PEACE TO THE MARTYRS, HONOUR TO THE HEROES!

Radu CIUCEANU*

Abstract: “The Communist Party of Romania has but a few times mistaken on those who were chosen and destined to fill important positions and main ranks, especially in a field as sensitive and hot as the realm of faith, where Orthodoxism has blended its history with the very existence of the Romanian people. And, again, it was but seldom that the innate shrewdness of a country priest, which is worthy of the skills of an Oltenian reaper, has reached the perfection of a long-lasting political programme, at a time when the nave of the church (in Romanian – navă – the same word used to refer to a ship), in a country invaded by the Red Armies, was threatened by shipwreck and dissolution. Justinian Marina, the “horse thief”, was the one to blame. By means of politics woven with unique skill, he managed to cheat on each and every one of his surveyors, to let down the masters who had given him the kalimmachion, thus becoming straightforwardly and undoubtedly a Thomas Becket of Romania” (Radu Ciuceanu, 2001).

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Preliminaries¹

There was no surprise that the East was atheist and its ideology was strange not only to Romania, but also to every country under the Iron Curtain. The Iron Curtain itself was not surprising at all. The horrors that took place on the widespread territory of the USSR and its proximity separated by a few-metre-wide water frontier called the Nistru

* Director of The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, the Romanian Academy, Bucureşti, Romania.

¹ *Acceptance Speech* within the ceremony of awarding the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* by the “1 December 1918” University in Alba Iulia (the Faculty of Orthodox Theology)

represented at first a purely diplomatic issue, because the Russians did not even acknowledge for once, after 1917, the legitimacy of a Romanian province whose history could not be contested, which belonged to a principality, to which a levy had unfavorably been applied and which had been sold to the Ottoman Empire in 1812. The issue of Bessarabia and its status were among the guiding ideas of the most gifted Romanian politician, Nicolae Titulescu, who was twice acknowledged as the president of the League of Nations. Unfortunately, his attempt was not successful, despite a so-called friendship with the Soviet delegate Maxim Litvinov, considering both Titulescu's unexpected removal in 1936, when King Charles the IInd dissolved the government and gathered it once again after N.T. had gone, an occurrence that caused just as much satisfaction in Berlin and in Romania, as it has received negative reviews in the Soviet media.

Later on, the historical research aiming at this issue, which followed the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, showed that the Red Dictator – as well as those who followed into his steps, without any exception – did not have the slightest intention to sign with the Kingdom of Romania a treaty acknowledging the territory between the Prut and the Nistru as a part of Romania: his politics aimed at obtaining the longest possible term with the League of Nations, which could be achieved via the best terms with the Romanian politician who played a decisive role when the USSR joined the League of Nations.

Domestically, many verbal and written statements have focused on the murders and the deeds that took place in a hugely widespread East inhabited by over 160 million people. The horrors that went on for years in the Gulag of the Soviet paradise well-known for the “bliss” of the Soviet man and of the entire mankind reminded of the Apocalypse. 150 bishops were imprisoned in the death camps at the White Sea between 1917 and 1923, and in the following period, 1924-1947, approximately 36 million more died, including around 5,000 priests, on the grounds of the Kirov law. In a subsequent global assessment submitted to Boris Yeltsin by Iakovlev as part of a report – *the Commission responsible for the rehabilitation of political victims* – the number of the martyrs acknowledged between 1917 and 1980 stood at 200,000 clergymen, plus 500,000 who were convicted and deported. It is a tragic account and, to complete it, we should mention that 40,000 churches and countless

mosques and synagogues have been destroyed². All these actions and the consequences of a real genocide have also relied on secret reasons issued by the institutions of the repressive system of the Soviet regime, which was also valid in the countries covered by the Iron Curtain. Item 34 in *NKDV's basic directives for the countries in the Soviet orbit* (Moscow, 02.06.1947 [top secret] K-AA/CC 113, *Indication NK/003/47*) "recommends" *special attention to churches. Cultural-educational activities should be directed so that they become the target of general antipathy. The following must be under surveillance: church publishing houses, archives, contents of sermons, hymns, of religious education and of burial ceremonies*³.

