



## ***CULTA Religion and Multiculturality: Educational Pathways for Local Church Leaders***

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### **The contribution of the Orthodox Church in Oltenia (South - West of Romania) to organizing the Social assistance for orphans and the needy in the interwar period and during the Second World War - model for helping the neighbor in times of crisis**

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After the First World War ended, the Romanian society was facing a serious problem: the large number of collateral victims of war, the most affected being children, the elderly and women. For this reason, the state encouraged the establishment of organizations to protect people in situations of crisis.

The Romanian Orthodox Church was always there for those who have suffered from war or social injustice, being a consolation for the Romanians who put their hope in God.

In Romania, the Orthodox Church was involved in the establishment of organized forms of social assistance, the bigger parishes being able to create foundations to support charity acts. These particular cases needed to be generalized through a unified action of the Church, by following a plan set in the smallest details and especially, having the coordination of the local bishop.

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Regarding Oltenia<sup>1</sup>, the spiritual jurisdiction over this province belonged, ever since the beginning of the sixteenth century until 1939, to the Episcopacy of Râmnic - Nouă Severin (based in Râmnicu - Vâlcea) and from 1939 until now (with an interruption of two years, 1945 - 1947) it belongs to the Metropolitan of Oltenia (located in Craiova).

After World War I, within the Episcopacy of Râmnic it is established a Society of priests from Oltenia whose aim was to expand among the population a real social apostolate following Christian principles, using the powers of the clergy to teach, lead and holy individual life and the community. The three directions were briefly mentioned in the Bylaw, suggestively called „Renașterea” (“Rebirth”), comprising the social, cultural and missionary component of the activity of the clergy from Oltenia.

The institutionalized social apostolate of the Church from Oltenia began shortly after World War I, because back then people hardship, poverty and immorality emphasized and tended to escalate. Each priest had to act uniformly, after strict rules, using the same means as everyone else. Thus, it was felt the need to group priests in a society with well defined statutes and purposes, which would have the possibility to identify and help the needy, to make responsible her every member for immediate struggle against illiteracy, deprivation and immorality. Feeling the delicate moment in the history of our nation, the Church begun a social, cultural and philanthropic unprecedented work, institutionalized, with strict rules, a complex work that was called "Social apostolate" and the clergy from Oltenia chose that all would work as one in a society that aimed to bring back Christian precepts in every person's soul as a spiritual rebirth, suggestively naming their new society "Renașterea" ("Rebirth").

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<sup>1</sup> Oltenia is a historical region in the South - West of Romania bounded on the East by the river Olt, on the South and West by the Danube and on the North by the Southern Carpathians. The surface of Oltenia is of 24.095 km<sup>2</sup>. The most important cities are: Craiova, Drobeta - Turnu Severin, Târgu - Jiu, Slatina and Râmnicu Vâlcea, residencies of the five counties that make up this region: Dolj, Mehedinți, Gorj, Olt and Vâlcea. It has a population of two million people.

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The artisan for creating the Society "Renașterea" ("Rebirth") was the bishop of Râmnic and Noul Severin, Dr. Vartolomeu Stănescu (1921 - 1938)<sup>2</sup>. He wanted the establishment of a society within the Church, able to support the efforts of the priests who wanted to acquire theological - religious and general knowledge in the field of philosophy, psychology and history of the country, with the aim to teach people and to enrich the spiritual life of the believers.

In 1920, when he was just a vicar of the Episcopacy of Râmnic and Noul Severin, Vartolomeu Stănescu encouraged the clergy from Oltenia to establish a society of priests with a strong social and cultural character.

To achieve his plan, there were called to the Episcopal residence the most distinguished priests in the district and they agreed with the social mission of the Church. It was then developed a bylaw project, sent to each protopope to be discussed in the quarterly meetings of the priests. There were about to be permanently settled the bylaws of the Society *Renașterea* (Rebirth)<sup>3</sup>.

The Articles of the Society were settled by writing a protocol signed on October 20<sup>th</sup> 1921<sup>4</sup>, being afterwards printed and distributed to priests. Having initially a provisional character, the Society *Renașterea* (Rebirth) acquires the right of "moral person" (legal status) after it entered the Legislative Bodies in May 1923<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Cristescu, *Life and achievements of His Grace Bishop Vartolomeiu until the age of 60 years*, Râmnicu Vâlcea, p. 94 - 108.

<sup>3</sup> Episcopacy of Râmnic and Noul Severin, *Yearbook for the years 1921 - 1925, compiled by H.G. Bishop Vartolomeu with the collaboration of the culture and administrative directorates' staff of the district*, Bucharest, 1924, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> "Gazette of Romania", no. 55 dated June 13th 1923.



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### **The social mission of the society "Renaşterea" ("Rebirth")**

The Church's involvement in social and cultural activities was also required by the state authorities, who fully understood the priest's role in the community, through his training and theological and moral formation.

The name of the Society had a strong spiritual resonance as it wanted to be a beginner of inner transformation through which profane selfishness would be replaced by Christian altruism by the entry in every man's soul of the self temperance and self - denial, which proved to be the only means to serve the neighbor, but also for personal and public good.

"Renaşterea" ("Rebirth") wanted to be a priestly movement organized in associations of pastoral work and common devoutness, its particular role consisting in making a continuous connection between Church and the believer by bringing it to the house and the soul of the Christians. This initiative was and remained owned by the Christian church, but its implementation had, especially in the last centuries, large gaps. Therefore the "Renaşterea" ("Rebirth") from Oltenia wanted to make responsible the clergy in order to determine Christians to a continuous collaboration with the Church, both spiritually and especially in the way that virtues become facts and thus give results.

