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The Autocephaly of the Romanian Orthodox Church: 125 Years Since its Acknowledgement

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Introduction

From antiquity, the ancestors of the Romanian people, the Geto-Dacians, living in the Carpatho-Danubiano-Pontic area, were well known, according to ancient sources, for their profound spirituality and monotheistic religion. That is why Christianity, first preached to them by the apostle Andrew, was welcome and rapidly took root in their minds and hearts.

For centuries, the Romanian Orthodox Church, as a spiritual mother of the Romanian people, bestowed eternal values on it, forming its identity and helping it live with dignity among the other peoples in the area.

Autocephaly is an ancient characteristic of the life and organization of the Orthodox Church; it is rooted in the practice of the Apostolic Church, and means a church that is self-governing, having its own leadership, autonomy and independence in terms of administration. As such it does not break the interdependence between the sister-churches at the dogmatic, canonic and liturgical levels.

In the beginning, for instance, the Apostles acted independently and all churches founded by them were ruled in an autocephalous manner. Thus, according to specialists in canon law, the basis of the ecclesiastic autocephaly of churches resides right in the Apostles’ legislation, i.e. in the 34th apostolic canon, which stipulates the following: “It is proper for the bishops of every kinship to know the first one among them and consider him the leader and do nothing of importance without having his approval; and every one of them ought to do only what he had to in his own eparchy and the villages under its control. Yet the leader also ought not to do anything without having everybody’s prior approval, because only in this way will there be a complete understanding and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit”.1

Examples of autocephalous apostolic churches are, first of all, those mentioned in the New Testament, such as those in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi, according to The Acts of the Apostles, or those of Smirna, Pergam, Thyatira, Sardes, Philadelphia, Laodicea, according to The Book of Revelation.

On the territory of present-day Romania, the ancient Dacia, there existed autocephalous ecclesiastical communities in Tropaeum Traiani (Adamclisi), Axiopolis (Cernavoda), Troesmis (Iglita), Noviodunum (Isaccea) etc., and the diocese, later archdiocese, of Tomis.2

As the organization of the church began to develop in a more systematic manner, especially after the first four ecumenical synods, autocephaly was limited to only certain churches, especially those with a proper individuality, that were well defined, developed in certain historical conditions and in certain geographic areas, with believers of the same kinship who spoke the same language. A church was to be considered autocephalous, only if it was able to form a synod of local bishops

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(this being its only canonical authority) and to choose its own head (archbishop or patriarch), with a well defined area of jurisdiction. When such a church unit – organized on an ethnic-territorial basis – wanted to obtain its independence or autocephaly, it had to take into consideration the hierarchical relationships in which it existed within the autocephalous church it belonged to up to that point and to ask to be released from these relationships. In general, the autocephaly had to be requested from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is considered by the other autocephalous sister churches as being the first among them, since Constantinople was, until 1453, the capital of the Byzantine Empire or “the New Rome”.

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The history of the Romanian Orthodox Church was tightly interwoven with that of its people, who were first called the Geto-Dacian people, then Moldo-Wallachian and Wallacho-Romanian and later on the Romanian people.

Thus, the important changes that took place in the history of the Romanian people, either at the level of social development, or at the level of state and administrative organization, led to corresponding changes in the life of the church. The history of the Romanian Lands in the 14th century illustrates this in a significant manner. The foundation of the Romanian feudal states, Wallachia and Moldavia, led to the creation of the Hungarian-Wallachian and Moldavian Metropolitanates. In 1359, the Patriarchate of Constantinople confirmed the Metropolitan See of Wallachia, which was independent and consequently autocephalous, having its own synod and leader. The same thing happened in Moldavia, where in 1401 the church was acknowledged by the Patriarchate of Constantinople as being independent in matters of organization and functioning, i.e. “insubordinate to any foreign jurisdiction”.

At that time, autocephaly consisted in the right of the local metropolitan to ordain local bishops, without any interference from the outside.

