

CHURCH AND STATE IN EASTERN EUROPE DURING THE 14th Century : THE ROMANIAN CASE

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After 1204, when Constantinople was conquered by the Western "Crusaders" (named Latini), the Papacy apparently had the best opportunity to put an end to the so-called Eastern Schism. Direct control over the center of the Eastern "Commonwealth" could mean the dissolution of the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople, the subordination of the Orthodox hierarchy to Rome and, for the future, the bringing back to unity of all Eastern Churches, in all respects (including the rite)¹. This fact would soon have led to the transformation of the great number of Eastern Christians, considered as "schismatics" (Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians, Russians, Serbs etc.), into Catholics. However, the course of events was different and "the great schism", officialized in 1054, was not only maintained but it went even deeper. It is tempting to try to find an answer to the question : How did this situation come about ?

Naturally, "Latin" rule over Constantinople lasted for a brief period of time, only about 50 years (1204-1261), and the return of the Byzantine (Greek) authorities in 1261 changed the West's plans completely. On the other hand, the Orthodox hierarchy was far from accepting the subordination as a *fait accompli* ; on the contrary, it started a "resistance", which proved to be quite efficient in the long run. After all, the Orthodox nations situated in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe refused to accept the spontaneous transition to Catholicism, only because the Byzantine center was in Western hands. Another negative fact was the great invasion of the Tartars (1241-1242) and theirs way in the region of the lower Danube. The Papacy did not put up easily with this situation and, in spite of the Tartars and of the Orthodox presence in Constantinople, Rome continued its proselyte work in the area after 1261. The idea of a uniform and unified church, following the Catholic pattern, was sustained in a very strict way in the 14th century, during the time of the Avignon Popes (1309-1377).

¹Ş. Papacostea, *Geneza statului în evul mediu românesc. Studii critice*, Cluj-Napoca, 1988, p. 206.

When the Union decided by the Council of Lyon (1274) was rejected by the population and by the Greek clergy, the Papacy considered that the only two efficient ways to follow were a new "crusade" against Constantinople and the total subordination, in all respects, of the Eastern Church. Therefore, the period of the Avignon Papacy was the time of the highest intransigence of the Catholic West towards the Orthodox East, as far as the imposition of religious Union is concerned².

We can't say here why the Greeks or other Orthodox peoples were not attracted to Catholicism during the 14th century. Some attempts and even some temporary successes existed, especially after 1354 (when the Turks secured for the first time a foothold in Europe), as a Christian reaction against the Ottoman danger. But we'll try to consider the particular case of the Romanians—the largest nation in South-Eastern Europe. For the Romanians, in comparison with the Greeks and the Slavs, some particular circumstances existed, which could have encouraged their Union with the Roman Catholic Church. First of all, their great majority was geographically situated within and around the Carpathian chain, i.e. exactly on the North-Western limit of the Orthodox area, where the Catholic influence was very strong. Secondly, the Romanians were of Roman origin and, at least some of them (their elite), were aware of this fact: they asserted their Latin heritage, they were proud of it and this reality was well known in Catholic circles³. In the third place, the Romanians' ancestors had become Christians *ab antiquo* (starting with the 2nd–3rd centuries) and the new faith was transmitted in Latin. The most important Christian terms in Romanian (Dumnezeu, biserică, cruce, creștin, cuminecătură, înger, păcat, rugăciune, Crăciun, Florii, Paști, Rusalii etc.) were inherited from Latin. That is why, the Romanians, as the sole important representatives of the Eastern Roman world, had a special place in this part of Europe.

Certainly, the question is: How was it possible that the Romanians - having such a Roman and Latin heritage - should have remained Orthodox, while neighboring Hungarians or Slavs (Poles, Czechs, Slovaks etc.) were Catholic? Concerning the 13th century, the right answer is given in an excellent recent book by Șerban Papacostea⁴. We'll try to outline a possible answer, using certain ideas of the same author, regarding the complex realities of the 14th century.

At the beginning, even Hungary oscillated between Rome and Constantinople and finally, Duke Geiza and especially his son Vajk (Stephen) chose the Western type of Christianity (about 1000). Obviously, for the Romanians the problem of a choice between West and East did not exist at that very moment. They did not become Christians by force, constrained by their leaders at a precise

² *Ibidem*, p. 207.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 222-230.

