Orthodox Monasticism in Romania Today

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The ancient monasteries of the Romanian Orthodox Church are as closely bound up with Romania's national consciousness as they are with its religious beliefs. Many of the country's heroes were buried within the walls of monastic churches, and wall paintings and architecture recall the traditions of the country's past, much as Canterbury Cathedral or Westminster Abbey do in England. In Romania, however, the impact is far greater for there has been no Reformation to break the centuries-old rhythm of prayer and work which blends in easily with ordinary life in a Romanian village.

Most of Romania's monasteries are in the provinces of Moldavia and Wallachia which were never under Hapsburg rule, and therefore never subjected to Catholic proselytism. But since the union of Transylvania with the rest of Romania after the First World War a few monasteries have been either established or re-founded in areas which for several centuries had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These include Rohia Monastery formed in 1926, Timiseni founded in 1944, and Simbata de Sus, a 17th century monastery destroyed by the Hapsburgs and re-consecrated in 1936.

At the end of 1975 the *Romanian Orthodox Church News* recorded the number of monasteries and *skits** in the country as 122 and the number of monks and nuns as approximately 2,200.[1]

Some of the largest monasteries in Romania are in fact monastic villages. Agapia and Varatec in the north have each over 350 nuns; Pasarea and Tiganesti in the south, approximately 150 each. Each has a central church and auxiliary chapels, an enclosure containing the workshops, administrative centre and accommodation for official guests, and streets of bungalow-type houses each containing three, four or five nuns, of whom one is responsible. Outside the circle of nuns' houses, and with no demarcation line to separate them, are other houses of the same type for villagers, some of whom help the nuns to work their lands. Although

*A *skit* is a hermitage, or small monastic community living in seclusion, sometimes near a monastery. This word — *schit* in Romanian — is here transliterated from the Russian. *Ed.*

there is a considerable amount of organization from the centre, with councils responsible for such aspects of life as spirituality, work, education and discipline, yet there is at the same time a good deal of freedom for the individual in the small houses, each with its own garden. This form of monastic life is popular among Romanian girls. Manastirea Varatec, for example, where the writer of this article spent a month in 1978, has a number of young novices, some of whom are graduates. These girls are intelligent, and all have been through the state system of education but are far less sophisticated than their western counterparts. No one has heard of a "youth culture": family and village ties are still strong and elders respected.

All these large monasteries are for women. The majority of others are smaller with life being lived in the traditional way in community. The number of monks or nuns varies from as few as half a dozen to groups of 60 to 80. Besides these, the great historic monasteries such as Neamt have *skits* in the surrounding countryside, each containing two or three monks. Nuns do not normally live in *skits*. The number of recruits to these monasteries seems to vary considerably, and to depend very much on the strictness of the life, and the quality of the spiritual father or mother. Nuns outnumber monks in the proportion of two to one as in the West, and this may ultimately pose a problem for the Romanian Church. There is no shortage of candidates for the priesthood, but by the age of 23 the student has to decide whether to marry or to become a monk (bishops are chosen only from among the ranks of the monks). Nevertheless, at least one monastery for men is flourishing and sending monks to re-populate the Romanian monastery on Mount Athos.

An interview with the Abbess of Agapia, Maica Eustochia Ciucana, was published a few years ago in the government-sponsored *Tribuna Romaniei*,[2] a fortnightly paper produced by the Romanian Association. This interview gives some idea of the part which monastic life has played both in the past and in the present lives of Romanian citizens. The abbess, referring to her own monastery in Moldavia, stated:

> ". . . Until 1800 this site contained only a church and the enclosure of a monastery of monks. Then these were moved to monasteries at Rîsca and Secu, while nuns were brought to Agapia from Iasi, Varatec and other places. A school functioned here, too, at which French and Greek were taught. In time the nuns no longer had sufficient room within the enclosure and so began to build houses outside it. In time many women and young girls came to the monastery from the world outside. A document dating from 1836 states that 'counting only the daughters of boyars there are over a hundred'. They came with their servants and received visits from their relations, and this increased the number of rooms needed. Today there are 170 houses with two, three, four or five

rooms each, some of which are put at the disposal of visitors. (Among the 350 nuns, many live within the enclosure.) . . . Some guests have visited regularly each summer for 40 years; they correspond with the nuns about their times of arrival and come as if to their own homes . . . The usual length of stay is from 10 to 20 days, during which time excursions are made on foot to the monasteries and beauty spots in the vicinity . . . The guests never complain that they have nothing to do", the abbess concluded with pride. "Those who spend holidays with us return year after year, parents with children, then the children who have become parents themselves."