As far as Transylvania is concerned, there is evidence that, together with the creation of the first political structures, in the 10th century in particular, religious hierarchical units appeared next to them, such as deaneries and bishoprics. The political rulers, called “dukes”, such as Duke Gelu, Duke Glad, Duke Menumorut had in their duchies Orthodox bishops (who were the target of Roman-Catholic proselitizing, as they were considered “schismatics” by the Catholic Church). Historical documents list, among others, Morisena, Alba Iulia, Biharea, Dibiscos, as places where Orthodox hierarchical structures existed.

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The rights that the Orthodox churches in the Romanian Lands enjoyed throughout their history and which confirm their independence equal to autocephaly, i.e. the jurisdictional non-interference of any church whatsoever in matters of ruling and organization, materialized at several levels, such as that of exercising the power of teaching, of the sacramental function and especially of jurisdictional authority.

However, the de facto autocephaly that the Romanian Orthodox Church in the Romanian
Lands enjoyed, had also to be recognized *de jure* by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the right moment arrived with two major events in modern Romanian history: The union of the Romanian Principalities in 1859 when Moldavia and Wallachia became one single state under the rule of Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza and the proclamation in 1877 of Romania’s independence from the Ottoman Empire.

**The Process**

Together and in parallel with the movement for the union of the Romanian Principalities, there was an energetic movement for the official recognition of the autocephaly of the Romanian church. It originated in Moldavia after an interference of Ecumenical Patriarch Cyril in the internal affairs of the Metropolitanate of Moldavia. The ecumenical Patriarch Cyril sent a letter to the Metropolitan Bishop, Sofronie Miclescu, admonishing him for his open support for the cause of the Union.

In reaction to this letter Archimandrite Neofit Scriban published *A Short History and Chronology of the Metropolitanate of Moldavia* (Paris, 1857), in which he presented and defended the ancient autocephaly of this church. In the fall of 1857, at the wish of some clergy – but also lay – deputies, the Ad-Hoc Council of Moldavia requested among other things: “The recognition of the independence of the Orthodox Church in the United Principalities from any jurisdiction, while keeping the unity of faith with the Eastern Ecumenical Church.”

The request was made to the Conference in Paris where it was not taken into consideration, however. Consequently the ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza, who wanted an independent Romanian Church, proceeded himself to its reorganization and introduced a law concerning the Romanian Church which stipulated: “The Romanian Church is independent from any other church (autokefalos). It will be administered by the prelate of the united Romania, who will be called Primate of Romania, by two metropolitanans and by several bishops.”

Patriarch Sofronie of Constantinople protested that this proclamation of autocephaly was made in a non-canonical way, to which in 1864 the Metropolitan Nifon wrote that “as far as its internal activity was concerned, the Romanian Church has always been an independent one”, that the new laws in the country did nothing else but legalize a situation which already existed. Alexandru Ioan Cuza also responded, stating that “the Romanian Church is independent of any other foreign church, as far as its organization and discipline are concerned, having this right *ab antiquo*, as certain ancient evidences prove”. Prince Cuza also declared that in his capacity as a ruler he was called upon to protect “of any temptations whatsoever the ancient autocephaly of the Dacian Church” and that for this he would fight with the proper weapons of the laws and canons, thus trying to elevate in honor the Romanian Orthodox Church to whom he wanted to ensure “the independence or the autonomy and the splendor that the Romanian nation was claiming”.

In this context, on December 3rd, 1864, A.I.Cuza “confirmed the Organic Decree for the foundation of a central synodical authority for the affairs of the Romanian Religion”, the first article of which very clearly stipulated that the Romanian Orthodox Church was and would continue to remain independent of any foreign church authority, as far as its organization and discipline were

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8 Ioan N. Floca, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
concerned. This declaration actually represented the official decree of the Romanian Church’s autocephaly.