The articles of the Society Renaşterea (Rebirth) present concretely the direction to be followed by the priests of Oltenia, united for achieving an unprecedented work in the social mission of the Orthodox Church up to then. In order to have the desired results it was established a social apostolate organized in the smallest details, feeling its effects in the decades that followed. It is remarkable the vision of Bishop Vartolomeu Stănescu that gives to the priesthood from Oltenia a new perspective of work, prestige and dignity by which to fulfill their evangelic precepts.

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Establishing this company enabled all priests to join efforts so that the work of educating and enlightening the parishioners to be seen as soon as possible in the improvement of social life. This unprecedented organization and the way in which they wanted to solve the moral, cultural and social problems of the parishioners, by rising the spiritual level of the people, is totally unique in the annals of Romanian Orthodoxy, and this is an undeniable truth<sup>6</sup>.

Through the Society *Renașterea* (Rebirth), Bishop Vartolomeu enabled the altar servants to work as in a true school of solidarity, of evangelical formation and of stimulation to fulfill some constructive actions. This large - scale social work has led many to claim that the *Renașterea* (Rebirth) produced among the clergy "a quiver of soul training and huge effort, as there never was in the Romanian Orthodox Church, especially in terms of fruitful ministry organization"<sup>7</sup>.

The Society *Renașterea* (Rebirth) had as starting point the fact that the priest was a cultural factor respected by all the villagers; he was in a permanent relationship with the teachers and other important representatives of the community. In order to meet the ambitious aspirations of the Society "*Renașterea*" ("Rebirth") priests were required to have a thorough culture in all areas of activity.

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<sup>6</sup> D. Cristescu, *Life and achievements of His Grace Bishop Vartolomeiu until the age of 60 years*, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 113-114.

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### **Organization of the society "Renașterea" ("Rebirth")**

The Society "Renașterea" ("Rebirth") had its headquarters in Craiova and had as members all active and retired priests and deacons of the district organized in parish centers comprising 8 - 12 parishes under the leadership of a "First State" priest<sup>8</sup>.

The society members were of two kinds: protectors, supporters, founders and active. The protector members were designed to help the society by giving moral, cultural and economic support. Adherents were those members, men and women, who paid voluntarily an annual fee, but they are not part of the clergy. The founding members were all priests and deacons in office or retired, who contributed to the society's incomes with the amount of 1,500 lei annually.

Students of theology and seminary students from each class were regarded as associates of the centers, having the obligation to attend, during school holidays, all meetings in their locality of residence. All members were provisionally received by county assemblies and were confirmed by the district Assembly<sup>9</sup>.

The district Assembly, consisting of all the priests and deacons of the district, members of society „Renașterea” („Rebirth”), was the one conducting the social mission of the Church, working through the central committee and the district congress.

Committee was elected for three years and control committee composed of three members had a mandate for one year. The committee members met every three months, on the last Sunday of each quarter to prepare the general budget of the society, which was

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<sup>8</sup> Episcopacy of Râmnic and Noul Severin, *Yearbook for the years 1921 - 1925 (Organization bylaws of the priestly Society „Renașterea” (Rebirth) , art. 2.1)*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> D. Cristescu, *Life and achievements of His Grace Bishop Vartolomeiu until the age of 60 years*, p. 97.

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formed from a quarter of the incomes of the county assemblies, as well as from all the revenues of the district assembly<sup>10</sup>.

The analysis of all aspects regarding the activity of the Society *Renaşterea* ("Rebirth") was made in the district congress, the second central organ of the society. The congress was chaired by the office led by a president, who was elected ad hoc during the sessions<sup>11</sup>.

The date when the congress was held was fixed by the Central Committee, under the chairmanship of the Bishop or the district Vicar, also establishing under this occasion the agenda. In addition to the issues brought to deliberation to the central committee, the district congress received proposals from both the members about the goals of society and from the outside, from any Romanian citizen or national and foreign institution.

The meetings of the district congress were public and were held in turn in each residence city of the county. At the end of each congress there were the topics finalized proposed to be addressed at the next congress, as well as those who implemented them. All works and decisions of the district Congress were handed to the Central Committee, who forwarded them to the bishop for approval.

Among the central activities there were the mission of spiritual restoring spiritual of those in prison by making them responsible towards the neighbor's property and life, investigating those in hospitals and nursing homes, to reinforce their belief that they are not alone, supporting orphanages, both financially and spiritually, by organizing collections meant to strengthen their faith and ease their longing for parents by putting them under the protection of the Savior, assuring them that Christ is in their hearts and they belong to His Church.

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<sup>10</sup> Episcopacy of Râmnic and Noul Severin, *Yearbook for the years 1921 - 1925 (Organization bylaws of the priestly Society „Renaşterea” (Rebirth))*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> D. Cristescu, *Life and achievements of His Grace Bishop Vartolomeiu until the age of 60 years*, p. 107.

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Convinced of the importance of education for young people, but also knowing the difficulties that students from rural areas faced, where most families were poor, the members of the society *Renașterea* (Rebirth) included in their Organization Bylaw the need to conduct boarding houses<sup>12</sup> for primary and secondary course students and in addition founding and conducting orphanages<sup>13</sup>, to relieve the suffering and longing of children of their parents.

