
CHURCH AND CULTURE IN A TIME OF SUFFERING

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS IN

WORLD WAR II

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Abstract

In this study, I explore the history of cultural and religious associations in a time of significant national and social suffering: WWII in Transylvania (Romania). Despite real difficulties, resources were identified for developing cultural and religious programmes. In virtue of some unpublished archive documents, I have documented the evolution of two religious-cultural associations (Frăția Ortodoxă Română and Astra) in the Vicarage of Alba Iulia (in the centre of Transylvania). These programmes pulled together cultural, national, and religious resources to develop social conscience and solidarity. The collaboration of priests, who took part enthusiastically in the accomplishments of these programmes, is worthy of praise. They were led by vicar archpriest Alexandru Baba from Alba Iulia, who turned the town into a real 'pilot-centre', through these projects.

Keywords: cultural associations, Transylvania, Diocese of Cluj, Orthodox Vicarage of Alba Iulia

1. Introduction

The seizure of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina by the Russians (June 1940) and the annexation of northern Transylvania to Hungary, as a consequence of the Vienna Dictate (August 30, 1940), marked the beginning of an epoch of national suffering with repercussions on the social, cultural and religious life of Romanians. Despite such events, during WWII there were many efforts to overcome the limits imposed by the context, which materialised in the religious-cultural programmes of various specialised associations. It is worth noting that these activities not only pulled together cultural resources, but also important mechanisms of national, religious, social conscience and solidarity. Such national and religious goals were declared explicitly by the leaders of these organisations. For example, the associations were considered a 'lay apostleship' and were meant to contribute to 'the moral recovery of the Romanian soul' and 'the consolidation of the nation'.

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The religious-cultural associations in the southern half of the Orthodox Diocese in Cluj constitute a special case. This area belonged to Romania after the Dictate, but it was without a bishop and was reorganised as a vicarage in Alba Iulia (in the centre of Transylvania), which lasted for 4 years and 7 months (September 6th 1940 - April 1st 1945) under the direction of the archpriest of Alba Iulia, Alexandru Baba [1-3] (see also the Archives of the Archdiocese in Cluj (in this document marked as AAC), Fund *Romanian Orthodox Vicarage of Alba Iulia (ROVAI)*, doc. no. 1878/8 May 1942). These associations endeavoured to adapt their structure to the new conditions and to fulfil their specific objectives. The inclusion of priests, led by archpriest Alexandru Baba, in such cultural projects is worthy of praise, as they participated enthusiastically and achieved significant outcomes.

Out of all of the cultural-religious associations existing at that time, I have selected two prominent ones, which created important programmes, for illustration: *Frăția Ortodoxă Română* (the association of lay intellectuals from Transylvania and Banat) and *Astra* (The Association for the literature and culture of the Romanian people). The latter was created by the Transylvanian Metropolitan Andrei Șaguna (1861), who has had an unequalled cultural and national position in the modern epoch of Transylvania. Consequently, I have structured this paper into two sections, approaching each association in turn, and delineating the concrete situation of the Vicarage of Alba Iulia, especially the deanery of Alba Iulia, in virtue of a number of unpublished documents, which were preserved in the Metropolitan Archive in Cluj-Napoca.

2. Frăția Ortodoxă Română (The Romanian Orthodox Brotherhood)

Frăția Ortodoxă Română (F.O.R.) was an association of lay intellectuals in Transylvania and Banat, created in 1933 at the initiative of the Metropolitan of Ardeal, Nicolae Bălan. The head office of F.O.R. was located in Cluj and Sextil Pușcariu served as its first president [4]. Later, the head office was moved to Brașov, where the Central Committee was located, and Professor I. Mateiu from the Commercial Academy became president. The role of the association was seen by the president as a lay apostleship that had to be practised with great dynamism given the difficult political context of the war [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, doc. no. 1957/4 April 1944], during which Orthodoxy reconfirmed its statute of “support of the people” [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, document dated 7 March 1941, unregistered]. The vicar archpriest Alexandru Baba, underlining the religious and national character of the organisation, stated its central objective in the same terms: “the moral recovery of the Romanian soul” and “the consolidation of the nation” [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, doc. no. 1237/March 1943]. The means of achieving these objectives were: conferences, social soirées, religious concerts, and distributing religious items [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, doc. no. 821/1943; no. 1957/4 April 1944] etc., especially during Great Lent.

