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## Un Orthodox milieu de mémoire: The Saint Nicholas Monastery's Memory on Communism and Orthodoxy

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## UN ORTHODOX MILIEU DE MÉMOIRE: THE SAINT NICHOLAS MONASTERY'S MEMORY ON COMMUNISM AND ORTHODOXY

### Introduction

In Romania, more than in the other countries from Eastern Europe, the communism hasn't yet been the subject of a public, sensational debate. Getting over the political and institutional set-backs, the Romanian society wasn't ready to confront its recent past<sup>1</sup>. The fall of the dictatorial regime was followed by a quick "professional reconversion" of the old members of the name, which constituted a policy of amnesia for the effected murders and of amnesty of executioners<sup>2</sup>. The problems of the archive's regime, the difficult access to the archives of the late PCR (Romanian Communist Party) and of the late Security, the lack of a law for purification<sup>3</sup> are just a few speaking examples for the difficult way that Romanians deal with their own recent past.

The 90s and the first decade of 2000 are basically dominated by the state's tendency to occult the memory and the history of the communism, to erase any trace from the public space that could remind us of the life under the regime.

Right during this period characterized by the tendency of occulting the recent past I have met the nuns from the Saint Nicholas monastery, who told me in an easy and maximum-detached manner about their experiences under communism. Remembering the past seemed to be their natural way of staying in contact with the others, to express their own identity. Therefore I have seen an unprecedented situation and, moreover, the importance of doing a research in the monastery, having as subject the memory of the communism experience shared by the nuns, the way in which this memory builds itself through the corroboration of different personal experiences with the information pre-

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<sup>1</sup> C.-F. Dobre, *Uses and Misuses of Memory: Dealing with the Communist Past in Postcommunist Bulgaria and Romania*, [in:] *European Memory: Eastern Perspectives*, ed. M. Pakier, J. Wawrzyniak, New York – Oxford 2015, p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> R. Robin, *La mémoire saturée*, Paris 2003, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> A law of hiding was adopted in 2010, but it was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court.

served in the local archives from the monastery. Apart from the concrete data meant to inform about the community's history and the personal life experiences, the meaning that the nuns were giving to their experiences seemed to be even more interesting. The actions are transfigured in such manner that they offer the faithful from outside the monastery, especially the young generation, exemplary cases of survival, despite the constraints and persecutions which the nuns have undergone during communism. Personal, anonymous stories (at the strong request of the nuns) are like an unwritten hagiography, waiting to be shared in order to be useful for the society.

As most societies of today, the Romanian society is governed by a regime of temporality, characterized by "presentism", by a life-rhythm ordered by the rules of the present. To escape amnesia, societies have to find the necessary resorts to acknowledge and value some withdrawn memorial structures that are on stand-by<sup>4</sup>. As Sanda Golopenția claims, we live today in a "principal time", located outside memory and in a "secondary time", which continues to stay within it. Memories, in their diversity ("of societies – memory", "of ideologies – memory", "of people – memory", "of histories – memory") haven't disappeared, but took refuge in memory sites which are waiting to be rediscovered by society. We can neither predict their total disappearance nor exclude their spectacular revitalization, at a local level<sup>5</sup>. In the stand-by state, these memories are structures through which the future can be examined.

The present study's aim is to inform about such a memory structure, rooted in the social and religious frames. The Saint Nicholas monastery, "with members who know each other, being in direct contact, both through language and ritual"<sup>6</sup>. Living a meditative life, the nuns from the monastery are like the older persons from a large family, being more accustomed to talking about life experience than the rest of the world, which is more preoccupied with the present time.

The monastery is situated in Bucegi Mountains and was founded in the middle of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century by a young girl coming from a family of rich peasants from Transylvania, as a result of a miraculous appearance of the Savior. At first, the monastery adopts a cenobitic way of life, and changes later on, in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, its organization method, remaining until today part of the Orthodox monasteries with an "own life"<sup>7</sup>.

Just like a village, having the church in the middle of it, with the houses spread around, the Saint Nicholas monastery was lived, during our field research, by 60 nuns. Each house guested a spiritual family composed by two, three or four nuns, having a certain autonomy in the ecclesiastical authority. Benefiting from the right of minimum property, the nuns administer their goods individually, the role of the tutelary authority, espe-

<sup>4</sup> S. Golopenția, *Intermemoria. Studii de pragmatică și antropologie*, Cluj-Napoca 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> It is known that in the oriental Christianity there are three types of monasteries: monasteries with shared life (everybody lives together), monasteries having an idiorhythmic organization and hermitages. See P.T. Șpidlik, *Monahism și religiozitate populară în România, convorbiri cu părintele Cleopa despre rugăciunea lui Iisus*, Sibiu 1997, p. 7.

cially the prioress's, being to take care of the overall cult welfare and to manage the shared property of the monastery, pretty reduced as a result of the collectivization of agriculture during communism.

Most of them having rural provenience, but choosing the ascetic way through their own will, the nuns do not hesitate to affirm a double identity, peasant and monastic-Orthodox. The Saint Nicholas monastery maintains, in this direction, a paradoxical relation with the society, of complementarity and distinction, at the same time. The monastery has created its own tradition, but according to the Orthodox tradition of the majority laity, the monastic community emerging from the society and continuing to maintain live interactions with it. Orthodoxy and family are the fundamental frames of monastic memory<sup>8</sup>, the nuns transposing in the familial and religious Orthodox frames "their collective universe of significations in which daily experiences regard divinity and the celestial world which transcends them"<sup>9</sup>. Even so, what makes from the monastic community an exemplary case is the experience lived in communism, whose theory makes family and Orthodoxy more than simple "traditional memory frames", as observed by Maurice Halbwachs<sup>10</sup>. For the monastery, but also for the whole of the Romanian society, family and religion transform into refuge places where traditional values withdraw from ideology in order to be rediscovered by the society<sup>11</sup>.