Easter Monday 1978 coincided with Labour Day and a national holiday, so that Romanians streamed out of their towns in even greater numbers than usual to spend the Easter weekend at their favourite monastery. This writer was at Agapia on 1 May and found the atmosphere around the monastery to be somewhat like that of an English seaside resort on a bank holiday, apart from one significant difference. Here the holiday was a Christian one. People had attended the Easter midnight service in their thousands and now wandered around the village in family groups dressed in their best clothes, taking photos, buying souvenirs at the monastic shop, eating simple monastic food and attending parts of the services. They were escaping for a little while from their high-rise flats and 20th century amenities, to find their roots again in the traditional Romanian way of life which the monasteries represent, and from which most of them are only one generation removed.

It is the seduction of western secularism which poses the chief threat to this Christian-orientated culture, far more than a political system which, from a sociological point of view, recognizes the value of tradition. The relationship of the Church with the nation is part of the heritage of Byzantium, and whether or not it is beneficial, it is at any rate nothing new. The historic monasteries are preserved with state assistance, are visited by many thousands of Romanian tourists as well as pilgrims each year, and so play a valuable part in building up a sense of national identity and pride. It was within the monasteries that the Romanian literary language was developed and that the first printing presses functioned. Priests and monks were represented on the Councils which planned the revolt against Turkish domination in the last century, and the gradual unification of the Romanian provinces into one nation. Monks fought alongside their fellow citizens for national freedom. In the middle of the 19th century, redistribution of the great monastic estates was accomplished without the dissolution of the monasteries and with the apparent acquiescence of the Church. Each monastery was left with enough land to supply its needs as is the case today. Salaries were paid by the State to parish priests and heads of monasteries before 1948, and this system has been extended

since the Revolution to include all monks and nuns engaged in productive work for the monastery as well as those acting as guides, or under contract to the State to produce carpets or embroidery for sale. Sometimes these salaries are put together to pay for some improvement to the buildings or equipment of the monastery. Besides necessary work on the land—and most monasteries are practically self-supporting—there are workshops in many monasteries in which articles needed for the worship and life of the Church are produced. One weaves material for vestments, another undertakes ecclesiastical embroidery, another makes candles, another frames icons, and so on. This integration of monasticism into the social system of the country has its advantages and its disadvantages, but at least the monastic life is not regarded as an exotic anachronism unrelated to the life of modern Romania.

An interesting essay on "The Way of the Hermit and the Prayer of Jesus in the Romanian Orthodox Tradition", which is included in the eighth volume of Professor Staniloae's translation of the *Philokalia* (Sayings of the Fathers) into Romanian, throws light on the influence of monastic spirituality on the life of the people as a whole. (Professor Staniloae is the doyen of Romanian theologians.) He writes first of all of the many hermits and monks who inhabited the mountains, valleys and forests of Romania from the 14th century until the present day, and who have given their names to many of these natural features. He writes:

> These hermits were in fact very popular in our past. They recognized that their role was to sustain the resistance of our people in difficult times. We think of Daniel the Hermit who advised Stephen the Great, strengthening him in a moment of discouragement in his struggle for the defence of Christian Moldavia. These were not simply recluses who were indifferent to the world in the sense of hermits in the West or even on Mount Athos. They helped the people in every possible way in their difficulties.[3]

Professor Staniloae remarks that in no other Orthodox country, to his knowledge, have hermits been held in such popular esteem as they have been in Romania for this very reason.

