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THE PRESERVATION OF ORTHODOXY THROUGH THE
ART OF THE ICON IN THE REGION OF MARAMUREŞ,
FROM THE FORCED ABOLISHMENT OF THE
ORTHODOX DIOCESE (1740) UP TO THE TIME OF
METROPOLITAN ANDREI ȘAGUNA (1848-1873)

SUMMARY

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Keywords: iconography, Maramureş, wooden churches, 18th century, iconographic program, Orthodox Church, Orthodox Diocese of Maramureş, nondiscursive theology

Maramureş, a unique region which preserved its identity and specificity, was studied by a large number of scholars from different domains. Beginning with the 20th century, numerous studies brought to light archival documents and new informations about the history of Maramureş, Chioar and the land of Lăpuş. I mention the contribution of the local historians: Ioan Mihalyi de Apşa, Alexandru Filipaşcu, Tit Bud, Alexandru Cziple, Ioan Bârlea, Joody Pál, Valer Hossu, as well as the contributions of Nicolae Iorga, Ştefan Meteş, I. Moga, Ioan Bogdan, Radu Popa and recently Ioan-Aurel Pop, Livia Ardelean, Ovidiu Ghitta, etc. The architecture and religious art of the region were studied by scholars who left us a rich bibliography about the iconography of the wooden churches from Maramureş, about the architectural features, about the iconographers and local schools of iconography, an inventory of the icons preserved, as well as the translation of some inscriptions from the chuches that did not survive. Valuable research contributions had the following art historians and architects: acad. Marius Porumb, Anca Bratu, I. D. Ştefănescu, Victor Brătulescu, Ecaterina Cincheza-Buculei, Atanasie Popa, Bogdana Tarnavscu, Aurel Bongiu, Raluca Betea, Alexandru Baboş, Joby Patterson, Szilveszter Térdik, David Buxton, Sabin Şainelic, Aurel Socolan, etc.

Reading the published bibliography about the art of the region, I noticed that there was a need of a new approach of the topic. There was a need to study the iconography of Maramureş from the perspective of the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Since iconography could express a profound theological statement in a visual form, since it did not necessitate an extensive net of intertwining *logoi* but, bypassing discourse, compressed theology in the form of seeing, it was always adapted to the spiritual needs of the humankind from the period of time when it was created. In this respect, there was a need to study iconography of the region and considering the historical, political and confesional context.

In my dissertation I endeavoured to decode the theological message of the 18th century iconographic program from the wooden churches of Maramureş. On the one hand, I tried to understand the courage the iconpainters had to make theology using colours, not words. On the other hand, I studied what has happened with the ecclesiastical community when there was no religious lider, when the ecclesiastical order was destorted.

In the Eastern-Orthodox tradition, the bishop is the principal source of legitimacy and apostolicity of any local gathering¹. According to the Orthodox Canon Law, he has a jurisdictional, legislator and judicial power². The bishop is responsible for handing down the tradition of the Church, due to the teaching and preaching power he was invested with. He is the head of the local Church and administering the sacraments and exercising ecclesiastical leadership he ensures the continuity of the ministry. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, who analyzed the role of the bishop in the Church, concluded, using some patristic writing that „the episcopal dignity is so necessary in the Church, that without it we can neither speak about Church, nor about Christians. Because the one ordained to be a bishop, as a successor of the Apostles... is a living icon of Christ”³. Considering his acute remarks in respect of the role of bishops along with the testimonies of patristic writings, we may conclude that the presence of the bishop in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Orthodox Church is a „sine qua non” condition for the existence of an Eucharistic community, of a local Church.

What happens when the political decision makers interfere with religious life and the ecclesiastical lineage is broken, the diocese is abolished and there is no bishop to supervise the church and show the direction?

What is it that supplies the tradition (paradosis) of the Church? What happens with the ecclesiastical community when there is no religious leader? Can we speak about a confessional survival?

Studying and contextualizing the particular case of the Orthodox Church from the region of Maramureş, I can assume that during the 18th century there was developed a *nondiscursive theology* (iconography) through which the tradition of the Church was handed down.