But Bolshevism had another equally bloody overture against a people who lost 3 million inhabitants. The civil war in Spain started on the grounds of a social, a political and an economic crisis. Having started in July 1936 and having taken place throughout the entire country, it resulted at first into a harsh attack against the Catholic Church and its people. 15 bishops died in tragic circumstances. It was an old settling of accounts whose main features were typical of the violent behavior of a predominantly rural population, as opposed to a cult aristocracy who had long forgotten the reality of pauper and oppressed classes. The assassinations of Calvo Sotelo and Primo de Riviera have marked, just like the victories of the Popular Front, the intervention of the army led by generals José Sanjurjo, Emilio Mola and Francisco Franco. During the three years of the civil war, which meant a direct transplant of the red revolution from the other end of Europe into Spain, more than 20,000 churches were destroyed (pulled down or robbed) and 17,755 priests fell victims. Facing a reality that the Vatican made public to the democrat world, France and England stopped helping the pro-communist

² During a visit I took with Minister of Culture Mihai Golu to Kiev in 1996, I collected a few details on the number of the victims among those who lived around the monasteries. Thus, I found out that some 70,000 monks and 20,000 nuns were killed during the Bolshevik terror. The same sources informed me that there were common tombs where the victims were buried in their surplice, along ditches, with the local bishop wearing his mantles assisting while nailed on a chair.

³ Paul CARAVIA/Virgiliu CONSTANTINESCU/Flori STĂNESCU, *The Imprisoned Church, Romania, 1944-1989*, București, The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, 1998, p. 10.

government, after having acted friendly towards the so-called legitimists, then they stopped sending backups to the communist government in Madrid.

Unfortunately, the Kingdom of Romania, G. Tătăărăscu's government, under the influence of mysterious circles, changed the destination of certain planes that France was to deliver to Romania and which had already been paid for, therefore several items of Schneider hard artillery were delivered to the Spanish communist government, also with the help of Minister of aviation Pierre Cot, of the Leon Blum government, who was later revealed to be a Soviet agent.

1. The Orthodox Church: the main enemy of the Communist Party

*“To destroy the Church / Is an act of justice... /
If it occurred, / In favour of a revolution, / When
the people inflamed / By rightful hatred, rebels /
It is but a natural and human action”*

(Al Peiro, 1936).

There was written evidence rightfully holding that the terrorist regime that came into force after the Kerensky Government was arrested in October 1917, which accounted for a double catastrophe, both to the Russian people and to a tired and exhausted Europe, for, after the carnage of the First World War, Europe no longer wished to interfere in a conflict it thought to be located inside the former Tsarist Empire. Winston Churchill's suggestion, in the Parliament, to only interfere by means of several divisions set ashore in Kronstadt – between 4 and 11 units – was rejected although the British Royal Family had agreed on it. Nevertheless, considering the troops of the Bolshevics in Petrograd, the presence of British divisions would have been decisive and would have cancelled the so-called Storming of the Winter Palace, which was defended by a detachment of women and by 150 governmental soldiers. The project was rejected, on the grounds that the British unions had not agreed with the army's interfering in the evolution of the events in Petrograd.

Happily for Europe's destiny, the foreseen Bolshevik revolution in Germany failed, and the sailors' rebellion on November 4th 1918, when 40 thousand marines and soldiers of the marine infantry, after having captured Kiel harbour and set up the Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets, were finally forced to surrender. If the revolutionary wave had got hold of the

entire Germany after the capitulation (truce façade), Europe would indeed have been communised! The Soviet penetration was also stopped by the resistance of the Polish people; in 1920, the latter turned down the red offensive which had got to the suburbs of Warsaw, obtaining a decisive victory under the command of the future marechal Pilsudski and in the presence of French general Maxime Weygand, the leader of the allied mission in Poland. The position of the Romanian Kingdom can be mentioned here as well, as it had mobilised two army corps on the line of Nistru river and a reserve corps, threatening the Bolshevik front by a side stroke, which contributed to certain contingents of the red army withdrawing in the left flank.

2. Settling the accounts

In Romania, the assault on the Romanian Orthodox Church started at the same time as the truce was written (the **capitulation** recommended via the **Communiqué to the People** of the night of August 23rd issued by the former King Michael). It should barely be mentioned that the church was not consulted (sic!) upon the preparation of the liberating document that imprisoned 165,000 officers and soldiers, of which only 60,000 people came back with all the armament. The Romanian Orthodox Church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română – *hereinafter: BOR*), appeared to be in a difficult position: as the Soviet troops had reoccupied Bessarabia in 1944, the inheritance of the Bolshevik heaven made itself fully known by massive deportations and by chasing the Romanian military leaders from the communes, as well as the priests who were still living on the occupied land and who also headed to Siberia.

