

The Contribution of the Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud County to the Foundation of the Romanian Patriarchate

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Introduction

THE DATE of 4 February 1925 is an important one for the Romanian Orthodox Church,¹ as it marks the moment when the Church was recognized as a Patriarchate. The recognition came after a few years defined by a complex process of integration involving the different ecclesiastic structures that became part of Romania after 1918 and of institutional uniformization (in Bukovina, Bessarabia,² and Transylvania³). Priests like Fr. Gheorghe Ciuhandu⁴ and Ioan Lupaș⁵ played an important role in this complex process, and bishops like Miron Cristea, Pimen Georgescu, and Nicolae Bălan each brought their own contribution.

While the general context of the founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, or its consequences, have been already investigated, especially in ecclesiastic historiography, local contributions have been less tackled by historical research. Therefore, in the following pages, we will focus on the way in which the Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud County contributed to the founding of the Romanian Patriarchate.

The Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud County and the Founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate

SITUATED in the northern part of Transylvania, Bistrița-Năsăud County links Maramureș and Bukovina, two areas with beautiful landscapes and a rich history. At the same time, it has its own peculiarities, related to both inter-confessionalism and the relationship between people of different nationalities. The documents show that the county had a Romanian majority, and Hungarian and Saxon minorities. At times, there were parts of the county that had a Greek Catholic majority, in the 18th and 19th centuries, and at beginning of the 20th. However, Orthodoxy remains relevant given its contribution to the education of an Orthodox elite. Later on, we will present some of its representatives.

When speaking about the founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, one would be tempted to consider as the main source of information the collections of the Romanian Orthodox Deanery found at the Bistrița-Năsăud Directorate of the National Archives. Nonetheless, upon a closer look at the said collections, one would be disappointed. Busy with the building of the Three Holy Hierarchs Cathedral, the Romanians barely noted the founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate or greet the new Patriarch Miron Cristea. Hence, the question is: how did the Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud County contribute to the founding of the Romanian Patriarchate? We must clearly look for an answer elsewhere. For instance, Archpriest Grigorie Pletosu (1848–1934),⁶ who had a certain age when the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate was founded and was also overwhelmed by sadness following the death of his youngest daughter, Lucia, in the United States,⁷ was not that much involved in the actual event, but played an important role in the period preceding it.

Moreover, the Năsăud Border Gymnasium was the place where some of the most important personalities of the Romanian Transylvania from the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century were educated. Founded as a Greek Catholic school, it benefited from the activity of teachers like Grigore Pletosu, who was a professor there from 1878 to 1909, when he retired.

Therefore, the main contribution of the Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud County to the founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate resides in the fact that the first Romanian Orthodox patriarch, Miron Cristea, and Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan of Transylvania studied there. In what follows, we will further dwell upon these two personalities.

Patriarch Miron Cristea and Bistrița-Năsăud

THE DESTINY of the first Romanian patriarch, Miron Cristea (1848–1939), is related to Năsăud and Bistrița-Năsăud County. Born in Toplița, which currently belongs to Harghita County, he studied both in the Evangelical Gymnasium of Bistrița (between 1879 and 1883) and in the Năsăud Border Gymnasium (between 1883 and 1887), being, for a short period of time, a schoolmate of the Romanian writer George Coșbuc (1866–1918), who was also studying there. While there is only little information about the period when he studied in Bistrița, the time spent studying in Năsăud is more substantially documented.