Neither the elderly nor the helpless were forgotten because they considered their assistance both through financial aid, but also through labor. An important part of the society's incomes brought by the choirs in the parish centers returned, in the form of donation, to the needy. Besides financial aid there were also made collections necessary to help those with fewer opportunities living.

### **Social and school eating houses**

In the bylaws of the priestly Society *Renașterea* (Rebirth) it was provided that the Church initiated specific programs to help children and the poor population by supporting their inclusion in schools and offering their needed daily nutrition within social or school eating houses. School eating houses functioned sporadically in the parishes from Oltenia, the priests calling for help from people and parish circles that collected money choir performances within them. The priests administered the food and took care of hiring in these committees more people with good material condition. The poorest parishes gave children in the morning only tea and rarely bread. Where the parish had land and additional

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<sup>12</sup> Episcopacy of Râmnic and Noul Severin, *Yearbook for the years 1921 - 1925 (Organization bylaws of the priestly Society „Renașterea” (Rebirth), cap. I, art. 2.4)*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

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revenue it was given tea in the morning and hot meal at lunchtime. Each parish had to report monthly how the school eating house operated.

The role and importance of these school eating houses increased during the World War II. New metropolitan of Oltenia, Nifon Criveanu (1939 - 1945), involved in this charity activity all the resources of the district, participating with personal funds so that these social and school eating houses would have a better organization and efficiency<sup>14</sup>.

This great work of social assistance should not be understood as exclusive of the clergy in Oltenia, but the initiative belongs to the Church that trained people with faith and moral sensibility able to help those in distress. Through these institutions the Church in Oltenia was close to its pastored ones, assuming the responsibility to be with those who suffered from the war.

The priests in Oltenia were the first who participated in supporting school eating houses, being aware that the best incentive is the personal example. Their wives took care of preparing the meal being supported by the children's teachers, who helped wholeheartedly this initiative of the Church. The communal city halls supported largely the good operation of school eating houses delegating from their staff people able to find support and funds.

Among the school eating houses founded in the interwar period or during World War II we mention:

The eating house "Iubirea Aproapelui" (Love of Neighbor) in Craiova, Dolj county. It was founded on February 11<sup>th</sup> 1940, near the school Traian. The eating house opened under the direction of priest C. Zamfirescu, aided by his wife, Elisabeta. At this eating house 120 children received food daily. Meals were served at noon, Thursdays and Saturdays two dishes and in other days only one dish. Children were primary school students and

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<sup>14</sup> Archive of the Cathedral of Oltenia, package no.17, File no. 128 / 1941, f. 2 - 16.

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apprentices, without material possibilities, which had many brothers or parents on the front<sup>15</sup>. The eating house had a large kitchen machine, tables, chairs and cabinets to keep the dishes. Two rooms were used, one as cellar and the other as dining room. Two cooks worked coordinated by a person who manage the donations in kind and in cash<sup>16</sup>. The eating house worked very well throughout the war, the necessary funds also coming from people and state institutions (monthly and annually). It was already a tradition that when each eating house started to function, the Metropolitan of Oltenia, Nifon Criveanu, donated the amount of 10,000 lei. Following his example, the city hall of Craiova donated 5,000 lei per month and the necessary fuel. The priests in Craiova also did donations, between 1,000 and 2,000 lei. The Senator from Oltenia, Constantin Argetoianu, gave for the eating houses in the four county capitals the amount of 100,000 lei and the choir of the Lyric Theatre in Craiova gave a charity concert, donating the amount of 30,000 lei<sup>17</sup>. The eating house administrator made donations of food and clothing to the poor children on the eve of the Nativity and Resurrection. Proper administration of all funds made that the surplus fund for each year to be around 200,000 lei<sup>18</sup>.

The eating house of the Cathedral of Oltenia in Craiova. It shared food daily for over 162 poor children and refugees. Other 110 children received hot meal at the eating houses of the churches Madona Dudu (inaugurated on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1944<sup>19</sup>) and Sfântul Gheorghe Vechi<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Idem, package no. 5, File no. 42 / 1942, f. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Holy Cathedral of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin, *Religious life in Oltenia. Yearbook of the Cathedral of Oltenia for the year 1940*, Craiova, 1941, p. 61 - 62.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p.63.

<sup>19</sup> *The Samaritan work of the clergy in Oltenia*, in the magazine „Renaşterea”, year XXIII, 1944, no. 9, p. 477 - 478.

<sup>20</sup> *Missionary zeal*, in the magazine „Renaşterea”, year XXIII, 1944, no.11, p. 477.

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The eating house of the parish Sfântul Nicolae in Băilești, Dolj county, founded on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1943<sup>21</sup> inside a school in the locality, gave meals daily for 42 students orphaned by the war. The parish contribution reached at the end of the first year of eating house operation to be 10,000 lei. A significant part of this amount (2,000 lei) was donated by the parish priest himself<sup>22</sup>.

Following the example offered by the Church, until the end of the war there would be set up hundreds of school eating houses in almost all villages of Dolj county. Getting over material difficulties, with the help of organized groups of generous Christians, the eating houses offered food daily to 5,000 poor children.