This may explain the ascent of iconography in the area as the means of theologizing. I may say that the meaning of images was concealed from the abusive political powers (Hungarians, Austrians, etc.) but was transparent to the faithful (Romanians) and thus could

¹ Hilarion Alfeyev, „Hierarchy as a Source of Authority in the Orthodox Church”, în Tamara Grdzlize (ed.), *Sources of Authority*, vol. II, Contemporary Churches, Faith and Order Paper no. 218, World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva, 2014, p. 121- 139.

² Arhid. Prof. Dr. Ioan Floca, *Drept canonic ortodox. Legislație și administrație bisericescă*, vol. II, Ed. IBMBOR, Bucureşti, 1990, p. 206-207.

³ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III, Ed. IBMBOR, Bucureşti, 2003, p. 156.

sustain the continuity of tradition and function as the primary means of educating people. In my dissertation I aimed to shed light on the role of the political and confessional issues of the region that forced the rural communities to develop a particular theological message in order to remain committed to their confession and to preserve their ethnic identity. On the other hand, analyzing the iconographic program, I identified the specific elements of the liturgical art developed in the region of Maramureş which define the particular features of the mural painting from the wooden churches of the region.

Throughout history, since 1391- the beginning of the institutionalized religious life in Maramureş due to the fact that the monastery from Peri became a stavropegic monastery-, up to the time of metropolitan Andrei Șaguna from Sibiu (1848-1873), the life of the Orthodox Church from the region was constrained by the political decision makers who ruled over the region. The life of the local Church was marked off by the sporadic presence of a bishop and then with a total absence of the ecclesiastical authority. Beginning with 1740, after the death of the last Orthodox bishop of Maramureş (Gavril Ștefanca of Bârsana), the imperial authorities forbade the election of a new hierach. Consequently, the Orthodox Diocese was abolished and the local Church was placed under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Rusyn (Ruthenian) Uniate Diocese of Mucachevo (Muncach). Officially, the entire region was registered as uniate. The study of the iconography of the region and the study of the old religious books of that time revealed that a part of the local people preserved their Eastern Orthodox faith.

Considering the primarily meaning of iconography, that of a nondiscursive theology, through which the tradition and the doctrine of the Church were handed down⁴, it is my conjecture that in the region of Maramureş this meaning of iconography was more obvious due to the historical context that constrained the freedom of expression of the Orthodox faith. The iconographic program became a visual manifesto that reflected the historical, political, confessional and social context and offered solutions to the challenges that community had to deal with.

The iconographic program was adapted to the spiritual needs of the faithful. On the one hand, it encouraged people to remain faithful and committed to the Eastern Orthodox faith and, on the other hand, it urged them to protect and preserve their ethno-religious identity, inspite of the political agenda of the assimilation of the Romanians pursued by the Hungarian or imperial

⁴ Arhid. Prof. Dr. Ioan Floca, *Drept canonic ortodox...*, p. 18-19.

authorities. It is my conjecture that there was a new agenda that combined kerygma and liturgical arts in order to preserve the Romanian religious and cultural self. There was a process of coding and decoding of the theological message by the means of a nonverbal communication to the parishioners. It is likely that this codification of the theological message was a consequence of the religious intolerance that the Orthodox Church from Maramureş was confronted with. There were three factors that contributed to the preservation of Orthodoxy in the region: the priests, the rural communities and the monasteries⁵. They had a role in the codification of the theological message painted inside the church building, a message delivered through iconography.

It is true that one of the main conditions for accepting the Union with the Church of Rome at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries was the condition to keep the Eastern Orthodox services, the liturgical tradition unaltered⁶ and the iconography preserved⁷. Considering this, the iconography from the uniate churches, theoretically, should have remained similar to the Orthodox one. However, this issue is beyond the scope of my present research. Taking into consideration the issue of ecclesiastic authority in the region of Maramureş, it was necessary to fully understand how the doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church was handed down in the absence of the bishop, who is the sole principle of authority and the guarantor of its continuity. Considering this, my dissertation, entitled „The preservation of Orthodoxy through the art of the icon in the region of Maramureş...”, is not only a study of the stylistic and thematic similarities found in the iconography of the wooden churches (Orthodox or Uniate churches), but also the discovery of a mechanism of confessional survival, in the absence of the ecclesiastic authority. I found this mechanism in ecclesiastical arts. This is why studying the „preservation of Orthodoxy” means to present and decode the theological message of an iconographic program, which was not a mere replica of the solutions by some other Eastern Orthodox communities. Rather, this „message” was designed and found its implementation in local architecture and arts

⁵ Nicolae Iorga, *Sate și preoți din Ardeal*, Institutul de Arte Grafice, București, 1902.