Young Ilie (his lay name) was the president of the *Virtus Romana Rediviva* literary society of the school for one year, between 1886 and 1887.⁸ Among other activities, like reading the most important Romanian literary creations of the time, analyzing them and producing their own, original creations, the students also had their own manuscript journal, called *Musa Someșană*.⁹ At the meetings of the society, Miron Cristea read *Prosit*, a story with a deep moral message, later published in the *Familia Română* journal of Oradea.¹⁰ Due to his activity as a student of the school, but also thanks to his interventions at the meetings of the society, young Elie Cristea, the future patriarch, was very much respected in the area.¹¹

His interest in Romanian literature and culture was cultivated by his professor, the Orthodox Archpriest Grigore Pletosu. As an Orthodox priest in a Greek Catholic school, Pletosu knew not only how to behave in order to avoid conflicts, but was also respected for

his professionalism and academic skills. Having studied in Sibiu, Leipzig and Budapest, the professor and author of handbooks,¹² studies and articles on theology and pedagogy left an important mark on the education of the future patriarch. This explains why, when he was delegated to this part of Transylvania, he visited his former professor and, in certain situations, collaborated with him. This was the case with the Săliște parish, at the beginning of the 20th century. As a delegate of the Sibiu Archdiocese, Miron Cristea visited the parish and talked to the people who were intending to leave the Orthodox Church to join the Greek Catholic one.¹³ Likewise, on the occasion of his 80th anniversary, in 1928, he decorated Pletosu with the Steaua Românei order, on behalf of the Royal Family of Romania.¹⁴ Later, in the 1930s, Miron Cristea also helped Pletosu with the construction of the Three Holy Hierarchs Cathedral of Bistrița, where Pletosu was the parish priest.¹⁵

Considering their special relationship and the fact that the Romanian patriarch always showed a deep respect for the Năsăud area and for his former professor, we can definitely conclude that, by contributing to the education of Miron Cristea, the Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud County contributed to the later founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate. The event took place on 4 February 1925 and its first patriarch was the former student of Fr. Grigore Pletosu.

Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan and Năsăud

ANOTHER IMPORTANT ecclesiastic personality that is related to the Bistrița-Năsăud area is Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan (1882–1955). Together with Miron Cristea and Nichita Duma (1864–1936)¹⁶ of Argeș, he was also a student of the Năsăud Border Gymnasium who later became one of the heads of the Romanian Orthodox Church during the interwar period. Besides these three, there were other priests and theologians who studied there and, through their work and activity, contributed to the founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate.

Born on 27 April 1882 in the village of Blăjenii de sus, in Bistrița-Năsăud County, he studied in Năsăud and later at the Faculty of Theology of Cernăuți and Breslau. In 1905, he received his doctorate in Theology¹⁷ from the same Faculty, known for the training of Romanian intellectuals who had an important word to say in the interwar period (such as Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, for example).¹⁸ Afterwards, he became professor at the Sibiu Seminary, where he remained until 1920, when he was elected Metropolitan of Transylvania. During these years, he published several studies and articles on theology and was among the founders of the *Revista Teologică* (Theological review) of Sibiu (1907), together with his former professor Grigore Pletosu.¹⁹ Moreover, in 1918, he founded *Gazeta Poporului* (The people's gazette) and had a contribution to the Great Union. On 27 February 1920, he was elected metropolitan bishop of Transylvania and, on 30 May, his investiture took place in the Sibiu Cathedral. As a bishop, he had a complex contribution to the development of the Romanian Orthodox Church of Transylvania, the schools of Transylvania, and the ecumenical field.²⁰ Between 1892 and 1900, the metropolitan bishop and member of the Romanian Academy had also studied at the Năsăud Border Gymnasium. Here, the same priest and Professor Pletosu, who later became his collaborator in the establishment of *Revista Teologică*,²¹ helped him discover Romanian literature and culture and introduced

him to the activity of *Virtus Romana Rediviva*, the literary society of the school. Although he did not become the president of the society, like George Coșbuc or Miron Cristea, Nicolae Bălan actively contributed its activity. The manuscript journal *Musa Someșană* contains some of his works from that period.²² They are short poems which speak about the later writer and theologian, but also about his concerns regarding the Romanian culture and its values. At the same time, his relationship with professor and Archpriest Grigore Pletosu, who spent an important part of his life in Năsăud (1878–1909) and another one in Bistrița, as dean (1909–1934), proves the contribution that, through his work and activity, the professor had to the training of a future head of the Holy Council of the Romanian Patriarchate.

