

COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE ARMY AND THE CHURCH IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Sergeant Ioan Dan POPOVICIU

24th Mountain Battalion "General Gheorghe Avramescu",

Miercurea Ciuc

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The process of secularisation, which started with the French Revolution in the late 18th century, was at its peak in the twentieth century when the Church was besieged by atheist regimes that emerged from the ashes of former empires after the First World War. However, the reverberations of this European anticlerical phenomenon were affected by the peculiarities of the Romanian space. Here, the church was called an auxiliary of the state, the support of the Church in preserving the state integrity being a constant throughout the centuries of existence of the Romanian people. This support was all the more visible in the first half of the twentieth century when the Romanian people fought for survival and national wholeness. These issues will be addressed, through the historical research method, during this article.

Keywords: army; church; "Metropolitan of the War"; military clergy; communist regime;

INTRODUCTION

The awakening of national consciousness in the mid-nineteenth century made the struggle that would unite Romanians within the borders of a single state and under a single flag inevitable. In anticipation of this struggle, the state authorities did not neglect the psychological and practical benefits expected by an active involvement of the Church within the Army. However, this involvement was not chaotic, but organised, according to a set of laws and regulations that were constantly updated, depending on the needs and requirements of the time.

Romania's entry into World War I led to the active involvement of all clerical personnel in the battles of 1916-1918. A character that brought invaluable services to the Army and People during this period was the Metropolitan of Moldavia, Pimen Georgescu, also dubbed the "*Metropolitan of the War*". He instructed that the authorities were provided with "*all available utilities of Metropolitanate*" (Pinca, 2010, p. 49).

The activity carried out by Metropolitan Pimen Georgescu for the benefit of the Army was a particularly extensive one, having a history dating back to the pre-war period. Thus, in 1913, he intervened with the Ministry of War to send doctors to monasteries to familiarise monks and nuns with the notions of small surgery. The results of this activity were not delayed, as "*both in the 1913 campaign and the 1916-1918 campaign, the teams of monks and nuns, sent to various hospitals by the wounded, they brought great services to the country*" (ib., p. 328). These great services were rewarded by the Army by granting the rank of second lieutenant in reserve to those military priests who distinguished themselves by valour during the defence battles of the autumn of 1916¹.

¹ Through report no. 473 of 12 February 1917, Archpriest Constantin Nazarie requested the granting of the rank of officer for the clergy who were with the troops in the trenches of the First World Conflagration. For more details, see Marius Catalin Mitrea, *Episcopia Armatei Române – Apostolat în slujba Patriei*, <https://www.aos.ro/wp-content/misiunea/MISVol1Art.13.pdf>, p. 55, retrieved on 12 August 2023.

LEGAL ADJUSTMENT OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ARMY AND THE CHURCH AT THE DAWN OF THE CONTEMPORARY AGE

The widening of the demographic basin of Romania, as a result of the First World War, has led to an increase in the number of soldiers of non-Orthodox confession. This diversification of the confessional spectrum among the troops emphasised the need to update the clerical-military legislation. The initiative of this change was taken by the *“Metropolitan of the War”* and the Minister of War, General Ioan Rășcanu. The new law on the organisation of the military clergy was passed on 19 July 1921. Thus, the Inspectorate of the military clergy within the Ministry of Interior was institutionalised. Within the ecclesiastical framework was born the Military Episcopate of the Romanian Army in the organigram of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church (Păcurariu, p. 29). This law, contained in 12 articles, legislated the status of Orthodox priests and those who met the needs of minority confessions.

