

“God’s Army” Spiritual Movement

Introductory facts about revivalists movements in Romania

In most of the communist countries the activity of revivalist movements was forbidden, many of their older members being imprisoned. After the collapse of the communist regimes these movements have become a common experience for the historical churches in the post-communist period in Romania. Their emergence constitutes a challenge for the churches that was unknown for decades. The activity of these movements led to new conflicts on the one hand between groups of laymen with greater religious expectations and religious experts, and between religious experts who accept to lead these lay-initiatives and the rest of the clergy on the other. Such reform movements could be initiated by certain groups of the clergy as well, their success being strengthened if certain lay groups join them.

Methodological remarks

The following research results consist of investigating the existent literature about God’s Army combined with qualitative analysis, namely 5 explorative interviews and observation where I have managed to get a general insight into and about the associations’ activity. The interviewed persons are members of the movement (the priest who coordinates the activity at the regional level, namely in Cluj Region, 3 laymen – two males and one female) and one person from the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church at diocesan level. The qualitative research is not finished.

The research covers only the parish “St. Elijah” from Cluj-Napoca, where the local members of God’s Army gather.

Short history of “God’s Army” movement

Establishment year: in 1923 the spiritual movement God’s Army was founded. The foundation of this movement is closely tied with the figure of P. Iosif Trifa and his publication of “The calling to a new life in Christ”, published in the first number of the weekly newspaper Light of Villages from 1923. The organization gathers in only few years a large number of members, actively engaged in fighting abusive language and alcoholism (the main fighting areas of the Movement).¹ In 1938, according to contemporary voices, the organisation has gathered 300 000 members inside the country and also abroad.²

Founder: Fr. Iosif Trifa was an orthodox priest, born on 3 March 1888 in the Region of Turda. He was an active publisher in the press of the time, namely before and after the First World War. In his articles he was preoccupied about the sufferings of his fellow countrymen.³ In 1922 publishes his first meditation book “On the way to Canaan”, which can be characterized as a harsh criticism on bolschewism. In 1922 he was appointed as chief editor of the weekly newspaper “Light of Villages” and from the beginning he clearly sets the goals of this periodical: “The advices and guidances of this periodical will fit with our daily needs in order to strengthen the good habits, in order to help in fulfilling the civic duties and needs, in youth guidance, for peace maintenance and good understanding among all sons of the Romanian nation.”⁴

By 1938 Iosif Trifa publishes almost 40 books with religious content (originals or remaking), printed in over one million copies. He also printed over 300 000 copies of calendar books and thousands of orthodox Bibles, dedicated especially to villagers. The aim was to educate this category of population, so that they will learn to read. The “Light of Villages” and from 1930 its supplement “God’s Army” will be printed in a large number of copies, so that around 1935 the number of copies summarized 15 millions sold copies.⁵

¹ P. Iosif Trifa, *Ce este Oastea Domnului?* [What is God’s Army?], 6th Revisited Edition, Sibiu 1996, 9.

² <http://www.oasteadomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=istoric>

³ <http://www.oasteadomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=priti&g=on&sid=5b958cc77456a08355ca8d99ee3f3ab4>

⁴ <http://www.oasteadomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=priti&g=on&sid=5b958cc77456a08355ca8d99ee3f3ab4>

⁵ <http://www.oasteadomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=priti&g=on&sid=5b958cc77456a08355ca8d99ee3f3ab4>

The amplitude of the “Trifa phenomenon” (as it was called at the time) stired up the envy and hatred of his fellow clergy colleagues, and their intrigues will lead to Trifa’s degradation from priesthood in 1935. The publication of the weekly newspaper “Light of Villages” and its supplement God’s Army will be also forbidden.

On 12th February 1938 after a heart surgery (the eighth) Fr. Trifa passes.

Well reknowned collaborators: the poet Traian Dorz and the layman Ioan Marini

Cultural, social and historical context for the appearance of “God’s Army”

I. After the First World War:

- The social-economic and moral-spiritual context offered a picture “which didn’t rise to the heroism of this nation and to the destiny which God arranged it”⁶
- A new phenomenon was more and more present, namely the emergergence of new forms of belief, which were considered to be inappropriate for the Romanian religious landscape.

