

# THE NEW ORGANIZATION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ROMANIA

by Emmerich András

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## 1. The Demand of Catholics in Transylvania for Their Own Church Province

Since the fall of the Ceausescu regime, the 1948 Prohibition of the Greek Catholic Church in Romania has been lifted. The Roman Catholic Church, which had been until then tolerated outside of the law, has likewise obtained legal status. During the years of suppression, the Church had to struggle to maintain its very existence; now it is once again able to carry out freely its pastoral duties. The present regime respects the autonomy of the Church in regards to the internal regulation of its own organization. On January 3, 1990, the Romanian Bishops of the Latin and Greek Rites held their first joint episcopal conference in Alba Julia (Karlsburg) under the leadership of the Apostolic Nuntius, Francesco Colasuonno. On March 14, 1990, Pope John Paul II named bishops to all of the until then vacant episcopal sees. Now the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Romania is once again fully reinstated.

Because of the recent appointment of an archbishop for the archdiocese of Bucharest, the century-old problem of the canonical representation of the Roman Catholic faithful of Transylvania is taking on a new urgency. And that for the following reason: it is feared that the Romanian government in the course of the church-state treaty negotiations will attempt to revive the 1929 Concordat, the terms of which were not at all to the advantage of the Roman Catholic Church in Transylvania.

In the negotiations of this Concordat the government, for its part, had managed to force all six of the Roman Catholic dioceses (Bucharest, Jasi, Alba Julia, Satu Mare, Oradea and Timisoara) into a single church province based in Bucharest. Although composed of only 26 parishes, the Diocese of Bucharest was elevated to the status of an archdiocese. The Archdiocese of Bucharest and the Diocese of Jasi are situated in Old Romania (which is almost exclusively Romanian) and the four other dioceses in Transylvania. Before the shifting of national boundaries these four other dioceses belonged to Hungary, were composed of Hungarian faithful of the same Hungarian tradition, and shared the same level of culture.

With the annexation of Transylvania by Romania, the number of Romania's Roman Catholic faithful reached an all-time high. Today 1.2 million Catholics live in the four Roman Catholic dioceses of Transylvania. Of these, 1.1 million are Hungarian-speaking and 80,000 German-speaking. Approximately half of the Hungarian Catholics of Transylvania (circa 543,000 persons) belong to the Diocese of Alba Julia. In contrast, the two dioceses joined together in Old Romania do not count more than 300,000 faithful.

Moreover, almost all of Greek-rite Catholics live in Transylvania. They are, with the exception of a small Hungarian minority, all Romanian. As a result of the union, they split from the Orthodox Church in 1698, were in 1948 then forcibly reincorporated by the Romanian Government back into the Orthodox Church, and on the 250th anniversary of the Union declared as no longer existing. Five Greek Catholic dioceses with approximately 1.5 million faithful in all, an archdiocese included, were affected by the prohibition.

The new church structures developed by the 1929 Concordat corresponded to the wishes of the government of that time but not at all to the pastoral needs of the faithful. For the four Roman Catholic dioceses of Transylvania, this compromise led to catastrophic consequences: for now the disadvantageous situation of the national minorities was also fixed in place by the new church structures. An improvement of the situation came about, paradoxically, because of the persecution of the Romanian Church after the war. On the one hand, the 1929 Concordat was abolished in 1948; on the other hand, because of their experience of being commonly threatened, the leadership of both Churches drew closer to one another--albeit, regrettably, for only five years.

Now, after the fall of the communist dictatorship in Romania, the opportunity is presenting itself to learn from the mistakes of the past and to create a new situation which, with the help of reorganization, both meets the pastoral demands of the faithful as well as guarantees a certain independence for the dioceses in which the national minorities live. In pursuit of this goal, the diocesan bishops of the four dioceses of Transylvania have sent to the Holy See on February 26th of last year a memorandum in which they petitioned for the creation of a new church province for Transylvania under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Alba Julia. For their part, the bishops of the four dioceses who were newly named on March 14, 1990, signed a petition with the same text as that of the memorandum and sent it as well to the Holy See in order to attest to the pressing urgency of the petition from the side of the new church leadership as well. In a further memorandum, priests and numerous faithful of the four affected dioceses have also, at the request of the above-mentioned bishops, expressed their support for this petition.

