

Rural Spirituality – nutrition for the soul. An Orthodox perspective based on Romanian realities and historical sources¹

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Abstract

This article gives a brief description of the actual situation of Romanian rural life from the perspective of Christian spirituality and a presentation of the main characteristics of rural Christian spirituality in the Romanian orthodox context. The final conclusion presents a few guidelines on how rural Orthodox spirituality could be made relevant in the actual realities of Romanian people. The author pleads for a realistic approach: it is not realistic to hope that a significant percentage of the population living in urban areas will move back to rural areas. Instead of nostalgia or artificial return to a type of Orthodox rural spirituality, the author proposes a creative use of its principals and values which can be lived out and implemented in any place.

Keywords

Rural spirituality; Orthodox understanding of rural spirituality; Ecumenism in Rural context; Ecology in Rural context

Introduction

It is a real honour for me, as Executive Coordinator for Church and Ecumenical Relations in the World Council of Churches, but also as an Orthodox priest and theologian and as a native Romanian, to be part

¹ This article is a revised version of the keynote paper presented under the same title on the Conference of European Network of the International Rural Church Association, Sibiu, Romania, June 6th-12th 2012.

of your conference organized here in Sibiu and to have the opportunity to give this keynote presentation. I was asked to prepare a paper about orthodox spirituality and its relation in rural areas and the Orthodox attitude regarding those who spend their lives in villages. As I prepared this presentation, I kept in mind the following personal elements that I would like to mention briefly here:

(1) I am myself an Orthodox priest who was born in a small place that was artificially transformed into a town during the communist time, being in fact a big village with some elements that could define it as a town: the mayor's house, a few shops, a hospital, a pharmacy, a high school and a few factories. My father was the first member of his family to leave his native village in order to learn a qualified profession and later get a job in the small town, not far from his native village. Although he was officially part of the urban population of Romania, he also built a farm that was run mainly by my mother. Many other families organised their lives in a similar way in many other small towns of communist Romania. My forefathers were all farmers, possessing important pieces of land which they worked in order to support their life. I was able to rebuild the ascendant line of my family from the beginning of the 18th Century and I am proud to say that my family belonged to the small Romanian nobility from the north part of Transylvania, whose rights and privileges were recognised by the Hungarian rulers, perhaps because they served in the Hungarian army as mercenaries. I say all this in order to underline that I will speak also from my experience of life with the rural area of Romania, both in the communist time and in the time after the changes that started in 1989.

(2) I speak here as an Orthodox priests who tries to observe the pastoral and spiritual dynamics in Romania. Most of my former colleagues from the theological seminary and theological faculty and now my former students are serving as priests in rural areas. Through them, but also through my relatives who are, with some exceptions, farmers, I feel that I am permanently linked to the situation and realities of rural life and spirituality in Romania.

(3) The five years that I have worked within the World Council of Churches has allowed me the privilege of traveling all around the world. I always try to understand the different dynamics of the life of the churches I visit. The experience of my wide travels, and also of living in Geneva, allows me to compare the Romanian situation with the situations in other

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parts of the world. Therefore, I hope that I am able to analyse the situation of the rural areas in Romania having in mind this worldwide perspective.

(4) As a member of World Council of Churches staff, but also as a theologian, I will try to analyse the rural spirituality from an ecumenical perspective.

(5) As a church historian I have the tendency to look at a situation from the historical point of view. My special interest for patristics will be also reflected in this paper.

Thus, I have written this paper bearing in mind these five aspects: my origins, my formation as an Orthodox priest, my worldwide perspective built from my working experience in a worldwide ecumenical organization and through travels, and my ecumenical and church historical formation.

Rural areas in Romania – a few characteristics and short statistic history

While speaking about the rural areas, the first tendency – at least in Eastern Europe, and I would add, especially in Romania – is to describe them as being less developed than the urban areas. And indeed, rural areas are less developed than urban areas in Romania. While most Romanian villages have electricity nowadays, many of them still do not have running water, are not connected to a canalization system or to a natural gas pipeline and the condition of roads are poor. The rural population is normally categorized as being less educated and normally trying to imitate –sometimes in strange ways – the life style and the habits of urban inhabitants. Authentic new ideas do not penetrate well into in rural areas; that is why the rural population is in general perceived as conservative or, even worse, narrow minded.

