

The Persecution of Romanian Monasticism during the Communist Regime – an attempt at Contextualization

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Abstract:

Taking into account a broader political and cultural context, we can better understand the genesis of Decree 410/1959 and we can appreciate accordingly the measures taken by Patriarch Justinian to develop and save monasticism from the constraints created by the communist regime. To that effect a sketchy arch over time is drawn, from which one can observe the existence of an anti-monastic current that lies latent in the Christian civilization, either because it is considered obsolete and a deviant form of Christian living that takes hold of human and economic resources to the detriment of the state, or because it realizes its strength to oppose it and to thwart the expansion of doctrinal and cultural “renewal” currents.

Keywords:

Romanian Orthodox Church, monasticism, Patriarch Justinian Marina, Decree 410/1959

Introduction

Ever since its establishment monasticism has represented a special form of dedication of one’s life to God and fulfillment of the evangelical precepts, a commitment to a path that looks from its beginning to be strewn with difficulties. Therefore it can be said that monasticism “is a new aspect of Christ the Saviour in the world; or in order to achieve this seraphic status those who wear monastic

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clothes should be brought up and trained for this purpose”.¹ Despite the vicissitudes of time, raising and training of monks has remained a priority of the Church, while the secular power challenged this kind of living, dismissing it as a way of evading their civic duties.

A famous example is given in the measures taken by the iconoclast kings, mainly Constantine V, against monasticism – perceived as the main supporter of icons – that had developed greatly and also possessed extensive areas of land, enjoying fiscal immunities, which was detrimental to the state treasury, to the army in lack of fighters and even to agriculture and other economic activities by shortage of land, workers and officials. Consequently, celibacy was banned, monks were expelled from monasteries, which were then turned into inns, barracks and stables.²

By its profound anchoring to the multi-secular history of the Holy Tradition and by preserving a genuine spirit of the great Fathers of the Church, the monastic institution hindered the development of the doctrinal and cultural currents of “renewal”, becoming automatically the target of retaliation, which brought monasticism, in many cases, on the verge of extinction. That is what happened at the middle of the eighteenth century in Transylvania, after the monks’ resistance to Uniatism proved sufficient to jeopardize the “Union with Rome” or in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution.

The material wealth that monasticism had enjoyed between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries also led to spiritual decline, which postulated the need for movements of spiritual revival, like Paisianism. Meanwhile the abuse, immorality and irregularities recorded in monasteries served as a pretext for government intervention. A good example is found in inter-war Romania when, on 11 March 1938, Decree-Law No. 1168 was issued, which, in order to gain legitimacy to interfere in the wealth management of monastic establishments, emphasized that “monasteries, with few exceptions, are not hotbeds of morality and culture, and what had been said about their contribution to Romanian culture and civilization in the past sometimes enters the field of myth, so that the state of monasteries today should not be compared to that in the past but to the one that must be according to their mission and to justify its existence within the state body; the immoral acts in some monasteries are even led by some abbots, with the rank of bishop.”³

¹ Pr. Lect. Augustin Faur, “Romanian Monasticism and its reorganization”, in *ST*, nr. 3-6/1950, p. 304.

² Gabriel Alexe, Causes of Byzantine iconoclasm, http://ortodoxie.3x.ro/diverse/Carti/Apologetica_ortodoxa/Iconoclasm.htm. Further on iconoclasm see: Pr. Prof. Nicolae Chifăr, *Iconology and iconoclasm*, Ed. Andreiana, Sibiu, 2010; Teodor Studitul, „*Jesus Christ— prototype of his image*”. *Treated against iconomachy*, translation and introduction: diac. Ioan I. Ica jr, Ed. Deisis, Alba Iulia, 1994

³ Cristina Păiușan, Radu Ciuceanu, *The Orthodox Church under the Communist rule*, vol. I, INST, Bucharest, 2001, p. 42.

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Neither was the idea new, nor had it appeared suddenly in the concerns of the authorities, who were animated by an anti-monastic current that emerged amid the Revolution of 1848, while importing several revolutionary “ideologies”, as shown in the work of Princess Elena Ghika (Dora d’Istria)⁴. She criticized monasticism in the name of a militant Christianity, who is considered a potential active principle of social development, revealing a certain mentality that dominated Romanian elites of the time, “which, without drafting systematic speeches, show a quite reluctant attitude towards monasticism, whether insensible to religion, or admitting that Christianity has a certain political or spiritual role. In any case, the general attitude is that monasticism operates a deviation in people’s lives, which is neither natural, nor is it in the true spirit of Christianity, as Dora d’Istria believes”.⁵

These themes were then taken over by the communists who introduced themselves as supporters “of the Church’s <renewal>, taking advantage of its <purification> in order to undermine it and, gradually, destroy it.”⁶ After the appointment of Petru Groza’s government on 6 March 1945 and after the rigged parliamentary elections of 19 November 1946⁷, the attitude of the political authorities towards the state becomes more trenchant, leaving aside the goodwill manifested until the elections. State interference became more frequent, culminating in the election of Metropolitan Justinian Marina of Moldavia as Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church on 24 May 1948⁸.

Paradoxically, the person meant to transform the Church into an ineffectual institution subservient to the state, has actually started to strengthen it through a program of revival of the monastic life, which, despite the restrictions caused by government provisions, managed to enjoy a period of prosperity.

⁴ Dora D’Istria, *La vie monastique dans l’Église orientale*, Joël Cherbuliez, Genève, 1858

⁵ George Enache, “The Monastic Issue in Modern Romania between the Liberal Indifferentism and the Communist Denial”, în *ST*, nr. 4/2013, p. 51.

⁶ George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, *Orthodox Monasticism and the Communist rule of Romania in the fifties*, Ed. Partener, 2009, p. 15.

⁷ Further on this, see: Cristina Păiușan, Narcis Dorin Ion, Mihai Retegan, *The communist regime in Romania. A political chronology (1945-1989)*, Editura Tritonic, Bucharest, 2002.

