

THE MORAL CONDUCT OF GREEK CATHOLIC PRIESTS FROM THE DIOCESE OF GHERLA IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, BETWEEN THE NORM AND REALITY

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***ABSTRACT:** THIS STUDY IS FOCUSED ON THE ANALYSIS OF THE MORAL BEHAVIOUR OF THE GREEK CATHOLIC PRIEST IN THE DIOCESE OF GHERLA IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, HUMAN BEHAVIOUR WHICH IS ILLUSTRATED BY MIRRORING THE REALITY OF EVERYDAY LIFE AGAINST THE NORMS PRESCRIBED BY THE CANONS AND THE PRECEPTS OF ECCLESIASTICAL DISCIPLINE. ALONGSIDE THE “DASCĂL” (PAROCHIAL SCHOOLMASTER) AND THE “JUDE” (MAYOR OF THE VILLAGE), THE PARISH PRIEST REPRESENTED THE CLOSEST LEVEL OF THE ELITE WITH WHICH THE ORDINARY PARISHIONER CAME INTO CONTACT, THEREFORE HE WAS EXPECTED TO BE A MODEL OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND THE EMBODIMENT OF THE HUMAN ARCHETYPE SHAPED BY RELIGIOUS RULES. CONSEQUENTLY, THE PRIEST WAS NOT TO BE LIMITED ONLY TO FULFILLING HIS PROFESSIONAL DUTIES FAIRLY AND PROMPTLY, BUT HAD, AT THE SAME TIME, THE OBLIGATION TO TAKE UP AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY, AS PROMOTER OF SOCIAL ETHICS, OF A HARMONIOUS FAMILY LIFE, OF THE DO-IT-YOURSELF SPIRIT AND OF CORDIAL RELATIONS WITH ALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS. TO AVOID THE TRAP OF UNFOUNDED GENERALIZATIONS, IT SHOULD BE POINTED OUT THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE PRIESTS IN THE PERIOD STUDIED ARE SITUATED VERY CLOSE TO THE OUTLINED STANDARD, AS IS APPARENT FROM THE REPORTS SUBMITTED BY VICARS AND ARCHPRIESTS TO THE DEANERY FROM GHERLA, WHILE OTHER DOCUMENTS FROM THE ARCHIVES GIVE DETAILS OF RATHER THE SENSATIONAL OCCURRENCES REPRESENTED BY DEVIATIONS FROM THE NORM, WHICH REQUIRED INVESTIGATIONS AND DECISIONS INTENDED TO CORRECT BEHAVIOURAL DEVIATIONS.*

***KEY WORDS:** GHERLA DIOCESE, PRIEST, NORM, REALITY, MORAL BEHAVIOUR*

Alongside the “dascăl” (parochial schoolmaster) and the “jude” (mayor of the village), the parish priest represented the closest level of the elite with which the parishioner came into contact, therefore he was expected to be a model of social behaviour and the embodiment of the human archetype shaped by religious rules. Consequently, the priest was not to be limited only to fulfilling his professional duties fairly and promptly, but had, at the same time, the obligation to take up an active role in the community, as promoter of social ethics, of a harmonious family life, of the do-it-yourself spirit and of cordial relations with all community members. The prototype of the ideal priest desired by the Episcopal factors of

decision would reveal his distinct social position, shown by proper fulfilment of his spiritual-pastoral and administrative duties, by the sobriety of his garments and by his social behaviour beyond reproach, expressed by calmness, generosity, honesty, humility and impeccable morality.[1]

