

**Autochthonism as a Form of Acculturation in Father
Arsenie Boca's Icon
of the Mother of God
with the Child in Prison Clothes Housed
in the Church of
“The Hieromartyr Saint Eleutherius – New”
in Bucharest**

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Abstract: This work was originally composed as a brief seminar paper in the discipline „Interculturality and ethnicity in the visual arts – icon and architecture in the Carpathian space” of the Czech professor Petre Balcárek, within the „Comparative Theology” courses that are part of the Master Degree study at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology from Alba-Iulia. Now expanded, the present study deals with the phenomenon of *acculturation* in the iconography present in the Romanian space exemplified in a fascinating and unique fresco painting unfortunately, hidden for a long time and belonging to the great Romanian spiritual father Arsenie Boca, highlighting especially the aspects related to the theme, style and message of this painting. Known as the “Mother of God with the Child Jesus in prison clothes (romanian = *zeghe*)” from the vault of the altar of the „The Hieromartyr Saint Eleutherius – New” Church in Bucharest, this fresco reveals a remarkable example of the concept of *autochthonism*, as a synthesis of the Byzantine tradition embedded with Western elements.

Keywords: acculturation, autochthonism, Mother of God, Jesus in prison clothes, „The Hieromartyr Saint Eleutherius – New” Church, Arsenie Boca, iconography, fresco painting

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Contextual information

The choice of this iconographic phenomenon was mainly motivated by the reverence for the wonderful figure of Romanian priest, Father Arsenie Boca (1910-1989)¹, nicknamed the *Saint of Transylvania*, who stood out especially for his life of holiness and vast activity as a painter, both “spiritual painter” of souls as deeply revered spiritual father and actual painter of church iconography. That is why I thought it very important to bring to light not just the teachings Father Arsenie Boca left to posterity through the few amazing and useful spiritual writings published posthumously² — which have been dealt with exhaustively by others — and through the countless testimonies of his contemporaries whose spiritual lives changed radically upon meeting him, but especially the theology in colors of the original fresco paintings of the few churches in Romania where the father worked as an icon painter. Therefore, the analysis of the wonderful and enigmatic fresco in the vault of the altar at the Church „The Hieromartyr Saint Eleftherios”³ – New in the middle of Bucharest claims to be a kind of iconology

¹ The most documented and complete biographical file of Father Arsenie Boca so far at Florin Duțu, „Și cărțile au fost deschise” (*Apoc. 20, 12*): *Părintele Arsenie Boca (1910-1989): o biografie*, Ed. Floare Albă de Colț, Bucharest, 2013, p. 290, structured in 8 chapters: I. *Curriculum Vitae or a possible annex for the future canonization file. „Here are the facts!”* (pp. 18-51); II. *Childhood and adolescence at Vața de Sus (1910-1922), Brad (1922-1929), Theological Academy of Sibiu (1929-1933)* (pp. 52-66); III. *Student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest (1933-1938)* (pp. 67-96); IV. *Sămbăta de Sus Period (1939-1948). „Painter of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ” in the storm of war at Brâncoveanu Monastery* (pp. 97-129); V. *Priest at the Prislop Monastery (1949-1959) during the period of the torturers* (pp. 130-173); VI. *The removal of Father Arsenie Boca from the monastery. A new decry of Prislop* (pp. 174-218); *Iconarian in Bucharest (1959-1967), in civilian clothes by order of the State Security. Bratu objective „The Painter”* (pp. 219-245) and VIII. *In the village of Drăgănescu (1967-1988). Departure to the Lord, Sinaia, † November 28, 1989* (pp. 246-264). The same author recently published a monumental work presented as a doctoral thesis: *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) – Monografie*, Ed. Floare Albă de Colț, Bucharest, 2021, 496p, divided into 3 large chapters: I. *The Father Arsenie Boca before the establishment of the communist regime* (pp. 61-201); II. *The pastoral-missionary activity of father Arsenie Boca from the establishment of the communist regime until decree 410/1959* (pp. 202-292) and III. *Father Arsenie Boca's activity as a church painter* (pp. 293-387).

² *Cărarea Împărăției*, Ed. of the Holy Romanian Orthodox Bishopric of Arad, Deva, 2006; *Scrieri inedite*, Ed. Charisma, Deva, 2019; *Cuvinte Vii*, Ed. Charisma, Deva, 2006; *Practica vieții monahale*, Ed. Charisma, Deva, 2019; *Manuscrise Inedite ale Părintelui Arsenie Boca in the work of PS Daniil Stoenescu, Părintele Arsenie Boca, „Omul îmbrăcat în haină de in” și „Îngerul cu cădelniță de aur” (Iezechiel 9,3; 10, 2 și 6; Apocalipsa 8, 1-6*, Ed. Charisma, Sinaia, 2008.