## **1. The methodology of the research**

The purpose of the undergone research in the monastery was to observe the manner in which the nuns have reacted to the state and the Orthodox Church's policy, as derived from the community memory, the monastery being a micro-unit compared to the society. To reach this purpose we have used an established methodology, both in anthropology and other socio-humanist areas, supposing the balance of the researcher's attention between the local and the global structures, with the purpose of simultaneously observing them in the analytical and interpretation process<sup>12</sup>.

In order to be successful we have gone a long way, with the field research having been done for more than for years in a row, between 1999 and 2004. Without a prior approach, driven mostly by curiosity, I have become gradually aware of the stakes of the research, of its importance and difficulties. The first concern that I had was to step into the consent of the community and win the nuns' trust. Much later I continued with the analyse and the interpretation of the collected data, gradually understanding the meaning of the stories and the local memory's role in connection to the society.

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<sup>8</sup> M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* [1925], Paris 1994, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> D. Hervieu-Léger, *La religion pour mémoire*, Paris 1993, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> M. Halbwachs, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> M. Mateoni, *La mémoire refuge: L'Orthodoxie et le communisme au monastère Saint-Nicolas*, Québec 2015.

<sup>12</sup> C. Geertz, "Le sens commun en tant que système culturel", in Clifford Geertz, *Savoir local, savoir global – les lieux du savoir*, Paris 1986, p. 88.

As the time went, I have become fully aware that the Saint Nicholas monastery was an excellent environment of memory, marginal and withdrawn, attached to the familial and religious backgrounds.

During the field research I have used the method of free discussion in order to avoid the communication gridlocks. Having as purpose the understanding of the meaning of the stories, the discussion that I had with the nuns are very much like the ones written by Jeanne Favret-Saada<sup>13</sup>, the words being invested with the power of carrying a specific secret of the community, a specific intimacy. At the end of the field research I had 20 recorded discussions like this, as well as copies after most of the documents in the monastery's archives.

Both interviews and archive documents have been analyzed and interpreted with no difference, based on the same procedures. The two types of sources were perceived as testimonies, rich in data and interpretations, referring with no doubt to a reality, a transfigured reality. In addition to this corpus we have added and corroborated our own field observations, therefore the research has become, as Gérard Althabe said, a sort of "initiatory journey", producing an understanding from within the studied world<sup>14</sup>.

When it comes to communication, there is not just researcher-subject observation, but also subject-researcher observation. The researcher's participation as an actor in the field of investigation is part of the studied subject. My physical presence within the monastery has undoubtedly produced a disturbance in the environment that we have chosen to observe, and the way we interacted with the nuns has also become a source of knowledge.

Therefore, we have adopted a type of hermeneutical analyses of the field, trying to observe, as much as possible, the plurality of the situations, the evolution in time of the communication with the nuns and, of course, the evolution in time of the related stories. I have used the ethnographical description as manner of writing, without ignoring the time-dimension of the stories. The description is, without doubt, an interpretative one, managing to gradually expose the meaning of the monastic community.

At the end of the research we have managed, on the first hand, to rebuild the recent past of the monastery and, on the other hand, to understand the meaning that the nuns have invested in this past.

The importance of such research is unquestioned; as such case study about the memory of the communism in an Orthodox environment is a premiere in the scientific field. Moreover, this research is important because the memory of the monastery provides us with vital information about Orthodoxy, which partly contradicts the already existing reflections. The memory of the monastery becomes, in consequence, an important source of information regarding the relationship between the nuns, as faithful Orthodox believers, and the state and the church's authority, the other people and God, which are meant to complete and enrich the already conducted studies.

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<sup>13</sup> J. Favret-Saada, *Les Mots, la mort, les sorts. La sorcellerie dans le Bocage*, Paris 1977.

<sup>14</sup> G. Althabe, *Ethnologie du contemporain et enquête de terrain*, "Terrain" 1990, no 14, p. 126–131.

## **2. The objectives of the research, starting with the studies concerning the role of Orthodoxy in the political and social fields**

From a canonical point of view, the monastics and the monastic system shouldn't limit themselves in an identity programme simply because they are, according to their unique condition, the "strangers" of this terrestrial world. They are "in a permanent transformation and discovery of the sense of existence", "which doesn't allow them to adhere at the state of a common familiarity"<sup>15</sup>. *Monachos* is the one whose heart is not double. Is the one who avoids losing, sharing himself between different actions, the one who puts unity in the center of his life, dedicating himself entirely to God. This ideal whose roots can be found in the Bible, of not having "a heart and a heart", but of serving God with a single heart, reminds us also about the theories of hellenic origin, platonically, largely developed in the Christian tradition<sup>16</sup>.

Even so, despite this ideal to follow, it isn't difficult to observe that, from more than a century, the monastics from Romania are recruited almost exclusively from the rural environment. In the opinion of many writers, this thing happens because of the process of including the peasant civilization and Orthodoxy in the programme of national identity affirmation, which debuts with the beginning of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries which influenced very much the life of the monasteries<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, there are also some opinions which say that the fusion between Orthodoxy and peasant life isn't reduced to ideology, but rather constitutes an historical reality which happens before the modern age.

If we were to take into account the historical dates, we must say that the Romanians didn't adopt modernity free-willingly, but the contrary, they feared modernity, preferring until present times the traditional organization. In all the Mediterranean European societies there existed, without doubt, a separation between institutions and social practices, between the Christianity of church elites and the ordinary Christianity of the masses. Between the ecclesiastical forms and the content of the popular religiousness the differences were considerable.

