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## Historical Frameworks of Military Priests

### Abstract

Christian teaching, embedded in the word preached by our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, promotes peace and supports it. Throughout its history, the Church has not disregarded the social aspects of its members' lives, guiding them to obey earthly rulers (the State) while emphasizing its mission to bring Heaven to earth, focusing more on spiritual life than material concerns. Therefore, starting with the writings of the Apostle Paul, Christian spiritual literature adopted a military metaphor, presenting the Christian as a soldier who must fight against evil, embodied by the devil, using all available weapons: faith, the grace of the Holy Spirit, fasting, prayer, etc. At the same time, when it comes to war, we find an attitude of complete rejection, considering its moral



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implications, yet some level of acceptance in the context of "defensive war" - the defense of one's life and neighbor.

Man being body and soul, war theorists have always maintained that, to achieve victory, spiritual and moral strengthening is needed, an activity undertaken both before and after the battle. Hence, there is a need for religious assistance in the army and the training of clerical personnel who carry out this activity.

## Keywords

Church, Christianity, war, religious assistance, military priest

## 1 Introduction

Loyal to Christ the Savior's evangelical message: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt. 5:9), the Church has always advocated against war, considering that it is a path towards desolation of lives and goods. Furthermore, the Church has consistently shown concern for its believers (including army representatives) and urged them to respect and integrate Christian values, love being the corollary of all such values. John the Baptist adopted the same attitude, advising the soldiers who showed a willingness to repent. Saint Luke the Evangelist recorded the words of the Harbinger: "and the soldiers asked Him, saying: And we, what shall we do? And He replied: Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3, 14).

Cherishing human life is the primordial and elementary reason enlivening any human being. However, when confronted with injustice, the Christian has a primary duty to take action, especially when such injustice targets their neighbor; accepting injustice incriminates the Christian as much as the one who commits it. The Church preaches peace with the utmost zeal and power and teaches that the God of Christians is the "God of

peace”; “the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”; “Peace on earth!” proclaimed by angels announced to humanity the birth of Jesus Christ.

Loyal to their patristic and ecclesiological tradition, the Orthodox Church does not legitimize war as an end in itself. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the need to defend life, order, and community while offering spiritual support to those called to fulfill such a difficult mission. The Holy Scripture does not see the military profession as an absolute condemnation and draws attention to how authority and force are exercised. John the Baptist’s response to the soldiers seeking spiritual guidance focused on the moral nature of this problem and overlooked the military as an institution. His reply took into account the ethics of individual behavior.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in the Epistle to the Romans, the state authority was introduced as a God-ordained service to maintain order and punish injustice (Romans 13:1-4), which provided a theological basis for defense institutions, without allowing them to cancel the moral exigencies of the Christian.

The fathers of the Church have manifested a balanced attitude with respect to the reality of war, which they have never considered to be a natural state of the world, but a consequence of the fall and sin. Saint Basil the Great distinguished between killing and murder. Yet, he imposed a period of restriction from communion, as a form of spiritual healing, which indicated the gravity of the act, even when committed in a legitimate context.<sup>2</sup> This perspective demonstrates the theological tension between the need to defend the community and the evangelical ideal of loving one’s enemies. The Church does not justify violence. On the contrary, they manifest pastoral care for those who, out of

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<sup>1</sup> Priest Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> volume, Publishing House of the Biblical Institute and Orthodox Mission, Bucharest, 1997, p. 304.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Basil the Great, Canon 13, in *Pedalion*, Publishing House of the Biblical Institute and Orthodox Mission, Bucharest, 2000, p. 220–221.

duty, are forced to partake in acts of violence, and provide them with the spiritual support and chance for inner restoration.

Man is understood as a person created in the image of God, a person called to communion and sanctification, irrespective of the social function which they exercise. From this very perspective, the soldier is not reduced to a mere role of executing orders, but remains a responsible moral subject, called to exercise their profession in line with Christian consciousness and values.<sup>3</sup> This personalist vision substantiates the need for the Church's pastoral presence in the army, as the soldier is exposed to the risk of dehumanization by routine and repetitive constraints and contact with violence. The role of the spiritual ministry is to keep alive the consciousness of personal dignity and moral responsibility.