³ The Hieromartyr Saint Eleutherius, bishop of Illyria (*Illyricum*), commemorated on December 15 together with his mother Martyr Anthia (Evanthia), was martyred during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (117-138). See the Synaxar for the month of December, on the fifteenth day, the commemoration of the holy martyr Eleftherios, bishop of Illyria in: *Mineiul pe decembrie*, Bucharest, 2005, Ed. of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, p. 236. Cf. The Synaxar Saint Nicodemus the Aghiorite in the *Synaxaristēs tōn dōdeka mēnōn tou eniautou* edition, Athenēsi: Ch. Nikolaou Philadelphēōs, 1868, vol. II, pp. 360-361.

meant to reveal the mystery surrounding it, and wonderfully exhibiting the autochthonous character of *acculturation* method.



The Mother of God with the Child in her arms: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Gal 3:27)”⁴

The analysis of this phenomenon is part of an individual research that arose, initially, from the curiosity to learn as much as possible about this pictorial masterpiece, and then, from the desire to bring to light the true meanings of the message that Father Arsenie Boca tried to transmit to his generation and beyond, unfortunately not received in time, and decoded only very late by a young graduate of philosophy and theology from Bucharest.

First, I would like to highlight the pictorial works in the artistic portfolio attributed to revered Father Arsenie Boca recently inventoried by Mr. Florin Dușu⁵, among which appears the fresco of the altar „The Mother of God with the Child in prison clothes”:

⁴ Source: https://sfelefterie.ro/wp-content/gallery/galerie/038_1_II.jpg (accessed on April 11, 2024).

⁵ Florin Dușu, „Și cărțile au fost deschise” (*Apoc. 20, 12*): *Părintele Arsenie Boca (1910-1989): o biografie*, pp. 36-38.

- The scene of the entry of Ruler Michael the Brave into Alba-Iulia, Romanian Athenaeum, Bucharest.
- Church „St. Demetrius” from Bixadul Oltului, Covasna county, where Fr. Arsenie Boca practices alongside the master painter Costin Petrescu.
- Church „The Hieromartyr St. Eleutherius – New” from Piața Eroilor, Cotroceni district, Bucharest, painting the altar (the fresco on the vault of the altar representing the *Mother of God with the Child in prison clothes, Abraham's Sacrifice*, etc.) working together with the painter Vasile Rudeanu.
- Church „St. Nicholas” from Drăgănescu village, Giurgiu county, fully painted.
- The icon of *St. Paraskeva* from Iași (of the Balkans) from the „Annunciation – St. Anthony” Church, Curtea Veche, Bucharest.
- The Icon of the *Life-giving Spring* from the Church „St. Trinity”, Tei, Bucharest.
- Icon of the *Mother of God with the Child*, „Holy Trinity” Church in Chichiș, Covasna county.
- The icon of *St. Joseph the New from Partoș*, the Metropolitan Residence of Timișoara, painted after the canonization in 1955 at the „Hermitage of the Nuns” in Bucharest.
- The icons of the iconostasis at the Church of the Prislop Monastery: *Jesus Christ the Savior* (standing), *the Mother of God* (standing) *with the Baby Jesus*, *the Annunciation* on the royal doors, the *Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel* on the deacon doors.
- The icons from the cell at Sinaia: *the Nativity of the Lord*, *the Savior Jesus Christ* and *Saint Nicodemus the Sanctified* from Vodița, Tismana and Prislop.

The fresco this article focuses on — “The Mother of God with Baby Jesus dressed in prison clothes” — has a special history and significance for the context in which it was created and, particularly, for the mysterious message it carries. Unfortunately, not much has been written on this topic. Florin Duțu is one of the very few who mentioned something about this iconographic phenomenon⁶. There are two articles that caught my attention and led me to delve deeper into the mystagogy of this amazing fresco. On the one hand, we have the article published by the then young Alexandru-Valentin Crăciun in September 2007 in the magazine “Lumea credinței”, referenced by Mr. F. Duțu as follows:

„About the contribution of Father Arsenie to the painting of the altar of St. EleutheriusNew Church, Alexandru Valentin Crăciun wrote for

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 222. See also Florin Duțu, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) – Monografie*, pp. 314-319.

the first time, in the article „The look of eternity. Father Arsenie Boca’s painting”⁷, but without researching the church archive. In the fall of 2007, he put forward the hypothesis that the Baby Jesus on the vault of the altar wears “zeghe” (prison clothes)⁸.

On the other hand, we have the short article by the writer Vasile Spiridon recently published in the magazine *România Literară* (Literary Romania) with the suggestive title „De veghe în zeghe” (On duty in prison clothes)⁹. The first part of this article relates the premonitory dream that the young poet Daniel Turcea had in relation to the iconographic representation from the vault of the altar of the church protected by the Hieromartyr Saint Eleutherius and which will be detailed below.

The novelty of the present work consists precisely in the analysis of autochthonism as a method of acculturation present in this unique fresco which unveils a secret hidden from the physical eyes, but so necessary in understanding the prophetic and mystical character of the pictorial message transmitted by Father Arsenie to the Romanian people from that period of communist deprivation.

