# BEYOND THE FRONT LINE. DILEMMAS AND RESPONSIVENESS DURING WORLD WAR I IN GREEK CATHOLIC EPARCHY OF TIRGU MUREŞ*

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*Abstract: The study aims to capture how people of the Greek-Catholic eparchy of Tirgu Mureş have felt the effects of the First World War. As the research is based on unpublished archival documents, on the Greek Catholic eparchy of Tirgu Mureş funds, most recorded states of mind are those of the ecclesiastical elite, of the vicars and deans. But even so, beyond these documents we can decipher interesting details about the situation, and the missionary clergy, of the policy choices of a fair world of more than half a century of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, aspects of daily life etc.*

*Keywords: Greek Catholic eparchy of Tirgu Mureş, vicars, Greek Catholic Metropolitan, faith, First World War.*

It has been said many times in the historiography of recent decades that after World War I world has never been the same, and this view is motivated not only by the crossed political cataclysm, but by how this dramatic event has left deep marks on the socially and mentally climate.

Beyond assuming this historiographical verdict, this study aims to capture how residents of the Greek Catholic eparchy of Tîrgu Mureş felt the effects of WWI. As the research is based on unpublished archival documents, from the fund of the Greek Catholic Eparchy of Tîrgu Mureş, most recorded moods are those of the vicars, archpriest, bishop of Blaj. But even so, at the level of the ecclesiastical elite beyond these documents we can decipher interesting details about the financial difficulties, about the survival of great identity role institutions (church and school), about the policy choices of a fair world for more than half century of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, faced after 1916 with a new political and military strategy of the United Kingdom of Romania etc.

Greek Catholic Eparchy of Tîrgu Mureş has seen a dramatic transformation, as a result of the establishment of the Hungarian episcopate Hajdúdorog on June 8, 1912 with the Bull of Pope Pius X, *Christifideles Graeci Ritus*[1] both by the passing some parishes to the newly created diocese and the transfer of the deanery from the urban environment to the rural area, from Tîrgu Mureş therefore, that was now part of the new Vicariate of the Székely, at Bandul

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1 The papal decision is presented and commented in Romanian translation in Romania, no. 145, year II, 3 / June 16, 1912, p 1-2. Transylvanian Greek Catholics have lost 83 parishes in this context.



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de Câmpie[2]. The drama of those years is not just a simple change of the ecclesiastical border but a refocusing communication between parishes and deanery office, for theoretical, the deanery parishes will have to take the way of Band at least twice a year at deanery synods. In addition to this drama of the Transylvanian Greek-Catholic church, the vicissitudes of the world war soon added.

If we hierarchically order the archival documents kept in Mureş County Department of National Archives Fund, we will find that few are those who have kept reflections of senior bishops. In compliance with the letters or the Pastorals formula, the incoming Blaj messages are general, aiming entirely the Greek Catholic community. Some of them are imbued with a meditative spirit, deeply religious, to understand the harsh reality that had to be surpassed. It is for example the case of the message sent by the vicar Alexandru Nicolescu at the beginning of the new year, in 1917: "Really! Time is a huge river that passes before our eyes like wildfire, and we hand one each to the great eternity. Every moment brings us closer to the target, breaking off a piece of our selves, our lives without us ever return it. St. Jerome had all the justice to remember how many times dictate, write, read, that every point of the letter was kidnapped as saying in his life, it shortened the moments of life"[3]. Therefore, it is an argument about the importance of time, in a context in which it seemed to bear the stigmata of human weakness.

In general war dramas can be captured in several ways. It is a trauma-sensitive world to war, as disclosed by the reflections of the ecclesiastical elite, and sometimes of the believers. A world of paradoxes, the shadow of war hangs over everything, including the sensitivity of school children sent to pick blackberries leaves in the forest for military needs[4], under the supervision of teachers or priests.