The school eating house "Clerul Gorjan" (Clergy in Gorj) in Târgu - Jiu, Gorj county. It was founded in February 1940, being funded by the Banca Populară (People's Bank) "Clerul Gorjan" of the priests in Gorj. It functioned in a room of the Society Renașterea houses, the branch in Gorj. In the school year 1939 - 1940 there received hot meals 50 poor students nominated by local primary school principals. As of May 15<sup>th</sup> 1941, the eating house passed under the care of the deanery of Târgu - Jiu, being supported from the material funds of the priests in Gorj. The bank „Clerul Gorjan” contributed with dishes, furniture, cookers and the wood necessary for preparing the meals. The annual amount needed for running the eating house in good condition amounted to 110,000 lei, half of this money being offered by the bank "Clerul Gorjan" and the other part from the donations of the local figures, Bishop Nifon offering 5,000 lei, annually<sup>23</sup>. The eating house was forced to cease its activity at the end of 1942, due to lack of funds. On February 15<sup>th</sup> 1943 it is reopened with the exclusive endeavor of the priests in Gorj. Daily

<sup>21</sup> Holy Cathedral of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin, *Religious life in Oltenia. Yearbook of the Cathedral of Oltenia for the year 1940*, p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> *Priesthood and the work of helping the poor*, in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXII, 1943, no. 12, p. 694.

<sup>23</sup> Holy Cathedral of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin, *Religious life in Oltenia. Yearbook of the Cathedral of Oltenia for the year 1940*, p. 64.

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20 poor children of primary course ate there. The clergy in the parishes of Gorj committed to supporting this eating house making available, for starters, the amount of 40,000 lei<sup>24</sup>.

The eating house of the parish Cărbunești, Gorj county, inaugurated on March 4<sup>th</sup> 1940, served tea (in the morning) and lunch to over 120 students. The largest contribution for maintaining this eating house belonged to Banca Populară (People's Bank) "Muntele Cărbunele" in the locality, led by father Grigorie Popescu.

Social eating houses also functioned in Gorj county near the parishes in Polovragi, Baia de Fier, Novaci and Săcelu. For each the metropolitan Nifon donated the amount of 3,000 lei, money needed to purchase the food<sup>25</sup>.

The school eating house "Iubirea Aproapelui" (Love of Neighbor) in Turnu - Severin, Mehedinți county. It was founded by the local priests at the urging of metropolitan Nifon. It offered lunch regularly to a number of 65 poor pupils. The eating house only functioned for nine months in the premises of the Society "Renașterea" and had a budget of 100,000 lei, 30,000 lei being the donation of the Cathedral of Oltenia, 40,000 lei donated by the Banca Populară "Clerul Mehedințean" and the remaining 35,000 lei, collected from donations and membership fees from compassionate people in the city and county<sup>26</sup>.

Also in Mehedinți county, Metropolitan Nifon urged priests to become involved in the establishment of school eating houses in the parishes they pastored. Although with limited funds necessary, the priests and organizing committees tried to have them working

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<sup>24</sup> Archive of the Cathedral of Oltenia, package no. 5, File no. 42 / 1942, f. 9

<sup>25</sup> *Internal chronical*, in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXII, 1943, no. 11, p. 594 - 595.

<sup>26</sup> Holy Cathedral of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin, *Religious life in Oltenia. Yearbook of the Cathedral of Oltenia for the year 1940*, p. 65.

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throughout the school year and where this was impossible, they succeeded that during winter, to offer children hot tea and bread<sup>27</sup>.

The eating house of the "Church" in Caracal, ex Romanați county (today in Olt county) was inaugurated March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1940, being financially supported by the metropolitan Nifon who participated in this charitable work with the amount of 25,000 lei<sup>28</sup>. The eating house was meant for the poor children who received hot meals daily. The 40 students served one meal every day, after school, within the priestly House of the Society *Renașterea* in Caracal. To this eating house there were also assigned the refugee students who continued their studies at the high school in Caracal.

The success of this social institution was an example for the priests in Romanați county who made a significant contribution to support school eating houses in every parish. For them, the clergy in Romanați donated annually the amount of 184,000 lei to be example for other state officials.

The school eating house "Iubirea de copii" (Love of children) in Râmnicu - Vâlcea, Vâlcea county. It was established at the initiative of metropolitan Nifon, being led by the county deanery, helped by several priests<sup>29</sup>. The first amounts of money for helping this eating house were given by the metropolitan Nifon, 10,000 lei from personal funds and 5,000 lei from the Cathedral of Oltenia. In a very short period of time the eating house had the amount of 300,000 lei plus the provisions received from the believers<sup>30</sup>. There received food, daily, 50 poor children from the local primary schools.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Archive of the Cathedral of Oltenia, package no. 10, File no. 79 / 1941, f. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Holy Cathedral of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin, *Religious life in Oltenia. Yearbook of the Cathedral of Oltenia for the year 1940*, p.69.

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The eating house of the churches Maica Domnului, Sfântul Gheorghe, Cetățuia and Sfinții Arhangheli in Râmnicu - Vâlcea. They were established in 1942 and fed 50 children each, being supported by the other parishes in the city<sup>31</sup>. Having also the City Hall's support, besides these school eating houses there were also established social eating houses, which, with the passage of time came to feed more and more needy people<sup>32</sup>.

The eating house of the parish Lădești, Vâlcea county. It was established for the 150 refugees who came from Basarabia and Bucovina. Besides it, there also functioned a school eating house, maintained through the care and local believers and clergy<sup>33</sup>.

The fact that in Vâlcea county the clergy was exemplarily organized it proven by the overall amount spent during the years 1940 - 1941, to support school eating houses in the amount of 1,200,000 lei. At the level of the whole county there received food, through parish eating houses, over 5,000 poor children.

