

A REPORT OF THE ITALIAN LEGATION IN BUCHAREST CONCERNING THE SITUATION OF THE GREEK CATHOLICS IN ROMANIA (4 OCTOBER 1948)

Abstract: This study presents a document of the Italian Minister in Bucharest, which recounts the evolution of the religious situation in Romania, particularly of the Greek-Catholic Church, which was constrained by the communist authorities to convert to Orthodoxy. The document shows the steps that were taken, the statement of reconversion to Orthodoxy that was made in Cluj, on 1 October 1948, after many threats and pressures. At the same time, the Italian diplomat estimated that the pressures would continue to seek the dismantling of the Greek-Catholic Church in Romania, but deplored the fact that he would not be able to oppose this process because the Greek-Catholic clergy in Romania did not have the strength to resist it.

Keywords: Romania, Church, Catholicism, Italy, diplomacy

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1948 represented a watershed in Romania's history. At the centenary of another historical turning point, 1848, which had a positive significance for the accomplishment of the national desiderata, instead of celebrating the modernization of the Romanian institutions, not only did the events that took place hamper the institutional and cultural development of the nation, but they also partly compromised, for many decades to come, the country's potential for positive evolution, as it would have been guaranteed by a democratic regime.

Of course, in the analyses undertaken by politicians, economists or sociologists, the events that prevail are the nationalization process, the ratification of the first Constitution of the Romanian People's Republic, the onset of the Cold War, etc.

It was only for a narrow category of scholars conducting research on the history of Romania, specializing in the history of Transylvania, that the year 1948 brought about an extremely negative event, whose consequences have not dissipated even to this day: the destruction of the Greek-Catholic Church United with Rome, an event anticipated by the vexations that the Catholic Church of both rites had been subjected for quite some while in Romania, about which people had believed, naively, perhaps, that it could eventually be avoided. This subject has been treated extensively in Transylvanian historiography over the past few decades and that is why we will not insist on it. The subject of this article is linked, however, to this event through a document that was issued by the titular Minister of the

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Italian Legation to Bucharest, Baron Michele Scammacca,² whereby he informed the Italian authorities about the evolution of religious policies in Romania. We must insist that the destiny of the Catholic Church of both rites in Romania was watched closely not only by the Apostolic Nunciature in Bucharest, entrusted, by the Holy See, with monitoring the developments, but also by the Italian Legation in Bucharest. The Legation was involved on at least two levels: the first level consisted in the consular assistance it granted the Italians who served as functional Catholic personnel in Romania (the overwhelming majority of the Italian priests or missionaries had Italian, not Vatican citizenship, as only the staff of the Nunciature had the latter type); the second level entailed providing mutual assistance within the diplomatic and consular corps, the Legation of Italy supporting the Nunciature, whose staff was strictly supervised and monitored by the authorities in Bucharest. In the latter case, the Italian Legation in Bucharest assumed the responsibility to inform the authorities in Rome directly about the fate of the Churches and the ecclesiastical personnel in Romania so that timely measures could be taken, although the situation was rapidly deteriorating.

The document we will present dates from 4 October 1948 and synthetically reflects the events that occurred at the dramatic beginning of the month of October, which meant the beginning of the end for the Romanian Church United with Rome.

The premonitory signals had been strong enough. Under Decree no. 151 of 17 July 1948, the Concordat between Romania and the Holy See was terminated by the communist authorities of Romania, and in August 1948, the Government took over some of the powers that had been the exclusive preserve, up until then, of the Holy See and the Sovereign Pontiff. At the same time, the new Law of Religious Denominations provided for the communist authorities' right to intervene in the ecclesiastical organization. Article 22 stipulated that "for the creation and operation of eparchies (dioceses, superintendences), 750.000 faithful shall have to be calculated on average for each diocese." As it were, the Romanian Church United with Rome could not meet this requirement, since, according to the Census of 1930 (the last in times of peace we can relate to), it had 1,427,391 faithful, any possible natural growth having been counteracted by the consequences of the war, in four dioceses (Oradea, Cluj-Gherla, Maramureş and Lugoj, and the Archdiocese of Alba-Iulia-Făgăraş, plus a vicar bishop in Bucharest).³ On 3 September 1948, a decree that was published in the Official Gazette of Romania stipulated the fact that Bishop Ioan Suci, considered the leader of Romanian anti-communist resistance in the Romanian Church United with

² Baron Michele Scammacca del Murgo e di Agone (Catania, 30 October 1898 – Rome, 2 April 1979). Plenipotentiary Minister at Italy's Legation in Romania. He was the descendant of a noble Sicilian family with roots in Alsace. A career diplomat, he was on assignment in Bucharest between 17 October 1947 and 14 March 1951. His name, as Director of the Italian Foreign Ministry's Protocol Directorate, is linked with the mediation of the conflict (1948-1954) that divided the Italian government and the Romanian government on the matter of the building of Accademia di Romania in Rome.