Metropolitan Attention is also directed to the family climate, given that war brings parallel destinies, male and female. That is a circular of the Bishop Victor Mihaly, from 10 May 1916 sent to the dean of Tîrgu Mureş, approves exemptions from the three proclamations in the church of the future marriages, "as long as they remain in the extraordinary current circumstances of war"[5]. Such requests come from the vicars from time to time throughout the war and every time they are solved positively, especially when joined by the moral connotation, "lest the appointed, not seeking the civil forum, to live in unrighteousness"[6].

In particular, the documentation taken out from Blaj metropolitan residence and arriving in the eparchy of Tîrgu Mureş confess this time the interest in the fate of orphans, especially at times of crisis that restore the charity role of the church. Thus the call of Blaj metropolitan to build an orphanage, released on February 25, 1915, intended primarily for the children of the priests and teachers, but also for the other orphans, is one uploaded by the dramatic moment of compassion in "the terrible whirlwind of slaughter, to lift up and glorify our white dove of mercy and Christian love"[7].

2 About the situation of the Archpresbyteriate after 1912 see Corina Teodor, „Destine clericale în spatele unei noi frontiere ecleziastice. Protopopiatul greco-catolic al Tîrgu Mureşului la începutul secolului XX", in *Anuarul Institutului de cercetări socio-umane „Gheorghe Şincai", Tîrgu Mureş,* 2013, in press.
3 Alexandru Nicolescu, „Un an nou", în *Unirea*, nr. 2, 13 ian. 1917, p. 1.
4 National Archives of Romania, Mures County, *Greco-Catholic Parish Fund Tirgu Mures*, file 1123, 127 f.
5 *Ibidem*, file 1159, f 11
6 *Ibidem*, file 1205, f. 1.
7 *Ibidem*, file 1151, f. 1.



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An official text, which calls for giving a Christian stake but which also raises the veil which seems to hide poverty and the borderless ordeal: "every penny, every piece of cloth or garment will be welcome, as you are asked in the name of the Spirit of our Divine Teacher, who said: "Whoever receives one of these babies in my name, receives me" (Mark, 9, 37)... From our deserted and lightless villages, thousands and thousands of innocent little hands stretch towards us into battle struggling into the black dirt that wants to devour"[8].

The archived files record the reaction of the deanery parishioners and of the vicars in this appeal. The list compiled by the Dean Dionisiu Decei has his wife Aurelia on the front list, who donated 60 wreaths, the dean submitting in 1915 for this purpose 365 crowns in total, gathered from his deanery, as well as many items of clothing and lingerie[9].

But it is a long project, completed only on August 25, 1919, as otherwise, given the economic and financial morass of the Transylvanian world, so in March 20, 1916 Decei sends a new call to the subordinated priests on this topic. It is one of the few where the clerical model is doubled by the feminist one, of the priestesses 'the priestesses roaming the house of the rich one in person, as well as of the poor in favor of the orphanage collection of money and fabrics (of any kind), to implement this mission to all ..."[10].

But as the project does not end too soon, the charitable facet of the ecclesiastical institution is reflected in other measures, decided by the authorities of Blaj meant just to fill the lack of an orphanage; the universe of the family still living in a naturally relational equilibrium had to provide a refuge to those who have known the bitterness of the times: thus the Greek Catholic Metropolitan's circular of 1917 required to disclose the names of those priests and teachers who could become tutors for war orphans and invalids and their families advisors[11].

Unfortunately for the Greek Catholic eparchy of Tîrgu Mureş this ambitious project of the orphanage in Blaj will reveal the attitude full of wrongdoing of the Roman priest from Sântana. If on May 1, 1916 was among the first vicars who transmitted a table with donors in the parish, in total 110 people that gathered 300 crowns, he himself being the first on the list of 19.34 crowns[12] at the end of the war he is the protagonist of a public scandal when the Dean and the Bishop discovers that he did not send any money or objects collected in Blaj. But the case is closed without cataclysms[13], especially since the collective dramas of the war are more acute than this unusual clerical negligence.

