

*The Edification of Churches  
in the '80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Northern Transylvania.  
A Case Study*

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**Abstract:** The end of World War II, in the context of the presence of the Soviet army in Romania, meant for our country the establishment of a new political regime: the communist one. This was a difficult period of time for all the Churches because the regime tried to push them to the periphery of society. Under these circumstances, we focused on one case that illustrates how a parish of the Romanian Orthodox Church, placed in the Bistrița-Năsăud County, managed in the '80s to build a new church, although the state authorities did not agree to it. It was neither simple nor risk-free. As proof stands that, despite the protection he managed to offer, the Eparchial Center of Cluj was forced, in order to put the vigilance of the authorities to sleep, to "punish" the priest, sending him for a whole month to the monastery. As a conclusion, we can say that in the last decade of the communist regime there was a weakening of the pressure over the Church, which allowed, at the level of the whole country, the construction of a quite large number of places of worship.

**Keywords:** edification of churches, communist regime, faith, demolition of churches, Blăjenii de Jos.

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If we search in the history of our nation, we may easily observe that it abounds in all sorts of torments and various challenges. The 20<sup>th</sup> century makes no exception. Its first half was marked by the two World Wars with everything that they meant for the political, social, economic and, last but not least, religious life. Between these two important wars, the two decades of apparent peace seem to be too little. However, at the end of World War II, the Eastern Europe and countries from other parts of the world enter into a new stage of their history, characterized by totalitarianism, persecutions, and violations of the fundamental rights, as a result of the communist regimes imposed by the Soviet Union.

In this general context, in the summer of 1944 (starting with the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August), the Soviet troops entered the territory of Romania. Beginning with this moment, the communist regime was imposed in our country gradually and quite quickly<sup>1</sup>.

In the given situation, the Romanian Orthodox Church searched for ways that offered the possibility to continue its mission towards its faithful, despite the difficulties that it had to deal with. In 1948, religious education was removed from the school curricula and the Church no longer had access to hospitals, social assistance institutions, and the army, which meant the exclusion of the ecclesiastical institution from the public life of the state. Moreover, most of the institutions of theological education were dissolved, which was also the case for magazines and other religious journals. Over 1,000 Orthodox priests were thrown into the communist prisons, where most of them died. Others were released as late as 1964. In 1959, following the

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<sup>1</sup> For the matter regarding the installation and functioning of the communist regime in Romania, see Vlad Georgescu, *Istoria românilor. De la origini până în zilele noastre* (București: Humanitas, 1992); Mihai Bărbulescu, Dennis Deletant, Keith Hitchins, Șerban Papacostea, Pompiliu Teodor, *Istoria României* (București: Corint, 2007); Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria românilor de la Carol I la Nicolae Ceaușescu* (București: Mica Valahie, 2011); Cezar Stanciu, *Documente fundamentale ale regimului comunist din România 1948-1989* (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun, 2013).

“famous” Decree 410, hundreds of monks were forced to return to civil life and many of the churches and monasteries were closed. There were also demolitions of churches, especially in Bucharest, and especially in the last years of the communist dictatorship<sup>2</sup>.