³ Rounded estimates made in the last decade speak of 1,800,000 believers, 1,900 priests, 2,400 religious buildings, 12% of Romania's population being Greek Catholic.

http://www.procesulcomunismului.com/marturii/fonduri/ioanitoiu/biserici/episcopi_romano_catolici/episcopi_romano_catolici.pdf

Rome and apostolic administrator of the archiepiscopal see in Blaj, had been deposed from office by the Petru Groza Government. The other Greek-Catholic bishops were removed from office on 18 September 1948, with the exception of Vasile Aftenie, the bishop-vicar for Bucharest, and of Iuliu Hossu, Bishop of Cluj, as they were considered to be more concessive, but probably also according to the share of the Greek-Catholic population.

The pressures exerted on the Greek-Catholic clergy became increasingly powerful and led to the organization, on 1 October 1948, of an assembly of the Greek-Catholic clergy. The communist authorities spread the news that the assembly would be chaired by Bishop Iuliu Hossu in Cluj. The latter, however, managed to send a circular letter on 30 September, announcing the excommunication *latae sententiae* of those who would participate in the meeting for conversion to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Under these circumstances, the meeting could not be held at the seat of the Diocese of Cluj-Gherla, but a short distance away, in the gym hall of Barițiu High School. The meeting was attended by a single Greek-Catholic archpriest, Traian Belășcu, Archpriest of Țichindeal, and by 37 secular priests, two of whom refused to sign the proclamation of conversion to the Romanian Orthodox Church. The 36 were received by the Orthodox Bishop Nicolae Colan in the afternoon of 1 October, after which they left for Bucharest, where they were received at the Patriarchal Palace, and subsequently celebrated service at the Church of Sf. Spiridon Nou, presided over by Patriarch Justinian Marina.⁴

The Italian diplomat's report, addressed to Italy's Foreign Minister, started by presenting these aspects: "A press release of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate dated 3 October 1948 announced that 38 Greek-Catholic (Uniate) archpriests and priests, as delegates of most Greek Catholics in all the provinces of Transylvania and Banat, gathered in Cluj on 1 October to discuss the appeal addressed to the United Church by the Orthodox Metropolitan of Transylvania, for a return to the bosom of Romanian Orthodoxy."⁵ Scammacca specified that the assembly had decided to return to Orthodoxy and appealed to the rest of the clergy and to the faithful to follow their example.

In the synthetic analysis he offered to the minister in the Italian Cabinet, Scammacca stated that, in fact, this movement of a fraction of the Greek-Catholic clergy was evidently the outcome of a political program imposed by the new communist power, to which the Romanian Orthodox Church had willy-nilly rallied itself. This program had at least two levels: 1. the elimination of religious freedom, which, in this case, affected the Romanians United with Rome, but would certainly expand to the other denominations as well; 2. apostasy towards Roman Catholicism. In the latter case, the Italian diplomat's opinion, which we see reflected throughout the report, evinces a post-Tridentine ecclesiological position, which pays little if any

⁴ The Apostolic Nunciature in Bucharest submitted its protest about this event to the government authorities, through Note Verbale no. 2130 of 2 October 1948. See *România-Vatican. Relații diplomatice*. Volume I, 1920-1950, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2003 pp. 342-343.

⁵ This was an appeal addressed by Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan in Blaj, on 15 May 1948, during the commemorations of the 100th anniversary of the 1848 Revolution.

attention to the specific ecclesiology of Greek-Catholicism in general and to Romanian Greek-Catholicism in particular.

