

The Latin-Rite Roman Catholic Church of Romania

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On 10 May 1927 Romania and the Vatican concluded a Concordat by which five dioceses were established. Two of them, Alba Iulia and Oradea-Satu Mare, straddle the Transylvanian Alps where ninety per cent of Romania's Hungarians, now estimated at between 1,700,000 and 2,500,000, live.¹ About sixty per cent of Romania's Catholic population are Hungarian. The diocese of Timișoara, in the middle-Danube plains of the Banat, is predominantly German. The other two are largely Romanian, the archdiocese of Bucharest in the lower-Danube plains and the diocese of Iași. Thus the Latin-rite Catholic Church is one of national minorities, a factor which has hampered church unity and has been used by the communists to keep the Church divided.

On 22 February 1948 Party secretary Gheorghiu-Dej said that the sole obstacle to "democracy" in Romania was the Catholic Church: on 19 July the government unilaterally revoked the Concordat; on 4 August it reduced the dioceses to two (Bucharest and Alba Iulia) on the arbitrary pretext that a diocese must have at least 750,000 members to justify its existence (Art. 22 of their legislation on religion). Thus three of the five bishops in office in 1948 were deprived of their sees, and the entire responsibility for the pastoral needs of about 1,200,000 Catholics in 683 parishes with 1,050 priests was left to two bishops, one of whom, Augustin Pacha of Bucharest, was already over eighty.² The administrative organisation of the Church was shattered. The State's attempt, however, from 1950 to 1951 to organise a national Church independent of Rome and provoke schism failed because only a tiny proportion of the clergy would support it.

Contact between the Church and the Vatican was effectively cut off under Art. 40 which states: "No religious community and none of its officials may have relations with religious communities abroad, except with permission of the Ministry of Cults and through the Ministry for External Affairs". Art. 47 also declared that "foreign religious cults may not exercise jurisdiction on Romanian State territory", thus enabling the State to close or nationalise most Catholic institutions.

All the seminaries were closed. All 24 newspapers and publications were suppressed. All charitable institutions, including hospitals, were closed. All but a token handful of religious houses were also closed, expatriates expelled, the orders disbanded and forbidden to accept novices. By 1953 three hundred church buildings had been requisitioned, and 101 schools which served 28,000 pupils were nationalised.³

The law of 1948 also demanded that every denomination present its own organisational charter for the Ministry's approval. This has not yet been done, so that the Catholic Church is now in the anomalous position of being the second largest Church in Romania, with about eight per cent of the population, and yet lacking legal standing. The first charter compiled was unacceptable to the government, which rejected 42 of its 46 articles, according to the Hungarian bishop of Alba Iulia, Aron Marton,⁴ its chief author. A so-called Catholic Action Committee, composed of "peace" priests, then submitted an amended version with 39 articles. The first 38 provided for all the features sought by Marton. The Pope was recognised as the highest authority; the nomination of bishops was the prerogative of the Holy See on the recommendation of the Romanian Church, based on the concurrence of the Romanian government. The right to communicate with Rome was to be guaranteed. However, the 39th article was the key one, providing that 14 of the articles needed government approval to be effective.

Archbishop Pacha instructed the people never to separate themselves from their legitimate bishops nor from the Pope. Pope Pius XII completely disapproved of the proposed charter and ordered his Nuncio, the American Gerald O'Hara, to veto it. Hansjakob Stehle⁵ feels that instead of accepting a workable compromise, Pius XII was too ready to plunge the Church into a catacomb situation. He instructed O'Hara to consecrate secret bishops and appoint twenty apostolic administrators, drawing up lists of replacements to succeed any who might be imprisoned. In 1950 the government declared O'Hara "persona non grata" and he departed. All the bishops and priests on the nunciature list suffered imprisonment.

Previous to this, on 8 October 1948, the Latin-rite bishops had joined their Eastern-rite colleagues in an energetic protest just before the forcible suppression of the Eastern-rite Church: "Three million citizens are being treated as if they were enemies of the people". The whole Catholic Church was very unpopular with Romania's rulers. Had it not been for the fact that the Latin-rite Church contained large national minorities whose sovereign states the government was afraid of antagonising, the Latin-rite Church might well have been suppressed too.

They did not escape persecution. Between 1949 and 1951 the government arrested all the bishops, Pacha included, as well as those secretly consecrated for Bucharest and Timișoara, Joseph Schubert and Adalbert Boros. At a show trial in September 1951 they confessed to having plotted

the overthrow of the regime with American aid. Pacha died soon after his release in 1954. Priests suffered too; about two hundred were imprisoned as "enemies of the people".⁶ Many faithful laypeople were also arrested. For the whole Church it was a time of terror and tribulation.⁷ (The same was true of the other Churches in Romania.) Fr Petru Mareş, an outspoken Romanian priest now in exile in the west, told how his own bishop, Anton Durcoviçi of Iaşi, was thrown naked into a crowded cell. No-one recognised him until he said "Sorry, brothers, I'm your bishop." He was removed and never seen again. He died of starvation. A priest passing along a corridor heard the words "*Antonius moribundus*" from a cell and, through the cell door, gave the words of extreme unction.⁸

