

**PhD Thesis**

*The Romanian Orthodox Church under the Communist Regime.*

*Orthodox clerics in the communist prisons (1945-1964).*

**SUMMARY**

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## **The Romanian Orthodox Church under the Communist Regime.**

### **Orthodox clerics in the communist prisons (1945-1964).**

**Keywords: oral history, memory, communism, Romanian Orthodox Church (R.O.C.), Security forces, repression, surveillance of religious institutions, detention, legal investigation, political detention, torture, imprisoned clerics**

Both at national and international levels, the 20th century has been significantly influenced by consequences of political extremism, either in the form of national-socialism or in the form of communism. The impacts of these phenomena have affected in various ways and to various degrees all nations of the world, in particular the societies of those countries where such regimes were in place and, most precisely, the resistance pillars of these societies. One of these has been the Christian religion, which has experienced numerous repressions, varying from subversion of the institutional autonomy to complete interdiction of all religious public and private manifestations.

Such has been the case of the Orthodox Church under the various communist regimes of Central-Eastern Europe, which was often described as a resistance institution, as an institutional enemy of popular democracy regimes. Within the context of atheist communism, the religious life, the Church and the faith in the Christian God were significantly damaged. This fate was shared by the Romanian Orthodox Church (R.O.C.), where the “love of the comrades” was generously manifested through long lists of people that suffered political repression, were arrested, convicted, sent to force labor, to the Danube-Channel construction, or simply killed.

Although the R.O.C. has benefited from certain “free favors” from the communist government – in comparison to other religions from Romania, which didn’t enjoy benefits such as official recognition and financial support of personnel and of necessary maintenance costs of the buildings – nevertheless the situation of the Church has not necessarily been a privileged one. Many of the clerics and Orthodox laymen were repressed, arrested, tortured, convicted to death or to many years of hard imprisonment. Others were followed by the secret services (known as Security), aggressed, fired from their working places, terrorized and even physically eliminated

through radiation or poisoning. At the same time religion classes were eliminated from public schools, religion studies were reduced or almost suppressed, and the activity of the R.O.C. was only allowed in the form of mass services.

The revolution of December 1989 brought about both the fall of communism as well as a certain freedom of research and expression manifested through academic papers and through (auto)biographical works that brought to light some the sacrifice of the church and of the orthodox clergy under the communist dictatorship. To the series of studies of the history of the R.O.C. in the 20th century belongs the present PhD thesis, with the title: *The Romanian Orthodox Church under the Communist regime. Orthodox clerics in the communist prisons (1945-1964)*.

The thesis has been structured in seven major chapters, each of which contains several sub-chapters and a number of annexes with supporting material. It begins with a large description of the historical context (**Chapter 1. The Foundation Stages of an Utopia**), which describes the ways in which the Communist regime came into power in Romania. This chapter is preceded by an introduction where we summarized the various phases of this process, as they were described by historians of the time, and the main means through which they occurred. The second subchapter presents characteristics of the communist regime throughout its first decade, with emphasis on the role of the political police. In the third subchapter we tried to shortly summarize the communist ideology and its particularities, generalities and eccentricities manifested throughout the incipient phase of the new regime in the Popular Republic of Romania. In the second half of this subchapter we also looked at the major events related to the parliamentary elections from November 1946. The end of the chapter deals with the year 1947 and with the relevant events that took place and led to the full seizure of power and authority by the communist party.

In the second chapter, entitled **Religious institutions and the communist state**, we tried to shed light on the position, attitude and relation between the R.O.C. and the popular democracy regime. In the first half we looked at the evolution of relations between the Church and the State in the preceding and initial phases of the communist regime, but also at the evolution of the process of surveillance of religious institutions, in particular of the R.O.C., through the Security agents. We followed with a presentation of the cultural revolution, which the communist regime

tried to promote within the Romanian society, and with the attack directed by the new political authority against the main public institutions and especially against the Church. In the third subchapter we underlined the changes imposed by the state upon the religious bodies around the year 1948 and the consequences of those upon the institution of the Church. The main body of this chapter describes the situation of the clergy of R.O.C. – bishops, priests and deacons – under the new regime and the main topics which the state required and expected from the religious discourse, such as: the struggles and engagement of communist regimes for world peace, the five-year work plan and the process of industrialization. The last two subchapters of the second chapter describe the effort of the R.O.C. to continue its mission and its activities, and the public actions undertaken by the communist state with the purpose of undermining the institutional autonomy of the Church.

