



Alin Cristian Scridon

Dimitrie Sabău. An Archpriest and His Time

Abstract

Father Dimitrie Sabău (1903-1977) was an important Romanian Orthodox clergyman in twentieth-century Hungary. He graduated from the Faculty of Theology with top grades and then became archpriest and counsellor of the Romanian Diocese in Hungary. His activity portrays a personality that must not be forgotten by history but promoted in specialised historiography.

Keywords

Orthodoxy, Dimitri Sabău, Theology, Romania, Hungary



Rev. Assist. Prof. Dr. Dr. Alin Cristian Scridon, Department of Romanian Studies, Faculty of Letters, History, and Theology, West University of Timișoara, Romania

1 Introduction. Biographical Data

We find important biographical data about Dimitrie Sabău in the *Theological Absolutorium* kept in the archives in Gyula. Dimitrie Sabău was born on 14 February 1903 in Gyula, Békés County. At that time, the Parish of Gyula was subordinated to the Archpriestship of Chişineu, which in turn was canonically subordinated to the Diocese of Arad.¹

He studied theology in Arad between 1924-1927 as an “ordinary student”. After graduation, he was elected as 2nd priest in Gyula I. We know from archival documents that he was elected archpriests administrator on 9 March 1932, i.e., substitute archpriest.² He served for two years and became the titular archpriest of the Gyula Archpriestship in the summer of 1934. Teodor Misaroş tells us that Dimitrie Sabău would rise further in the priestly hierarchy in 1946 when he was elected administrative-church counsellor. He passed away in 1977, at the age of 74.³

2 Dimitrie Sabău in the archival documents

In the archives of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese in Gyula, we have discovered over a hundred documents that were either

¹ AEORU (Archives of the Romanian Orthodox Bishopric of Hungary), coll Gyula I, foll 1927, no. 146/22 august 1927.

² Idem, foll 1933, Extras din protocolul sinodului protoprezbiteral a românilor ortodocși din Ungaria, 9 march 1933, Giula.

³ T. Misaroş, *Din istoria comunităților bisericești ortodoxe române din Ungaria*, Ediția a II-a, revizuită, (Gyula, Ungaria: Editura Schneider Nyomda Kft., 2002), p. 152.

written by Father Sabău, were addressed to him, or included his name. The letters start in 1926 and end in 1936. Therefore, we can see in the archives a decade of Dimitrie Sabău's young years. In other words, when he was between 23 and 33 years old, a period of youthful vigour which we will try to reveal in the following.

1.1. The systematization of documents

We will try to systematise topics thematically, as follows: early priesthood years, involvement in the struggle for organisation, participation in various synods, involvement in solving problems in different parishes, the relationship with Father Toma Ungurean (fellow at the altar in Gyula I), and problems that occurred after Father Toma Ungurean moved to Budapest, and, obviously, vacated the parish.

The first record is from a secular position. Sabău, a student in Arad in the second year, was the president of the parish council in Gyula I, or at least this is attested by the letter of 6 May 1926. It is a *service contract* provided for the repair of the church clock by a certain clockmaker Stéberl Mihály. Obviously, the obligations of the parties are recorded.⁴

A year later, on 1 June 1927, he reappeared in documents, signing a letter with Petru Mișcuția, also an eminent graduate of the school in Arad. The two inform a priest that they are graduates of Theology, and will ask to join parishes in the autumn of 1927, requesting support for the accomplishment of their desideratum.⁵

And that is exactly what happened. The young Sabău submits an application on 19 August 1927 to the "Honourable Parish

⁴ AEORU, coll Gyula I, foll 1926, Contractul de prestări servicii, 6 may 1926.

⁵ Idem, coll Gyula I, foll 1927, The letter from 1 june 1927.

