

Patriarch Justinian of Romania: His Early Social Thought

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Patriarch Justinian of the Romanian Orthodox Church died on 26 March 1977. His death raises questions about the future of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The late Patriarch ruled the Church for 29 years, almost from the time when the Romanian Communist Party took control of the country in 1947. Many people, both within the Orthodox Church and outside, believe that Justinian's personal relationships and convictions were an essential ingredient in the preservation of the Church's relative prosperity under socialism. He left behind him a thriving Church of 10,000 parishes with trained clergy to fill them all; two theological institutes of 1,400 students studying at undergraduate or graduate level¹ and a reordered monastic life which has managed to preserve its spiritual vitality.² The Romanian Orthodox Church has enhanced its prestige abroad by taking part in ecumenical affairs: it has participated in the deliberations of the WCC, it has sent speakers to address international conferences, and has promoted the regular exchange of its graduate students with the world's leading theological colleges.

Theological education, the pastoral ministry, and monasticism were the three major concerns of Justinian as he began his life as Patriarch on 6 June 1948. His speeches, writings and sermons from the whole period of his Patriarchate were collected and published in a series entitled *Apostolat Social*.³ The basis of his thought, which later motivated his ministry, was expressed in the early volumes.⁴ The "social apostolate" ("apostolat social") has become the term which defines what present-day Romanian Orthodox theologians and hierarchs understand to be the true role of the Christian Church, not only in a socialist system but throughout the world. The focal point of the "social apostolate" is *service*:⁵ the Church must cease being preoccupied with itself, its status, its rights, and go out to serve mankind in the name of Christ the Servant. Such service involves paying special attention to the areas of greatest need in the suffering world: the undernourished, homeless, exploited. Great emphasis is placed on the need for peace in the world.

The early statements of Patriarch Justinian indicate that his launching

of the "social apostolate" with its implications for clergy, theologians and religious, stemmed from deep conviction and not simply from a desire to please the socialists. Nevertheless, the State approved of his programme⁶ as he constantly reminded his people. He continually adhered to the "social apostolate", even throughout the period of persecution which struck the churches and monasteries in 1958–63. He felt that outright resistance would have led to greater losses than gains.⁷ "If some say that the Church finds herself at a turning point in her history," he told clergy during his time as Administrative Vicar of the Metropolitanate of Moldova and Suceava, "then it is the clergy's duty to pay full attention to how she turns that corner, by obeying the voice of God and not heeding the rumours of Satan."⁸ The restoration of the Church to its former strength appears, outwardly at least, to have borne out the success of his policy.

In the early days of his Patriarchal responsibilities Justinian spent much of his time trying to calm his clergy's fears about the effect which the new socialist regime would have on the Church. He was confident that the Church would survive. "There are old-fashioned men who think that the Church must proceed as she has done in the past. Those times have passed and will never return. The Church, however, will remain with the people, to serve them."⁹ In his 1948 New Year address as Metropolitan of Moldova and Suceava he said :

This New Year finds Romania in new social conditions – the People's Republic of Romania. The Church is not bound by finite institutions, created by men for their needs of the moment. The Church is created by the Eternal God. In this present age she will support social justice, patriotism and seek after man's salvation. She must not remain closed, isolated within herself, but be permanently vibrant in order to revolutionize the religious life of her community.¹⁰

Furthermore, Justinian did not consider that the Church had anything to fear from dialectical materialism. The supernatural revelation of scripture and the natural discoveries of science and human technology should be combined, he thought, to provide wholesome human happiness :

Faith and the Church are not objects of the past, incompatible with science and progress. They are essential for life at every moment, supporting healthy progress and acting as complements to science. There is no contradiction between what we read in scripture and what science teaches us. Both together teach us how to read the everlasting book of life.¹¹

Patriarch Justinian discerned the seeds of socialism in the Bible. As examples he pointed to the importance of work as outlined in 2 Thessalonians 3 : 10, the apostles' collective way of life and their sharing

of all they possessed. Jesus, the Carpenter, born among the poor and simple working people of his time and not among the rich, symbolized for Patriarch Justinian that the Church's place was among the workers.¹² Besides this, he considered that the scriptural injunctions to defend the poor and the needy gave the Church the necessary basis for accepting the new system :