The first called to shepherd this institution was Archpriest Vasile Saftu² from Brașov (Pinca, pp. 86-141). He was appointed the first Inspector of the Military Clergy by Royal High Decree no. 5303 of 10 December 1921. Unfortunately, his death, on 6 April 1922, took place before the completion of the stages preceding the inauguration ceremony. These stages were: tonsured a monk, ascending to the rank of archimandrite, ordaining as an archpriest, royal investiture, and installation in the episcopal see. The first to go through these stages and occupy both de facto and de jure the position of Army Bishop was Justinian Teculescu (Păcurariu, lb.). He was followed by the priest Dr Ioan Stroia, installed in this position on 20 May 1925. Under his supervision, the seat of the military Episcopate was moved from Bucharest to Alba Iulia. During his pastoral care, the priests of the former Austro-Hungarian army were integrated into the Romanian army. Brigadier General Ioan Stroia fought a fierce battle against the so-called *“sects”* who were active in the army and who had received 110 patents for *“a spread freely, unconditionally, their heresies throughout the country”* (Pinca, p. 77).

² Vasile Saftu (1863-1922), bishop of the Romanian Army. He was born in Brașov on 12 June 1863. In the period 1881-1888, he graduated from the Seminary “Andreian”, and pursued theological, philosophical and pedagogical studies at the University of Lipsca, obtaining the title of Doctor of Philosophy in 1888, with the work *“A comparison of physical education at Locke and Rousseau, the inaugural dissertation for obtaining the dignity of a doctor at the Philosophical Faculty of Lipsca”*. In 1896, he was appointed priest at the church “Sf. Nicolae” of Șcheii Brașovului, and in 1911 he became archpriest. He was actively involved in organising the Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia in December 1918.

The military clergy functioned, based on the law, from 1921 to 1937, when a reorganisation of this institution became more and more stringent. This new law was adopted on 22 March 1937. Among the novelties brought into the organisation of the Military Episcopate was the establishment of a new function, that of the priest of the garrison. This measure was imposed by the financial hardships generated by the Great Depression, which no longer allowed the existence of a priest beside each regiment. Based on the new law, for various confessions, except the Orthodox one, diurnal priests were co-opted instead of active military priests, and the election of the military bishop was made by the close collaboration between the leadership of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the leadership of the Army. Of the three candidates proposed by the Holy Synod, the Ministry of National Defence designated the one whom it considered fit physically and culturally to serve as Inspector of the Military Clergy. In addition to the rank of bishop, within the ecclesiastical organisation, the appointed one was to receive the rank of brigadier general, thus achieving an assimilation of the priestly degrees with the military ones³ (Pentelescu, 2016, pp. 120-121).

Based on this new legislation, the head of the Military Clergy Inspectorate was elected His Grace Partenie Ciopron⁴ (lb., pp. 21-24). *“The Hierarch Partenie”*, as it was called, led the Military Clergy Inspectorate through the troubled times of the Second World War and during the installation of the communist regime in Romania. Following the territorial lawlessness suffered in the summer of 1940, the morale of the Romanian army *“reached the ground”* (AMNR, file 846, p. 25). For this reason, the former soldier from Oituz⁵, accompanied by the priest Colonel Ioan Dăncilă, travelled the country performing numerous religious services, completed

³ The assimilation of the ranks of the active military priests was done as follows: the garrison priest was assimilated to the rank of Captain, the division priest was assimilated to the rank of Major or Lieutenant Colonel, the army corps priest was assimilated to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel, the military clergy inspector was assimilated to the rank of Brigadier General. Active military priests had the right to be greeted by all soldiers, as well as by lower or equal ranks in rank. Their duties extended from confessions, giving communions to the soldiers in posts, or at least once a year, to the vigil and care of the religious and moral education of the soldiers.

⁴ Partenie Ciopron (1896-1980), Romanian military bishop. He was born in the village of Păltiniș, Dorohoi County. He fought in the First World War and was wounded in the battle of Oituz. After the end of the war, he became a monk at Slatina Monastery in 1921. A graduate of the Faculty of Theology in Chernivtsi (1929-1933), he climbed the steps of the clerical hierarchy, being ordained archimandrite in 1934. Following the death of the Bishop of the Romanian Army, Doctor Ioan Stroia, on 18 April 1937, Doctor Partenie Ciopron climbed another hierarchical step. On 10 October 1937, the latter was enthroned in Alba Iulia as Bishop of the Romanian Army, having the rank of Brigadier General. He led an intense campaign to revive the institution of the military clergy. After the Communists took power in 1948, the Army Episcopate was disbanded, and Partenie Ciopron came to the attention of the Securitate due to his activity during the Second World War.