As it turned out, none of the unfortunate clergy secretly consecrated were ever able to function as diocesans. Those who survived their long sentences were usually exiled to remote parishes, often broken men.⁹ From time to time the Vatican duly announces that another bishop has died.¹⁰ A handful still survive.¹¹ Two who were released early from prison and restored to pastoral work after swearing oaths of loyalty to the State were considered as apostates by the Vatican. The actual administrator of the archdiocese of Bucharest from 1954 to 1983, when he died, was Francisco Augustin, an ethnic German born in 1906. He was recognised by the State, but was never regarded as trustworthy by the Vatican. From 1961 his title was "substitute ordinary" (provisional administrator). The Vatican would not promote him to the rank of apostolic administrator. He was the first Catholic priest permitted to travel from Romania. He came to Rome in 1964 for the later stages of the Vatican Council but the Vatican refused to allow him to attend. As the bishops the Vatican *had* invited were not allowed to leave their country, the Romanian Church had no part in the Council and its decrees were not made available by the State for many years afterwards. Augustin was also a deputy in the Romanian parliament. Until Antal Jakab became bishop of Alba Iulia in 1979, he was the main spokesman for the Church, obviously with government approval.

As late as 1962 priests were still being arrested. When there was a general amnesty in 1964 those who had survived emerged from prison, emaciated, poverty-stricken and dressed in rags, and were rarely allowed back into their parishes for at least a year.¹² Conditions improved generally from this date and became a little more tolerable, if still unduly restrictive. In 1965 priests were permitted to visit families who dared to have them, but seldom did so in order not to compromise them.¹³ Churches were "surprisingly full" despite the very hard times Catholics had been through, and the discrimination they suffered (and still may suffer) in jobs and the professional careers.

Despite the resumption of occasional contacts with Rome since Cardinal König's first visit to Bucharest in November 1967, with an

increasing stream of Romanian churchmen coming to Rome, with President Nicolae Ceaușescu's reception by the Pope on 27 May 1973, and with regular visits to Romania by Mgr Luigi Poggi,¹⁴ Vatican *Ostpolitik* has achieved little. Poggi has few illusions. The problem of dioceses and bishops remains unresolved to this day and is the cause of continuing tension between Church and State, and between State and the Vatican. Nor has the charter yet been agreed on.

There is considerable mistrust of *Ostpolitik* among rank and file church members. "Have they forgotten in Rome what the regime has done to the Church since 1944? Is it possible to negotiate seriously with communists who have killed more than 1,400 priests, monks and nuns?"¹⁵ they ask: "Do they really believe Bucharest will stick to agreements?"¹⁶ Nevertheless the Latin-rite Church though viewed by the regime with continuing suspicion is allowed to function, unlike its Eastern-rite brothers. As already suggested, this may be due to the fact that the vast majority of Latin-rite Catholics are from the national minorities — Hungarian, German, and in the Banat a considerable number of Croats, Bulgars and Slovaks. The regime is unwilling to antagonise its Warsaw Pact neighbours. Its relationship with Hungary is particularly uneasy. The articulate Hungarians in Romania already complain bitterly about their treatment as a national minority. For the Romanian government to have added complete suppression of their Church would have been foolish.

On 29 February 1968 Ceaușescu received all Romanian religious leaders, including the Hungarian bishop, Aron Marton. Marton, born in 1896, was bishop of Alba Iulia from 1939. He had been seriously injured in an arranged car accident, deprived of his see, and imprisoned from 1949 to 1955, and was only then released because of pressure from his faithful clergy. For a further six years he was under house-arrest. As late as 1969 a visiting journalist, Daniel Madden, was not allowed to meet him and he was told that he "avoided visitors". Only in 1970 was he allowed to go to Rome.

For years Marton was the sole functioning bishop recognised by the State in Romania and thus had to ordain priests for other dioceses than his own. He was so incorruptible that even his enemies had to admire him. Now regarded as a "confessor" by Hungarians, he was a man of character and energy, warm, courageous, profoundly spiritual. He always firmly upheld the rights and dignity of man in his dealings with the authorities. He was also widely loved by Eastern-rite Catholics who were Romanians and could speak their language. His time in prison broadened his outlook towards fellow Christians.¹⁷ He had a tremendous admiration for the Eastern-rite bishops and, when free, gave Eastern-rite Catholics every possible moral and practical support. He often directed his own priests, where asked, to assist the banned Eastern-rite priests.

In 1972 the Romanian Church Office for the first time gave express permission for the consecration of a bishop. The Hungarian Antal Jakab (who had spent seven years in prison) was consecrated in Rome and appointed as Marton's co-adjutor with right of succession. Marton, whose health had been severely affected by his imprisonment, retired in 1979 and died on 2 October 1980. Jakab does not appear to enjoy quite the same confidence from his flock as did Marton. Like Augustin he is a member of the Front for Social Democracy and Unity. At the Episcopal Conference in September 1980 he presented the current "official" teaching of the regime on the Family as being consistent with Rome's view of Natural Law.