Dionisiu Deci, archpriest in those years, otherwise a rational mind, meditates on the murky situation, as the notes at the beginning of September 1916 show when only the trust in divine providence can give them spiritual support. Almost knelt by those confusing times he lives, he seems ready to abandon all the responsibility and take refuge in the family environment and the bandwidth of a simple priest, surrounded by uncertainty immediate future, "with this day I see my personal insurance and of my family and of my work, and of being more intense to my faithful comforter. I sit here at my place while loathing and force

[8] *Ibidem.*
[9] *Ibidem,* file 1151, f 3.
[10] *Ibidem,* file 1153, f. 4.
[11] *Ibidem,* file 1172, f. 2.
[12] *Ibidem,* file 1151, f. 8-9.
[13] It was sufficient that the Roman priest to exculpate himself, arguing that roads and mail uncertainty led him not to send the money and supplies collected at Blaj.



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will drag me to move out of place. We'll see then the upcoming events... The Holy God to extend His mercy and to put an end to all the sufferings caused by tomorrow uncertainties and the anguish that reigns over the souls, as I write this ... With moist eyes and full of doubt by the tomorrow uncertainty for me, my family and my people, I lock the cabinets and I trust myself, my people and my Good Almighty God"[14].

The war and proximity to the front line creates difficulties when it comes to convene the deanery synods, especially since Romania entered the war the atmosphere in the Transylvanian communities will be quite difficult. Trying to find a protector for the traditional council in autumn 1917, given that in Band he had to do with the close supervision of state authorities, but also to a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic community, Decei shall consult the priest of Sântana de Mureş, Ioan Roman, on the desirability of keeping there the upcoming meetings. Unfortunately, the answer is not at all favorable the priest's circumspection rooting in the same multi-confessional local realities: "Our village is full of militia and it seems that it burdens from their jam. To us the spirits are much more agitated, being close to the center that in a community like for example, Band. Then it is known that to us so far an itinerant Deanery Synod was not yet to be, and the world wonders great aplomb, why today? in so critical times? and why even in Sântana..."[15].

The atmosphere has no way to clear out, by here the indecision of the ecclesiastical authorities: although initially Decei had written on the back of this unsatisfactory response that he keeps the decision to convene the council of Sântana, a few days later, from the correspondence with the pastor of Sângeorgiu Mureş we deduce that he took into account another solution. But in this eparchy it seems to be somewhat a similar atmosphere, so full of suspicion, due to mixed community, "where people could easily make remote combination of our intention and cannot predict whether of the same reason we could not expose to some inconvenience…"[16]

However, these obstacles did not seem for the priest there, George Târnăvean, to be insurmountable obstacles, so he seems ready to support the dean in organizational details in early October 1917: "So the council to take place might be in due time so as not to entrust any individual person to prepare lunch, which otherwise would be kind of hard. Here we have hoods that we prepare and equip with those necessary and pleasure as desired. Who to submit that to determine the number of the day before the date of the meeting will be the last detail"[17].

The lack of documents attesting the content of the debates planned during the council in the autumn of 1917, can lead us to the assumption that it should no longer be kept at all.

But the canonical Archpriest's visits also suffered, as seen from his own confessions, especially after the changes related to Romania entering the war. In the fall of 1916, Decei writes to his superiors in Blaj that "because of the heavy days, caused to us then, especially by the poor invasion of the enemy, in August 1916"[18] he could not make the canonical visit to the subordinate parishes around.

14 National Archives of Romania, Mures County, *Fond cit*., file 1146, f.8.
15 *Ibidem*, file 1173, f. 4.
16 *Ibidem*, file 1175, f. 2-3.
17 *Ibidem*.
18 *Ibidem*, file 1176, f. 19.



