

VISARION PUIU
BIOGRAPHY OF A METROPOLITAN
ABSTRACT

The case of Metropolitan Visarion Puiu, the only bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Church that remained in exile after August 23, 1944, sentenced to death in February 1946 and defrocked by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church in February 1950, is still one of the most controversial topics in recent historiography of the Romanian Church. Studied in part and rarely documented, unedited and unread to his true contribution to Romanian contemporary theology, Visarion Puiu is still a character that has been much discussed, but little known. Visarion Puiu's biography was studied by Colonel Dumitru Stavarache, publishing the documents from the Metropolitan's personal archive from the National Central Archives and those from Freiburg, bringing the latter in the archives in Iasi in 1996 through the initiative of Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea, the Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bukovina at the time, initiating symposia at Pascani and Roman in his memory, declassification of Foreign Intelligence Service archives, did nothing but trigger the interest in knowing this important theologian, founder and minister of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

I have come to be interested about this subject studying some documents from the Association "Metropolitan Visarion Puiu" where I am a member, brought to my attention by the president of the association, the Protopresbyter of Roman, Florin Aurel Tuscanu, documents that impressed me and urged me to research more about the life and work of this great metropolitan of our nation. By participating in symposia dedicated to him, and being eager for research of archives even since I elaborated the monograph of the parish where I carry out my mission, as a priest, I have decided to continue my research which could be helpful to me, first of all, but to others too that do not know yet who and what was the Metropolitan Visarion Puiu, especially as during my studies at the Faculty of Theology in Iasi, 1994-1998, I did not research anything about this character.

Except for the insufficient data recorded by the priest Dr. Mircea Pacurariu, PhD in his book, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane (History of the Romanian Orthodox Church)*, for more than four decades, until the change of our political regime in 1989, nothing was written and spoken about this Metropolitan, nobody spoken about him due to the fact that he was condemned to death and defrocked. Since 1990, when the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church cancelled the defrocking pronounced in 1950 and restored him, there were

some writings, articles and books about his involvement in public and social life of Romanians everywhere, works that can be studied by all persons eager for knowledge about his personality. For several years, numerous clergy and laity approached the subject, among which we can mention, Daniil Ciobotea, Ioachim Giosanu, Nicolae Dascalul, Ioan Iovan, Mircea Pacurariu, Nita-Dan Danielescu, Eugen Dragoi, Florin Tuscanu, Pavel Postolache, Dumitru Cristea, Dumitru Valenciuc, Dragos-Radu Mihai, Boris Buzila, Aurel Sergiu Marinescu, Gheorghe Vasilescu, Florin Manolescu or Ion Negoescu. Among their articles we should mention the books written by retired Colonel Dumitru Stavarache, founder of the association mentioned, *Documente din pribegie (Documents from wandering)*, published by the Publishing House Moldopress, Pascani, 2002, *Relatiile cu biserici din Athos (Relations with churches from Athos)*, published by the Publishing House Artpress, Targoviste, 2008 or the Articles written by Mrs. Elena Istratescu from Bucharest or those of Adrian Nicolae Petcu, counsellor and researcher with the CNSAS, published in the official bulletin of the Association “*Valori Pascanene*” (Values of city of Pascani) or the more recent magazine “*Valori Perene*” (Perennial Values), a sequel of the former. Nobody could write better about the life of the Metropolitan than Visarion Puiu, the document in the National Archives entitled *Insemnari din viata mea (Notes from my life)*, published at the Publishing House Trinitas - Iasi in 2004 and reissued four years later. To all these we have to add the 85 files which are to be found at the National Central Historical Archives - Visarion Puiu Fund, the 17 files to be found at the Ministry of Culture and National Patrimony about the Diocese of Arges (church and monastery staff of Arges and Olt Counties), the Fund of the Diocese of Hotin from the National Archives, the documents from the archives of the Romanian Patriarchate, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bukovina, the Library “Dumitru Staniloae”, the Central University Library of Iasi, in my notes or records of some contemporary people, photos stored in archives, all urging me to research and to compile a distinct writing. Studies, articles and books published until now are nothing but testimonies and documents that consider only certain aspects of his life or simply a list of letters and documents signed by Metropolitan, with small informative additions, taken by different authors mentioned above, most of them without being processed. Guided by scientific leaders, dr. Corneliu-Gabriel Badarau, PhD from the Faculty of History and Father Gheorghe Petraru from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Iasi, I have decided to gather all these documents and many others discovered during my research and to study further and to complete the necessary information to make up a work, containing, if possible, the whole life, work and activity of this great man that had such an insignificant name “Puiu”.