Concrete temporal and spatial determination of the phenomenon

The phenomenon in question strictly refers to the fresco painting in the vault of the altar of the cathedral church „The Hieromartyr Saint Eleutherius – New” in Bucharest, a monumental church, neo-Byzantine style, with an inscribed Greek cross type plan. The foundation stone of the church was laid on June 29, 1935 and its works spanned a period of 36 years, being consecrated on the day of the celebration of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul (1971) by the patriarch Justinian Marina¹⁰. As far as Father Arsenie Boca’s temporal and spatial positioning

⁷ Alexandru Valentin Crăciun, “Privirea veșniciei. Pictura Părintelui Arsenie Boca”, in the *Lumea credinței*, year V, no. 9 (50), Bucharest, Sept. 2007, pp. 9–13 (available online: <https://lumeacredintei.com/taine/privirea-vesniciei-pictura-parintelui-arsenie-boca/>, accessed on April 11, 2024). The article is also available on the author’s personal blog, published two years later: <https://alexandruvalentincraciun.wordpress.com/2009/07/18/privirea-vesniciei-%E2%80%93-93-pictura-parintelui-arsenie-boca/> (accessed on April 12, 2024).

⁸ Florin Duțu, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) – Monografie*, p. 318.

⁹ Vasile Spiridon, „De veghe în zeghe” in *România Literară*, no. 13, 2019 (available online <https://romanaliterara.com/2019/04/de-veghe-in-zeghe/>, accessed on April 12, 2024).

¹⁰ For more details, see the monograph of the „St. Eleftherios” parish, which contains important information about the Church of St. Eleftherios-Old and the Church of St. Eleftherios-New, available online on its official website, which, unfortunately, lacks absolutely any reference to Father Arsenie Boca, even on the list of painters shown on the short description on the plaque that attests to the fact that the building is classified as a historical monument: <https://sfelefterie.ro/despre-biserica-sfantul-elefterie/monografie/> (accessed on April 12, 2024).

is concerned, it is known from his autobiography that he was removed from the Prislop Nuns' Monastery in the village of Silvașul de Sus in Hunedoara county pursuant to the decision of the Bishop of Arad no. 2407 of May 14, 1959. He had been a spiritual father and priest at Prislop since November 25, 1948, after being transferred from the Brâncoveanu Monastery located in Sâmbăta de Sus in Țara Făgărașului, where he had been ordained a monk on May 3, 1940 receiving the name of Saint Arsenius the Great. The year 1959 was the sad year of the application of the infamous and unwanted „Decree 410” of October 28 of the Presidium of the Grand National Assembly of the Romanian People's Republic which supplemented Decree no. 177/1948 concerning the general regime of religious cults. As a result of this decree, numerous monasteries (more than 92 of the 224 that were functioning on January 1, 1959) were abolished and around 4750 monks and nuns (out of almost 6,014 who existed on January 1, 1959) were abusively removed and stripped of their monastic robes, many of whom refused to renounce the monastic lifestyle, being arrested and convicted or sent to forced residence¹¹.

As a victim of this decree, Father Arsenie Boca was forced out of the Prislop Monastery, stripped of his monastic garb and forbidden to serve at the altar without any good reason. Under the pressure of the communist National Security and with the tacit approval of certain hierarchs, the priest from Prislop began his ministry „as a painter in the church painting studio”¹², living in Bucharest, changing his residence several times between 1959-1978, being dressed in plainclothes and wearing „a forked mustache and double-lens green glass spectacles”¹³.

Being a graduate of Academy of Fine Arts from Bucharest — as Father Arsenie himself mentions in his *Autobiography*¹⁴ —, he majored in „Decorative Art” in the class of master Costin Petrescu¹⁵, whose courses he attended between 1933-1938, obtaining the qualification „Very good”¹⁶, immediately after graduating from the Theological Academy in Sibiu (1929-1933).

¹¹ For details, see *Decree 410/28 October 1959* (George Enache, „Decretul 410/1959. Un scurt bilanț la 50 de ani de la adoptare” in *Ziarul Lumina*, 28 October 2009 (<https://ziarulumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/documentar/decretul-410-1959-un-scurt-bilanț-la-50-de-ani-de-la-adoptare-37899.html>), accessed on April 10, 2024).

¹² Florin Duțu, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) – Monografie*, p. 312.

¹³ Archives of the National Council for the Study of Security Archives (ACNSAS), Informative fund, file 2637, vol. I, f. 302 apud Florin Duțu, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) - Monografie*, p. 313.

¹⁴ Father Arsenie Boca, *Autobiografie*, January 10, 1961, Bucharest.

¹⁵ Florin Duțu, „Și cărțile au fost deschise” (*Apoc. 20, 12*): *Părintele Arsenie Boca (1910-1989): o biografie*, p. 20.