On 25 July 1981 another Hungarian priest, Lajos Balint, was allowed to be appointed as auxiliary bishop of Alba Iulia. A Vatican attempt to occupy the see of Iași had previously miscarried, however. An ordinary priest, Fr Petru Pleșca, acceptable to most, had, from March 1951 till his death in 1977, tried to organise the diocese. While in Rome on a visit in December 1965 he was consecrated bishop. The Romanian Church Office was only subsequently informed, and hence, in retaliation, refused Pleșca official recognition, and he had to be named Titular Bishop of Fico instead of Iași.¹⁸ A 1977 *samizdat* document from Moldavia gives a graphic picture of the difficulties he encountered both before and after his appointment. He tried to enter into dialogue with the regime but what little he could achieve came only gradually. For the first five years he was not even permitted to contact his congregations. All administrative problems had to be resolved through the distant archdiocese of Bucharest or the Ministry of Cults. In 1956 he managed to get Iași Seminary reopened, a major achievement, but after his consecration the State made it almost impossible to administer the diocese. Confirmations had to be requested a year ahead and the date kept secret. He never got permission to send a pastoral letter. All his correspondence was censored. In his latter years he was "simply suffocated" by the Securitate (secret police) who interrogated him almost every day. Other sources speak derogatively of Pleșca, and there is mention of a letter of complaint to the Holy See in 1968 signed by over 100 priests.¹⁹ Perhaps the explanation lies partly in a reference in 1978 to Pleșca's "right-hand man", Fr Alfons Donea, as corrupt. It is possible that Donea could have been deliberately planted in this key position by the Securitate. Exhausted, Pleșca died suddenly. After his requiem, Fr Petru Mareș, the leading spokesman for the rights of the Church, spoke out courageously. The Vatican was allowed to appoint as Pleșca's successor only an "ordinary *ad nutam sanctae sedis*", usually a temporary appointment in which a priest remains in his Order, but may confirm (but not ordain). He is Petru Gherghel, a younger man (b. 1940), formerly vice-rector of Iași seminary and just the active sort of person the rapidly expanding diocese of Iași needs. The government

recognises him as Vicar General, but there are urgent problems which only a bishop with formal episcopal status can solve.

Discussions over bishops, dioceses and the charter drag on. In 1976 Emil Bodnaras, Minister of Cults, suggested that there should be three dioceses according to nationality:²⁰ a composite diocese of Alba Iulia, Satu Mare and Oradea for the Hungarians, Timișoara for the Germans, and Bucharest and Iași for the Romanians. The Moldavians of Iași, however, objected to becoming part of the Bucharest archdiocese, which they distrust. However, in the autumn of 1983 some progress was made with the appointment by Pope John Paul II of Fr Sebastian Kräuter, 61, as Bishop of Timișoara and Dr Stefan Daszkal, 64, as Bishop of Oradea, though they, like Pleșca, are only “interim” bishops, without formal episcopal status. The Vatican has left the preparation of the charter to the local clergy while reserving the authority and final decision over such matters as the delineation of a diocese.*

The continued hostility of the Romanian government to the Vatican was shown by their being the only eastern bloc country not to send a delegation to the investiture of Pope John Paul II. He on his part has since championed the cause of the Eastern-rite Catholics pressing for reinstatement and recognition of their Church. There were times during the 1970s when Ceaușescu, ever the opportunist, seemed on the point of trying to unite the two rites into one Church, as a solution to the problem of the Eastern-rite Catholics, who would not disappear. In the eyes of many Vatican diplomats the difference of rites is not important — there is one Catholic Church in Romania, half of which officially does not exist. In this respect they have the support of the majority of Latin-rite Catholics who sympathise deeply with their persecuted brethren. Those who oppose the idea usually belong to minority national groups.

State Restrictions on the Church

It is irksome for Latin-rite Catholics that they are the only one of sixteen recognised religious bodies without a charter, especially as they are the second largest. However, the lack of *de jure* recognition does not prevent the State from controlling the Church and interfering in its internal affairs as minutely as it does with the others.

Stipends are subsidised by the State by a third; even so they are minimal and there is no pension scheme, nor any home for retired priests. Despite this there is a recently built, prestigious conference house for clergy in the mountains at Sinaia in the archdiocese of Bucharest.²¹ Special salaries may be given as rewards to clergy who have proved themselves “loyal” or “efficient” to the government.²²

*The first workable draft had been prepared in July 1979, the first not to mention article 47 of the 1948 law, with its prohibition on foreign jurisdiction.