In drafting this thesis I sought for beginning to relate his genealogy, mentioning his primary education, schools attended in Pascani, his birthplace, and Roman, the city of his first seminary secondary studies, continuing with the Superior Seminary “Veniamin Costache” in the Moldovan capital, then those from the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest. His work after completing his higher studies can be timed as follows: Roman (between 1905-1908), Kiev (Ukraine, 1908-1909), Galati (1909-1918), Chisinau (1918-1921), Curtea de Arges (1921-1923), Balti (1923-1935, as Bishop of Hotin, in Republic of Moldavia), Chernivtsi (1935-1940, Ukraine, as Metropolitan of Bukovina) and Odessa (1942-1943, Ukraine, the head of the Orthodox Mission in Transnistria). After August 23, 1944, he sought to help Romanians in the West in the same manner, thus avoiding any relations with the Communist regime in Romania. His activity during the exile could be summarized as follows: Croatia 13-17 August 1944; Austria, August 1944 – October 1945, Italy, October 1945 – November 1947, Switzerland, November 1947 – August 1949 France, August 1949 – August 1964.

He came back to Roman for a short while, experiencing the joy of union with Christ, accepting willingly to become a monk in the cathedral of this city, seeking later to complete his studies attending the Spiritual Academy in the capital of Ukraine. The experience gathered as a clerk during his higher education in Bucharest will boost him in the position of vicar of the Lower Danube and Manager of the Seminary “St. Andrew“ in Galati. The documents published until now are an incontestable proof of Visarion’s attempt to try to place the school in Galati on a constructive direction, in stirring times and educational and vocational ideals lived and desired by the future Metropolitan. Over the eight years while he was a Manager, the Archimandrite Visarion showed enough maturity, responsibility, courage and priestly farsightedness, promoting church life not only in the Diocese where he served, but across the country. Beside these administrative and educational activities, I have pursued his editorial activity, whereas after his first works were published while he was still a student, Visarion Puiu published during this period his first findings on shortcomings faced by the Romanian Orthodox Church and clergy of his time in his monumental work, *Adevaruri crude (Cruel Truths)*, mentioning his proposals for improving the training of clergy, reorganization of seminaries and monasteries, all based on observations and his personal experience, some of them read or observed by several seminars researched in Russia, Austria, Germany or France.

The next chapter shows him as the guide of Romanians in Bessarabia right after the Great Union, analyzing his work as Manager of the Seminary in Chisinau and Exarch of Bessarabian monasteries. This seminary was in a disastrous situation, the building being destroyed by the Bolsheviks and military units stationed there, the school furniture and

boarding equipment being destroyed or transferred to different schools or hospitals, teachers rebelled and disoriented, with just one teacher who could speak Romanian. The situation did not deter the new Manager who, had run the seminary in Galati, opened the courses, that's right, with delay only on 10 January 1919, after he repaired the boarding in three months, brought food and woods there, nationalized the whole curriculum, allowing some parallel departments in Russian, that could be cancelled at any time, elaborated the syllabus entering for the first time German and English instead of Latin and Greek, ancient languages and with no practical benefit, composed the teachers' staff with local and national teachers, confessing that he regretted that he was not helped enough by the bishop of the place. Lack of transport, particularly railways, however, was the main reason for which he could not make the inspections required as Exarch of the monasteries, but he succeeded, how much he could do by mail, to gather the material to outline their history, compiled monastery staff and assets inventories, introduced the Romanian accounting and made all kinds of suggestions for improving their lives. Thus, he set up a monastic seminar, some schools and craftsman workshops, introduced annual budgetary provisions for cultural and charity purposes, set up a regulation for choosing the abbots and other administrative and church bodies, regulated the Cheirothesia of monks and granting monastic ranks, introduced severe legal norms for the management of monastery assets. Among the first obligations he had from the Archbishop Nicodim Munteanu was to write the diocesan advertising sheet "*Luminatorul*" (the "*Illuminator*"), which ceased to be published. Due to lack of collaborators, of Latin letters and print media, he succeeded to print, after many hardships as a diocesan monitor in two parts, one official with Latin letters and one literary friendly, and one with Cyrillic and Russian letters. However, the main book published during his work in Chisinau is *Manastirile din Basarabia (Monasteries in Bessarabia)*. The work includes a history of monasteries in Bessarabia from the foundation thereof until 1918, their cultural, moral or national importance (some of them being served uninterrupted in Romanian even under foreign rule), being compiled according to abbots' reports that have been kept to date at the National Archives of Romania and according to the notes published until then in Russian.