Being present to offer religious assistance in military environments cannot be interpreted merely as a functional service intended to meet individual needs. Such presence should be seen as an institutional expression of the ecclesiastical communion transcending the borders of the parochial space. From an ecclesiological perspective, the soldier never ceases to be a member of the Church after joining the military, and the ecclesial community is responsible for providing them with sacramental, pastoral, and moral support in the specific context of their missions. Therefore, military pastoral care reflects the continuity of ecclesial life beyond the geographical and social limits of the parish. As servants of the Holy Sacraments and shepherds of a specific professional community, the military priests contribute to the integration of the military life into the horizon of the ecclesial communion and salvation.

Consequently, the military pastoral care organically falls within the universal mission of the Church, which, according to God our

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<sup>3</sup> Priest Prof. Dumitru Popescu, *Theology and Culture*, Publishing House of the Biblical Institute and Orthodox Mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1993, p. 236.

Savior's command, is called to preach the Gospel "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Church has no spatial and institutional limits and defines itself as the Body of Christ present with and within communities of believers. In this regard, the presence of the priest in the army expresses the universal and profoundly missionary nature of the Church, a mission that goes beyond the traditional parochial space and whose service reaches professional environments with distinct existential specificity.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Aspects regarding the history of military priests

The earliest historical sources attesting the presence of military priests (chaplains) date back to the time of the Byzantine historian Sozomen (400 – 450 A.D.), who writes in his work "Ecclesiastical History", that, to spiritually support his soldiers, the Holy Emperor Constantine the Great ordered that, before battles, all his armies wear the Christian symbol and be blessed by *priests of the imperial palace*. The emperor was guided to take this action after seeing a cross of light in the sky, in broad daylight<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, a special chapel was erected in the imperial palace to enable these priests to perform divine service. Every time soldiers went to war, they carried a *portable altar (tabernacle)*, similar to a small church. In this created space, the soldiers used to pray to God, make confessions, and receive the sacraments so that their souls would gain strength. The religious services were conducted by priests and deacons accompanying the troops every step of the way, adhering to all Church rituals and military discipline.

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<sup>4</sup> Priest Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> volume, Publishing House of the Biblical Institute and Orthodox Mission, Bucharest, 1997, p. 197-201.

<sup>5</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical Church*, translation by His Eminence Iosif Gheorghian, Typo-Lithography of "The Liturgical Books", Bucharest, 1897, pp. 10 - 11.

There is evidence of Church representatives supporting soldiers in England in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, in 430, a certain bishop, Gherman, led the army in Wales against the Saxons and blessed the troops' victory. The documents also refer to other battles in Wales and in Scotland, where clergy members played an important role.

The first official document demonstrating the role of military chaplains up to the 6<sup>th</sup> century is the letter written by Pope Pelagius I (556-561) to Bishop Lawrence of Civitavecchia, stating that priests serving in the army needed a letter of recommendation from Emperor Justinian I (527-565). Among other suggestions made by the bishop of Rome, there are some referring to a thorough examination of such priests' status, whether they are well prepared and worthy of serving in the imperial army, and whether they abide by the holy canons of the Church. This text proves the existence of a church establishment responsible for preparing the clergy serving in the army, who report to both the Church and the emperor.

In the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Byzantine emperor Maurice (582 - 602), in his attempt to guide the art of war, refers to his work "Strategikon", to the importance of blessing flags before battles, attesting by such a liturgical act the gracious presence of God, who will lead the soldiers to victory. Therefore, the consecration was carried out long beforehand, so if circumstances occur in rapid succession, such a sacred act should not be sudden and abrupt. The urge to the persons responsible for such an act was to "consecrate the flags one or two days before battle and only then to hand them over to the military flag bearers"<sup>6</sup>. The ritual was certainly officiated by a priest or a group of sacerdots who were joining the troops on the battlefield.

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice, *Military Art, VII, 2*, critical edition, translation and introduction by H. Mihăescu, Publishing House of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest, 1970, p. 169.

In his book “The Byzantines”<sup>7</sup>, the historian Guglielmo Cavallo makes reference to the military priests (chaplains) going to war alongside the Byzantine armies. The chapter “The Soldier and Death, the Faith and the Religion in Soldiers’ Life” introduces the reader to several aspects of military life, intertwining them with details of spiritual life. Therefore, we find that whenever the army approached an enemy military camp, the priest used to pray for mercy. In case the exact date of battle was set, the Holy Liturgy was performed before such day, after which soldiers were supposed to fast for three days, a period throughout which “they were allowed to eat only one time a day (in the evening).”<sup>8</sup>

Regarding Emperor Nikifor Focas and his reign (963 - 969), the same author tells us that, even though the emperor did not go to war, the soldiers were expected to pray in the morning and evening, with other activities discontinued during this time. Regarding how prayers were said, it is noted that both the infantrymen and the cavalymen knelt to pray<sup>9</sup>.