In order to respect historical truth regarding the demolition and construction of places of worship during the communist regime in Romania, we need to mention from the very beginning that the demolition of churches or the destination change of these buildings was not a massive phenomenon in our country. It cannot be compared with that taking place in some of the states of the communist bloc (the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria etc.). In fact, in Bucharest, 20 churches have been demolished; the first one in 1977 and the others along the 80's. Also, in Bucharest, some of the churches were moved from their old locations to new ones<sup>3</sup>. In the rest of the country, there were several other cases of demolitions generally due to reasons of urban systematisation<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For the situation of the Romanian Orthodox Church during the communist regime, the following volumes are relevant: Alexandru Moraru, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română între anii 1885-2000. Biserică. Națiune. Cultură* (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, III, 1, 2006); Mircea Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române* (Iași: Trinitas, III, 2008); Ștefan Iloaie, Paul Caravia, Virgiliu Ștefan Constantinescu, *Mărturisitori de după gratii. Slujitori ai Bisericii în temnițele comuniste* (Cluj-Napoca: Arhidiecezana, 1995); Lidia Anania, Cecilia Luminea, Livia Melinte, Ana-Nina Prosan, Lucia Stoica, Neculai Ionescu-Ghinea, *Bisericile osândite de Ceaușescu, București 1977-1989* (București: Anastasia, 1995); Paul Caravia, Virgiliu Ștefan Constantinescu, Flori Stănescu, *The Imprisoned Church: Romania, 1944-1989* (București, 1999); George Enache, *Ortodoxie și putere politică în România contemporană* (București: Nemira, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Lidia Anania and contributors, *Bisericile osândite* passim; see also [http://adevarul.ro/news/bucuresti/fotogalerie-planul-ceausescu-ras-dictatorul-zeci-biserici-capitala-povesti-cutremuratoare-demolari-1\\_50be03217c42d5a663d1d73b/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/news/bucuresti/fotogalerie-planul-ceausescu-ras-dictatorul-zeci-biserici-capitala-povesti-cutremuratoare-demolari-1_50be03217c42d5a663d1d73b/index.html), accessed May 14, 2017; for the matter of displacement from their initial location of over 10 churches in Bucharest, see also Daniela Cârlea Șontică, “Biserici mutate din calea dictatorilor”, *Ziarul Lumina*, March 22, 2008, accessed May 14, 2017. <https://ziarullumina.ro/documentar/biserici-mutate-din-calea-dictatorilor-60124.html>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the case of the Saint Sophia Church in Galați, demolished at the end of 1963. On that spot, a new street was built. Today, instead of the old church, there is a marble cross as a reminder of the old church built in 1872-1880.

We may conclude from what was said above that in the case of the churches demolished during the communist regime, it is not the number that is impressive, but their artistic value and, of course, their spiritual importance.

Demolishing the churches or hiding them from the sight of the rulers of that time was compensated, to a certain extent, with the building of new churches. It is true that only a few of them were built in the cities, mostly for the same reason: It was best not to draw the attention of the authorities on the Church and its activity. The respective reality was very well described by the words: *...hiding their emblematic buildings of faith, people knew that they had to stay away from its exterior manifestations*<sup>5</sup>.

In our villages, where people practiced religion along the centuries of oppressions and sufferance, there seemed to be more freedom for religious life. As mentioned in the official data of the Romanian Patriarchate, between 1948 and 1989, over 500 new churches were built<sup>6</sup>. Most of them were constructed in the last two decades of the regime, namely in the '70s and '80s of the last century. The rather high number of new churches in this period does not mean that such initiatives were easily put into practice, without any impediments from the state authorities. At the same time, it is true that it all depended on the attitude of the people who held different positions in the administration system. Many times, such persons showed an amiable attitude towards the Church, even though they did not dare to show it publicly, or they tried to be as discreet as possible.

For illustrating the manner in which the wish of the Romanian priests and faithful parishioners to have a new church could be fulfilled under the

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<sup>5</sup> Daniela Cârlea Șontică, "Biserici mutate."

<sup>6</sup> Information taken from the official site of the Romanian Patriarchate, <http://patriarhia.ro/v-b-biserica-ortodoxa-romana-in-perioada-dintre-1944-si-1989-151.html>, accessed May 14, 2017.

communist regime, we will present the case of a parish from the Archbishopric of Vad, Feleac and Cluj.

In the last decade of Ceaușescu's regime, the Eparchy of Cluj comprised the counties of Cluj, Maramureș and Bistrița-Năsăud, and in 1973, it became an Archbishopric<sup>7</sup>. It was led since 1957 by the Righteous Bishop Teofil Herineanu (1909-1992)<sup>8</sup>, assisted starting with 1973 by Vicar Bishop Justinian Chira Maramureșeanul (1921-2016)<sup>9</sup>.

In the following we will direct our attention towards the Parish of Blăjenii de Jos, which belongs to the Orthodox Archpriestship Bistrița, considering the manner in which the parishioners, together with their priest Vasile Vultur, succeeded to build a new church starting with 1986<sup>10</sup>.