⁴ *Idem*, *Românii în secolul al XIII-lea. Între Cruciată și Imperiul mongol*, București, 1993, passim.

time, but gradually and peacefully, long before the breaking up of Christian unity. In the meantime, after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and after the great barbarian invasions, the close relations of Rome (and of the Western world) with the South-Eastern European world broke, and the Romanians gradually came under Byzantine and Orthodox influence⁵. After the restoration of the Western "Roman" Empire, under Charlemagne and the later German emperors, and after the schism of 1054, Rome's assaults of Central and South-Eastern Europe, as a part of Roman-Byzantine rivalry, became a matter of routine. The West came back to the Eastern part of Europe, using a religious face and spreading the Catholic faith. Unfortunately, in spite of its international character, the Church often acted in the Middle Ages through certain individual states, which also defended their own interests. Frederick Hertz, a specialist in nationalism, says that "in the course of development, Church and State everywhere contended for predominance, and it was often doubtful which side defended the truly national cause"⁶. Anyway, in spite of the universal character of Catholicism, at the beginning of the 14th century, certain high prelates recognized that "the Pope governed through other pastors *diversas ecclesias speciales*"⁷. This *special churches* were sometimes in contradiction or even in conflict with the Holy See, because they served too eagerly the interests of their states. Today, it is very hard to accept the cliché according to which it was only the Eastern Church that adapted and submitted to local political interests, while the Catholic Church always expressed a universal vision and policy.

The situation in Eastern Europe was very complex. The incipient Romanian states (during the 9th 13th centuries) and then the unified, centralized and finally independent Romanian states (during the 14th century) were not inevitably destined to religious obedience or subordination towards Constantinople, in spite of the Byzantine-Slav influence. Everything depended on the political and military interests in that region and on the methods used by Rome (Avignon) and Byzantium, within the framework of their rivalry, in order to achieve their aims. As far back as 1945, Vitalien Laurent, a distinguished French scholar, noticed with good reason that "the most important conquest (achievement) made by the Byzantine Church in the 14th century was really to subordinate the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia"⁸. Therefore, according to Laurent, the Eastern Church "conquered" the Principalities; that means there was a struggle

⁵ P.P. Panaitescu, *Contribuții la istoria culturii românești*, București, 1971, p. 28-50.

⁶ Fr. Hertz, *The Role of the Medieval Church*, in "Nationalism in the Middle Ages", edited by C. L. Tipton, New York, Chicago etc., 1972, p. 75.

⁷ I.P. Shaw, *Nationality and the Western Church Before the Reformation*, London, 1959, p. 2-3.

⁸ V. Laurent, *Contribution a l'histoire des relations de l'Église byzantine avec l'Église roumaine au debut du XV^e siècle*, in "Academie Roumaine. Bulletin de la Section Historique", XXVI, 2, 1945, p. 165.

and the Byzantine success came later after a long effort. It is still to be learnt who (except for the role of the Byzantine State and Church) was responsible for such an evolution.

Generally speaking, within the framework of its obvious proselyte policy, the Catholic Church did not act directly among the Romanians. Rome used for that special purpose the Kingdom of Hungary, as a state with an "apostolic mission". But frequently, especially during the 14th century, the kings of Hungary exceeded the task given to them by the Papacy. Charles Robert of Anjou (1308 — 1342) started a vast proselyte action, which only reached its climax during the reign of his son, Louis I (or Louis the Great), between 1342 and 1382. Some examples will be self-evident. As far back as 1345, Pope Clement VI wrote to Louis I about some Romanians from Transylvania, Wallachia and Sirmium (today the region Srjem, in Serbia), who, abandoning "the seed of the schism", had accepted the Catholic faith⁹. The Pope said in addition that, having in view "the salvation of the Romanians" and "the spreading of the Catholic faith", he had written a number of letters to King Louis himself, to Queen-Mother Elizabeth, to the bishop of Oradea, and to some Romanian high nobles, among whom Prince Nicolae Alexandru, the son of the great voivode Basarab (around 1310 — 1352), and the heir of the Wallachian throne. The letters addressed to the Romanian leaders had to be delivered by two "Franciscan brothers", but the king of Hungary had intercepted those epistles. The Pope asked then Louis to let the letters to continue their way to the place of destination. In the Pope's record, the Romanians are called *Olachi Romani*; that was their double name, the first bestowed upon them by foreigners, and the second given by themselves; both names prove their Roman origin. The content of this historical source is very important: the Hungarian political and ecclesiastical authorities, cooperating (perhaps) with the religious orders, had contributed to the conversion of numerous Romanians, within and outside the Kingdom; when the Holy See tried to be in a direct contact with these Romanians, the King of Hungary interfered and stopped this direct relation.