In the difficult years of the Second World War, social eating houses had the role of not letting anyone starve to death, to wipe the tears from the cheeks of orphans, to reinforce the belief that they are not alone because God and the Church would always be there for them. Good work and charity had to continue "for good must never stop"<sup>34</sup>.

Each eating house established in Oltenia was meant to persuade children to attend school, while also being a form of helping the neighbor, being a part of the social apostolate of the priests in Oltenia. Their beneficiaries were poor children, all communities contributing to their good functioning. The local committees that administered them had the parish priest, many eating houses being directly managed by priests and others by school teachers

<sup>31</sup> *Missionary zeal*, in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXII, 1943, no. 6, p. 334

<sup>32</sup> Archive of the Cathedral of Oltenia, package no. 16, file no. 241 / 1940, f. 41.

<sup>33</sup> *Canonical visits and inspections of His Grace Metropolitan Nifon of Oltenia*, in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXIII, 1944, nr. 9. p. 489.

<sup>34</sup> *Inauguration of eating house No. 3 in Craiova*, in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXII, 1943, no. 9, p. 468.

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assisted by the committee<sup>35</sup>. Part of the necessary amounts came from the city halls' contribution, from public subventions and collections, school festivities and the activity of parish Centers and parish pedlary<sup>36</sup>. The church did its duty towards those in distress, especially in those hard times of war, remaining forever a pillar of support for the Romanian people.

### **War orphanages**

During the World War II, the Romanian Orthodox Church also got involved in helping the orphans of war, for whom there were founded several orphanages in the monasteries belonging to the Cathedral of Oltenia. Thus, in 1942 it founded at the monastery Hurezi, Vâlcea county, an orphanage for boys, which was moved in 1943 to the state orphanage at the monastery Cozia, Vâlcea county. Instead of boys there were brought war orphan girls<sup>37</sup>, the metropolitan Nifon of Oltenia asking all district priests to announce the war widows who no longer could raise and educate their daughters about the possibility of sending them to this social institution of the Church<sup>38</sup>.

Another orphanage was established at the monastery Bistrița in Vâlcea county, the Cathedral having an elaborate plan for establishing social centers in each monastery. These orphanages were supported only by the Church, each parish and monastery having the obligation to contribute to their proper functioning.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>36</sup> The parish pedlary was made through the sale of icons, crosses, praying books, the raised amounts being used as funds for these school eating houses.

<sup>37</sup> Archive of the Cathedral of Oltenia, package no. 8, File no. 159 / 1943, f. 11.

<sup>38</sup> *The girls orphanage at the holy monastery Hurezi*, in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXII, 1943, no. 9, p. 478.



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To provide the means necessary to finance this social work, Bishop Niphon Criveanu called the abbesses and abbots of the monasteries with better material funds at a meeting held on June 8<sup>th</sup> 1943, in the Metropolitan Office of Craiova. It was then decided to allocate the amount of one million lei to support orphanages<sup>39</sup>. The money was to be ensured from the sale of timber from the woods belonging to the monasteries<sup>40</sup>.

Came in an inspection on March 2nd 1943, monk Dosoftei Florea, member in the management committee of the Orphanage of the Holy Cathedral of Oltenia from the monastery Hurezi, wrote some interesting facts about the organization of this orphanage. Thus, upon arrival children were examined by a physician; the bedroom was arranged in one room, on the first floor, the beds being well maintained, having enough and clean sheets, blankets and pillows. The room was brightened by the sun, clean and heated. The living room - well maintained and the tableware, tables and dishes - new and kept in perfect cleanliness. The Food is prepared in a kitchen separate from that of the community and meals were served twice a day: at 12 and 6 p.m., with two dishes. At 7 in the morning there was tea, milk and bread and at 4 p.m., bread with jam or butter. The classroom was located upstairs, properly brightened, spacious and heated, with new furniture. In the education process nuns with studies were also involved<sup>41</sup>. In that year, the Ward of the monasteries in Oltenia contributed to help the Orphanage, with the amount of 26,445 lei<sup>42</sup>. All Oltenia monasteries had the obligation to put in the annual budget substantial funds for the

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<sup>39</sup> Nifon Criveanu, *Synod of the abbots and abbesses of the holy monasteries in Oltenia*, in the magazine "Renaşterea", year XXII, 1943, no. 9, p. 490.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 489.

<sup>41</sup> Dosoftei Florea, *How the war orphanage at the monastery Hurezi works*, in the magazine "Renaşterea", year XXII, 1943, no. 2-3, p. 132.

<sup>42</sup> Archive of the Cathedral of Oltenia, package no. 8, File no. 159 / 1943, f. 16.

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orphanages of the Cathedral of Oltenia and the employee monks had to contribute with a fixed amount to support the social apostolate of the clergy in Oltenia.

In the same way it was also organized the orphanage at the monastery Bistrița in Vâlcea county. Children lived in huts, received three meals a day and were examined by a physician at a certain period of time<sup>43</sup>. Because of the duration of the war and the withdrawal of the Romanian army, the funds of the Cathedral of Oltenia to support the social mission became insufficient. All priests in Oltenia were urged to personally give clothing, towels, woolen socks, corn, wheat, potatoes, onions and everything that was superfluous. The church had an obligation to help the small ones, the innocent and the lonely<sup>44</sup>.