Keeping the tradition of the connection between the Church and the state, we find that all the other empires that succeeded one another throughout history also continued to support the presence of Church representatives alongside soldiers, both in peace and in wartime. Thus, some chaplains are recorded as present on the territory of today's Austria as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century. However, a constant presence may be evidenced only after the Thirty Years’ War (1618 – 1648).

Actually, starting with the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a “Pastoral Service for the Army” operated within the Imperial-Royal army. It was led by a Catholic priest whose responsibility was to ensure that every military division was accompanied by a “chaplain” on all

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<sup>7</sup> Guglielmo Cavallo, *The Byzantines*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2000, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 127 – 128.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128. We find the same information in *Les pratiques religieuses dans l'armée byzantine d'après les traités militaires* by J. R. Vieillefond, in “*Revue des Études Anciennes*”, Année 1935/ 37-3, p. 325, apud [https://www.persee.fr/issue/rea\\_0035-2004\\_1935\\_num\\_37\\_3](https://www.persee.fr/issue/rea_0035-2004_1935_num_37_3)

war missions. Later on, “in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the popes Clement XI, Innocent XIII, and Benedict XIV officially removed the Habsburg military regiments from under the authority of the diocesan bishops, placing them under the authority of the Apostolic Nuncio and then under that of the superior chaplain whom only the sovereign monarch of Vienna was entitled to appoint. This long-lasting process of total transfer of the ecclesial, spiritual, canonical, and jurisdictional authority over the armed forces of the Habsburg Empire from under the authority of Rome and the diocesan bishops under that of the Vienna Court was completed in December 1773<sup>10</sup>. That was the year when the Apostolic Vicariate of the Imperial Army was established to meet all the spiritual needs of the army's representatives, as approved, of course, by the Holy See. The institution was established in line with modern bureaucratic principles, as most state institutions under the monarchy were. This vicariate continued its activities until 1918<sup>11</sup>.

The empire was a multiethnic conglomerate that led to the acceptance of priests of sacramental confessions other than Roman Catholic ones. Their status was covered by the imperial decrees issued by the Court of Vienna. A decree of 1834 stipulated that soldiers of other confessions should attend, at least once a year, the Holy Liturgy officiated in their native

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<sup>10</sup> Mircea Gheorghe Abrudan, *Under the Arms of the Habsburgs: Romanian Orthodox Military Priests in the Armies of the Austrian Empire (1788 - 1848)*, in: volume “History and Theology – In honorem Priest Professor Ioan-Vasile Leb PhD”, 2<sup>nd</sup> volume, “Presa Universitară Clujeană” Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2021, p. 423, (actually, the author writes an ample paper on the religious assistance in the Imperial-Royal Army, as part of his Doctorate Thesis: *Orthodox Church and Military Clergy in the Habsburg Monarchy between the Peace of Karlowitz and World War I (1699 - 1914)*, published by “Presa Universitară Clujeană” Publishing House, Cluj Napoca, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Ionela Zaharia, *Romanian Military Clergy in Austria-Hungary in the Great War and the Propaganda against the Enemy*, in: “The Mission”, No. 1–2 / 2015, p. 157.

language, confess, and receive the Holy Communion. A new article of the law in the same year stated that:

“in the Border Guard Regiments, in which most soldiers were Orthodox or Greek-Catholic, a military priest of such confessions should be hired and provided with a mobile chapel. In addition, the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic military priests were to have the same rights as the Catholic military priests”.<sup>12</sup>

As recorded by historian Mircea Gheorghe Abrudan,

“employing Orthodox and Greek-Catholic military priests in regiments with a significantly high number of Romanian and Serbian Orthodox soldiers became a constant, regardless of the place where such military units were quartered, either in the native regions of the recruits or in other regions in the central, western, or south-western areas of the Empire”<sup>13</sup>.

This attitude of the Imperial Court shows that (both civil and military) decision-making factors had approved to allow priests of the same language and confession as the soldiers they guided and counselled to be present among them.

The duties of a *military chaplain*, as they were denominated, included: officiating religious services within a military unit as well as “ensuring and cultivating a religious life among the members of a regiment, an army corps, an educational or medical establishment of the Imperial-Royal Army”<sup>14</sup>, as noted by the history researcher Mircea - Gheorghe Abrudan.