The task of the BOR, which was led by patriarch Nicodim Munteanu⁴, was dramatic after the invasion and could even turn tragic, should the Soviets start counting the rebuilt churches and those that had obtained staff and adornments sent from Bessarabia and Transnistria, which were more than 300, as part of a process intended to christianise godless people.

⁴ Born in the commune of Pipirig (the birthplace of famous storyteller Ion Creangă), he joined the monachal orders as a young man and filled several highly prestigious positions, such as that of a preacher at the Metropolitan Church of Iași, a bishop of Huși, an archbishop of Chișinău and Hotin, a member of the Romanian Academy.

Happily for our church, Stalin had reinstated the Patriarchate of the USSR by means of a decree – to keep the West silent – which had established a hierarchy of the clergy under the leadership of patriarch Alexey, who had miraculously survived the great epurations and executions of the orthodox Russia.

Considering the Orthodox Church of Romania to be the first obstacle they would need to remove, the communist regime started its demolishing offensive by annulling certain dioceses which also supposed that higher officials needed to be removed. Thus, the following bishopries have ceased to exist: the Bishopry of the Army, the bishopries of Huși, Argeș, Constanța, Caransebeș and two large Metropolitan Seats, one – in Oltenia (on April 20th 1945) and another one in South Bukovina. By means of a law passed under no.166 in 1947, they removed from his position the one who was to become the Patriarch, according to tradition, namely Irineu Mihălcescu. At the same time, the vicar's position was cancelled and, on this occasion, vicar-bishops Veniamin Pocitan, Pavel Șerpeș, Emilian Antal, Mircea Băcăuanu, Atanasie Dincă were dismissed from service. Meanwhile, after many talks with Justinian Marina, the new Patriarch, and even Petru Groza, they removed Nicolae Popovici, the most important bishop of the opposition, who was brave enough to assert: “We have given and will continue to give Caesar's what's Caesar's, but we will not allow anybody to steal God's things from us. We will give up everything that we own, up to our latest piece of clothing, if need be, but we'll save our faith and our hearts for our Lord”⁵. The drama of the patriarch Nicodim Munteanu took place at the same time. As far as law making is concerned, a cascade of repressive laws followed. Starting with 1948, the year in which the church was separated from public education and all the faith schools were nationalized, along with forbidding religion classes and any kind of religious behavior.

Simultaneously, BOR was cut off from the list of socially assisted institutions and all the church establishments and associations were abolished. Another tough blow to the church occurred when they cut off

⁵ Ana Maria RĂDULESCU, “Biserica Ortodoxă Română” (The Romanian Orthodox Church), in Octavian ROSKE (coordinator), *România 1945-1989. Enciclopedia regimului comunist. Represiunea* (Romania 1945-1989. The Encyclopaedia of the Communist Regime. The Repression) Vol. I, A-E, București, The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, 2011, p. 196.

the periodical publications of the church. The only exception was the traditional Romanian Telegraph in Sibiu. Additional steps were taken to abolish theological academies, and the state did not recognize any diploma issued by the theological seminaries and institutions. The repression extended over BOR's land properties: By Decree 92/1950 – the Church was deprived of all its real estates. And, as a victory that the Securitate bodies and the Ministry of Religious Affairs had long yearned for and deliberately planned, the fulminating Decree no. 410 was passed on October 28th, 1959. The decree was preceded and justified by several famous trials incriminating the subversive activity of certain servants of the monasteries of Tismana, Polovraci and, last but not least, that of the believers in the “Rugul Aprins” (*The Burning Bush*) association. Before the month of March 1960, 30 monasteries had been abolished, and 62 more followed. Despite this decree which was meant to destroy BOR, at the dawn of the Revolution in 1989, 2000 monks were still living in 103 monasteries and hermitages. It is worth mentioning that the following have become direct victims by being assassinated one way or the other: Patriarch Nicodim Munteanu, metropolitan bishop Sebastian Rusan, Grigore Leu, archimandrite Gherasim Iscu, archimandrite Haralambie Vasilache, hierodeacons Daniil Sandu, Tudor and Emilian Gâțu, students Valeriu Gafencu and Gheorghe Jimboiu, teacher Ilarion Felea, poet Vasile Militaru, philosopher Mircea Vulcănescu, philosopher and poet Constantin Oprea. The “Securitate” also killed priest Ioan Mitrică and hierodeacons Visarion Toia și Ion Volănescu. But three priests of the BOR stood out for actively participating in the organisation Haiducii Muscelului (the Outlaws of Muscel), and they were executed in July 1959 in Jilava.

