

The Romanian Orthodox Church Today

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According to the "Law for the General Direction of Cults", of 1948, the Romanian Orthodox Church has no special privileges within the Romanian State; all discrimination between citizens on religious grounds is forbidden, and the free practice of all cults is guaranteed. But of all these denominations the Orthodox Church has by far the most adherents; the faithful number 13,000,000, it is claimed, which is 65 per cent of the total population of Romania. So the Orthodox might be justified by numbers alone in seeking a special position within the State even if there were not also historical and cultural reasons for it. The State is communist and atheistic, and in theory, of course, the Church is completely separated from the State, yet in practice it has a position which amounts almost to establishment. In 1968 there were 8,600 parishes with 9,400 priests whose salaries are met in part by State funds, as are the salaries of the professors in the two theological institutes in Bucharest and Sibiu. State scholarships are awarded to students at these institutes, and State funds are also used to finance the administrative personnel of the Patriarchate. With so much help from the State, the Church is able to organise for its clergy a complete Social Insurance scheme comparable to that of the State, with pensions, medical assistance, rest-homes by the sea and holiday houses in the mountains.

Such facts are proof that the Church is not merely tolerated within an officially atheistic, communist State, but that it has a positive role which is recognised and encouraged by the secular leaders. The reasons for this are several; firstly, the Romanian Orthodox Church, in common with many other churches of Eastern Europe, is an intensely national Church. Its clergy, by participating in any event of any importance to an emerging nation ever since the fourteenth century, made a great contribution both to the moulding of a Romanian national consciousness, and to the formation of Romanian culture, especially through educational activities, and through the printing and dissemination of books. At a different level Orthodox theology and liturgy have entered the folk-lore of a nation with strong peasant traditions, and which still has large numbers of workers on the land. The large numbers of young people who attend the Easter Liturgies in spite of the intense political indoctrination to which they are subjected in the course of their studies, testify to a feeling of national solidarity which goes deeper than the dictates of the intellect. The televising of

the village funeral of President Ceausescu's father, who was buried, in April 1972, with the full rites of the Church conducted by a bishop and 13 priests, surprised many foreign observers, but it is an example of the recognition given by the Romanian leaders to the cohesive power of religion in the forging of a strong national state.

Of course the close ties between Church and State, and the deep nationalism of the clergy are not necessarily conducive to sound spiritual development. A Church may act as preserver of the national identity to the detriment of its duties towards the spiritual needs of the faithful. However there are signs that the Romanian Orthodox Church, its position assured and its morale soaring, is paradoxically enough celebrating its entrenchment in a secular position of some strength by entering a period of real spiritual rebirth. This is the achievement of the Patriarch Justinian, Patriarch since 1948, who himself provides another reason for the survival of the Church in such strength. His skilful diplomacy brought the Church through difficult times during the early years of the communist régime, and he now presides over a well-organised and spiritually active church. Vocations are plentiful; in 1971 alone 118 priests were ordained in the Transylvanian dioceses of Arad, Cluj and Oradea. There are about 1,400 full-time theological students in the theological institutes and seminaries, and the writer has herself met several students at Bucharest University in various disciplines who are taking part-time courses at the Theological Institute in Bucharest. In the drive towards a more educated clergy the students in the theological institutes take courses in a range of subjects which includes church history, biblical studies and at least two foreign languages. Every year several students go abroad to study in theological institutes in Western Europe and America. Obtaining and translating books from abroad is a problem for the theological institutes as it is for all University departments in Romania, but *Ortodoxia* and *Studii Teologice*, the two learned journals published by the Patriarchate's own press devote a quarter of their pages at least to reviews and résumés of theological writings, many of them received from abroad. The works reviewed cover a wide spectrum of topics; the Liturgy, ecumenism, textual criticism etc., though a thorough search of articles and book reviews alike reveal few which make reference to the role of the Church in modern society. However the contributors to the journals, freed from the need for apologetics, or from upholding the Church's point of view in disruptive quarrels with the State, have published much profound and scholarly work, especially in the field of patristic studies.