The decree was of historical importance because it was “for the first time in the history of the Romanian Church that the Romanian State, officially, through its own laws, stipulated the autocephaly of its church”.10

Yet problems and tensions between the Romanian Church in the Principalities and the Patriarchate of Constantinople continued to exist. Even after the Independence of the state of Romania was recognized by the Peace Congress in Berlin, the ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III (1878-1884) took an intransigent attitude towards the actions taken by the Romanian Church. He reacted in particular to the sanctification of the Holy and Great Chrism in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Bucharest on Holy Thursday, March 25, 1883, which was a privilege reserved only to autocephalous churches.

The Patriarch wrote a letter to the hierarchs of the Romanian Church accusing them of disobedience and disorderly behavior. The Holy Synod of the Romanian Church delegated bishop Melchisedec Stefanescu, a bright intellectual and member of the Romanian Academy, to write a response. His response, called “Synodal Act explaining the Autocephaly of the Romanian Orthodox Church and its relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople”, was approved by the Synod on November 23, 1882. It systematically and forcefully rejected the accusations brought against the Romanian Church and demonstrated its historical and canonical autocephaly.11 There was no answer to this report from the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

After the Russian-Turkish War (1877-1878) Romania obtained its independence of state and within this context the discussion between the Romanian Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, now under Joachim IV, was renewed. The Church and the State were equally involved in the discussions on autocephaly. Following lengthy negotiations on April 25, 1885, the Patriarch Joachim IV declared that taking into consideration, together with the Holy Patriarchal Synod, the request that had been sent and “taking a deep thinking of it”, he found it “rightfully justified and in accordance with the Church institutions” and thus sends his blessing to the Holy Church of Romania, “confirming it to be autocephalous and self administered in all matters.” He proclaimed the Holy Synod of the Romanian Church “the most beloved brethren in Christ”. At the same time he sent to the Romanian Church the synodical tomos of recognition specifying that he had already informed the other Orthodox autocephalous churches about it.12

At about the same time, events took a similar course in the Romanian Church on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains. In Transylvania Metropolitan Andrei Saguna (+1873) was working for the independence and the national defense of the Romanians from the Northern part of the Carpathian Mountains against foreign oppressors. He participated in the 1848 Romanian Revolution when, at the Great Assembly in Blaj (May 3-15, 1848), among other things, the independence of the Romanian nation was requested, together with the confirmation of the freedom of the Orthodox Church in Transylvania and its equality in rights with the other churches in the area, as well as the abolition of serfdom and terrage.13

With his fervent religious, social and political activism Andrei Saguna contributed decisively to the reestablishment of the old Romanian Metropolitanate of Transylvania, which had been suppressed in 1701. Due to his wisdom, skill and vision, on December 24, 1864 the diocese of

10 Ibidem.
12 Ioan N. Floca, op. cit., p. 110.
13 Niculae Serbanescu, op. cit., p. 98.
Sibiu broke free from the Serbian Metropolitanate of Carlowitz and was raised to the rank of metropolitanate, with its own autonomy and two dioceses of its own, in Arad and Caransebes. Metropolitan Andrei Saguna was, undoubtedly, the most significant personality in the fight of Romanians in Transylvania for religious, social and political emancipation.14

In this way, after centuries of struggles, where the Romanian Orthodox Church gained and maintained the rights of an independent church thanks to the quality and degree of its organization and functioning and as a consequence of favorable historical circumstances as well as of its actions led with dignity and consistency, it finally gained the acknowledgement of its canonical and historical condition that it rightfully deserved.

Conclusion

One can thus draw the conclusion that since the oldest times the Romanian Orthodox Church enjoyed a vigorous development within the Romanian people, being close to its believers for better and worse, in all the historical stages of their social and political development.

Autocephaly was a concrete reality in the life of the church, long before its formal acknowledgement by the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The enthusiasm, unanimity and common action at all levels of society of all those involved in the achievement of this great wish, Church and State, clergy and believers, rulers and ordinary people, demonstrated that when there is “a union in thought and heart”, no obstacle was too difficult to be overcome, that union makes the power and that the Romanian people, although in various historical periods of time partially spread out under foreign dominations, kept on being conscious of its advantage and privilege at the same time: the unity of kinship, language and faith, a unity which made it last through centuries and fulfilled its great historical wishes.

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