There seems to be one report – a *top secret, particularly important document* – report no. 340 of October 22nd, 1955, that must be analysed by all means. It focuses on where the Orthodox monasteries and other religious establishments in the People's Republic of Romania really stood, in order to solve certain issues concerning not only their existence, but also the possibility to *suppress* these monasteries. This measure followed an excursus in which the decree described the role of these establishments before August 23rd, accusing them of being against the people and antisocial, *breeding grounds of Iron-Guardism and centres of support to the bourgeois-landlord regime*, their anti-people activity is

said to have continued after August 23rd, all the more emphasized by the *affluence of the hostile individuals in the monasteries*. Another charge is *their influence over an important number of believers* and especially among the peasantry, which is considered to be rather *backward* and, has, therefore, its high share in *religious celebrations*. Therefore, a solution is needed in order to oppose the hostile activity of the monks and nuns in the monasteries. Three solutions are set forth: the first and most radical one, to abolish them; the second, to concentrate the monks and the nuns in the large monasteries of the Republic, and the third one was a compromise consisting in reducing the access by recruiting the ones who were allowed to seek refuge in monasteries and forbidding the recruitment of new monks and nuns.

- “As for the first solution proposed – to abolish the monasteries – it would include a series of steps, such as:
- Handing over the buildings so that they may be used as: maternities, hospitals, resting places and schools;
- Handing over the religious items to the administrative body of the respective religion;
- Handing over for use the lands and the agricultural inventory to the villagers who hold little land or to the Collective Agricultural Households (Gospodării Agricole Colective – GAC) in the nearby communes;
- Using the plants in the warehouses of the monasteries to set up state factories which may provide for continuing the production, especially in the fields related to foreign affairs;
- Sending the monks and the nuns to where they lived before coming to the monasteries and making sure they are hired;
- Assign the monasteries that are considered to be historic monuments to the Academy of the People’s Republic of Romania”⁶.

Advantages:

- it abolishes certain seats gathering together hostile individuals;

⁶ Radu CIUCEANU/Cristina PĂIUȘAN, *The Romanian Orthodox Church under the Communist Regime, 1945 – 1958*, vol. I, București, The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, 2001, p. 302.

- it abolishes centres that support reactionary forces;
- these measures were supported by villagers who took advantage of them;
- some of the monks and nuns that are involved in production shall be taken out of the range of influence of hostile forces;

Disadvantages:

- spreading the monks away would not make them stop their hostile activity;
- the current status of the agency in the rural environment does not guarantee that any event will be notified in due time;
- since the suppression of the monasteries affects the interests of the Church leaders (who gain very high incomes from the monasteries), they would certainly not support this measure even if they formally accept it;
- the large number of hostile forces among the leaders of the Church and inside its administrative apparatus shall represent a serious impediment against successfully taking such steps;
- abolishing the monasteries shall be considered as a blow against the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, if it is compared to certain concessions made to the Catholic Church, this might strengthen the existing catolicising trend inside the Orthodox Church, which is entirely supported by hostile forces;
- the status of being politically and culturally backward of most believers does not guarantee that the above-mentioned steps can be successfully taken.

Each of the above-mentioned steps can cause trouble.

As most monasteries are in isolated places, they cannot be used as schools, hospitals or maternities. Therefore, the believers in the communes surrounding such monasteries will not fully participate in the steps to be taken. The worldwide political status does not favour such a step.

As for the second solution, according to the report, the following decisions would be required:

- abolishing faith schools of all levels;
- abolishing the workshops that function for public use;
- setting new regulations for those who want to become monks or

nuns;

- forbidding monks and nuns to travel freely.

The **advantages** of this solution are as follows:

- it reduces by far the number of hostile forces gathering centres;
- it makes it difficult for outsiders to support reactionary elements;
- it removes one of the means of mystical education;
- it largely impedes the affluence of new members into the monastery;
- informational surveillance could take place more efficiently.