The first Romanian Orthodox military priests were accepted into the border guard troops of the Empire at the persistent urging of the Metropolitan Pavle Nenadović from Karlowitz (1749-1768), the Primate of the Orthodox Church in the Habsburg Monarchy.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> Mircea Gheorghe Abrudan, *Under the Arms of the Habsburgs: Romanian Orthodox Military Priests in the Armies of the Austrian Empire*, cited works, pp. 442 - 443.

<sup>14</sup> Mircea - Gheorghe Abrudan, *Orthodox Church and Military Clergy in the Habsburg Monarchy between the Peace of Karlowitz and World War I (1699 - 1914)*, cited works, p. 283.

As historian Ionela Zaharia notes, the Orthodox military priests were appointed from among the priests who applied for the position. At the same time, the bishop to whom they reported made the decision, the same one who remitted the list to the Ministry of War and the Apostolic Vicariate of the Army. The emperor then confirmed the appointment. "The priests fell into two categories: active duty and reserves, the latter were to be activated if needed". Furthermore, in case of war, "all priests could be called to the battlefield as military priests"<sup>15</sup>. In the accounts on border guards, we find the name of a priest, Ianăș Cazan from Mesteacăn village, Hunedoara village, who, in the summer of 1784, said prayers for the military going to Bălgrad (Alba-Iulia), to officially join the "regiments of border guards" (*translator's note* "cătane" in the Romanian language)<sup>16</sup>.

As stated in some documents of that time, throughout the Dual Monarchy (1867 - 1918), all graduates of theological studies who were ordained as priests and appointed to such positions were to be included in the army reserves in case of war, becoming therefore mobilizable. This is why there are accounts of numerous Romanian (Orthodox or Greek-Catholic) priests incorporated in the military structures of the Imperial Crown. In February 1914, around 11 Romanian priests served in the Religious Service of the Joint Austro-Hungarian Army, whereas, on the same date, there were 9 Romanian Greek-Catholic military priests and 12 Orthodox military priests serving in the territorial army, at Honvezi, and 3 Orthodox priests in the territorial army, at Landwehr<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, *Army and Church in the Past of our Country*, in: "Theological Magazine", No. 7 / 2018, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> (Retired) Commander Professor Aurel Pentelescu PhD, Ionuț-Constantin Petcu, *The Romanian Orthodox Priest (1889-1983) in the Austro-Hungarian Army between 1915 and 1918*, in "Mission" Magazine, No. 3/2016, p. 105.

Taking all these aspects into account, we find that, in the pre-war period of the World War I, all belligerent countries had an older or newer tradition with regards to the religious assistance to the army. In a study on the priests who participated in the War for Unifying the Nation, the authors analyze the contextual situation of the fighting armed forces, showing that

“the German army, for example, also laid great emphasis on the soldier’s spiritual education. In addition to large church staff, well-prepared for the task of spiritually educating the soldiers, the officers and in particular the superior officers take good care of the spiritual teaching of the troops.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, we find details on the situation in Russia, where the care for the spiritual education of the army was diligently provided by the clergy and the army commanders, in the sense that

“there is [a] priest serving in all small and large military units; including on all warships – of escorts there was a priest and the military priests are placed under the command of a military protopresbyter, who served under the Russian Synod, despite him not being a bishop”<sup>19</sup>.

### 3 Landmarks of religious assistance in the Romanian Army (1850-1921)

*“Priests wearing crosses on foreheads/As the army is Christian”.* When writing these verses, the poet Andrei Mureșanu took into consideration not only the reality of his time – *the leading role of the priests in the revolutions of both 1821 and 1848* - but also a grounded tradition mingling with the history of the Romanian

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<sup>18</sup> Aurel Pentelescu, Gavriil Preda, *Sacrifice of the Priests Mobilized in the War for Unifying the Nation (1916-1919)*, p. 1, study consulted at [https://www.once.ro/sesiuni/sesiune\\_2007/8](https://www.once.ro/sesiuni/sesiune_2007/8)

<sup>19</sup> Gabriel Pârvu, *Spiritual Preparations for Great Days*, “Atelierele Socec et Co.” Printing House, Bucharest, 1916, p. 44.

people, born of water, as part of their ethnogenesis. The age of Christianity, with the priests as its missionary vectors, as well as the presence of our ancestors who continued to live in this Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space, were demonstrated through evidence from various domains<sup>20</sup>.

