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**MISSIONARY PRIESTS IN TRANSNISTRIA:
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PASTORAL ACTIVITY
(1941-1944)**

- Abstract -

The article presents the reconstruction of pastoral activity by the Orthodox priest during the years of the Second World War who was sent by the Romanian Orthodox Mission to a remote village in the south of Ukraine with the purpose of resurrecting Christian life. A number of exclusive sources belonging to the pre-occupational period, mainly of epistolary character, allow reconstituting the social history of the priest's life and activity during the year from 1942 to 1943 of his service to God and people. We see the task of the article as an attempt to investigate the correlation of human feelings, personal feelings of the Holy Father and, correspondingly, his self-assessment of the role of the church and his own assignment. Conclusions made in the article allow perceiving the past polar, controversial, however, substantially comprehensive, humanistic and traditional Christian period.

Keywords: *Second World War, Transnistria, the Romanian Orthodox Church*

The history of the separate Orthodox communities or parishes, pastoral activities of the Orthodox missionaries during the years of the Second World War, particularly in the period of occupation, are rather scarcely presented in scientific and historical literature in Ukraine. Longstanding experience of scientific work of

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Church-religious issues allows us to state that this situation was caused, first of all, by the absence of investigation methods and wide base of sources in the recent past, particularly, systematized monthly reports periodically sent from localities, from provincial remote villages to the managing bodies of Church and administrative authorities or institutions. By the way, materials and documents separated by archive specialists even for the post-war period, particularly for 60-s of the 20th century, when the process of funds formation was under way are not sufficient, and at the same time the funds of Romanian origin from the period of 1941-1944 were hushed up. Proceeding from the above, archaeological materials are not an exclusion, predominantly they are presented by documents from the funds of activity of Romanian Orthodox mission in the Romanian language (hereinafter – ROM or Mission) in Transnistria kept in the archives of those regions of Ukraine whose territories were completely or partially included in the structure of German or Romanian occupation zones and, correspondingly, stayed in the sphere of their interests during the years of the Second World War. We refer in the first place to the funds of state archives of Odessa, Mykolaiv and Vinnitsa regions SAVR, SAMR, SAOR¹.

Therefore, we establish a scientific goal to attempt to reconstruct the activity of one of several dozens of local south Ukrainian foci of Orthodox religion – Domanivskyy² rural dean's district. Generally, within 13 powiats in Romanian zone of occupation called Transnistria, 63³ such administrative religious structures were created. The use of documents in the Romanian language, which have been kept in special restricted access collections of the above-mentioned archives and their publication by us for the first time, is not our first priority task, though it is without doubt a significant advantage of this article. So, we shall review the process of re-Christianization and Renaissance of Orthodox belief in the occupied territories in-between the Bug and the Dniester rivers by segments, through pastoral activities of spiritual fathers-missionaries, leaders of district deanery and based on the example of spiritual-religious life of one district religious community and its members.

¹ State Archive of Vinnitsa Region (SAVR), f. r.-2966, reg. 1-2, (1941-1944); f. r.-2888, reg. 1 (1941-1943); f. r.-2988, reg. 1 (1941-1943); State Archive of Mykolaiv Region (SAMR), f. r.-2704, reg. 1 (1942-1944); State Archive of Odessa Region (SAOR), f. r-2270, reg. 1 (1942-1943).

² Now Domanivskyy district according to administrative-territorial subordination belongs to Mykolaiv region of Ukraine.

³ M.I. Myhailutsa, *Religious policy of Romanian occupational authorities in southern Bessarabia and Transnistria (end of 1930-1944)*, Odessa, "Optimum", 2006, p. 68.

At the end of 1942, in Goltyansky⁴ powiat, which consisted of 5 districts, the deanery of the same name was organized by Romanian administration. Within the borders of the powiat populated mainly by Ukrainians there were 32 churches according to the data of the Romanian administration. The state of the majority of these buildings of cultic purpose was quite good. However, only four priests-newcomers and six local priests represented the Orthodox clergy in the whole region. Judging from the report of Yevtihiy Rudny, sub-archpriest of Goltyansky powiat, there was a lack of priests in the region⁵. Thus, in Domanivsky region there were only 3 priests over 80 years each, who executed pastoral guidance over 5930 families. However, thanks to the responsibility and diligence of the sub-archpriests of Domanivsky district, Golthansky powiat – father Mikhail Melnik and then father B.⁶ appointed to this position from April 5, 1943, we can roughly restore the past. On the one side, to define directions, essence and methods of the revival of Christian life under Romanian occupation, and on the other side – to give the characteristic of the processes of Orthodox confession revival in this region specifically by words of direct participants of the events who made subjective accents on the processes that were going on without excessive missionary pathos.

