

THE TRANSYLVANIAN GREEK CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN PETRU MAIOR (1756–1821) AND THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN CATHOLIC ENLIGHTENMENT¹

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Abstract: In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Romanian Greek Catholic theologians embarked upon a canonical and doctrinal renewal of their Church, which has been established at the end of the previous century. The institutional consolidation of the Greek Catholicism was carried out in accordance with the developments within the so-called Central European Catholic Enlightenment. From the Romanian point of view, one of the main intellectual tasks was to give the idea of the reconciliation of the traditions of Eastern and Western Churches a chance. The essay treats the issue of the Catholic Enlightenment in the light of the works of the Transylvanian Greek Catholic theologian Petru Maior.

Key words: Catholic Enlightenment, Febronianism, Habsburg Empire, Romanian Greek Catholic culture, Petru Maior

1. The union between the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches in the principality of Transylvania as a part of the Habsburg Empire has been concluded in 1699 after only two years of preparation. The associated events and the consequences continue to have an effect even today and are extremely controversial. (Starting with the year 2001, the issue of the union is treated by the church historians of all denominations of Transylvania in the international research project of the Foundation Pro Oriente.) In its early stages the Romanian Greek Catholic Church was aiming high at conversion of the Orthodox. But in the second half of the eighteenth century, there might be perceived a renewal, which sought the synodal organization and management of the Church and the restoration of the *ecclesia primitiva*, the latter having been acknowledged as an ideal of the Christian unity that has been existent before the Great Schism between the Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Patristic and church history studies played a major role in these endeavours. The Romanian Greek Catholic theologians have worked to keep the particularities of the Orthodox tradition and at the same time to make certain that

¹ This is a preliminary part of a project pertained to the reception of the eighteenth-century German canon law and church history writing in the Romanian Greek Catholic culture. The research was conducted at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel with the scholarship of the government of Niedersachsen.

the renewal process within their Church will occur. In doing so, they witnessed the reform efforts of the Viennese government as well as the current developments within the Catholic Church. Petru Maior was one of those visionaries who wanted to give the idea of the reconciliation of both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches a chance. To perform the balancing act between the two church traditions meant, in fact, to give a new strength to the principles of the Union of Florence. The decree of union between the Greeks and Latins at the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1439 (*Laetentur caeli*) assumes an equal approach of the denominations to each other and protects in an equal manner the rites, administrative power and canonical rules of both Western and Eastern Churches. The works of Petru Maior played a key role for the Church reform undertakings and a detailed investigation of his literary sources constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for the understanding of his theology, which, given the current laborious debates, has gained new, surprising actuality.

2. The theological writings of Petru Maior should be connected to the main developments in the framework of the so-called Catholic Enlightenment in Central Europe in the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Maior's education in Rome at the Collegium Urbanum de Propaganda Fide (1774–1779) and in Vienna at the Collegium Pazmaneum (1779–1780) permitted him to embark upon a canonical grounding of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church. These efforts were complementary to those of the first Romanian Uniates trained in the European Catholic university colleges (e.g. Grigore Maior, Gherontie Cotore, Silvestru Caliani, Petru Pavel Aaron and others) in creating a specific Greek Catholic theology. Through the action of reasoning canonically and dogmatically the Church Union in Transylvania at the end of the seventeenth century, the Romanian theologians in the second half of the eighteenth century tried to remove the confusion within the church, which was caused by the lack of theological precision that dominated the documents of the Union signed by the metropolitan Athanasius.

3. Between 1783 and 1785 Petru Maior wrote two treatises on canon law concerning the synodal principle of the church organization and the institution of the protopopes: *Procanonul* [Treatise about the Canons] (the first edition: Bucharest, 1894) and *Protopopadichia* [The Privileges of the Protopresbyters] (the first edition: Vienna, 1865–1866). Maior's views on canon law were formed under the influence of the reformist thinking of the eighteenth-century German Catholic Episcopate against the absolutist principle of governing in the Roman Catholic Church.