What we should understand is the fact that, by acquiring the golden law of the Gospel, namely the love of God and our fellow human beings, our forerunners learned the love of one's country and people, to which they attached imperishable value. In fact, between *faith* and *patriotism* – i.e. love of one's country, there is an intrinsic connection, in the sense that patriotism is seen as “such a natural and universal feeling that one may say that he who does not love their country, the land where they were born and grew up, is a heartless human being”<sup>21</sup>, with no faith, a real monster. Our ancestors considered the “law” to be the same as “faith”, which has gradually turned into “the heritage of the land” and which will govern the people's life in all its aspects: social, political, religious, and even economic. The gospel spirit will enliven the nation, and this is how one may explain the spirit of sacrifice and the belief in immortality.

The defiant attitude before death and the desire to offer man's most valuable asset to God are also found in the Dacians' tradition of sending Him, every five years, a messenger from among them, one who should be impeccable and among the best. The messenger is thrown upward, towards the sky, as a gesture of love, and let to fall in three fixed pointed ends up spears; should the messenger die, it meant that the offering was accepted and Zamolxes would fulfill their requests; otherwise, the messenger was considered unworthy, and another

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<sup>20</sup> An example in this respect is the work of the great patriot historian Vasile Pârvan, *Epigraphic Contributions to the History of the Dacian-Roman Christianity*, published by “Atelierele grafice SOCEC&Co” Publishing House, Bucharest, 1911.

<sup>21</sup> George Topârceanu, *War Memoirs*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, p. 67.

messenger was chosen for the offering. Furthermore, divine help was sought in connection with all activities and circumstances, especially in times of war or danger. On those occasions, the priests first said the prayer of mercy and then blessed the soldiers, who, prior to going to war, were given communion with water from the Danube<sup>22</sup>.

When providing arguments on the Latin origin of the Romanian people, the presence of the Romanian military stationed on the territory north of the Danube is also noted, as some of them were sure to have been baptized in the new teaching forbidden by the state<sup>23</sup>, later representing the ferment that raised the lump of the faith of the Romanian nation.

Actually, the new teaching brought to the world by the Son of God found a favorable environment in the souls of all those who courageously faced death every second of their lives, and who were brave, disciplined, and willing to achieve victory. The Christian's life is seen as the life of a soldier serving God, his Master, in all faith and devotion, looking after their souls and fighting temptations of all kinds so that nothing evil should reach inside.

Therefore, finding numerous similarities between religious life and military life, we understand why the Army and the Church went hand in hand, sharing virtues and showing that love, faith, courage, and the desire to fight for an ideal may all be relevant both in everyday, practical life as well as in spiritual life. The victories achieved throughout history could not have been possible without the involvement of all those who took pride and were animated by a strong belief in their success. The great artisans of war realized that for the soldiers to be victorious, they

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> See the decree promulgated by emperor Nero against the Christians (also called *Institutum Neronianum*), of which words "non licet esse vos" – you are not allowed to exist – are well-known; (quoted in Ioan Rămureanu, coord., *Universal Church History*, 1<sup>st</sup> volume, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Publishing House of the Biblical Institute and Orthodox Mission, Bucharest, 1987, p. 111).

also needed spiritual support. Moreover, they understood that the soldier as a man cannot be taken away from their religious life. As a consequence, the religious assistance among the troops was seen as a necessity, without which the soldiers' lives would stand no chance.

Being present on the battlefield also requires a spiritual state that, since the dawn of Christianity, has made a significant, if not decisive, contribution to the decision to go to war. In His teachings, Our Savior Jesus Christ did not urge violence. On the contrary, He said: "Do not resist the evil one; if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matthew 5, 39 -41), words encouraging the idea to overcome wickedness by doing good, hatred by loving. They also promote peace as a natural state of human life. This is the exact reason why the Orthodox Church does not endorse war as a justification. Despite referring to war as "defense", it continues to be an action taken towards destruction and loss of numerous human lives. Nevertheless, throughout its history, the Church has assimilated certain lay concepts and eventually accepted to promote heroism with the intent to defend one's faith, which most times also implied engaging in armed conflicts.

The Romanian people understood war as a defense of one's life and country, a concept closely connected to the family. Looking back at the bloody history of this deeply-troubled nation, priest Dumitru Stăniloae was to conclude "the Romanian Principalities are certain to have fought only defensive battles of their own being and implicitly their faith"<sup>24</sup>. They defended their "poverty and needs and nation", as ruler Mircea the Old Wise Man expressed himself through Mihai Eminescu's quill. It follows that, for the Romanian soldier, the relationship with God the

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<sup>24</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Reflections on Spirituality of Romanian People*, Elion Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 30.