⁸ Further on this, see: George Stan, *HE Patriarch Justinian Marina, Patriarch of Romanian Orthodox Church*, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 2005; Acad. Florin Constantiniu, „The Patriarch’s election (1948) seen from Moscow”, <https://istorieevanghelica.ro/2017/01/01/alegerea-de-patriarh-1948-vazuta-de-la-moscova/> (2.03.2017); Diac. Gheorghe I. Moisescu, „The election, handing crutches and installation of His Eminence Justinian as Archbishop of Bucharest, Metropolitan of Wallachia and Patriarch of Romanian Orthodox Church”, in *BOR*, nr. 3-4/1948, p. 213-224. Gala Galaction, *Jurnal 1947-1952*, Ed. Vestala, București, 2007; George Enache, Adrian N. Petcu, *Patriarch Justinian and Romanian Orthodox Church in the years 1948-1964*, Ed. Partener, Galați, 2009.

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Starting from the ascetic principle of joining work and prayer together to counter the attacks of Acedia and summarized in the phrase “Ora et labora”, Patriarch Justinian declared ever since his enthronement speech that monasteries should become centres of spiritual irradiation and work.⁹ In this respect Patriarch Justinian realized that he should provide a legal framework allowing him to match church legislation to the new political realities of post-war Romania, “but taking into account the traditions of our Church. Having in sight the progress towards which the doors of our entire life were wide open, and leaning on all those elements of tradition which do not constitute an obstacle to progress, but rather a starting point for further action on a forward course, His Eminence proceeded in 1948 to compiling the new Law of church organization in the form of a Statute, which preserved and deepened old principles of universality, of church constitutionalism, like that of canonicity, giving them a new and appropriate expression and a much broader application.”¹⁰

In this eulogistic manner that Rev Prof Fr Liviu Stan intended to summarize the 5 years of patriarchy of His Beatitude Justinian, the teacher of Canon Law highlighted a particular reality: the special concern that the Romanian Orthodox Church primate showed for developing the new statute of organization and functioning, as well as for drawing up the “Rules for organizing monastic life and for administrative and disciplinary functioning of monasteries”.

By imposing certain moral stringencies, which were meant to reform the “spirit” of monasteries and to convince the authorities that the monks are real examples of conduct and devoted citizens, who do not seek to undermine the state, but on the contrary, co-operate to “democratize” the country, Patriarch Justinian set the necessary tone to compensate for the measure taken by the authorities to bring the land of the monasteries under state administration – which was ultimately aiming at decreasing the number of monks and enclosing monastic life – and ordered the founding of handiwork cooperatives in monasteries for them to have their own income and to develop independently of state policy.¹¹ In addition to these measures, the patriarch encouraged the monks and nuns to take up studies in monastic seminaries or courses organized by major

⁹ *BOR* (The Romanian Orthodox Church) nr. 5-6/1948, p. 235-236 apud George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, *op. cit.*, p. 15

¹⁰ Pr. Prof. Liviu Stan, “Church Law by Patriarch Justinian”, in *BOR*, nr. 5-6/1953, also in Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Liviu Stan, *Church and Law. Studies in Orthodox Canon Law* Vol. VI. *Romanian Orthodoxy*, coordinator Pr. Conf. Irimie Marga, Ed. Andreiana and ASTRA Museum, Sibiu, 2015, p. 139-140.

¹¹ See Adrian-Nicolae Petcu, “Hand-made workshops in Orthodox Monasteries between 1949 and 1960”, in *The CNSAS Notebooks*, Year II, nr. 2(6)/2010, p. 229-254.

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monasteries to enhance the level of intelligence and spiritual experience among Romanian monasticism. Patriarch Justinian noted the importance of these development paths ever since he was a parish priest, having a model in the person of Metropolitan Nifon Criveanu, who had exemplarily organized the life of monks in his bishopric. The patriarch took up those regulations, making them known and urging their application throughout the patriarchate, thereby aiming to raise monasticism through culture, through serving the Church and the nation and through order and obedience.

These provisions are:

- “1. Early drafting of budgets for the following year.
2. Forestry in the lands provided must be done in all fairness and income must be used for the very purpose given to them. Wood sale must be done in auctions publicly announced by the Official Gazette and various newspapers.
3. Most efficient use of agricultural land through systematic farming, through plantation of trees, vegetable crops, making apiaries, setting up ponds, breeding cocoons, birds etc.
4. Work should intensify in workshops for carpet weaving, embroidery and knitting in monasteries of nuns; setting up workshops for woodcarving and church painting in monasteries of monks.
5. Observation of a pure monastic living and re-enthronement of monastic discipline, rooting out completely the rambling of monks, giving due attention to the clothing and attire of the inhabitants, thereby eliminating the sad spectacle of monks going about in rags and begging. [...]
6. Community life, being the most appropriate in monasteries, shall continue to be observed further, but for that purpose the most venerable abbots and abbesses shall take parental care of the ruled, who they will treat as sons or daughters and with whom they will form a true spiritual family.
7. Regular morning or evening services must be held daily according to the monastic order. [...]
8. Churches in need of repair and restoration must be immediately dealt with.
9. Monasteries and sketes shall not accepting easily new members, out of their will for a bigger community, but must go instead for a severe selection of them, so that completely unprepared individuals may not sneak in”¹².

This classification makes clear the desire of Patriarch Justinian – in whose monastic regulations these requirements by Metropolitan Nifon are found, taken almost verbatim – to revive and develop the Romanian monastic life to the highest standards.

¹² Church life in Oltenia. Yearbook of the Metropolis of Oltenia, The Printing House of the Holy Metropolis of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin, Craiova, 1941, p. 889-892.