Two records from 1351, issued at Avignon, certify that Louis I had obtained from the Pope the right to found churches for the great number of "Schismatics, *Philistei*, Cumans, Tartars, pagans and unbelievers", situated within and around Hungary; these people were to be baptized in the Catholic way and to be exempt (for a period of time) from paying the tithe¹⁰. Many sources document that the Pope granted the King of Hungary the tithe collected from the whole kingdom, or from some provinces only, including Romanian provinces.

⁹ *Documenta Roumaniae Historica* (= DRH), D. Relații între Țările Române, I, București, 1977, p. 60 — 61, no. 32.

¹⁰ DRH, C. Transilvania, X, București, 1977, p. 40 — 42, no. 45, 46.

But the sovereign experienced a lot of difficulty in collecting this rent.¹¹ Here is a visible contradiction between the claim of King Louis to collect as much tithe as possible and the temporary exemption of the new converts from this payment. The exemption was established by papal decisions in order to attract or to allure the new-comers, but the king wanted a maximum benefit.

Louis I of Hungary considered himself "the secular arm" of the Papacy. He ordered many military campaigns, officially called "crusades", although the enemies were mostly Christians. In a papal letter issued in 1356¹², all the Transylvanians are named "heretics" (i.e. members of the Orthodox Church), which proves the large Romanian majority in this country. The Pope often insisted on the conversion of the heretics situated first of all within the Hungarian Kingdom, while Louis I, especially during the first 20 — 25 years of his reign, was inclined to conquer new territories inhabited mostly by Orthodox believers. The king made this conquests for Hungary, but in the name of the Catholic faith.

Being under such a military, political, religious and even economic pressure (applied by Hungary), the two Romanian Principalities — Wallachia and Moldavia — in the name of their freedom, rose in arms simultaneously against the King of Hungary in 1359¹³. In Moldavia the uprising was defeated, but to the South of the Carpathians, the Great Voivode Nicolae Alexandru (1352 — 1364) stood his ground and, in order to put an end to the Hungarian pressure, forsook his Catholic ties, being ready to find another patron. In the same year (1359), the Romanian Prince founded (with the agreement of the Constantinople Patriarchate) the Metropolitan Seat of Wallachia at Argeş and he took on the titles of *Authentis* (i.e. autocrat) and of *Independent Dominus* (i.e. ruler, sovereign of the country). This was a sign that his power and authority came straight from God, rather than from some earthly force. The act was in fact a categorical challenge of the pretension of Louis I to exercise a superior authority over Wallachia¹⁴. From 1345, when Nicolae Alexandru seemed to be attracted by Catholicism (he even had a Catholic Hungarian wife), until 1359, when the same Prince founded the Argeş Metropolitan Seat, a mere 15 years had passed. During all these years, King Louis has made constant pressures in order to subdue Wallachia. Moreover, he deliberately impeded the direct contacts of this country with the Papacy, with a view to organizing Catholic hierarchy in Wallachia under the control of Hungary (namely of the bishopric of

¹¹ Examples : DRH, C. Transilvania, X, p. 145, no. 138 ; DRH, C. Transilvania, XI, p. 165, no. 172.

¹² DRH, C. Transilvania, XI, p. 13, no. 9. Especially after the fourth Crusade (1204), in the Catholic circles, the term "schismatic" became synonymous with "heretic". See Ş. Papacostea, *Românii în secolul al XIII-lea...*, p. 51.

¹³ Ş. Papacostea, *Geneza statului...*, p. 48.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

Alba Iulia)¹⁵. What followed, was the sovereignty act of Nicolae Alexandru in 1359 and, therefore, the clear orientation towards Byzantium.