⁵ Some sources claim that Partenie Ciopron fought in Oituz, where he was also wounded; see A. Pentelescu, *op.cit.*, p. 83; Other sources claim that he fought in Mărășești, for this see P. Pinca, *op.cit.*, p. 235.

by moralising speeches for the mobilised soldiers. The coming to power of General Ion Antonescu on 6 September 1940, and the installation of a military government led to an accentuation of the symbiotic relationship between the church and the army. General Ion Antonescu understood that for national salvation, close cooperation between priests and civilians was necessary. At the end of September 1940, General Ion Antonescu launched a *“call to the servants of the altars”*, requesting the help of the clergy in what was to become known as the *“holy war against Bolshevism”* (Constantiniu, 2011, p. 390).

For this campaign were brought under arms and equipped an impressive number of soldiers⁶ (Boda, 2016), supported by numerous Orthodox priests. On 22 June 1941, there was a Brigadier General priest, a Colonel archpriest, 18 army corps priests with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and 88 Garrison priests with Major and Captain ranks. In addition to these active military personnel, for short periods of time, 200 priests from rural areas were mobilised, to whom the rank of captain was granted. One aspect that must be emphasised, in this social context, is the national humiliation of 1940, which has, paradoxically, generated an attenuation of ecclesiastical differences, as well as the formation of a common front of various confessions against the atheist scourge promoted by the communists⁷ (Păcurariu, pp. 31-32).

To participate in the action initiated on 22 June 1941, the military clergy benefited from varied equipment, adapted to the reality of war. It consisted of a *“bag of leather upholstered on the inside and provided with partitions. In this bag, the priest always had the Epitrachelion, the Metal Box with Holy Communion, the Cross, the Holly Water and Panikhida, two small pieces of blanket, the spoon, a bottle of wine, a metal plate, a bottle of spirits and matches. The latter were necessary for the disinfection of the spoon. In this bag, the priest also had the individual dressing’s package and the personal notebook, especially for noting deaths in any circumstances”* (Pentelescu, p. 141).

The activity of the lower echelons of the priesthood during the Second World War was particularly prolific, especially on the territory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, where the population had been subjected to an extensive

process of atheization. Throughout the territory ruled by the USSR, the churches were transformed into barns and cinema halls. The military priests, at the vanguard of the Army, first entered the villages of Ukraine and southern Russia: *“In the places where they arrived, the priests married, baptized, and so on, they sealed tombs and officiated jobs forbidden until then by the Soviet regime”* (Pop, 2018, p. 469). For example, the image offered by the village of Rosfiatowka is suggestive of thousands of other villages throughout the USSR: *“The altar became a screen. On the walls, instead of the icons, there was Stalin’s face, and instead of the Gospel quotations, some of the words of the man who imagined that he could fight with God are written in bright red. However, with a joy to admire, the people throw everything out of the church, making room for the cross and icons”*⁸. (Niculescu et al, 1998, p. 11).