The village Blăjenii de Jos, attested in 1434<sup>11</sup>, is situated on the territory of the Șintereag Parish, Bistrița-Năsăud County. It is a small settlement, with a little over 350 inhabitants, located on the hills of the Someș Plateau. The people here are hard-working and warm-hearted. They cannot easily accept the idea that someone else is ahead of them, especially when it comes to household matters.

In December 1979, a new priest was assigned to this parish. He was Father Vasile Vultur, a young spiritual pastor at that time, with a little over two years of experience in a community<sup>12</sup> close to Gherla, in Cluj County,

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<sup>7</sup> Alexandru Moraru, *Scurt istoric al Eparhiei Ortodoxe Române a Vadului, Feleacului și Clujului*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2006), 89.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandru Moraru, *Dicționarul ierarhilor români și străini slujitori ai credincioșilor Bisericii Ortodoxe Române* (București: Basilica, 2015), 195-196. For the life and activity of Bishop Teofil, see also the volume *Arhiepiscopul Teofil Herineanu 100 de ani de la naștere*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, with a foreword by Rev. Ioan Chirilă (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Moraru, *Dicționarul*, 74-75.

<sup>10</sup> The present paper is based on an interview taken on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2017 with the Missionary Priest Vasile Vultur, former parson in Blăjenii de Jos.

<sup>11</sup> Coriolan Suciu, *Dicționar istoric al localităților din Transilvania*, vol. I (București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1966), 84.

<sup>12</sup> Pădureni, a village in Cluj County.

after graduating in 1977 from the Special Theological Seminary in Curtea de Argeş<sup>13</sup>.

As Father Vasile himself confessed, in that very first day when he entered his parish, he noticed that the village had several very well-kept public buildings, fairly new and which showed that the locals were really good householders. These edifices were the community centre, the school, the village shop, and the office of the CAP (Agricultural Production Cooperative). The village even had a new parish house, built between 1974 and 1976 by Priest Ioan Jauca, who was later on reassigned to the Prundu Bârgăului Parish<sup>14</sup>.

The only public building that did not reflect the hard-working spirit of the locals was the church. The place of worship was at that time over two hundred years old, and the history of the Parish preserved the information that in ancient times, the church had a holy antimins given by the Serbian Bishop Dionisius Novakovici to the Romanians of Transylvania<sup>15</sup>. The old construction was made of freestone combined with boulders. It seems that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was already necessary to replace the old construction with a new one, since in 1909 endeavours were initiated in this respect.

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<sup>13</sup> Dănuţ Manu, „Studiu istoric, la 160 de ani de la înfiinţarea, în oraşul Basarabilor, dăător de legi şi datini, a Seminarului „Neogoe Vodă”, *Buletinul ştiinţific al Universităţii Piteşti, Teologie Ortodoxă series*, vol. II, year II (1997): 7-25.

<sup>14</sup> Prundu Bârgăului: village in the Bistriţa-Năsăud County.

<sup>15</sup> Moraru, *Dicţionarul*, 331-332. The history of the Parish preserved the data referring to the old church, with an error regarding the year of its consecration. The year 1768 is mentioned, but it is a well-known fact that Dionisius Novakovici resigned his position on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1767, and returned to his former eparchy in Buda, where he passed in December of that year. Hence, if the respective antimins were donated by Dionisius Novakovici, this could not have happened later than September 1767, which is the most plausible version. The follower of Dionisius Novakovici was the Serbian Sofronie Kirilovici (see Moraru, *Dicţionarul*, 77-78), assigned by Empress Maria Theresa as late as the beginning of 1770, which allows us to exclude him as a possible donor of the mentioned antimins.

In the first half of the last century, funds were raised for the construction of a new church. Even the inhabitants who were working in America started to donate money for this purpose<sup>16</sup>.

