

Book Review

**Francisca Băltăceanu and Monica Broșteanu. (2019).
Martori ai fericirii: șapte vieți de sfinți români.
Humanitas. 260 pp. (softcover). ISBN: 9789735064136**

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In the past a book such as *Martori ai fericirii: șapte vieți de sfinți români* would have been placed in area studies, nationalities studies, Romanian studies, Catholic Church history, or some intersection of these fields. In recent times, however, what could have previously been relegated to one of the above studies and reserved for specialists has shown its potential global impact. A further reason for reviewing a book like this at Sophia University Junior College Division include the traditional liberal arts teaching goals among which are: developing an informed appreciation of other cultures and developing an informed historical perspective (Andrade 142, citing Angelo and Cross). To this one might add the benefits of showcasing “diversity [which] enriches a nation by providing all citizens with rich opportunities to experience other cultures and thus to become more fulfilled as human beings” (Banks 1).

The book tells the story of seven men from a minority group within the Catholic Church who were imprisoned during the communist take-over of Romania after World War II. Surprisingly, it found a large audience in Romania in 2019, tapping into the large Orthodox readership in a country where Catholics as a whole number less than 5% of the population.¹ The book’s publication was timed to coincide with the visit of the head of the Catholic Church to Romania and with the ceremony held in June of that year in which Pope Francis made the seven men featured in the book officially “Blessed,” meaning that the Catholic Church recognized them as exemplary and opened the door to public prayer to them. The book did more than present the lives of seven bishops from the minority Greek Catholic Church in Romania, it challenged the narrative of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church that had spread under communism. According to the old narrative, the leaders of the Romanian Orthodox Church used the communist takeover of Romania in 1945 to regain the faithful lost in the year 1700 because of the union of many Transylvanian clergy with Rome. That communist-era

narrative also suggested that the union had been the result of political opportunism, that the Romanian Greek Catholic Church united to Rome had made few significant contributions to society, and that its relationship with the Romanian Orthodox Church had always been antagonistic. The book presented archival evidence to show that the cultural contribution of the Greek Catholic Church in Transylvania since 1700 had been purposefully overlooked in communist histories, that Orthodox and Greek Catholics had often collaborated successfully in the past three centuries and that the secret police and not the Orthodox leadership had engineered its ban in 1948. The book therefore filled a narrative gap and appealed to many in Romania seeking to verify the truth claims of communist history concerning minority religious groups.²

Part of the book's appeal was its clear organization and judicious use of archival evidence, all written in concise and simple language. Will benefit from reading this book today those who want a glimpse at how normal daily life can become a walk of suffering in the wake of war, conflict, and coercive government.

The Romanian title of *Martori ai fericirii: șapte vieți de sfinți români* might be adequately rendered in English as “Seven Lives of Romanian Greek Catholic Bishop Martyrs,” a translation which focuses on the book's subtitle. Translating the main title poses some problems in English. First, the English word *martyrs* comes from the same Ancient Greek word as the Romanian *martori*, but usually captures only one of the two meanings of its Romanian cognate. In English a martyr is a person who is killed for his or her beliefs, but in Romanian as in Greek, *martor* is also the technical term for a person who witnesses an event and testifies about it, particularly in a courtroom setting. The book's authors, Francisca Băltăceanu and Monica Broșteanu, exploit this latter definition when they show that the seven men who are the object of this book were not only victims of the persecution which they endured but also agents who spoke out and tried to put their beliefs into practice. Translating the word *fericirii* which in Romanian come from the Latin word *felix* meaning happy, would best be done by going back to the New Testament Greek word *makarioi* which Romanian translates as *fericiți* in the context of Jesus's teaching about true happiness.³ Băltăceanu and Broșteanu show that the seven men whose lives we read in this book had their share of life's sadness and pain but also of happiness and God's presence.

The book combines narratives from two contrasting sources. The first is a case file of 1,868 pages presented to the Vatican in view of an official declaration of sainthood in the Catholic Church. The second are secret police case files which documented the seven men in view of outlawing them. We learn from the book that in the year 1956 the secret

police case file already had 984 pages, and that the last of the bishops, Iuliu Hossu, continued to be surveilled until his death in 1970. In addition, the book reproduces the bibliography of ninety-one works used to produce the Vatican case file and lists the eleven archives that were consulted. The authors ask critically if the secret police case files can be trusted for accurate information and explain the meticulous process of triangulation used to obtain the same information from multiple informers (210). As a coercive technique, the secret police confronted informers with information obtained by others and led the potential informer to believe that the secret police already knew everything and that he or she would suffer dire consequences for not saying everything in turn (211).