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It was imperative that monastic life underwent a big change and the patriarch wanted a thorough transformation within the spirit of his time, just to cope with the new regime. He was aware that without a monastic foundation he would not be able to withstand the interference of the communist power.¹³ What should be noted is how Patriarch Justinian used the obsessive communist theme to create a new, active and “productive” man, managing by means of linguistic tricks to convince the authorities that the monks will give up the “idleness”, contemplation and needless concerns that the communist propaganda would constantly denounce, seeking to get every person fully integrated into the “working field”. Some clerics have interpreted this direction as measures for the destruction of Orthodox monasticism, without taking into account that in this way the survival of this institution was secured, and that, fooled by a wooden language that could be imitated and simulated, the communist regime found monastic “activism” to be more acceptable than “mysticism”, which had been fought by propaganda and repressive measures. “Therefore, Patriarch Justinian’s monastic «reforms» are not a <<communization>> of monasticism, as it was written many times, but the reflection of a inter-war trend to reform monasticism in a more “active” spirit, but which still preserved the ‘mystical’ spirit. “¹⁴ Statistically, the prosperity of the monastic life can also be seen in a note from the Department of Religious Affairs dated 11 March 1958.¹⁵

Year	Monastic Personnel			Monasteries and Sketes		
	Monks	Nuns	Total	Monks	Nuns	Total
1938	1638	2549	4187	119	35	154
1949	1528	3807	5335	122	56	178
1957	1773	4041	5814	113	77	190

Circumstances around the promulgation of Decree 410 of 28 October 1959

Gradually, by the middle of the sixth decade of the twentieth century most of the sectors in which the Church was a force had been annihilated and solely Romanian monasticism had remained the only untouched sector yet so strong, being viewed as an oasis in the vast desert of blows taken by the Church. It came as a natural thing that the soviet-oriented regime should not to stop halfway its path,

¹³ Adrian Gabor, *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the communist regime (1945-1964). A picture of the State – Church relations*, Bucharest, 2006-2007, p. 61.

¹⁴ George Enache, “The Monastic Issue in Modern Romania between the Liberal Indifferentism and the Communist Denial”, p. 51.

¹⁵ ASRI, fond D, dosar nr. 7755, vol. 5, f. 97, apud C. Păiușanu, R. Ciuceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

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especially since the “State Security” Department had started long before to assess life in monasteries and even arrest some of the monks and nuns whose activities was deemed an affront to the ruling state. To curb this development of monasticism, the authorities drafted a document, which provided for the closure of monasteries, for the limitation and removal of monks from these centres of spiritual strength, and which, after more lobbying, was adopted as Decree 410 of 28 October 1959. Again, the government provision has not appeared out of nowhere. First of all the authorities felt threatened by this revival which had seen two movements different in their manifestations, but which increasingly highlighted the potential and the attraction exerted by the intense spiritual life: the “Burning Bush”¹⁶ and “Vladimirești”¹⁷ movements.

The measures taken by the patriarch were meant to revive monastic life because it represented a key segment of the Church, which had to become stronger even if the authorities tried to achieve the opposite. The patriarch wished to strengthen his position even more as he was aware of the repression that the Church would face in the future. The clergy of the time were also aware of these realities and alongside them most intellectuals living the Orthodox faith. These two social groups had the wisdom to form a common front to revive the authentic Orthodox experience and to become enriched in the gifts of the Romanian Orthodox culture. This was how the “Burning Bush” group emerged around the Antim Monastery near Bucharest and formed around the writer and publicist Alexandru Teodorescu – known especially under the pseudonym of Sandu Tudor. This movement was based on another group, “Spirit and letter”, coordinated by Archimandrite Iuliu Scriban, who had the same Monastery of Antim in Bucharest as a meeting point.

The movement was founded in 1945 and consisted of a series of cultural-religious conferences titled “The Burning Bush of the Theotokos.”¹⁸ This group approached Hesychasm thanks to Father John Culîghin, who brought an anthology of hesychastic texts from Russia – *Sbornicul* – named after the Russian saints who practiced this prayer. Many priests attended the meetings at Antim where, inevitably, they discussed the political situation of Romania or the suffer-

¹⁶ Further on this, see: André Scrima, *The age of the Burning Bush*, introduction by Andrei Pleșu, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 1996; † Antonie Plămădeală, *The Burning Bush*, Ed. Arhidiecezană, Sibiu, 2002; Ierom. Daniil Sandu Tudor, *The Mystery of the Burning Bush*, edit. Gh. Vasilescu, Ed. Anastasia, Bucharest, 1999; Ierod. Paraschiv Cleopa, *Elder Daniel from Rarău and the Burning Bush*, Editura Agaton, Făgăraș, 2012.

¹⁷ Further on this, see: George Enache, Adrian N. Petcu, *Orthodox Monasticism and the Communist rule of Romania in the fifties*, Ed. Partener, Galați, 2009, Mihail Urzică, *False miracles and wonders*, Ed. Anastasia, București, 1993.

¹⁸ The name comes from Exodus 3, 2-5, which speaks of the burning bush that was not consumed, being both a symbol of the Theotokos and of the endless prayer, the Jesus Prayer.

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ing of Romanians, clergy and Church at the hands of communism. This religious association received legal status somewhere between 1945 and 1946 – in statements made by Sandu Tudor the date of the official founding of the association lies between 1945 and 1st September 1946¹⁹ – also many students taking part in its meetings. Communists could not remain insensitive to this movement, which had a deeply mystical and cultural connotation, which made it suspicious to the authorities. For this reason the association was driven underground and “dissolved” most likely in April 1948, and Sandu Tudor, in a statement made in 1958, kept Valeriu Zaharia – the new abbot of Antim Monastery, a man with a notorious legionnaire past but also with “affinity” for communism – responsible for this situation.²⁰

The movement was labelled as counterrevolutionary and driven underground, but its members were able to further meet in the coming years, but rather sporadically since on 2nd September 1948 Sandu Tudor – the “soul” of this group at Antim Monastery – became a monk and in 1949 he left Bucharest for Crasna Monastery in Gorj, where he would be ordained a priest (hieromonk) under the name of Agathon.²¹ After years 1954-1955 the ties between the former members of the “Burning Bush” resumed. Sandu Tudor – now Hieroschemamonk Daniil of Rarău – would come to Bucharest very often, and meetings were held in various locations in the capital, but those meetings would be suppressed after the arrest of Sandu Tudor on the night of 13th to 14th June 1958 and the association was left to oblivion. Archbishop Antony said that the real reason for which this association had been banned by the authorities was that “the Burning Bush movement should be included among the first and therefore most daring and practical actions of Orthodox spiritual resistance against communism, while this endeavoured to become established in post-war Romania”.²²

This religious movement gave the authorities a lot of headache, showing people that “if freedom of the body can be restricted and oppressed by the nobles of the day, freedom of the spirit is invincible, because it is born and comes from God, who gives strength and steadiness in the face of all adversities of time”²³. The Burning Bush was and remains “a meeting between cult and culture, between lay intellectuals and clerics, between science and religion in a time of crisis, be-

¹⁹ Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-163

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 180.