Successive situations, such as the short period of peace between the two World Wars, marked by the great economic crisis during the '30s, World War II, the economic, social, and political post-war difficulties, the inflation and the monetary reforms in 1947 and 1952, corroborated, as Father Vasile Vultur says, with the not very skilful administration by the former priests and the Parish Council, determined the reduction of the funds collected for the construction of a new church in Blăjenii de Jos to derisory amounts. As a consequence of this aspect, in the '50s and '60s, given the political situation in Romania, the matter of a new church was no longer of interest. As we have already shown previously, the parish house was built in the '70s, in harsh conditions for obtaining the necessary clearances from the state authorities.

This was the situation in which Priest Vasile Vultur began to work in this Parish. According to his memories, the people were fond of the church, but they had "a certain fear". In this village, there was a Station of Vehicles and Tractors (S.M.T.). Its employees (both from Blăjenii de Jos and other neighbouring localities) were forced to work in the fields even on special feast days (such as some Sundays, the second day of Easter etc.). However, the rest of the faithful went to church. The parishioners did not abandon the idea of building a new church, but for the reasons shown above, it was set aside. One of the factors that contributed to the revival of this idea was, beyond any doubt, the first Vestryman, Vasile Runcan. He stood by Father Vasile throughout the entire construction period.

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<sup>16</sup> Until the end of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a great communion between the Romanians from Transylvania, a phenomenon known as "One Thousand (Dollars) and the Road". See details in Gabriel-Viorel Gărdan, *Episcopia Ortodoxă Română din America - parte a Ortodoxiei Americane* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2007), 111-112.

At first, the plan to start building a new church was discussed by the Parson only with the first Vestryman, in 1980-1981, when Father Vasile was also a student at the Theological University Institute in Sibiu. Then, they both started to question the other parishioners for finding out the amount each family could afford to offer as contribution to the construction, since it is well-known that in those times, the funds necessary for such a work were mainly donations made by the faithful. All these lasted for several years, and during all this time, the parishioners' decision to build a new church grew stronger by each day. In the meanwhile, Priest Vasile Vultur and the Parish Council tried to obtain the necessary clearances from the state authorities. When the representatives of the local authorities realized the intention of the Parish Council and of the Priest, they sent messages through various means, telling them to "mind their own business", as Father Vasile remembers. Apparently, the real reason for this appeal to patience was the fact that there already were three churches in construction in three of the villages in that area. We refer to Șieu Cristur<sup>17</sup>, Sânmihaiu de Câmpie<sup>18</sup>, and Visuia<sup>19</sup>. It becomes obvious that the representatives of the local authorities did not want to have too many churches under construction in this county at the same time, probably because they did not want to draw the attention of the central authorities.

Despite of what was said before, it seems that there were chances for the faithful to see their dream come true, to see the new church built without having to wait for too long. The Archpriest of Bistrița in that period, Father Simion Creța, suggested to the Priest of Blăjenii de Jos that if he presented the state of the old church, pointing out the precarious resistance of the walls, he might have a chance to obtain the necessary clearances to start the construction. Clinching to this idea, in the spring of 1986, on a day when their

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<sup>17</sup> Șieu Cristur: village in the Bistrița-Năsăud County.

<sup>18</sup> Sânmihaiu de Câmpie: village in the Bistrița-Năsăud County.

<sup>19</sup> Visuia: village in the Bistrița-Năsăud County.

priest was at a meeting with the Archpriest of Bistrița, so that no one could accuse him of instigation, the parishioners entered the church and started to tear down the coating of the church, using whatever tools they had, so they could prove that the walls were fragile. The interior coating was removed right inside the church. Services continued to be held in this church and people placed candles on the piles of waste. In this gesture, Father Vasile saw a form of prayer to God through which the people asked for help for the construction of a new church.

In the meanwhile, the first Vestryman bought cement and bricks. The bricks were bought in Gherla. A problem occurred when they had to transport them to Blăjenii de Jos, since the inter-county transportation of goods for physical persons was restricted. In order to transport those goods with the trucks of the state factories (there were no private trucks at that time), the Vestryman had to pay several fines. We should mention the fact that he hired the trucks on his behalf, because the Parish did not have any approval for construction or rehabilitation.