Committee and Synod” from Gyula I in which he announces that “he is reflecting on the abovementioned vacant parish”⁶, annexing at the same time the *Theological Absolutorium* (issued on 18 June 1927) demonstrating that he had completed his theological studies with very good grades.⁷

His fellow, Petru Mișcuția, was running against him in the same application, but he signed it a day later (20 August). However, on 28 August, Mișcuția *clears the path* for his fellow Sabău, announcing the Honourable Synod of Gyula that he was withdrawing from the contest as follows: “(...) I withdraw – for some reasons, which I cannot list here – my contest application”.⁸

We do not know when he was ordained, but, in any case, a letter from 15 December 1927 attests that Dimitrie Sabău was already a priest: Bishop Grigorie Comșa of Arad asked the Parish Priest of Gyula, Toma Ungurean, to “(...) please invite Priest Dimitrie Sabău to submit all the supporting documents (...)”.⁹

His *epistolary vocation* manifested quite early, as we see in a letter dated 22 August 1928 by which he was requesting – in Hungarian – the approval of the Minister of Religious Affairs and Public Instruction from Budapest so that teacher Gheorghe Negru could teach at Gyula in the school year 1928/29.¹⁰ The answer *lingered* at the relevant Ministry for more than four months, given that, on 8 January 1929, it was suggested to Father Sabău that he should read regulation 99.165/928.VIII issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Instruction. Under the regulation, the Authority concludes: “the application for the operating license of Teacher Nyegru György may not be

⁶ Idem, The request from 19 august 1927.

⁷ Idem, Act no. 146/22 august 1927.

⁸ Idem, The request from 28 august 1927

⁹ Idem, Act no. 6351/15 december 1927.

¹⁰ Idem, foll 1928, Act from 22 august 1928.

approved until the said holder has a diploma that is recognised in the country”.¹¹

From the long series of letters, we notice that this was the first recorded failure. But what if it was not a failure? You will notice that the regulation in question was approved about the *very* time as Sabău was writing to the Ministry. Could the 25-year-old 2nd priest, a chaplain at the other end of Hungary, have played a role in the expediency of the adoption of laws in Budapest? We do not know. In any case, it seems that the law was life-saving for the Hungarian authorities, as it fits perfectly into the massive assimilation project, and *put* the worthy Priest Sabău *in his place* just in time.

Even if he could not help Gheorghe Negru, chaplain Sabău seems to have had a close relationship with – at that time, the young – Negru, because after Parish Priest Ungurean left for Budapest in 1934, he would bring him as a priest to Gyula I.

1.2. The correspondence of Simeon Cornea

The close relationship with Father Simeon Cornea is attested by a letter written by Father Sabău on 2 July 1929. The long *confession* attests that Father Sabău had not recovered after the cold ministerial *shower*, although half a year had passed. In any case, the *issue* encouraged him, and he asked Father Cornea to convene a priestly assembly, “as soon as possible”, to resolve the issue of recognition of diplomas.¹²

Father Cornea’s prompt answer (July 5) began with the words: “I found the change of ideas as useful and necessary as the sun’s rays”, which attests that the two *resonated* concerning their common goals¹³. The letter also reveals that the protagonists of

¹¹ Idem, foll, Act no. 127/8 January 1929.

¹² Idem, The letter from 2 July 1929.

¹³ Idem, The letter from 5 July 1929.

the church organisation in Hungary were willing to make substantial efforts to achieve their goals, which brought them even closer. It was not enough to want, but something had to be done, and Sabău proved that he wanted to get involved, which is what happened.

The reunion between the two, in the privacy of writing, appears recorded on the eve of the Assembly in Békéscsaba. The Assembly took place on 29 July 1929. Father Sabău himself had convened it.¹⁴ Thus, on 22 July, Cornea wrote to Sabău about the delicate situation created by the government's non-acceptance of Romanian diplomas. This, unfortunately, was not the only problem in the field of education. Cornea had forgotten to record on 5 July but now replied with: "I forgot to mention the obstacles that the principals of the normal schools in Arad put in our way when it came to enrolling our students in their school".¹⁵ So, the same *dedicated* (Sic!) treatment came from the Romanians as well.