Conclusions

AS WE have tried to show, despite the fact that, in 1925, and close to the founding of the Romanian Patriarchate, the Orthodox Romanians from Bistrița and Năsăud—like, for instance, Gheorghe Ciuhandu—were not very much involved in the event, due to the fact that they were rather concerned with local problems,²³ they were interested in it and had previously contributed to it. The role played by priests like Grigore Pletosu in the education of the first patriarch, Miron Cristea, or of the Metropolitan of Transylvania Nicolae Bălan is proof of this contribution. Moreover, the fact that a Greek Catholic school trained the future elite of the Romanian Orthodox Church is important evidence of the good cooperation that existed between Romanians in the Năsăud area. It also shows that the national ideal was a reality for whose accomplishment they worked together. The role played by associations like the ASTRA (The Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and Culture of the Romanian People), where Pletosu was president of the education section²⁴ between 1902 and 1911, was also important, if we consider, for example, the effort it made to give scholarships and to print Romanian works of literature and culture.



Notes

1. Constantin Părvu, “Organizarea și dezvoltarea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în spiritul autonomiei și autocefaliei” (The organization and development of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the spirit of autonomy and autocephaly), in Constantin Părvu, Mircea Păcurariu, Ioan Floca, eds., *Autocefalie, Patriarhie, Slujire Sfântă. Momente aniversare în Biserica Ortodoxă Română* (Autocephaly, Patriarchate, Holy Service. Anniversary moments in the Romanian Orthodox Church), (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1995), 20–21.
2. Boris Buzilă, *Din istoria vieții bisericești din Basarabia (1812–1918; 1918–1944)* (From the history of church life in Bessarabia. 1812–1918; 1918–1944), (Bucharest, Chișinău: Press of the Romanian Cultural Foundation/Știința Press, 1996), 155.
3. Cf. Paul Brusanowski, *Stat și Biserică în Vechea Românie între 1821–1925* (State and Church in Old Romania between 1821 and 1925), (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University