Only that, while the catholic Church was constantly making the effort to fade out these differences through successive reforms, trying to impose the church canons on the European rural communities, it wasn't the same thing which happened within the Orthodox churches. The knowledge and the canonical practice of Orthodoxy were particularly reserved to a specialized elite. This particular aspect of Orthodoxy is very well treated by Daniel Barbu in his book, *Bizant contra Bizant* [*Byzantium against Byzantium*]<sup>18</sup>. The author tries to dismantle the theory of the historian Nicolae Iorga, who claimed that the Romanian Countries, just like Bulgaria, Serbia, Russia, have perpetuated the byzantine civilization through Orthodoxy after the fall of Constantinople. The Romanian Countries were, in fact, a genuine *Bizant contra Bizant*. This situation can be explained by the fact that be-

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<sup>15</sup> A. Manolescu, *Călugărul țăran – un erou al modernității*, "Revista de istorie socială", I, 1996, p. 215.

<sup>16</sup> A. Guillaumont, *Esquisse d'une phénoménologie du monachisme*, "Numen", vol. XXV, fasc. I, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> A. Manolescu, *Călugărul țăran...*, op. cit., p. 207–216.

<sup>18</sup> D. Barbu, *Bizant contra Bizant*, București 2001.

tween the culture of elites, which affirms a certain continuity with the byzantine world, and the people there existed a separation rather than a bond, which was maintained up to the present.

In other words, the separation appears between a totally formal byzantine culture, represented by political and ecclesiastical institutions and regulated by written laws, imposed starting with 1534 by the ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople, and a non-byzantine culture, profound, regulated by the local traditions. The pre-modern Romanian Countries didn't generate a system of natural right and divine, byzantine-like, and neither did they generate a civil society or a contractual, occidental-type state<sup>19</sup>. The purpose of justice in the case of Romanian realities isn't to apply the law, but to please everyone. The juristic notions were at the same time religious, justice being the synonym of forgiveness and faith. The Orthodox Christianity is defined through the "Christian law" which is the "Romanian law", as a community and national standard which cares more about the traditional right rather than about a personal religion resulted from a dogmatic theology and from a canonic right<sup>20</sup>. This type of Orthodoxy "understood less as a dogmatic patrimony, and more as an instance of production and reproduction of the community union, seems to constitute a kind of social capital of Romanians, characterized as an ethic of political conformity and of authority dependence..."<sup>21</sup>.

More or less following the same logic, Anca Manolescu tries too to draw the particular elements of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy doesn't match to modernity in the same way that Catholicism or Protestantism do. "Orthodoxy's style of entering modernity would be rather one of slow adaptation, through probations made under the pressure of mentality changes in the big society, but especially through alignment decisions at the signal of political power. Put in front of a challenge, she doesn't manifest in the public space through debate and critic auto-inquiry but, in a first phase, through a call to traditionalism, to the already existent models, in the ecclesiastical and collective mentality"<sup>22</sup>. This particularity also reflects in the relations between the Orthodox Romanian church and the state. The church continues to support, even after 1989, the theme about the relation of Orthodoxy with the nation, presented as a sole remedy against communism. The return to the "true" national values which haven't been perverted by the communist regime's propaganda, process acclaimed in the first decade after 1989, found the Orthodox Church ready to re-take the role of identity connector, which it has been assigned for starting with the modernity<sup>23</sup>.

Unlike Daniel Barbu and Anca Manolescu, who tend to find explanations for the bond between Orthodoxy and people in the reality and ideology built starting with the pre-modern era, Ioanichie Bălan is looking for the genesis of these relations. The peasant

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 96–98.

<sup>21</sup> D. Barbu, *Firearomânilor*, București 2000, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> A. Manolescu, *Democrație pluralistă: o șansă pentru desecularizarea religiei?*, [in:] *Religia în democrație. O dilemă a modernității*, coord. C. Ungureanu, Polirom 2011, p. 364.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 364.

communities weren't broken from Orthodoxy (this wasn't the exclusive separation of elites, as Daniel Barbu says). The peasant environment has, in his turn, generated a popular Orthodoxy older than the one officially recognized. At the north of the Danube there were numerous "rural hermitages" even before the IV<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>. Those hermitages were nothing but "brotherhoods" evolved near the village's churches, following the model of the apostolic tradition of the first Christians. Those were formed by older persons or by widows who chose out of their own will to withdraw from the world and follow Christ. Those rural hermitages existed everywhere across the Mediterranean countries, but disappeared in time because of the appearance of the organized monastic system. Their destiny, as Ioanichie Bălan claims, was different in the Romanian Countries where it has been maintained up to the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>.

Having as a starting point the ideas above, we wondered what was the role of Orthodoxy in the society during communism and how does this role apply at a church scale. Do the stories of the nuns from the Saint Nicholas monastery refer to a collective or to a personal vision of the world? How do nuns respond to the ecclesiastical and state authority? How did they react to the measures taken by the communist system? Was the communist state just a shape without content which was unable to change the principles or exactly the opposite, did it leave deep scars in their lives? Can the memory of the monastery allow us to form a vision upon the above-imposed norms? Does Orthodoxy suppose, as Daniel Barbu claims, to bow in front of authority and rather co-participation, "not to believe in something or in somebody, but simply conform to the opinion of the majority"?

We are aware of the fact that the answers to such questions which come from a single survey may imply the risk of applying a particular reality to the society as a whole. At the same time, just a particular analysis can help us to understand life in its smallest details, lived and narrated by simple persons with no implication in high politic. Our study is even more important as it refers to an Orthodox religious community, being situated, in other words, in the heart of Orthodoxy, which allows us to observe everything from the social and religious frames of the communism experience's memory, the influence of the Orthodox knowledge and tradition upon the attitudes and the behaviors of nuns, their relations with laity, with authority, to their relation with the idea of death and sacrifice.

We left from the premise which says that the communist regime has strengthened the memory's tendency to find refuge in its traditional frames, the familial and religious ones, both inside and outside the church.