The **disadvantages** are as follows:

- the monachal elements (sic!) shall go on influencing the believers;
- stronger hostile monachal centres appear;
- concentrating the monks and nuns might be fought against both by certain monks, and also by some of the believers in the communes neighbouring the monasteries to be abolished;

The third solution also included a political motivation:

- to intensify the activity of the political and social bodies in the villages. To this regard, it should be taken into account that starting now an immediate and direct campaign against mysticism in the villages will not lead to the intended results, and that, in order to obtain them, a serious and constant preparation is needed and it should consist of:
- being aware of the phenomena of nature;
- explaining them clearly, as far as the peasants are able to understand;
- insisting on the notions that obviously contradict the Bible;
- explaining the social phenomena so that the working peasants may understand them and from the point of view of their interests;
- carefully selecting the films that are shown to the public in village cultural centres and inside the mobile cinemas and when carrying out such selection, taking into account that religion

may greatly influence many working peasants”⁷.

But the epic of how much the ancestral faith can hold on has also been completed by causing the death of patriarch Iustin Moisescu, who stubbornly and uncompromisingly refused to leave the Patriarchal Palace and the building founded by voivode Constantin Șerban, of the Metropolitan Seat Hill, as ordered by the leaders of the Communist Party of Romania. He paid for such disobedience with his own life! His successor, patriarch Teoctist Arăpașu, followed in his footsteps.

There was a punishment this time too: the largest monastery in our country was destroyed and more than 500 square metres of Romania's artistic and historic patrimony, of an incalculable value, simply disappeared.

Nicodim kept refusing Patriarch Alexey's recurring invitations. But when Prime Minister Petru Groza asked him to come to his office and threatened that a constant refusal may have serious consequences on the entire clergy of Romania, the Romanian patriarch gave in, and his visit to Moscow became a success of the communist regime, therefore the Romanian Orthodox Church came to be considered as the second largest Patriarchate in the worldwide history of Orthodox religion, obviously, after the one in Moscow.

The patriarch physically disappearing caused a wave of protests and rumours in the winter of 1948. It was said and the information was also secretly spread abroad, that Nicodim Munteanu had been assassinated on Epiphany, while assisting the ritual of throwing the cross in the frozen waters of Dâmbovița river and when, *by chance*, those who put his winter coat on him forgot to add a fur vest that he always wore, even on less cold days. The same evening he became feverish, and the doctors noted he had caught chest congestion. We do not know whether he was given an antibiotic (penicillin, at that time). Anyway, he died in a few weeks, and, since his death caused a national state of sadness, we can only suppose that the people who had planned and caused it were glad. The first enemy of the best organised army they were facing was gone.

The successor to the patriarchal throne was an essential issue to the communist regime set up after March 6th, under the leadership of Prime Minister Petre Groza, himself no more than a mere puppet of General

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 302-304.

Susaykov, the representative of I.V. Stalin in Romania.

According to a long-lasting tradition of the Orthodox Church, the next in line in the patriarchat chair came from the second capital city, Iași, and from among the higher clergy; no one doubted that his successor would be Archbishop Irineu Mihălcescu⁸, but this did not happen! The first reason concerned the archbishop's personality and his biography showing him – as it should have –, as opposing the pro-Soviet regime and its activity, a biography supported by his many visits in Bessarabia between 1941 and 1944; besides that, there were the tens of sermons, articles and homilies he had said in the metropolitan cathedral of Iași. The judgment was simple and the decision was made. The scholar archbishop Irineu Mihălcescu did not have to come to Bucharest. To such purpose, besides his compulsory resignation, someone to replace him had to be found immediately and the odds chose the man who had once sheltered Gheorghiu Dej after his escape from Târgu Jiu in August 1944. His name was Ioan Marina⁹.

His ascension was also seen as a blow to the Orthodox Church who had already nicknamed the newly ordained „the Red Patriarch”. But his

⁸ Born on July 24th 1874 in Pătârlagele commune, Buzău county, he graduates from the Seminary, then enrolls to the Faculty of Theology of Bucharest. He also attended specialisation studies at the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy in Leipzig and Berlin. One of the most important oecumenical congresses he attended outside Romania was the Congress of the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches, which took place in Prague (1928). As for the stages of his career, in 1939 he was assigned the position of a substitute to the metropolitan bishop of Oltenia. He is then named a metropolitan bishop of Moldavia, and he fills this position by the summer of 1947 when, following a political recommendation, he retires into the Monastery of Agapia. As for his physical death, there was a suspicion that he had been poisoned. But it was not confirmed.