- Press, 2010); Paul Brusanowski, *Autonomia și constituționalismul în dezbaterile privind unificarea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (1919–1925)* (Autonomy and constitutionalism in the debates regarding the unification of the Romanian Orthodox Church. 1919–1925), (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2007); Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Organizarea bisericească a românilor ortodocși din teritoriile alipite țării după Marea Unire” (The church organization of the Orthodox Romanians in the territories annexed to the country after the Great Union), in *Acta Musei Porolissensis*, XXXVI (2014): 247–254.
4. For details, see: Gheorghe Ciuhandu, *Împreunarea Bisericilor Ortodoxe Române de pe teritoriul României-Mari într-o singură Biserică și raportul acestei Biserici față cu Statul* (The unification of the Romanian Orthodox Churches on the territory of Greater Romania into a single Church and the relationship of this Church with the State), (Arad: Press of the Greek Orthodox Diocese, 1919); Pavel Vesa, *Protopop dr. Gheorghe Ciuhandu (1875–1947) – după documente, manuscrise, corespondență* (Archpriest Gheorghe Ciuhandu, PhD.—documents, manuscripts and correspondence), (Arad: Press of Arad Archdiocese, 2011).
 5. Ioan Chirilă, Iuliu-Marius Morariu (coord.), *Ioan Lupaș*, (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2021).
 6. For details about his life and activity, see: Marius-Dan Goga, Maxim Morariu, “Publicistica Protopopului Grigore Pletosu (1848–1934)” (Collected articles of Archpriest Grigore Pletosu), in *Tăbor*, XI (2016), no. 6: 19–28; Marius-Dan Goga, “Activitatea unui erudit slujitor al Bisericii” (The activity of an erudite servant of the Church), in *Altarul Banatului*, XXVII (2016), no. 1–3: 120–129; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Protoiereul astrict Grigore Pletosu – cleric și cărturar năsăudean” (Archpriest Grigore Pletosu of the ASTRA—a Năsăud clergyman and scholar), in *Transilvania*, XLI (CXLV) (2013), no. 3: 28–32; Dan-Marius Goga, *Hărintele protopop Grigore Pletosu (1848–1934) – profesor, teolog și cărturar ortodox transilvănean* (Archpriest Grigore Pletosu (1848–1934) — professor, theologian and Orthodox scholar from Transylvania), (Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2018); Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Restitutio Grigore Pletosu*, (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon/Renașterea Publishing Houses, 2014); Grigore Pletosu, *Publicistica, volum I* (Collected articles—Vol. 1), eds. Dan-Marius Goga, Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Napoca Star, 2018).
 7. For more information about her life and activity, see: Teodor Tanco, “Lucia Pletosu,” in *Virtus Romana Rediviva*, vol. VII, (Cluj-Napoca: Virtus Romana Rediviva Press, 1993), 301–305.
 8. For details about its history and role in the training of future Romanian intellectuals, see, for example: National Archives of Romania, Bistrița-Năsăud County Department (hereafter ANDJBN), *Fondul “Virtus Romana Rediviva,”* file 1/1868, f. 1 and all the other documents in the collection, but also: Septimiu Pop, “Din istoricul învățământului în județul Bistrița-Năsăud” (From the history of education in Bistrița-Năsăud County), in *File de Istorie* (Pages of history), 1 (1971), 215–218; Simion Lupșan, Adrian Onofreiu, “*Virtus Romana Rediviva*.” *Societatea de lectură a liceului grăniceresc năsăudean – contribuții documentare* (Virtus Romana Rediviva. The Literary Society of the Năsăud Border Gymnasium), (Năsăud: “George Coșbuc” Foundation Press, 2002).
 9. For details, see: Tanco, Teodor, “Musa Someșană,” in *Virtus Romana Rediviva*, vol. II, (Bistrița: Press of the Committee of Socialist Culture and Education of Bistrița-Năsăud County, 1974), 24–28.