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Decei's notes made during these years, on several occasions, reveal a realistic attitude about the war, of its effects on the collective sensitivity and the negative impact upon some unstable structures, such as schools. In the report on behalf of the denominational schools during the school year 1915/1916 he notes "for two years, World War that takes its huge share of our Motherland, and extraordinary states, in many respects, were a normal product of this war in all the social, economic and cultural directions, and in us"[19].

A year later, still in a report on the situation of religious education, Decei bitterly testifies that the collective atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety were unable to be such catalysts for the destiny of these schools. In addition, we note the fact that even in those years the idea of motherland identified in the collective mind with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy "during the school year 1916/1917 at our Greek Catholic confessional schools and this time in this district of the archpriest of Murăş took part in extraordinary circumstances and more strongly also because the enemy invasion of Romania has occurred just during those days when the lectures of 1916/1917 should start. A general uncertainty in the future the inhabitants' anxiety of our country and in the life insurance and personal wealth all were thinking in their own interests first, and very least at those public"[20]. This includes 8 denominational schools that have failed to work, out of 12, even though due to the war the classes started lately.

Interestingly, the image he wants to convey to his superiors is one of solidarity and vitality, not one full of pessimism: "energy for work, a more intensive interest and continually zeal had to justify all those left behind, as to handle those many powers went elsewhere. Love has worked on all sides and if the desired result did not show up and due to the religious education in this district, workers are not to be blamed, but the extremely critical states, as they often stopped us even in our better intentions..."[21].

There are few details that Dean Decei gives about the political atmosphere of those years, but even in these bits an oppressive political picture can shape, especially after Romania's exit from neutrality, in the summer of 1916. The dean describes on August 22nd, 1916, when he presented to the police chief of Band, Béla Kelemen, requesting confidentiality to the clergy of maximum caution in public life, regarding each "publicly utterance or making any active step". As such, he attempts to follow this recommendation, with great diplomacy, prudence associating with trust in divine power, "quietly and trust in unsearchable counsels of the Almighty God to be forever in our place here for all those to have come, where Divine Providence has placed us"[22].

Priests' reactions of the deanery before the war are clearly marked on how the front line is so close to the community that has been entrusted to them. In addition, the war drama of the human universe that is familiar to them, cause immediate reactions: so it happened for example when George Târnăvean, parish administrator in Ernei, asks Decei to exempt Mr. Ştefan Chiorean, a local cantor, from the military service, exposing a veritable procession of loads of family with elderly parents and five minor children in care. The archpriest's answer came on March 8, 1917, however, was not at all encouraging, because "proposals of

[19] *Ibidem,* file 1165, f.147.
[20] *Ibidem,* file 1185, f. 93.
[21] *Ibidem,* file 1165, f.147.
[22] *Ibidem,* file 1176, f.21 v.



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exempting cantors can only be done in the village where the common applicant operates are at least 1,000 souls of his confession... So any procedure I would follow in this case, it would be rejected"[23].

In such cases the decision is expected to come on Blaj branch of the Austro-Hungarian authorities, but sometimes the Bishop tries to find solutions to the local climate. This happens for instance when the priest of Niraşteu requested that the parish cantor, Augustine Andruş to be issued from military service the chances seem nule, while the Austro-Hungarian authorities resolved only 3 of 38 such applications of the archdiocese. Except for Vasile Suciu, the vicar of Blaj this is not the outcome; he writes to the Archpriest Decei in 1918, offering a solution "the priest of Niraşteu to instruct a child in a school according to rules and songs and using him as he could. We live in extraordinary times, when we seek to accommodate to difficult circumstances that weigh on all"[24].

The fate of education consumes much energy of the priests from the deanery and the most conscientious of them have signed, even without expecting any material remuneration in filling the odyssey of the teachers gone to the front. For example, of the periodic balance made by George Târnăvean, one of the ecclesial models of the deanery, we conclude that moving the front line made the atmosphere not to be favorable for any further replacement of the teacher in the village, for the school year 1916/1917 school was occupied by troops. In contrast, in the previous year to discharge this responsibility, from November to April, the study managed to win a total of 31 of the 40 enrolled students[25]. In the same aspect we find the priest Zosim Nuţiu of Tirimia Mare, who substituted the teacher early in the war, although he did not receive any remuneration for this[26].

