

The "Lord's Army" Movement in the Romanian Orthodox Church

The Lord's Army was founded in 1923 by a Romanian Orthodox priest from Transylvania, Iosif Trifa. Essentially a moral renewal movement, aimed at countering the strong influence of the evangelical movements, the Lord's Army developed into a lay-initiative mission movement within Orthodoxy. In its heyday in the mid-thirties and forties, millions of Romanian Orthodox, including priests and religious, took part in its activities of evangelization, printing and open air meetings. In 1935 the movement rejected attempts by the hierarchy to curb the lay role in leadership. Fr Trifa was defrocked and the movement continued independent of the Church, though its members continued to be part of the Romanian Orthodox Church. After coming to power in 1947 the communists banned the organization entirely and its leaders were imprisoned. Its most prominent leader, Traian Dorz, poet and hymn writer, has spent 17 years in prison and since 1965 has been under house arrest. The movement still claims up to 400,000 members, and continues to attract the youth of Romanian Orthodoxy. Its clandestine existence has brought its members much hardship, as the following document indicates. It was distributed by ALRC (the Christian Committee for the Defence of Religious Freedom and Freedom of Conscience) on behalf of the Christian Committee for the Defence of Religious Rights in Romania.

A LIMB OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH WHICH
CONTINUES TO BLEED: THE LORD'S ARMY

The fairly widespread impression that the Orthodox Church enjoys a privileged position in Romania is only partially correct. It is only one section of Orthodox church members who are safe from persecution: these are the conformists, who are willing to compromise with the atheists, or to resign themselves in the face of certain violent measures. The government officials who hold the monopoly on religious matters would like all Orthodox to belong to this category. Fortunately, the garden of the Lord is immense, and so there exists, apart from those people who are easily manipulated, another category among

Orthodox laity and even among the clergy which is becoming increasingly unmanageable, and consists of those people capable of thinking for themselves and assuming responsibilities. The regime would like to use the Orthodox Church as a missile with which to strike the other denominations, and it has to a certain extent achieved this. The regime has adopted the diabolical tactic of attempting to fuse together the concepts of "good Romanian" and "Orthodox". In the eyes of the authorities, a "good Romanian" is one who does not cause trouble and an "Orthodox" is, again, someone who does not cause trouble; so that if an Orthodox believer causes trouble, he can no longer be considered either a good Orthodox or a good Romanian. The confusion wrought by merging these two different concepts is extremely useful to those who intend to dominate by creating strife.

Thirty years ago, when plans were afoot to make Orthodoxy the official state religion — if not an actual accomplice in establishing the new order — there existed, on the one hand, the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church (i.e. Orthodox believers dependent on Rome but independent of the regime: a grave situation for a totalitarian State) and, on the other hand, the "Lord's Army", a movement to revive religious life within the Orthodox Church.

To eliminate the Uniate Church, the tactic of forced conversion to pure Orthodoxy was used: and for those who resisted, the tactic of extermination. Will it ever be known how many Uniate priests and believers perished in prison?

The fight against the Lord's Army was more difficult for these were Orthodox believers, and the most fervent of them. The Lord's Army was founded in 1923 by the priest Iosif Trifa of Sibiu, in conjunction with Orthodox believers, both priests and laymen, who wished to devote themselves to a more intense spiritual activity than was to be found in routine and formalism. They met several times a week for communal spiritual activities: prayer, Bible studies, hymn-singing and preaching. The various communities visited each other frequently, even if they were some distance apart, for a pilgrimage on a feast-

day, or the dedication of a church, or a special religious service. On such occasions several thousand "soldiers" would gather.

Any Orthodox believer may join the Lord's Army if he wishes to take to heart the advice of the Gospel and apply it in his own life, and is determined to fight systematically against sin — a battle beginning at baptism when the child becomes in fact a "soldier of Christ", in the words of the prayer said on this occasion. It behoves the adult who is baptized in Christ to become aware of his belonging to the army led by the Lord of Light and Truth. Thus anybody who is willing and able to mobilize himself in the fight against evil in himself and in the world can be a "soldier of Christ", becoming in this way an active participant in the salvation of the world.

The Lord's Army has awakened such enthusiasm and fervour, such capacity for sacrifice among even the most simple people that the coming to power of the present regime has not eliminated them.

In spite of the risks and attacks it has incurred — or rather, because of them — the Lord's Army has continued its intense activity without interruption, and on an increasing scale. The movement's ability to resist, its ingenuity and boldness, and the determination and perseverance of its members will provide a totally unique chapter in the history of the Orthodox Church.