The ideal profile of the priest is clearly defined in decrees adopted at the Council of Trent. Thus, the Reform Decree of 17 September 1562 adopted by the XXII Tridentine Catholic Session of the Council required priests "to organise their whole life and conduct so that their garments, way of being, walking, their words and other things should transmit but seriousness, moderation and religiosity." [2] It also recommended priests "to avoid even slight mistakes that would seem important coming from them, so that their deeds should arouse respect from all." [3] During the period under consideration, Orthodox Metropolitan Andrei Șaguna believed that priests had to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world", i.e. religious, moral, wise and diligent in teaching others, true models for parishioners who, upon seeing their good deeds, should glorify God. [4] Moreover, the canons of diocesan synod of Blaj of September 16, 1821 required the priests to be a role model for all their parishioners through good deeds and "refraining from those permitted to the others". [5] The social behaviour of the priests was also the concern of the Greek Catholic archdiocesan synod held in Blaj between 20 to 22 October 1869, whose decrees imposed upon priests an exemplary moral behaviour that could be gained through regular participation in contractual councils, through the study of biblical and theological works, exemplary administration of sacraments and by "enthusiasm for all that is good and decent to the priestly position." [6] Therefore, the priests were obliged to lead an exemplary life and to show integrity, so as "not to appear to belie by behaviour what they preach by word." [7] In order to approach the pattern desired by Episcopal leaders, the priests had to refrain from exercising administrative and civil dignities and from obtaining any income from economic activities inconsistent with the priestly status (being a tenant or a tax collector), as well as from keeping pubs in the parish house or visiting one. [8] Also, the priest was totally forbidden to get drunk, to deceive, to fight and "to be a lover of discord," to be greedy and "to seek to gain a profit from usury." [9] The priests had to abstain from all worldly sins, forbidden both by the "the law of nature" and "the laws of God and the Church," for there was nothing more damaging to the image of the Church than the morally and socially inappropriate behaviour their priests. [10] However, the norm did not deny the humanity of the priest and accepted those recreational activities that do not affect the clerical dignity. Among these activities allowed there were conversations with representatives of the intellectual class, attending private parties organized by respectable families, travelling, listening to quality music, especially sacred music, and household activities, such as orchards and gardening. Among the activities unworthy of the priestly status were reading "forbidden and immoral" books, pub attendance when the priests were not travelling, drinking in excess, hunting, playing cards, attending "profane theatres", participation in games and balls and roaming at night. [11]

The ideal profile of the priest can be drawn from the Episcopal and pastoral circulars. For example, the pastoral circular of bishop Ioan Alexi of 5 September 1860 asks the priests, considered "light in the lighthouse" to be true spiritual and behavioural role models for their followers : "... so must priests who are called to the Lord's service draw their life and all their manners, that by their clothes, their customs, their word and all other

things they should show only what is pious and sober and full of devotion and they should avoid even the small sins that in them would be great, they should beware so that all their deeds might encourage respect". The pastoral calls priests to shelter from the temptation of immoral acts and especially "the waste of drunkenness". The true priest, the bishop says, is good, wise, kind and has courteous and "sweet" manners, being the "paragon of his people, the good salt, the long fruitful branches, the true instructor and enlightener of the people." The priests were also required to keep a certain distance from political issues and the other worldly matters, because their motto should be "the Holy Cross and the Holy Scripture." The pastoral recommended priests to use their free time for household chores, prayer and spiritual meditation and not waste it by attending "worldly gatherings" where they could hear words not compliant with the priestly status or "feasts" where "by means of indulging into alcohol one might do things and words that may cause more inconvenience, let alone damage the priest's character." By drawing the image depicting the ideal priest, Bishop Alexi asked priests to be godly, wise, gentle, guardian, forgiving, peaceful, clean, innocent, "with the best drawing in all your works, so that you can never be blamed or confronted by anyone, so that no one can say that you behaved unwisely in any situation." [12]

The appropriate social behaviour of the priests also preoccupied Bishop Ioan Vancea. In his pastoral to the diocesan clergy of 1 February 1866 the Bishop required the diocesan priests that in their conduct there be "nothing that would decrease the glory of God", but that they strive to be role models for all their parishioners that "seeing the good works, shall glorify our Father in heaven". [13]