This doesn't mean that family and religion weren't repositioned, in their turn, in regard to the communism. This memory's refuge in family and religion isn't obligatory opposing the fact that the communist policies have more or less influenced the thinking or the society. Initially imposed by force, communism becomes in time a product of the Romanian society.

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<sup>24</sup> I. Bălan, *Vetre de sihăstrie românească*, București 2001, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14–33.



Despite the memory's resistance and its refuge in the traditional frames, the communist project has left many marks in the practices of the social actors, even managing to reach the old social structures. For that reason these frames have evolved too, getting new configurations and significations. If communism initially breaks with violence all the traditional legitimacy forms, it goes back to Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's national values from his last years. Nicolae Ceaușescu continues this nationalistic policy and he leads it to paroxysm at the same time with the apparition of the personality cult.

"Refounded" on the traditional model, communism has in this way given birth to an entire culture of mixing the old with the new<sup>26</sup>, which has affirmed in terms of conflict, tension and negotiation. Communism has paradoxically lead to both the "absorption" of Orthodoxy in its society project and to its withdrawal from the public towards the private sphere, from the political frames of society towards the intimate and sacred.

From the beginning there is a distinction to be imposed between a manipulated and ideological (on which the regime has refounded its own nationalist doctrine) Orthodox tradition and a personal and small-group memory, a memory which drew back in the familial and cultural frames (which opposed the regime by simply existing and lasting despite the political aggressions).

The totalitarian political culture generates the double language. "People frequently use two languages – considers the historian Daniel Barbu – a private one through which the truths about society are formed and a public one, used for expressing the ideological principles [...] The double language is the moral evidence of separation between the private and the public sphere, separation appeared in the peak of the totalitarian age of the Romanian history"<sup>27</sup>. Not only the Romanian communism wasn't able to control the state, but it didn't even manage to break its historical relations with the nation. The Romanian totalitarianism has permitted the existence of "a certain number of ideological competitors"<sup>28</sup>. Orthodoxy, for instance, could occupy "a protected niche against intrusions, situated towards the edge of the system, from where it actioned on certain segments of society on which they had a great influence"<sup>29</sup>.

The memory of the Saint Nicholas monastery constitutes itself on the background of such a protected niche. Moreover, the Orthodox monasticism per total keeps, during the communism and after, an active role in society, despite the atheist and anticlerical propaganda, manifested publicly.

The Orthodox monastic system had an important role in building identities. The social impact of monasteries cannot be contested, being spaces of confinement, but open for the society. The founding rituals for monasteries, the pilgrimages and the cult of the saints

<sup>26</sup> D. Sabev, *L'Aquarium et la jungle. Représentations corporelles de la réussite en Bulgarie post-communiste (1990-1999)*, PhD thesis presented at the University Laval of Québec, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> D. Barbu, *Republica absentă – Politică și societate în România postcomunistă*, București 1999, p. 18–20.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

contribute to the building of social and religious identities<sup>30</sup>. This is why monasteries couldn't pass unnoticed by the oppressive bodies of the communist regime. In the 50s, the Orthodox monasteries from Romania were subject to a thorough intervention of Security, which perceived them as reactionary centers<sup>31</sup>. The repressive interventions had as base the ascertainment that the anticommunist actions were better organized in the regions where the number of monasteries was bigger.

The repressions reach the peak towards the end of the 50s, when the regime issues, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1959 the no. 410 decree, which stipulated the abolition of certain monasteries, together with the pretty drastic decrease in the number of monks and nuns in the others. The decree appears in the context of the soviet army's retreat from the country, the repressive measures taken against the Christians having the meaning not only to put aside any form of resistance to the regime, but also to prove Moscow that the communist leaders won't give up the revolutionary vigilance<sup>32</sup>.

The persecutions from the end of the 50s have profoundly marked the religious life from Romania. The nuns' memories from Saint Nicholas concentrate on this moment of crunch which has become a starting point of their collective identity.

The decree contained, among others, the following clauses: "art. 7 – The monastic system can function only in the authorized monasteries of the legally recognized cults. The functioning authorization of monasteries is given by the Department of Cults. The graduates from the clergy preparing schools can enter the monastic system at any age if they had satisfied the military service. Other persons can enter the monastic system only if they have reached the age of 55, for men, and 50, for women, if they give up their salary or state pension, if they aren't married and if they don't have any other obligations already established by the Family Code..."<sup>33</sup>.

The main outcome of this decree would have been 1467 monks and nuns to abandon the monasteries<sup>34</sup>. Even so, as a result of the policy of church towards state, especially as an outcome of the constant interventions of the patriarch Justinian Marina among the communist leaders, the effects of the decree were largely diminished.

The decree is interpreted in such manner that the persons who followed the courses of the monastic schools for 3 years, initialized through a more thorough reform of the patriarch, could continue staying in monasteries<sup>35</sup>. More precise, the article about the schooling level established at 7 years of elementary school was interpreted in order for the mo-

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<sup>30</sup> A. Manolescu, *Eveil du monastère, fondation mythique, fondation actuelle en Transylvanie*, "Ethnologie Française" 1995, no. 3, p. 43–62.

<sup>31</sup> C. Vasile, *Autoritățile comuniste și problema mănăstirilor ortodoxe în anii '50*, [in:] *Analele Sighet. Anii 1954–1960: Fluxurile și refluxurile stalinismului*, ed. R. Rusan, București 2000, p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> ACNSAS, fond Documentar, file 66, f. 37, apud G. Enache, A.N. Petcu, *Monahismul orthodox și puterea comunistă în România anilor 50*, Galați 2009, p. 57.