The State controls clerical appointments. All have to be approved by the Department of Cults which can, and does, block transfers, keep some vacancies unfilled and move particularly effective priests rapidly from parish to parish. Bishops even have to get permission to ordain, and in Moldavia it has been common practice to keep newly ordained priests waiting for a work permit for a couple of years to unsettle them.²³

Thanks to local initiative and demand, two of the seminaries were reopened — Alba Iulia in 1952 and Iași in 1956; Alba Iulia also has a junior seminary with seventy boys. The history of the seminaries is a saga in its own right and provides a telling indictment of state interference in church affairs. Young men from Romanian-speaking Moldavia had gone to Alba Iulia but encountered great difficulties as instruction there was in Hungarian. Sixty returned to Iași where, out of 85 applicants, the State limited the intake to six a year. Iași also had to find places for students from Bucharest whose seminary remains closed to this day. Many vocations were thus frustrated.²⁴

By 1976 seminaries were being allowed to take as many students as they liked but this too was causing problems. Iași had between seventy and eighty places, but the intake was increasing yearly aided by large families and the greatest increase in vocations. Alba Iulia had between 140 and 160 places (an increase on 1969 when it had only 88), but it had buildings only for sixty students. The demand for extra places arose from having to cater for three dioceses.²⁵ In response to this it now provides services and instruction in German and Romanian as well as Hungarian. Plans were made in 1974 to enlarge the seminary. Overcrowding and poor hygiene were so bad that they made the headlines outside Romania; Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) described Alba Iulia seminary as materially the poorest in Europe. It sent a large sum of money, but permission to erect new buildings was withdrawn, on the pretext they would destroy the harmony of the city's architecture (though this didn't apparently apply to a huge concrete hotel erected near the beautiful old Cathedral!) Students had to sleep herded together in bunk-beds in cellars or about 12 in a room in rented and dilapidated property, with the danger of a TB epidemic. There were no showers, only cold water and tin basins. Every corner of the seminary resembled an underground station at rush hour. The chapel, built for sixty, has not been enlarged. As for kitchen premises, cooks and washerwomen stood before the intense heat of open wood fires. ACN equipped a good kitchen with new gas-cookers several years ago but the gas supply was turned off and reconnected only in 1982. Recently students got bathrooms and hot water for the first time. They still lack privacy, or space to study, and have to work in the corridors. ACN has promised Bishop Jakab it will find the money to rebuild the seminary as soon as the State permits.

Iași seminary is now in far better condition. It was partially damaged by

the 1977 earthquake, and was rebuilt in 1980 with a new section added.

For years the seminaries had no manuals, only cyclostyled texts, so blurred that men's eyesight was sometimes badly damaged. Most teaching had to be done by dictation with every book shared.²⁶ Iași did not receive foreign books until 1977. For years not a single Catholic publication from abroad, even Vatican II decrees, was available in Romania. In 1978 Fr Mareș complained that 25 newly-ordained priests had to go to their first parishes with no teaching material other than their breviaries. It was only in 1981 that the authorities relaxed the stringent restrictions on import of an adequate supply of theological works and allowed ACN to send books to the value of 25,000 DM.

On top of all these difficulties the seminaries have had to withstand determined campaigns by the authorities to infiltrate them and create tension and division. Between 1977 and 1978 Alba Iulia seminarians were interrogated, and a minute and disruptive inquiry was made into its courses and internal matters. Each week one student was detailed to report to the Securitate. At Iași, students were offered bribes of visits abroad and "better" parishes in return for cooperation.

The Catholic seminaries, however, have withstood pressure better than have other theological colleges. The rectors made firm, outspoken protests and had the solid backing of staff and students — and this has worked. Staff and students are of high calibre,²⁷ and the priests who emerge are dedicated, hard-working and, not surprisingly, very conservative in outlook. Although the ministries they can look forward to have to be exercised within the framework of tight restrictions, they can also be very fulfilling with a responsive flock. Financially they are supported through their studies by aid from abroad, a levy from the priesthood, and sacrificial giving by the laity.

Restrictions on the activities of priests are severe, though often hidden. Many have to live in an atmosphere of perpetual fear. Danger can threaten the good priest, possibly a beating up from the police. It is thought that Ion Ecsy, rector of Seikenburg Marian pilgrimage church, was murdered on 9 April 1982.²⁸ He was an excellent pastor with a ministry to thousands of pilgrims, and his funeral was held under extremely tight security. The Securitate also tries to sow distrust and isolate priests from contact with intellectuals, with the young²⁹ or with each other. Those with pastoral problems are afraid to confide in others; many presbyteries are bugged, telephones sometimes tapped, and even internal mail liable to be opened.³⁰ Even in the 1980s foreign visitors find priests, and laypeople too, afraid to communicate with them.³¹ Anyone visited by a foreigner has to report it within 24 hours. Priests with western contacts are subjected to long interrogations. In each parish there are four or five individuals at least whom the priest cannot trust and who report the content of each sermon.³² Priests dare not touch on social or

humanitarian issues. The standard of sermons, however, is high and many Orthodox attend Catholic churches to hear good doctrinal teaching. Official clergy reunions are useless because a Department of Cults representative sits in on them, acts as an unofficial chairman and inhibits free discussion of problems.³³

Instruction of minors under 15 is forbidden by the Constitution, but in practice this is not strictly enforced. Priests can instruct children, usually in their parishes. Teaching is hampered by the fact that they are not allowed Bibles or blackboards, and children are forbidden to take notes. It is estimated that only twenty to thirty per cent of Catholic children receive instruction in this way. Children of teachers, civil servants and professional people do not, or their parents could lose their jobs.³⁴