The period he spent in Curtea de Arges (1921-1923) is relatively short but extremely important and rich in actions and activities, the Bishop Visarion being the first bishop of this diocese holder after the Great Union. Even if communist officials, which were joined by some recent authors, claiming the lack of documents, erased him from the collective memory and literature, from the files in the Central National Historical Archives gathered in the Visarion Puiu fund, from those of the Funds of the Ministry of Culture and National Patrimony

regarding the Diocese of Arges, from notes or diaries of contemporary people, photographs at the same institution, we can restore his activity in the Diocese of Arges, filling the gaps left intentionally by the dictatorial management with enough evidence.

On March 29, 1923 the Grand Electoral College met in Bucharest to elect Visarion Puiu for the diocese of Hotin. The acceptance of this diocese by the bishop of Arges came at the insistence of the Prime Minister Ionel Bratianu who actually wanted to settle the situation in Curtea de Arges, not to claim the bishop's residence abusively occupied by the rulers of the royal court and because of whom the bishop was forced to live for two years near some stables, a situation not exactly worthy of a bishop, but also because the situation in Bessarabia was familiar to him, from the period 1918-1921, when he was an Exarch of monasteries and crossed the whole territory.

The period of 12 years while Bishop Visarion had run this diocese was particularly beneficial, both in terms of pastoral and missionary issues and in terms of equipment. With energy, patience and missionary tact, Visarion Puiu left behind, after he left Balti, a monumental cathedral, a sumptuous Bishop residence, a property of about 30 hectares with fruit trees, garden, vineyard, apiary, nursery, other 4 churches built in the city. The largest and most beautiful achievement of Bishop Visarion remains the construction and consecration of cathedral "Sf. Imparati Constantin si Elena" (St. Constantine and Helena), the most prominent monument built while Romanians run Bessarabia since its union with the motherland, until the consecration thereof on June 2, 1935, participating, beside the King Carol II of Romania, the Prince Michael, the members of the Holy Synod and the Romanian Government, several dignitaries, and a representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

His work was not limited to the pastoral and missionary aspects, but also regarding theological education. His first work, *Preotii satesti (Village Priests)*, published in Bucharest in 1902, while he was still a theology student, would be published again, in the 2nd edition in 1925, printed in Neamt monastery and *Povestiri pentru sateni (Stories for villagers)*, printed again in Bucharest in the same year. His monumental works were published in Chisinau: *Glas in pustie (A voice in the wilderness)* (1931 and 1935) and *Documente din Basarabia (Documents from Bessarabia)* in two volumes (1928-1938), in collaboration with Stefan Berechet, Stefan Ciobanu, Leon T. Boga and Constantin N. Tomescu and multiple brochures and articles in periodicals.

His achievements in Balti were known only by the local authorities, but brought him on a superior hierarchical stage, the members of the Holy Synod and King Carol II of Romania appreciated his work and recommended him to run the richest dioceses in Orthodoxy, that of

Bukovina.