After the split of the Cluj Eparchy into two parts, the Vicarage of Alba Iulia reorganised the eparchial department of the F.O.R. to re-establish normal activities, and in 1941 appointed professor Lazăr Chirilă PhD as president. Lazăr Chirilă had taken refuge in Turda and later settled in Bucharest [AAC, Fund ROVAI, doc. no. 1111/20 March 1941; no. 612/13 February 1943; no. 565/11 February 1943; *The Minutes of April 3rd 1941*, in *Registry of the Minutes of the Romanian Orthodox Vicarage in Alba Iulia, September 10th 1940 – February 27th 1943*, vol. I, 85].

The first religious-cultural programmes in this period began in the spring of 1943 [AAC, Fund ROVAI, document dated 7 March 1941, unregistered; Alba County Department of National Archives, Fund *Orthodox Deanery of Alba Iulia*, file no. 1/1944, page 13]. Public conferences on different topics were organised on the Sundays of Great Lent in the deaneries in Aiud, Alba Iulia, Baia de Arieş and Turda [AAC, Fund ROVAI, *Report on the activity of Vicarage in 1943*, unregistered, 23]. In Alba Iulia, they began on March 14th 1943 with the lecture *The worship of the holy icons* by Professor of Theology Gheorghe Stănescu from Sibiu. On March 21st 1943 a conference with Professor Isidor Todoran from Sibiu was scheduled but it was cancelled. Then followed Liviu Stan with the topic *Law in Romanian thinking* (March 28th); Grigorie T. Marcu with a conference on *Was Jesus Christ God?* (April 4th); Petru Deheleanu with the topic *The commandment of love* (April 11th); and Ilarion V. Felea with a conference on *Christianity and atheist communism* (April 18th). Nichifor Crainic was scheduled to give a presentation in Alba Iulia after Pascha, but we do not know if he came or not.

Initially, the lectures were to be delivered in the church of the central parish in Alba Iulia, after a short service and religious hymns, so as not to coincide with the programme of *Astra*, which was also organising a series of public conferences, as well as to avoid possible sabotage from the local Greek-Catholics. Eventually, however, the location was transferred to the Chamber of Commerce.

The work of archpriest Alexandru Baba from Alba Iulia was essential for the success of the moment. He corresponded with the rector of the Theological Academy in Sibiu, Dumitru Stăniloae (the greatest Romanian theologian), with the lecturers and with Lazăr Chirilă, the president of F.O.R., and the branch of the Vicarage in Alba Iulia; in addition, he addressed the invitations and the guests stayed in his house. In each cultural-religious centre, the role of the archpriest as organiser was essential, but all the more so in Alba Iulia. As the 'pilot-centre', archpriest Alexandru Baba was received with enthusiasm and was expected to be a cultural and missionary success [AAC, Fund ROVAI, doc. no. 1237/March 1943; no. 2032/16 April 1943; no. 1371/15 March 1943; no. 1547/20 March 1943; no. 868/25 February 1943; no. 1187/10 March 1943; no. 612/13 February 1943; no. 819/22 February 1943]. That is why the relationship between the president of F.O.R. and the archpriest in Alba Iulia was a close one: the latter was asked to be involved in organizing these conferences in Alba Iulia, to deliver a lecture [AAC, Fund ROVAI, *Address of the president of the F.O.R.*,

section of the Alba, Lazăr Chirilă, to the president of the Vicarage, archpriest Alexandru Baba, dated February 15th 1943, unregistered], and to include the choir of the church from Alba Iulia Centru in the programme. The Orthodox teachers in Alba Iulia were also included; they were asked by Lazăr Chirilă to collaborate with the association in order to prepare conferences for some deaneries in the Vicarage [AAC, Fund ROVAI, *Address of the president of the F.O.R., section of the Alba, Lazăr Chirilă, to the president of the Vicarage, archpriest Alexandru Baba*, dated February 15th 1943, unregistered]. The religion teachers at the high school for boys and the high school for girls in Alba Iulia were also asked to take part in the F.O.R. conferences with the pupils in the higher grades.

However, the appointment of the association's president in Bucharest caused breaks in communication with the Vicarage. For example, conferences planned by Lazăr Chirilă at times overlapped with the programme of meditations during Great Lent organised by the Vicarage at the centre, which included the F.O.R. conferences. There were also technical inconveniences, such as schedule changes or correspondence delivered to the wrong address. For example, the rector of the Theological Academy in Sibiu addressed the Vicarage in Alba Iulia to contact the president of F.O.R. At other times, those who were to deliver conference presentations addressed archpriest Alexandru Baba directly, complaining because of the lack of details. Such confusion made the archpriest in Alba Iulia feel a certain amount of irritation and, consequently, he requested that the president of the F.O.R. provide more efficient communication [AAC, Fund ROVAI, doc. no. 565/11 February 1943].