Grounds for the appearance of this movement:

- Around New Years Eve of 1923, Fr. Trifa took a deep insight into the life which he led up to that point, especially his way of living the ministry of priesthood. Profoundly saddened and unsatisfied, he came to the conclusion that his life and that of his fellow countryman wasn’t characterized by prayer and worship, but more of pagan practices. “People were living in distractions and scandalous disorders”.⁷
- Fr. Trifa wanted a spiritual regeneration for the entire Romania. He wroted: “Romania was under humiliating slavery. Our habits are altered... Through poisoned storms...our faith got also poisoned, we lost the love and our hearts filled with the sins’ poison.

⁶ <http://www.oasteadomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=istoric#1>

⁷ <http://www.roboam.com/identitate/oasteadomnului.htm>

This poison is the cause why churches emptied with people and why souls are faithless.”⁸

- Trifa describes the movement “as a soul renewal movement, as an attempt to reach the deepest places of the human heart...”⁹

The solution proposed by Fr. Trifa:

Fr. Trifa proposed two elements as being a sine qua non condition in order to revival the human heart and to have an active belief.

- **Inner penitence**
- **Fear of God and obedience to his word.**

II. During communism

The establishment of the communist regime in 1947 means also a turning point in the way in which God’s Army is seen by the political authorities, so this Movement is seen more as an enemy and a “dangerous enemy which could break the building of socialism and communism”.¹⁰ According to its functioning statute, the movement doesn’t engage in any militant and combative type of politics. But this doesn’t mean that it won’t criticise the political evil from the side of Christ’s Gospel. In 1948 the movement is put out of the legal functioning frame. Their mentors and members have continued to be active underground, according to the evangelical principle: “We have to listen more to God than to people” (Acts of Apostels 5, 29).¹¹

III. After the 1989 Revolution

The changes which took place in Romania after the fall of communism had a positive impact on God’s Army, which was reinstated in its legal rights. The Holy Synode of the Romanian Orthodox Church issued a document in its first number of the periodical “Proclaimer of the Orthodoxy” from 1990 by which God’s Army should be included as an active member in the

⁸ <http://www.roboam.com/identitate/oastedomnului.htm>

⁹ P. Trifa, Ce este Oastea Domnului?, 10.

¹⁰ <http://www.oastedomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=istoric#2>

¹¹ <http://www.oastedomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=istoric#2>

Orthodox Church missionary activity. Other rectifying acts towards God's Army were taken by the authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church: in its session from 28 September 1990 the Holy Synode acknowledges God's Army as a living and faithful limb of the Orthodox Church, and the movement's functioning statutes were approved. In the same session Fr. Trifa's prestige, memory and rights were reinstated and rehabilitated.¹² The grounds for his rehabilitation relied on the fact that he apologized to his bishop Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan and on the ground that Trifa's insubordination wasn't of doctrinal but more of disciplinary nature.

Doctrine, ritual, experience and organization of the Movement

1) Doctrine or Message?

God's Army as a movement inside the Romanian Orthodox Church embraces all doctrinal teachings of the above mentioned Church. In the case of this movement we can also speak about a special radical message that this organization is trying to offer to its members, as Trifa also acted at his time. Trifa's goal was to emphasize "the necessity of living according to the Gospel in order to witness a real spiritual renewal in our Lord Jesus Christ, on the growth and strengthening of the spiritual gifts received from God, on the fermentation of life with the Gospel's paste."¹³

The Movement's message is also nowadays strictly focused on its founder way of thinking. *The rebirth to a new life* plays a central role in all Trifa's books. In order to get a proper understanding about this teaching we have to link it to Trifa's mission and that of God's Army.¹⁴

As Trifa stated "the scope of God's Army is to bring the sinners back to the spring of moral reform and power, namely our Saviour Jesus Christ."¹⁵ The Movement is seen as a spiritual

¹² <http://www.oasteadomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=istoric#2>

¹³ Trifa, *Ce este Oastea Domnului?*, 10.