⁶ Uniate old religious books had similar content and hymnography as the Orthodox ones, up to the second half of the 19th century.

⁷ In 1737 bishop Inochentie Micu Klein signed a contract with the painter Ștefan from Ocnele Mari. He asked the iconographer to paint the iconostasis of the cathedral in Blaj in Wallachian style. Wallachia was an Orthodox country recognized by the political authority. Painting the iconostas in a similar style found in Wallachian churches could guarantee the preservation of the Eastern- Orthodox iconography. Cf. Marius Porumb, *Dicționar de pictură veche românească din Transilvania, sc. XIII-XVIII*, Ed. Academiei Române, București, 1998, p. 44.

developed within the confessional horizon of Maramureş⁸. We can speak about an iconographic phenomenon specific to the region of Maramureş. It was developed in the 18th century, during the time when the local Church was confronted with the issue of ecclesiastic authority, had to supply the missionary and teaching activities of the bishop.

Another aspect regarding the title chosen refers to the „forced abolishment” of the Orthodox Diocese that took place in 1740. In the chapter dedicated to the historical context I explained that the Diocese of Maramureş was officially established by the royal Decree issued in 1937⁹. Up to that time, we can speak about a diocese only considering that the local Church had a bishop confirmed by the political authorities (the Assembly of the Comitatus, the Transylvanian Princes- while the region was under their administration, and then the Court of Wien). The bishops of Maramureş were ordained by the Moldavian or Wallachian hierarchs.

The Diocese of Maramureş was a natural evolution of another ecclesiastical institution- the Exarchate established in 1391 when the monastery Peri became a stavropegic monastery. There is no document to attest the abolishment of the Orthodox Diocese of Maramureş. The published bibliography on this topic does not cite any document regarding the abolishment. However, we can speak about a forced abolishment initiated in 1720, when the emperor Carol 6th placed the parishes from Maramureş under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Ruthenian Diocese of Mucachevo and borebade bishop Dosoftei 2nd (Teodorovici) to exert his ecclesiastical attributions¹⁰. The Diocese of Maramureş continued to function, but it was outlawed. The last Orthodox bishop, Gavriil Ştefanca of Bârsana, was never confirmed by the Court of Wien. After his death, the imperial authorities did (1740) not allow the election of a new Romanian Orthodox bishop and the Diocese was abolished.

⁸ Although we can find representations of some themes, the iconographic program from the wooden churches of Maramureş is different from the one we can find in Transylvanian churches. Ioana Cristache Panait, *Biserici de lemn, monumente istorice din Episcopia Alba Iuliei, mărturii de continuitate și creație românească*, Ed. Episcopiei Ortodoxe Române a Alba Iuliei, 1987, published the iconographic programs she found in the churches from the counties Mureş și Alba. My field research made in that area confirmed, on the one hand, the uniqueness of the iconography from Maramureş and on the other hand confirmed that it was designed to be a response to the challenges of that time.

⁹ Royal decree no. 2971/ August 21st 1937, published in Monitorul Oficial no. 194/ August 24th 1937.

¹⁰ Pr. Dr. Alexandru Cziple, „Documente privitoare la Episcopia din Maramureş”, în *Analele Academiei Române*, seria II, tom. XXXVIII, Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice, p. 104.