²¹ † Dr. Antonie Plămădeală, *The Burning Bush*, Sibiu, 2002, p. 20.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 18.

²³ Alexandru Moraru, *The Romanian Orthodox Church between 1885 and 2000*, Ed. IBM-BOR, București, 2006, p. 662.

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ing” the last episode of real synodality of the Orthodox Church during the communist dictatorship years”(Andrei Plesu)”²⁴.

In connection with the Burning Bush movement many priests and theologians were monitored, among which Priests Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania and Benedict Vasile Ghiuș at the Patriarchate and Professors Dumitru Stăniloae at the Theological Institute in Bucharest and Alexandru Mironescu. Because of this movement and of those who practiced hesychasm the communist authorities began a fierce battle against Orthodox mysticism. This was predictable because the practitioners of prayer and hesychasm could not agree with the communist actions. This is how they hit “mysticism”, qualified as a source of insubordination and an engine of anti-communist attitude, which could not be tolerated by the authorities. The Monastery of Vladimirești was considered another centre spreading religious mysticism and, according to the informative notes of the time, it was gathering around it by means of pilgrimages “thousands of believers possessed of “hatred and contempt” towards the communist regime.” Alongside these accusations the monastery leaders were accused of having given material and moral support to several persons wanted by the State Security. It was Abbess Veronica who was accused of the above – she was said to have obtained three identity cards for Dumitru Teodosiade in 1953, whom the State Security had been searching since 1948. The monastery’s confessor was accused of having covered the identity of Ion Lupaș – a Legionnaire supporter – and of having absolved him from his sins encouraging him that “what he did was not a sin because he did it against communism”²⁵.

These events convinced the authorities to arrest, on 30 March 1955, the monastery leadership, made of Abbess Veronica, confessor Ioan Silviu Iordache and nun Mihaela Iovan. However, communist repression would have not been possible without the support from some members of the Church like Bishop Antim Anghelescu of Buzău, who was at law with the monastery leadership, accusing the abbess of immorality and disobedience. After their arrest, some nuns, going over the new leadership of the monastery, formed an Interim Committee, stirring up the other nuns in various forms. Faced with these pressures, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided between 10th and 12th September 1955 that the nuns and sisters who were not originally from Galați area should be transferred to their native regions, and that 61 sisters should be sent to Bistrița Monastery (Pitești) for tuition, thereby willing to suppress resistance in the monastery. The synod members were surprised to hear that the nuns refused to leave the monastery, showing fierceness and composing anti-communist songs dedicated

²⁴ Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

²⁵ ASRI, stock D, file 7755, vol. 7, f.86, apud Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, p. 251

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to those arrested. Moreover, in December 1955, the monastery council sent a letter to the Holy Synod, in which it threatened solidarity with the old leadership and proclaimed breaking all relations with the Orthodox Church, leaving this cult massively²⁶. The monastery council's decision is not only an act of ecclesiastical disobedience, but rather an act of defiance of the communist regime that violated religious freedom guaranteed by the two Constitutions – that of 1948 (art. 27) and that of 1952 (art. 84)²⁷.

The Romanian Patriarchate did not want an open conflict with the state authorities and decided to close down the monastery on 12th January 1956, but this decision could not be implemented due to the fact that relatives of the nuns and farmers from neighbouring villages gathered at the monastery in order to make it impossible for the authorities to intervene forcefully. Faced with these problems, the State Security agents developed in February 1956 a thorough plan for the evacuation of the monastery so that the nuns and guards were detained and loaded onto 30 trucks, in order to be “screened” later, and the nuns in the monastery board were arrested. Unfortunately this was not the only monastery under the attention of the State Security, but others were not subjected to such strong and visible attacks – at least until 1959 – being only searched or supervised. Many monasteries have paid dearly following the communist attacks, the price consisting of the large number of martyrs and confessors who suffered simply because they were Christians, theologians and members of the Church: “You are a legionnaire because you are a theologian and being a theologian you are anti-communist and to be anti-communist means being a legionnaire”²⁸ – as Teodor M. Popescu was reprimanded while under investigation. For these “faults” major punishments were given – between 10 and 25 years of harsh imprisonment. Many monks were persecuted for their faith – “at Vladimirești Monastery alone more than 60 nuns and sisters were arrested between 1956 and 1960, and at Sihastru Monastery 35 of them. Many of the monks arrested died in prison: nun Mihaela of Vladimirești, Abbess Nectaria of Poiana Mărului and Nicodima of Tismana are just a few names of martyrs from among the monastic order”²⁹. The trial of Vladimirești convinced the state authorities they were facing a veritable

²⁶ Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

²⁷ I. Moraru, Ghe. Iancu, *Romanian Constitutions. Texts. Notes. Comparative presentation*, 2nd edition, Official Gazzette, Bucharest, 1995, p. 148.

²⁸ Vasile M. Popescu, *A martyr of the Cross. Life and writings of Teodor M. Popescu*, edited by Gabriela Moldoveanu, Răzvan Codrescu, with a documentary by Adrian Nicolau Petcu, Ed. Christiana, București, 2006, p. 400.

²⁹ V. Manea, *Orthodox priests in communist prisons*, ed. a II-a, Ed. Patmos, f. l., 2001, p. 9.

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“black army of monks and nuns” that the patriarch supported and valued as a very precious good of the Church.

