

ASPECTS OF BYZANTINE TRADITION IN THE GREEK-CATHOLIC EPISCOPACY OF ORADEA. TRAINING OF THE CLERGY AND THE LITURGICAL CELEBRATIONS (1850-1900)

Located in the space adjacent to the Pannonian Plain - close to a compact territory where most of the Hungarian population is Roman-Catholic and Calvinist - the Greek-Catholic Episcopacy of Oradea is today the religious institution under whose jurisdiction the Romanians from Bihor, Sătmar and Sălaj Counties are. Reduced as number after the years of the communist persecution (1948-1989), the parochial communities of this eparchy are today small islands in a sea of Orthodox communities with which they share the liturgical and spiritual heritage of Byzantine tradition, the external differences, those of the religious ceremonies, being a few words and phrases that are spoken during the liturgy (reference to the Pope, "Lord have pity[...]" instead of "Lord have mercy [...]", "Holy Spirit" instead of "Holy Ghost" etc.). Yet, which is the Greek-Catholics' identity, since they share the same Orthodox Byzantine tradition, but, at a theological level, share the same tenets with the Roman-Catholics? Was or was not the Byzantine tradition an important factor that contributed to the passing of the Greek-Catholics to Orthodoxy in the period 1948-1989? This paper wants to give an answer to these questions, carefully analyzing the aspects of Byzantine tradition from the history of the Greek-Catholic Episcopacy of Oradea-Mare, in the period 1850-1900, on a territory where the Romanian Greek-Catholicism has held, until 1948, the highest percentage of believers.

1853 brings a profound change in the life of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church, the Greek-Catholic Episcopacy of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș, located in Blaj, coming up to the rank of Mitropoly, thereby constituting a new church province, consisting of four Romanian eparchies (Alba Iulia and Făgăraș, Oradea, Gherla and Lugoj) and that was subordinate directly to the Holy See. It was the moment of a new beginning, the settlement and perfection of the status of the new metropolitan province, according to the pontifical decrees and the socio-political situations of the time, thing made with the help of the three Provincial Synods from 1872, 1882 and 1900. These Synods have clearly defined the specific of the Byzantine tradition of the Romanian Greek-Catholics, being made also changes in the canonical law, especially regarding the synodical issue, the problem of the sacrament of marriage and of the Protopopes' ecclesiastic-legal status¹. These changes have not substantially affected the ritual

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¹ See Conciliulu Provincialu Primu 1872, Actele și Decretele Conciliului 1882; Acta et Decreta Concilii Provinciae 1900.

identity of the Byzantine tradition, but have perfected some laws exactly for a better understanding of the own confession and an organic progress adapted to the realities of the society. Only from this perspective can be understood the statement of the Bishop Iosif Papp-Szilágyi (1862-1872), who on the January 19th, 1864, addressing to his superior from Blaj, the Metropolitan Alexander Șterca-Șuluțiu (1851-1867), affirms the equality of the Byzantine tradition to the Latin one, which had to be kept in its own ritual form, approved by the Pope: “[...] we, as members of the Catholic church, that according to our conviction and our profession, is the only true church, founded by Christ, not [to be n.n.] subordinate but coordinate brothers, with the Latin Catholics, to emulate with them in perfection [...]; We, who are members of the parish of the Catholic church are not forgiven to remain back; not to preserve the rite and the ritual discipline approved and signed by our common Head, by the Pope of Rome, or, in other words, the large keeping of the type of the Catholic Eastern Church and to emulate with the Latin brothers in the science of Catholicism and in all perfection”². This statement is also found in the “commemoration decree of the Holy Union” from 1900: “The Metropolitan, the Bishops and the legal members gathered at the Provincial Council [...] express the joining [...] firm to our Oriental Rite according to its purity [...]”³. From here implicitly results that the specific of the Byzantine tradition is well argued, for which the same acts of the Provincial Synods have established several provisions for preserving the specific of the ritual⁴.

Regarding the education and training of the clergy, the Provincial Synod from 1872 clearly specified the importance of preserving and promoting the Byzantine Rite: “The compulsory studies besides the usual ones and the study of the Greek Rite church law, of the church rite and the sacred eloquence, theoretically and practically”⁵. While most of the Greek-Catholic seminarians were attending the courses of the Roman-Catholic Seminary from Oradea⁶, the danger of alienation from the Byzantine Rite existed, each seminarian being required to learn the liturgical ceremonies of Byzantine tradition in a parish during the holidays⁷.

2 Details in Apan 2004, 215-232.

3 Genț 1913, 1.

4 We believe that the setting of these canonical rules in the decrees of the Provincial Synods comes in a crucial moment of the church life of the Romanian Greek-Catholics, when all are gathered in one ecclesiastic province, in order to clearly define the identity of the Byzantine tradition and to achieve an organic progress in all the structures of this church.

5 Conciliulu Provincialu Primu 1872, 157.

6 For the period 1850-1900, the Greek-Catholic seminarians belonging to the Greek-Catholic Episcopacy of Oradea were most of them trained in the Roman-Catholic seminaries in the Empire. We present below the quantitative balance of the number of graduate seminarians: Oradea – 252 seminarians; Ungvár – 112 seminarians; Budapest – 55 seminarians; Vienna – 42 seminarians (Details at Sana 2011, 178-184).

