> This is why the process is also called "canonisation by popular devotion" (*canonizare prin evlavie populară*). This means that ecclesiastical officials only acknowledge saints already venerated by the people (popular saints), recognising them as saints and officialising their cult by solemn proclamation. Thus, pre-existing popular devotion is a crucial condition with a view to canonisation, and the spread of popular devotion is crucial for the generalisation of the cult. Consequently, both acts (canonisation and generalisation) actually certify the existence of faith. It is in this last conclusion that their importance resides, as both give the measure of faith within a Church. This means that the Romanian Church can only canonise national saints, although not all national saints have been canonised by the Romanian Church. Moreover, if all formally canonised saints are at the same time popular saints, not all popular saints are necessarily formally canonised.

The policy of the Romanian Orthodox Church with regard to the national saints indisputably involves a political aspect, mainly with regard to the national identity. However, as argued so far this is not the *only* motivation behind the church's actions in this matter, which are primarily engendered by the religious experiences of the population. The nationalist discourse and related actions, to which the national saints are a later addition, have been the main resort of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the often tense relationship it has had with the modern state.<sup>70</sup> Finding the right balance between politics and their primary vocation, i.e. guiding the faithful towards salvation (national salvation), between temporal and eternal goals, has actually been a challenge for all national Orthodox churches in south-eastern Europe, since their separation from the Ecumenical church.<sup>71</sup> As religious nationalism resurfaced at the beginning of the new millennium, voices from both within and without the Orthodox Church accuse it of

<sup>67</sup> Already in 1950, in an attempt to synthesise the various Romanian canonisation procedures encountered over time, Liviu Stan was underlining the need for communal, pan-Orthodox regulation in this matter.

<sup>68</sup> This is also true for the Catholic Church. See GEARY 1986. 175-176.

<sup>69</sup> STAN 1945. 77-78; STAN 1950. 268-272.

<sup>70</sup> CONOVICI 2009. 304-355.

<sup>71</sup> STAN – TURCESCU 2010. 97.

being a new form of internal secularisation.<sup>72</sup> Because of their political implications, the cults of the saints represent a challenge for the church and numerous dangers lie ahead of their official recognition.

## Final Remarks

Since entering the new millennium, an increase in the popularity of new saints has been witnessed in Romania. So far, no clear ethnic preference in the choice of saints has been shown and Romanian, as well as new, non-local saints,<sup>73</sup> are equally embraced. However, the question remains: are there any differences between the saints? And if so, what is the nature of these differences? Pending further developments, the responses to these questions remain, for now, open. It is to be expected that the position of the ecclesiastic authorities will play an essential role in this matter.

Since the initiation of this research, the first Romanian martyr-saint of the communist era has been proclaimed. The initiative, however, did not come from the Romanian Orthodox Church, but from the Roman Catholic Church. Vladimir Ghika, descendent of a long line of Moldavian and Wallachian princes and a former Catholic priest, was arrested in 1952 by the communist authorities. He died in Jilava prison, two years later, at the age of eighty-four.<sup>74</sup> The beatification proclamation took place in Bucharest, on 31 August 2013, in the presence of a special emissary of the Pope, several Catholic cardinals and a large public, many of whom were Orthodox. The Romanian Orthodox Church, however, as well as the Romanian political authorities for that matter, was poorly represented. The event was hardly mentioned in the local media. Although numerous aspects of Ghika's life relate to both Christian churches (i.e. he was baptised Orthodox in a family with both Orthodox and Catholic members and was ordained as both a Roman and a Greek Catholic priest), the moment passed in silence for the Orthodox church, whose official news agency did not even mention it. The position of the Orthodox church in this matter is obviously marked by the historical rivalry with the Catholic church. However, it remains to be seen if the cult of the most recent Romanian saint will gradually grow within the Orthodox population. This would make Vladimir Ghika the first universal saint (venerated in both Christian churches<sup>75</sup>), to hail from Romania.

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72 See CONOVICI 2009. 313-317.

73 See for instance the spread of Saint Nektarios' cult: STAHL 2013a.

74 See BĂLTĂCEANU et al. 2013.

75 STAN 1950. 276.

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Fig. 4. The chapel-monument of Aiud

The official description of the monument is that of seven pairs of crosses, symbolising the unity in suffering of those who died, sustaining a larger cross representing the cross of the nation



Fig. 5. The icon of the saints of the prisons.

Source: <http://www.calvarulaiudului.ro/img/icoana800.jpg>  
(retrieved 01.09.2013)



Fig. 6. The tomb of Ilie Lăcătușul, the Dormition of the Mother of God cemetery in Giulești, Bucharest (21.07.2012). Photo: Irina Stahl





Fig. 7. Ilie Lăcătușul during his lifetime.  
Source: [http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilie\\_L%C4%83c%C4%83tu%C8%99u](http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilie_L%C4%83c%C4%83tu%C8%99u)  
(retrieved 01.09.2013)



Fig. 8. Ilie Lăcătușul represented on the exterior wall of Petru Vodă monastery in Moldavia.  
Source: <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/parinti/parintele-ilie-lacatusu-118559.html>  
(retrieved 01.09.2013)



Fig. 9. The relics of Ilie Lăcătușul  
Source: <http://ciprianvoicila.blogspot.ro/2012/01/sfantul-ilie-lacatusu-marele-protector.html>  
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