Another threat for the authorities was the establishment of the National Movement of Resistance against Communism after 1948³⁰, consisting of various groups of people who disagreed with the political changes of the time and who were even refused the right to say this because the opposition parties – like all other legal forms which could have passed as opposition or criticism – were dissolved. Clearly this movement has become the number one enemy of the communists. This is why representatives of this movement began to search for specific places to hide and where they can come up with other ways of resistance. Many found shelter in monasteries located in more remote locations where not every one had access, being hosted and even supported materially and morally by the leadership of the respective monasteries. It is clear that the monasteries, and, one might argue, the whole Church supported this Movement of resistance as one that expressed the same beliefs as the members of the clergy. This is also mentioned by Adrian Nicolae Petcu, who highlights the areas in which the Church has helped and supported the anti-communist resistance: “so we can identify: a support for the movement of anti-communist armed resistance in the mountains and forests of Romania, an action taken by many monks in Orthodox sketes and monasteries, and also by parish priests; another facet is that of the sermon as anti-communist speech, most often dressed in the shape of Christian language and wisdom. Another aspect of the resistance is that by means of intense spirituality, using prayer as a weapon against atheism, both in monasteries and in communist prisons. The last forms are the resistance of the hierarchy and that of the Romanian Exile”³¹.

This series of events led the communist authorities to change their perspective of the Church: while before 1957 the danger came from various “reactionary” clergy, afterwards the Orthodox Church, as a whole, was perceived as a threat to the regime and the communist power initiated a series of “systemic” measures of an administrative and repressive nature, meant to destroy an institution that had become too powerful³². Based on these observations George Enache and Adrian

³⁰ Radu Ciuceanu, Octavian Roske, Cristian Troncota, *The beginnings of the Resistance Movement in Romania: Vol. II, June to November 1946*, Institutul Național pentru studiul totalitarismului, Bucharest, 2001; Radu Ciuceanu, *The National Resistance Movement in Oltenia. Vol. I: 1947-1949*, Institutul Național pentru studiul totalitarismului, Bucharest, 2001.

³¹ Adrian Nicolae Petcu, “The participation of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the anti-communist resistance”, in *The armed movement of anti-communist resistance in Romania, 1944-1962*, CNSAS, Ed. Kullusys, București, 2003, p. 185.

³² George Enache, “«The arrest» of Patriarch Justinian at Dragoslavele, in 1958. Myth and truth”, in *Ziarul Lumina*, nr. 29 septembrie 2009, <http://ziarullumina.ro/arestul-patriarhului-justini->

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Nicolae Petcu believe that “documents indicate that the reasons for this repression of 1959 are not caused by the events in the socialist camp, but have an internal character in that the Romanian Orthodox Church dangerously overcame the limits imposed by the State and the State Security”³³. However, we must not ignore that an extremely important factor, which led to the persecution of Romanian monasticism, was the change of the entire religious policy of the U.S.S.R. In 1958, when Nikita Sergheevici Khrushchev initiated a visible process of de-Stalinization, which also involved damaging the already fragile relations with the Orthodox Church, namely undermining it in order to achieve a complete atheist state until the semi-centennial anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution (1967). The ideological change and the split from the Stalinist standard led to the launch of a new offensive against the Church, which sought:

“1) a substantial reduction in the number of parishes and monasteries; 2) weakening their material and financial base; 3) dissolution of theology schools; 4) changing the church status and imposing a strict control on the policy regarding the Patriarchate personnel; 5) repression of certain categories of faithful and banning other categories from attending church (teenagers, military personnel, etc.).”³⁴

The measures were applied beyond the borders of Russia and thus the Ukrainian seminaries in Kiev, Lvov and Lutsk were closed, with only the one in Odessa remaining open while the important religious centres of Lavra Pecerska near Kiev and Hlinska Pustîn were closed.³⁵ A decree referring to monasteries of the USSR was also implemented in Belarus after it was promulgated by the Council of Ministers on 16th October 1958, which was calling for the reduction of agricultural areas leased to monasteries and also the gradual closure of active monasteries.³⁶ In the Republic of Moldova, as in other countries of the Soviet bloc, since 1958 a new stage in the fight against religion was opened, “with the closure of more than 300 Orthodox churches so that by 1988 only 193 churches remained open, which numbered 230 priests, 12 deacons and 114 singers. So were dissolved, one

[an-la-dragoslavele-in-1958-legenda-si-adevar-39063.html](#)

³³ George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, “The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Securitate Service. Reading notes”, in vol. *Totalitarianism and resistance, terror and repression in Communist Romania*, Coordinator: Conf. univ. dr. Gheorghe Onișoru, București, 2001, p. 114-115

³⁴ Prof. Mihail Vitalievici Șkarovski, “The Russian Orthodox Church during the twentieth century”, in *The Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century*, coord. Christine Chaillot, translation by Liliana Donose Samuelsson, Humanitas, București, 2011, p. 438.

³⁵ Dr. Sonia Senik, “The Orthodox Church in Ukraine in the twentieth century”, in *The Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century*, coord. Christine Chaillot, ed. cit., p. 360.

³⁶ Pr. Feodor Krivonos, “The Orthodox Church of Belarus in the twentieth century”, in *The Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century*, coord. Christine Chaillot, ed. cit., p. 341.

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by one, especially after Decision No. 18 of the Central Committee meeting of the P.C.M. on 23rd January 1959, those approximately 20 monasteries and sketes, with only Japca Monastery remaining open, where nuns of Russian and Polish nationality were living, known ever since the inter-war period as supporters of Pan-Slavic ideology and of the ‘old rite’.³⁷ Taking into account the wider context of the U.S.S.R. religious policy it is easier to understand why the authorities have unleashed their fury during the second half of 1958.