On the eve of the Assembly in Békéscsaba, on 10 July, Sabău also signed first, together with Fathers Mișcuția, Mândruțau and Ungureanu, a petition addressed to Father Bogoevici in Budapest.¹⁶ Requests for organisation were inserted. Only later will he feel that the pleadings addressed to Bogoevici had been a waste of time.

On 29 July 1929, he not only participated in the Assembly but was also involved in the implementation of the decisions taken in the Synod.¹⁷ For example, on 26 August, he communicated to Father Cornea that the day before (25 August) he had met the parish synod in the church commune of Săcal, to elect the lay

¹⁴ Idem, Act no. 22/22 July 1929.

¹⁵ Idem, The letter from 22 July 1929.

¹⁶ Idem, The letter from 10 July 1929.

¹⁷ Idem, Meeting minutes 29 July 1929.

member in the archpriests' synod. At that time, Mihail Hodoșan was elected to represent Săcal in the archpriests' synod.¹⁸

At the boycotted archpriests' synod in Békéscsaba, which was held on 5 September 1929, he was elected notary.¹⁹ *Boycotted*, as both the prefect's order and Bogoevici's order were clearly against the organisation of the synod. However, some of the priests and laymen gathered. The Assembly was also attended by the Mayor of Csaba who presented the ministerial order which clearly stipulated that the conditions in which the Synod had been organised "damaged the right of supervision of church and civil authorities".²⁰ At the same time, the participants in the Synod – Cornea, Sabău, Mișcuția, Botteu – sent a petition to the relevant ministry requesting freedom of organisation, assuring the Hungarian government that "our organisation activity benefits both the state and the citizens".²¹

A month and a half later, Dimitrie Sabău managed to convince his fellows to also go to the Ministry to hasten a reply. Therefore, Sabău established the place, date, and time of the meeting: Budapest, 8 Holló Str., on 23 October 1929, at 12 o'clock. The plan was to meet at the established place (the Romanian chapel in Budapest) and from there – Sabău emphasised – to go "to the Ministry with Him as well"²² (Bogoevici).²³

From the letter of 1 November (the Day of the Dead) it appears that "He" (Sic!) had convinced the priests not to go to the Ministry, seeing that Cornea wrote to Alexici: "On the occasion of my

¹⁸ Idem, The letter from 26 august 1929.

¹⁹ Idem, Protocol întocmit în ședința sinodului protopopesc a românilor ortodocși din Ungaria, Bichișciaba, 5 september 1929.

²⁰ Idem, foll 1932, Protocol – întocmit cu ocazia ședinței a colegiului preoțesc convocat de preoții din Gyula, 25 january 1932.

²¹ Idem, foll 1929, Act from 5 september 1929.

²² Idem, The letter from 21 octomber 1929, Gyula.

²³ Ibidem.

visit to Budapest, we reached an agreement with Father Bogoevici that he would go to the Ministry to have the interdiction order for holding the archpriests' synod revoked, and that he would convene – in the name of the priests' college – an archpriests' synod this autumn. He has to inform Father S. Cornea about the result within 8 days".²⁴

It seems that the trip to Budapest failed, because, if we admit that they were received in a ministerial audience, *the matter* would have been solved by the priests, and Bogoevici would not have had to go to the Ministry "to have the interdiction order..."

2 The problem of proselytism

Finally, more serious issues, such as proselytism, would be debated a few weeks later by Fathers Cornea and Sabău. For example, in his 14 December letter, Cornea told Sabău about the initiatives of Adventists, Nazarenes, Greek Catholics, all of whom wanted to *sink their teeth into* the Romanian Orthodox *lambs* that belonged to no one, and concluded bitterly: "We are surrounded by wolves and we even bare teeth amongst ourselves".²⁵

Outraged, Father Cornea replied on 31 December saying that it was imperative to take action and proposed an activity plan to defend the faith, to begin in early 1930 in the town most affected by the phenomenon – Kétegyháza.²⁶

In fact, Cornea asked Sabău to get involved, by holding conferences, to promote the ancestral faith and thus to limit the departures of the faithful to other denominations.

²⁴ Idem, The letter from 1 november 1929, Gyula.