The memorandum gives the following reasons for the petition:

- 1) the above-mentioned proportion of the faithful;
- 2) the priestly formation which has been for decades commonly conducted as well as pastoral work which is partly done in common.
- 3) the common religious and cultural tradition, but also, in divergence from the Old Romanian dioceses, the pastoral tasks particular to each;
- 4) the painful experiences gained as result of the persecution of the Churches.

## 2. Shared Priestly Formation, Shared Pastoral Work

After the war, all of the Catholic seminaries of Romania with the exception of one were closed by the government. The one exception was the seminary in Alba Julia--the only Catholic institution for theological formation in the whole of Romania. Until 1955 the seminarians of the dioceses of Transylvania as well as of Old Romania were trained there. In 1955 the Romanian Minister of Religious Affairs permitted the opening of a Romanian-language seminary in Jasi in order to keep the theology students recruited from the ranks of the Tschangos from becoming newly conscious of and then reviving their Hungarian identity in Hungarian surroundings. (The Tschangos are an old Hungarian ethnic group situated in the Moldavian region east of Transylvania which, in the course of time, had integrated itself extensively into their Romanian milieu.) Since the opening of the seminary in Jasi, which since then has been run as a daughter school of the seminary in Alba Julia, courses have been taught in the Romanian language in Jasi but in Hungarian in Alba Julia.

Yet even after the linguistic separation of priestly formation, the government did not abandon its further aims and plans for the future with regard to the "homogenization" of church life--that is, the implementation of Romanian as the only language for instruction. A step in this direction was the Limitation of Admissions Decree (*numerus clausus*) issued in 1982 to all the schools of theology. The number of admissions to the individual schools was then so set that, although there would have been more than enough applicants, a shortage of priests in Transylvania and an oversupply of priests in Old Romania were artificially created. This was done so that the Romanian-speaking dioceses could recommend their priests for the pastoral care of the faithful in priestless Hungarian-speaking areas. In 1977 (before the introduction of the *numerus clausus*), 40 admissions were recorded; in 1983 twenty-five; in 1985 and 1986 only 16 seminarians were allowed entrance each year in both seminaries. While in Alba Julia 120-130 young theologians had earlier been trained, there was in 1986 only 70. In 1987 the number of admissions granted was then further reduced: now both of the dioceses were allowed to accept only 16 candidates, eight in each seminary. Earlier in Alba Julia, in response to demand, four to five times as many theologians were trained as in Jasi. With the introduction of the *numerus clausus*, the number of admissions granted, regardless of need, was made the same in both dioceses.

This strategy has strengthened the solidarity of the dioceses of Transylvania with another. After their shared formation--in which Slovakian seminarians from the Diocese of Oradea as well as German-speaking, Croatian-speaking and Czech-speaking seminarians from the Diocese of Timisoara were also included--they all also shared to some degree the same pastoral work. The dioceses of Transylvania shared their priests with one another as far as they were able. The Diocese of Timisoara is especially dependent on support, since the pastoral responsibilities there are being taken over in increasing measure by Hungarian priests as a result of the wave of emigration of German-speaking Catholic faithful, together with their priests.

### 3. Divergent Traditions, Differing Pastoral Tasks

As already mentioned, the Old Romanian dioceses are more than willing to share Romanian-speaking priests in the dioceses of Transylvania. In one of the most important pastoral tasks, the Old Romanian dioceses could not and would not offer the dioceses of Transylvania any help: namely, in the maintaining of confessional schools which are very intimately bound with the further existence of a national identity. For centuries, when Transylvania was officially a Protestant principality and the Catholics did not even have a bishop, it was the confessional schools which preserved the faith among the people. The centuries-old traditions demand today that the Church maintain confessional schools as it once did in order to nurture the popular culture. In the old Romanian dioceses there are no such traditions. Nor have these dioceses ever maintained such a large network of confessional schools as have the dioceses of Transylvania. The appendix (Monit. Off. August 3, 1948) to Law No. 176/1948, which provides for the nationalization of confessional schools, shows quite clearly that 84.5% of the 1593 nationalized schools are found in Transylvania. 29.4% were Catholic, 33.3% Reformed protestants, and 16.7% Lutheran. In contrast, only 8.9% of the confessional schools run by the Romanian Orthodox Church nation-wide (1/4 of which located in Transylvania) and only 1% of the Greek Catholic confessional schools (all located in Transylvania and still existing at that time) were nationalized.