¹⁴ Pr. Dr. Vasile Mihoc, *Nașterea de sus și trezirea la ea prin Oastea Domnului* [The rebirth from above and the awakening through God's Army], Sibiu 2007, 51.

¹⁵ Trifa, 10.

army, which leads a “though war against sins and moral corruption. Also God’s Army wants to mobilize souls against sins, against dark and Evil. It fights for God’s Reign and for the redemption of souls.”¹⁶

Trifa’s goal isn’t to persuade somebody about the integrity of the baptism gift, but moreover to renew the spiritual life of those who called themselves as “orthodox”.¹⁷ Also he states that he doesn’t emphasize a new teaching, but the emphasis is set on an aspect of the orthodox teaching, which is practically neglected by the orthodox believers, namely living and showing the effects of the received baptism.¹⁸ The Movement emphasizes the need for searching and finding the real Christ and its grace and also showing this gift by living according to Christ’s commendments.

2) Ritual

Regarding the ritual dimension God’s Army has some special features. Also in the present this movement kept a clear direction regarding its ritual. There are four major ritualic features at the movement’s gatherings (assemblies):

- Free speech (sermon) with the call to penitence
- Declamation of spiritual poetry
- Intonation of religious songs with instrumental accompaniment
- Free and spontaneous prayer

In the community from the parish of “St. Elijah” in Cluj-Napoca the spiritual programm is lead by two members’ of the Brotherly (Fraternal) Council. They prepare the prayers, the sermon and the songs, but as the coordinator of this community, Fr. Claudiu Melean stated “this wasn’t the case in past”.

All this ritualic features aren’t allowed in the Orthodox Church. The communities’ gatherings last for two hours, according to the number of members who actively take part in the religious services. The basis of the religious services lies in the liturgical features typical for the Orthodox Church namely the Holy Mass, verspers and other specific byzantine liturgical

¹⁶ Trifa, 12.

¹⁷ Mihoc, Nașterea de Sus, 51.

¹⁸ Trifa, 10.

features. All those present spread a profound joy and at the same time a real and not dissimulated fear of God. These gatherings are attended by a large number of young people. After doing a regular observation of the gatherings of the community from Cluj-Napoca I could notice that more than 100 young people are regularly attending these assemblies.

In public gatherings and private life for the members of the Movement the Bible plays a central role. Trifa believed that “the Holy Scripture isn’t a book among other books. It is God’s book. It is a book through which God talks with us about his plans. The Bible is a book in which God reveals his plans”.

3) Dimension of experience

As previously mentioned the members are living their faith according to the liturgical features of the Orthodox Church, but also with special features for the Movement.

There is also a daily conduct for a soldier of God’s Army. According to Fr. Melean first they “try to abandon all the sinful passions” e.g.: alcohol, smoking, concupiscence, parties.

This conduct is sustained through constant prayer, singing. The emphasis is set on the morality of the members.

Sometimes public testimonies about the personal conversion are made. In the centre of these testimonies lies the “meeting with Christ-the Saviour”, this according to Fr. Melean isn’t seen “as something beyond normal, but more as an awakening of the conscience regarding his/her’s own sins and understanding God’s will”.

The members of the community are encouraged to go to confession, to attend the Holy Mass every day, but there are no clear indicators to measure the frequency of the attended services, and this also on grounds of dispersion of the communities’ members in other parishes. Things seem to be clearer about the young ones, because they are coordinated by P. Pușcaș, the priest in charge with the spiritual matters at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Cluj-Napoca.

Advices for the soldiers of God’s Army how to coordinate their spiritual life are given by one of the charismatic leaders of the Movement namely Traian Dorz. In his book “Dreptarul învățăturii sănătoase” [Directory on the healthy doctrine] he emphasizes the need for a soldier to go to confession at least four times in a year.

4) Organization

God's Army Movement functions according to clear regulations stated first in 1937 and then in 1990.