In the year that followed, in order to prevent similar confusing situations, archpriest Alexandru Baba suggested changes in the manner of organisation of the conferences, given the experience of the previous year. For example, he suggested that organisation be *descentralised*, every deanery was to organise this programme independently, without the intercession of the Vicarage, communicating directly, through the archpriest and the local president to the president of the F.O.R. The Vicarage only had to coordinate the general programme, thus eliminating the challenges of over-lapping duties and cross-correspondence. For the centre in Alba Iulia, archpriest Alexandru Baba decided to be in charge personally, to plan the F.O.R. conferences that were to take place [AAC, Fund ROVAI, doc. no. 756/12 February 1944; no. 566/4 February 1944]. Despite such labours, there were inconveniences, for the president of the association, Lazăr Chirilă, who having wanted to collaborate with many professors, established correspondence with the Theological Academies and fixed a programme that could not be applied in Alba Iulia. The deficiency consisted in the fact that the conferences overlapped with those of *Astra*, which divided the public and limited the number of the participants, which is what had happened in 1943 as well, when there were few participants. This was the reason why in 1944 there was a local agreement in which *Astra* renounced its cultural programmes on two Sundays, offering the F.O.R. the possibility to organise its lectures. In such conditions, the professors suggested by Lazăr Chirilă for Alba

Iulia, that is, Sofron Vlad, the rector of the Theological Academy of Oradea–Timișoara, and Isidor Todoran from Sibiu, could not be included in the programme in Alba Iulia. Moreover, the project could not be utilised in the Vicarage because of the same deficiencies in communication. Despite his good intentions, which can be noted in his correspondence, the president of the F.O.R. created breaches and confusions by establishing agreements with the Theological Academies in Sibiu and Oradea without a preliminary agreement with the Vicarage and without managing in a precise way the distribution of the professors or collaboration with the deaneries to discount the expenses [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, doc. no. 756/12 February 1944; no. 566/4 February 1944]. Consequently, the task of organizing fell to the Vicarage even though *descentralisation* had been intended to prevent the annoyances of the previous year, caused by parallel management from two locations, Alba Iulia and Bucharest.

On March 5th 1944, Dumitru Stăniloae, the rector of the Theological Academy in Sibiu was invited to Alba Iulia, to deliver the conference ‘Latinity and Orthodoxy’. The lecture was accompanied by six musical pieces, interpreted by the choir of the central church, under the direction of deacon Ioan C. Popescu [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, doc. no. 2749/2 June 1944]. Archpriest Alexandru Baba was mentioned as soloist, which denotes his vocal talent.

In the spring of 1944, two other lectures were mentioned, but we have no confirmation that they were held: Sofron Vlad’s *The fight for the cross* (March 19th 1944) and *The Christian and the present social problems*’ – the name of the lecturer was not mentioned [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, *Draft* undated, unregistered].

Although reactivated in the Vicarage of Alba Iulia in difficult conditions, with incomplete information concerning the number of members and a president who took refuge in Bucharest, the Branch in Cluj of the Association *Frăția Ortodoxă Română* (The Romanian Orthodox Brotherhood) attempted to re-establish its normal course of activity after the Vienna Dictate. Its involvement in public life was significant, discussing topics of great interest, but especially initiating religious-cultural programmes during Great Lent of 1943 and 1944 at the deaneries in the Vicarage of Alba Iulia. Despite some organisational deficiencies, the public conferences were instrumental to the spiritual and cultural purpose of the association, through the generosity and contemporaneousness of the topics. An essential factor was the work of archpriest Alexandru Baba, who turned Alba Iulia into a ‘pilot-centre’ through this programme, in which the faithful in Alba Iulia had the chance to listen to some of the most important theologians of the time: Dumitru Stăniloae, Liviu Stan, Grigorie T. Marcu, Ilarion V. Felea, Gheorghe Stănescu and Petru Deheleanu.

3. Astra

For Astra [4] the priests were the most dedicated collaborators in the programme of culturalisation of the masses and the preservation of the

Romanian conscience [5, 6]. Astra's branch in Alba Iulia also benefitted from cooperation with the administration of the Vicarage and with the clergy in the deanery of Alba Iulia – especially with vicar archpriest Alexandru Baba, who cooperated with the leadership of the local Astra organisation immediately after his installation as archpriest in 1925 [6]. His labours materialised under various forms: lectures at Astra conferences, participation in anniversaries and commemorations patronised by the association or in its cultural programmes, educational activities for rural schools, etc.: “between the Vicarage and the local branch of Astra there was a close cooperation, based on the interpenetration of the administration of the two institutions. Archpriest Alexandru Baba was appointed president of the vicarial council, and from 1942 a vicar. Archpriest Nicolae VasIU was a vicarial counselor and the attorneys Ioan Pop and Petru Mețeș were lay eparchial deputies. All these were part of the committee of Astra's Branch in Alba Iulia; moreover, Nicolae VasIU was vice-president [...]. In this difficult period, the voice of the local Astra was also heard in the pages of the mentioned gazette (*Renașterea*).” [6, p. 479-480] Usually, the presidents of the cultural circles were the parish priests.