The then press, too, speaks about priests as behavioural model to follow for believers. According to the journalists of the time, the priest was obliged to be both a standard of morality and spiritual cleanliness and a viable model of a good householder. It was his duty, given his moral probity and priestly function, to combat "the ruining intoxication that the unfortunate Romanians still could not know as to how poisonous an enemy it is" and laziness, "which dumps down the soul and causes drowsiness in the agility of the body." [14]

Highlighted by all these documentary sources, the picture of the ideal priest is that of a perfect professional, exercising accurately the spiritual and administrative duties prescribed by his function, being both a leader and guide of his flock, and a socio-moral standard, given by the integrity of his morals, his exemplary family life, his civic virtue and cultural concerns along with his abilities of a good householder. Countless deans' reports sent to the Ordinariate of the diocese illustrate the fact that most diocesan priests were trying to, and even succeeding in approaching this priestly model outlined by the ecclesiastic norm. [15] Of the many priests with competence and diligence in carrying out their spiritual and administrative duties and with perfect social behaviour, we would like to mention priest George Popescu from Socaciu, about whom vice dean of Eriu region, Grigore Popdan, says he always meets his priestly demands with "humanity and accuracy" and demonstrates an exemplary behaviour. [16]

Even though the vast majority of priests are mentioned in the reports to the Deanery with "exemplary moral behaviour" and stories about them are not very common for this very reason, there are also deviations from the norm, occurring more often in the correspondence with the diocese, in the form of cases which require investigation and specific measures, but without this meaning that they are predominant. The main deviations of priests from the norm prescribed, which are found in the documents of the period studied, were drinking in excess, verbal and physical violence and marital infidelity.

Unfortunately, the great scourge of alcoholism also afflicted some diocesan priests, despite frequent recommendations in this regard. One such case is that of the priest of Sarasău, Vasile Serbacu. On May 11, 1862, the vice dean of the tract of Sighet, Alexandru Lazăr, sent Bishop Ioan Alexi the findings of his investigation on the moral conduct of priest Serbacu, from which we learn about the fact that the cleric was "accustomed to frequenting the local pub and there drink together with his people". On June 28, 1862, the diocesan Ordinariate writes to the vicar of Maramureș, Mihail Pavel, regarding this excessive priest: "... this priest goes into pubs and gets drunk and commits other excesses, and otherwise, too, his whole behaviour inconsistent with his priestly status is proven enough." The Episcopal Board asks the vicar to cite the said priest to appear before the deputy Consistory of Maramureș and rebuke him "so that also the people stop drinking and attending pubs in the future, so that he lead the people with the good example, for otherwise, in case he be referred to here with such excesses, he shall be cast out from the clergy altogether." [17] Despite efforts of the Ordinariate and the vicar to restore this priest to morality, his excesses will continue and even increase. On October 5, 1864, vicar Mihail Pavel writes again to the Ordinariate about the priest Vasile Serbacu and his serious misconduct: "... the priest from Saraseu, the honourable Vasile Serbacu not only frequents pubs, gets drunk, fights with the ordinary people, while drunk causes scandals in region Sighet and in his parish, but also not living with his lawful wife for a long time has been keeping a woman from Saraseu and living with her in the wrong." At the end of his account, the vicar requests from the episcopal Ordinariate to judge to suspend this priest who "from day to day more excessively behaves." [18] Following the depraved life of priest Serbacu on December 17, 1864, the Episcopal Consistory suspended him from all his benefit in Sarasău, subsequently to be arranged in another parish, but only if he "amends his scandalous life". [19]