Protector never aimed at gaining trophies or other riches; they invoked divine grace to defend what the Creator had offered them: a beautiful country, fertile land, and unshakeable faith. Their conciliatory soul, reborn through the water of baptism and veiled in the bright cloak of faith, urges them to live harmoniously among their fellow men and to seek resolution of the problems, firstly amicably and diplomatically.

Seeking to guide his heir son for the time when he would no longer be alive, the wise Wallachian ruler Neagoe Basarab advises him that, if ever other nations invade his country in bad will, he should firstly use “kind words and a humble attitude” to convince the invaders to return home peacefully; otherwise, he should use other ways of persuasion (through various gifts) to persuade the invaders to renounce the idea of invasion. After and only after all diplomatic means have failed to stop the invaders is the soldier allowed to start using weapons and fight courageously, keeping the faith that God, who knows people’s hearts, and that the war is not the choice of those praying to Him, will be their shield and support against the enemies<sup>25</sup>.

Therefore, going to war armed with faith and hope, the Romanians faced death and further carried the belief that it is the very sacrifice that renders life precious. Such feelings were gained during the Holy Liturgy through the village priest who spoke to them of divine love and of Christ’s sacrifice for us. The same priest joined them on the battlefield and spoke to them again about the Same Sacrificed and Resurrected Christ and about His help offered to those who fight for justice and the good of their fellow men.

The history of the Romanian people provides us with examples of the Church’s servants’ total devotion and involvement in everything related to the good of this nation and the fulfillment of their secular aspirations for unity and independence. The

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<sup>25</sup> *Neagoe Basarab’s Teachings to his Son Teodosie*, translated by Prof. G. Mihăilă PhD, ROZA VÂNTURILOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 310.

armies of the great rulers Mircea the Old Wise Man, Vlad the Impaler, Stephen the Great, Petru Rareș, Ioan Vodă the Great, and Michael the Great were never deprived of priests. Moreover, there were times when the priests actually fought alongside the other troops of the country, for instance, the legendary priest Stoica of Fărcaș (Dolj), in the army of the first union ruler<sup>26</sup>. Others were involved in the Revolution of 1784, the Revolution of 1821, led by Tudor Vladimirescu. Later on, in 1848, Avram Iancu's troops included numerous priests and alumni of theology, some of whom were even assigned leading positions, see priest-prefect Simion Balint, from Roșia Montana (Alba), priest-vice-prefect Simion Groza, from Rovina (Hunedoara), priests-tribunes Simion Prodan from Mărgina and Bucur from Golda (Alba)<sup>27</sup>.

#### **4 Religious assistance in the Romanian army in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1850-1914)**

The institutional relationship between the Romanian Army and the Church grew over time, alongside the existential development of the two institutions, so that this historical connection acquired legal status as early as the beginning of the 21st century, the century of the social and institutional modernization of the Romanian Principalities. This status would, in time, be perfected, tested during World War I, and completed by the establishment of the Army Diocese in 1921. We will attempt in this study to encompass all these stages and to emphasize man's need for a priest in their life, in particular when

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<sup>26</sup> For further references, see Mircea Păcurariu, *Military Priests in the Romanian Army prior to 1918*, in volume "Army and Church", coordinator Ilie Manole, Publishing House of Hans Seidel Foundation, Bucharest, 1996, p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

they experience the most difficult moments of their life, i.e., approaching death.

We find the earliest preoccupations with introducing religious assistance into the Romanian Army in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, *the national militia* was established in both Principalities in 1830. This represented the “nucleus of our national army”<sup>28</sup>. Although some preoccupations emerged regarding the introduction of religious assistance into the national militia in Moldova and Wallachia during the Organic Regulations (1834-1848), clearer, more institutional references may be found after 1848. Under these circumstances, we mention that in the Wallachia of the 1850, during the reign of Barbu Știrbei (1849-1853), known for this persistence to put together “the land army”, the Department for Army Activities, through the great governor Nicolae Ghica, decided of assigning a priest for each *polc* (regiment) of the army in the garnisons of Bucharest Craiova and Brăila. While corresponding with the Metropolitan of Hungaro-Wallachia, the latter was requested to

“seek three priests, recommendable for their honest conduct in society, outstanding expertise in their profession and useful knowledge to nurture the troops towards the moral truth, namely fearing God, obeying the law and exactly accomplishing their duties”<sup>29</sup>.