The dioceses of Transylvania cannot hope for understanding from the Old Romanian dioceses in the matter of confessional schools because the latter have done all they could in the past few decades to hinder or to eliminate the pastoral care of the minorities in the regions under their jurisdiction. Although they themselves do not have good relations with the government authorities, the Old Romanian dioceses nevertheless have preferred to support the official party line--the oppression of the national minorities--rather than placing themselves on the side of their brothers and sisters in the faith, who happen to be of other nationalities. Thus, for example, they did not allow the Transylvanian dioceses to respond to the desires of the Tschangos living in the Moldavian (Old Romanian) region for pastoral care in their own language. This refusal then led also, regrettably, to several scandalous incidents. At the same time, moreover, the Old Romanian dioceses insisted upon pastoral care in the Romanian language for the approximately 7,000 Tschangos living in Diaspora in Transylvania. Although this Romanian demand has met acceptance and the pastoral needs of the national minorities in Transylvania are being regularly served in the Romanian language by priests in 23 locations, the Romanians are not responsive to the Transylvania dioceses' offers to help.

#### 4. Painful Experiences

The juridical submission of the four dioceses of Transylvania to the Archdioceses of Bucharest had already produced considerable unrest among the priests and the faithful during the time when the Concordat was enacted. All too aware of their status as a national minority, they now felt themselves forced as well into the status of an ecclesiastical minority. Thus, in the time between the two world wars, no communities or common interests developed between the Old Romanian and Transylvanian Catholics of the Latin Rite. On the contrary, the alienation between them increased even more. The persecution of the Churches in the postwar period brought them together for awhile. Yet

the struggle for the rights of the Church brought about renewed alienation. The new bishops of the Old Romanian dioceses, who took the place of the bishops who had "gotten the boot," decided to collaborate with the State. The bishops of Transylvania, on the other hand, together with the Old Romanian bishops who had been forced out, preferred to suffer persecution and the loss of their freedom in their struggle for the rights of the Church.

Those ecclesiastical-political statements made during the times of church persecution by the responsible leaders of the Old Romanian dioceses in the name of the whole Catholic Church of Romania--and without the consultation of the leaders of the other dioceses--were, for the Churches of the national minorities, unacceptable and as such compromised the Church. On April 18, 1989, for example, at the plenary session of the National Council of the Socialist Front for Democracy and Unity, the bishop of Bucharest, Joan Robu, paid homage to Ceausescu with the following words, according to official newspaper reports: "It is for me a special honor, highly honored Mister President Nicolae Ceausescu, before this forum at which representatives from all sections of our society are gathered, in the name of the Catholic clergy and of the Catholic faithful of Romania, to be able to express to you our heartfelt thanks for all which you are doing for our homeland and for the good and prosperity of all the people. I also place myself together with the servants and the faithful of our Catholic Church on the side of the sons of our country, who express their special thanks to you for everything, which you are doing for the progress and growth of our country and for the welfare of all our people. . . . I would like to emphasize that we are aware that the plan, which for several years now has been put into action for the modernization of settlements and the systematization of regions, is attaining its goal of creating better working and living conditions." The bishops of Transylvania, who had distanced themselves consistently from every groundless manifestation of homage, cannot and will not accept that in the future someone in their name could possibly make such ecclesiastical-political statements. The misgivings of the Transylvanian bishops might not be unfounded, according to statements of Church observers; the Orthodox patriarch of Romania, Teoctist, who because of his collaboration with the Ceausescu regime voluntarily retired was, upon request, once again reinstated as patriarch of Romania. Even the Catholic Church, so it is said, tolerates collaboration and that proves that speeches made in honor of the dictator were at that time practically necessary and unavoidable.

##### 5. Greek Catholic Bishops in the Bishops' Conference

In wake of all the political changes, the Holy See would like to establish in Romania a common bishop's conference for all the Catholic dioceses of the country. The bishops of the five Romanian Greek Catholic dioceses, who have now regained their freedom, will then take part as well in the activities of the Catholic bishops' conference. The inclusion of the Uniate dioceses of the Eastern Rite in the activities of the bishops' conference must be considered, in view of the historical background, to be a quite bold undertaking in Romania.

