# THE FAITH OF THE TRANSYLVANIAN ROMANIANS BETWEEN 'ANCIENT CUSTOM' AND THE ARTICLES OF FLORENCE

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## Abstract

The religious unification of the Transylvanian Romanians with the Roman Catholic Church (1697-1701) brought into direct contact the two European cultures, Western and Eastern, not just at the level of the Transylvanian Romanian elite, but also − through religious life − at the parish level, even in rural Romanian communities in Transylvania. This article focuses on the period when Western and Eastern (Latin and Greek) dogmatic literature engaged in dialogue which proved decisive in building modern Romanian identity in Transylvania. In 1744-1754 Transylvanians joined the theological dispute between Greeks and Latin around the heritage of the 'Romanian Law' or 'ancient custom', focused on the Articles of Florence. This paper shows the relevance of the Articles of Florence, as an expression of the differences between Uniates and non-Uniate, to the faith and religious behaviour of Romanians during the interconfessional conflict triggered by the monk Visarion Sarai.

*Keywords:* Habsburg Empire, Transylvania, Church, religious Union

## 1. Introduction

Beyond the reciprocal accusations between Transylvanian Uniate and non-Uniate, I am concerned about how parishioners perceived and experienced the ‚crisis of conscience' in eighteenth-century Transylvania [1]. This was similar to the experience of a few decades earlier in Western Europe. My goal is to try to understand − based on the few testimonies left − how the Romanian communities approached the elements of faith and what form these elements took in their religious life during the confessional conflict among the Transylvanian Romanians.

## 2. Elements of faith

The anti-Uniate literature brought into the province from outside and popularized by Visarion Sarai appealed to Transylvanian Romanians with the

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idea that their salvation depended on returning to 'ancient custom' (*legea strămoşească*) (Maxim Peloponesul [2]) and renouncing the 'third law' (Visarion de la Sâmbăta) [3, 4]. In response, in 1746 the Uniate Gherontie Cotore proposed a synthesis where confession and nation fused as elements of identity in an appeal to 'Romanity' and the return to Rome, regarded as the only sure way to salvation [5]. He held that insubordination to the Pope had serious consequences; the impossibility of salvation for the schismatic, the illegitimacy of non-Uniate bishops and priests, and the invalidity of the sacraments they administered. He and his colleagues in Blaj clearly stated in *Floarea adevărului* (*The Flower of the Truth,* 1750) [6, 7] that the Union represented the only way to preserve the fidelity of 'ancient custom' and that spreading the Union meant the consolidation and guaranteed existence of their traditional Romanian Church [5]. The Uniate elite had to differentiate itself in its discourse from Latin theology, as the Roman Catholics were tempted to force them more or less into assimilation, and also from Greek theology, which accused the Uniate of 'betrayal of the law' and separatism.

In trying to define the faith of the Transylvanians - either of Latin or Greek tradition - we face a dual situation. The Uniate clerical elite was educated in the Trent school that promoted teachings from the Catholics and assimilated their vision on the teachings of Florence. This explains why and how they were sure to preserve the Florentine vision of the Union in their debate with the non-Uniate about 'ancient custom'. Following the fathers of the Union, they saw in the Union the preservation of all their traditions, including the entire Eastern autonomous discipline. On the other hand they held that fidelity toward the Catholic Church could be expressed only through the acknowledgement of papal supremacy, in their view the only authority that could guarantee to preserve the tradition and rite of their ancestral Eastern Church. This view, however, lost the very essence of the Florentine spirit, namely the closeness and reciprocal acknowledgement of two churches, the Latin and the Greek, and surrendered to the Tridentine tendency of Catholic unification 'under one shepherd'. The Roman perspective on the preservation of tradition and rite was to restrict the differences between Latin and Uniate to differences of liturgy and ceremony. Thus an ambiguous belief in Florentine Unification was imposed but still claimed from a Tridentine perspective, later also influenced by trends in Catholic reform (Febronianism and Gallicanism). This syncretism fuelled another belief of the next generation from Blaj, related to the autonomy of the Uniate Church within universal Catholicism.