To reduce the effects of communism, the priests of the army undertook extensive actions to recreate and reshape the places of worship. The testimony is, for example, the story of priest Dumitrescu H. Marin, who was accompanying the 2nd Mixed Brigade Mountain Hunters with the 38th Mountain Ambulance and who, as he was pictured in the Report no. 24/1941, in the 23 passed localities he performed the following religious assistance actions of the civilian population of Ukraine: 843 baptised, 574 received Holly communion, 4 churches opened for worship, 7 open chapels, etc., 434 prayers, 606 memorial services, 55 Holy unction services, 22 funerals, 8 divine services, 27 water sanctification. In a statement for the period 15 September-15 December 1942, the same priest, Captain Dumitrescu H. Marin, confessor of the 9th Mountain Battalion A.P. (active part), wrote among other things: *“I have endeavoured and God has helped me to gather and identify all the soldiers of unity who have given their lives so far away from their beloved country and all their loved ones for the Holy Cross and the justice of the Romanian Fatherland. I officiated the funeral service for 75 brother soldiers, heroes of the 9th Mountain Battalion, and several 145 brother soldiers, heroes from other units. A part (60) was buried in the cemetery formed by me in the municipality of Bakssan Kaukazia, and the rest (160) in the cemetery I built in the churchyard of Algir Kaukazia. So, in Gruzia, under the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains”* (Ib., pp. 25-26). The activity of the priests was much more visible in times of calm when they could officiate the Divine Liturgy and address a moralising message to the troops, such as, for example, this: *“I then preached, a priest notes, about the importance of letting go of personal*

⁶ For the offensive over the Prut, the Romanian Army had at its disposal several 14 divisions. Their strength was of about 150,000 soldiers. For more details, see Adrian Gheorghe Boda (2016). *Aliați și dușmani în percepția combatanților români în cel de-Al Doilea Război Mondial*, Cluj Napoca, unpublished doctoral thesis.

⁷ In addition to Orthodox priests, representatives of military confessions also went on the Eastern Front, along with troops. Thus, in the army organigram, we find both Catholic and Greek-catholic priests, Reformed priests and even Mullahs.

⁸ For more details on the state of Orthodox churches in Ukraine, see Niculescu et al, *op.cit.*

worries and desires and focusing only on the Homeland as the ultimate goal, which I have described using various ideas and images, as the highest good in the world after God, for whose defence and honour we should be willing to sacrifice ourselves. (Pinca, pp. 247-248).

At the higher level of the military clergy, Bishop Partenie Ciopron had an intense cultural activity, editing monthly publications *“Biserica basarabeană”* (totalising 14 issues, with over 450 pages) and *“Arma cuvântului”* (totalising 19 issues, with about 64 pages each). In this magazine, Partenie Ciopron vehemently sanctioned the Soviet territorial abduction since 1940, calling it *“a heavy and unexpected ordeal”*. These publications ceased to appear, as the Russians gained ground, the first in 1943, and the last in 1944. The advance of the Russians also meant the withdrawal of priests sent by Partenie Ciopron to carry out the re-Christianisation of Transnistrians. After 23 August 1944, military priests continued their work by accompanying the troops in the Western Campaign. Their work was hampered by collaboration with a regime that had been trying to suppress them since first contact. To this cohabitation, it was added the need to explain to the peasant soldiers why the *“holy war”* was stopped and why their comrades were taken prisoners by the Soviet ally, even after the return of arms⁹ (*“Veterani pe drumul onoarei și jertfei”*, 2002, p. 275). As Moscow’s influence on the government in Bucharest increased, the situation of military priests became increasingly undesirable for new decision-makers. Just before the end of the war, the *“brother from the East”* started the process of total secularisation of society. It began with the Metropolitans of Bucovina and Basarabia passing under the jurisdiction of the Russian Patriarchate, while the Bishops of the White Fortress-Ismail and Hotin were disbanded shortly after the occupation of these regions in 1944. Inside the country, on 20 April 1945, the Metropolitanate of Oltenia was abolished. (Pinca, p. 374).