The authors, Francisca Băltăceanu and Monica Broșteanu, are professors at the University of Bucharest in Romania where they teach courses on the Bible and on biblical languages. They have previously published a detailed monograph on the life of Vladimir Ghika, a Romanian prince and Catholic priest of the diocese of Paris who traveled the world from Argentina to Japan⁴ engaging in charitable works.⁵ Refusing to flee persecution in Romania, he was arrested in 1952, died in prison two years later, and was officially recognized by the Catholic Church as a martyr in 2013. The current book focuses on seven bishops, some of whom had worked with Ghika in Bucharest and who were arrested in 1948.

The book's genre is seemingly saints' lives, but it also resembles the "lives" genre that was common in Greco-Roman Antiquity and inspired later works grouping biographies of several people around a similar theme: of these works Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* have come down to us and many more survive today in title or in fragments. During the Renaissance, Giorgio Vasari published *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* which continues to be printed today and is considered a valuable source of information on the Renaissance in Italy perhaps precisely because the "lives" genre allows for a narrow focus taken from multiple angles on a given subject or time period. In the case of Băltăceanu and Broșteanu's book, the numerous and poignant citations from case files allow the bishops to tell their story and open a window into post-war Romanian life. Perhaps for this reason the book was a bestseller at Romania's Bookfest 2019, a feat that would not have been possible if the readership was limited only to those who identify as Romanian Greek Catholic today.

In the first two chapters the authors detail the origins of the Greek Catholic Church and how the Communist Party in Romania decided to target it. The area currently called

Romania had seen over the course of the years the advent of several powerful empires: the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, and the Russian Tsarist Empire. The beginnings of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church are connected to the Romanians living within the borders of the Habsburg empire in an area known as Transylvania. In the seventeenth century Vienna saw the union of Romanians to Rome as a chance to increase the Catholic population in the empire. Romanians were generally Orthodox Christians, but for the Romanians in Transylvania, becoming Greek Catholic, that is, keeping the Eastern way of celebrating the liturgy and their internal canon laws but acknowledging the four points decided at the Council of Florence namely: primacy of the Pope, the addition of the *Filioque* to the Creed, the validity of the use of unleavened bread for the Eucharistic celebration, and the doctrine of purgatory, was a chance to leave behind medieval serfdom, enter into political rights, and reaffirm an ancient connection that had been severed at the schism of 1054 (19). Over the years Romanians in Transylvania continued to struggle for their rights, and the union with Rome was at times contested both from within and from without. Nevertheless, on several important historical occasions including the great political union of 1918 which joined Transylvania to Romania, Greek Catholic Romanians worked side by side with Orthodox Romanians. On that occasion Bishop Iuliu Hossu himself proclaimed the declaration whereby Transylvania would become a part of the Romanian Kingdom and delivered the text to King Ferdinand. The Romanian education system in Transylvania was also largely set up by Greek Catholics who were the engine of the Romanian cultural movement called the Transylvanian School.

The authors go on to show how the Romanian state organized the persecution of the Greek Catholic Church following the Soviet occupation at the end of World War II. The model used was copied on the actions taken by Stalin to liquidate the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, “a liquidation through unification” (35). What would later be called the Romanian Communist Party argued that religious groups should not be influenced by powers outside national borders. Several state ministries were mobilized to persuade the Greek Catholic faithful to come over to the Orthodox Church. Leaders of the Orthodox Church at the instigation of the Ministry of Cults made open calls for the Greek Catholics to come back to Orthodoxy. Greek Catholic priests were persuaded or coerced to take part in a sham synod claiming to represent the Greek Catholics coming over to Orthodoxy. The second chapter ends with the arrest of the Greek Catholic bishops on October 28 and 29, 1948, as a preventive measure so that they not interfere with the crossing over to Orthodoxy of the Greek Catholic population.

The authors then present brief portraits of the seven bishops in ordinary life: Vasile Aftenie, Valeriu Traian Frențiu, Ioan Suciu, Tit Liviu Chinezu, Ioan Bălan, Alexandru Rusu, and Iuliu Hossu. The portraits lead up to their arrest in 1948 and are given in the order of their date of martyrdom.