The provisions of Decree 410 and its implementation

“Considered «guilty» of the situation of the Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Justinian was “warned” by the political power through the arrest and conviction of the “Burning Bush” and “Viforâta” groups, which included the closest collaborators of the patriarch. At the recommendation of the Interior Minister, Alexandru Drăghici, who warned of a Legionnaire conspiracy within the Romanian Orthodox Church, which had to be eradicated immediately, there were several waves of arrests: on 14th June 1958 most of the suspects were arrested: Alexandru Teodorescu (Sandu Tudor), Benedict Ghiuș, Roman Braga, Sofian Boghiu, Felix Dubneac, Arsenie Papacioc, Alexandru (“Codin”) Mironescu, George Vășii and Șerban Mironescu; on 29th July: Nicolae Radulescu and Dan Grigore Pistol. 5th August: Vasile Voiculescu and Gheorghe Dabija. 4th September: Dumitru Stăniloae; 18th September: Emanoil Mihăilescu. Others that were arrested: Paul Sterian, Nichifor Crainic, Paul Constantinescu, Constantin Joja, Alexandru Elian, Antonie Plămădeală, Nicolae Bordașiu, Petroniu Tănase, Vasile Vasilache, Grigorie Babuș, Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, Andre Scrima, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Anton Dumitriu, Gheorghe Dabija, Arsenie Boca, Vladimir Streinu and many others. The series of arrests would continue with short breaks in the coming years, which made Bishop Pavel Șerpe (who in the meantime became vice-chancellor of the Centre for Missionary Guidance in Curtea de Argeș) say, according to an informative note on 15th April 1960, that even then “... the country’s leadership is treating the priests badly. They were arrested without reason, namely those arrested were the best preachers and serving clergy, the most virtuous people on the assumption that they are wealthy, mystics, “former Legionnaires”, that they camouflaged gold, weapons etc. and many other such reasons (...)”³⁸.

³⁷ Romeo Cemartan, *The Bessarabian Church case. Political and religious interference*, Ed. Alfa&Omega, Chișinău, 2004, p. 38.

³⁸ A.C.N.S.A.S., background information, case no. 709, vol. II, f. 93 cited George Enache Adrian Nicolae Petcu, “The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Securitate Service. Reading notes, p. 118. Further on this, see: Paul Caravia (coord.), Virgiliu Constantinescu, Flori Stănescu, *The im-*

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The shock in the church world was so great that it was then thought that Patriarch Justinian would also be arrested or at least removed from office. Considering him sufficiently isolated the regime asked him in September 1958 to implement a series of measures that would have resulted in the destruction of monastic life in Romania and the considerable weakening of economic and social positions of the Church.³⁹ Thus, a report by Alexandru Drăghici dated 6th October 1958, makes clear the hostile attitude towards these “hotbeds of counter-revolutionary activities” as monasteries were regarded: “further toleration of the large number of Legionnaire and reactionary individuals in monasteries as well as maintaining a large number of monasteries where the number of monks is continuously increased by indoctrinated individuals holding counter-revolutionary ideas represents a social danger” and therefore “suggested that:

a) Legionnaire supporters and individuals that held positions in the bourgeois-landlord state apparatus, who are monks in monasteries, bishoprics, metropolises and the patriarchate must be removed from monasticism, must be denied the use of monastic clothing and must not be allowed to return to monasteries;

b) dissolution of monastic seminaries and forbidding monks and nuns to attend the Theological Institute;

c) entry into monasticism must be done in the future only by notice of regional commissioners for religions;

d) total ban on the future establishment of monasteries and sketes and closure of the monasteries and sketes that were established after 23rd August 1944, which were to be restored to their previous purpose, namely of churches served by a parish priest;

e) since the number of monasteries is too big it must be reduced by half, particularly including those that are ordinary and those that were established after 23rd August 1944. Their buildings must be turned into maternity homes, hospitals, clubs, nursing homes and schools;

f) land, agricultural inventory and their machinery must be handed over to the G. A. C. sites around these monasteries;

prisoned Church. Romania 1944-1989, Institutul Național pentru studiul totalitarismului, Bucharest, 1998; Fabian Seiche, *Romanian martyrs and confessors of the twentieth century. Communist prisons in Romania*, 2nd edition, Ed. Agaton, Făgăraș, 2014; Cristina Păiușan, Radu Ciuceanu, *Romanian Orthodox Church under Communism. Vol.1: 1945-1958*, Institutul Național pentru studiul totalitarismului, Bucharest, 2001, Ștefan Iloaie, Paul Caravia, Virgiliu Șt Constantinescu, *Confessors behind bars: servants of the Church in communist prisons*, Ed. Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 1995.

³⁹ George Enache, “The arrest” of Patriarch Justinian in Dragoslavele in 1958. Myth and truth.”

g) banning the youth from entering into monasticism before the age limit of 50 years and above.⁷⁴⁰

Patriarch Justinian refused to implement these measures and prepared for confrontation in the same manner in which he had acted before, “namely negotiating permanently with the political power and preparing churchmen to discreetly block the steps taken by the government. To gain time, he postponed calling the Holy Synod until December 1958, while he desperately sought solutions. During this time his mysterious three-week «vacation» at the Dragoslavele Skete took place.”⁷⁴¹ Meanwhile, on 29th October 1958 the defendants in the “Burning Bush” group were put on trial, being judged “for having attempted to overthrow the state order. Dressed in clerical clothes and bearded, they admitted in court the statements made during the investigation. During the debates names of acting hierarchs were mentioned. It is believed that a group of bishops (possibly Metropolitan Firmilian Marin of Oltenia, former green etc. and Patriarch Justinian) will follow”⁷⁴². Attempts to intimidate the patriarch were growing, and the possibility of his detention became more plausible.

George Enache tries to shed light on the withdrawal of the patriarch and argues that the long-stay at his Dragoslavele residence caused panic among the clergy, the rumour being that the patriarch is under house arrest or that he was already arrested, and after returning to Bucharest His Beatitude Justinian refused any discussion on the matter, saying only that he used the time to write a memoir to be handed in to the communist power. In this document “the measures taken against the Church are denounced point wise. Thus, we hear that the sons and daughters of priests were discriminated against in terms of chances to study and their parents had to cope with a reduced salary and considerable increase of taxes on the parish income. As far as monasteries are concerned, the policy to sabotage the monastery workshops was criticized, since they no longer received orders from the state, nor from individuals, who had become fearful. The situation of workshops and printing houses attached to bishoprics had become equally critical. Moreover, overnight, the State began selling to the Church construction materials at significantly increased prices. [...] These “subversive” steps were doubled by actions openly catalogued by the patriarch as “anti-religious propaganda”, consisting of suspending the construction and repair of places of worship and trigger-

⁴⁰ Constantin Aioanei, Frusinica Moraru, “ROC fighting the “red devil””, the Altar of Banat, no. 1-3 / 2001, p. 90-91.