In 1948, in its haste to liquidate all movements which it could not totally control and manipulate, the new regime launched a full-scale attack on the Lord's Army. It was announced through the priest Secaş (who represents a branch of the Lord's Army which is far too submissive to Caesar) that the Lord's Army had been dissolved, although no official decree to this effect had yet been published. That same year, in June, some of the most zealous organizers of the Lord's Army were arrested: Cornel Rusu of Simeria and Traian Dorz of Beius. They were released in 1952 but arrested again some months later. This time their fate was shared by Ioan Opriş of Călan, Serghie Paraschiv of Moldova, Eftimie of Moldova, Alexandru Codruţ of Nămolosa, Vasile Axinuţa of Lasna (Dorohoi), Carlinca of Suceava, Harasiniuc of Bucovina, Răcoviţeanu and others. They were released in 1954, but in 1958 there was another wave of arrests.

It began with a drastic warning: the

dispersal of a gathering of 2,000 in Preluci-Asău, near Comaneşti (Bacău). In the same year, at a meeting in Vulcana-Pandele (Tîrgovişte) in which Sergiu Grossu and Traian Dorz participated, the security police surrounded the building and took down the identity of everyone present. Around the same time, Dorz and Grossu had a confrontation in the Ministry of Internal Affairs with the then Minister, Drăghici, who announced plainly, "I will exterminate the lot of you!" Notwithstanding these threats, they were asked to draw up a statement in triplicate applying for legalization of the Lord's Army, and to submit a draft statute listing 22 names of possible leaders. This was nothing but a classical ploy to trap leading representatives of the Lord's Army. Arrests followed immediately: it was precisely the 22 persons nominated in the statement, representing regional groups, who were arrested. They were tried in Cluj and charged with belonging to a group of anti-State orientation. The name "Lord's Army" was enough to give rein to the most ridiculous and fantastic hypotheses. Anyone who belonged to the Army was suspected of belonging to an Army organized for regular armed combat. Arrests followed one after the other; people were rounded up by region. A total of 500 "soldiers" were arrested. Many were not released until 1964.

From 1959 to 1964, though deprived of its most active members, the Lord's Army continued its activities. Fraternal meetings were held regularly despite all the obstructions and dangers.

Although a respite was expected after 1964, people were still arrested. In 1965, at a meeting in the Banat, three Lord's Army members were arrested and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. They were acquitted, however, thanks to Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu's intervention on their behalf. In the same year David Bălăuţă of Iveşti (Moldova) was arrested; he spent two years in prison.

After 1965 the authorities adopted a method of intimidation which consisted of administering stiff fines to people found praying together in houses and in churches. In 1967, 400 families in the Lord's Army were fined twice: 40,000 and 60,000 lei. In subsequent years fines were administered in great profusion: in 1970, at Comăneşti, 20,000 lei; in 1971, at Simeria, 1,300 lei were paid by Cornel

Rusu and 1,000 lei by Traian Dogaru; in 1973, at Cluj, 9,000 lei; from 1973 to 1974, at Alba Iulia, 55,000 lei. During this time Ionuț Pod was fined 3,000 lei, E. Plăcintă 2,000 lei and Ioan Opreș 2,000 lei. In 1975, at Cărpinișul Sibiului, Dumitru Piliția was fined 2,000 lei; at Poiana de Sus (Sebeș), Ioan Voica paid 3,000 lei. In 1976, at Vintul de Jos, Ioan Magdici was fined 5,500 lei. In 1977, at Losna-Dorohoi, Emanoil Furtună paid 1,000 lei and ten others were fined 50 lei each.

Searches are another method of intimidation used not only against the Lord's Army. These are often carried out with a warrant based on a fictitious denunciation — possession of gold, jewellery, foreign currency or weapons. The following have been searched: Sabin Oprea in 1971; Cornel Rusu in 1974; Nicolae Moldoveanu of Sibiu in 1971, '73, '76 and '77; Petru Pop of Botiz (Hunedoara) in 1976; David Bocăneală of Cluj in 1977 (a number of Bibles were confiscated from him); Constantin Tudose of Galați; Virginia Cojocaru, a teacher in Măgirești (Băcau) — during a search of her home carried out in her absence, important manuscripts on the history of the Lord's Army were confiscated.

Traian Dorz, who has spent almost 20 years in prison since the so-called "liberation", is searched every year; his house and his movements are closely watched. Lately, the effervescence of the Army's activities has provoked the repressive apparatus to reactions of violence comparable to that of 20 years ago, although they attempt by every possible means to conceal it. In January 1978, in Suceava, the Security Police raided the home of Gheorghe Velniciuc and his family and broke up an innocent family name-day party.

Priests suspected of sympathizing with the Lord's Army are closely watched by the archpriests and the territorial inspector, who place them under virtual house arrest in their parish. In recent months certain priests in the Banat have received warnings in writing from their superiors ordering them to cease missionary activities in support of the Lord's Army. When threats do not produce results, administrative measures are enforced: the priest Ștefan Gavrilă was suspended from the priesthood for having introduced in his parish the greeting "Praise the Lord!", commonly used by members of the Lord's

Army. One of the accusations against Professor Gheorghe Calciu, who was dismissed from his post of professor at Bucharest theological seminary, was that he had supported the Lord's Army in his sermons.