<sup>34</sup> G. Enache, A.N. Petcu, *Monahismul orthodox...*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> In the 50s, the patriarch has initiated schools for educating the clergy, nuns and monks in all the Orthodox monasteries of Romania. G. Enache, A.N. Petcu, *Patriarhul Justinian și Biserica Ortodoxă Română în anii 1948–1964*, Galați 2009.

nastic pupils who followed the monastic school to be assimilated to this category<sup>36</sup>. These interventions of the churches' heads diminish the effects of the oppressive measures, which don't imply at all that the moment was not extremely dramatic.

How was the decree no. 410 lived through and subsequently perceived in the Saint Nicholas monastery and which were the events that have preceded and followed it? We will try to illustrate in the following pages both the historical moment and the meanings that this moment has gained in time, by interpreting the archives and the living memory of the monastery.

### **3. The decree to reduce the monastic personnel and its impact on the Saint Nicholas monastery**

In the Saint Nicholas monastery the crisis had begun many years before, the decree of 1959 representing the summit of a pretty long and difficult period. Starting with 1958 the political and economic constraints increase, having the role to push the community towards the margin of the abyss, to determine the nuns to accept that they are unable to adapt by themselves to the exigencies of the new system. In 1958, the monastery's workshops (a carpet workshop and a paper-bag confection workshop) are closed by force, with no right to appeal. The only means of living is land work. Only that, having suddenly become indispensable, the monastery's harvest property proves insufficient to assure the products needed for the community, and in addition the monastery is obliged to deliver to the state a tribute from its harvest products<sup>37</sup>. The community lives, for a long period of time, with fear of losing its harvest properties. Moreover, this actually happens immediately after the promulgation of decree number 410, the departure of a part of the nuns being one of the conjured pretexts to rob the monastery of its grounds, at the same time with the collectivization of agriculture. As a result, the monastery is left, after 1962, for a long period of time, without any source of living, excepting the state pensions of old nuns.

Going back to the events which preceded the decree, in March 1959, as an outcome of the new Regulation for the organization and function of the monasteries, 14 monastery sisters and 5 nuns, from the 120 persons who composed the community, are forced to leave the monastery<sup>38</sup>. At the same time with the exclusion of young candidate girls to the monastic life, the "gates" of the monastery are closed: the community no longer has the right to accomplish the ritual of entering the monastic life. Without the institution of apprentices, the nuns begin to live in fear of the abolition of the monastery.

In January 1960, the monastery's council requires the nuns to fill in the "personal files", which comprised, among age, provenience, schooling level and health condition, al-

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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 60–61.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Monastery's Archive, File nr. 14, *Surorile de mănăstire. Registrele matricole*, 1954–1958, inv. no. 338/1960.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

so information about the nuns' implication in politics and experiences of foreign traveling<sup>39</sup>.

The evaluation of the "monastery's personnel" is accompanied by the inventory of goods and properties, which had to be included in a separate file-type. This included rubrics referring to "harvest surfaces, common properties, and animal, building, accommodation and harvest tools inventories"<sup>40</sup>. What must have worried the community a lot was the authorities' unyieldingness for the dates referring to the living space: "the number of buildings, rooms, and the total surface of the living space, the locative capacity, the water, evacuation and electricity facilities' existence"<sup>41</sup>.

The files sent to the monasteries in Romania, the same for all monastics, show us which the selection's criteria of the monastic personnel were. The age and the health condition of the person indicated his/her ability to work, the possibility of being included in the "work field". One of the criteria which mattered very much for the selection was the schooling level, if the monastics had followed the courses of the monastic school from the monastery, founded as an outcome of the reform imposed by patriarch Justinian for educating the clergy and the religious personnel. The property, the affiliation to a rich family or to a political party other than the Communist Party, as well as the foreign travels made the interviewed person a true "enemy of the nation" and of the communist revolution.

Starting from the personal files, the nuns from the Saint Nicholas monastery were divided into four categories regarding age, health condition, studies and income<sup>42</sup>. The selection endangered the sick nuns and the nuns under 50 who hadn't followed the courses of the monastic school for exclusion, and they were considered able to work outside the monastery. Among the sick there were three nuns who owned private properties, one of them with a house in Buzău city, another one who owned 3 ha of harvest land and the third one with 1 ha of harvest land and 0,5 ha of field. In the community there were another 13 nuns who had inherited harvest surfaces, varying between 0,13 ha and 3 ha from their parents. 20 nuns owned a cow each. In the table which indicated the nuns' fortune, there are the unexpected names of two nuns who had just sold their cows.

The intervention of the state in the life of the monastery shocks the community. Retrospectively, looking back from the present upon the life stories, the Decree represents a rupture in time, which created the "conditions as the base from which the local universe had to reorganize"<sup>43</sup>. The decree 410 disturbs at first the life of the community, causing a loss of the sense of existence from within the monastery, becoming later, through memory, a place of production of sense (instead of resignification). The event represents, in front of anything else, a temporal threshold, becoming in time a place where all the val-

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<sup>39</sup> Monastery's Archive, *The Files of the personnel from the Saint Nicholas monastery*, inv. no. 345/1960, f. 113.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, f. 127.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>42</sup> M. Mateoni, *Le Décret d'État de 1959 - entre la peur et l'acceptation de la souffrance*, "Martor" 2010, no. 15, p.15-29.

<sup>43</sup> A. Bensa, É. Fassin, *Les sciences sociales face à l'événement*, "Terrain" 2002, no. 38, p. 7.

ues of the monastic community concentrate. The brutal intervention of the state turns, through memory, into a failed attempt to disturb the divine order. The reaction to the crisis provoked by the regime becomes an example of survival, a life lesson, as well as positively particularizing the nuns' experiences.