⁹ Born on February 22nd 1901 in Suesți village. He graduates from the Seminar and the Normal School of Vâlcea. The first step he took up the church hierarchy was being appointed as an assistant bishop within the Metropolitan Church of Moldavia. During its meeting of July 30th 1945, the saint Synod grants him the rank of bishop. On December 28th 1947 he is named an assistant bishop at the Metropolitan Cathedral, and on May 28th 1948 he is ordained archbishop of Bucharest, metropolitan priest of Wallachia, and a patriarch of Romania. His schedule as a patriarch included the following objectives: to reform the Romanian monachism and theological education, respectively to abolish the Greek Catholic Church and to integrate its believers into the Romanian Orthodox Church.

evolution was entirely astonishing and, even if our ancestral church was expected to share the destiny of its sister-churches of Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania¹⁰, where religious cults had been declared illegal, in our country, the existence of a village priest whose skills could not be equalled, but who was constantly firm in thinking of himself as the saviour of the Orthodox faith during the hardest times of its history, not only provided a lawful relationship acknowledged by the communist regime that allowed the Romanian Orthodox Church to go on functioning, and, from certain viewpoints, even to develop, although the price of the **resistance**, which was manifest under various forms, cost the freedom and, sometimes, the life of over two thousand priests, monks and nuns, martyrs on the most important building sites and slaughterhouses of the Danube-Black Sea canal, where they suffered a special suffering and destructive treatment¹¹.

3. The silence of the memory: remembrance

I was taking part in a late dinner on God's day and I had been invited, as already usual, by mediation of father Vlad, the home secretary of Patriarch Teoctist. In a sweet and unmistakable voice, some time between 23.30 and midnight – two specific times that had also become sacred:

- *Professor, the Right Reverend hereby invites you to lunch tomorrow. And he added emphatically... Father archimandrite Grigore Băbuș will be there too; and, he went on in a neutral voice...*
- *Please forgive my calling so late, but we are aware that you only rest after midnight!*

The lunch was typical; the appetizer made of many vegetables, an

¹⁰ In Albania, the process that imposed a total secularity not only by separating the church from the state, but also through a radical politics consisting in a total suppression of religion and in massively arresting clergy members, as well as in hundreds of executions, terrified the christian world and even the papal curia.

¹¹ The special-treatment brigades intended for priests are well-known. They were in force in Poarta Albă, in Coasta Găleşului, in Patru Culme, Salcia, Stoenesti, Capul Midia etc and, last, but not least, on the Periprava archeological site, where mortality hit the highest rates. Two more hours were added to the overall work schedule of the priests. They were awakened at 4, then they were forced into one hour of *enlivenment* as if it hadn't been enough to walk, which, generally, took an hour.

excellent soup, cooked by the nuns who were ruling over the monastery kitchen at the Patriarchal Palace, there came the usual beef roll competing with a plate full of trout, as I had got used to a menu that only became richer on great feast days. The gastronomic finale on the Patriarch's table consisted in the eternal apple strudel, which, as it was always there, determined me to talk to the nun who led the kitchen and whisper to her that they might enrich the dessert, without removing the strudel that appeared to fascinate our master.

We had once decided – at first supported by Grigore, my cell comrade, and then approved by the Patriarch, in the sweet voice of a pure-blooded Moldavian: *alright, alright, brother Radu, may it be as you wish, let them bring in even more sweets...* - to end the sacred meal with a story, and that each of us shall strive to tell a brief and ... true one. Of course, the master of the house was the first who spoke, and, naming Băbuș his witness, he evoked the moment when he și had exchanged glances with the one who shared lunch with us and who had spent more than 10 years imprisoned in the worst circumstances.

On another occasion, Grigore too recalled that and on that particular Sunday it was my turn. But I pondered a bit on the matter and decided that Patriarch ought to speak. Teoctist did not disagree. He reflected for a while and it was as if his look had gone past us, in a dimension that he alone knew about.