⁴¹ George Enache, “«The arrest» of Patriarch Justinian at Dragoslavele, in 1958. Myth and truth”.

⁴² Dudu Velicu, *The Orthodox Church during the Sovietization of Romania. Daily notes. Vol. II. 1948-1958*, edited by Alina Tudor-Pavelescu, Bucharest, 2004, p. 250.

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ing an intense campaign of promotion, by all means, of atheism and discouraging of religious beliefs.”⁴³

The memoir remained without effect. Consequently, the proposals made by Drăghici reached the Department for Religious Affairs and were then presented in the session of the Holy Synod of the ROC of 15th December 1958 by the General Secretary of this Department – Dogaru Dumitru – who recommended the Synod several measures to be taken against monasteries “which by the activity inside their premises presented a danger to public order and state security:

- amending the Rules of Organization and Functioning of monasteries in order to secure a monastic personnel of good moral and civic quality;
- excluding from monasticism those who have been convicted, arrested or who, because of their past, stain the Church’s reputation, those who violated monastic values, who had been in education for less than 7 years or whose presence in the monastery was contrary to their regulations;
- setting for each monastery a maximum number of monks, according to their capacity, shutting down monasteries and sketes which were found unsuitable for monasticism, or changing their purpose”⁴⁴.

Patriarch Justinian was the only hierarch of the Holy Synod, who in 1959 refused categorically to accept the project proposed by the Department of Religious Affairs.⁴⁵ In fact, he even claimed “he will not recognize the decision of the Council in the presence of other Church leaders, describing it as a government measure and not one taken by the Church.”⁴⁶ Certainly, the members of the Holy Synod refused to hear of such measures, denying them completely, but the Department of Religious Affairs resorted to another measure of squeezing the Church. Its members sought the help of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and thus built up a considerable front against the Romanian Orthodox Church. Help to this coalition also came from the State Security, which was able to provide valuable information about the exact status of monasteries, their historical value and accommodation capacity, the history and hostile activity of some monks etc. This close collaboration between the Department of Religious Affairs, State Security and MIA (Ministry of Internal Affairs) was completed by the promulgation of Decree 410 of 28th October 1959,

⁴³ George Enache, “«The arrest» of Patriarch Justinian at Dragoslavele, in 1958. Myth and truth”.

⁴⁴ Constantin Aioanei, Frusinica Moraru, art. cit., p. 91.

⁴⁵ Adrian Nicolae Petcu, “ Documents on the attitude of Patriarch Justinian towards the implementation of Decree 410/1959” in *The CNSAS Notebooks*, Year II, no. 2 (4) / 2009, p. 334-335. For a more developed approach see Dr. Sebastian Dumitru Cârstea, “Patriarch Justinian’s position towards monasticism until the State Decree 410 of 1959” in *RT*, no. 3/2009, p. 55-77.

⁴⁶ George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, *op. cit.*, p. 52

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which formed the legal basis of attacks against monasteries, being a new and heavy blow to the ROC. This decree mostly contained the provisions stipulated by Alexandru Drăghici and Dumitru Dogaru pointing towards “the destruction of some monasteries and the removal of several monks from monasticism.”⁴⁷

Decree 410/1959 was the culmination of a generalized repression of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which aimed to purge it from all things considered hostile. It can be said that the year 1959 is the moment of truth regarding the real nature of the church-state relations. But at the same time one must understand that its composition was not a spontaneous gesture since “the prosecution files show us the antecedents of this event dating back at least 4 years. A systematic pursuit convinced the State Security agents that the Romanian Orthodox Church representatives systematically evaded the directives of the party, trying to set up centres of resistance.

The conclusion of these facts was submitted to the Interior Minister Alexandru Drăghici, who suggested appropriate measures under the circumstances.”⁴⁸ As a result of this decree, over 3,000 monks and nuns were removed from monasteries and sketes, of which 1775 have left “voluntarily”⁴⁹ and 62 Orthodox monasteries and sketes were dissolved on 31st March 1960, with only 132 left “.”⁵⁰ According to statistics compiled in April 1960, between 1st January and 28th October 1959, when the decree was implemented, from a total of 224 monasteries open on 1st January 1959 another 30 were closed down. The same statistics indicate that after April 1960 a new wave would remove more monks from monasteries, whose number was said to have reached 1783, with only 1456 of them being allowed to stay in the establishments.⁵¹ There are also other statistics and imprecise information provided by the hierarchy and press of the time, but their data are very difficult to put together as the difference between the figures provided is very high.⁵²

In applying the provisions of Decree 410, the communist authorities have faced two opposition forces: one represented by those who oppose leaving the monasteries, namely those monks and nuns who understand the subtleties of this

⁴⁷ Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

⁴⁸ George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, “The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Securitate Service. Reading Notes”, p. 114-115.

⁴⁹ Constantin Aioanei, Frusinica Moraru, *art. cit.*, p. 92-94

⁵⁰ Cristian Vasile, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

⁵¹ George Enache, Adrian Nicolae Petcu, *op. cit.*, p. 58-59.

⁵² See for this purpose Rev. Fr. Dr. John Dura, *Romanian monasticism in the years 1948-1989. Testimonies of Romanians and considerations relating to them*, Ed. Harisma, Bucharest, 1994, and in particular Chapter II: Definitions and considerations regarding testimonies of Romanians about the statistical situation of the Romanian Orthodox monasticism during the regime of atheistic-communist dictatorship in Romania (December 1948-1989), p. 46-63.