According to the mentality of our society, which is familiar to the ideas of different rights and liberties guaranteed by law, such as religious liberty, liberty of conscience, the abolishment of the Diocese was, indeed, an abuse of power by the political decision makers. It was a forced action. According to the mentality of that epoch and especially to that of the Habsburg Emperors, there is a nuanced issue. The aggressive proselytism of the Uniate hierarchs of Mucachevo, the intrigues they created throughout the history in order to obtain jurisdiction over Maramureş, the politics of changing the ethnic and confessional identity of the Romanians from the region of Maramureş, can be arguments for keeping the expression „forced abolition” in the title. Thus, there was an imposed abolition that did not come from the will of the local community. Because the confessional changes were imposed by the imperial authorities and they did not come from the will of the faithful people, the local community found alternative solutions to preserve their faith and to hand down the tradition and spirituality of the Church. Thus ensured the confessional survival.

From a confessional point of view, my research covers a difficult period of time. A period of time dominated by political and social tensions and confessional strifes. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Union with the Church of Rome was spread among the Romanians from Transylvania. After the Habsburgs came to rule over Transylvania and Maramureş, the religious policies in the favour of the Church of Rome were sustained by the Court of Wien. These were accompanied by confessional strifes, resistance and revolts. The attempts to convert the people of Maramureş to Catholicism by placing the local Church under the ecclesiastic jurisdiction of the Ruthenian Uniate Diocese of Mucachevo did not have roots inside the community. The new confession (uniate) was accepted and assumed by a large number of communities from Maramureş only at the middle of the 19th century when the Romanian Uniate Diocese of Gherla was established. They were silently absorbed into union because they had a Romanian bishop. The new historical context, that appeared in the 19th century, was characterized by the movement of people who aimed to affirm and defend their national identity. The ethnic/national identity became more important than the confessional one.

My research started at the suggestion of the bishops from Maramureş (H.G. Justinian Chira and H.G. Justin). It meant to be a contribution at the history of the Orthodox Church of Maramureş. This is why the geographic area included in my research is similar to the borders of

Maramureş county, where the Diocese exerts its ecclesiastical jurisdiction today¹¹. I chose this area of research for other reasons, too. The first documents that attested the beginning of the institutionalized religious life in Maramureş was issued in 1391, when the monastery from Peri became a stavropegic monastery and the hegumenon received some quasi-episcopal rights and a large territorial jurisdiction. His jurisdiction extended the Maramureş county and was larger than the jurisdiction of the current Diocese. I started my research considering that old jurisdiction. I looked for stylistic and thematic similarities in the iconography of the existent wooden churches built in the region that corresponded to the medieval time jurisdiction of the monastery of Peri. I had in mind a hypothesis that the 18th century iconographic program had its origin in medieval times and was masterminded by the monks, most probably the ones who lived in the monastery from Peri. It was the most important monastery from Maramureş at that time. The iconographers did not work in isolation. They had a remarkable mobility. There are painters from Maramureş who also made icons in the neighbouring counties (Bistriţa-Năsăud, Cluj, Sălaj). There were also itinerant painters who came from north Carpathians, Polish-Lituanian commonwealth, Moldavia, etc. Considering this, I found the same iconographic phenomenon on both sides of Gutâi Mountains (in Maramureş county). This phenomenon was specific to the 18th century and was historically contextualized. In conclusion, I reshaped the research map by keeping only the churches from Maramureş county that nowadays form five archpriestships (deaneries). With the exception of the churches situated on the other side of Someş river (Bicaz, Orţiţa, Buzeşti) that present similarities with the churches from Sălaj county, due to the fact that they were included in that region throughout history. They will be included in another research project.

Therefore, I included in my final presentation of the thesis the Uniate and Orthodox churches, historical monuments, that preserved the mural décor painted between 1740 and 1848 and are located in Maramureş county, under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Diocese of Maramureş has jurisdiction, to the river Someş.

My dissertation offers a radically new approach and utilizes new sources, including some unpublished documents. The original approach of my research, on the one hand, consists of an analysis of the iconography from the perspective of the teachings and the spirituality of the Eastern-Orthodox Church. On the other hand, it consists of a new contextualized reading of the

¹¹ Satu-Mare county preserves a few Orthodox or Greek-Catholic churches painted during the 18th century. The research on that iconography will be other time.

iconographic program made manifest during this historical period. Therefore, I pointed out the correspondence between the mural painting from Maramureş and the political, social and confessional context, as well as the themes and the details depicted in the mural décor that reflected that context. Having an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of the mural painting from Maramureş, I could establish a connection between different aspect of social, religious and artistic life and the way they intertwined in the daily life of a community.