Regarding the current situation, after Romania joined the European Union (2007), many Romanian citizens chose to leave the country to seek better paid work in Western Europe. Although there is no exact data on the number of Romanian citizens living abroad, most experts believe that their number has exceeded 3 million. Their integration in countries like Italy, Spain, UK, Germany, France, etc. has been and continues to be a hot topic. On the one hand, the influx of people coming from Eastern Europe has created some difficulties for Western governments (social and economic pressures) and on the other hand, there became serious social cases in the country, where in many families were left only the elderly (retired) and minor children. In these families, the social and economic problems were immediately felt. Grandparents were not able to handle the education of children, some of them showing a total lack of interest in education or even quitting school. Another situation, even more

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>44</sup> *The war orphanage at the monastery Hurezi* in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXIII, 1944, no. 9, p. 520 - 521; *Gifts for war orphans*, in the magazine „Renașterea”, year XXIII, 1944, no. 9, p. 515.



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worrying, is of the children also abandoned economically and financially by their parents. Left to work in Western Europe, many Romanian discovered that also in this part of Europe the effects of severe economic crisis are felt. Without a job, they were not able to financially support the children left in the care of grandparents. These were the premises for a genuine social and educational crisis.

In recent years, the Romanian Orthodox Church was more and more involved in helping disadvantaged groups (children and elderly).

The social programs promoted and run by the Romanian Orthodox Church are in conformity with the Regulation for the organization and functioning of the national system of social assistance of the Romanian Orthodox Church, document which aligns the activity of the territorial administrative units of the church with the principles and standards in the area of social assistance. Chapter IV, Human resources, clearly states that the "social worker's activating in the social assistance structures of the Romanian Orthodox Church must observe the provisions of the laws enforced in the area of social assistance" (art. 20) and the most important effect at the level of the practical social assistance is the accreditation of the units providing social services.

Currently, the social assistance activity organized and carried out by the eparchies of Oltenia, both through its own structures (parishes, monasteries and social assistance offices) and also at the level of non - governmental organizations operating under the sponsorship of these eparchies.

To illustrate, in the following lines we will present some data about how it is organized and carried out the social work within the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova. The most important non - governmental organizations sponsored by this archiepiscopacy, which has in its jurisdiction Dolj and Gorj counties, are the Association "Vasiliada" (for Dolj county) and the Association "Vasiliada" - Branch in Tîrgu - Jiu (for Gorj county).

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In 2012, the eparchy Center conducted social projects, through the Philanthropic and Missionary Social Sector of the Association Vasiliada, from funds raised from internal, external donors or the Fund "Filantropia" of the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova.

An important aspect was the social assistance in parishes. In their actions, in 2012, the parishes of the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova supported the following categories of people: 5,327 children in need, 2,786 elderly people in distressed, 4,769 poor families and 1,231 people from other categories of beneficiaries.

The people supported by the parishes of the eparchy had material support consisting of food, clothing, school supplies, financial aid, construction materials, etc., the total estimated value being of 371,457 lei (87,000 €).

In the same year, 2012, the Social Services Agency in Dolj accredited 4 parishes as providers specialized in social services.

The main social centers sponsored by the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova are:

The Day Centre for the elderly „Mitropolit Firmilian” in Craiova. It was inaugurated in 2012, being rehabilitated and properly equipped through a special project, co - financed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007 - 2013, Priority 3.2 “Social infrastructure development”. The center has a total capacity of 350 seats and offers the elderly people in Craiova counseling, primary and specialized social services, occupational therapy, leisure time activities, serving lunch. In 2012, 97 elderly people benefitted from the services of this Center. The Center was accredited, according to the legislation in force, the specialized provider of social services for the elderly.

The BEST LIFE Multifunctional Social Center for the socially disadvantaged children in Craiova. It was inaugurated in 2012, being rehabilitated and adequately equipped through a project co - financed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007 - 2013, Priority 3.2 “Social infrastructure development”. It has a total capacity of 300 seats and provides

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children from disadvantaged families, the following social services: counseling, education assistance, primary and specialized social services, occupational therapy, independent living skills. In 2012, 20 children benefitted from the services of this Center.

The Social day care Center "Anastasia" in Craiova. It was inaugurated in 2012, being rehabilitated, modernized and developed within a project co - financed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007 - 2013, Priority 3.2 "Social infrastructure development". It has a total capacity of 200 seats and offers social and educational services for preschool children coming from socially vulnerable families, having also the possibility to provide support to children with visual impairments.

The Multifunctional Social Center in Tîrgu - Jiu. It was inaugurated in 2012, being rehabilitated and equipped through a project co - financed by the Regional Operational Programme 2007 - 2013, Priority 3.2 "Social infrastructure development". The center is for children coming from poor families in Târgu - Jiu. The specialized staff of the center offers children the following services: primary and specialized social services, counseling, assisted education, independent living skills and occupational therapy. The center has a total capacity of 300 seats.

Emergency Centre "Sfântul Vasile" in Craiova. Emergency Social Centre project "Sf. Vasile" is run by the Association Vasiliada, in partnership with the Local Council of Craiova and the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova. It has a total capacity of 52 seats and offers in residential regime, for homeless people, the following services: accommodation and daily food (3 meals / day), primary and specialized social services, counseling, primary medical care, vocational training, mediation for finding a job. In 2012, 116 homeless people benefitted from the services of this Center, 14 of which were helped to find a job, thus beginning an socially independent life.