Teaching the faith is made even more difficult because the State uses the fact that the Church has no charter to deny it the right to have a press or paper to print its own religious literature. Catholics complain bitterly about the lamentable lack of even basic books, and that, unlike other Churches, they do not have their own newspaper.³⁵ It is illegal to import religious literature without permission, for it comes under general censorship regulations. Thus they feel isolated from the rest of the Catholic world. Hungarian religious books have to be brought in unofficially from Hungary; German ones from West Germany or Rome. The Hungarians in particular suffer acute shortages. Until 1976 there were no Hungarian prayer books or catechisms, only the revised lectionary which Marton managed to import in 1973. Even now Bishop Jakab is allowed only 3,000 catechisms for a diocese of 450,000. Unlike other denominations, Catholics got no Bibles till 1980, when 10,000 New Testaments were imported from Paris. It is very difficult for parents to instruct their children at home, for there are no simple religious books, while children may be prevented from attending Sunday Mass by deliberately-arranged school sports events. Recently the situation has perhaps improved slightly with a 400-page Prayer book printed in 1980 — but it is expensive, and is probably in short supply.³⁶

All church communications and orders have to be submitted to scrutiny by the Department of Cults, which can ban pastoral letters and suspend church orders. Explicit government approval is required for all contacts with Catholics abroad, and must be channelled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this area Catholics are obviously more disadvantaged than other Christians.

Government restrictions on repairs or enlargements to church buildings are a constant source of tension between Catholics and the State. Many congregations have to worship in dangerous or leaky buildings, or ones that are too small. This is particularly true of Moldavia where many churches were damaged in the 1977 earthquake and where families are larger than elsewhere. There, it is common for the church to be packed

with just the elderly and nursing mothers while the rest of the congregation stands outside. Some congregations have been held up for up to twenty years for repairs or rebuilding.³⁷ A judicious bribe to local officials can produce a permit, but just how risky any initiative may be was shown when 67-year-old Fr Michael Godo³⁸ was arrested (in August 1979) and given a six-year sentence in 1980 for having 75,000 lei in his own room. He had collected the money for rebuilding and was keeping it at home for safety. His sentence was intended to deter other priests with similar ideas. At what was meant to be a political show trial, not one of thirty witnesses would testify against him. Moreover he had kept accurate accounts and was living in personal poverty. He was released in 1981 as a result of protests and publicity, particularly by fellow Jesuits³⁹ in the west.

The total ban on religious orders is resented by Catholics, especially because the Orthodox are allowed them. True, there are still three "token" religious houses but they are allowed only aged religious, and have been kept open so that when the inmates die off it will "prove" the government's assertion that they are unnecessary. Yet there are hundreds longing to test their vocations.⁴⁰ The clergy do not dare to organise secret religious communities for fear of heavy sentences. *Samizdat* sources, however, tell of groups of two or three living together, usually working on farms or as domestics. They have to find a trustworthy priest to whom to make their vows.⁴¹ They carry out an invaluable ministry, assisting overworked priests. Because they are "workers" they are often closer to the laity and are more confided in than the clergy; they are also able to give away what they don't require to those in greater need.⁴² Charitable activities are, of course, forbidden to the Church as such.

Catechetical or study courses, or other meetings, are also forbidden, particularly anything to do with the young. Lay people and churchgoing children may face discrimination in further education and at work, though apparently to a lesser extent than evangelical Protestants. The Moldavians claim that many youngsters who want to enter the army or the teaching profession dare not go to Church, and that some who do, although capable of a professional career, end up in menial work.

In view of all these restrictions, it might seem surprising how well Catholics have maintained their faith, and how they have become, if anything, keener, attending Mass more frequently and even taking notes on the sermons. According to Augustin, eighty per cent attend Mass regularly. Their isolation has protected them from the ravages of modernism, and Fr Mareş testifies to the strength of their simple, secure and unquestioning faith. There is no doubt that the family has played a major role in transmitting the faith. Jakab says that the prohibition of religious education in school has brought home to parents their responsibility. Moldavian Catholics confirm this; Catholic traditions there have been

passed down within the family despite the terrors of the past, intense anti-religious education and new “more diabolical methods of persecution”. However there is also contrary evidence that within some families fear prevails, parents tell few things to their children and many are too tired to take them to Church.

Catholics have played a part in the overall revival of religion in Romania in the last few years. The election of a Pope from Poland has also given encouragement; as Fr Mareş says “He (too) laboured and suffered and struggled”. However, as one would expect in a Church of different nationalities, conditions and the extent of survival and revival differ considerably between one group and another. For convenience the Church may be considered in four areas: the Romanians in Moldavia (Iaşi diocese); the Romanians in Bucharest archdiocese; the Hungarians (dioceses of Alba Iulia and Oradea-Satu Mare); and the Germans in Timișoara diocese. There are said to be 650 churches altogether. The following statistics, by dioceses, from the 1978 *Annuario Pontificio* provides the latest, though they are far from satisfactory.

| Diocese | Priests | Seminarians | Total Catholics |
|------------------|---------|-------------|-----------------|
| Alba Iulia | 266 | 58 | 455,000 |
| Oradea-Satu Mare | 240 | 25 | 202,000 |
| Timișoara | 153 | 15 | 320,000 |
| Iași | 97 | 41 | 221,335 |
| Bucharest | 50 | 8 | 84,162 |

(The number of seminarians at Iași is much lower than other sources suggest).