The main research method used in my dissertation was the iconographic analysis, based on observing and interpreting the primarily sources (the mural painting from the historical churches that were selected for research, the icons from the collection of the Orthodox Diocese of Maramureş and other parish collections). Along with this, an investigation of the other primarily sources (e.g. archival documents, confessional registers) was needed. The published literature about the topic was carefully reviewed and critically accessed.

The method of comparative analysis was very useful to make connections between the depicted themes and the changes of the historical context. Observing the mural painting I could clearly delineate the themes that form the iconographic program, their order/ disposal on the walls. The interpretation of the collected data from the field research was followed by a theological analysis of the images. There was a decodification of the theological message transmitted through the art of the icon and a presentation of the ideas nondiscursively (visually) handed down.

Considering the research method used- the iconographic analysis, based on the observation and the theological interpretation of the mural painting, the research tools used were the following: the photographic documentation and the analytical record of evidence (monographic file¹²), written for every church-historical monument, painted within the temporal range of my research. The analytical record of evidence helped me reach the following targets: to identify the mural compositions and of the portable icons, to establish the order of the scene that form the iconographic program and the frequency of some themes, to identify and to record the manuscript writings and inscriptions that mentioned the founder of the church building, the date of the mural décor and other local historical events (if there were any). It also facilitated the analyses of the stylistic features and history of the building (genesis and evolutions).

¹² Virgil Vătăşianu, *Metodica cercetării în istoria artei*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucureşti, 1974, p. 51-55.

The method of comparative analysis emphasized the fact that the iconography from the Orthodox churches was similar to the one from the Uniate churches. The thematic differences that can be seen from one church to another, were determined by various factors, such as: the architectural particularities of every church building, the personality of the painter, the artistic taste of the sponsor and of the founders of the church, and other factors that were presented in the dissertation. The thematical changes that occurred at the turn of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century consisted of an introduction of some new scenes in the iconographic program. This was possible due to the fact that the iconography was continuously reflecting the historical context. We can speak about a theology „in progress”.

Radical changes in the iconography of Maramureş occurred in the second half of the 19th century, a period of time that coincided with the episcopacy of metropolitan Andrei Șaguna (1848-1873) as well as with a movement of national emancipation, with a change of the political, social and confessional context. The churches painted after 1848 (a small number can be found in Maramureş) were grouped in two categories: churches that suffered repainting after 1848 (i.e. Breb, Săliștea Bâleni, Săcălașeni etc.) and churches painted after 1848 (i.e. Lăschia, Stoiceni). The iconographic program was simplified in that time both from a thematical and stylistic point of view.

I noticed that during the time when the region of Maramureş did not have an Orthodox bishop, the iconographic program was characterized by the unity of thematical approach and the themes depicted became a theological statement, a nondiscursive theology, marked by a missionary agenda. From the middle of the 19th century, the local Orthodox community had metropolitan Andrei Șaguna as a religious leader and a leader of national identity, the Uniates obtained the approval of Chatolic Church and of Wien for the establishment of the Romanian Uniate Diocese of Gherla. As a result, the local parishes managed to detach themselves from the Ruthenian Uniate Diocese of Mucachevo. In that period of time, the confessional identity was once again restored by the communities. The iconographic program of that period of time, however, lost its thematic complexity and deepness of the theological message.

Analyzing the iconography of the region, using the iconographic and iconological methods¹³, I found several themes that urged people to the preserve Orthodox faith and their ethnic identity. The iconographic program, read and decoded as a statement (painted text) has a

¹³ Virgil Vătășianu, *Metodica cercetării în istoria artei*, Ed. Meridiane, Bucureşti, 1974.

theological dept. It became a visual manifesto that incoureged the community to preserve their confessional and cultural self. The thematical unity of the mural painting of Maramureş opened a new research perspective: was this thematical unity a consequence of a manifesto that combined kerigma and sacred arts? Was the iconographic program a theological discourse adapted to the historical context? Did it supply the absence of eccelsiasitcal authority and did it become a nondiscursive theology throuh which the tradition of the Church was handed down? These questions became working hypothesis and the main targets of my research. Therefore, in three main chapters I aimed to defend my research hypothesis.