¹⁶ Cf. The report of July 14, 1938 and the matriculation situation was declared „diplomat graduate of the decorative arts section” in the Archive of the National Arts University of Bucharest (AUNAB), *Academy of Fine Arts, Matriculation Register no. 256*, f. 105.

This is what Father Arsenie requested from Patriarch Justinian Marina on July 4, 1959 after he received the decree decision:

„to work at one of the church painting sites in Bucharest, as I have no other possibility of creating meaning in my life, thanks to the decision of the Bishop of Arad no. 2407/1959 of May 14, 1959 by which, after 20 years of being a monk, I was forced to leave the monastery”¹⁷.

The Patriarch officially assigned Father Arsenie to the painter Vasile Rudeanu in the team of painters from the „The Hieromartyr Saint Eleutherius – New” from Cotroceni (Bucharest), in the position of „second painter”, where he will work between 1959-1960, dealing only with the iconographic program of the holy altar, and not being part of the team that had to paint the rest of the Church. We know from a communist National Security file note dated February 1, 1961 provided by the informant with the conspiratorial name „Ionescu Ion” that his brother, Vasile Rudeanu, was disabled while Father Arsenie Boca was painting at the altar of the New „St. Eleftherios” Church. We also learn from the same note that during this time Father Arsenie was much sought after by people for spiritual guidance:

„A former Boca priest works with my younger brother. My brother Rudeanu Vasile is disabled, but he is currently painting at the Eleutheriuschurch [...] My brother and another friend Șelariu Constantin who works with them are very surprised by many people from the province who come to see them at the Eleutheriuschurch, some with letters, others with packages”¹⁸.

After 1960, Father Arsenie also worked for a while at the painting workshops of the Patriarchate, remaining in Bucharest until 1967. From Bucharest he left for Drăgănescu (Giurgiu County) where he would paint the entire Church dedicated to „Saint Nicholas” and stay there until 1983.

It is important to state that the last murderous wave of communist terror had begun a year before (1958) with the aim of arresting the patriotic elite of the country¹⁹, including the „Burning Bush”²⁰ movement, a hesychast group placed

¹⁷ Archives of the Church Painting Commission (ACPC), file no. 13, f. unnum. *apud* Florin Duțu, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) - Monografie*, p. 315.

¹⁸ ACNSAS, Informative fund, file 2637, vol. I, f. 225 *apud* Florin Duțu, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) - Monografie*, p. 318.

¹⁹ Florin Duțu, „Și cărțile au fost deschise” (*Apoc. 20, 12*): *Părintele Arsenie Boca (1910-1989): o biografie*, p. 222.

²⁰ On the movement „The Burning Bush” see: Herod. Cleopa Paraschiv, *Rugul Aprins. Starețul Daniil de la Rarău*, Ed. Panaghia, 2004, as well as Fr. Constantin Jinga, *Ieroschimonahul Daniil Sandu Tudor. Omul și opera*, Ed. Christiana, Bucharest, 2005. Also, André Scrima, *Timpul Rugului*

under the aegis and protection of the Mother of God and which had as leader the writer and journalist, who then became the hieroschemamonk Daniil Sandu Tudor, the abbot from Rarău. Father Arsenie himself, before being abusively removed from the monastery, had been arrested by the communist regime twice serving the following periods of detention: January 19, 1951–March 17, 1952 at the Danube-Black Sea Canal on the charge of „omission to report” („in 1949 he hosted, until 1950, at the Prislop Monastery the monk Plămădeala Leonida who was sentenced to 7 years of hard prison for incitement”²¹) and September 20, 1955–April 7, 1956 in:

- the arrest of the Timișoara Security (20.09.1955–11.11.1955)
- Timișoara Penitentiary (12.11.1955–7.12.1955)
- Jilava Penitentiary (07.12.1955)
- Oradea Penitentiary (17.12.1955–07.04.1956),

with the accusation of „omission to denounce” („he did not denounce the legionnaire Nicolae Bordașiu”²²).

„But their eyes were holden that they should not know Him.” (Lk 24: 16)

There was a long period of spiritual „blindness” for all who wandered through the “St. Eleutherius – New” church. The imposing representation of the Mother of God with the Baby Jesus in her arms, dressed in the loose clothes of a prisoner, went unnoticed even by the eyes of the communist National Security, by the servants of this holy altar and even by those skilled in the field of painting.

A first attempt to decipher this iconographic phenomenon took place in 1972 when the young Romanian poet, Daniel Turcea, had a special, prophetic dream, which he related to his sister Lucia, which in turn was revealed only recently through the article written by Vasile Spiridon mentioned above. Daniel Turcea²³

Aprins. Maestrul spiritual în tradiția răsăriteană, Ed. Humanitas, ed. second revisited, 2000 (1996) and historian Marius Oprea's remarkable reconstruction, *Adevărata călătorie a lui Zahei. V. Voiculescu și taina Rugului Aprins*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2008.