In response to the request of the great governor Nicolae Ghica (chief of army), the Metropolitan of Wallachia requested all archpriests of Bucharest, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1850, to search for three priests possessing the qualities required and in favor of joining the army under the conditions expressed. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1850, based on Nicolae Ghica’s report, the ruler of Wallachia issued an appointment order for three priests recommended to join the army, order which also stated that two church singers (cantors/vergers) should be employed for each priest appointed,

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> Gheorghe Vasilescu, *Religious Assistance in the Army of Wallachia between 1850 and 1870*, in volume “Army and Church”..., p. 129.

cantors who were to support the priest in singing and reading during the divine mass and whose wages and provision with books and clothes were also outlined in by the same order issued.

In reference to the provision of liturgical objects, the Holy Metropolitan Church offered each priest a Holy Antimis, without which the Holy Liturgy could not be officiated, two sets of vestements (“a higher quality one and an everyday one”), three sets of liturgical books to use during religious masses and a set of sacred vessels and other object to use during church activities. Furthermore, the Metropolitan Church would employ, at their own expense, six church singers (cantors/vergers) who were scheduled to start their activity on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1850. While the troops were stationed in the regiment, the priests assigned were allowed to serve in one of the churches of the respective town/city, specifically chosen by the bishop of the area.

Additionally, there was a debate concerning the uniform that the military priests should wear. On the one side, the Department for Army Activities suggested that “our priests should change their vestements so that they match the ones of the Russian Imperial Army”. On the other side, the Metropolitan Nifon of Wallachia decides that “the body should continue to wear the uniform of our nation, which all priests of this Principality usually wear”.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, they were allowed to wear, as a distinctive sign, a dark-colored hat, with a black bow on the hatband, instead of an ecclesiastical cap, “throughout their entire service in the army.”<sup>31</sup> In late October 1850, all these provisions led to the first instructions concerning “*The Army Priests’ Duties*”<sup>32</sup>, duties which represented the foundation of *The Regulation of the Clergy in the Permanent Army*, approved by decree no. 603 and promulgated by king Carol I on 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1870.

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<sup>30</sup> Gheorghe Vasilescu, *Religious Assistance in the Army of Wallachia between 1850 and 1870*, in volume “Army and Church” ..., p. 131.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> \*\*\* “Army and the Church”, coordinator Ilie Manole..., pp. 132 - 135.

In 1876, another decree set forth that all territorial troops and units could have their own priest. Thus, shortly before *the War of Independence*, there was a priest servicing within each garnison<sup>33</sup>. The service of such priests covered all units under the respective garnison and their position was entitled *military confessor*. To ensure the conditions for a good completion of their mission, the Church sought to have the military priests' activities governed by Specific Regulations that defined their duties in both peacetime and wartime.

Later on, the military priests participated in the Second Balkan War (1913), alongside the troops and the Red Cross staff, under the coordination of the Metropolitan of Moldovia and Suceava, Pimen Georgescu. Romanian troops' participation in the campaign of 1913 brought about the following conclusions – seen as “lessons” – of which role was to implement the actions necessary for the effective organization of military units and the improvement of the army equipment. Some clarifications regarding the religious service in the Army were, however, necessary.

As the political and social emancipation of the Kingdom of Romania triggered major changes in military life, the regulation of religious services in the Army was therefore required, especially because important military events were marked by a particular solemnity that required a grand-style celebration. As a result, the presence of the priest was absolutely necessary while the religious act was to be officiated in a such a manner so as to render the event “the aura of sumptuosity”<sup>34</sup>. Owing respect to the holy aspects of human life, the soldier is aware that only by cultivating a strong feeling of faith will they acquire those divine gifts to strengthen their virtues and to empower them to defeat with great courage the dangers coming their way.

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<sup>33</sup> Priest Mircea Păcurariu, *The Attitude of the Romanian Orthodox Church in relation to the War of Independence*, in: “Romanian Orthodox Church”, no. 5- 6/ 1967, p. 607-610.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

We can therefore observe that, before Romania entered World War I, the religious service in the Romanian army called for numerous improvements, in terms of the number of father confessors, on the one hand, and indications relating to masses rendered for soldiers under various circumstances in peacetime and on the battlefield, on the other hand. In addition, following analysis of the legislation of that time, we see that there was no law governing the military priest's status – their rights and obligations -, an involvement in settling this situation being more the attitude of the Church and less that of the General Army Staff, which was more “successful in delaying or rejecting different proposals of the Romanian Orthodox Church”<sup>35</sup>.