Here is how nun Tecla tells about the experience of her leaving the monastery and living at the distance (in the world): "The Decree appeared in 1950, because I entered the monastery in 1950 and the abbess told me: 'My dear, you have come, but the things are not going well around here. But, since you came anyway, stay now...'. This means that the problem had already existed, because the Russians were saying: 'Why are there so many monks in Romania?' At first they took the young girls aged between 18-20, and then they forced another wave to leave, and then another, until it has come to the Decree, when they told every nun over 50 years old to leave.

It was a difficult moment, full of fear and insecurity. But seeing all of this I told myself: 'I will not die!', and then I ended up at the factory. But this is what God wanted for me, my lady, because if it hadn't been for the 8 years that I have worked in the factory, I would have no income today. So I stayed there (until I came back to the monastery) and the colleagues told me to stay longer: 'Stay with us, nun!' They knew that I was a nun. 'I can't stay any longer!' I couldn't stay any longer because I had left the monastery and I felt uneasy, so it was impossible to stay more. I have always thought about going back to the monastery. Do you know how I felt? I went down with depression and the doctor told me that I was sick because I didn't want to marry. He sent me to a resting house and there I met all kinds of securists, who were depressed just like me..."

#### **4. The reconfiguration of the monastery after the 1959 crisis**

After 1959, the monastery's perimeter starts to be even more drastically controlled by the state agents. Wishing to escape the control over the monastery's perimeter, the nuns try to face the political pressures finding refuge more and more in the domestic space of their houses. This process manifests along a few decades, while the nuns try to preserve their rights to property and work within the monastery. They send numerous petitions to the government and to the Patriarchy. Due to these repeated petitions, the patriarch Justinian interferes personally in 1962 to help the nuns keep their last properties, after the end of the collectivization of harvest, when the monastery loses most of its harvest properties. The community eventually manages to keep a few "eyes" of field (as the nuns call them), situated in the near, and for them the nuns have to carry a true war with the Forestry.

After 1964, major changes appear both at the level of state policy and at the level of the Romanian Orthodox Church's (ROC) policy. In 1965, the patriarch Justinian initiates a site for the restoration of the monastery, this date being considered by a part of the nuns (especially by those who remained in the monastery after the decree in 1959) as a moment of refoundation, of return to normality after the crisis period started in 1959. The site changes the appearance of the monastery. The enclosure is remade, the houses'

frontages are restored in such a manner to emphasize their rustic, authentic character. The site brought electricity and running water into the monastery, and each house incorporated a bathroom. In other words, the site brings modernity to the monastery, conserving at the same time the elements considered to be archaic and authentic.

The rebuilding of the monastery's territory after 1965 explains very well the process of the political power's usage of Orthodoxy in such a way that it would contribute to the remodeling of national identity within the nationalism promoted by Nicolae Ceaușescu. The hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church accept the policy of the state which has as a purpose the transformation of Orthodox churches in patrimonial places. The church had to accept this new orientation as the most viable solution to the crisis it was suffering. If we take into account the fact that the monastery's workshops were abusively closed and that most of the harvest property was seized by the state, the valorization of the patrimony and the openness to the religious mass tourism becomes the only source of subsistence for the nuns at Saint Nicholas.

The reality of the monastery is as revelatory as it can be for this double movement between, on one side, the state policy's seizure over Orthodoxy and, on the other side, its refuge in its traditional frames. The monastic territory builds according to the official policy of the ROC and of the state, to value the ecclesiastical patrimony, a process of patrimonization to which the nuns have adapted in time. At the same time, to escape from the increasingly stricter control to which the monastery's territory was committed by the authorities, the nuns find refuge in the domestic space. The living memory is practically the antidote of the collective body to the oblivion tendency and to a "museification" proposed by the state as a sole solution for survival<sup>44</sup>.

## 5. Spokesmen, heroes and emblems

Following the logic of the founding moment of the primordial time, the nuns build through their stories emblematic, charismatic characters of their community, models which portray the Orthodox teachings and tradition. The founder of the monastery represents a special case, and the nuns speak about their own experiences lived in communism following the logic of continuity and of the inner bond with the act of foundation of the community they are part of. The patriarch Justinian Marina and the priest Damian, the confessor of the community in the crisis period, are pictured as the spokesmen of the monastery in its relation with the exterior, especially with the political authorities.

Through his intervention to defend the religious community, the patriarch Justinian wins the nuns' trust. In the life stories, he is endowed with a protective saint's aura, through his actions getting very close to Saint Nicholas's image, the monastery's protective saint. With the patriarch's aura, the nuns don't give up their own dialogue with God.

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<sup>44</sup> M. Mateoni, *La maison perdue, la maison retrouvée. La mémoire du monastère de Saint-Nicolas (Roumanie)*, "Ethnologies" 2007, vol. 29, 1–2, p. 215–238.

In other words, they do not give up the conviction of each person's unicity in the eyes of God.

The nuns prove many times that they have a balanced attitude between listening to the ecclesiastical authority, portrayed by the patriarch Justinian Mariana and the faith in the free will of their own person to differentiate between good and evil. Right underneath there is an example of nun Neonila, who is, with dignity, in the position of defending her own beliefs in front of the patriarch.

In the spirit of the communion, the free and sincere dialogue, mother Neonila, for instance, goes to patriarch Justinian not necessary for paying for her misdeeds, but especially for defending her faith and her convictions. Here is a fragment of this meeting, as it has been narrated to us: "I made a misdeed once. I demanded to go to the Seminary, but there the woman who was the headmaster spoke only about Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Stalin. And I suffered because of this... When she came, she said: 'Let's be happy, my girls, because we are free. Our comrade Stalin has freed the country from kulaks, aristocrats, from many others... And you must be happy, too. You must know that the future of Our nation was enlightened. Today we are free. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who did... I can't remember what etc. etc...'" And she spoke like this from autumn until Christmas. At Christmas I left and never came back. The headmaster wrote to me and to the Blessed patriarch to tell him that I didn't want to go to school. And the Blessed called for me. The abbess was upset and she wrote him to remove my cap and punish me.