The spiritual revival is particularly clear in the monasteries, though the 'Hesychast' movement centred round the Jesus Prayer, and the Paissist

movement associated with the name of the Russian, Paisi Velichkovsky, abbot of Neamt in the eighteenth century, testify to the fact that monasticism has always been a force in Romanian religious life. Visitors from the West are struck by the large numbers of well-kept monasteries supporting active communities of monks and nuns, many of them young, as well as by the religious atmosphere of the monastic churches, and by the real sense of spirituality felt even in the communities of those monasteries most visited by tourists, and whose upkeep is therefore particularly important to the State, let alone in the monasteries such as Neamt and Slatina, which are regarded as spiritual powerhouses. According to figures published recently by the Patriarchate, there are 105 monastic foundations, containing 540 monks and 1,443 nuns; many of these foundations are self-supporting, forming collectives in which the religious work in exactly the same way as the agricultural workers in the villages round them. As in other periods of high morale and spiritual advancement, the monastic revival has been helped by the emergence of strong and saintly personalities, such as Fr. Cleopa of Slatina, much revered even within his lifetime, many of whose acts and sayings have already become legendary. This is a confident monasticism, well able to criticise Western monasticism for its rigidity and formalism. (Bp. Antonie Plamadeala, "Tradition et crise dans la vie monastique" *The Altar Almanach* 1970, p. 101-102).

In the field of interconfessional relations the Romanian Orthodox Church has shown characteristic energy and initiative; it sees itself clearly, by virtue of being both Latin and Orthodox, as a bridge between East and West and therefore in a position uniquely suited to leading a fruitful dialogue between the two. Most of the other Orthodox Churches do not seem to resent the activities of their sister Church. With the Protestants relations are excellent; the Romanian Orthodox Church joined the World Council of Churches in 1961. The Anglican Church is so well received as to enjoy a "special relationship". Relationships with the Roman Catholics are less satisfactory, though the recent visits of Cardinal König and Cardinal Döpfner to Bucharest, and the visit of the Patriarch Justinian to Cardinal Suenens in 1972 were both highly successful in terms of goodwill. On the other hand the controversial question of the Uniate Church, absorbed into the Orthodox Church in 1948, remains unanswered; this prevents even now relations of any real warmth with the Vatican.

Of course there are other problems; it is mystifying to visitors unfamiliar with Romanian attitudes that the Orthodox Church should show so little of a debate on social or economic lines with the Marxist ideologues of the state within whose framework it exists. This total absence of a Marxist-Christian dialogue apparently exists elsewhere in the Balkans; it

was in Bulgaria that a recent visitor was told: "Neither side desires a debate, nor does either of us need one." In Romania this situation is very marked; since the publication of Ceausescu's "July Theses" of 1971, Marxist-Leninist indoctrination classes, atheistic by implication at least, have been intensified within the schools and universities; the State talks one language, the Church another, and with the apparent connivance of both sides all dialogue is avoided. Children wearing the uniform of the Communist Youth Organisation appear sometimes in Church, civil servants, even Party officials, attend services discreetly, or holiday in monasteries; the enormous contradiction exists, and is ignored. Yet the Church is not totally subservient to the State; it is not merely tolerated as a puppet of the secular powers; its silences are self-imposed, but not necessarily through cowardice, and it must be emphasised that the Romanian Orthodox Church is not only producing a generation of notable churchmen and theologians, but also impresses even casual visitors with its dignity and spirituality. The astonishing capacity to ignore, even to transcend, contradictions is also apparent in other aspects of Romanian life; in this characteristic the Romanian Orthodox Church reflects perfectly the complex, enigmatic nature of the people with which it is so closely identified. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," is understandably often quoted at the Patriarchate. Whether the Church has rendered too much to Caesar is an open question; it certainly leaves to the State whole areas of teaching regarded in the West as very much the province of the Church. Yet within the restrictions, it contrives proudly to uphold the traditions of Orthodox Christianity among a people still deeply imbued with them.