Close examination reveals a divided Church — a fact of which the State takes full advantage. In contrast the Eastern-rite Catholics have one great advantage, an internal unity from their all being Romanian by nationality.

Moldavia

It is significant that the two main collective *samizdat* appeals (1977 and 1978) have both come from Moldavia, and emphasise the particularly severe victimisation of Catholics there by the government. Because they are Romanians they are regarded by the regime with a special dislike; the attitude seems to be that if Romanians are to be Christians, they ought at least to be Orthodox. In fact the Moldavian Catholics are Chingos, a people of Hungarian origin, but they appear to have been completely assimilated, though it is said that some families still speak Chango (a very old Hungarian dialect) at home. Between 1948 and 1952 the government allowed sermons in Hungarian only. In the face of determined opposition from priests and people claiming to speak only Romanian, the scheme was dropped.

These two documents give a much more graphic picture than we have for any other area, and emphasise the vitality of church life there. The

Catholic population has doubled its previously estimated figure of 275,000, helped by a high birth-rate and rejection of abortion. Eighty parishes and 97 priests are far too few; the diocese could well be split into two, yet they still have no diocesan bishop. Moldavians provide a large, honest and productive labour force and with increasing industrialisation many have migrated to the towns, or to other parts of Romania, where there may be no church, or not a big enough one. Their contribution to the economy is great, and more enlightened officials recognise that the priest's control over his people, especially the young, is beneficial to society — but they lose their jobs if they try to make things easier for the priests.

Fr Mareş sent an appeal on 16 August 1978 to Ceauşescu for the restoration of the Eastern-rite Church and of monastic orders, for approval for churches to be built where required, for the abolition of censorship, for the holding of a national conference on church affairs and for the abatement of surveillance and pressure on priests. Subsequently he was forced to emigrate.

The 1978 letter to the Pope actually accuses the State of favouring the archdiocese of Bucharest and the Hungarians, while subjecting Romanian Catholics to extra discrimination. It must be said that a westerner in touch with aid to Romania rebuffs the accusation as far as it concerns the Hungarians. The overall picture in Moldavia is one of hope; of a diocese which could afford to export priests to other dioceses; of laity who, in migrating elsewhere, bring moral and spiritual benefits to the areas where they settle.

Bucharest

It is very difficult to get objective information about the archdiocese of Bucharest, recognised by the regime and administered by Augustin until his death in 1983. The 1978 letter laments the generally low level of spirituality, and the inadequate pastoral care given by the priests of Bucharest. It speaks of priests kept on when too old, and of rushed services. An honest and active priest, Fr Petre Băcăuanal, was compulsorily retired when he tried to expose dishonest practices. In 1970 Fr Mihai Căitar, vicar of St Joseph's Cathedral, asked to be removed from the jurisdiction of the archdiocese because of abuses and corruption there. Eventually he decided to leave the priesthood and became a factory worker. Fr Ilea Sociu has been waiting ten years for an urgently-needed new church.

Augustin painted a different picture.⁴³ In 1980, there were six well-attended Sunday Masses at the Cathedral attracting many young people. Indeed it must be emphasised that Augustin's early record as a pastor was good. He brought the cathedral through the worst times, managed to

instruct the children, and had better church attendances than any church in Rome.

However there were alarming accusations of corruption and of connivance between the Department of Cults and "a servile clique of priests led by Mgr Augustin", going as far as misappropriation of some church funds. We learnt of Persian carpets and expensive hi-fi equipment in the episcopal palace, which is administered by the all-powerful Maria Balint.⁴⁴ These were very unpleasant accusations, but the letter was addressed to the Pope and any appeals are exceedingly risky to send out so they should be taken seriously. They cannot be substantiated but are entirely consistent with the general corruption in Romanian society and can be paralleled with similar *samizdat* accusations against certain Orthodox clergy.

Transylvania

The Hungarian Catholics of Transylvania originated as a result of mission activity from Budapest and Vienna under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Pre-war they formed about seventy-five per cent of Romania's Latin-rite Catholics, but this proportion has now fallen to sixty per cent; there are still probably over half a million. Visitors report well-attended churches and flourishing church life; though officially banned, pilgrimages have been reported. The two dioceses continue to supply an encouraging number of seminarians, a sure sign of spiritual health. They have benefitted from the caring episcopate of Marton who, to some extent, succeeded in reducing state interference, and tried to visit every parish. Alba Iulia, with both Jakab and Balint, is assured of proper episcopal administration; and Oradea now has an interim bishop appointed by the Pope.