I went to see the Blessed. I arrived there, I did a genuflection, I kissed his hand and he told me: 'I am upset with you, you must know this. How could you ask to go to the Seminary and refuse to go there now?' 'Blessed father, I suffered because of the communists and we make there only politics. I didn't go there to learn politics and especially communist politics. I went there to learn about religious matters... And this is why I don't want to go any longer. Please give me your Holiness's blessedness. I did wrong when I left [without your Holiness's permission], but I couldn't imagine that in a normal, religious school we would do such thing as politics. It's beyond my power to stand that. I can't!' The Blessed father took his time to think and said: 'You are right, you are right!' And after that, I started to tell him about my history, the way they wanted to imprison me, how we hid in the forest and how everybody came to bring us food...

Q: 'And what did the patriarch say?'

He said: 'Look what happens in this country!' He wrote a letter to the abbess: 'I listened the whole story of this young girl who shows great love for Christ, but unfortunately there are people in our church who don't know what they're talking'. And the school headmaster has been made redundant. I didn't ask for this, but he made her redundant. And 'we have to learn Christ's faith and not Stalin's dictatorship...'

Q: 'Did patriarch Justinian write all these things?'

He wrote all these things and 'I forgave her, so you must, in your turn, forgive her'. And this is how I kept my cap on".

In front of the imposing patriarch Justinian, mother Neonila acts as a simple woman, without great expectations, which doesn't disturb her from sustaining her opinion, categorically refusing to study in a religious school where the headmaster made communist propaganda. She assumes, in other words, the risk of being accused of lack of compliance and of being excluded from the monastery. The fact that the patriarch agrees with the nun, giving the propagandist headmaster the sack, unravels Justinian's hidden qualities. Despite the compromised ROC's public support declarations, the patriarch personifies the supreme authority, of divine origin, in the monastery's memory. Through what he does in favor of the nuns, he becomes a chosen person to complete God's work. He is "God's man".

While the patriarch personifies the authority which protects and spreads justice, priest Damian is a humble character, obliged to collaborate with the Security, but who transforms through death into an emblematic character for the community. We find the priest in the community's most difficult moments. In October 1959, he is left without earnings: he is no longer paid by the Department of Cults<sup>45</sup>. Because the monastery is "under threat of remaining without priest", the abbess calls for the help of the high hierarchs of the Church<sup>46</sup>. She doesn't receive any answer to this request. According to the order no. 21 900/1959, the authorities demand the closure of bill accountants, and at the second point of the same text it is forbidden in all the Orthodox monasteries in the country to distribute candles between the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 31<sup>st</sup> of December<sup>47</sup>. The interdiction of lighting candles during Christmas is a symptomatic measure for the agitated atmosphere of these last days of 1959. The decree of the monasteries' epuration, issued in October, had already been communicated to the nuns. Waiting to be "chosen" or "excluded" into/from the monastery, the nuns were the victims of pressures and rumors which were meant to increase their fear and anxiety.

After the decree, we find again priest Damian accomplishing both tasks of being a confessor and a guide for the monastery. He takes many guide courses, but he also has the role of constantly informing the monastery about the patriarchate's and the Minister of Cults' decisions towards the protection and the valuation of the monastic patrimony. As a guide he also has the concrete task of registering the foreign persons who come from time to time at the monastery, dates which he must redirect to the local police, as instructed. It is the beginning of his collaboration with the Security. The attempt to escape from the Security's grasp, to get out of the "herd", as one of the nuns said, leads to his violent death. He is found dead in the forest 40 days after his disappearance.

The death of the priest affects the community even more because the death is declared as being suicide by the prosecution and Militia. This harsh verdict, contrary to the

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<sup>45</sup> The article 32 from the law of religious cults from 4<sup>th</sup> August 1948 implied: "the priests who claim anti-democratic opinions can be temporary or permanently stripped of their state salary". R. Rusan, *Le système répressif communiste en Roumanie*, [in:] S. Courtois, *Du passé faisons table rase! Histoire et mémoire du communisme en Europe*, Paris 2002, p. 424.

<sup>46</sup> Monastery's Archive, File no. 1, *Diverse probleme ale anului 1959*, inv. no. 339/1960, f. 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, f. 17.



church's canons, isn't accepted by the nuns, who try in time to transmit the truth of the events. Priest Damian didn't commit suicide; he was foully killed by the Security. He is a person who confronts death in order not to lose his faith entirely.

The nuns identify themselves with his tragic destiny, trying to tell the world the truth. Unlike the nuns who place themselves under the patriarch's protection, the priest accepts to conform in a first stage to the political power, which would bring about his death, but a death made of sacrifice, of redemption. If the nuns manage to save themselves through the power or holding on and through compliance, priest Damian saves himself through a death which brings eternal life.

This is how nun Cornelia and nun Tecla tell the history of priest Damian:

T: 'Priest Damian was living in this house (they show the house on the other side of the road through the window) when they took him'.

Q: 'Was he a monk?'

C: 'He was a monk at the Chilia Nouă monastery and a priest here'.

Q: 'And they took him away from here?'

T: 'They took it from here because he had lent someone some money'.

C: 'There was a thievery in the middle'.

T: 'The ones who had borrowed the money didn't want to give it back. There was a forester and another man who killed him. The one who killed him couldn't die until he confessed his crime'.

C: 'This means it was the will of God'.

Q: 'But how did it happen?'

T: 'They took him away at night, in 1968, on the day of John the Baptist Beheading. The men who organized everything were from the Security'.

C: 'But this belongs to the past'.