The outbreak of the first worldwide conflagration made the Army chiefs attach more importance to the religious service and implicitly start a correspondence between the Chief of Staff and the heads of the dioceses within which the garnisons were headquartered, because the priest carries out their duties only with the blessing of their hierarch, the priests having in this respect double subordination: one ecclesiastical – to their Diocesan Bishop, and one military, to the commanding officer of the military unit to which they were assigned. After 1918, the status of the father confessors would be governed by royal decree no. 3378 of 20<sup>th</sup> July 1921, transposed in the *Law regarding organization of military clergy* by which the establishment of the Army Diocese was approved. The Army Diocese was therefore based in the Reunification Cathedral in Alba-Iulia, a location carrying a special symbolic meaning in the national consciousness.

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<sup>35</sup> Marius Emanuel Sandu, *Church and their Servants in the World War I*, in “Apostle” Magazine, No 210, May 2018, accessed at <https://www.slineamt.ro/apostolul/studii-si-sinteze/biserica-si-slujitorii-acesteia-in-primul-razboi-mondial/>

## Conclusions

Man has always sought divine grace and protection. This is the reason why, when in danger, they used to bring offerings to the protecting divinity, keeping the faith that only by doing so will they overcome difficulties. Especially when at war, regardless of how early or late ahead the conflict would be, they made sure they did the religious rituals and received divine blessing and only then went to war. The religious feeling among soldiers is more visibly manifested throughout the Byzantine Empire, when the Army became truly Christian and the religious ceremonies were more and more present in the military environment. This tradition will also be taken over by the newly-formed states of the Middle Ages, as observed in the German, French or Austrian military history.

The history of the Romanian people shows that the Orthodox Church has always been present through their servants in the middle of the great turmoil experienced by their sons. The Church acquired the ideals of the Romanian nation and, by doing so, they supported, in word and in deed, the battles and the endeavors of the people towards defending the ancestral land, gaining independence, and shaping the statal unity. Faithful rulers such as Mircea the Old Wise Man, Stephen the Great, or Saint Constantin Brâncoveanu demonstrated by their sacrifice that the teachings of the Bible profoundly pierced the consciousness of the sons of this nation, defending at the price of their life, the eternal values: faith, love of nation, love of country, and ancestral land.

Following their example, the blood of generations of heroes watered the country's precious land, hand in hand with the servants of the holy altars. Despite its rather difficult legal path, their presence among soldiers demonstrated that to achieve a victory, it takes both weapons and souls strengthened by strong faith, animated by the sincere, ardent mission of the military priests.

To ensure the good performance of its mission, the Church strove on a steady basis to regulate the military priests' activities through specific Regulations that clearly and formally stated the priests' responsibilities in peacetime and wartime. Later, after their involvement in the War of Independence (1877-1878), the military priests participated in the Second Balkan War (1913), accompanying the troops or supporting Red Cross representatives, under the coordination of the Metropolitan of Moldovia and Suceva, Pimen Georgescu.

Given the natural connection between the Church and the Army, a traditional relation in the culture of the Romanian people, and the emergence of those aspirations in relation to the well-being of our country and people, it is imperative to take into consideration the intellectual and spiritual needs of the soldiers. In this respect, as stated in the "*Instructions for Military Priests*"<sup>36</sup>, the military barracks should become a school "of light and education", a place where the soldier may learn "love of country and endless love of its defense". In addition, the soldier should, however, acquire "warm obedience and observance of their superiors' orders."<sup>37</sup>

The experience of the armies of other countries, in particular the Western countries (Austria, France) and Russia, demonstrated that victory means both equipping the soldier's strong arm and enlivening their hearts for their country and nation. Needless to say, such feelings may only be stirred by the priest. Nevertheless, the Country may also benefit from the priest's activity, considering that the army should be protected against the influence of certain teachings that may be dangerous to both the people's unshakeable faith and soldiers' everyday life.

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<sup>36</sup> Priest Constantin Nazarie, *The Activity of Priests in the Army, cited works*, pp. 190 - 191.

<sup>37</sup> *Internal Church Chronicles. Military Priests, cited works*, p. 1312.