Some consider materialism hostile to Christianity. We, however, judge men according to their deeds and achievements. We judge doctrine according to the order of society which it produces. Can we not see in the present social order the most sacred principles of the Gospel being put into practice? Is not the sharing of goods, thus excluding them from the use of exploiters, better? . . . do we not recognize that for 2,000 years the Church has counselled men with riches to lay up their treasure in heaven and not on earth? Have we not told them that they are but administrators of their wealth and not its masters? Let us therefore be loyal and recognize that the state leadership has brought peace to men by assuring them of an existence and by allowing them to live off the first-fruits of their own honourable labours.¹³

Justinian, then, was convinced that the Church would survive but only as she came to understand the new emphases of the Gospel which socialism was challenging her to discover. The seeds of Justinian's convictions were sown in his own family and during his days as a peasant parish priest in the village of Brabeni.¹⁴ When he returned to the village as Patriarch in 1949, he remembered how important that beginning had been. He acknowledged that his father, who had suffered for his political convictions, had taught him not to flee from politics. He remembered, too, how his family had opened their home to three orphans; this demonstration of Christian care had deeply touched him. Soon after the war when he was Administrator in Iasi he tried to organize schemes on a regional level for the care of orphans. There were 35,000 orphans in the region and Justinian made his clergy responsible for them. He suggested two ways of helping : by opening orphanages (a costly and limited business); or by finding relatives, friends or kind-hearted Christians who would take the orphans into their own homes. Justinian was horrified at the indifference of many Orthodox people to the idea: conditions in the cities of Romania were, he thought, partly responsible for their hardness of heart and lack of maternal love. He chastised those "rich women who were more fond of promenading with their dogs than looking after needy children" but doubted whether one should be surprised at the slowness of the rich to assist the programme, for, after all, the accumulation of wealth itself, Justinian considered, was a sign of egotism and individualism.¹⁵ These comments reveal a little of the Patriarch's reasoning which

led him to believe that Christian principles were being put into practice by the socialist policies of the Communist Party.

As Patriarch, in 1948, having already shown his administrative ability, Justinian quickly set about preparing his Church for the inevitable changes to come. In his first address to the National Assembly he made four proposals: (1) to institute a new series of pastoral training and refresher courses through which priests and missionaries, educated during an earlier period, could receive new instruction; (2) to reorganize the monastic orders so that the training and admission of monks and nuns included a useful trade as well as a basic general education (special seminaries were to be established for this); (3) to revise literature and sermon aids so that they were adapted to the "social apostolate" and could help educate villagers on agriculture, economics and assist the literacy programme; (4) to reorganize theological education under the auspices of the Church. Justinian acknowledged that the separation of Church and State for educational purposes had benefited the Church. It meant that she could now supervise the teaching of her students and guard against secularized theology.¹⁶

Within the year all four proposals were being put into practice. The Patriarch once more emphasized that the Church must remain flexible and, at the opening of the seminary for monks at Neamt in 1949, warned against over-reacting to change:

It can be dangerous and harmful for the Church to find herself without new forms in a new life. But with the laying of the foundation stone through the establishment of the seminary in Neamt a new form of life for Romanian monasticism has been created and this danger has been avoided.¹⁷

By "a new form of life" the Patriarch meant the new requirement whereby those entering a monastic order had to learn a trade. Justinian realized how painful it was to renounce traditional ways, but he was enthusiastic about the results of the new policy. He did not believe that the centrality of prayer would be threatened in any way. At the seminary at Varatec he urged the nuns to begin the "new form of life" with optimism and enthusiasm. The State had approved the change and the Patriarch suggested that by entering into the state programme whole-heartedly the Church could affect her country's development by helping to produce the new man and new society:¹⁸

I believe in the realization of this programme and in the renewal of church life . . . I want an enlightened monasticism, not an ignorant one. You are not here simply to obtain a diploma but to learn how to sanctify your souls in this spiritual storehouse.¹⁹

Justinian believed profoundly in the possibilities for the Church if she took the social aspects of socialism seriously and recognized in them the principles of Christ's own teaching. His policy on monastic life appears to have been effective, for by 1956 the number of religious had increased to 7,000.²⁰ He had committed his Church to a complete change of emphasis for the sake, he believed, both of the Church's survival and the people's good. The real value of that commitment, however, was severely tested by the State's *volte-face* in 1958 which resulted in the arrest of 1,500 Orthodox priests, monks and laymen alongside members of other religious or mystical groups. Justinian himself was held for a time under house arrest in 1959.²¹ His reorganization of the monasteries was shattered when he was forced to close over 100 monasteries and three monastic schools and make more than 2,000 monks and nuns return to secular life.