Father Mikhail Melnik was the principal author of manuscripts-reports found, systematized and analyzed by us, which were sent during almost a year (chronological limits – from July 1, 1942 to April 5, 1943) to the higher church-administrative instance. He was sent by Chisinau archbishop Yefrem to the south of Ukraine occupied by the Romanians and appointed by the Romanian Orthodox mission in Transnistria that was situated in Odessa to the position of sub-archpriest of Domanivsky district from July 1, 1942.

“At the beginning, – as the parish priest says, – I went with assuredness and pride on this land washed by the waters of the Bug, being sure that I can be useful in the work entrusted to me as a priest and administrator of church matters in the whole district with the residence in Domanivka situated at the distance of 52 km from Golta”⁷. Though soon living among alien people, the priest felt nostalgia for his native land. He did not find even a trace of church organization because he was the first missionary to bring order to the spiritual life in the territory of the district. Having experienced personally various attitudes – from “You are welcome!” on the

⁴ The territory of Goltyansky powiat in the structure of western districts of Mykolaivska region within its pre-war administrative borders stayed under Romanian occupational administration during the period of 1941-1944 and was called “Governorship Transnistria”.

⁵ *Transnistria Creștină*. Revista Misiunea Ortodoxă Română în Transnistria, (București), an. I (1942), № 1 (ianuarie–martie), p. 55.

⁶ Unfortunately, the analysis of the text of document in the Romanian language and handwritten signature of the priest did not allow determining the actual name of the priest-missionary.

⁷ SAOR, f. r-2270, reg.1, act. 1, p. 64.

side of elder people to interested glances, mockery and even abuse on the side of youths who had never seen a priest's attire, the missionary saw his assignment in placing everything on their places and proving to everybody that priests are not those "pops" of whom communists were speaking.

Having found common language with local believers, father Mikhail obtained one room which served at the beginning as the deanery office. T. Iliescu, the district praetor, submitted confessional-parochial information and provided him with a single harnessing road cart for visiting remote villages. At the beginning while inspecting 14 rural parishes in the subordinate district, father Mikhail found only three priests, and those were elderly and weak⁸. Thus, having visited Marynivka religious community, consisting of one thousand households, the sub-archpriest noted that though there was a church with all necessary accessories consecrated on July 12, 1942, the parish, unfortunately, had no priest.

At the time of inspection many churches were found in a terrible state – some were ruined by the communists, others used for different purposes except their principal purpose, that is, for penance and adoration of the Supreme creator. The churches were full of garbage, sometimes up to the windows⁹.

In this very difficult situation, the priest began selecting decent people predominantly from specialists capable of bringing order and repairing the churches. Construction materials were found in several rural parishes, some assets were collected, church accessories and liturgical books were found, etc. Having formed a district church council, Father Mikhail began working for the arrangement of church residence and the repair of Domanivska church. The latter was reconstructed from inside and outside, surrounded by a wall, the roof was repaired and painted, 5 bells purchased and a good iconostasis decorated according to orthodox Canon was delivered from Odessa. During the above-mentioned period and thanks to laborious efforts of the parishioners and the archpriest himself, the churches in the villages of Akmechetka, Marynivka, Novoorlovka were repaired, iconostasis restored and the walls painted. Despite a great deficit in the rural Transnistria, all these churches were provided with church accessories and liturgical literature and few clergy – with ecclesiastic attire.

In the matter of restoring religious life, Father Mikhail used to struggle for the right of religious community to return the cult buildings that had been used by occupational administration and police from the beginning of the war. Thus, the priest-missionary achieved the return to the subordination of the church those parochial buildings that were used as police posts¹⁰. As far as only three parochial churches satisfied religious needs of the population of the whole district, the

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁹ SAOR, f. r-2270, reg.1, act. 1, p. 64 3B.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

missionary authorities took the decision to open preaching houses in the villages of Bogdanivka, Tsaredarivka, Starogolovo and Karlivka. For the restoration of the church in Marynivka parish a furniture workshop was opened and in Domanivka a workshop for manufacturing pole hedges and a workshop for founding bells.

The activity of the district archpriest and probably other religious officials of the same level was dedicated to several directions of work: missionary, cultural, administrative, philanthropic, etc. Therefore, in the reports to volost management were reflected examples of concrete work of father Mikhail: every week he carried out the services and sermons; on Christmas, he visited village parishes, organized village choruses to sing religious songs and Yule-songs. On demand of order No. 89 of September 28, 1942 issued by G. Aleksyanu, the governor of Transnistria "on regulation of religious cults and religious life"¹¹ in the territory of governorship, the priests were to prevent distribution of religious ideas of sectarians of any kind. Correspondingly, M. Melnik was periodically carrying out conversations with people who were indifferent to religion and with sectarians.