7 The problem of the alienation from the liturgical prescriptions specific to the Byzantine Rite has been reported ever since the late 18th century. At the meeting of the diocesan Consistory from November 2nd, 1799 were specified the following: “Because it was noticed, that the Greek Rite clerics, put in the new built Latin seminar [...], partly due to the lack of ritual books, partly due to the lack of a proper room and head, cannot learn their own rite and the ceremonies of the Eastern Church, it has been decided that each cleric will spend his holiday at a vicar to learn the practice of the divine Service and the ceremonies of the Eastern Church”. (Quoted in Tămăian 1930, 86-87).

Under the Bishop Vasile Erdélyi (1843-1862), during the consistorial meeting from August 3rd, 1854, he manifested his dissatisfaction at the fact that seminarians were undisciplined and made no progress regarding the learning of the liturgical ceremonies specific for the Byzantine Rite, demanding the *scholastic* canon, that was professor of singing and church rituals, “to teach regular lessons and conscientiously report about the progress of the clerics, for, as noticed, very little have they learned so far from the religious rite”⁸.

Regarding the liturgical celebrations specific to the Byzantine Rite, the documents of the time reveal some problematic situations against which the bishops from Oradea took stand. In the circular from May 12th, 1853, the Greek-Catholic Consistory from Oradea took a stand against those priests who neglected their pastoral duties. It spoke about those priests “who on holidays and Sundays leave their parishes, neglect their sacred services, choosing and traveling to other villages, to parties and pleasures and that in the biggest scandal and lunacy of the parishioners [...]”⁹. In this case, the Consistory warned the priests to remain faithful to the entrusted mission: “None of your Fraternities should dare commit such mistakes and neglect his duties”¹⁰. To eliminate these drawbacks, the Bishop Erdélyi asked the vice-archdeacons to supervise the priests and immediately inform the Consistory about any problems that might appear among them¹¹. In the circular from March 11th, 1865, the Bishop Iosif Papp-Szilágyi (1862-1873) ordered the priests, in all the days of the Easter fasting, to hold the divine service prescribed in the liturgical books *Horologion* and *Triodion*, according to the ecclesiastic tradition prescribed therein. The aim was to remind the priests the importance of celebrating the ceremonies based on the Byzantine Rite and the necessary way to “strengthen the believers’ Christian faith and life”¹². The Bishop Mihail Pavel (1879-1902) also ordered the clergy to observe the frequency and the ritual of the liturgical celebrations, knowing that the believers’ spiritual life was closely linked to them. In the pastoral letter from May 1st, 1898, he signalized the indifference of the priests, “[...] who neglect the celebration of some sacred functions, such as matins (Lauds) and Vigils [...]”¹³, noticing them to fulfill “with due diligence and accuracy all the priestly duties”¹⁴.

If such problems existed among priests, regarding the believers, the situation of the attendance to the liturgical worship was much more problematic. No wonder the Provincial Synod set clear rules, demanding that “[...] in all the Sundays and the legal holidays to listen the H. Liturgy as they should [...]”¹⁵. And to encourage the believers to attend the Church, priests were encouraged to “[...] explain the spirit and the meaning of the litur-

8 Georgescu 1923, 46.

9 D.J.B.A.N., Greek-Catholic Parish Vășad, file 2, 13v.

10 D.J.B.A.N., Greek-Catholic Parish Vășad, file 2, 13v.

11 D.J.B.A.N., Greek-Catholic Parish Vășad, file 2, 13v.

12 Radu 1929, 152.

13 D.J.B.A.N., Greek-Catholic Archpriestship Beiuș, file 58/1898, 61-63.

14 D.J.B.A.N., Greek-Catholic Archpriestship Beiuș, file 58/1898, 61-63.

15 Conciliulu Provincialu Primu 1872, 107.

gical parties and other sacred functions”¹⁶. This advice of the Synod given to the priests reached the problem of explaining the liturgical ritual to the laymen, the receiving of this message by the priests and then by believers materializing in different ways. Thus, the reports sent by the priests to the episcopacy, about attending the church services, pointed out various situations. For example, the report of the priest Vasile Kövály from Suplacul de Barcău (Bihar County), given on November 8th, 1864, describes the disastrous situation of the community, while the believers did not attend the liturgical worships, because they worked the field also on holidays¹⁷. The issue regarding the violation of the holidays was also denounced by the priests from Haieu¹⁸ Cihei¹⁹ Almosd and the filial Ciocaia²⁰ a sign that this was not a particular situation.

However, for the period of the years 1850-1900, the reports sent to the Ordinariate indicated a quite good frequency (over 70%) regarding the believers' participation in the liturgical celebrations. In the exceptions found, the causes for not attending the liturgical services were various: breach of the Sunday rest by physical labor, going to the fair, frequency depending on seasons, etc..