3.1. Thus, *Treatise about the Canons* is an adaptation of the book by the auxiliary Bishop of Trier, Johann Nikolaus von Hontheim (under the pseudonym *Justinus Febronius*) *Justini Febronii Jcti. De statu Ecclesiae et legitima potestate Romani Pontificis liber singularis: ad reuniendos dissidentes in religione christianos composites* (Frankfurt am Main, 1763). Descending from Gallicanism (one of the main literary influences of Hontheim being the book by Bossuet *Defensio declarationis cleri Gallicani*, 1730), the Febronianism became more

radical than its model and argued the insubstantiality of the doctrine of papal primacy. The wrestling with the Roman ecclesiastical system gave birth to a dissident ecclesiological doctrine based on the synodal principle. This line of interpretation in the canon law has the origin in the medieval conciliarist tradition. Following the argumentation of Febronius, in the *Treatise about the Canons* Petru Maior discusses the issue of the conflict between the State and the Church, on the one hand, and that of the canonical foundation of the infallibility of the ruler of the Roman Church, on the other hand.

As regards the Church-State relations, the author firstly speaks about the different prerogatives of the Emperor and the Bishop. The separation of both powers is ascertained by their different goals: the imperial power seeks the “impermanent happiness”, while the ecclesiastical power seeks the “eternal happiness”. In Maior’s judgement, precisely these distinction characteristics should prevent the struggles between the princes and the bishops in order to make the public life safe. Furthermore, he offers reasons against the papal act of pretending the authority over “the whole world both in spiritual and temporary, earthly matters”. This is an error, which diminishes the authority of the Church. Therefore, the right of the Roman Pontiff to hold the legislative and executive powers in the Church should be challenged and the doctrine of infallibility should be viewed as a “ghost” and “superstition”. Petru Maior pleads for the transfer of the legislative and executive powers to the universal councils, which had governed the ancient Church.

3.2. The tradition of the early Christianity delivered Maior arguments for the thesis of keeping the Church synodal principle. In *The Privileges of the Protopresbyters*, which is an adaptation of the writing *Origines ecclesiasticae* (10 volumes, London, 1708–1722) by the English theologian and historian Joseph Bingham, the author has connected the epoch of the early Christianity with the ecclesiastical life of his own time, restoring, in the historical perspective, the institution of the protopopes in the framework of the Romanian Greek Catholic Church. Maior himself was a protopope and, therefore, he wanted to show the real prestige of this position in the Church. He considered that most of the Transylvanian protopopes were not aware of the rights and privileges conferred upon this status by the ancient Church. In this way, on the basis both of the old Eastern and Western canons and of the custom, the latter sharing the same power as the former, Maior establishes a direct link between the protopopes of the Eastern Church and the chorepiscopi from the hierarchy of the first Christian communities. This canonical lineage is treated in the two parts of the book, the first part dealing with the institution of chorepiscopi and the second one with the institution of the protopopes. As models for his treatise Maior used the writings on canon law and church history by the Protestant and Catholic authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries such as Johannes Morinus, David Blondel, William Beveridge, Caspar Ziegler, Pierre de Marca, Jacque Bénigne Bossuet, Claude Fleury, Louis Thomassin,

Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, etc.

3.3. In 1813, Petru Maior published at Buda *Istoria beséricii românilor atât a cestor din coace, precum și a celor din colo de Dunăre* [The History of the Church of Romanians from Both Banks of the Danube River]. The main objectives of the book are the further – as compared to previous theological treatises – doctrinal consolidation of the Church and the argumentation of the issue of *romanae descensio* of the Romanians. There is established a relationship between the Roman colonization of 107 C.E. and the beginning of Christianity among the predecessors of the Romanians. This fact stressed the genuine Roman essence of the Romanian Church. According to Maior, due to the geographical factor, the Romanians, being under the canonical jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, always belonged to Eastern Church. Therefore, after the Schism of 1050 they had to separate themselves from the Church of ancient Rome. The author shows that the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the Western and Eastern Roman Empire was followed by the disintegration of the Christian Church. This was a gradual process during which there were created different orders of rites and ceremonies prescribed for the ecclesiastical uniformity: in the East by monks and in the West, at Pope's initiative, by scholastic theologians.

Maior asserts that it is of fundamental importance to understand that there was not any lack of unity in the early Church. For that reason, the Union of the Transylvanian Romanians with the Church of Rome in 1699 was an act of re-establishing the apostolic continuity and of ascertaining the unity of the Christian Church.

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