Anyone who is a believer of the Orthodox Church, male, female, consecrated person and has passed the age of 15 can become a member of God's Army.¹⁹

Supervision from the side of the Romanian Orthodox Church: the movement is organized in every Metropoly of the Romanian Orthodox Church and it functions under the observation of the local bishop who appoints a priest in order to coordinate the movements' activities. Fr. Vasile Mihoc and his Excellency Bishop Visarion Rașinăreanu are empowered from the side of the Holy Synode to review God's Army publications, edited in Sibiu at the Movements' own publishing house.

The Movement is lead at local level by a Brotherly Council build up by two types of circles: a restricted circle formed by 7 members, who have experience inside the Movement and a large circle formed by all male members of the community. The Council meets everytime when urgent problems have to be discussed. There is no one who plays the role of a "local spokesman", because as Fr. Melean said "everyone is involved in the development of the community".

At least 20 members of the movement belonging to a parish constitute a circle, and if the number is not reached members from neighbour parishes are forming the circle.

Regarding other activities of the Movement, besides those with a spiritual character, we can determine the following ones,

- Categorical pastoral in form of catechization for children and youth (e.g. in the community from Cluj-Napoca there is a group for children between the age of 7-12); missionary activities at the Gherla Penitentiary in Cluj Region.
- Cultural activities in form of discussion and debates where priests or well reknowned members of the Movement are invited to talk about different current topics, e.g.: about friendship, compromise, the mission of the youth, freedom, abandoning sins.

¹⁹ http://www.roboam.com/Ortodoxie/oastea_domnului_3.htm ART. 10.

There are no guests from “outside” the Movement, because as Fr. Melean stated “we don’t want to have discussion at a higher level”.

- Active fight against the liberalization of abortion, protection mother, child and family.
- Philanthropic activities (helping the poor, disabled and disadvantages ones), mission among convicted persons
- Local and national meetings (once in a year).

Regarding the actual number of members there are no statistics. This lack of important information was explained by the fact that the members “regard this sort of statistics as something negative tied with the communist experience, when the Secret Police collected informations about the members”. Fr. Melean stated, “That we don’t see it as an urgency to have this statistics, because the members know one another, and besides that we are in contact by telephone with our members”.

Attitude of the Romanian Orthodox Church regarding God’s Army

As previously mentioned the Romanian Orthodox Church acknowledges the role of the God’s Army as an important part of its structure. But searching the official website of the Romanian Orthodox Church and similar websites of the Metropolies of this Church there is no mention about God’s Army and its role in the Orthodox Church. In the local papers of the Church the Movement is mentioned only at a superficial level

Interviewing the community leader from Cluj-Napoca, Fr. Melean, three types of attitudes regarding the Movement emerged:

- Acceptance from the hierarchy of the local Church and acceptance at the parish level
- Neutral attitude towards the Movement and its activities
- Conflictual attitude and in some cases a latent conflict. Interviewing a representative figure from the Orthodox Metropoly of Vad, Cluj and Feleac the following statement was issued: “Many priestes are happy of not having in their parish members of God’s Army”. Conflictual situations are solved through the help of the appointed person in charge with the Movement at the local level. This negative attitude can have two possible explanations: on one hand the Movement was regarded during communism as a sect, a connotation given also from the Hierachy of the Orthodox Church. On the other hand the members of the community aren’t so much involved in their own

parishes. The way in which some of the God's Army soldiers express their spirituality causes for priests and bishops to have doubts and restraints about the Movement.

Literature

Pr. Iosif Trifa, Ce este Oastea Domnului? [What is God's Army?], 6th Revisited Edition, S

Pr. Dr. Vasile Mihoc, Nașterea de sus și trezirea la ea prin Oastea Domnului [The rebirth from above and the awakening through God's Army], Sibiu 2007

Websites

<http://www.oastedomnului.ro/prezentare/index.php?v=istoric> ibiu 1996

<http://www.roboam.com/identitate/oastedomnului.htm>