The cultural work of the clergy was concentrated principally on the distribution and popularization of Christian traditions, with Romanian influence on the pattern of Domanivskyy "Freed from slavery". Such circles included courses of Romanian language for teachers, officials and church personnel. Along with that, not taking into account the Moldavian population, which constituted an insignificant share of the district, the missionaries were forced to propagate Romanian nationalism, distribute brochures, calendars, crosses and children books. In the territory of the district they cared for the graves of the dead Romanian soldiers with the aim to underline the significance of the activity of Romanian soldiers for "liberation of local population from kolkhoz-bolshevik slavery".

Administrative duties of Domanivsky sub-archpriest included the organization of church secretariat control over keeping civil registers (birth certificates, etc), creation of parish councils in the district. Father Mikhail's duties also included the following: inspection of incomes of the church servicemen, which were received from the mission and parishioners for the needs and repair of churches, donations to poor, sick and disabled. Significant amounts were collected and transferred to Romanian missionary funds and to the Red Cross. The Romanian administration obliged church communities to collect assets, food products for Romanian soldiers, for wounded and invalids, as well as for those in need and to the families of local imprisoned priests. The actions for collecting Christmas gifts for children in orphanages were widely popular in the district.

However, the Holy Father when staying in Transnistria with the missionary assignment dared to express his non-satisfaction with the process of re-

¹¹ SAOR, f. 13, reg. 2, act. 138, p. 149.

Christianization in the remote villages of the province occupied by the Romanians. His claims expressed in his letters-reports to the management of Romanian-Orthodox mission should be considered from several points of view. First of all, sub-archpriest M. Melnik connected the difficulties in the arrangement of church-religious life in the district with the problem that resulted on one side from the military activity which was the reason for the absence of necessary materials to repair churches and church premises, secondly, with ignoring on the side of civil authorities the necessity to solve urgent questions of the church and religious community. Consequently, the minimization of participation of representatives of the authorities in the improvement of religious life led to the fall of the authority of Orthodox clergy¹². Failure by local population to observe the norms of Christian moral and behavior on religious holidays and Sundays, bathing in basins, visiting fairs on Sundays instead of church services, as well as lack of various literature and materials for religious propaganda, the absence of factories for manufacturing candles and even the candles themselves in the churches – all this brought to naught the missionary work of even most diligent priest.

Last but not the least which interfered with rooting Christianity in the district patronized by him in the opinion of Father Mikhail was the lack of knowledge of local language by the missionaries who were predominantly Romanians and due to this they could not find understanding with local believers. Religious administration in the person of the mission management in Odesa did not practice periodical meeting of clergy with the aim of arranging joint measures for managing and organization of the church life activity.

At the same time one of the key reasons for breaking down of the processes of resurrection of Christian life was seen by priest-missionary in brutality of policemen “who implemented terror similar to the terror of NKVD in Communist period”. That horror was preserved in the memory of young and old people.

In the opinion of archpriest Melnik, the people saw, felt and suffered these and other drawbacks, while the church only suffered and thus it lost. At the same time the clergy themselves did not stand up to their assignment because of their deeds that drove people crazy, – underlined the missionary with sadness¹³. Father Mikhail insisted on urgent measures for correcting wrong deeds so that the “disappointment that will come later should not be larger than initial”.

Before leaving, the archpriest of the district father Mikhail in his letter¹⁴ to the volost management of March 9, 1943 characterized versatile picture of religious life in the district by painting interesting portrait characteristics of the whole regional clergy. Thus, the priest Georgy Bazylevsky from Akmechetka

¹² SAOR, f. r-2270, reg. 1, act. 1, p. 65b.

¹³ SAOR, f. r-2270, reg. 1, act. 1, p. 66.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 9-9b.

parish who arrived from Odessa is “very old and therefore he hardly endures and is not interested in the needs of the church. The absence of deacon in his parish makes it more difficult to carry out church services. And though the priest has normal relations with local authorities, the inhabitants asked me to replace him because of his inability”; the priest Ioann Sulkovsky in Domanivsky parish is a local inhabitant. “During the time of Bolshevik rule he worked as an accountant. He suffered from the Bolsheviks, however, his behavior is not ideal: in the first place he is greedy for money, he tried to establish prices for various occasional services. He always thinks of great profit. <...> A bit egoistic. He works well, teaches religion in a primary school. He is far from the soul of people for whom he serves. I shall not be mistaken if I say that he is proud and hypocritical”; psalm reader Semyon Kovalenko in Domanivska parish – “was a psalm reader in the time of tsarist rule in Novosilska parish. He is elderly, married. He performs his duties without great efforts. He is greedy for money and alcohol and because of this he loses his authority among the parishioners. Being a chorus conductor he is not interested in the repair of the church and in provision with all necessities”; psalm reader Petro Furman from Marynivska parish is a decent psalm reader who performs his duties with great diligence. Possessing a nice voice – baritone, he organizes good chorus. He is obedient and manageable.