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The Information and Counseling Centre "Sf. Ecaterina" in Craiova. The objectives of the center are: identifying people with disabilities in Craiova, creating support groups for these beneficiaries and their families, supporting people with disabilities in their social and professional reintegration. The services of this institution were received in 2012 by a number of 153 people with physical deficiencies, hearing impairments and neurologically disabled. In 2012, the center was re - authorized by the County Agency for Employment in Dolj the as specialized Provider for counseling and mediation services for the employment of disadvantaged people. In the past year, the Centre's social workers were able to employ 38 persons with disabilities.

Center for Children "Aripi de lumină" ("Wings of Light") in Craiova. The center continued to assist and support children who were not in school or at risk of dropping out of school in Craiova. The educational, psychological counseling and social activities, leisure, occupational therapy and physical support in their homes contributed to the reduction of social exclusion for 98 children and young beneficiaries of the program. In 2012, the Centre for Children "Aripi de lumina" also continued its activity in the Pediatric Oncology Department of the County Clinical Hospital no. 1 in Craiova, where volunteer psychologists, teachers, actors and students from the faculties of Theology and Medicine have developed a series of counseling and leisure activities for children with leukemia, hospitalized in this section.

The Social Centre "Sfântul Stelian" in Lipovu, Dolj county. Within this center continued to be given assisted education services for preschool children, school tutoring and literacy courses. The total number of beneficiaries in 2012 was of 84 children, who also received, in addition to education services, a hot meal per day. The center is currently funded through a strategic project undertaken by the Association Vasiliada in partnership with the Foundation Children in Need in Bucharest.

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The Day Center "Sfântul Vasile cel Mare" in Târgu - Jiu. The center was opened in early 2009, through the project "Invest in my education", funded by the U.S. Embassy in Bucharest and in 2012 developed its activity through funds raised by the Association Vasiliada, the branch in Târgu - Jiu, especially in the campaign based on the 2 % of the Tax Code. Today, the Center provides educational services (school tutoring school for Romanian, English and mathematics), psychological counseling, but also programs to develop the life skills for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2012, a number of 57 children benefitted from the services of this center, with ages between 9 and 16.

The Integrated Services Centre for Employment in Craiova and Târgu - Jiu. The centers were established in 2011 in order to provide specialized services for unemployed people, to facilitate their access on the labor market. The services offered in the two centers are: psychological counseling, vocational guidance, mediation and employment, vocational training, counseling for job retention. In 2012, 415 inactive people in the labor market benefitted from the services of these centers, 265 in Dolj county and 150 in Gorj county.

Also, in 2012 several projects were implemented:

The Project "Centre for Social Inclusion" developed by the Association Vasiliada in partnership with the National Institute of Social Policy in Romania. The project provides counseling, professional training or qualification and support social reintegration of the persons belonging to social groups at risk of marginalization, in Dolj county. In 2012, within this project, 308 people were trained in jobs such as: elderly caregiver, cook, worker in crop production, commercial worker and computer operator.

The project "Integrated Services for Employment" developed by the Association Vasiliada in partnership with the University of Craiova, Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Federation of Employers in Oltenia (F - PRO). Project's activities were conducted in 20 urban



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and rural communities in Gorj and Dolj counties, where the employment rate is very low. In 2012, the project offered its beneficiaries with a complex of integrated services, providing them the development of some skills and abilities, to help them at employment. Through the project, 120 people were trained in jobs such as: technician in tourism, elderly caregiver and input and validation data operator; 76 people were helped to find a job.

The "SOCIAL" project, implemented nationally by the National Agency of Prisons and the Federation Filantropia of the Romanian Patriarchate. In this project, the Association Vasiliada has been selected to receive financial support for setting up a social enterprise that will have as main activity the production of bread and pastries. In 2012 there took place the rehabilitation and spatial planning works, as well as its equipping with the necessary equipment and machinery.

The program "Masa Bucuriei" ("Table of Joy"), developed by the Association Vasiliada in partnership with Selgros Craiova continued to offer also in 2012 food assistance for needy families, being registered 1,342 beneficiaries.

The above mentioned establishments, programs and projects have also many other philanthropic initiatives and actions that the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova, through NGOs, the parishes and monasteries, have endeavored to support people in difficulty (in Dolj and Gorj counties)<sup>45</sup>.

## **Sociological research**

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<sup>45</sup> Data offered by father Stănilică Adrian, social problems counselor within the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This document reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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Knowing the involvement of the Orthodox Church in Oltenia in the social assistance of distressed people (especially children and the elderly), even before the Second World War, but also after the elimination of the communist regime (1989), a number of 15 priests from the Archiepiscopacy of Craiova were asked 12 questions whose purpose was to learn how it reflect locally (in each parish), the social apostolate conducted by the Orthodox Church of Oltenia, but also the relationship / collaboration with other religions (Christian or non - Christian).

For the first question, Tell us what do you know about your local church / parish in this city / neighborhood and how do its activities evolve today. (How is it organized, etc.), the respondents gave different answers showing that they have knowledge about the History of the Orthodox Church, including the one in Oltenia and the parish in which they serve. Most of them (9 answers) believe that the main activity of the parish must remain the liturgy gracious one, 4 respondents highlighted the importance of the parish involvement in various activities and social projects and 2 respondents felt that the priest must also be a good teacher (instructor) of the community on various issues concerning its good functioning.