Another bad example on alcohol is offered by priest Vasile Oros from the parish Pruni. On April 28, 1866, vice dean of the tract Olpret, Iosif Orianu writes to the Ordinariate about the excesses of this priest cast the shadow of immorality upon the entire diocesan clergy: "... I saw him once in Olpret at the fair, very much drunk and only wearing a shirt, much to the dishonour of the priestly status. Another time, he came before me as a great best-man in a lay wedding in Pesteșiu (n.n. Peștera), also in the state of drunkenness, so that the people marvelled at him, and last fall, at the tractual priests meeting in Cetanu, also prostituted to the people, then in his own parish in all feasts is addicted to partying until he is one with the laity, which is why the people like him, that they would rather readily applaud than blame him for the excesses of drunkenness". Following testimony by vice Archpriest Orianu, the Ordinariate will have a disciplinary investigation on this priest leaning towards the liquor of the god Bacchus. [20]

Vice Archpriest of Șomcuta, Athanasiu Cotoțiu, was sent to investigate the drunkard and violent priest from parish Săcălășeni. As a result of this disposition by the bishop, vice dean Cotoțiu will come on site on January 26, 1857, together with two other priests, to investigate the "outrageous and drunken life" of priest George Trif. The Commission of Inquiry headed by the vice - dean will interview under oath all the community leaders regarding attendance of pubs by the priest, his propensity to drink and his violent character. Witness statements indicate a tendency of that priest to attend taverns and drink alcohol in excess: "he walks mostly in a drunken state ", "he goes to the pub and gets drunk", "the Holy Mass was postponed twice this year on Sundays for drunkenness ", "he goes to pubs and drinks until he gets drunk", "the priest goes to pubs and gets drunk,

especially at feasts." Moreover, all witnesses statements converge towards a violent physical or verbal character of the parish priest: "he invites people to scold and fight" , "he knocked over several of the village people in pubs", "he beat 20 villagers in the pub", "many of the village he beat in the pubs", "in the pub of the Jew Herskovitz Lazar he broke all bottles and an oven", "he swears and shouts at women in all ways", "he badly beat Contin Gavril", "he fights with women", "with a big spoon and tablespoons he threw at us out of the window." The interviewed witnesses accused the priest that he sold the incense from the church in Baia Mare for 1 florin, and the money he used to buy alcohol. This disciplinary case was investigated again on the March 27, 1857, when the accused priest avoided suspension due to correction of his behaviour.[21]

Priest Demetriu Pop of the parish Chieșd was also accused of drunkenness and violent social behaviour. On 27 March 1858 he was the subject of investigation conducted by Theodor Cortis, the parishioner of Recea and at the same time a consistorial tax inspector. The witnesses questioned on this occasion unveil the great attraction of this priest towards consumption of alcohol: "He was drunk on several occasions at home, at fairs and at memorial services", "He once drank in Hidigu (n.n. Maeriste) at the inn, he was so drunk that he fell off his sleigh on a straight road and thus smashed his nose", "he goes from pub to pub", "He was also drunk while performing hid priestly duties, as well as on the occasions of consecrations, so drunk that he could not perform the service, at funerals and weddings so drunk that he could barely speak", "he was so drunk (...) that tripped while carrying the censer around the church, he almost fell on the people and could not utter a word". According to the witnesses, due to consumption of alcohol this priest had fits of physical and verbal violence: "many of the people he scolded not only without grounds but also using a most obscene and rustic language he cursed and bullied", "with the Jew Abraham he quarrelled like two gypsies because the former refused to give him drink on faith", "he is such a bully, he beat the curator Pop Toader out of the assembly by hitting his chest with his fists", "he bullies the people calling them names of outlaws, cheaters, thieves, arsonists, cursed, damned, doomed, people worthy of nothing". Some of the witnesses accuse the priest of drinking the wine from church together with the parochial schoolmaster, some of the curators and the justice of peace: "the lust of drinking wine led the priest to the scandalous malice that he did not frown at taking part in stealing the church wine". Staring from all these serious accusations, the consistorial tax inspector asks the bishop Ioan Alexi to exclude this scandalous priest from the clergy as "defiling of the holy things, for he dared perform the Holy Mass in a drunken state", "like a bully in pubs, he who likes to quarrel, to curse, to damn, to mock and irritate the people" and "as a thief and embezzler of the church wine".[22]