We have no opportunity to check his past during the years of Communist rule which limits our attempts to propose him for the position of a priest. He is an excellent clerk, he is interested in the questions of the church repair. On his own initiative together with the church chorus he organized in the district Yule-songs on Christmas 1942 and collected 2621 marks and about 10000 kg of grain. All this was transferred for the repair of Marynivska church”.

The nine months of administrating of father Mikhail Melnik on the position of sub-archpriest of Domanivsky district expired at the end of March, 1943 and he returned to Chisinau eparchy, which had sent him on Christian mission. Probably, his brave criticism and non-conformism became the reason to return him to the previous place of pastoral service.

From April 5, the district church management was headed by archpriest B., whose appointment coincided with the preparation to Easter, 1943. All clergy in the district were engaged in spiritual life of the population. The visits of the newly appointed archpriest of rural parishes in which there were priests, witnessed the presence of women and children in the churches. The rest of population – men and youth – were working in the fields almost all the time, which resulted in non-satisfaction of the majority of workers and the anxiety of archpriest. Finally with the participation of spiritual father, civil occupational administration of the district allowed to attend churches to those who so desired, to accept the body sacraments on Yew Sunday, Holy Thursday, Saturday and Easter. On this Holy day the district

clergy paid much attention to schoolchildren who had almost main role of participants in church actions, confession and Eucharist. Focus on youth and children was among main tasks in the process of re-Christianization. However, teachers and agronomists, though their number was not large, taking into account their atheistic education at the time of Communist rule, skeptically perceived the resurrection of religious life and lack of respect to church Holidays and traditions called forth anxiety of the archpriest of the district, which he expressed in the reports to his volost management¹⁵.

When teachers take, children to church they personally do not always confess and make communion. Correspondingly, the priest took measures through school inspectorate and teacher's councils to make the teachers serve an example to children in these matters.

The state of the population spirituality in the rural districts of occupied territory is reflected in the statistics of attending churches and preaching houses on the Easter eve for making communion and confession submitted by the priests to the mission office, paying special attention to children, youth and elderly people. Thus, on the Easter eve of 1943 in the 6 villages of Domanivsky district – Marynivka, Bogdanivka, Akmechetka, Novoselivka, Domanivka and Viktorivka the churches were attended by 6950 adults and elderly people, 1650 youth and 2200 children. Easter day attracted a great number of people. Many carts arrived on previous evening delivering hundreds of believers from distant places. "Joy of soul and gratitude of people from the Holiday of Easter is felt and noted all around and I felt it myself together with them"¹⁶. In the same document the arch-priest gives an interesting example, which is quite characteristic and indicative for other communities even when taking into account the overestimation of merits of other clergy in the processes, which concerned them. The missionary remarks that as compared to winter 1941, the level of spirituality and Christian moral among the population has significantly increased: "Then I saw youths coming to the church more from curiosity smoking cigarettes till the very threshold of the church, while now I am glad to see youths hurrying to the church to be the first to receive church banners, cross or icon"¹⁷.

During Easter, the parishioners were specifically active to render support to poor families collecting for them food, money, various things. Assistance was rendered to 70 families during these days, as well as 350 marks for social needs.

Summer 1944 made pastoral service more difficult. Work in the fields and crop harvesting entered corrections to religious life of believers because the occupational authorities obliged village administration by its order to drive workers

¹⁵ SAOR, f. r-2270, reg.1, act. 1, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15b.

¹⁷ SAOR, f. r-2270, reg.1, act. 1, p. 16.

to fields even on Holy days and on Sundays. When the front approached the Transnistrian lands, the occupational essence became more and more evident, and robbery of Ukrainian peasants increased. Romanian missionaries had no concern about church matters any longer.

So, the resurrection of Christian life in remote parts of south Ukrainian lands under control of Romanian military forces and civil administration, though it undergone tremendous difficulties due to military situation, still had positive consequences in the form of building churches, rooting of Christian pietism, traditions and moral. At the same time, the occupants used religious community in the process of economic exploitation and occupational administrating.