²¹ ACNSAS, Informative fund, file 2637, vol. I, f. 3 *apud* Florin Duțu, „Și cărțile au fost deschise” (*Apoc. 20, 12*): *Părintele Arsenie Boca (1910-1989): o biografie*, p. 34.

²² *Ibidem*, f. 35.

²³ The poet Daniel Turcea (July 22, 1945–March 28, 1979), born in Târgu Jiu, with special knowledge in higher mathematics, atomic physics, chemistry, anatomy, philosophy, art history and literature, attracted by Eastern philosophy and religions, but conquered, finally, by the Orthodox faith. He published poems in the magazine „Amfiteatru (*Amphitheater*)”, being the author of the volumes „Epifania (*Epiphany*)” and „Entropia (*Entropy*)”, which show on the one hand the spiritual difference, but also the spiritual path he followed with his conversion. He had as spiritual fathers Rev. Arsenie Papacioc and Rev. Sofian Boghiu, called by Nichita Stănescu „the greatest poet of Romanian literature, after Eminescu”. He spent the last part of his life in the Monastery of Cernica Island, in whose cemetery he was buried, even wanting to become a priest, his last words being:

unfortunately passed away in eternity at only 33 years old, but his dream was as follows:

„He felt as if a strong hand struck his forehead against the bottom step of a church, so that he could no longer set his foot even on a single step. This church seemed to have been set in the clouds and two young men were coming out of it. One was dressed as a Roman soldier and was armed with a spear, and the other was a bishop, holding the Gospel in his hand. After disputing their possession of a child, who was none other than Jesus, they seized him by the hand and entered the church with him. As the dreamy poet entered that church, he trembled when he saw the Mother of God standing on the clouds, with the Child in her arms, dressed in a robe”²⁴.

Following this *image-vision* of the Baby Jesus „watching in prison clothes”, Daniel Turcea is nicknamed „Daniel the New” by Sorin Dumitrescu and Horia Barnea due to his radical spiritual change after this amazing event. He searches for that image-vision for two years until in 1974, he discovers the very church in the middle of Bucharest with the two saints from his vision as protectors, none others than The Hieromartyr Saint Eleftherios, the bishop of Illyria and the Great Holy Martyr George. He also identifies in the apse of the altar the Mother of the Lord sitting on the clouds with the Baby Jesus in Her arms:

„After reviewing the paintings inside numerous churches, known or unknown to him until then, everything was revealed to him, by chance, on the day when he had to get off a trolleybus in the Opera Square, following a breakdown of the trolleybus. Looking around, he saw the St. Eleutherius – New Church, consecrated three years prior and having as patrons the Holy Martyr Eleftherios, bishop of Illyria, and the Great Martyr George (which were the protagonists of his dream). Finding himself without transportation and without faith, traveler Turcea entered the church and looking up he saw in the apse of the altar the painting «The Mother of God with the Child», where, indeed, Jesus was represented in prison clothes. It had been made by the mural painter’s assistant... Arsenie Boca, who was in the Bucharest hermitage, but the

„Pray!”. On his deathbed, he asked his sister Lucia that after death a wooden „Troia” (*Crucifix*) would be raised for him („Although I know you have nothing to do, if God will help you and you will ever be able to in life, make me a wooden „Troia” (*Crucifix*), please!”), something that happened recently (<https://basilica.ro/poetul-daniel-turcea-45-de-ani-de-la-trecerea-in-vesnicie/>, accessed on April 12, 2024).

²⁴ Vasile Spiridon, „De veghe în zeghe” in *România literară*, no. 13, 2019.

full name, «Mother of God with the Child in Zeghe», was not yet given to her²⁵.

The proper identification and naming of this fresco, „The Mother of God with the Child in prison clothes”, would be realized 33 years later, only in 2007, by another young and very faithful man, Alexandru-Valentin Crăciun, then 29 years old, with a degree in philosophy and theology. According to his own testimonies, A.V. Crăciun first discovered the icon of Saint Paraskeva from the Church of St. Anthony-Curtea Veche, Bucharest, on an afternoon in May 2007. He was worshipping the icons in the church, when he also noticed this icon which was placed in the nave in a niche with a window, but which was then strongly illuminated by a bundle of light rays that shone on the Saint's face:

„But that afternoon, a beam of rays had crept through the stained glass windows and hit the saint's face hard. Bathed in the rays of the sun, the icon is like a fly of gold and light, shining magnificently! And Saint Paraskeva had a radiant face, strengthened by the sun reflected in the rich icon, embossed in gold leaf with filigree. The light of the saint had gathered on her face and eyes. It's Father Arsenie, it's his icon! - I said to myself suddenly, as if in a trance! No need for arguments. That figure of the saint reminded me of the face of Christ from the scene of the Resurrection, which I had previously discovered in a book. The same focused expression in the gaze that came from those eyes. It was the same expression monk Arsenie had those fiery eyes²⁶.