The first chapter, entitled „*The historical, political and confessional context from the institutionalization of the religious life in Maramureş (1391) up to the time of metropolitan Andrei Șagune (1848-1873)*” is a presentation of the history of the Othodox Church from Muaramureş, considering the permanent chenges of the historical context. The religious life and the organisations of the local Church were constrained by the political decision makers that ruled over the region (the Hungarian Kings, the Transylvanian princes, the Habsburg emperors). The presentation of the historical context started with the begining of the institutionalized religious life in Maramureş (1391), when the monastery of Peri from Maramureş became a stavropegic monastery of the Patriachate of Constantinopol. This historical event justified the development of the religious life in the region and the emergence of the bishops of Maramureş which allows us to speak about a diocese in the region which functioned without any canonical legislation as no edicts were issued by either political or ecclesiastical authorities of that time.

In this chapter I have also presented the conflict between the church of Maramureş and the Diocese of Mucachevo initiated by the Ruthenian bishops of Mucachevo in order to obtain ecclesiastic jurisdiction over the region of Maramureş. They had several reasons for launching this campain. The most important was the financial incom of the monastery from Peri (the hegumens from Peri enhareded a large teritorial jurisdiction which assured financial power). After the diocese of Mucachevo became Uniate, they also had misionary reasons: to convert the Orthodox „schismatic” communities to catholicism by accepting the Union with the Church of Rome. The political decision makers and the Ruthenian bishops desired to obtain jurisdiction over Maramureş. Thus they interfered with the Romanian religious life. Consequently, the Orthodox Diocese of Maramureş was abolished. However, the Orthodoxy from Maramureş was

handed down due to the involvement of the monasteries in the preservation of the faith and due to the ties between Maramureş and the Romanian Lands.

The iconographic program from the wooden churches of the region, made in a period of time when the ecclesiastic community confronted with the issue of ecclesiastic authority and did not have a local bishop to supervise the religious life, was invested with a discreet missionary dimension that meant to be a response to the challenges of the time. It sought to encourage the community to preserve its faith.

In the second chapter of my dissertation, entitled „*The iconographic program of the churches from Maramureş (18th-19th centuries)*” I presented the results of my field research: the themes that form the mural decor, their order and disposal on the walls, factors that determinated and conditioned the thematical approach. I also outlined the biography of the most important 18th century iconpainters of the region, who passed tradition to their disciples and manage to establish local „schools” of iconography.

After analysing the iconographic program of the wooden churches from Maramureş, I grouped them taking into consideration the frequency of the depicted themes/ scenes and considering the temporal range of my study. Therefore, I includede the churches the churches that were painted before 1740 (four church building) in the first group. The second group was formed by the churches painted between 1740-1848 (50 church buildings) and the last group consisted of the eight churches painted between 1848-1873, in the time of metropolitan Andrei Șaguna from Sibiu. I studied a larger number of churches. It was neccesary for me to also investigate the newly-built churches, because they store some old icons that belonged to the wooden churches which did not survive. Old icons discovered in these newly-built churches make a significant contribution to the agenda of enriching the biography of the iconpainters and their artistic itinerary.

In the last chapter, entitled „*The Preservation of Orthodoxy through the art of the icon in the region of Maramureş from the forced abolishment of the Orthodox Diocese (1740) up to the time of metropolitan Andrei Șaguna (1848-1873)*”, I carefully investigated the theology of the iconographic program of that time, I decoded the message of the iconography, the nondiscursive theology and endevoured to shed light on the sources of their inspiration. I also investigated the issue of associated with the ways the historical, political, confessional context and the issues of ecclesiastical authority found their nondiscursive manifestation in local

iconography. The iconography from Maramureş is a nondiscursive theology based or inspired from the theology of the Triodion. This was not a random choice. The theology of the Triodion was an „aggiornamento”, an update of the Gospel to the challenges of the epoch¹⁴. It was the solution to make through the crisis (the issue of ecclesiastic authority) of that Eucharistic community. The solution was to follow the model of the Crucified and Ressurected Christ.

