

PONTIFICIO COMITATO DI SCIENZE STORICHE

ANTAL MOLNÁR

CATHOLIC CONFESSIONALIZATION IN EARLY MODERN MOLDAVIA

THE SYNOD OF COTNARI
AND THE *SPECULUM ORDINIS*
OF BARTOLOMEO BASSETTI OFMCONV.
(1642)



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PREFACE

The Catholic Church, despite being by self-definition universal in nature, has always maintained important connections with states and nations. Furthermore, modern historiography, with its typically national basis, has treated the church's relationship with nations as an immanent fact and projected it back into previous centuries as a self-evident truth. We can therefore learn much by exploring the church history of border regions and peripheries, because the national component in these areas in the medieval and early modern periods is even more questionable than in the central or western parts of Europe.

The history of the Catholic minority in the Voivodate of Moldavia supremely exemplifies the truth of the foregoing statement. The story of a Catholic minority that, in the medieval and early modern periods, settled in a country where Orthodoxy was the state religion cannot easily be fitted into the history of church organizations that evolved within national frameworks. Predominantly ethnic Hungarians, but also including Saxons and Poles, these Catholics missed out on the process of early national development only to come under pressure, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from the Orthodox-based modern nationalism of newly-formed Romania. Historians approached these developments with their own means, and both Hungarian and Romanian scholars – historians, linguists and ethnographers – started to examine and interpret the past, and the identity of the Catholic community within the coordinate system of the modern concept of the nation. Romanians emphasized Romanian origins with a view to promoting the linguistic and national assimilation of the Catholics, while their Hungarian counterparts produced a historical account that served attempts to prevent assimilation and preserve Hungarian identity. This retrospective national approach placed the Moldavian Catholic Church of the medieval – and particularly the early modern – periods in a coordinate system that could not accommodate the

complex reality of fundamentally mission-type church institutions operating in a peripheral area, and in an Orthodox environment.

Perhaps the greatest merit of Antal Molnár's new book is that it consciously breaks from the engrained national-political mindset of Hungarian and Romanian historiography that has prevailed for the last hundred years. He has attempted to put the history of the Moldavian Catholic Church back into the early modern context in which its formation and operation can truly be understood. The Voivodate of Moldavia, with its Orthodox population and state religion, was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire, and the local Catholic Church, like Catholic communities in the Balkan peninsula, lay at the intersection of different church cultures and institutional systems. Hungarian and Polish suzerainty over this area in medieval times led to the presence of both of these countries' church organizations in Moldavia, and the Polish church maintained its presence until the early nineteenth century, even though the Holy See directly started to establish mission structures, some involving the Italian Conventual Franciscans, others the Balkan Observant Franciscans, in the early seventeenth century. The Polish court sent representatives to press its political interests, and Catholic envoys in Constantinople sent agents and spies with a similar purpose. The Moldavian Catholic Church was thus enmeshed in an extremely complex web of jurisdictional control and conflicts, political interests, and individual influences, creating conditions of operation that were often opaque to both clergy and laity.

I am particularly pleased that what gave rise to the book was the discovery of a document that was intended to regulate the ecclesiastical discipline and liturgy for this little Catholic community. We know very little about how the religious culture of Catholic minorities formed up in Eastern Europe, particularly those in the Ottoman Empire and its vassal states. There are hardly any surviving sources for their synods or the liturgical norms that regulated their sacramental life. This highlights the significance of the corpus of ecclesiastical discipline and liturgy drafted in the synod (or rather clerical assembly) of Cotnari in 1642. The decrees and the Moldavian ritual that it contains precisely reflect the complex reality of a church otherwise known to us only from the correspondence of missionaries. The decrees and the ritual compiled into *Speculum Ordinis* by the Conventual Franciscan missionary Bartolomeo Bassetti and the secular priest Pál Bellinus came from four sources, which flowed together to form the canon-law and liturgical landscape of Moldavia. The primary source was the *Rituale Romanum*, and that was supplemented by the provincial council of Nagyszombat held by Ferenc Forgách in 1611 and the *Rituale Strigoniense* published by Péter

Pázmány, both archbishops of Esztergom, in 1625. The benedictions of the Polish ritual, unified in the early seventeenth century, were also built into the liturgical corpus. Local Moldavian characteristics and demands also show up at several points in the synod decrees and liturgical headings. The book gives a fascinating and original account of the many-branched relations of the Moldavian church. Owing to the ethnic and linguistic affinities of the faithful, it draws strongly on the norms of Catholic confessional organization in Hungary, but it also takes heed of the other organizational ties of the local church and of conditions in Moldavia. The creativity, breadth of knowledge and sensitivity with which the Italian missionary and the Hungarian priest together compiled this collection of laws raises *Speculum Ordinis* above many of its contemporary counterparts in Western Europe.

Finally, I would like to express my delight that the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences and its leaders have made the generous gesture of including this book among their publications. Since the Catholic Church in Central and Eastern Europe evolved in historical circumstances that greatly differed from those that guided the development of the Western European church, I attach great importance to finding opportunities for presenting its history in scholarly forums within the church and beyond. With this English-language publication, the Committee is performing a great service to scholars interested in the region. The book will also be received with joy by readers in Hungary and Romania, whose story has hitherto reached the centre of the Church in Rome only in very subdued voices. Furthermore, it convincingly represents the spirit of the guidelines by which Pope Francis encourages historians to seek the truth free of ideology and represent the culture of dialogue. The book may thus provide an incentive to lay aside the grudges of a century and – making use of excellent Hungarian-Romanian church connections – to embark on joint research into the past of the Moldavian Catholics, seeking authentic, impartial, anachronism-free historical knowledge by which the Catholic community may shape its identity.

Esztergom, 20 January 2025