After 1360, the religious intransigence of the king of Hungary became stronger. On the occasion of his journey to Buda, in 1365—1366, the Byzantine Emperor, Ioannes V Paleologus, was obliged to accept a formal union of the Eastern Church with Catholicism. He did it with the hope of an efficient help for the fight against the Turks. Hungary seemed to be now the hegemonic Catholic power in South Eastern Europe. The Romanian policy of independence was again endangered. Naturally, Hungary had no intention whatsoever to help Constantinople. In 1365, the Hungarian army conquered the fortress of Vidin (Bulgaria) and attempted to impose violently the Catholic faith in Bulgaria. The Hungarian Kingdom now had within its borders a greater number of Eastern Christians – Romanians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Ukrainians – who had to be converted. The apparent success in the Byzantine State and in Bulgaria directed the Hungarian effort towards other Orthodox nations too. Being in such a danger again, in 1365, the two Romanian Principalities rose together (as they had six years before) against the Hungarian King – prepared to attack from Transylvania – and they managed to avoid being incorporated in Hungary. In 1366, King Louis I spent six months in Transylvania in order to solve the difficult Romanian question, within and outside his kingdom. The king could not subordinate Wallachia and Moldavia, but he was able to carry out another important political aim: *he prevented Transylvania – now a Hungarian province, but with a huge Romanian majority – from following the example of independence offered by the other two Romanian Principalities*. In order to achieve that, the king planned to remove the Romanian elite from the Transylvanian political scene, leaving these leaders without any economic and social power, without any of the rights they had as representatives of their nation. Consequently, Louis I decided that every landowner and nobleman had to be Catholic, otherwise they would lose their properties and titles; also, the king started the organized oppression against the Orthodox clergy¹⁶. Through these measures of 1366, *a denomination – the Orthodox one – and a nation – the elite group of the community who accepted this denomination, i.e. the Romanian leaders – were excluded from Transylvania's governing system*¹⁷. Earlier, before these decisions, the Romanian leaders, as representatives of their nation, together with the representatives of the Saxons, Szeklers and (Hungarian) Nobles, had had a say in the process of ruling Transylvania¹⁸.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 44 – 45.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 85 – 89

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 88

¹⁸ Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Instituții medievale românești. Adunările cneziale și nobiliare (boierești) din Transilvania în secolele XIV–XVI*, Cluj-Napoca, 1991, p. 9–26.

This political thinking and action are illustrated by the writings of Bartholomew of Alverna, a Franciscan friar and close collaborator of Louis. He acted in Hungary and in the neighboring regions at the end of the reign of Louis I, when the King decided to destroy completely “the schism” in his kingdom. The Franciscan friar (a leader of his Order) wrote about the conversion of the Romanian and Slav “schismatics” in Hungary. Around 1379–1382, the author said that Louis I imitated some illustrious predecessors, such as Charlemagne and Stephen I (of Hungary), who had baptized their subjects “not so much by words, as by sword and by terrible wars”¹⁹. The forced conversion of the Romanians and Slavs – said Bartholomew of Alverna – has, naturally, an importance for the Church, but it has also some “secular advantages” for Hungary: 1) “the greater strength of the kingdom at the borders and the greater fidelity of this nation to its landlords; because those who – having a strange creed – are unfaithful to God, could never be faithful to their landlords”; 2) “a lot of bad deeds [...] will stop, deeds they commit now, in an irresponsible way, against Christians, with the assistance of those from abroad, of the same language and denomination”²⁰. The political role of the conversion follows clearly from these words. This political role is not an obscure one, on the contrary, it is well known and directly asserted by the king and by the instruments of his power. The Franciscan official said openly that the Catholic unity of faith, obtained by force, would consolidate the inner cohesion of the kingdom (the former “schismatics” would have the same belief as their masters and would serve them better), and would remove some external dangers, breaking the close relations between the Romanians, the Serbs and the Bulgarians incorporated in Hungary and those living in their independent states (the danger was that they worked together against Hungarian policy).

During the last part of Louis’ reign, the attention of Hungary was also directed towards Moldavia, which was on the point of consolidating its independence. In order to avoid the Hungarian and Polish pressure – very active under the pretext of the Eastern faith of the Romanians in Moldavia – Prince Lațcu I (about 1365 – 1374) turned to Rome (Avignon). The Holy See gave him a bishopric at Siret (1370), which was directly dependent on the Papacy, as a sign of the recognition of Moldavia’s complete independence. But Louis I thwarted the policy of the Romanian Prince: in the same year, 1370, the king of Hungary was also crowned king of Poland and round 1375, he annulled the autonomy of the bishopric of Siret, at the same time with his new attempt to subordinate Moldavia politically. Its direct relations with Rome (Avignon)

¹⁹ S. Papacostea, *Geneza statului...*, p. 92.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 94–95.

being blocked, the country tried to obtain its ecclesiastical independence from Constantinople. This happened under Prince Petru I, around 1386 – 1387²¹. We have a source dating from the period when Moldavia turned to the Papacy, a source which shows clearly why the conversion campaign was not entirely successful. In 1374, when Moldavia and Wallachia were again together in open conflict with Hungary, Pope Gregory XI addressed a letter to King Louis and to the two archbishops of Hungary. The Pope said that “a part of the numerous Romanian nation”, who lived “at the borders of the Hungarian kingdom, close to the Tartars”, had accepted to become Catholic. But the papal letter shows also that the majority of the Romanians living in that area had not, however, accepted a true conversion. The Pope knew the cause of this refusal: “they – the Romanians – were not satisfied with the service of the Hungarian priests” and they asked for a superior prelate “able to speak the language of their nation” (*qui linguam dicte nationis scire asseritur*)²². In other words, around 1374, in the region of Eastern Carpathians, the religious antagonism had a national connotation: the Romanians rejected the Hungarian priests (because they did not speak Romanian) and they asked the explanation of the Catholic creed in their language.