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law and will not play the role dictated by the state, and the other opposition force was concentrated in the person of Patriarch Justinian, who tried, using the same diplomatic style, to limit and even reduce the effects of the decree as much as possible. Alongside the patriarch other clergy from the Church leadership also tried to appease the enthusiasm with which the main repressive power of the state committed itself to implementing the provisions of the decree; they “undertook various manoeuvres for preventing and sabotaging the measures taken by the State on the one hand, and on the other hand they manifested resistance and procrastination in the total and timely implementation of the program envisaged”⁵³. All these clerics were an observable force, but among all, the patriarch was the main opposition, who through various actions tried to maintain a larger number of individuals in monasteries. To this end, he “gives the decree a number of interpretations in order to distort and prevent the implementation of its provisions”⁵⁴:

a) he argues that in addition to those who graduated from seminaries and theological institutes, the graduates of elementary monastic seminaries, regardless of age, should also be accepted as having clergy education and should be allowed to remain in monasteries. Under church rules though, only seminaries and theological institutes are considered clergy-training schools, but according to the patriarch’s interpretation it would mean that a large number of monks and especially nuns under the age of 30 are allowed to stay in monasteries, since in recent years most of the monks finished studies of the 2-year monastic schools operating within most of these monasteries;

b) young monks and nuns who have in their monasteries relatives who are old, severely disabled or unable to work should remain there to take care of them. This would enable even more inhabitants to remain in monasteries;

c) under the pretext that closing some monasteries, which in recent years have been visited by foreigners, the regime in our country would face an unfavourable situation abroad, the patriarch asserts the monasteries should remain open;

d) using the excuse that some nuns, who were meant to leave the monasteries, are actually owners of some of the houses inside their premises, the patriarch ordered them to continue living in their homes.

e) by these interpretations the patriarch tried to inoculate the authorities the idea that the implementation of this decree must be delivered over a period of time in order to “allegedly” avoid creating disturbances, especially since he considered this law as having no canonical legal basis – which was true. He wanted as many monasteries to remain open and tried with every effort to keep as many monks in their communities.

⁵³ Constantin Aioanei, Frusinica Moraru, art. cit., p.94.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

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“Further evidence of the attitude of resistance manifested by Patriarch Justinian Marina in applying Decree 410/1959 is given by the unjustified delay in implementing the decree in the monasteries of the Archbishopric of Bucharest, under his direct responsibility, and where the number of individuals who left the monastic life is far too small compared to the total number of monks and nuns who do not qualify”⁵⁵. The patriarch’s opposition is further illustrated by the fact that Justinian also wanted to keep traditional and beautiful monasteries that reflect the richness of the Orthodox spirituality: “when no monastery will be left in the country, then I will close Ciorogârla and Ghighiu myself. These two monasteries must remain open. Here also we must have some beautiful, well-organized monasteries, so that I myself have something to show to foreigners when visiting our country.”⁵⁶ Decree 410 also regulated the situation of the old-rite Orthodox worship, whose operational status was not recognized and accepted in our country. The leaders of this cult refused to obey the decree because their monasteries had not been built by the state but by the faithful – as they declared. Many Old Calendarists also had violent attitudes, which were immediately repressed⁵⁷.

This decree marked the beginning of a new persecution against monasteries in particular, and against the Church in general. It lasted between 1958 and 1960 and corresponds to “the second freeze” after the withdrawal of the Soviet Army (1956). This wave of arrests, which claimed victims both among intellectuals and students, and among priests and nuns, was also a demonstration made by the Romanian State before Russia, showing that the Romanian Communist leaders have not lost the “revolutionary vigilance” of universal communism.⁵⁸ Romanian Orthodox monasteries were in the sixth decade of the twentieth century true bastions of Romanian culture and spirituality, therefore becoming a constant opponent of the communist authorities, which explains why the state has made so many efforts to suppress this “opium of the Romanian people” that darkened the minds of many “free” citizens of the Romanian People’s Republic.

Conclusion

The provisions of Decree 410/1959 were a heavy blow to the Romanian monasticism and their consequences propagated across time depriving the Roma-

⁵⁵ Adrian Nicolae Petcu, “Documents on the attitude of Patriarch Justinian towards the implementation of Decree 410/1959”, p. 334-335.

⁵⁶ George Enache, *Orthodoxy and political power in contemporary Romania*, p. 107.

⁵⁷ Pr. Lect. Dr. Radu Petre Mureșan, *Old Calendarism in Romania*, Agnos, Sibiu, 2012, in particular Chapter III.

⁵⁸ Florin Constantiniu, *An honest history of the Romanian people*, Encyclopedic Universe, Bucharest, 1997, p. 192.

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nian Orthodox Church of an entire generation of spiritual fathers, a loss which is becoming more visible as the great confessors passed away one by one, but not before giving witness about the sufferings and persecutions endured as a result of the Decree's implementation or the purges on the pretext of Legionnaire support.

By creating a sketchy arch over time one can observe the existence of an anti-monastic current that lies latent in the Christian civilization, either because it is considered obsolete and a deviant form of Christian living that takes hold of human and economic resources to the detriment of the state, or because it realizes its strength to oppose it and to thwart the expansion of doctrinal and cultural "renewal" currents.

The work of Patriarch Justinian reveals a deep concern to achieve a level of autonomy for the monasteries by emphasizing a substantial economic contribution of the community which manages to sustain itself, implementing the plan of Metropolitan Nifon Criveanu. In addition to these measures it began a process of educating the monastic personnel, aiming at training people in order to understand the role which they made by submitting the three votes.

The amplitude of the plan to revive monastic life and the echoes caused in society by the movement "Burning Bush" or by "Vladimirești" phenomenon have warned the authorities which have identified a legionary structure inside the Church, acting mainly through the monastic centers that provided support to the Resistance Movement. Making use of other pretexts and numerous intimidations like the arrest of the members of "Burning Bush" and "Viforâta", the authorities forced the Church to accept the 410/1959 Decree.

Taking into account a broader political and cultural context, we can appreciate accordingly the measures taken by Patriarch Justinian to develop and, respectively, save monasticism from the constraints created by the communist regime.