Identified and verified by priest Lucian Petcu, parish priest of the Church in Drăgănescu, and by the bishop of Vîrșeț, Daniil Stoenescu, who was a disciple of Father Arsenie Boca, the icon of Saint Paraskeva began to attract more and more people to the Church protected by Saint Anthony the Great from Curtea Veche, Bucharest.

After this amazing discovery, young Alexandru developed a true obsession for Father Arsenie, as he tried to follow as much as possible „in his footsteps” around Bucharest. That is why, in a short time thereafter, he will have a new revelation regarding the painting in the vault of the altar of St. Elefterios – New Church, in the Cotroceni neighborhood (near the Opera House). Knowing that Father Arsenie had worked at this church as Vasile Rudeanu's second painter, Alexandru Valentin goes to see the painting and is impressed by its magnificence

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Valentin Iacob, „Jesus in prison clothes. The extraordinary story of some unknown icons, painted by Father Arsenie Boca. Both are located in Bucharest. One at the Eleutheriuschurch, the other at St. Anthony” in *Formula AS*, year XVIII, no. 822 (22), 2008 (<http://arhiva.formula-as.ro/2008/822/spiritualitate-39/iisus-in-zeghe-9711>, accessed on April 12, 2024).

and especially by the Child who looked out with open arms like a cross. However, he did not understand Child Jesus' clothes, seeing that they are atypical. One night, the meaning of the Baby Jesus's clothes is revealed to Alexander: *Jesus was dressed in prison clothes!* Even though he „sees” the prison clothes of the Baby Jesus, he still doubts its message, agonizing over it for weeks. That's why, on a very hot summer afternoon in the same year 2007, Alexandru Valentin had a real „vision”:

„It was as if I had gone to St. Eleutherius and found there a priest with whom I was arguing about the fresco. I wanted to tell the priest about Baby Jesus' clothes, but I didn't know how to do it. We were both in the yard at St. Eleftherios. Looking towards the church, I suddenly began to see directly through its walls, as if it was a huge aquarium of saints. And I could see the great fresco of the altar, painted by Father Arsenie, and the fresco shone brighter and brighter as time passed, then became brighter, and brighter until it almost blinded you! By this time, Baby Jesus' clothing had begun to change as well, they were no longer prison clothes. Then I finally started telling the father what was troubling me. I told him about the Child's prison clothes. Jesus in prison clothes you say? «Let's compare!», said the father in my dream. And he pulled out an icon from his breast pocket. And on the icon, the very Mother and Child from the altar was painted exactly. I was looking further directly through the translucent walls of the church, towards the huge fresco, and I what I saw, I will not forget my entire life. I saw Baby Jesus dressed like the sun, engulfed in rays! And the prison like stripes of the garment he was originally dressed in had changed - they had gathered together into a cross... a cross made of bars and darkness... And Baby Jesus was alive, he was living, he had come to life!... And the cross was alive too and was changing together with the garment. «Do you see, father, that Jesus is in prison clothes?», said the priest with whom I was talking in the dream to yet another priest that was there. And at the same moment, a kind of thick myrrh like honey began to drip from that little icon he was holding... And I fell to my knees and cried. Then I collected my tears that had run down on the pavement, so that none of them would remain on the asphalt. And I anointed my eyelids with them. And I woke up happy”²⁷.

In a wonderful way, Father Arsenie intercedes this time as well, as in the case of the young poet Daniel Turcea. Then, the parish priest Lucian Petcu from the Church „St. Nicholas” from Drăgănescu discovers in the attic of the parish

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

house a huge charcoal sketch about to be destroyed that did not correspond to any of the icons that were painted by Father Arsenie in that church. Then, comparing it with the icon of the Mother of God from „St. Elefterios – New”, Fr. Lucian notes that it was certainly made for the huge church in the middle of Bucharest, clear proof of the authenticity of its iconography and its author. The authorship of the fresco in the vault of the altar at the Church in the Cotroceni district is also confirmed by a request of Father Arsenie dated February 13, 1961, shortly after his departure from the team of painters, by which he wanted to record „his contribution to the painting of the Holy Altar”²⁸. Also, by comparing with the other painting works attributed to him, one can easily see the same unmistakable and unique style.



The charcoal sketch made by Father Arsenie Boca and discovered in the attic of the parish house at Drăgănescu Church by parish priest Lucian Petcu²⁹

It is interesting that after this episode, Alexandru Valentin confesses his dream to the parish priest of the St. Elefterios – New Church, Mihai Dragomir,

²⁸ Rev. Prof. Dr. Nicu Moldoveanu, *Cartierul Sf Elefterie — Cotroceni*, Ed. Basilica of the Romanian Patriarchate, Bucharest, 2012, p. 247.