10. “The latter (Miron Cristea) also made his debut, in 1876, as a fiction writer, reading at one of the literary evenings the piece entitled *Prosit*, with a profound moral message. It enjoyed the appreciation of the president and the participants in the event, Pletosu noticing his literary talent and encouraging him to continue his literary activity. A few years later, the former debutant would publish this piece in the magazine *Familia română*, making his journalistic debut, which took place in 1887/92. It is true that Miron Cristea did not subsequently become active in the realm of literature, as Coșbuc did, but his doctorate, the first in the specialist literature dedicated to Mihai Eminescu, shortly after the poet’s passing, was certainly influenced by the literary experience he had here, in the Năsăud school.” Iuliu-Marius Morariu, *Restitutio Grigore Pletosu*, 78. Cf. Antonie Plămădeală, *Pagini dintr-o arhivă inedită* (Pages from an unpublished archive), (Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, 1984), VI.
11. For more information about his activity and role there, see also: Dorel Marc, “Publicistica de debut a lui Elie (Miron) Cristea și mediul cultural-școlar năsăudean. Preocupări etnofolclorice” (The early publications of Elie [Miron] Cristea and the educational and cultural Năsăud environment. Ethno-folkloric concerns), in *Revista Bistriței*, XXI, 2 (2007); Petre Dan, *Asociații, cluburi, ligi, societăți* (Associations, clubs, leagues, societies), (Bucharest: Scientific and Encyclopaedic Press, 1992), 115.
12. See: Grigore Pletosu, *Propedeutica filosofică pentru învățământul secundar* (Philosophical propaedeutics for secondary education), (Năsăud: Carol Csallner Press, 1899); Gregoriu Pletosu, Ion Gheție, *Retorica și carte de cetire pentru clasa a VI-a gimnazială* (Rhetoric and reading book for the 6th grade of high school), (Bistrița: Carol Csallner Press, 1904); Gregoriu Pletosu, *Dogmatica Ortodoxă* (Orthodox Dogmatics), (Năsăud: Press of Diocesan Publishing House in Sibiu, 1893). The book was reprinted in 2013 by Ioan Pinteă and George Linul as editors at Renașterea Publishing House in Cluj-Napoca.
13. Archive of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan See of Sibiu (hereafter AMORS), *Fond Consistoriul arhidiecezan*, dossier III/1900, doc. 481; Macarie Drăgoi, *Ortodoxi și Greco-Catolici în Transilvania (1867–1916). Convergențe și divergențe* (Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Transylvania (1867–1916). Convergences and divergences), (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2011), 415; Macarie Drăgoi, *Ortodoxi și Greco-Catolici în Transilvania (1867–1916). Contribuții documentare, vol. 1, Tomul IV – “Schimbarea identității confesionale. Cazul Săcel și filia Dragomirești*, (Orthodox and Greek Catholics in Transylvania (1867–1916). Documentary Contributions, vol. 1, tome IV— “Changing confessional identity. The Săcel case and the Dragomirești affiliate), (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2013), 25, 388, 413.
14. ***, “Protopopul Grigore Pletosu” (Archpriest Grigore Pletosu), in *Gazeta Bistriței*, VIII (1928), no. 13, 1; ***, “Sărbătorirea Protopopului Grigore Pletosu în orașul Bistrița” (The anniversary of Archpriest Grigore Pletosu in Bistrița town), in Ioan Pinteă (ed.), *Pro Memoria Preot Protopop Grigore Pletosu* (Pro Memoria Archpriest Grigore Pletosu), (Bistrița, Aletheia Press, 1999), 60–61.
15. ANDJBN, *Fond Protopopiatul Ortodox Român Bistrița*, doc. 5246/933; Ibid., doc. 4579/933, f. 2; ibid., doc. 4758/933.
16. Duma Nichita (lay name Vasile, 1864–1936), a graduate of the Border Gymnasium in Năsăud (class of 1875–1883), served as bishop of Argeș between 1923 and 1936. For more information about his life and activity, see: Mircea Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români* (Dictionary of Romanian Theologians), 2nd edition, (Bucharest: Encyclope-