The iconographic phenomenon specific to the 18th century Maramureş had an important contribution to the preservation and to the handing down of the tradition of the Church through image in the form of nondiscursive theology. Iconography became a way of nonverbal, coded communication between the monks who assued the role of ecclesiastical authority, in the absence of the bishop, and the members of the Eucharistic community. The faithful, who were familiar with the teachings and with the spirituality of the Church, understood the coded message, concealed for the outsiders. It was very hard to properly identify the meaning of the images for the people who came from another confessional, cultural or ethnic background.

The iconography of the 18th century assured the preservation of Orhotox faith in the region of Maramureş. The tradition (paradosis) was handed down revealing also the historical context, not only the teachings of the Church. The iconography became an historical document that drew a glorious epoch for Maramureş, from an artistic and theological point of view.

Nowadays Maramureş preserved its uniqueness and specificity mostly because the people of the 18th century found adequate solutions to preserve the confessional, ethnic and cultural self. It is my conjecture that, if today there are impressive communities of Orthodox believers and there is an Orthodox Diocese of Maramureş, this is due to that „branch” of the Lord (Iasiah 4, 2) who assimilated and handed down the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The study of the iconography from Maramureş and its theological meaning is relevant to the present aristic and ecclesiastical environment`s needs. Thus, because this reaseach decodes and „translates” the meaning of nondiscursive theology (iconography) considering the historical, political, social and confessional context of the 18th century up to the time of metropolitan Andrei Șaguna from Sibiu (1848-1873). This study does not merely aim to analyse the stylistic features of the iconography from Maramureş; it also indents to descipher the

¹⁴ The word „aggiornamento” of the Gospel was inspired by fr. Nicolae Steinhardt who used it in a homily about how the priests should give a lecture and adapt the message to the audience. N. Steinhardt, *Dăruind vei dobândi. Cuvinte de credință*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2008, p. 501.

meaning of iconography. The iconographic phenomenon developed in the region of Maramureş can offer a good model of ecclesiastical pursuit and paradosis to the iconographers of our time. It can help them adapt the visual message to the present historical context in order to offer a proper response to the present spiritual needs and to the present challenges.

Iconography from Maramureş can guide iconographers in respect of its capacity to make a theological message relevant of the Church and to address the struggles and issues of a society. The iconpainters from Maramureş did not copy already existing iconographic programs from some other Orthodox countries. They developed a unique nondiscursive theology adapted to their time; therefore, they could sustain the continuity of the tradition and to preserve Orthodoxy and Romanian cultural self. It was a form of mission through iconography.

From an artistic, iconographic perspective, this dissertation brings the idea of a contextualized iconographic program that was addressed to a specific community. This can be relevant to the present iconographers who often depict on the walls an iconographic program that does not fit the architectural features or its message is not an answer to the spiritual needs of that specific ecclesiastical community.

The present renewal iconographic movement that recently appeared in the Romanian artistic environment, cannot succeed without a better knowledge of the iconography made centuries ago, considering the historical context and the knowledge of the doctrine and spirituality of the Church which brought it into existence. This research comes to meet the needs of the present artistic-ecclesiastic and theological environments by offering an alternative: the model of the iconographic phenomenon developed in the 18th century Maramureş, which successfully synthesized various threads and assured the continuity of tradition and spirituality of the Church. It also established a correspondence between the thematic approach, the architectural features and the historical context of that time.

This dissertation also aims to open other future research directions. One of this is the study of the phenomenon of the confessional survival in the absence of the ecclesiastical authority (the bishop), in other religious communities and historical contexts (i.e. the Dutch Catholics, etc.). The results of such a research can identify methods of preserving the faith inside a community, in a difficult period of time. It can be useful in the study of misiology.

The region of Maramureş is a reference point in iconography and in the theology of the icon, due to the 18th century iconographic program. Iconography, as nondiscursive theology,

functioned as the primary means of educating people and thus could sustain the continuity of tradition.