THE END OF THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE ARMY AND THE CHURCH

To eliminate any outbreak of future resistance against the communist regime, Partenie Ciopron, together with the rest of the military priests, were placed under surveillance by the Securitate bodies. In an information note dated 12 May 1947, it was stated, inter alia, the fact that *“the bishop and his associates are considered to*

⁹ After 23 August 1944, the treatment applied to the Romanian soldiers captured by the Soviets was, most of the times, a special cruelty: driven from behind by machine guns, embarked on trains without windows, without food, without water, and sent to prisoner camps in the USSR.

be a highly reactionary group that is fuelling a strong reactionary response in the city (Alba Iulia) and the County, and the Bishop himself voted with the *«eye»* (the electoral sign of the National Peasant Party, led by Iuliu Maniu in the parliamentary elections of 1946). I suggest that the Bishop be replaced and his associates be transferred to other locations. I recommend that an ECP (education, culture and propaganda) unit be established within the Military Episcopate”¹⁰. (Pinca, p. 380). For three years, the Army Episcopate struggled with forced layoffs and retirements, trying to keep the priesthood in the army structure. The attacks against the collaboration between the Army and the Church, which the bishop of the army faced, were accompanied by attacks against the influence exercised by the Church on civil society. In his fight, Partenie Ciopron resorted to the relations he had with some senior officers who still had some political influence. However, his attempts were doomed to failure in August 1944, when Romania entered under the sphere of influence of the USSR. The catastrophic situation of both the army and the clergy was sealed by the abdication of King Michael on 30 December 1947. The day after the abdication of the king, Petru Groza paid a visit to the second patriarch of Romania, Nicodim Munteanu (1939-1948). Following this meeting, the patriarch resigned. His last words, apparently prophetic, were retained by Dudu Velicu, former secretary general in the Ministry of Cults, the former patriarch remarking that, *“if he left, I no longer have any sense”* (Ib., p. 56). The communists did not wait long to remove the religious factor from the new political order of the army. Thus, by articles 58, 59, 60, and 61 of Decree-law no. 177 for the general regime of religious cults of 4 August 1948, the Romanian Army Episcopate was abolished. With the revocation of Law no. 68 of 19 March 1937, for the organisation of the military clergy, the military churches and chapels, with their entire inventory, passed into the property of the parishes within which they were located, and the Episcopal Cathedral of Alba Iulia, with its entire patrimony, passed into the property of the Episcopacy of Cluj, Vad and Feleac (art. 59). Through Art. 60, military priests could work in various parishes or could retire, under certain conditions (Maciu, p. 38). By the same art. 60, His Grace Partenie Ciopron was made available to the Holy Synod, preserving its titles and rights.

¹⁰ A classic measure of removing undesirable cadres, often used by communists, was retirement. Thus, through a Draft Decree, issued by the Ministry of National Defence and the Ministry of Cults, on 3 July 1948, it was decided that *“members of the Military Clergy who, on the date of publication in the Official Gazette of this Law, have at least 20 years of effective public service, will be able to request retirement by way of derogation from the provisions of the general pension law, adding to it a 5-year increment to the time served”*.

By this law, fruitful collaboration between the Church and the Army was obliterated. The disappearance of the Army Episcopate meant the end of a centuries-old tradition of the presence of priests in the ranks of the country's army. "Religious assistance was removed from the structures of the Romanian army. Atheism replaced religion in barracks, military schools and hospitals, garrisons, with the army being separated from the official church". (Pinca, p. 384).

CONCLUSIONS

The collaboration between the Church and the State in the military field in the first half of the twentieth century was generated by the violent context in which the Romanian people evolved and existed. These circumstances caused the servants of the altars to be both on the front line and behind it, ensuring, under not always favourable conditions, the moral support of the troops.

Throughout history, the Church and the Army have represented two of the fundamental institutions of the Romanian people and, in addition, institutions with real credibility in the lives of the citizens of this nation, "two twinned institutions, which form the foundation of the state organisation", as stated by General Brigadier Bishop Partenie Ciopron (Nicolescu et al, p. II).

The geopolitical situation in which Romania was at the end of the Second World War did not allow the presence of priests in the army anymore, the place of the church and the priests was taken by the Romanian Workers' Party and its propaganda ideas.

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