To some, such a confrontation was inevitable. The Uniates, for example, who had been abolished in 1948 by the State with Justinian's blessing,²² considered that Justinian had been exposed as a naive opportunist or a simple communist lackey. Such feelings were, doubtless, natural for men who had witnessed his compliance and his joy at the "reintegration" of their Uniate Church with the Orthodox. Their feelings were also shared by others who had served prison sentences under the communists for their beliefs, while Justinian was calling his people to fulfil the "social apostolate". This highly sensitive issue will need separate treatment.²³ The intention of this study has been to concentrate on the priorities expressed by Justinian in his early official pronouncements on national and social commitment. In these Justinian was fiercely loyal to the Romanian people. His attitude towards other denominations, including the Uniates, was rooted in the traditionalism which identified Romania with Orthodoxy.²⁴ And from this it followed that communism in Romania would need the Orthodox Church.

Justinian did not forget his peasant background, nor the insights into practical Christianity which he received from his own family. He came into prominence when his country had been devastated by war and earthquake,²⁵ and in some degree he was inspired by the recovery plans of the new regime with which he had had personal contact.²⁶ But what was more important, those social plans harmonized with his own pastoral vision. His silence in the darker times may be dismissed as feeble compromise, but his early thought shows that this could well have been a silent but pained confidence – confidence that he had found the only way in which the Church could turn "that corner" and continue to serve the people. The increased strength of the Church since 1966 has in some measure justified such confidence.²⁷

He offers us his own epilogue: "I am not a man of many words, but if

I have any satisfaction in life then it will be the fact that the fruits of my heavy labours will come into sight".²⁸

¹ "The Romanian Orthodox Church today", *Romanian Orthodox Church News*, Vol. 5, 1975, p. 62.

² "Impressions of the Orthodox Church and Monasticism in Romania and Serbia", by Sister Eileen Mary, *One in Christ*, 1972-73, pp. 291-299.

³ Cf. "Problèmes de morale chrétienne dans les préoccupations des théologiens orthodoxes roumains", *De la théologie Orthodoxe Roumaine des origines à nos jours*, Bucharest, 1974, pp. 285-288.

⁴ This article draws from volumes 1-4, 1949-52.

⁵ Two examples of this theology are *The Servant Church*, the doctoral thesis of Bishop Antonie Ploiesteanul, 1973, and "Servire si proexistentia", an article on service and living for others by Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, 1963. A general bibliography on this subject is available in "Problèmes de morale chrétienne", op. cit., pp. 295-299.

⁶ *Apostolat Social*, (2nd ed.) 1949, p. 181.

⁷ Interview with Patriarch Justinian published in *Current Developments in the Eastern European Churches (CDEEC)*, Geneva, May 1961, pp. 21-22.

⁸ *Apostolat Social*, op. cit., p. 52.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 71.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 12.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 171.

¹⁴ In 1930 Justinian wrote a paper, "Cooperatie si Crestinismul" in which he argued that the clergy should seek to improve man's economic as well as his spiritual welfare. Cf. "The Romanian Orthodox Church and the State" by Keith Hitchens in *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, edited by Bociurkiw and Strong, 1975, pp. 314-327.

¹⁵ *Apostolat Social*, op. cit., pp. 43-49.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 163.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 169.

¹⁸ Some monasteries were registered as cooperatives.

¹⁹ *Apostolat Social*, op. cit., p. 182.

²⁰ *Discretion and Valour*, London, 1974, pp. 302-304 and 311-312.

²¹ *CDEEC*, No. 1, 1959, p. 17.

²² *Apostolat Social*, Vol. 4, 1952, pp. 56-69.

²³ An article on the Greek-Catholic Church in Romania (the Uniates) will be appearing in a future issue of *RCL*.

²⁴ Cf. "Patriarch's death may have wide repercussions", *Baptist Times*, 7 April 1977.

²⁵ In 1940 Romania suffered a devastating earthquake.

²⁶ Patriarch Justinian is thought to have hidden the future leader of Romania, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, when the latter was on the run from prison before the war. His family, too, hid another communist leader in a similar position, namely Gheorghe Apostol.

²⁷ According to the latest statistics from the *Romanian Orthodox Church News*, there has been an increase of church numbers on all fronts since 1964. The number of theological students equals the number at the time when Justinian became Patriarch. Cf., *Discretion and Valour*, op. cit., pp. 302-304.

²⁸ *Apostolat Social*, (2nd ed.) 1949, p. 51.