Hungarians are relatively prosperous and sophisticated compared with the native Romanians. In Hungary, churchgoing has dropped drastically, whereas in Romania this is not so, perhaps partly because churchgoing is also an act of witness to their nationality and culture. The Hungarian Catholics are looking for a state policy like Hungary's, relatively more liberal and less restrictive on church life.

The situation in Transylvania is further complicated by its also being the centre of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church. Until 1978 the government forbade the Mass to be celebrated in Romanian so as to deter Eastern-rite Catholics from attending the Latin-rite Church in preference to the Orthodox. Many former Eastern-rite Catholics, especially intellectuals, have given up hope of the reinstatement of their Church, and joined the Latin-rite church.⁴⁵ Now many Hungarian and German town parishes also provide Romanian language Masses celebrated by Iași-trained priests. The Party, which generally regards the Hungarian priesthood as tightknit and strongly nationalistic, now seems willing to reverse

its previous policy, possibly as a means of diluting the Hungarian character of the Transylvanian church.

At grassroots level, relationships between Romanians, whether Orthodox, Latin-rite or Eastern-rite, are, as they were before the communist takeover, excellent, and there is much intermarriage and coming and going between the churches. Nationality seems a more divisive factor than denominational differences and relations between Romanians and Hungarians in Romania tend to be poor.

Timișoara

The overall picture in the German diocese, Timișoara, is much less encouraging. Pre-war, Germans formed twenty-one per cent of the Latin-rite Catholic population. Their proportion and numbers have steadily decreased, the diocese is in decline and had its seminary closed in 1948. It was administered by an ordinary, vicar-capitular Konrad Kernweiss, until his death in 1981. Originally nominated by Pacha, he was allowed to oversee the diocese but never had the full trust of the Vatican.⁴⁶ In 1983, at last, a papally-nominated bishop was appointed.

Although there are many fine buildings, the churches are not as full as elsewhere. This is largely due to German emigration. Since 1975, 16,000 Germans have been allowed repatriation each year and most of them are seeking to leave. Hence the number of vocations, and clergy, is falling. In 1967 Timișoara had 210 priests for 164 parishes;⁴⁷ in 1978 this had fallen to 153 priests of whom only 123 were active, and 15 seminarians. Only ten per cent of the priests are under forty.⁴⁸ There are now substantial numbers of Hungarians, as well as Bulgars, Czechs, Croats and Slovenes. With their proportion increasing, and the clergy still preponderantly German, difficulties of communication between priest and people are growing. While Moldavia could supply priests, this would not solve the communication problem. It should be emphasised that the German Protestant Churches in this area find themselves with almost the same problems as the Catholic Church.

Conclusion

Despite severe state harassment the Catholic Church has proved extremely resilient. The number of Latin-rite Catholics has increased to over one and a half million, possibly rather more than the number of Eastern-rite Catholics. It should be said that the Eastern-rite Church suffered greater persecution in that it was completely suppressed and officially incorporated into the Orthodox Church. Part of the increase comes from former Eastern-rite Catholics; part is due to population increase; both trends will almost certainly continue. The Church needs more moral support from abroad, and an understanding of its difficulties. For too long

it has been forgotten and ignored by the western religious press, and most western Catholics are hardly aware of its existence.

The ratio of priests to people, Poland excepted, is the highest in the Eastern bloc. This fortunate position, however, may not last much longer. From 1,180 priests in 1948, the number has dropped in thirty years to eight hundred, of whom sixty per cent were said to be over sixty. In 1982 the government suddenly imposed a drastic new *numerus clausus* on theological colleges and seminaries. The Church is now allowed only thirty senior and fifteen junior seminarians a year. Twenty of the 192 seminarians enrolled at Alba Iulia on the order of the Ministry of Public Worship and Education were forcibly ejected.⁴⁹ Orthodox, Reformed and Baptist Churches face similar harsh restrictions in numbers of students, and the latter, like the Catholic Church, is expanding. In the next two decades they all face a rapid drop in the number of active clergy.

By enforcing such a strict *numerus clausus* the State could actually force Roman Catholics to follow their fellow churchmen in Czechoslovakia and Lithuania and resort to underground training of priests. Perhaps the Romanian regime thinks that their secret police are efficient enough to prevent such a situation, but they have been unable to prevent the Eastern-rite Church from training 450 secret "worker-priests". Whether the Latin-rite Church can rise to this new challenge will be a significant test of its resourcefulness, vitality and unity.

Visitors are extremely impressed by what they see of this Church. Mareş, moreover, testifies that Catholics are respected as a leaven in Romania's very corrupt society. They are already making a great contribution to national life as model workers. In his mistreatment of Catholics and in the new restrictions on the number of priests, Ceauşescu appears to be working against the best long-term interests of Romania.

¹ It is virtually impossible to obtain reliable or exact statistics from Romania, even on such a basic matter as the numbers of Hungarians. Available figures are frequently contradictory.

² *The Silent Church*: Lino Gussori and Aristede Brunello, New York: Veritas Publishers, 1954, pp. 136-37.

³ Gussori, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁴ Daniel Madden: *Romania's "Illegal Catholics"*. Columbia, December 1969, p. 18.