The third chapter: **the Church from the Prisons** provides an analysis of the process of elimination from the public life of clerics and laymen undesired by the communist regime through incarceration, police investigation and legal conviction (approximately 2000 orthodox clerics have suffered in this period political detention). There are details provided about the methods and stages of the process of incarceration, the range of accusations and the changes brought by the regime to the legal system in order to serve their purposes. The second half of this chapter concentrates on the phenomenon of police investigation which was undergone by a large number of clerics and Christian laymen in the communist prisons. References are made to several models and examples of declarations and interrogation processes, but also to various means of resistance employed by the victims during the interrogations, including exceptional cases, when the detainees were pushed to the limit by Security forces in order to make (often illusionary) declarations. The chapter ends with a short presentation of legal processes and convictions that were inflicted upon political detainees, clerics and laymen throughout the first two decades of popular democracy.

The fourth chapter, with the title **The Prisons**, looks at the Romanian detention system in the first twenty years of communism. The first half of this chapter contains a classification of political prisons with a focus on general characteristics and examples of particularities of the large detention centers. The author looks at the personnel assigned in these centers, the regulations in place and the living conditions. The second half pictures the attempts of detained



clerics to maintain the tradition through fasting, prayers and schedules of prayer, and the effects of those among the other detainees. It continues with references to the role and typologies of clerics in detention, and to the secret means of communication among themselves and between them and other imprisoned laymen. The next subchapter deals with the topic of torture, presenting the methods generally used in the communist prisons and the methods of extreme torture, often employed by investigators, guards and administrative personnel. There follows a critical analysis of two realities of detention, namely regulations and isolation, for latter being used the case of Stefan Straja. The last two subchapters describe succinctly the spaces of forced labor, the brigade of priests that was formed in one of these spaces and the cases of Security informers infiltrated among the detainees.

Chapter five, **The Holy Sacraments in Prison**, includes a classification and a description of the Holy Sacraments as they were performed in the communist detention spaces. There are references to cases and ways in which confession, communion and the Holy Mass were conducted.

Chapter six, **Priests who experienced the communist terror. Outstanding cases**, portrays remarkable clerics that were victims of the communist terror. Among them there are Father Ioan Fulea, Father Dumitru Straja Stefan, Father Ilie Bodescu and Father Calin Ioachim. The range of oppressions experienced by these clerics varied from interrogations, incarcerations, convictions and political detainment, to disciplinary transfer into smaller parishes, constant harassment from Security agents all the way to direct physical suppression.

Chapter seven, **Orthodox clerics previously imprisoned**, is dedicated to the period of time after release from prison. The author makes reference to supervision of clerics by Security agents after being released from prison, using the case study of Father Nicolae Grebenea, but also aspects related to their professional reintegration within the R.O.C., using the case study of Father Ioan Vladovici. The second half of the chapter describes the efforts undertaken by Bishop Nicolae Colan from Ardeal to provide for the clerics arrested for political reasons and for their families. There are presented various direct and indirect ways in which the Bishop tried to support the political victims, and the risks he exposed himself to in doing so.

This PhD thesis contains fragments from the unwritten life of Romanian clerics who experienced detention and harassment during the communist dictatorship. The sacrifice of some orthodox clerics, often unknown or unspoken of, is a reality proven by the many who paid with years of detention, hard sufferings and, sometimes, with their own lives. Nevertheless, these cases have been known too little, and the message of some of the detained clerics and laymen – **Do not revenge us, but also do not forget us!** – has often been ignored or distorted.