Half a century after Union, the perception of the Uniate in Romanian communities in Transylvania was contrary to that propagated by the elite from Blaj through the work that served as a manifesto for that generation, *Floarea adevărului*. Despite the scarcity of extant sources, we can present edifying examples from the province of how believers related to their faith and tradition. The confession of the priest Moise Măcinic is very important; he proved to have a good knowledge of the Florentine Articles and understood the differences between Uniate and non-Uniate. When asked on behalf of the inhabitants of Sibiel during the visitation of 14th April 1752 whether he knew the difference

between the Uniate and non-Uniate Church, he answered that the Uniate said that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and from the Son, while the non-Uniate said that it proceeds only from the Father. It seems that the subtleties of the *filioque* clause had been understood at least by some parish priests, as to the second question, "but does he know that the Father and the Son are one God?" he confessed that he knew and believed it, and he even saw that both parties say the same. Though, he declared that he followed the faith of the Serbs and Greeks [8].

A few years later (23rd September 1763) the Uniate bishop Aron took a deposition from a representative of the Uniate elite, the master of the post Ioan Dragos of Turmas, about his understanding and knowledge of the Uniate faith [9]. For him in 1763, to be Uniate meant to share the same faith with the Roman Catholics, differentiated however by the 'ancient' rite [10, 11].

Testimonies originating from the Roman Catholic elite, some of them indirect, and sources from the province reflecting the opinion of the elite of Uniate believers show us the elements that defined the faith of the Romanians in the mid-eighteenth century. It also shows the elements that differentiated between Uniate and non-Uniate and how they were perceived in local Romanian communities. We note the limited effect of the message introduced by Uniate identity discourse and the lack of interest in the Florentine Articles as an expression of the differences between Uniate and non-Uniate, except of course for papal primacy. Although known, the use of unleavened bread and the issues of Purgatory and the *filioque* seem to have been of limited relevance in the Romanian inter-confessional dispute in the 1740s and 1750s. Even if they were the quintessence of theological debate between the Uniate and non-Uniate elites, the Florentine Articles had only a limited impact in the province, though we can find cases to contradict this. The explanation is to be found first and foremost in the parishioners' limited appetite for dogmatic issues.

## 2.1. How did some religious aspects nevertheless lead to conflict in rural communities? Was this dispute only about faith?

The 'ancient custom' summed up a code of social practices; it was religion lived by the community, regulating the daily life of the community as a whole. The attachment to 'ancient custom' was real proof of the involvement of the church in community life and the strong faith parishioners had in it as a guide on the path of life. This was about the connection between church and community intermediated by the parish priest, who enjoyed great credibility and authority since he was no different from his parishioners in social status and did not stand out through a particular intellectual education. The 'ancient custom' was a blend of religion – which also included Eastern tradition (with its defining elements of the calendar, fasts and the cult of the dead) and the rites of the ancestral Church – and the social code of the community. Responsible for safeguarding the law was the priest, who served the community he blended into. Based on this 'ancient custom', two competing theological discourses took shape

– 'the return to Rome' (Gherontie Cotore) versus the abandonment of the 'third law' (Visarion of Sâmbăta). Their impact on the parishioners undermined the comfort and guarantee of redemption 'ensured' by strict adherence to tradition and the law. Such conduct was largely made up of religious and social mimicry of course, but it was the only law people knew; they grew up within it, certain that their salvation depended on following this law. To break the ancestral 'ancient custom' or not follow it strictly meant to break the relationship between man and God consecrated by baptism. This is why the accusation of baptismal invalidity, used by both the Uniate Gherontie Cotore and the non-Uniate Visarion Sarai in their theological polemic, represented the supreme condemnation. With their faith thus undermined, parishioners were crushed by the fear of losing salvation. For most, the hope for eternal life was the only salvation from the failures of everyday life.
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## 3. The power of tradition and the governmental authorities

In 1742 Count Harrach, speaking for Vienna, noted the internal state of the province, marked by tensions, division and ambition. He saw the Principality as a horse that could very easily bring down its rider. The province was divided in two and the heads of this separation were the government and political diet. There was a close bond between non-Catholics in Hungary and Transylvania; there was also religious division in the province, together with hatred for the Transylvanian Aulic Chancellery [8, p. 104]. This was the background against which the Romanian inter-confessional crisis appeared. My interest is in how it was managed, in such a context, at the central level and by the Transylvanian local authorities.

### 3.1. The central level

Following petitions from the inhabitants of the district of Sălişte, in March 1749 Maria Theresa ordered that the sacraments be given according to the 'old custom' and that the gatherings summoned by the 'new' priests be abandoned. One month later, the protocol of the ministerial conference on Transylvanian Union noted that "it is widely known that the spread of the teachings of the true faith is incompatible with the constraints of the Union". The protocol was echoed by the opinion of the ministerial conference on Transylvanian questions, concerning ways to rebuild the Union in the province and recommending that the Uniate clergy instruct the people and to bring them back, gently and wisely, to the true faith.