For the second question, Show us briefly how is your local church / parish involved in social issues of your local area (assistance in prisons, hospitals, orphanages, charities, voluntary associations etc.)?, the most common answer was to provide material support, including money, to the elderly or disabled living in the parish. There were three responses that highlighted the importance of giving gifts to children in orphanages and the elderly in nursing homes around major holidays (Christmas and Easter). Five respondents felt the need to appoint a priest to each prison. Also, it was appreciated the imperative permanent presence of a priest in hospitals.



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For the third question, We live in a time of major demographic changes resulting from emigration and immigration. What is your local church / parish' position concerning this issue?, in four cases it was emphasized the need for the priest's involvement to support the children left in the care of grandparents (the parents being left to work abroad). Five respondents emphasized the need to involve all the authorities in creating conditions for our country to get closer to the EU standards and determine the return of those who left to work abroad. We will point out that eight respondents were worried by the negative demographic evolution of Romania.

For the next question, How do you view other local religious (Muslim / Jewish / Other) or local Christian communities?, all respondents emphasized the need to respect religious freedom. Only in three parishes there were identified neo - protestant religions (Adventists and Baptists).

For the question, Is there a formal relation to these communities? If yes, describe the character of this relationship, the three respondents characterized as being limited the relations with these communities, especially due to the aggressive proselytism practiced by them.

For the sixth question, How does your local church / parish deal with migrants and ethnic minorities in its local area? Could you tell us about activities, programs, contacts and / or cooperation with other religious communities?, most respondents felt that the priest has the duty to ensure firstly the establishment of correct relations between the Romanians and the Roma minority, where it exists. Note that in seven parishes subjected to the sociological research there are no emigrants or ethnic minorities. In the other eight cases, the Roma communities have been accepted by the majority population and the priest believes that for the peace of the community, the Roma citizens should be economically and socially



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integrated, giving them the religious assistance that they request / accept. There are no ongoing projects initiated by these parishes exclusively meant for the Roma population.

Regarding the question, If applicable in your context: How does your local church / parish support parishioners who have immigrated to other countries?, in only three cases the respondents indicated that they keep, via the internet, a connection with some believers abroad. In other cases it was highlighted the importance of Christmas and Easter, when many of those who are working abroad return with their family and the priest has the opportunity to talk to them. Important events in the life of a family such as baptism or marriage are suitable for a priest to strengthen the spiritual connections with those members of the parish.

For question number eight, How does the local church etc. deal with discrimination, either ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual, etc. What kind of activities, methods, programs does your local church employ on this matter?, it was emphasized by all participants in the sociological research that there is no discrimination on grounds of ethnic, religious, cultural, or sexual reasons. Two respondents pointed out, however, that in some Roma communities we can speak of a self - discrimination, a self - exclusion from the economic, social and cultural life of the community. According to the teaching of the Orthodox faith, homosexuality and lesbianism are considered sins. But there is no action taken against these minorities, the Church reserving its right to defend its own dogmas and canons.

For the following question, How is the official doctrine of your denomination / national church reflected on other religions or other Christian communities in your practices at a local level? (Motivation? Inspiration? Legitimation?), all respondents stressed the importance of preserving the teaching of faith and tradition of the Orthodox Church. To understand the other religions or Christian communities, it is necessary to know their past (history) and their attitude towards the majority religion. Only afterwards we can speak of a

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local practice. However, the starting point in these relations can be: mutual respect, recognition of the Orthodox identity for most Romanians, dignity, freedom, responsibility, concern for others, etc. These principles should be taught by every Orthodox priest and have normative value.

Regarding the question: In your work with people and communities from other religions, would you say your own denomination / national church supports you? What kind of support do you experience in this regard? What kind of conflicts, if there are any, do you experience?, only three respondents (where there are neo - protestant communities) emphasized the importance of involving the Archiepiscopacy in social projects or charitable actions targeting disadvantaged social groups, without taking into account their religious identity. No conflicts were reported.

For question number eleven, How does your local church / parish participate in “peace work”, such as religious dialogue, cooperation with non - Christian (secular) associations etc.?, it was stated once again the principle of religious freedom. In 12 cases, priests mentioned the Ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches, highlighting the importance of these institutions for inter - religious and inter - Christian dialogue. Among the local institutions with whom parishes frequently collaborate, all respondents mentioned the City Hall and Local Council.

For the last question, Does your local church / parish support the idea of religious freedom?

- a. If yes - how does your church deal with religious freedom in your local area?
- b. If not - why do you think your church is not permissive concerning the concept of religious freedom?
- c. Does your local church / parish experience any conflicts with the national church body on this issue?

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→ If yes: Could you tell us some examples of specific conflict issues?, all respondents stressed the importance of religious freedom, Christianity in general and Orthodoxy in particular considering freedom (of any kind, including religious one) as a gift of God. In the three parishes where neo - protestant religions were identified, priests claimed that the existence of other faiths motivated them both in performing religious services, but also especially in organizing regular pastoral visits to maintain a permanent dialogue with the believers (including with those who do not regularly attend Church).

In conclusion, in the extremely fluid space marked by the strongest economic crisis of the past 60 years, one can observe that the state and the Church became institutions undergoing major changes, while religion becomes shelter for the people in risk of social and economic exclusion. The world economic crisis which started in 2008 shows major changes in the public policies, particularly in the social policies and the Church may play a major role for the support of the vulnerable groups, now that the budget allocations traditionally administered by the State have decreased. Thus, the complementarity of assisting the vulnerable groups through social programs developed by the Church is beneficial both for the state and the Church itself due to the predominant social - philanthropic character of the support provided to the believers during this period of economic crisis.