The evolution of Astra's programme was related in the war years to ‘the reconstruction work’ initiated by marshal Ion Antonescu, in which all internal energies were directed to maintaining national and social equilibrium.

In these conditions, in which “the autonomy of an institution becomes fiction”, Astra “entered, willingly, or unwillingly, a system of relations that imposed it a different conduct from the traditional one”, subordinating itself to “the programme of work adapted to the moment” [6, p. 480-481]. Despite such challenges, from 1942-1944 the association experienced a period of impetus, “one of the richest harvests in the years after the Union”, as there were generous subventions from the Social Work Patronage Council led by Maria Antonescu [6, p. 482] and from the government, which included Astra in the project *The National Internal Action*, initiated by the Ministry of Propaganda for the purpose of maintaining Romanian enthusiasm for concerns regarding the war [6]. Astra's branch in Alba Iulia benefitted from generous sums and managed to orient part of these funds towards its specific programme: libraries, rural schools, exhibitions, etc. [6].

The clergy took part in the cultural circles of the primary school teachers and at the festivities organised by Astra [AAC, Fund ROVAI, *Report on the activity of the Vicarage from April 1st 1942 to April 1st 1943*, Alba Iulia, 1943, p. 19], and in the case of the rural school organised by the association, priests contributed to religious instruction and moral education of the youth, through educational and patriotic programmes (religion lessons, thematic conferences, etc.).

In 1940, an article in *Transylvania* magazine mentions the rural schools in Șard and Cricău, near Alba Iulia: the rural school for girls in Șard was organised in the period from March 18th - April 14th, with the participation of 62 pupils and with the help of the teachers in Alba Iulia. The rural school from Cricău, whose classes had the same duration, was attended by 143 peasants (men and women);

its teachers were the lecturers from Alba Iulia. In Șard, Astra organised a festival and the children presented an exhibition of their works. We do not know the extent to which the Orthodox clergy in these villages were involved in these actions, lacking information in this respect [7].

In 1943, among the 11 parishes in the Vicarage that had a rural school there was the parish Alba Iulia I Centru, whose classes unfolded in the period January 18th – February 21st and which were attended by 15 pupils [8].

In 1944 there were classes in a rural school in: *Cricău* (December 3rd 1943 – March 19th 1944), attended by 18 pupils, led by priest N. Munteanu; *Ighiel* (January 16th – February 20th 1944), attended by 11 pupils, led by priest Aurel Velea; *Blandiana* (in two series: January 17th – February 20th 1944; March 15th – April 17th 1944), attended by 12 and 10 pupils respectively; *Vurpăr* (in two series: January 24th – March 5th 1944; March 5th – April 2nd 1944), attended by 16 and 12 pupils respectively. The classes were ended with festivities and exhibitions, and in Ighiel there was also a children's exhibition [9].

In 1942, the first and the unique urban cultural circle of the branch in Alba Iulia was created in the Maieri district, whose president was the priest Mircea Fodorean [6].

Following the request of Astra, the Vicarage agreed to send an Orthodox priest with the lecturers of the association in the villages, in order to perform a service in the respective community and say the sermon of the day. (For this purpose, on June 6th 1943, four clerics were sent by the Vicarage to Ampoița, Tăuți, Meteș and Poiana Ampoiului) [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, doc. no. 2753/2 June 1943]. Some priests were not just “supporters of organizing Astra's activity in towns and villages, but also active collaborators, especially in the Branches of Alba Iulia, Turda and Zlatna” [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, *Report on the activity of the Vicarage in 1943*, Alba Iulia, 1944, 23]. Thus, on November 28th 1943, the priests Adrian Flămând, Ioan Lazăr, Olimpiu Bucin, Octavian Nicola and Nicolae Vasiiu, from the vicarial centre, gave lectures in the communes near Alba Iulia, as partners of Astra [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, *Report on the activity of the Vicarage in 1943*, Alba Iulia, 1944, 23].