- *It was the spring of 1951 and I had become a vicar in the Metropolitanate Hill. It was just around noon, when Justinian sent for me, telling me to come immediately.*
- *Get dressed... and there he paused as if with intent, you'll see why...*
- When I came down the stairs in the stone-paved yard he whispered to me:*
- *Ghiță has invited me to join him to the Athenaeum. I must have seemed surprised.*
- *I don't even know why, but he told me to come alone and meet him, in front of Nestor's, you know...*

In a few minutes, maybe even more, I saw him getting inside alone. Gheorghiu-Dej must have preferred they entered the luxury Bucharest confectionery. They did not stay there long and got out together. Ghiță's car went past our, and we were late, as the patriarch had wished. We stopped in front of the Athenaeum, by the columns, where several official

state cars had stopped. I followed him close behind, according to the protocol. He seemed stiff with anger and he had a constant stare. We went up the marble stairs into the columella and got under the dome. Inside, there was Chişinevschi throwing his arms to the western walls of the Athenaeum. Dej was already there and having a passionate conversation with his interlocutor. Dej says:

- *I also had the Patriarch come here and tell us how the Church sees the matter, but first you need to set forth the Party's opinion. Right? and he took a glance at Chişinevschi.*
- *Yes, yes, that's right, but one shouldn't forget that we are the ones who make the decision!*

Chişinevschi, whose feelings had been hurt, started his peroration sweeping with his eyes the huge fresco of the Romanian Athenaeum, painted by Costin Petrescu.

- *Have a look, all of you, for you can see what I see. From the beginning to the end, it is the work of a bourgeois painter who earned a lot for it. At first he praised the Romans for having conquered us and taken tens of thousands of slaves to Rome. Then he names only the chiefs, those voivodes who exploited hundreds of villages. He paints Michael only mounted and he forgets to show that he shook the hand of the Hungarian land owners and he had the peasants depend on the land. Further on, you may see for yourself, nothing but lies. 1907, the peasants' uprising, is an episode he chose to ignore, while, when depicting the Union of 1918, he only mentions the Romanians. Nobody else took part in it?! Therefore, it is the fresco of a history that does not deserve to be here, in this cultural establishment. I suggest it should be scraped as thoroughly and as soon as possible!*

Dej interrupted him slowly:

- *Alright, alright, now let's listen to the Patriarch, for this is why we summoned him here!*

We were standing behind the Patriarch and could not see his face, but I could sense his rage in his voice.

- *I don't mean to upset you, Prime Secretary and Secretary Chişinevschi, but we are looking at our very history, and we were born out of two peoples, and nobody has ever contested our genesis. It is a historic fact that belongs to the past; the entire living of the Romanian people is represented in the work of the painter Costin Predescu, with the ups and downs of its assertiveness, and the fact that there was a voivode like Michael the Brave,*

as had before him Stephen the Great, that one can refer to as defenders of christianity, is a glory that no one can scrape or forget. As for the soldiers who fought and died for the iconostasis of the Romanian conscience, again, I can only be humble in their presence. Before destroying this splendid fresco, whose length is 70 metres, let us ponder thoroughly over the matter, whether by erasing it we serve the Romanian people better than by sheltering it one way or another.

I was watching Chişinevschi, who once wanted to interrupt Justinian, but changed his mind and categorically gave his verdict:

- *We shall be the ones to decide what to do with the fresco, because we certainly cannot leave it here.*

Dej broke in calmly:

- *But, comrades, why don't we solve this issue right now? What would you say, Ioşca¹², if - and here he smiled a little - we left it on the wall, but no one could see it?!*

The Patriarch stood silent, but Chişinevschi, surprised, reacted instantly:

- *But how can we do that, Ghiţă, by playing some trick?*

Dej turned to the Patriarch and asked him:

- *Would you be against... covering it?!*

Justinian, after a calculated moment of hesitation, looked straight into his eyes, I suppose:

- *No, no, but that could at least be a temporary solution. I repeat, the fresco is a generous illustration, a painting of the history of the Romanian people, which, therefore, deserves being kept, maybe even worshipped. On behalf of the Orthodox Church, I thank you!*

He scarcely turned to me, and then, with a slight nod, and after having said goodbye to the commission and I, as a sly fox, cast a glance to Iosif Chişinevschi's face which had turned as red as a baked beetroot.

In the car, the Patriarch stood still and when we got up the hill he told me he would step inside the Cathedral for a while. I think he kneeled

¹² A diminutive of the Romanian given name Iosif (Joseph), the Secretary's forename, frequently used in Transylvania for being borrowed from Hungarian, a language that some Transylvanians spoke, as a consequence of Transylvania's having been part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire (translator's note).

before the emperors' icons...

This is how that wonderful fresco was saved from destruction, because God wanted it and via a subversive *understanding* between the Patriarch of a besieged church and the head of the Communist Party.

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