²⁹ Source: https://i0.wp.com/www.voci.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/schita-in-carbune_Arsenie_Boca.jpg (accessed on April 12, 2024).

whose eyes now „open”. He, like many others before him, „were holden that they should not know Him” (*Lk* 24: 16), but now besides the prison clothes, he also notices the fact that *Baby Jesus's haircut* resembles that of a prisoner. Regarding the prison clothes of Baby Jesus, Father Professor Nicu Moldoveanu, one of the parishioners of this Church, has a different opinion:

„these are mere assumptions, without coverage. Arsenie Boca did not work alone, but in a team of painters led by Vasile Rudeanu. And then we believe that they were strictly supervised by the [communist] «agencies»³⁰.

Despite these claims, I consider essential the prophetic words spoken by Father Arsenie Boca immediately after his release from the Danube-Black Sea Canal who said that „prisons will turn into cathedrals!”³¹, which indeed happened. Florin Duțu also comments on this episode claiming that:

„Even if they had been strictly supervised by the «agencies», the communists would not have realized the decorative motifs in this fresco, as they were not interested in the painting, but in the discussions of the painters and their possible political connections and subversive actions. At the same time, Father Arsenie later allowed himself, at the Drăgănescu Church, to paint certain scenes that could be interpreted as «subversive» by the National Security agents”³².

These two amazing discoveries, the icon of „Saint Paraskeva”, and that of the „Mother of God with the Child in prison clothes”, were documented in the fall of 2007 in a short article published in the magazine “*Lumea credinței*” entitled „The sight of eternity. Father Arsenie Boca’s painting”³³ by the young Alexandru Valentin Crăciun.

Analysis of the autochthonism phenomenon

According to the ermine of Byzantine painting³⁴, the image of the Mother of God „Highest than the heavens” or „The most comprehensive than the heavens”

³⁰ Rev. Prof. Dr. Nicu Moldoveanu, *Cartierul Sf Elefterie — Cotroceni*, p. 247.

³¹ Romeo Patrașciuc, *Pr. Valerian Grecu — monahul din livada cu sfinți*, Ed. Agnos, Sibiu, 2017, p. 95.

³² Florin Duțu, *Părintele și pictorul bisericesc Arsenie Boca (1910-1989) – Monografie*, p. 319.

³³ Alexandru Valentin Crăciun, „Privirea veșniciei. Pictura Părintelui Arsenie Boca” in *Lumea credinței*, anul V, nr. 9 (50), Bucharest, sept. 2007, pp. 9–13.

³⁴ *The Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fournà An English Translation [from the Greek] with Commentary*, trans. by Paul Hetherington, London, UK: Sagittarius Press, 1974.

(gr. *Hē Platytera tōn ouranōn*) is usually painted in the half-cap of the altar apse, either sitting on a royal throne and carrying in Her arms or holding on Her knees Baby Jesus-Emmanuel who blesses, either „Oranta”, in a prayer attitude with outstretched hands, interceding for all the faithful, or, more rarely, standing with the Baby in a medallion on Her chest, being framed most of the time by the holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel, as one who sat in the Holy of Holies of the Jewish Temple for 10 or 12 years³⁵. The apse shell of the altar from „St. Eleutherius – New” seems not to respect this erminy at all. Valentin Crăciun notes that:

„The Mother of God floated majestically and sovereignly on gigantic, red and dark clouds, as if from a bombardment or the Apocalypse [...] Baby Jesus looks out with open arms like a cross, as if calling: «Come to Me (Mt 11, 28)!»”³⁶.

In this sense, I consider that there are two types of acculturation in this iconographic representation: based *on work* and based *on reception*. First, Father Arsenie introduced new elements, keeping the theme, but changing the style and, above all reigns the iconographic message. However, this is not a case where Father Arsenie wanted to „violate” the Byzantine erminia, instead, being a victim of communist oppression himself, recently stripped of both his white and black (monastic) clothes, he prophesied, on one hand, the profound struggles the Romanian people went through and would still go through, and on the other hand, it showed the ultimate goal of those who became saints and martyrs, younger brothers of Christ and children of the Mother of God by grace, who tasted from the eternal good things, even at the price of life: „for our eternity in the Kingdom of Jesus, neither the price of life nor any price is too high”³⁷.

The actual manifestation of the iconographic phenomenon as autochtonism becomes evident only after the discovering of this fresco, unfortunately, late, by the post-Decemberist people who begin to pay attention to the details of this painting and to the deep message conveyed from the beginning by its author. Young Valentine discovers *the prison garment* of the Baby Jesus Who waited so patiently for years until someone would „see” Him and recognize Him:

³⁵ See „The Discovery or Protoevangelium of Jacob” in Epiphanius the Monk, Simeon Metaphrastus, Maximus the Confessor, *Trei vieți bizantine ale Maicii Domnului*, trans. and postf. deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2007, pp. 221–235. See the english version: Lily C. Vuong, *The protevangelium of James*, Eugene or Cascade Books, 2018 (available online: <https://www.nass-cal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Vuong-Protevangelium-of-James-Preview.pdf>, accessed on April 12, 2024).