²⁵ Idem, The letter from 14 december 1929.

²⁶ Idem, The letter from 31 december 1929.

By the letter of 9 January, Dimitrie Sabău accepted *the mission* and proposed that to convene a conference in Kétegyháza²⁷ on Monday, 20 January 1930.

Simeon Cornea, in his letter of 14 January, accepts the proposal that the presentations be held on 20 January, showing that there is an urgent need for involvement, as “there are many weeds to uproot”²⁸ in Kétegyháza.

The correspondence from 17 and 23 January between the two is rather controversial. Sabău declines public support for conferences, because, first of all, the joint priestly efforts should be directed towards the coagulation of an organisation, and only after that should a rigorous, well-coordinated missionary program be started. Cornea knew that an organisation would imply a long wait, and any inaction will disintegrate the ROC in Hungary even more. Therefore, he rhetorically asked, “Aren’t there 4 priests among us who can give a sermon against the Neo-Protestants?”²⁹

Dimitrie Sabău could not refuse the proposal of the older *dean* Cornea and announces the public conferences in Kétegyháza. The speakers were Sabău, Ungureanu, Mișcuția, and Mândruțău, and the first *action* was announced for 26 March.³⁰

In the meantime, he got involved in solving the problems in Kétegyháza. Petru Mișcuția from Békés had applied for the position of chaplain on 19 January 1930. He had been elected, but the Hungarian authorities did not allow him to take his position.³¹ It would be 25 March 1931 when Sabău finally an-

²⁷ Idem, foll 1930, The letter from 9 January 1930.

²⁸ Idem, The letter from 14 January 1930.

²⁹ Idem, The letters from 17 și 23 January 1930.

³⁰ Idem, The letter from 19 March 1930.

³¹ Idem, The letter from 11 February 1930.

nounced with satisfaction that on 20 March the county prefect allowed Mișcuția to take over his position.³²

On 19 February 1930, Dimitrie Sabău would briefly describe the Church which he had been pastoring for 3 years: "(...) the Romanian Orthodox denomination is the weakest in the country, the most isolated, the most abandoned, the least noticed, the most disorganised, - and after all this with such indolent, shy, selfish and flattering clergy (honour to the exceptions) - the least capable of existing in the future!".³³

However, turning to action, from the numerous letters, we will mention the two petitions submitted to the Minister of Religious Affairs and Public Instruction in Budapest. We are referring to the letters dated 27 January 1930³⁴, and 1 May 1930.³⁵ Both are signed by Dimitrie Sabău (second signature - after Cornea). The petitioners asked for permission to set up an archpriestship. To receive an answer *more quickly*, on 8 May, five priests, including Sabău, but also 2 laymen, requested an audience with the Ministerial Secretary, Dr. Petri Pál.³⁶

Thus, the answer came quite quickly, namely on 30 June 1930. In fact, the relevant ministry gives its reply through Kovács - the chief magistrate in Battonya district. The Budapest decision was short: the election of Simeon Cornea as archpriest is not recognised by the State, as the Orthodox dioceses of Arad and Oradea gave Ghenadie Bogoevici this function.³⁷

Later, in a letter to his peers, Dimitrie Sabău expressed his indignation against the ministerial response, without being dis-

³² Idem, foll 1931, The letter from 25 march 1931.

³³ Idem, foll 1930, The letter from 19 february 1930, Gyula.

³⁴ Idem, Act no. 49/27 january 1930.

³⁵ Idem, Act from 1 may 1930, Gyula.

³⁶ Idem, foll 1932, Protocol - întocmit cu ocazia ședinței a colegiului preoțesc convocat de preoții din Gyula, 25 january 1932.