Among the practices that had engendered the perspective of a return to Orthodoxy, Scammacca specified that "the Romanian Government has put in place a drastic system of coercion in order to ensure the reconversion to Orthodoxy; everyone's signature was extorted, apostasy was imposed through arrests and threats of deportation to Siberia." However, by the time this report was drafted, such pressures had affected only 25% of the Greek-Catholic Romanian clergy – in absolute numbers, these represented about 400 priests. Of course, we should not imagine that everything was accomplished in three days. Certainly, the pressures in favour of apostasy had started much earlier, at the time when the Orthodox Metropolitan Nicolae made the above-mentioned call. According to Scammacca, those 38 signatories who had come to Bucharest to present their pro-Orthodox position to Patriarch Justinian "represented only those 400 priests whose relinquishment of the Union with Rome had been obtained through pressures, but suggests that things are serious and will continue to worsen through the use of coercive methods. Everything appears to indicate that other forced renunciations will follow shortly, that they will be obtained through any means, whether by pressure or physical and moral threats, or through administrative measures that the new law of religious denominations easily permits, in order to destroy the United Church and to incorporate it in the Orthodox Church."

A reference that occurs twice in the text of the Italian Minister from Bucharest: the weaknesses of the Greek-Catholic clergy in Romania. One of the more or less valid accusations that the Orthodox world brought against Greek-Catholicism in Eastern Europe was that although the Orthodox identity was supposed to be maintained at the level of the Greek-Catholic communities, with the exception of the points negotiated and harmonized at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, the Roman Catholic Church had imposed on the Greek Catholics in Eastern Europe, over the course of two centuries, certain elements of liturgical and administrative practice that undermined the dogmatic and disciplinary heritage of Orthodoxy, in the way in which that Orthodoxy or a part thereof that was United with Rome was understood. This gave the Orthodox Churches the opportunity to accuse the phenomenon of religious Union as an obscure and shrewd form of proselytizing and to claim that the Greek Catholics were in fact nothing but some instruments for the slow Catholicizing of those who had belonged to the cultural area of the Orthodox confession. From the other side, of Roman Catholicism, Greek Catholics had always been accused, more or less openly, that they did not take the required and sufficient steps towards ensuring their full belonging to the body of Catholicism and that the hybrid formula of the Greek-Catholic Church was marred by far too many vulnerabilities. The Italian diplomat presented just such a point of view in his report. Probably with a fairly strong religious conduct, which would have been customary for a high figure of the Italian elite, rigorously Roman Catholic in terms of the Church administration and the personnel in the service of the Church (see his sacerdotal celibacy), Baron Scammacca saw with a critical eye the possibility that the Greek-Catholic clergy in

Romania would be able to withstand the pressures of the authorities. As I have already noted, Scammacca made clarifications regarding the specificity of the Greek-Catholic priests not once, but twice in his report. He stated the following: “Although I do not agree with the pressures exerted by the authorities, the Greek-Catholic priests did have not dared to withstand those pressures and threats also because their refusal would have led to harassments of their families (it is well known that nearly all the Greek-Catholic priests are married and have numerous children).” At the end of his report, when he estimated the level of resistance of the Greek-Catholic Church, he suggested that “one cannot count too much on the resistance of the Greek Catholics, and especially on the courage and heroism of the clergy and the faithful. For various reasons – *its origin, which dates back 250 years ago, during the rule of the Habsburg Empire, derived from its collective detachment from the connection with the Romanian Orthodox Church, or because of its poor tradition and poor training, or because of the serious matrimonial error of the secular clergy – the Greek-Catholic community in Romania does not appear to have sufficient cohesion and force to overcome today’s severe crisis*”.

The point of view that Scammacca presented to the Italian authorities was that of a first-hand observer of the local events. The cultural baggage of the Italian Minister to Bucharest did not include knowledge about the ecclesiology of the Churches United with Rome. His point of view, which was that of a moderate Catholic, with average theological knowledge, was, however, diffuse at the level of the Catholic Italian and European intelligentsia. Thus the Greek-Catholic Churches that suffered the direct (Ukraine) or mediated consequences of the Soviet occupation machine (Romania) could not benefit from sufficient understanding at this level of knowledge. For Scammacca, the Romanian Greek-Catholic clergy had a poor tradition and poor training, being also tarnished by the possibility of marriage. These were harsh points of view, unjustified with historical hindsight, but they must be taken into account because they lay at the basis of how West Europeans perceived and understood Greek Catholicism and influenced their willingness to take action for defending it.⁶ Without any other data in this sense, we can venture to state that in terms of the political lobby that Westerners could still make in the defence of Catholicism in the Soviet bloc, it unfalteringly privileged Roman Catholicism and left Greek-Catholicism to pursue its tragic destiny.

We do not know how the document presented here will be received by the official historiography of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church, but it is living proof that although they watched attentively all the developments affecting the evolution of Catholicism in Romania, the Italian authorities did not prove to have sufficient understanding of the characteristics and traditions of Romanian Greek Catholicism and of its contribution to strengthening the national identity and establishing the national community that took the institutional form of the nation-state.

