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THIRTY YEARS LATER:
BEING ORTHODOX IN ROMANIA, THEN AND NOW

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Orthodoxy has been an identity element for the Romanian people. Claims such as: “Romanians were born Christians (Orthodox)” or Romania is “the Garden of the Mother of God” are frequently encountered both among the Orthodox Christians and the Romanian Catholics. Pope Paul II, on his visit to Romania, made the same statement. There are many historical examples of this: during the Hungarian domination, the Transylvanian Romanians found the elements of resistance to the pressures of forcefully trying to turn them into Hungarians and Catholics in the consciousness of their Orthodox identity and in their Romanian mother tongue. For the Wallachian/Moldavian Romanians, during the Phanariot period (in the Middle Ages), Orthodoxy was the salvation of a nation in the midst of the Muslim conquest.

1. Orthodoxy: Communist and Post-Communist Periods

Romania’s recent history during the Communist period has offered models of religious resistance (Orthodox, Catholic, Greek-Catholic), which are impossible to reasonably conceptualize. In the Communist prisons in Pitesti, Aiud, Gherla (referential names for the oppression of the Romanian Communist regime) real saints emerged. People who resisted physical pain (hunger, beatings, humiliation, real human atrocities with the purpose of being dehumanized) had their faith in God as their single support.

This identity element was preserved after the Revolution of December 1989, as well. For Romanians, this date means a split, a demarcation line in their historical and national existence. Orthodoxy experienced it in particular. It was the barometer which recorded the

changes in the conceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the Romanian people, who lived through unprecedented experiences and who managed it quite harshly. If during the Communist period Romanians could not go to church without fear or repercussions,¹ now, immediately after the revolution, they lived moments of spiritual effusion. The young were discovering the Christian values in the public space, talking openly about what it means to believe and about what the living, working faith is.

In the same period, the names of some surviving spiritual fathers from the Orthodox space appeared as models to follow: Father Cleopa, Father Galeriu, Father Sofian, Father Arsenie Boca, Father Arsenie Papacioc, Father Iustin. Many of them had gone through the Communist prisons and had survived oppression by the power of faith. They were living testimonies of how faith helps you defeat fear, and even yourself no matter how helpless you are.

The joy of being able to practice the Orthodox faith freely and unswervingly touched the students, who at that time were the generation of the children of the Communist period, of the children who used to be the “pioneers.” Because they had no knowledge about the Orthodox religion and its teaching, since they had only seen their parents secretly attending some services, these children, who were students at the time of the Revolution, tried to reveal the beauty of Orthodoxy in many ways: by organizing Orthodox Christian Conferences held by well-known priests (Father Dumitru Stăniloae, Father Galeriu) with the purpose of catechizing, of explaining meanings from the teaching and practice of the Orthodox Christian religion; by going on pilgrimages to the monasteries which were restored or revived after 1989; by celebrating the Orthodox feasts (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and others); by organizing student festivals with religious themes; by attending icon workshops; by learning how to make prayer beads; by taking care of the old and of children with special needs. The activities were diverse and contributed to the coagulation around millennial Orthodox Christian principles and values: love of neighbor, hope of salvation, and faith in God. This was the spiritual explosion after the Revolution and its effervescence continued for more than a decade.

2. Orthodoxy Today

¹ Before the Revolution, the Romanians were afraid to go to church because of the punishments: reprimands in P.C.R. meetings, prison sentences, sanctions such as exclusion from P.C.R., which means loss of work, social isolation, and persecution by the State Security (Romanian Intelligence Service).

But as Western civilization penetrated the Romanians' life structures, Orthodoxy began to be seen as an outdated, obsolete manifestation of everyday existence. The values of Orthodoxy came to no longer be appreciated by the youth of the year 2000. Although religion was introduced to schools, although dogmatic knowledge was at the disposal of young people, the appreciation of the values promoted by Orthodoxy began dropping. For example, the Family Referendum of 2018 highlighted the division between the everyday values of the Romanian people and the values promoted by their officially stated faith. Only one third of the population showed support for Orthodox Christian values (such as hope, faith and love, good, truth and beauty, self-sacrifice, modesty, compassion, help), in the context in which 86.5% of the Romanian citizens officially declared themselves to be Orthodox (at the 2013 census).