War brings social imbalance evident in communities, which can priests endowed with the role of "spiritual parents" are aware to a greater extent than other people. Augustin Mera parish in Minişul de Cîmpie, confesses to the Archpriest on March 19, 1917, recognizing that it failed to constantly meet the catechesis of the youth "from the beginning of this terrible war, as the arms are all taken their countries into war, only women are at home and the youth is forced in their absence to perform menial things on Sundays and holidays"[27] . The palliative in which he firmly believes is the moral force of predication, so that "in a year it was 2-3 Sundays not to have preached"[28].

The same firmness of faith seems to be for the pastor of Niraşteu, Victor Tufan, in March 1917, the binder designed to unite the local community. His attitude, caught in front of the conflict with the Hungarian villager, triggers a defense of religious substratum of society: "today times are troubled, but not in matters of faith, yet until the faith does not waver, until then I hope the victory, when the faith shall be removed, then the Christian ideal will disappear, look bannermen elsewhere"[29]. The thought is actually synchronous with the recommendations made by the dean Decei on the Deanery Synod occasion in April 1918: "the harsh times in which we live and the call of the priest to be in his right place in these difficult

[23] *Ibidem,* file 1165, f.16 v.
[24] *Ibidem,* file 1198, f. 9.
[25] *Ibidem,* file 1176, f. 33.
[26] *Ibidem,* file 1176, f. 36.
[27] *Ibidem,* file 1185, f. 20.
[28] *Ibidem.*
[29] *Ibidem,* file 1190, f. 26.



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days, helping, advising, directing with skill and caution the believers to be strong in faith and bear sorrows..."[30].

The extension of the war worsens the material hardship that seems increasingly oppressive, especially because it's how the world can survive beyond the current needs of food and clothing. The voice of the priest Târnăvean on 7 May 1917 seems to synchronize with those of his peers, as expressed in the *Union* newspaper pages. Fact that he associates his own situation to the one found it from reading the newspapers is also an evidence on the role of cathartic reading "it was written in different times to our advertising columns of the *Union* body, about the many gaps and shortcomings that must fight especially now in these tough times our clergy, in the absence of added expensiveness no longer may fall into issue, we deserve it with all the right... At those written in no. 23 issue of the *Union* I could add that it would not be possible today to make you a coat or allow you some innocent amusement is completely exclusive. A total self-sacrifice, forced by the present circumstances is now almost universal in the priests"[31]. What more remains to be done in this situation? According to the priest Târnăvean - a collective claim to the superior ecclesiastical authorities to increase the wage directly proportional with the academic qualification as well as the material award aid due to price increases[32].

In conclusion, the archive documents, generally official documents, issued by the authorities of Blaj, by the dean or the priests of the deanery are a strong reaction to the way in which the World War disrupted the balance of the family daily life or the functioning of some important institutions, such as school and church. The texts often reflect the mood of the unpredictable collective and individual survival across everyday. In general, the priests and the Dean, this elite world of Transylvania, recorded these dramatic times, for expressions such as "troubled", "bitter war", "difficult circumstances", etc. are common. Beyond this painful reality, the solutions they need to find them to various problems still remain, both those related to the need of religious schools functioning, the care of orphans of war, filling ecclesiastical personnel sent to the front, of the air of normality that is still hanging upon the marriage vows. The reactions recorded in this county archive are similar to the mood of other geographies of identity. At the level of this ecclesiastical organization, the Greek Catholic eparchy of Tîrgu Mureş, all these details, fragments of a history of collective mentalities reflects how people of different age had the power to take their destiny, which is more than ever on quicksand.

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[30] *Ibidem*, file 1194, f.10.
[31] *Ibidem*, file 1178, f. 60.
[32] *Ibidem.*



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