⁶ For a partial summary statistic (on a diocese) of resistance and non-resistance to the apostasy of faith, see Sergiu Soica, *Eparhia Greco-Catolică de Oradea și Securitatea în anul 1948*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Mega, 2014, pp. 50-75.

DOCUMENTARY ANNEX⁷

LEGAZIONE D'ITALIA
BUCAREST

TELESPRESSO N. 225/1072

Al Ministero degli Affari Esteri – Affari Politici
Ufficio Santa Sede – Roma
e.p.c.
Ambasciate D'Italia – Ankara – Mosca
Legazioni: Sofia – Budapest – Belgrado

Bucarest, 4 ottobre 1948

Politica religiosa in Romania

Un comunicato della Patriarchia ortodossa romena in data 3 ottobre c.a. ha annunciato che 38 arcipreti e preti greco-cattolici (uniti), quali delegati della maggioranza del clero greco-cattolico di tutte le provincie della Transilvania e del Banato si sono riuniti a Cluj il 1 ottobre per discutere l'appello rivolto alla Chiesa Unita dal Metropolita ortodosso di Transilvania per il ritorno di essa in seno all'ortodossia romena.

Il comunicato aggiunge che la predetta Assemblea ha deciso all'unanimità di ritornare al rito ortodosso, rivolgendo a sua volta un appello in tal senso al clero e ai fedeli. Dopo di che i 38 delegati sono venuti a Bucarest per presentare al Patriarca le loro decisioni.

Con ciò è stato compiuto il primo atto decisivo contro la libertà religiosa degli Uniti per forzarli alla apostasia dal cattolicesimo romano, come era stato chiaramente annunciato nel programma religioso del nuovo regime di questo paese e nei discorsi del nuovo Patriarca romeno Giustiniano fin dal suo avvento alla direzione della Chiesa Ortodossa autocefale di Romania.

Mi consta nel modo più sicuro che il Governo romeno ha messo in opera i mezzi coercitivi più drastici per ottenere l'abiura dei sacerdoti predetti; si estorse la firma ai singoli atti di apostasia mediante l'arresto e le minacce della deportazione in Siberia.

Le adesioni in tal modo ottenute sono più di 400 e rappresentano circa il 25 % dell'intero clero cattolico-unito.

Benchè riluttanti questi sacerdoti non osarono resistere alle pressioni e alle minacce, anche per il fatto che le conseguenze di un loro rifiuto sarebbero ricadute

⁷ The document is preserved in Rome, at the Archivio Storico-Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, fund *Affari Politici 1946-1950, Romania, busta nr. 7 (1948)*, without page numbers.

sulle loro famiglie (è noto che i sacerdoti cattolici del rito greco-unito sono quasi tutti ammogliati e con numerosa prole).

Non è esatto quanto il comunicato afferma che i 38 ecclesiastici convenuti a Bucarest siano muniti della delega della maggioranza del clero unito: essi rappresentano soltanto i 400 preti dei quali si è ottenuto l'abiura nel modo anzidetto, ma ciò non toglie che il fatto per il modo in cui è avvenuto e per il gran numero di sacerdoti che vi sono compresi, è di grande gravità. Tutto lascia prevedere che altre simili forzate apostasie seguiranno fra breve e che ogni mezzo, sia con pressioni e minacce di ordine fisico e morale, sia con gli espedienti amministrativi ai quale la recente legge sull'esercizio dei culti si presta agevolmente, sarà attuato per distruggere la Chiesa Unita ed incorporarla in quella ortodossa.

I vescovi greco-cattolici si riuniranno prossimamente in conferenza per esaminare la grave questione e per cercare di opporre difesa all'azione del Governo, facendo appello al clero e ai fedeli affinché si mantengano uniti nella loro comunità religiosa.

Ma purtroppo non si può fare grande assegnamento su tali sforzi e specialmente sul coraggio e tanto meno sull'eroismo del basso clero e dei fedeli.

La comunità greco-cattolica di Romania sia per la sua origine derivata circa 250 anni addietro sotto l'Impero degli Asburgo da un distacco collettivo di essa dal nesso della Chiesa Ortodossa romena, sia per la scarsa tradizione e preparazione, sia infine per la grave tara del coniugato del clero minore, non ha in se – a quanto pare – sufficiente forza e compattezza per superare la grave crisi presente.

Il Ministro
Scammacca