Once the action was started, it could not be stopped. The Parson and the Parish Council hired a team of constructors (Hungarian) from Nimigea<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, they started to dig and lay the foundation of the new church around the foundation of the existing church, so that the old church remained inside the new one. The Parish Council aimed to create the impression that in fact those were rehabilitation works for the old church, which was fragile because of its age. When the foundation was laid, the authorities realized that this was no rehabilitation or preservation procedure, but a new construction for which no clearances had been issued.

However, we should mention that the start of the construction was encouraged, even though tacitly. Work began after some signs were received

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<sup>20</sup> Nimigea: commune with eight villages, Bistrița-Năsăud County.

- we may even call them secret signs - by the Parson from the Archpriest of Bistrița and ... from the representative of the feared Department of Cults. At a certain point, Father Vasile was called to the Archpriest Office, where he met the persons mentioned above. They accused him of trying to defy the law by starting the construction of a church without the necessary clearances. The Parson tried to explain that, together with his parishioners, he only wished to consolidate the old church. He said that he needed to reinforce the resistance of the tower and to move the bells that were currently in a rather frail belfry to this tower. The representative of the Department of Cults did not believe the Priest, but at the end of the discussion, he mentioned something that had nothing to do with the previous discussion. He referred to the churches of Western Europe, saying that if the people of Blăjenii de Jos wanted to build something, then it should be a modern construction, of western inspiration. When Father Vasile left the office, Archpriest Simion Crețea gently pressed his arm, a gesture that Father Vasile interpreted, together with the words of the Department of Cults representative, as a tacit encouragement to take action.

Despite of the events described above, the county authorities started an investigation on the Blăjenii de Jos "case". They notified the Eparchy Centre in Cluj, which subsequently had to take its own measures. Here one may observe the tact proved by the Archbishopric through Pastor Teofil Herineanu and the manner in which Archbishop Teofil protected his priests, trying not to trigger the opposition of the state representatives against the Church and its servants.

Archbishop Teofil designated one of the counsellors of the Eparchy<sup>21</sup> to go to the construction site in order to get a clear impression of the situation.

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<sup>21</sup> We refer to Priest Ștefan Cosmuța, secretary of the Eparchy between 1980 and 1985, economic counselor between 1985 and 1990, and pensioner since 2016. From his accounts we were able to reconstitute a part of the events that took place in the summer of 1986 in Blăjenii de Jos.

In fact, this was known to the Eparchy Centre in Cluj, but the investigation had to follow the usual steps. Even before the investigation, it was clear that Father Vasile Vultur needed to be punished, because he started the construction without the documents and authorizations necessary in such cases. "The punishment" for the disobedient priest was decided in advance. He was to be suspended "of his office and benefit" for a month, a time that the priest from Blăjenii de Jos had to spend in a monastery. In this way, the representatives of the state authorities could no longer claim that no measures had been taken against the priest who had defied the laws.

In the context described above we must also see the messages that Archbishop Teofil has sent to the Parish through the counsellor that was designated to take care of the inquiry. A first advice was addressed to the Parish Council: While the priest was at the monastery, they should accelerate the construction process, because during that time, it was unlikely that any representative of the state authority was preoccupied with the situation in the Parish.

A second message was addressed to the Parson's wife. Since the salary of Father Vasile for that month of "punishment" was about to be suspended, she needed to apply for financial support at the Archbishopric. This was granted and the amount equalled Father Vasile's usual salary.

These two messages clearly reveal the care of the Cluj hierarch for protecting everyone as much as possible against the effects of the punishment that he was about to order, to calm the state representatives, the "disobedient" priest and his family.

However, the Archbishop could not entirely protect Father Vasile, because the local authorities wished to apply their own punishment, so they decided to suspend his children's allowance that was paid by the state.

Regarding the place in which “the guilty” had to spend August, he had to choose between two monasteries, i.e. Nicula<sup>22</sup> or Rohia<sup>23</sup>, the only ones in that area before 1990<sup>24</sup>. He chose the second one, and now he remembers many of the moments that he has spent there. He met his former Seminary colleagues, priests or hieromonks; he participated in the services that were held in the monastery, including those officiated for the feast of the monastery, namely the Assumption, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, in which a few of the faithful from Blăjenii de Jos also participated; he worked with Father Nicolae Steinhardt to arrange the books in the library of the monastery.

