

Chronicle

Father Calciu's First Year of "Freedom"

Father Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, the Orthodox priest who has spent more than 21 years of his life in Romanian jails, arrived in the USA together with his wife and son on 9 August 1985, almost a year after his release from his most recent spell of imprisonment. During that year the Calciu family had been kept in virtual isolation under a sort of unofficial "house arrest". A few months under these conditions had convinced Fr Calciu that he had no alternative but to seek emigration, but the Romanian authorities required a whole year, as well as a certain amount of international pressure, before they could find a way to let him leave — even though, one would suppose, they should be happier to see him outside their borders than within.

Interviewed by Keston College over the telephone shortly after reaching America, Fr Calciu attributed his arrival in the West to the power of prayer, and he expressed gratitude to all who had been praying for him in recent years. His first thoughts, however, were for those left behind in Romania, he said; and he emphasised that this meant "all without exception", not just those who were suffering for coming into conflict with authority but everyone who has to live under the material and spiritual conditions of present-day Romania. Asked about his future plans, he said that he was sure that the move to America was part of God's plan for him and his family even if at first it had not been clear what that plan might be; now it was becoming clearer, and he hoped that they would begin to work with others in America, of whatever de-

nomination, on behalf of those who are suffering.

Gheorghe Calciu trained for the Orthodox priesthood after his release, in the early 1960s, from his first period in prison, having resolved to enter the priesthood "out of gratitude to God" for his preservation through 16 years during which thousands of his fellow political prisoners had perished. He was ordained in 1973 and was given a post on the staff of the seminary in Bucharest, where he became a popular teacher and preacher.

Fr Calciu's renewed conflicts with authority began in 1977 when he publicly denounced the demolition of one of Bucharest's most famous churches. Then, in a sermon delivered in January 1978 in the patriarchal cathedral, he described atheism as a "philosophy of despair". In March that year he began a cycle of Lenten sermons in the seminary chapel which attracted as many as five hundred students, despite measures taken to prevent some of them from attending. On 15 May the seminary Director ordered him to stop preaching; and a month later he was suspended from his teaching post there. Harassment of Fr Calciu and his family was stepped up, and this culminated eventually in his arrest, on 10 March 1979. His ten-year sentence, on charges which were never publicly specified but were understood to relate to alleged "neo-Fascist activity", was passed on 4 May and confirmed on 6 June that year.

Far from defending Fr Calciu in this situation the Romanian Orthodox hierarchy supported his imprisonment; indeed, it was

from high Orthodox Church sources that the allegation of "neo-Fascist activity" came. The church was no more helpful during his last year in the country. Released from his second spell of imprisonment on 20 August 1984, just over half-way through the ten-year sentence, Fr Calciu found himself unfrocked by his ecclesiastical superiors just a few weeks later, on 6 October. Even before this decision could be confirmed by Synod (which, strictly speaking, would be necessary before the unfrocking could be made effective) local party members were being asked to inform the Securitate (state security police) if they saw him out in the street dressed in his clerical garments. The real initiative for the unfrocking had come, evidently, from the Securitate, and the church had simply carried out its wishes.

Indeed, the Securitate had been very much in evidence around the Calciu home in the twelve months following Fr Calciu's release from prison. According to his own account, there were three Securitate cars, each with two or three people in them, stationed day and night near their block of flats. If the Calcius ventured out into town at least six policemen would accompany them in order to prevent anyone from having contact with them. In addition to this there were uniformed militiamen always on duty inside and outside the building. Intending visitors were turned away from the Calciu home unless they were relatives or belonged to a restricted number of close friends. Other visitors risked unpleasant interrogation if they persisted in the attempt: one Romanian who tried to visit was detained for ten hours in the Securitate investigation centre. And foreign visitors, whether official (this included a delegation of American senators and British MPs who went to the country in December 1984) or unofficial, were always denied access. It is clear that the Romanian authorities devoted considerable resources to the surveillance of the Calcius and their forcible isolation from the rest of society — including the burning of a large quantity of fuel by Securitate vehicles during the winter period when all private motoring in Romania was barred as an economy measure.

For a period of several weeks shortly after his release from prison Fr Calciu was made to move to a town in the Danube delta area, presumably for the same purpose, that of keeping him away from potential

visitors; but he was eventually allowed to return to his Bucharest flat. It was reported that the Calcius again had to move out of Bucharest for a period of time some months later, although the circumstances of this move — if it did take place — are uncertain.

Before his release from jail Fr Calciu was reported to be insistent that he should *not* have to emigrate; he had hoped to resume duties as a priest and be given a parish. The circumstances he was forced to live under, together with his unfrocking by the church in which he had been expecting to minister, served to convince him that emigration would be, after all, the only alternative left open to him. It is now known, from material written by Fr Calciu and sent to the West round about June 1985, that he had decided upon this course as long ago as October 1984. All would-be emigrants from Romania have to face a period of uncertain waiting, and the Calcius were no exception; indeed, many have to wait considerably longer than the Calcius did (though none would have had to wait in similar circumstances). In the case of the Calciu family, there was no doubt that there were several countries willing to receive them, but for some time Romania was even denying all knowledge, at the official level, of their desire to emigrate. According to an unconfirmed report, Fr Calciu had been refused access to the appropriate office in order to make his application for a passport.

The Calcius' wish to emigrate was made public when an 11-page hand-written document by Fr Calciu reached the West and was published, in June 1985. In it, there was detailed description of his circumstances since his release from prison, a meditation on the death of the murdered Polish priest, Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko, and an unequivocal statement that he wished to leave the country. The family's departure from Romania two months later followed a certain amount of international pressure — just as his release from prison had done, a year earlier. It is difficult to assess just how significant the annual renewal of the Most Favoured Nation economic status by the United States can be as means of obtaining concessions in the human rights field, but it is worth noting that the Calcius were allowed to leave Romania within two weeks of the beginning of the renewal process in July.

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