T: 'I wasn't here at the time (because they had sent me away, regarding the Decree), but I imagine how it was. The nuns who stayed said that the whole monastery was surrounded by men of Security and that they came here right after the service, at the window, and shouted for him. The old nun that was living here in the house heard everything but was paralysed with fear. He was shouting: 'You can take everything but don't take my soul!' and they took him and killed him. There was a man from the Moroeni village who couldn't die, his arms kept growing longer and longer'.

C: 'He was everywhere, visited all the doctors and they told him: 'We cannot help you! Go to the church!' And he came to the priest here and told him everything. 'If it is about what you have to say, then confess everything!' He was priest Arseni. 'Even though you have killed, in your condition the police can do you no harm'.

T: 'This is how it happened. With his last breath he confessed having been forced by the Security to kill priest Damian''.

The death of priest Damian, as narrated by the nuns, holds nothing exaggerated. We have neither an exaltation of death and sacrifice, nor a fall in despair. The stories have a philosophical character, they are as ensamples for the ones who listen to them. The murderers are punished by a justice higher than man. All die a bad death, bed-ridden. One's arms grow longer and he only dies after confession. Death is under no circumstances deprived of reason, as lived from the perspective of the eschatological time, with confidence in God's presence, He who sees and stands over them all. As for the memory, it assures the continuity of the relationships between the present life and the afterlife, between man's justice and divine, redemptory justice.

## **6. The meaning of the memory of Saint Nicholas monastery**

The importance of the Saint Nicholas monastery is unquestionable, because it shows us less known and less valued facts about Orthodoxy. The purpose of this memory is to raise national awareness ("patrimonization") about these life experiences in which the most difficult moments are overcome with divine help. The nuns refuse to be viewed as victims of the history and they share the most difficult moments of their lives through their stories.

Aware that the terrestrial sphere doesn't exist outside divine economy, the nuns are waiting for the miracles that God doesn't hold up to make. The probe of this divine economy's manifestation is actually solving the crisis and continuing the religious life inside the monastery. At the same time, the contemplative and eschatological vision of the nuns at Saint Nicholas (the understanding of divine presence in everything that surrounds them) doesn't oppose the active life they have always showed. The way in which the monastery reacted to oppose the abuses coming from outside, from the laic authorities, show the nuns' capacity to stand on their grounds and fight against the abuses.

The way in which the nuns at Saint Nicholas reacted to the aggression coming from the regime (the deeds which have been described by the nuns and which we have drawn upon the monastery's archives) is after all the most redoubtable probe of their authentic and paradoxical life. The temporal dimension of their life can be eventually found between the awaiting for the ultimate judgement of God and the concrete action in present. The past is valuable only when it becomes an ensample and a teaching for the future.

The crisis of the Decree gives the nuns the opportunity to live "on the edge" and to manifest their devotion for their religious condition: to be inside and outside the world at the same time, to live as strangers while expecting the divine providence and at the same time to respond to the challenges of the present times. This balance to which the community tends is, in fact, conditioned every time by the extremely hard historical conditions. The exterior pressures oblige the nuns to concentrate on their own survival within the church. Along the centuries, their actions were dominated by the necessity of opposing their own church's abolition.

The eschatological view of the nuns has nothing in common with the projection into a utopic and millennial future. The awaiting for God's final action isn't a purpose in itself, but a state of spirit which accompanies the nuns in everything they concretely do, an receptive attitude towards faith and hope.

### Concluding remarks

The memory of Saint Nicholas monastery is important for the actual Romanian society, even more important because the society hasn't yet found the strength to make an indictment to its own recent past and to develop a society project to be agreed with by most of the citizens. Finding support in the anthropological model of community personalization, the Orthodoxy hasn't yet managed to deliver itself up to the present as an active element to reform the society in crisis, after the fall of the communism. Because of the political manipulations, the elaboration of a memorial strategy still raises many difficulties. Finding refuge in the private frames of family and religion, the memory of the communism let free space to the amnesia policies from the public space. How could we pass over this abyss between public and private in order to reach to a coherent policy of memory, an identity creator with impact on the society? How could we convince Romanians to trust such a memory after better than sixty years during which the memory has been politically instrumentalized? What role could Orthodoxy is given in such a memorial strategy?

An easily accessible way is to make public some cases of exemplary memory. As a memory site, the Saint Nicholas monastery has conserved a positive memory, which comes to show us exactly the Orthodoxy's capacity of generating dialogue, hope and the love for others in interpersonal and community relationships without politics<sup>48</sup>. Different from the Romanian Orthodox Church's position as an institution, but not totally separate, the memory of the monastery carries a Christian vision, very alike with the one of the first Christians<sup>49</sup>. Its strength comes from the fact that it has nothing in common with the memorial obsession which is characteristic for the contemporary societies<sup>50</sup>. Without suffering from an "anguish of loss", the nuns perceive death, in the virtue of their own traditions, as a transition towards the afterlife. This is why their memory opposes the patrimonial fever, which betrays an implicit anguish towards death and suffering. Their aspiration for eternity passes through the "hat in hand" acceptance of the terrestrial mischiefs and through the hope in the future. In front of the danger of artificial memories, the memory of Saint Nicholas monastery uncovers as being a creator of solidarity and social relationships, allowing tradition to survive and renew itself.

<sup>48</sup> See also S. Șerban, *La Roumanisation d'un espace sacré: Le Pèlerinage au monastère de Celic Dere dans le contexte de l'histoire religieuse locale*, "Revue des études sud-est européennes" 2009, vol XLVII, no. 1-4, p. 119-129.

<sup>49</sup> I.I. Ică jr., *Biserică, societate, gândire în Răsărit, în Occident și în Europa de azi*, [in:] I.I. Ică Jr., G. Maroni, *Gândirea socială a bisericii*, Sibiu 2002, p. 17-55.

<sup>50</sup> *Patrimoine en folie*, ed. H.P. Jeudy, Paris 1990.

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