⁵ Hansjakob Stehle, *Eastern Politics of the Vatican, 1917-1979*. Athens, Ohio and London: Ohio University Press, 1981, pp. 263-68.

⁶ The words of Dumitru Dogaru, then Minister of Cults, to Madden, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁷ This is graphically described by the longer of two anonymous *samizdat* documents from priests and parishioners from Moldavia, 1977 and 1978. It was published as "Il pastore é morto ma la chiesa vive" in *Mondo e Missione* (ed. Piero Gheddo). Incidentally, it is significant that these documents, like almost all documents from religious groups in Moldavia, with the exception of those from ALRC, are unsigned.

⁸ See also account in *Stolen Church*, Fr Alexander Ratiu and Fr William Virtue. Huntingdon, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 1978.

⁹For instance Pacha's designated successor Schubert, released in 1964, died in Munich aged 79 in 1969 soon after being allowed to leave.

¹⁰Ioan Duma (Iași) died in 1981 aged 79.

¹¹Adalbert Boros (Timișoara) was allowed to visit Rome in 1971.

¹²"Il pastore é morto", p. 310.

¹³Information supplied in 1965 by a Frenchman who had lived in Romania; see "*Un regard porté sur la vie de l'Eglise Catholique en Roumanie*", Mission en Tourisme et Loisir.

¹⁴In 1973, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80.

¹⁵The total includes of course victims from the suppressed Eastern-rite church, which in 1948 was numerically stronger than the Latin-rite Church, with over 1,500,000 members.

¹⁶Aid to the Church in Need report by Rudolf Grulich, 1977. Report of a private conversation.

¹⁷Obituary letter by Octavian Barlea, 2 October 1980.

¹⁸The designated successor to the diocese, Ioan Duma, had been deported to the Dobrogea.

¹⁹Appeal to the Pope, 8 December 1978. See *Catacombes*, October 1980. This is the shorter and more controversial of the two *samizdat* documents compiled by Moldavian priests and parishioners.

²⁰*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

²¹Information from Francisc Augustin in interview with Francesco Strazzari for *Messenger of St Anthony of Padua*, July 1980.

²²Bohdan Bociurkiw provides invaluable information on the legal framework of church-state relations in "Religious Rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe" May 1980. Basket 3, Helsinki Implementation Accords, Published in Washington, D.C.

²³"Il pastore é morto" pp. 310-11 tells how in 1967 25 "unauthorised" priests who were nevertheless working because of the desperate need for them were thrown out of their parishes. Some were kept waiting two years for reinstatement.

²⁴One mature applicant, the heroic Silviu Simonetti, applied without success for 18 years and had become a pensioner (*ibid.*).

²⁵In 1982 it had 123 students from Alba Iulia, 25 from Oradea, 29 from Satu Mare and 18 from Timișoara.

²⁶ACN reports and "Il pastore é morto" give a graphic picture of internal difficulties within Alba Iulia and Iași seminaries respectively.

²⁷For instance the energetic and determined Anton Trifa who led Iași seminary for 12 years.

²⁸"Franziskaner Pater unter tragischen Umständen ums Leben gekommen", *Glaube in der 2. Welt*, 4 June 1982.

²⁹Don Ioan Pirtac was imprisoned for this. No further details are available.

³⁰"Il pastore é morto", p. 311.

³¹One priest took his visitor outside so as to be able to speak to him frankly, for instance.

³²Similar complaints and references to infiltration of congregations are made by Baptists.

³³"Il pastore é morto".

³⁴*Buna Vestire*, 1976.

³⁵The 1978 appeal demands a weekly newspaper giving news of their own Church both at home and abroad and a monthly spiritual and theological review.

³⁶Information on New Testaments and prayer book from Augustin; on expense and scarcity from Mareș.

³⁷"Il pastore é morto", pp. 315-18.

³⁸Priest of Basile Herculane in the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps. He had been imprisoned for ten years earlier and was the only one of ten surviving Jesuits allowed to function in a parish. (Radio Free Europe Report, "Problems of the Catholic Church", October 1980.)

³⁹*Kathpress*, 2 January 1981.

⁴⁰Appeal of 8 December 1978.

⁴¹"Il pastore é morto", pp. 313-14.

⁴²Some members of men's orders, for instance, Franciscans, still quietly do parish work. (Private letter — 1976.)

⁴³See interview 1980, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴The 1978 letter says that it is common knowledge that two priests in Iași diocese were "bribed" by cash and Persian carpets. A joke circulates among Catholics that they spread out their carpets five times a day, turn towards Mecca and beg Allah to send them more petro-dollars! Meanwhile, many priests in Iași cannot even afford cars for parish work.

⁴⁵Ton Rațiu, "Romanian Catholics", *The Tablet*, 2 September 1978.

⁴⁶*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 April 1981.

⁴⁷*The Tablet*, 1967.

⁴⁸*Kathpress*, 29 October 1981.

⁴⁹*Info: Internationaler Informationsdienst Kirche in Not/Ostpriesterhilfe e.v.* September 1983.