The Lord's Army now has at least half a million adherents. Instead of halting the movement's progress, repressive measures — searches, discrimination, and confiscation of Bibles, printed matter, literature and manuscripts — allow it to develop continually. Repression, by creating apparent limitations, increases the tension and, consequently, the efficiency, of any real spiritual activity. It is this principle which made possible the Fraternal Council in Brașov in November 1976, attended by the 30 Lord's Army leaders. Although everyone who participated in the Council was afterwards subjected to investigations and interrogations, their enthusiasm was in no way diminished.

The ability to survive and the spiritual calibre of Lord's Army members should convince the Patriarchate to undertake at last to bring the Lord's Army under its protection. Otherwise, the Patriarchate would be a neglectful mother, for the Lord's Army is, after all, a daughter of the Orthodox Church — indeed, one of her most noble daughters. To continue to treat the Lord's Army as totally alien to Orthodoxy could eventually lead to a division between the broad mass of believers and the hierarchy, with the latter reduced to the instrument of those who aim to eliminate all true spiritual life in Romania.

Will the Patriarchate again fail to understand its higher interests, as it did when it became the executioner of the Uniate Church?

Lastly, and this is a constant source of insomnia to the church hierarchy, there is the far from docile attitude of certain priests, both young and old, who at the risk of being charged with insanity are determined to serve Christ with dignity and honour. One of these priests, Ștefan Gavrilă, was banned from priestly duties by the Synod in 1974, then pardoned by the same Synod on 10 December 1977, at the order of the Security Police given through the Department of Cults. The indulgence of the police in this case resulted from a reading of the material entitled "The Case of Fr Ștefan Gavrilă", broadcast by Radio Free Europe on 15 October 1977. This is added proof that one of the

ways to resist tyranny, whether directly or indirectly, is to denounce it, to strip away its anonymity, to cry out against the violations which have been committed, so that everybody will hear. Thanks to this kind of denunciation against tyranny, Fr Ștefan Gavrilă became a parish priest again on 1 April 1978 in the parish of Constandoiu, Vrancea district.

Fr Costică Maței, former parish priest of Titan parish in Bucharest, requested permission to build a church for the tens of thousands of families in his district; for this he was dismissed from his post, was treated rudely by the then Archiepiscopal Vicar, and was sent this year [1978] to Austria with his family. In this case, independent Romania has adopted the Soviet method of exporting — even free of charge — people who have become a nuisance inside the country.

The priest Gheorghe Calciu, guilty of preaching zealously and eloquently in church, and of being seriously and wholeheartedly involved in the training of future priests, was dismissed in May this year from his post of professor, which left him without a job. The authorities are planning to revoke his work contract, with a view to barring him from the priesthood and abandoning him to the mercy of the Security Police.* And this is the result of a vile plot by dozens of officials of the Patriarchate, who are priests themselves, and fully aware of the baseness of their actions, but are unable to retract out of fear and servility.

Lastly, there are many other priests, cloaked in anonymity, who make a huge effort to create a sort of positive diversion, attempting thus to snatch a little spiritual oxygen from the grasp of the totalitarian

regime for an unfortunate people satiated with slogans and thirsting after real spirituality. The efforts of some priests to teach the catechism to adults and youth infuriate church leaders and the Department of Cults. Other priests' attempts to repair or restore churches come up against the inertia of the church hierarchy and the hostility of bureaucrats who believe that socialism cannot triumph except by reducing to ruins the sacred traditions of the Romanian people.

As long as state and church leaders fail to understand that religious life in Romania must be allowed freedom to develop, history will place them — regardless of their zealous attempts to put up a respectable front — alongside those pagans who fought against the fundamental aspirations of the Romanian soul. Those who aim to eradicate religion in the Romanian people intend in fact to eliminate their ability to resist oppression. But the instinct of race preservation, by some mysterious alchemy, ensures that when spiritual affliction reaches its height, then the religious fervour of the masses increases also.

For this reason, if our hearts bleed at the sight of all the abuses mentioned here — and this is only a minute part of the huge Romanian chronicle of suffering for one's faith — yet we cannot keep from quivering with joy at the evidence that, as a divine consolation from Heaven, the Romanian people have been given a religious fervour comparable to that of the Christians in the first centuries.

Therefore, let us praise God, who uses even men of bad faith to achieve good, and let us pray, at the example of our Saviour, that He will forgive all those who — knowingly or unknowingly — persecute Him, who is the Truth and the Light.

*Fr Calciu was in fact arrested in March 1979. He was 52, and had already spent 16 years in prison during the Stalinist period before becoming a priest in 1973. In July 1979 he was given another prison sentence of ten years. *Ed.*