Vasile Aftenie

Vasile Aftenie was born in 1899 to a poor peasant family in Transylvania. His father migrated to the United States in order to save enough money to buy a small piece of land in Transylvania. The young Vasile learned the value of hard work in such a family and his talent earned him a scholarship to do seminary studies in Rome. He opted to be ordained a celibate priest and returned to Blaj. He was eventually named to Bucharest where there was need for a representative of the Greek Catholic Church in the nation's capital. Not always well understood by the older generation of Transylvanian clerics, he actively engaged in pastoral work at all levels of society and in the delicate diplomatic tasks assigned to him. Ascending to the rank of bishop and known for his humor and prudence, he spent the last years of his life tailed by agents of the state secret police, the *Securitate*. He was the first Greek Catholic bishop to give his life for the faith.

Valeriu Traian Frențiu

Valeriu Traian Frențiu was the eldest of the seven bishop martyrs. The son of a married Greek Catholic priest, Frențiu himself entered the seminary and studied in Budapest and in Vienna where he was chaplain to ex-patriates and to servicemen. He was an honest and able administrator who started numerous schools, parishes, and even created public utilities to meet the physical needs of the local population he had the charge of. He had a particular care for the spiritual training of priests and the laity.

Ioan Suciu

Ioan Suciu was one of ten children born to a married Greek Catholic priest. Gifted for writing, he was sent to study in Rome and was ordained a celibate priest there. A friend of young people, ethnic minorities, and even animals, he creatively served those around him in both spiritual and material ways and at the young age of thirty-two was already consecrated bishop. He held the position of auxiliary bishop and then vicar general for the diocese of Oradea, and as such he protested the injustices suffered by the Romanian population following the 1940 accords. In 1947 when the government refused the nomination of Alexandru Rusu to the Metropolitan See of Blaj, Ioan Suciu

was named apostolic administrator there and put his oratorical and literary skill toward resisting the persecution of the Greek Catholic Church.

Tit Liviu Chinezu

Tit Liviu Chinezu, the only one of the seven bishops to be consecrated clandestinely, had in a climate of growing ecclesial ambitions made a vow never to become bishop even though the Vatican nuncio had proposed his name. He finally accepted when the persecutions began. He came from an impoverished background but learned German, French, and other languages well. Upon returning from seminary studies in Rome and being ordained a priest, he taught philosophy in several schools and became director of the seminary. He could calmly and clearly debate with students and contemporaries in the heated philosophical debates of the times. Nevertheless, his clear thinking was joined with a listening heart that endeared him to many. He was active in organizing innovative and adapted programs both for the clergy and the laity.

Ioan Bălan

Ioan Bălan had a rigorous training in biblical studies and canon law. After studying in Budapest and Vienna, he served in numerous roles often simultaneously: member of the steering committee for the newspaper *Unirea [The Union]*, secretary of the Transylvanian Association for Literature and Culture, political involvement in Iuliu Maniu's National Party, pastor of the first Greek Catholic church in Bucharest, and instructor at the seminary. He was later made rector of the seminary in Blaj and spent four years as deputy in the Romanian Parliament for the National Party before spending six years in Rome to work in the Commission for the Codification of Oriental Canon Law. In 1936 he was consecrated bishop and given the charge of Lugoj, a poor eparchy which he worked to build up. All through his active life he published books on religion intended for a wide audience as well as critical and scholarly editions of biblical texts. When the winds of persecution began to blow, he prepared the faithful for the coming trials by intensifying prayers and adorations at the cathedral church in Lugoj.

Alexandru Rusu

Similar to bishops Frențiu, Suciu, and Hossu, bishop Rusu was born into the family of a married Greek Catholic priest. His doctoral dissertation at the University of Sciences of Hungary where he completed his seminary studies focused on the marriage of priests in the Romanian Greek Catholic Church. He served in government

administration in 1919 and 1920 and was a deputy in Parliament before withdrawing his campaign in 1920 due to disappointment at abuses in political campaigning. In the seminary in Blaj, he held the chair of dogmatics and also directed several important publications for the general public. He was consecrated bishop and entrusted with the delicate task of heading a newly created eparchy, Maramureș, which resulted from Romania's territorial expansions following World War I. He applied his zeal and talent to the task, but successive governments looked upon him with suspicion for his outspokenness.