Another factor for not attending the church was related to the believers' poor catechization, which, in most of the cases, used to indicate the priest's indifference towards his own parishioners. However, compared to the previous periods, this process of learning and taking on the teaching of the Church was marked by a higher interest of the priest for their own believers. This fact was a natural consequence of the priests' training level, which is higher after 1848, but also of the spread of the catechetical literature, books that are no longer rarities, but are present in almost every parish. The reports sent to the Ordinariate indicate a difficult progression, different from one area to another, from one parish to another. So, there were parishes with a good catechization program, like the Ruthenian one Olosig-Oradea, where, in 1858, stress was laid on explaining the bases of faith and religious service, and that was successful among the pupils²¹. Then, there were parishes with problematic situations, such as the parish Şauaieu (Oradea archpriestship), where the parents refused to send their children to catechization, because the teacher was not well trained²².

There is no doubt that the negative exceptions from the ecclesiastical rule, reported in the documents of the time, are balanced with the positive ones. One of these is that of the believers of the parish Pişcari, from the vice-archdiaconate Arduşat (Satu Mare County), about which the priest Avram Rezei reported on December 31st, 1864: ‘S[acred] Sundays and Holidays were held with the utmost piety. This people is very

¹⁶ Conciliulu Provincialu Primu 1872, 107.

¹⁷ D.J.B.A.N. F.G.C.O., inv 1403, file 178, 18.

¹⁸ D.J.B.A.N. F.G.C.O. inv 1403, file 178, 67.

¹⁹ D.J.B.A.N. F.G.C.O. inv 1403, file 178, 69.

²⁰ D.J.B.A.N. F.G.C.O. inv 1403, file 178, 46.

²¹ D.J.B.A.N. F.G.C.O. inv 1403, file 178, 11.

²² D.J.B.A.N. F.G.C.O. inv 1403, file 178, 16.

faithful, who also this year with the most beautiful ceremony and crowd went to Petea, at the Feast of S. Virgin Mary's Dormition, among the most beautiful songs"²³.

The situation regarding the believers' presence at the liturgical services from 103 parishes, reported in 1864, was as follows: 78 had a good participation of the believers; the other 25 encountering difficulties for various reasons: work, indifference, fights for land, trade, laziness and shame²⁴.

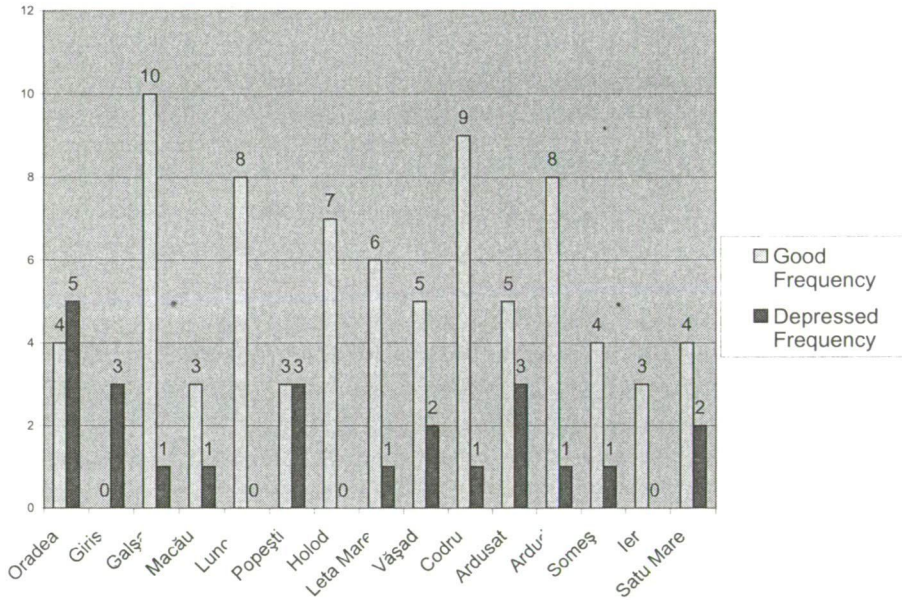


Chart no. 1 The statistics of the attendance at church services in some archpriestships of the Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Oradea in 1864. Source: D.J.B.A.N, fund E.G.C.O., inv. 1403, file 178, 1-203.

In conclusion, there should be noted some guidelines of the historical evolution of this Romanian Greek-Catholic eparchy. No doubt, due to the contact with the Roman-Catholics, and here we refer to the formation of the seminarians in the Latin seminars of the Empire, there existed a tendency to neglect the ritual identity of Byzantine tradition. In addition, the inability of some priests to be faithful and to cultivate their specific rite warned the episcopal leadership. Thus, the "alarm signals" transmitted through circulars and pastoral letters, and then the canonical regulations of the Provincial Synods have counterbalanced these tendencies, unfailingly asserting the affiliation to the Byzantine Rite. And here we refer to the education of the clergy, the faithfulness of liturgical celebrations, but especially of the believers, who, with few exceptions, have attended church.

23 D.J.B.A.N., E.G.C.O., inv. 1403, file 178, 106.

24 D.J.B.A.N., E.G.C.O., inv. 1403, file 178, 1-203.

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