The Viennese minister Bartenstein repeatedly condemned the reactions of Transylvanian local authorities to anti-Unionist actions in the province. Here I refer to his comments to minister Kaunitz on 21st March 1741, recommending that "moderate means have priority over repression and violence". Bartenstein regarded it as "useless and even damaging for the Union to express public antipathy and hatred against all the *non-Uniate,* which could be perceived in a painful manner". The two ministers' attitude towards Transylvanian Romanians

and relation to the Union is also illustrated by another letter from Bartenstein, dated 17th November 1750, where he reiterated "the agreement to act with great severity against those disturbing public order and not to grant the liberties of the Uniate to the non-Uniate". Thus he recommended the use of the same tactics employed by Emperor Leopold, to grant more liberties to Uniate than to non-Uniate. In the context of perpetual disturbances between Uniate and non-Uniate, Bartenstein's opinion of 25th September 1753 about the situation of the Union reveals the opinion of a high court official on the nature of the Romanian inter-confessional conflict in the territory. He was convinced that the guilt for the entire situation lay with members of the 'Greek' clergy, who acted deliberately, presenting the difference between the Latin and Eastern churches to laypeople by emphasising the novelties introduced to the teaching by the Latin faith. Continuity of faith is one of the arguments best received by the Greeks, as they emphasize the old tradition a great deal, just as Catholics do [8, 12]. Further, Vienna's decrees forbade harshness or violence in constraining the non-Uniate to the Union (21st August 1752, 2nd November 1753). The court officials considered that the most suitable way to solve the conflict was to grant religious tolerance to those who had left the Union, and recommended that local authorities "refrain from instigating this uneducated and unreliable people" [13].

### 3.2. In the province

Although the actions of the central and local authorities seemed to show a common purpose – to rebuild and consolidate the Union in Transylvania - the proposals of the provincial authorities were quite different, in their content and in the firmness of the solutions, from those of the court. They were also criticized by Vienna. Of course, under the impact of events in their territory and disappointed by the effects of the Edict of Tolerance granted by Maria Theresa to the non-Uniate (13th July 1759), the provincial authorities issued among other measures a document drawn up in Sibiu on 20th September 1759, reaffirming some stipulations of the Edict of Tolerance from 1759 [Direcția Județeană Alba a Arhivelor Naționale, *Mitropolia Română Unită Blaj. Arhiva Generală. Documente neînregistrate* (further DJAAN. MRUB. AG-d.n.) 5/1753, Sibiu, 28 septembrie 1759, f. 3v].

These governmental instructions seemed to have been a severe reaction to the letter of the Jesuit Emeric Pallovics to Count Bethlen, president of the Transylvanian Aulic Chancellery, from Sibiu on 15th September 1759, relating events that had happened near Sibiu: priests had been chased away from their houses, opponents of Union had gathered, Uniate priests were removed and schismatic priests imposed [14]. Trying to ameliorate the situation by the proposals submitted to the Transylvanian Diets, the second article recommended disclaiming the tolerance granted to those fighting the Union. The formulation shows the provincial authorities' unwillingness to support Vienna's decision "[…] how much power is allowed meanwhile to the tolerance of the old rage, considering the rescripts – to speak only of those who never embraced the holy

Union […] without doubt they should be refused the tolerance extended. For he who abuses the favour he was offered, should be refused that favour" [DJAAN. MRUB. AG-d.n., 5/1759, 28 septembrie, f. 1r]. The lack of concert between the Vienna authorities and the provincial administration is obvious. Moreover, the document stressed Transylvanian intransigence and the governor's and Catholic bishops' determination to punish the *schismatic*. The Transylvanian authorities showed that they had not understood the concept of tolerance adopted by Vienna and requested arrests, imprisonments, a prohibition on gatherings, and confiscations (or restitutions) against those who continued to leave the Union [DJAAN. MRUB. AG-d.n., 5/1759, 28 septembrie, f. 1r-3r].