³⁷ Idem, foll 1930, Act no. 69 from 30 june 1930.

couraged, since the text starts with “please do not think we gave up fighting for the action started”.³⁸

3 The letter of request to Bishop

The epistolary *front* would move temporarily to Arad and Oradea, as we understand from the letter that the petitioners had started preparing the letters to the bishops from the mentioned localities to ask them about the status of Priest Ghenadie Bogoevici.³⁹

The resolution of this *matter* was left to Father Simeon Cornea. The Right Reverent signed two letters on 30 September to Bishop Grigorie Comşa (Arad) and to Bishop Roman Ciorogariu (Oradea). Bishop Comşa told him that he had searched the documents empowering Bogoevici in the archives of the Arad diocese and could not find it, so he officially asked the Diocese for a position on this issue. He attached the petitions sent to the ministry in Budapest for the bishops, but the answer received. Therefore, he motivated the approach as follows: the Hungarians are using Bogoevici to thwart the establishment of the Romanian archpriestship.⁴⁰

On 3 November, Simeon Cornea wrote another letter to the Diocese of Arad, with the same content, reminding that “I need that document, for the organisation of our church before the Government in Budapest”.⁴¹

Oradea communicated first the fact that Ghenadie Bogoevici was then empowered to fill the vacant parishes, but had not the authority of an archpriest. Moreover, Bishop Roman Ciorogariu

³⁸ Idem, The letter from 22 august 1930.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Idem, The letter from 30 september 1930.

⁴¹ Idem, The letter from 3 november 1930.

reminded that, since the Romanian government's principle was not to intervene in parishes outside the border, it would not have the legal power to appoint archpriests in Hungary.⁴²

A few weeks later, Arad also communicated that "the proto-sínghellos has no powers from us".⁴³

4 Ministerial Memoirs

*The new state encouraged Sabău, because, through the letter dated 27 December 1930, he proposed to his fellows to have the two replies received from Arad and Oradea in the matter of Bogoevici's leadership translated into Hungarian, notarised, and sent to the relevant ministry in Budapest, to request the recognition of the archpriestship. This is because the Ministry had said very clearly through letter 69/1930 that it could not recognise the archpriestship and, therefore, Simeon Cornea as archpriest as long as the dioceses of Arad and Oradea had another archpriest (Bogoevici).*⁴⁴

In the letter of 30 March 1931, Simeon Cornea reminded Dimitrie Sabău of the new petition prepared with the help of some lawyers. The document began circulating in the priestly *circuit* to be signed on 11 March 1931.⁴⁵

The attitude of the priests towards signing the document for the Ministry will remain bizarre. In the letter of 27 May 1931, Dimitrie Sabău complained to Simeon Cornea that only he and Ola had signed the document, and the other "fellows did not subscribe, because we asked many times in such a tone and were not taken into account. I have little hope in this plead-

⁴² Idem, Act no. 2606/2 octomber 1930, Oradea-Mare.

⁴³ Idem, Act no. 6659/2 december 1930.

⁴⁴ Idem, The letter from 27 december 1930.

⁴⁵ Idem, foll 1931, The letter from 30 march 1931.

ing”.⁴⁶ However, he urges Cornea to sign on behalf of the priestly college, as an “authority”, and send it. However, he pragmatically continued to show that “(...) if we want to maintain the liturgical language and the national character of our Church, we will have to appeal to the League of Nations, because here the government will never allow us to organise. But if we shout so others can hear us, it will be done faster”.⁴⁷

In the *matter* of ministerial pleadings, in the same letter, Dimitrie Sabău mentioned a second pleading, drawn up “in another language”. He suggested that both be sent, as the latter would be more likely to receive a *feedback*.⁴⁸

On 29 May 1931, the pleading, with the two annexes from Arad and Oradea translated and notarised, were sent to the government. The answer was long-awaited, as this aspect is mentioned in the *Protocol* drafted on the occasion of the priestly conference of 25 January 1932.⁴⁹ At the same time, it was decided to organise an archpriests’ synod on 29 February 1932 in Kétegyháza.⁵⁰

Father Dimitrie Sabău was elected notary in the archpriests’ synod convened on 29 February 1932 in Kétegyháza. The decisions were sent to the Budapest government and the bishops of Arad and Oradea. The bishops were asked to ordain Father Simeon Cornea.⁵¹

Even if the ministerial replies would not come, the organisational efforts intensified, and Father Sabău became an im-

⁴⁶ Idem, The letter from 27 may 1931.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Idem, foll 1932, Protocol – întocmit cu ocazia şedinţei a colegiului preoţesc convocat de preoţii din Gyula, 25 january 1932.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Idem, Proces verbal din 29 februarie 1932 - întocmit cu ocazia adunării protoprezbiteriale din Chitighaz.

portant part in this, seconding Cornea, and after the latter's death in 1932, he would take over the leadership mission.