- dic Publishing House, 2002), 165; Nicolae Șerbănescu, “Episcopii Argeșului” (The Bishops of Argeș), *Mitropolia Olteniei*, XVIII (1965), no. 7–8: 625–626; Ion Ionescu, “Episcopul Nichita Duma al Argeșului” (Bishop Nichita Duma of Argeș), in *Telegraful Român*, CXLIV (1996), no. 33–36: 4.
17. For more information about his life and activity, see also: Ionel Ene, *Chipul mitropolitului Nicolae Bălan după documente de arhivă* (The image of Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan according to archive documents), (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2012); Nicolae Bălan, *Biserica împotriva Concordatului: discurs rostit la discuția pentru ratificarea Concordatului în ședința dela 23 mai 1929, a Senatului Român* (The Church against the Concordat: speech during the the debate on the ratification of the Concordat in the meeting of 23 May 1929 of the Romanian Senate), (Sibiu: Diocesan Press, 1929); Nicolae Bălan, *Biserica neamului și drepturile ei* (The Church of the Nation and its rights), (Bucharest: Profile Press, 2002); Nicolae Bălan, *Cuvântări rostite cu ocazia alegerii, sfințirii și investiturii* (Speeches delivered on the occasion of election, consecration and investiture), (Sibiu: Diocesan Press, 1921); Ioan Pinteș, Constantin Mileșan, eds., *In aeternum – Nicolae Bălan, Arhiepiscop și Mitropolit* (In aeternum—Nicolae Bălan, archbishop and metropolitan), (Bistrița: Aletheia Press, 2001).
 18. For details about this aspect, see also: Răzvan Mihai Neagu, *Formarea elitei ortodoxe din Transilvania, Banat și Crișana la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului al XX-lea. Studenți români din Transilvania, Banat și Crișana la Facultatea de Teologie din Cernăuți (1875–1918)* (The formation of the Orthodox elite in Transylvania, Banat and Crișana at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Romanian students from Transylvania, Banat and Crișana at the Faculty of Theology in Chernivtsi (1875–1918), (Cluj-Napoca: Transylvanian School and Mega Publishing Houses, 2018).
 19. For details, see: Ana Grama, “Revista Teologică, Consistoriul sibian și asesorul Elie Miron Cristea” (1904–1905) (The *Theological Review*, the Sibiu consistory and the counselor Elie Miron Cristea), in *Revista Teologică*, XVII, 1(2007): 26–38.
 20. About his relationships and correspondence with Nathan Soderblom, a pioneer of Ecumenism, see: Macarie Drăgoi, *Artisan of Christian Unity between North and East: Nathan Soderblom. His Correspondence with Orthodox Personalities (1896–1931)*, (Stockholm: Felicitas Publishing House, 2014).
 21. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Contribuția protoiereului Grigore Pletosu la înființarea *Revistei Teologice*” (The contribution of Archpriest Grigore Pletosu to the establishment of the *Theological Review*), in Nicolae Dumbrăvescu, ed. *Tinerii istorici și cercetările lor, vol. 2* (Young historians and their research, second volume), (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut Press, 2015), 153–160.
 22. See: Nicolae Bălan, “Vocea păstorului,” *Musa Someșană*, 1889/1900, 233–238; Nicolae Bălan, “Lacrimile,” *Musa Someșană*, 1889/1900, 143–152. Cf. Simion Lupan, Adrian Onofreiu, “Virtus Romana Rediviva.” Societatea de lectură a liceului grăniceresc năsăudean – contribuții documentare, Ed. Fundației “George Coșbuc,” Năsăud, 2002, 412.
 23. For a detailed presentation of the then situation of the Romanian Orthodoxy in the region, see also: Mircea Gelu Buta, Adrian Onofreiu, *Bistrița Bărgăului: lupta familiei Monda pentru Biserica, Școală și Națiune* (Bistrița Bărgăului: the struggle of the Monda family for Church, school and nation), (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2015); Mircea Gelu Buta, Adrian Onofreiu, *Biserica Ortodoxă din Bistrița – o cronologie documentară*

(The Orthodox Church in Bistrița —a documentary chronology), (Cluj-Napoca: Școala Ardeleană Press, 2016).

24. For details, see: Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Activitatea protoiereului și profesorului Grigore Pletosu ca președinte al Secțiunii școlare a “Astrei” (1902–1911) (The activity of archpriest and professor Grigore Pletosu as president of the School Section of the ASTRA (1902–1911), in Anamaria Macavei, Roxana Dorina Pop, eds. *Consemnări despre trecut. Societate și imagine de-a lungul timpului* (Notes on the past. Society and image through time), (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2015), 187–198.

Abstract

The Contribution of the Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud County to the Founding of the Romanian Patriarchate

Despite the fact that, in 1925, the Romanians from Bistrița-Năsăud county were not visibly involved in the founding of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate, due to aspects related to the building of the Romanian Three Holy Hierarchs Cathedral in Bistrița, their contribution to the event was notable. More specifically, the first Romanian patriarch, Miron Cristea, Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan of Sibiu, and other important Orthodox cultural personalities from the interwar period were educated at the Năsăud Border Gymnasium. The role played by professors like Archpriest Grigore Pletosu (1848–1934) was also very important. In this study we highlight his role and show how the aforementioned personalities contributed to the training of future Church leaders.

Keywords

Nicolae Bălan, Miron Cristea, Grigore Pletosu, Năsăud Border Gymnasium, Romanian culture and education