The few examples evoked here show clearly the circumstances and one of the main causes which can explain why the Romanians were finally subordinated to the Eastern hierarchy from Constantinople during the 14th century, in spite of their good relations with the Papacy and with the Catholic Church, relations promoted by their princes Nicolae Alexandru, Bogdan I, Lațcu I and others.

1. The direct leaders of the campaign of Catholic conversion of Romanians were neither the Pope nor the religious orders, but the kings of Hungary.

2. The last ones replaced the religious spirit of the conversion with a political and military aim, i.e. the extension at any price of the multinational Hungarian kingdom and the achievement of a uniform internal structure.

3. The methods used were violent and warlike, situated very far from the Christian doctrine, which was, actually, familiar to the Orthodox believers.

4. The language used during the proselyte Catholic campaign was not Romanian and the promoters of that campaign were often Hungarian priests or friars.

²¹ Idem, *Întemeierea Mitropoliei Moldovei: implicații central- și est europene*, in “România în istoria universală”. vol. III/1, edited by I. Agrigoroaiei, Gh. Buzatu, V. Cristian, Iași, 1988, p. 525 – 541; R. Theodorescu, *Implicații balcanice ale începuturilor Mitropoliei Moldovei. O ipoteză*, in “România în istoria universală” ..., p. 543 – 566.

²² Ș. Papacostea, *Geneza statului ...*, p. 120.

5. The Hungarians were not trusted by the Romanians because of their domination policy in Transylvania and because of their attempts to conquer and subordinate Wallachia and Moldavia.

6. When the Romanian princes appealed directly to the Papacy – in order to remove the accusation that they were not Catholics and to avoid external dangers – the king of Hungary interfered and those direct relations were interrupted.

7. During the Middle Ages, two European centers had the prerogative to recognize the legitimacy of the political power and to sanction the independence of any state : Rome (Avignon) and Constantinople. As the Romanians noticed, their relations with the Holy See meant the acceptance of the Hungarian political domination and the loss of their very independence. That is why, Wallachia and Moldavia were obliged to turn towards the other center – Constantinople.

8. Therefore, in 1359 and 1386–1387, in Wallachia and Moldavia, the two metropolitan seats were founded in a direct relation with Constantinople. This fact sanctioned the independence of the Principalities : their princes were free to assert the divine origin of their power. At that time, the foundation of the Romanian metropolitan seats was considered an act of opposition and even of hostility against Hungary. That is why, the Hungarian pressure did not stop, but the Principalities had now a new strong (moral) support for their resistance.

9. Naturally, under the circumstances, the great proselyte effort of King Louis did not yield the anticipated results. The number given by the Franciscan friars – 400,000 “schismatics” turned Catholic in one year, around 1380, in Hungary²³ – is an example of propaganda, lacking any real significance. This number has to be reduced more than ten times. As a matter of fact, the general result of King Louis’ religious policy – result given by Antonio Bonfini in his *Historia Pannonica*, written in the 15th century – is much more important. The classical scholar said that, after an unprecedented action of conversion, around 1382, the King could be very proud because, *according to the general opinion, the third part of the population of the Hungarian Kingdom was Catholic*²⁴ . This proportion shows that, in fact, even in the medieval Hungarian state, with a great number of nationalities and faiths, the Catholics – and, consequently, the Hungarians – were a minority. It is not difficult to notice here the huge discrepancy between the great South-Eastern European dimension of the Hungarian proselyte plan and the meagre possibilities of achieving it.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

²⁴ A. Bonfinius, *Historia Pannonica sive Hungaricarum rerum decades IV et dimidia, libris XLV*, Köln, 1690, p. 250.

The papal action of attracting the Romanians towards the Catholic denomination and of connecting the Romanian Church with Rome (Avignon) was not a success. A cause of this failure was the unrealistic policy of Hungary, both in Transylvania and in the two independent Principalities. In such a manner, Hungary paved the way for the Romanian orientation towards the Eastern hierarchy, and this orientation remained unchanged throughout the centuries. Only during the Counter-Reformation, when Hungary was no longer an independent and powerful state and when the circumstances were completely different, a part of the Transylvanian Romanians accepted – around 1700 – the union with the Catholic Church.