Father Sabău was not the only one who was sceptic about whether the government would accept the ROC in Hungary having a legally constituted archpriestship. A month before Cornea's death, Axentie Roşu, parish communal notary, and Traian Selegia, vice-president of the parish committee in the Battonya church commune, were sure that Budapest would not approve the *anointing* of their parish priest.⁵² And this was what happened. Cornea died on 22 May 1932 without being confirmed by the ministry, and we have no evidence that he was ordained by any bishop.

After the death of Father Cornea, the Battonya parish came into the care of Father Sabău. He repeatedly substituted in the parish and urged the president of the parish committee in Battonya to strive to name a titular priest for the parish.⁵³

5 The archpriests' succession

The archpriests' succession after the passing of the *virtual* archpriest Cornea is interesting. He was initially replaced by Petru Mişcuția (Kétegyháza) - who took over the archpriestship's archive in the meeting held in Gyula on 27 June 1932.⁵⁴ He remained *in charge* for two months, until 22 August 1932, when the priestly college appointed Petru Mândruțău (Gyula II) to take over the archpriest's office.⁵⁵ Mândruțău remained a substitute archpriest for half a year until the archpriests' synod

⁵² Idem, Act. from 3 april 1932.

⁵³ Idem, Act from 14 june 1932; Idem, Act from 16 march 1933 etc.

⁵⁴ Idem, Meeting minutes from 27 june 1932.

⁵⁵ Idem, Extras din protocolul sinodului protoprezbiteral a românilor ortodocși din Ungaria, 9 march 1933, Gyula.

convened on 9 March 1932 in Gyula I. At this time, Mândruțău “is not appointed archpriestship administrator”, a position that would go to Father Dimitrie Sabău who was elected by the synod with 13 votes for and 5 against. He started his activity on the same day - 9 March 1932. The same synod announced that the final election would take place in February 1934.⁵⁶ We know, moreover, that he was elected titular archpriest of the Gyula archpriestship on 24 June 1934.⁵⁷

In his new capacity as substitute archpriest, his activity is precipitated as his duties oblige him to preside over a parish synod in Peterd⁵⁸; to maintain communications with the diocese of Arad on various topics⁵⁹; to restore order in the church commune of Magyarcsanád⁶⁰; to appoint priests to fill vacant parishes⁶¹; to settle conflicts between the clergy⁶²; to intervene in the smooth running of some parishes⁶³, and so on.

Conclusion

Through his work, Father Dimitrie Sabău remains one of the brightest clerical figures in interwar Hungary. Therefore, the development of the subject on *Priest Dimitrie Sabău* is both a

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ T. Misaroș, *Op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁵⁸ AEORU, coll Gyula I, foll 1933, Extras din Procesul Verbal din 17 septembrie 1933 a sinodului parohial ortodox român din Peterd.

⁵⁹ Idem, Act no. 1104/7 octomber 1933, Arad; Idem, Act no. 1396/4 january 1934, Arad; Idem, Act no. 499/22 march 1934, Arad.

⁶⁰ Idem, Act no. 140/26 march 1934, Gyula.

⁶¹ Idem, Act no. 153/1 september 1933, Gyula.

⁶² Idem, Act no. 1104/7 octomber 1933, Arad; Idem, Act no. 1396/4 january 1934, Arad.

⁶³ Idem, Act no. 160/1 april 1934, Gyula.

beautiful page in the history of the ROC, but also real sources of inspiration in various fields – that want to piece together the interwar landscape in Eastern Europe.

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