The targets set even since the first month of his arrival, supported by a memorandum of local priests who requested better conditions for this diocese were: organization of a Church Fund with the effective capitalization of products and establishment of current state, harmonization of pensions for priest widowers, reorganization of the Savings and Credit House, reorganization of monasteries, setting up a printer house, recalculation of overdue salaries of priests, tabulation of plots of land and allotment of parishes that did not have any land in property, reorganization of the Mutual Credit House, reorganization of the Faculty of Theology. By the reorganization of the Church Fund, diocese's debts and overdue salaries were paid, large amounts were allocated for church repairing and building, to help the poor, the Cultural Palace was built, the University Library Carol II, a Nursing Home in Suceava, a house for the Romanian clerks in Chernivtsi, Northern Bank in collaboration with the National Bank, rehabilitation and development of the spa resort Vatra Dornei, a cafeteria for the forestry workers, but also the establishment of the new diocese of Maramures. To achieve such control over the Church Fund, the Metropolitan Visarion drew up a new Regulation for fund assets management, sanctioned and promulgated by King Carol II of Romania in the Official Gazette of Romania, a regulation that proved to be, by the separation of administration and control services thereof, one of the most important reforms that were conducted in the diocese of Bukovina.

Nevertheless, in conducting his activity he quickly came into conflict with various politicians, some of them near the royal house, who fraudulently profited of the church property in Bukovina, resisting to their attacks for a certain period, until May 1940, when they succeeded in retiring him by force at the age of 59.

Under the new Romanian administration in Transnistria, introduced in August 1941, the Metropolitan Visarion was called to take over the management of the Church Mission established especially for the re-christianization of this province after twenty-five years of Bolshevik persecution. Among the reorganization measures taken by the Metropolitan after only one month of running the mission, found in a report submitted to the patriarch on January 5, 1943 we can include: divide the province into three dioceses (Odessa, Balta and Tulcin) for a better supervision of the clergy and activities, repairs the metropolitan residence in Odessa where he organized the services of the chancellery, set up a home with cafeteria for the clerks and priests in missions, reinstated the Theological Seminary and School of singers from Odessa, drew up a plan for missionary activity and a list of Christian books, and anti-Bolshevik to be published, sanctified and reopened the church of University of Odessa and

helped by professors and students here, he initiated a series of anti-Bolshevik conferences in the university, made arrangements with the St. Synod, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Civil Governor and Ruler of the State for more priests to be sent in the area. The Metropolitan Visarion did not neglect the public works that were much needed after the destructions caused during the war. He is considered to be the one that built the civilian airport and the road paved between Odessa and Tiraspol, joined later by the one between Tighina, Chisinau and Iasi, and he was the one who supported and drove the reconstruction of several charity institutions, reorganized the hospital “Alexandru Sturza” and opened several churches health centers for the ill and canteens for the poor.

The period he spent in exile (August 23, 1944 - August 10, 1964) can be seen from several points of view, being reflected both in the operational archive of the Romanian Intelligence Service which can be found at CNSAS (the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives), in the personal archive of the Metropolitan from the Romanian Library in Freiburg (Germany) which was brought to the Library “Dumitru Staniloae” in Iasi, and in the periodicals published at the time or publications after 1990. His work during the exile might be summarized as follows: Croatia 13-17 August, 1944; Austria, August 1944 – October 1945; Italy, October 1945 – November 1947; Switzerland, November 1947 – August 1949; France, August 1949 – August 1964. I have tracked this period to show the background and rationale for him to remain in exile, of establishing the Romanian Eparchy of Western Europe, the pretext of the Romanian communist security bodies to contact him, the investigative methods used to gather evidence to be sentenced to death and defrocked, the operational plans on contacting and attempting to determine him to repatriate to be used as an agent of influence among emigration.

Visarion Puiu was a true visionary and missionary of the Romanian Orthodox Church who, from the beginning of his career, was concerned with all sorts of church issues, especially ecumenism at a time when this word was uttered only in small groups and the modern ecumenist work was just beginning. People considered that he thought of himself as an international religious leader only because he tried to change mindsets and principles tributary to his times and secularized and atheism ideologies, which made him an unfortunate trend setter of the stigmatized hierarchs by the regime imposed by force in Romania during 1944-1989.