Iuliu Hossu

Iuliu Hossu was nicknamed the “bishop of canonical visits” because of the number of parishes he visited as bishop of Cluj-Gherla. As bishop of Gherla he helped in the transition of the region from Austro-Hungarian rule to union with Romania in 1918. He read the declaration of union from the tribune of the National Assembly and as already noted was an official delegate to bring the document to the king. He maintained cordial relations with the Orthodox Church and refused to flee when his city was occupied during World War II. On the contrary he opposed the fascist rule that had come over the region and was honored for his work on behalf of the Jews.

Following these seven portraits, the chapter called “Their Common Calvary” first details the various actions taken by the bishops as a group to oppose the outlawing of the Greek Catholic Church. It then describes how the bishops and some priests were taken to Orthodox monasteries, put under house arrest, and how the government made it look as if the Orthodox Church was responsible for this persecution. The bishops' daily life in house arrest is described as is also the clandestine episcopal consecration of Tit Liviu Chinezu which the Vatican nuncio to Romania referred to as an event “perhaps unique in the history of the Church” (167). At this time three of the bishops were brought to the Ministry of the Interior where they were interrogated under torture for several months resulting in the death of Vasile Aftenie. The remaining bishops were then brought to the infamous extermination prison of Sighet where after some time Bishops Frențiu, Suci, and Chinezu ended their days. The bishops lived through their sufferings at Sighet by offering these to Jesus Christ whose sufferings joined their own and found consolation and comfort in their common faith and their presence to God and to each. Various testimonies show that they were offered freedom in exchange for joining the Orthodox Church, but they repeatedly refused. The chapter ends with the release from the Sighet

extermination prison of Bishops Bălan, Rusu and Hossu in January 1955.

The final chapter, “Free?,” details the lives of the three remaining bishops after their release. First, they were given some medical treatment and eventually brought to a hospital where they needed to receive care for several months. There was a relative thaw in the terror of the regime after the death of Stalin and the government was offering to send them away quietly, but the bishops insisted that the 1948 ban on the Greek Catholic Church be lifted. They were first sent to Curtea de Argeş Monastery where they were kept under surveillance. The government feared an increase in petitions and activism by Greek Catholics due to the thaw and moved the bishops again and finally separated the three bishops. Ioan Bălan died of health complications; he had been forbidden to leave his house arrest to get medical treatment. Alexandru Rusu was sentenced to life in prison for high treason based on the charge of trying to pass copies of his demands to a foreign ambassador. Bishop Hossu made yearly requests to the government which were left unanswered. In 1969 a Vatican envoy came to Romania and informed him of the Pope’s intention to make him a Cardinal, but Bishop Hossu chose to remain in Romania with the persecuted Church. He died in 1970 after being made a Cardinal *in pectore*.

The purpose of this book review has been to introduce in English a book about the Romanian Greek Catholic Church whose access is otherwise difficult until an English translation be made available. The book challenged a dominant Soviet-era narrative about this minority religious group and painted vivid portraits of lives changing during the communist take-over. Though tied to past events and a particular culture that may differ from that of many readers, this book’s relevance seems to grow as threats of war increase in Eastern Europe precisely over issues of narratives and national identities.

Notes

¹ Cf. The World Factbook. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/romania/>.

² While biases against the Romanian Greek Catholic Church date prior to the communist take-over as Roland Clark has eloquently and elaborately argued in his monograph on the Orthodox Church in the 1920s (Clark 87-99), these individual or partisan views were augmented and turned into state policy under the communist government. These biases include charges of being an institution controlled by foreign powers and not being genuinely Romanian.

³ The happiness of those who have no pain or sadness because they are with God is

attributed in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to unlikely groups of people: the poor, the humble, the suffering, and those who make peace. By calling these groups *makarioi* or blessed, Jesus suggests that the happiness of being in heaven with God already belongs to them. In Japanese a commonly used translation for Matthew chapter 5 verse 1 and Luke chapter 6 verse 20 gives the expression *saiwai de aru* for these people.

⁴ Vladimir Ghika made two trips to Japan in 1933 and in 1936-37. His first trip was to accompany the Carmelite nuns who were going to start the Carmelite monastery of Tokyo (Lupas 81). On his second trip he visited several care facilities including the Koyama Hospital for patients with Hansen's disease (Băltăceanu et al. 253).

⁵ Băltăceanu, Francisca, et al. 2013.

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