Knowing that while he had to stay at Rohia, his parishioners, together with the masters hired before, were building the walls of the new church, Father Vasile could not resist the temptation to leave one night by car and go see his Parish. He went directly to the church, he kneeled down next to the new walls, he prayed and cried at the same time, thanking for all the help that God gave him, and in the morning, he returned to the monastery. He did not even visit his family during this night time visit.

Sooner or later, August came to an end and at the feast of Beheading of the Holy Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, the Archpriest of Târgu Lăpuș, to whom Father Vasile was entrusted, announced him that he was free to return home. When he came back to his Parish, Father Vasile was glad to see that the walls were built and the masters were assembling the roof. To be as discreet as possible, the parishioners had sprinkled whitewash on the walls of the new church so that the people who passed by it would think that it was the old church.

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<sup>22</sup> Arhim. Dumitru Cobzaru, *Monografia Mănăstirii „Adormirea Maicii Domnului” Nicula*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Nicula: Ecclesia, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Justinian Chira, *Mănăstirea „Sfânta Ana” Rohia – monografie* (Baia Mare: Editura Episcopiei Maramureșului și Sătmăruului, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> In the entire Eparchy of Vad, Feleac and Cluj there were only three monasteries until 1989: Rohia, Nicula and Moisei.

According to the testimony of Father Vasile Vultur, after the works reached the upper part of the walls, it was already too late for the authorities to take any measures against the new church. In fact, there were no such attempts. The works continued peacefully after this less common episode. The construction was covered with zinc coated sheet, and in the following years, the walls were decorated with frescoes by Simion Seserman from Humor, who has authored several such works in the Bistrița region. Inside, after the painting was finished, the parishioners placed the characteristic furniture whittled in oak wood<sup>25</sup>. All these efforts were crowned with the consecration of the church on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1992 by Irineu Pop Bistrițeanul, Vicar Bishop of Vad, Feleac and Cluj<sup>26</sup>.

From today's perspective, the events presented above depict the '80s as a period in which things could be arranged in a manner that was convenient to the Church. Actually, even the last decade of the communist regime in Romania was characterized by fear and a lot of uncertainty. The Parson of Blăjenii de Jos told us another story that happened after the episode of "investigation" and "punishment". After August 1986, being preoccupied with the roof of the church and everything else that this stage of construction meant, he went to Bucharest, because he wanted to ask at the Patriarchate where he could find a cross to fix on the new tower. There, close to the Mitropoly Hill, he met with his former professor from the Seminary in Curtea de Argeș, Archimandrite Chesarie Georgescu<sup>27</sup>, who was until that year the exarch of the monasteries in the Archbishopric of Bucharest. When Archimandrite Chesarie asked Father Vasile Vultur why he came to Bucharest and found out the purpose of his visit, he transmitted him the

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Ersilian Roșca, *Micromonografie a parohiei Blăjenii de Jos*, manuscript.

<sup>26</sup> Today he is archbishop of Alba Iulia. See more in Moraru, *Dicționarul*, 357-358.

<sup>27</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, *Dicționarul teologilor români* (București: Univers Enciclopedic, 1996), 181-182.

following message or, more exactly, advice: "Go and do whatever God helps you to do, because no one knows what will be. It is said that the Patriarchal Cathedral will be demolished." Of course, these words did not calm the Parson from Bistrița since he had just faced that investigation and punishment we presented above.

Hence, even the period of the last years of the communist regime in Romania was an agitated one, full of uncertainties regarding the future of the Church. However, the faithful, priests and the members of the hierarchy had the courage to act even when they knew they could attract the punishments of the authorities. Although it would be too much to call it a struggle, we may see in the courage of the clergy and of the faithful *a form of resistance* against the pressure that the atheist regime imposed upon the Church and those who did not follow the rules of the unique party.