We find the "same political concept" and "the same obsolete measures, incapable of restoring Union" in the decrees of the provincial authorities issued in Sibiu on 20th April and 11th June 1759 [14, p. 126, 340-342]. This time, in order to "preserve and consolidate the holy Uniate religion" fifteen proposals were drawn up, which the authorities saw as infallible yet which were completely inadequate to calm the situation. The Transylvanian authorities' inability to solve the anti-Union revolt is shown by the uninspired proposal on the use of church patrimony and priests' incomes. This lack of concern to find an effective remedy, capable of defusing the conflict, appears once more in the instruction that the non-Uniate must restitute churches and priest's houses to the Uniate. The inability of the government was also evident in the regulation on the use of bells by the non-Uniate, who "abuse noisy bells by tolling them wrongly [and] must be forbidden from using them, and the Uniate priest should be granted the right to use them" [DJAAN. MRUB. AG-d.n., 5/1753, Sibiu, 28 septembrie 1759, f. 2r]. We notice how, contrary to court opinion, even after religious tolerance had been adopted for the non-Uniate, provincial authorities persisted in asking Vienna for restrictions and regulations that aimed not so much at faith or religious life as at sanctioning the perturbation of public order [12, p. 166, 170-171; 15]. Wishing to end instability in the province, the members of the Catholic council insisted on tougher legislation against those hindering the free exercise of the Catholic religion [DJAAN. MRUB. AG-d.n., 5/1753, Sibiu, 28 septembrie 1759, f. 1r-v]. In addition, they asked that the governor of Transylvania be allowed to build some churches for the non-Uniate to host the sacraments, as the existing churches could accommodate only the acolytes but not the believers [DJAAN. MRUB. AG-d.n., 5/1753, Sibiu, 28 septembrie 1759, f. 4r-v]. Looking beyond the severity of the proposals [16], this was a desperate reaction to a conflict that was becoming chronic and that eventually forced the governor Count Kemény – in the circular of 7th October 1759 – to name persons to explain to the people from the rebellious villages "in an understandable way" the decree of tolerance "to understand the true intention of Maria Theresa" [17].

## 4. Conclusions

We may say that in the daily life of parishioners in the Principality, the dispute between the Uniate and non-Uniate elite did not matter much, as it

focused on dogmatic issues represented by the Florentine Articles. Following the few extant sources, we may state that parish clergy successfully invoked the issue of identity, which also captivated the believers. This focused on the legitimate inheritance of 'ancient custom' and aimed to preserve it faithfully. We note also the perception of regular believers toward their own identity, their feeling of belonging to a confessional nation [18]. For them the "Romanian faith" was synonym with the faith of the Serbs and with the "Greek [faith], because we found ourselves in it" [16, p. 170]. As we know, identity is built in time; it takes a long time to build, it is always linked to the past and thus continuity, tradition, is the most important element. Tradition here was represented by the 'ancient custom'. Since the Uniate and non-Uniate elite were contesting the claim to preserve such custom, we can easily see the confusion created; such identical claims did not provide a clear line of demarcation between Uniate and non-Uniate. This is actually one reason why the Hapsburg authorities accused Uniate priests of not trying to explain the Union [8, p. 234].

The court in Vienna gave various commitments when the Union was concluded. When these were then not observed, Union's success in the province depended on its supporters and on the support granted for its propagation by all local and central administrative actors, in a common strategy of promotion. At the same time, the involvement of the high clergy and the parish clergy was also decisive in spreading the message about the Union as clearly and convincingly as possible, at all levels. In reality, the confessional policy in the province was not coordinated with central policy. Rather we find the perpetuation of an ambiguity that served nobody except perhaps the Transylvanian Diets, which Vienna could not persuade of the necessity to pacify the province by granting tolerance, which in its turn implied knowledge and observance of the faith in every parish. David Prodan states that the regime proposed ambiguous measures that alternated severity with persuasion. Whatever the truth of this, the equivocal vision of the authorities on the Union was echoed by the poor involvement of parish clergy who were insufficiently theologically educated and not really willing to explain differences between Uniate and non-Uniate from a dogmatic point of view. This complex of circumstances, and the complicity of Transylvanian Diets uninterested in consolidating the Union, perpetuated the confusion and fuelled confessional conflict between Uniate and non-Uniate.

Despite all this, we should note the success – albeit limited – of the message that the Uniate elite propagated about identity in the 1750s. It managed to convince with its concise thesis about belonging to the Catholic Church while preserving fidelity to the Eastern rite. It was a discourse that broke the monopoly of tradition and disrupted the old equilibrium. Even if tradition loses its authority when made a matter of discussion, the resistance to the new, to change, was also obvious. After all, the confrontation between old (the 'ancient custom') and new (the Florentine Articles) escalated open conflict within the Romanian communities. In Transylvania, this was the proof that the modern confessional identity of Transylvanian Romanians was born, thus validating the beginnings of modern Romanian culture.

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