Even if serious deviations from the moral norm of this priest will trigger an ample consistorial against him, his social behaviour will not improve at all in the future. On April 8, 1859, the Dean of tract Pericei, Ioan Lobontiu, writes to the Ordinariate about the deviations of parish priest in Chieșd , "who is very excessive in drinking, he surreptitiously drinks, and then curses and calls people all kinds of names and upon confession he gives them canons that they cannot fulfill." Following the revelation of the Dean, on April 16 , 1859, the Ordinariate will suspend forever Demetriu Pop parish priest from Chieșd, advising him that he will not acquire another parish benefit "until it shows signs of total reformation".[23]

In some cases, besides inclination to drunkenness and physical violence, priests were accused of the serious sin of adultery, which entailed a rigorous investigation by the

Consistory, those found to be guilty being suspended from office or even removed from the clergy. Under the charge of adultery is prosecuted priest Iosif Tohati from Căței, accused by the maid Paraschiva Vaida of indecent exposure. The case is being investigated on June 13, 1860 by a commission of inquiry composed of dean of Gherla, Simion Boțșă and vice-dean of Cățcău, Ioan Colceriu. The witnesses interviewed on this occasion will not thoroughly prove the servant's accusation.[24] On November 8, 1860, will be a new investigation of this particular disciplinary case by the same committee of inquiry. They will also hear other women who were maids in the priest's house and also his neighbours. Some statements made on this occasion converge to certain guilt of the priest in his relationship with the maid. Incidentally, vice-dean Ioan Colceriu recommended to the Ordinariate to punish the impugned priest by transfer to a poorer parish: "...because the data on this priest by Paraschiva Vaida by some testimonies are strengthened, it would be necessary that the priest be moved to another worse location to be punished." [25]

Documents also reveal situations in which the priests themselves produce a blueprint for moral health of the diocesan clergy. Therefore, on July 1, 1861, an anonymous priest around Căvnic writes to the Ordinariate a missive about "how priesthood declined." In his letter, the priest incriminates the fact that some priests have totally forgotten the divine laws, chasing worldly pleasures and riches: "Unspoken awe swept my heart seeing some of our priests being very feeble in observing priestly rules, since most do not want to live according to the commandments of Christ, but according to the bodily pleasure, they do not want the poverty of Christ, but have chosen the exaltation of life." The anonymous priest blames primarily his fellow widows, who keep young maids, "living with them", thus being judged by the parishioners and providing a bad example for them. The cleric also criticizes drunkard priests, quarrelsome and thugs, who bring great harm to the image of the whole priesthood: "Some priests are lovers of feasts, they have this great desire to be godparents and are drunks, quarrellers and thugs". As a negative example in this regard is presented Gabriel Simon, priest of Preluca, who was at a wedding as a godfather and being under the influence of alcohol, caused a general fight between the wedding parties, which resulted in days of arrest in Lăpușul Unguresc. At the end of his letter, the anonymous priest requests the intervention of Bishop Ioan Alexi to straighten the falls among diocesan priests: "Your Holiness, it is necessary that you operate and indebt everyone to be diligent in everything, but mostly in the use of words, and to beware of scandalous behaviour by which the people perish even sooner." [26]

Therefore, we find not only in the Episcopal circulars, but also in the press of the period, an ideal model that priests should approach by their daily behaviour and in relation to which they were assessed by their bishops and parishioners. The majority of priests of the age are within range of the prescribed norm, as shown in works of synthesis presented in the deans' reports sent regularly to the diocesan Ordinariate, while the documents in the archive give more details on deviation from the norm, those that require explanations, investigations and decisions to correct the deviant behaviours. We thus find such documents that describe the priest as worthy of the cassock and of carrying the title of "Greatly Honored Sir", head of household responsible of the material and spiritual welfare of his family, thrifty model and community leader along with other representatives of the rural elite, but also a victim of his human nature, fallen for worldly sins that often afflicted the faithful flock as well.

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