The tradition still lingers on today in the ideal of the holy man who has left the world and learnt wisdom both from God and from nature in the solitary places of the mountains and forests, or within a monastic community, and who returns to serve his people by transmitting the power and holiness of God to them. This may serve to explain the adulation paid to Romanian bishops. Not all of them are holy men, nor are all holy men bishops, but bishops are considered to be among those who have followed this pattern of withdrawal and return. For their part the bishops recognize that their function is to be the servants of the most humble of their

countrymen. An indelible memory remains of a Liturgy in the cathedral at Bucharest at which a weeping peasant woman came up to one of the princes of the Church with her troubles, was received with the utmost courtesy and gravity, and sent away blessed and comforted.

The greatest figure in the history of Romanian monasticism is Paisi Velichkovsky, a Ukrainian who settled in Romania at the end of the 18th century, and was responsible both for translating the *Philokalia* from Greek into Russian, and also for bringing the prayer and spiritual life of the desert into the community life of the great monasteries. Under his influence and that of his disciple Gheorghe, monastic life took on the colour and character which it has today, and which is described by Professor Staniloae in the article cited above. "He (Gheorghe) emphasized even more than Paisi the practical aspect of the spiritual life. This was not only to help the monk to gain complete perfection in a more sure way, but also to make him useful to the monastic community and even to other men who needed help." St Calinic of Cernica is regarded as the model of this mode of spirituality.

> In his spiritual life he combined in an astonishing manner the most severe prayer and abstinence on one side, together with entire obedience in community and care for the poor, and, on the other, the activity of a founder and builder of churches. In his written *Counsels* he demands in the first place, fulfilment of the commandments of God together with the practice of humility and obedience, but he also says that "the Prayer of Jesus must be unceasing in the mouth, in the mind and in the heart".[4]

This, in Fr Staniloae's view, is a spirituality which is whole and complete.

Monastic life in Romania today owes its inspiration to this model of a life balanced between prayer and work. The ideals of *serviciu* and *ascultare* (obedience) are regarded as expressions of love, not only for God and for one's brothers or sisters in religion, but also for the nation as a whole. So in recent years it has been comparatively easy for the particular contribution of the monasteries to be taken into a communist-led society. Many of the values are in fact the same; it is the philosophy behind them which differs.

Religious literature, although in short supply, is permitted as something essential for an approved cult. In the past two or three years, since the present Patriarch Justin was enthroned, a number of basic texts have been published which can be bought by the ordinary Romanian citizen from monastic or church bookshops. Among the most important of these are the three volumes of *Teologia Dogmatica Ortodoxa* by Professor Dumitru Staniloae, and eight volumes of the *Philokalia* (all translated by Professor Staniloae) with four more to follow. These together with the Bible and the extremely rich texts of the Liturgy and Offices, would supply the

average monk or nun with enough spiritual nourishment for a lifetime, since for the average Eastern Orthodox, prayer, theology and tradition are indissolubly linked together, and the speculative theology of the West is not understood, nor wanted, except by professional theologians.

It is not easy to see what the future holds for Romanian monasticism as the country moves inexorably into the modern industrial era. Yet given the religious temperament of the people, and a stable political situation, it seems that the monasteries will be with us for some time to come, especially those for women. Christians and non-Christians alike must realize the value of these centres of ancestral faith as a potent force in uniting and strengthening a people, who throughout their history have had their identity threatened by one set of invaders or another.

For the Romanian monk the inner life is subjected to the same imponderables of human love and weakness as those which affect the spiritual way in the West, and this has to be worked out in terms of individual lives whatever the external conditions at any given time may be. This writer has met saints and sinners, more perfect and less perfect monasteries in Romania as in England, but there has always been a sense of unity with them in a common vocation which transcends political, ecclesiastical and cultural divisions, and gives to the western pilgrim a deeper understanding of the soul of this remarkable people.

[1]*Romanian Orthodox Church News*, Year V, No. 4, October-November 1975, p. 80.
[2]*Tribuna Romaniei*, April 1973.
[3]"Din Istoria Isihasmului in Ortodoxia Romana." Essay in *Philokalia*, No. 8, translated by Professor Dr Dumitru Staniloae, p. 565.
[4]Staniloae, *op. cit.*, pp. 582-3.