The Third National Synod of the Autonomous Greek Catholic Church Province of Alba Julia and Fogaras had spoken out in 1900--precisely because its experiences of living in close vicinity to Hungarian Catholics of the Latin rite--clearly and distinctly in a resolution against pursuing common interests with them. In Point 5 of this resolution the readiness to cooperate with Catholics of the Latin Rite is, to be sure, expressed. Yet the demand for independence in Paragraph 1, Point 3, is not at all ambiguous: "All institutions of the Romanian Church must for all time remain free from every interference whatsoever of those church jurisdictions which do not belong to the Uniate Romanian Church" (*"Omnes institutiones ecclesiae rumaenae pro omnibus temporibus liberae esse debent ab omni immixtione alius iurisdictionis ecclesiasticae, quae ad illam ecclesiam Romae unitam non pertinet."*) A fully autonomous position was guaranteed to the Romanian Greek Catholic Church in Transylvania as well by the Romanian Constitution of 1923. According to it, the Romanian Greek Catholic Church, in rank just below the "ruling Greek Orthodox Church,," is endowed with the privileges of the "Romanian National Church."

A common bishops' conference has the prospect of successful activity only on the basis of full collegiality. But a collegial-legal arrangement is hard to imagine, if numerical, linguistic, cultural, and tradition-conditioned specifics of the dioceses are not taken into consideration in the structural formation of the bishops' conference. In order to assure that the bishop's conference can properly function, it would be desirable that the internal structure of the bishops' college reflect in a pluralistic manner the real situation which arises from its pastoral work. If this is not the case, the danger thus exists that the national tensions--which dictate public life and which in the past have lead again and again to serious conflicts-- will also find expression in the bishops' conference and adversely affect its work.

The Greek Catholic Church must also, in the course of its revitalization, struggle with a series of its own problems, which make it vulnerable and susceptible to external manipulation. At that time, when the Greek Catholic Church was forbidden, it counted one and a half million faithful. A not inconsiderable number of these faithful did not allow themselves to be merged into the Orthodox Church. Rather, they remained faithful to their Church and went underground. As was reported in internal church circles, Ceausescu, on the occasion of his visit in Rome, "offered" this group of faithful to the pope, in that he suggested that the Romanian Catholics of the Greek Rite should join the Latin Rite, that is, become Roman Catholic. Rome would then revoke the status of the Uniate Churches as such. The Holy See naturally rejected this request. But at the same time, it is worth considering that the young generation of the Greek Catholic population hardly know their own faith anymore. Those who asked for pastoral care from the Orthodox priests were integrated relatively easily into the Romanian Orthodox Church. But it cannot be at all assumed that these persons have the desire to return to the fold of the Greek Catholic Church, which for the time being must still struggle with considerable difficulties in order to build up its life once again.

The Greek Catholic Church in Romania--which was forbidden in 1948 but after the events of 1989 was once again permitted and which now exists exclusively in Transylvania--had

played a decisive role in the establishment of the Romanian national culture and gained for itself thereby abiding merit. The Roman Catholic dioceses of Transylvania have proudly recognized and honored again and again the merit of the Transylvanian Romanians. These dioceses declared themselves, moreover, to be in solidarity with them during and until the end of the religious persecutions. The Orthodox Church of Romania, on the other hand, subscribing to the fundamental idea of "one religion-one nation," did not stop at making itself a willing stooge of the Ceausescu regime in its homogenization attempts. In 1948, when the Greek Catholic Church was forbidden, the Orthodox Church took over the institutions of the Greek Catholic Church after it was outlawed. Now, even though conditions have changed, it is still not ready to give these institutions back to the Greek Catholic Church. The Romanian Orthodox Church still considers the Greek Catholic Church of Romania to be, as it were, apostate. In the past, the Uniate Church had to defend itself all too often against the accusation that it followed the "Religion of Hungary" and thereby injured national unity. As long as the Romanian Orthodox Church is not ready to apply the principle of pluralism to the Greek Catholic portion of its people, will the Orthodox Church refuse to acknowledge the existence of the Romanian Uniate Churches and strive to make them into tools of its "homogenization" efforts within the Catholic Church.

After thoughtful consideration, the Roman Catholic bishops of Transylvania see their situation in the following way: It is absolutely necessary that the Holy See guarantee them that minimal independence allowed to them by the present canon law, which provides for the erection of independent church provinces; they can "not imagine their future under one leadership, the goals and ways of which are so vastly different from their own, unless they, operating from an independent situation, are able to shape their shared relation as members of the Church of Christ."