On March 1944, following the recommendation of the Ministry of Cults, Astra's Branch in Alba Iulia established collaboration with the Vicarage in order to set up a committee for the reception of refugee clerics, teachers or members of cultural institutions. This committee, together with the local authorities, took care of the housing of the University in Iași, whose faculties were established in the schools in Alba Iulia until May 1945 [6].

As for the various commemorative moments organised by Astra in Alba Iulia, the priests at the vicarial centre, led by archpriest Alexandru Baba, always accepted the invitation to participate.

- In 1940, starting with December 15th, Astra's branch in Alba Iulia, together with the secondary school teachers in Alba Iulia, organised Sunday conferences in the *Caragiale room* in Alba Iulia, attempting to evoke representative figures of the Romanian national and cultural history. Among the guests present there were also members of the Vicarage.

- On June 14th 1942, on the occasion of the commemoration of 50 years from the *Memorandum*, Astra organised a great procession, having the central church in Alba Iulia as starting point. The suite was led by Alexandru Baba, accompanied by vicarial clerks and by a delegation of the Military Diocese, made up of clerics from the Coronation cathedral [10].
- In the spring of 1942 and 1943, Astra organised a cycle of public conferences, with the support of the *University Extension*, presided by professor Silviu Dragomir, PhD.
- On August 28th 1943, on the occasion of the anniversary of Romania's entrance in the war, Astra organised the conference 'Hungary's historical mission' (sic!), delivered by professor Gheorghe Brătianu, PhD. Receiving the invitation, archpriest Alexandru Baba asked all the clerks of the vicarial centre to accept the invitation [AAC, Fund *ROVAI*, no. 868/25 February 1943; document dated 26 August 1943, unregistered].
- 'The Union days' could not be celebrated in any year because of obvious political reasons: the alliance of Marshal Antonescu with Germany, a country which, on August 30th 1940 offered Hungary the north-western half of Transylvania. For example, the intention of Astra's central committee to convoke the general assembly of the association in Alba Iulia on December 1st 1940, as a reaction against the Dictate, was disavowed by the government, which motivated its refusal saying that the country was going through difficult times. Nevertheless, the commemoration assembly in Alba Iulia was already prepared and the presence of Marshal Antonescu and the leader Horea Sima was included in the programme [6]. In 1943, the government again did not approve of the program for the anniversary of 25 years from the Great Union to the extent Astra planned, with ample programmes and manifestations of a national and cultural character. However, the moment was celebrated "in the branches through conferences and religious services in the churches, having only a local character. Astra's central Branch in Alba Iulia still organised a more solemn festivity...", with the participation of the government's representatives and of many members of Astra's Central Committee, led by its president, Iuliu Moldovan [9]. On December 1st 1944, on the occasion of the festivities of the Union, the president of Astra's branch, Eugen Hulea, invited archpriest Alexandru Baba and the priests at the vicarial centre to the anniversaries organised by the association [11].

4. Conclusions

In a time of national and social suffering, when they were involved in a war of defence and recovery of the diminished borders, the Romanians in Transylvania found resources, rich or scarce, to develop cultural programmes which activated not just specific cultural mechanisms, but also the resources of national, religious, social conscience and solidarity.

In the Vicarage of Alba Iulia, two associations that unfolded ample religious and cultural programmes stand out: Frăția Ortodoxă Română and Astra.

Although reactivated in very difficult conditions in Alba Iulia, the Cluj branch of the Frăția Ortodoxă Română Association attempted to follow its normal activities after the Vienna Dictate. This included getting involved in public life, and discussing subjects of general interest, especially through the initiation of some religious-cultural programmes in the deaneries in the Vicarage of Alba Iulia. Despite some organisational deficiencies, the public conferences were instrumental to the spiritual and cultural purpose of the association, through the generosity and contemporaneity of the topics, but also through the authority of the speakers. An essential factor was the work of archpriest Alexandru Baba, who turned Alba Iulia into a 'pilot-centre' through this programme, in which the faithful in Alba Iulia had the chance to listen to some of the most important theologians of the time.

In the case of the Alba Iulia Branch of the Astra association, the clergy at the vicarial centre and in the neighbourhood of Alba Iulia, especially archpriest vicar Alexandru Baba, were dedicated collaborators in the programme of culturalisation of the masses and preservation of the Romanian conscience. Their work materialised in lectures, anniversaries and commemorations, educational and patriotic activities in rural schools (religion lessons, thematic conferences) etc.

Undoubtedly, these movements constitute a lesson for each generation, through which is demonstrated that cultural actions can defy the suffering and limits of war, offering a genuine reliance on others and a return to national solidarity.

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