³⁶ Valentin Iacob, „Jesus in church clothes. The extraordinary story of some unknown icons, painted by Father Arsenie Boca. Both are located in Bucharest. One at the Eleutheriuschurch, the other at St. Anthony” in *Formula AS*, year XVIII, no. 822 (22), 2008. Also taken from „Jesus Christ in prison clothes” (<https://www.voci.ro/iisus-hristos-zeghe/>, accessed on April 12, 2024).

³⁷ Părintele Arsenie Boca, *Cuvinte vii*, p. 269.

„the fresco seems to depict a Baby Jesus dressed in prison clothes («I was in prison and you came to visit Me» Matthew 25:36), with open loving and sacrificial hands. Quite remarkable fact, the „seamless effect” is obtained by the arrangement of folds and shadows. The baby suffers along with those unjustly imprisoned, it could be the „point” of this troubling scene (of whose singularity in Orthodox iconography we do not doubt)”³⁸.

As the writer Vasile Spiridon rightly intuited in the title of his article about Daniel Turcea’s dream, the Baby Jesus „in prison clothes sits „watching” receiving and providing rest to all those locked up in the dungeons, but also to those locked up in the „dungeons of sins” (“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”³⁹). On the other hand, perhaps Father Arsenie wanted to show through generations not so much the drama of the Romanian people, but especially the drama that every man goes through for his own sins and passions, with the understanding that man can become the „torturer” of Christ whom, instead of receiving Him in his heart in a spiritual way, imprisons Him, spitting on Him, whipping Him, beating Him, impaling Him and everything else that happened during His Holy Passions. Whatever the symbolic or mystagogic interpretation of this famous iconographic representation, it is certain that Father Arsenie Boca never stopped guiding people’s souls, because even though he was forbidden to serve and especially to speak as he did before his abusive removal from the monastery, the Father „spoke” further with the brush, painting with color in the souls of the people. His message, even if it has remained unheard, unseen or misunderstood by many, is still as profound and current, always having the goal of *restoring the icon of man* built in the image of God⁴⁰.

Let’s not forget that in a homily on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, in the 50s, Father Arsenie „painted” before, just as prophetically, with enlightening words the icon of the man he highlighted:

„But there is another icon in danger: the icon of Jesus, which we each have inside us;

— because from Baptism each one of us is destined to be an icon of Jesus. Against this icon of Jesus in man, there is a more hostile fight today than before against the holy icons.

There is a fight against *the icon of man*!

Where are his defenders!?”⁴¹.

³⁸ Alexandru Valentin Crăciun, „The look of eternity. The painting of Father Arsenie Boca”.

³⁹ Mt 11:28.

⁴⁰ Cf. Fc. 1:27.

⁴¹ Părintele Arsenie Boca, *Cuvinte vii*, p. 334.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of acculturation, „The Mother of God with the Child in prison clothes”, which I dealt with briefly in the present study — considered to be an *autochthonism* that was omitted for a long time by Romanian researchers — is specific to the fresco painting of the parish church „St. Elefhterios – New” in Bucharest and took place during the communist period starting in 1959, but fully revealed only after 2007 and unfortunately absent, together with its author, from the rich monograph of this parish.

The specific elements of this phenomenon are related, in particular, to the pictorial style approached and the mysterious message encoded, especially, in the clothes worn by Baby Jesus Christ. He does not bless, but is in a gesture of stretching out his hands like on the Cross of Golgotha, as if identifying with the suffering of every communist prisoner dressed in torn and bloodied clothing, so that this fresco can be considered an *icon-symbol* of the suffering of the Romanian nation during the terrifying period of communist deprivation.

In the present study, we could not deal in more detail with the mysticism of this iconographic phenomenon in relation to the suffering that took place in the communist prisons, which we did not have time and space to deepen, remaining to be analyzed in a later work or by other interested researchers in the field.

Therefore, at least for the Romanian space, I believe that a *rediscovery of the icon* and the *theology of the icon* of Father Arsenie Boca is necessary. The icon of the Mother of God with Jesus Christ dressed in prison garments reveals to us in colors in an amazing and unique way not only our Lord Jesus Christ together with His Blessed Mother, but also *the man of suffering* of those times, suffering that continues to this day in other forms. Hence, it is clear that the great spiritual Father from Prislop remains as current for all of us today as it was in his time through the mystical depths of his paintings that forever await the healing of the „spiritual blindness” that many are encompassed by.

Through the two young men, Daniel Turcea and Alexandru-Valentin Crăciun, the Holy Father Arsenie Boca shows us the potential that any of us can be the protagonists of a new „revelation” about his life, his sanctity, his rich literary and artistic work, but above all his theological and spiritual teachings written and transmitted in a patristic and philocalic spirit, with the hope that one day the Holy Spirit will enlighten the synodals for an official recognition of his canonization.