This fracture between what we want to look like and what we do is similar to the opposition between mind and soul. Romanians know themselves to be traditionally Orthodox, so they declare themselves in censuses as belonging to the majority religion. But in fact, in practice, only about 30 percent are Orthodox practitioners. This discrepancy is representative of the current Romanian collective mentality, but also of today's individual mind: "I declare myself Orthodox because this is the religion in which I was born, because my parents are Orthodox, because it is too complicated for me to look for something else in the context in which God occupies an ever smaller and less important place in my life."

If I, as a Romanian, belong to the two-thirds who have only declared themselves Orthodox without living the faith in its true dogmatic dimensions, this means I have replaced God in my life with the Internet, with the psychologist, with my job, with trips, with activities which distract my attention from myself and from my own identity.

If I am part of the third who lives the faith in an active and conscious way means that I constantly strive to be close to the Church through frequent confession and Holy Communion, by listening to biblical explanations, by taking part in pilgrimages (to places where things get a different, deeper meaning), by always behaving according to the Orthodox Christian conception of life. For example, an Orthodox Christian practitioner gets spiritual enjoyment by being humble, that is, when she/he does not show off her or his qualities, when he/she considers himself/herself a person just like everybody else, a person who earns their living by doing things as well as possible. The Orthodox conception of life advises people to do everything as if for God. Only by positioning himself/herself like this towards God can he/she achieve humility, that state of being which paradoxically renders people the sense of peace, fulfilment, and love of oneself and of others.

True humility, which the Orthodox believer seeks to live in the truth, will not help him/her get promoted in the new competitive society. So our Orthodox Christian will experience an internal conflict. The true Orthodox believers resist the temptation of promoting themselves, but many give up in time. The feeling of incapability and the hopeless struggle are often overwhelming. Spiritually, Orthodox Christians find their support in confession, in the Holy Communion and in the Christian model of Jesus Christ the Savior, Who has been wronged the most in the history of the world.

Another absolute value of Orthodoxy and of Christianity in general is to love your neighbor as yourself; to love a stranger, a friend, a colleague who aspires to take your job. This seems unreal in today's society, but it is unfortunately true. And few Orthodox practitioners manage to attain this value in their lives.

By definition, being Orthodox is an effort and a seeming madness. Throughout history, the martyrs have paid with their own life for their faith. Being Orthodox nowadays seems like a subtle walk on the wire. In order to avoid acute internal conflicts, one must always find the optimal option to respect the Christian precepts in a given context. All this effort requires continuous vigilance over what you do, what you say, what you think. And this is one of the basic indications of Christianity: discernment, watchfulness, constant care for doing things as God would advise you, because God is right next to you and sustains you.

An important idea in Orthodoxy is to behave, to think, and to live with the consciousness that God is near you and sees you at any moment, be it good or bad. This thought can save you when you are fallen, and is useful when you are on the heights, a situation in which you can be proud and forget about the ephemeral aspect of life.

If you call yourself Orthodox, but you do not live according to the Orthodox values, you become inconsistent, rebuked by constant remorse, in an emotional, cognitive, and physically visible imbalance. A possible explanation for the increase in depression in Romania and in the world is that the Divine presence has been exiled from our lives. The Supreme Authority Who balances things has disappeared from our lives because He has been banished. Suddenly, we took over responsibilities which overwhelm us, which we cannot bear. The person relives every day the desire to become his or her own god. And that's a little too much for him.

3. Conclusion

Today, Religion Orthodox and the other religions in Romania can freely manifest their faith. But freedom of religious practice is not equivalent to inner freedom. In the Christian

Orthodox conception, this is given only by authentic faith in God. To follow the laws written in the Bible and not written in the Holy Tradition means to be free from the sin and addictions. So, today, many of the Orthodox Romanians enjoy external religious freedom, but they have lost much of the inner freedom given by the authentic faith.