As I will present later, Romanian villages in our history served as a permanent source of human resources and as refuge in difficult times, such as wars or economic crisis. Traditionally, Romania was a very rural country. In 1930, 80% of the Romanian population were living in villages. Until 1948, the rate of rural population slightly decreased to 76.6%. Romania experienced a strong process of urbanization at the beginning of the second part of the 20th Century as a result of an aggressive and artificial industrialization implemented by the communist regimes. Consequently, in 1985 more than 50% of the Romanian population were living in urban areas. Current estimates suggest that 55% of the Romanian population

live in rural areas. According to UN estimations for the future, in 2030, 68% of Romanian citizens will live in urban area and 77% in 2050.²

This statistics clearly emphasizes that two steps of migration strongly affected the rural life in Romania. The first type of migration *from rural areas to urban areas* started in the fifth decade of the previous century and was determined by two factors: (1) the so-called “collectivization” (Romanian: “colectivizare”) which was implemented in Romania by the communist regime which forced expropriation of lands and other goods and creation of the so-called kolkhoz.³ Being put in the situation of working their own former lands which were included in the communist kolkhozes, but without really benefiting of the products of their own agricultural work, many young people left their native villages for urban areas. (2) the massive, aggressive and artificial industrialization promised – and partly also offered – an easier and better life in urban areas and was able to attract many young people from villages. Many villages were modernized and transformed into towns, so that in 1985 more Romanians lived in urban than in rural communities. The second type of migration *from Romanian villages to different European countries* took place especially after 2007 when Romania became part of the European Union. Looking for a better life and perceiving European Union as a land of promise, many Romanians, also from the rural areas, decided to migrate, particularly to Italy and Spain in order to work largely in agricultural and construction sectors. In the years before 2007, when Romania had the status of candidate for European Union membership, some villages were artificially transformed into towns in order to increase the percentage of urban population and to improve the chance of Romania to become part of the European Union. In other words, the same process of artificial urbanization implemented during communism was also used by the post-communist governments to increase the percentage of the urban population.

While the first type of migration allowed some Romanians to keep a certain connection with their native villages, the second type meant a total disconnection with the native village, its traditions and values. In

² These statistics were taken from <http://businessday.ro/07/2011/urbanizarea-romaniei-cum-a-crescut-populatia-urbana-de-la-37-milioane-locuitori-in-1948-la-12-milioane-in-1989/>

³ In Romanian, the official name of a kolkhoz is “Cooperativă Agricolă de Producție” (eng. Agricultural Cooperative for Production). It existed also the so-called “Întreprindere Agricolă de Stat” (eng. State Agricultural Company).

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communist Romania a large percentage of young people decided to leave their native villages, but they remained connected with their parents and relatives who remained in their native places. For many Romanian families living in housing blocks in the towns and cities of communist Romania, the week-end included a visit to their parents and relatives in the native villages. Many of them dreamed of reaching retirement age and returning “home.” The second type of migration makes this periodic connection with the native village impossible. For those who choose to migrate from their villages to Western Europe, the native place remained only a place to be visited, perhaps once per year.

The recent economic crisis which affects the entire world has slowed down the flux of migration. So far, people are waiting to see what will happen. It is encouraging to know that most of those who migrated from the Romanian villages to Western Europe kept their houses and properties back home.⁴ In practical terms it means that they have a place to return to. In my opinion it is unrealistic to think that many of them will return. However it is imaginable that some of them will have the courage to return “home.”

Rural spirituality. A few characteristics

Let me start this part of my paper with a few remarks from a historical perspective. History deals mainly with events that took place in urban areas. This reality is to be accepted as such, because the most important events took place in cities and towns and the most influential decisions were taken there. This affirmation applies also for the history of Christianity. It is generally accepted that Christianity first penetrated the cities and only later the rural areas. In general it is also accepted that the term *paganus* was originally used to describe a person living in a rural area who was

⁴ A specific phenomenon in Romania, especially in rural areas, is that of children who remained alone at home, while their parents left the country for seeking work in Western Europe. Such children are usually supervised by their grandparents or other relatives. Growing up without their parents, many feel abandoned and start looking for inappropriate companies. Many choose to abandon school or, in some cases, start using drugs or even commit suicide. Many of these children dispose of significant amounts of money sent by their parents who try in this way to compensate their absence. The Romanian Orthodox Church developed a special program for these children called “Nobody is alone.” Against school abandon the Romanian Orthodox church developed a program called “Choose the school!”

most often not a Christian. Step by step “*paganus*” defined what we call today a pagan, but originally it was “a habitant of rural area”. However, there is another theory on the meaning of the term “*paganus*” in the first Centuries of the Christian era which I would like to share with you. A pre-eminent Church historian writes that

“the word (i. e. *pagani*) means <country folk>, and the usual explanation is that urban Christians looked down on rural folk (sic!) who they believed stuck like backwoodsmen to traditional cults. More likely is that the word was army slang for <non-combatants>: non-Christians that had not enrolled in the army of Christ, as Christians did in baptism.”⁵

In any case, there is no evidence that Christian missionaries systematically avoided mission in villages. On the contrary, if we look at the mission of our Lord in the Holy Land as it is described in the canonical Gospels, we understand that he visited both cities and villages and preached and made miracles both in cities without any difference. The fact that Christian missionaries spread the Gospel firstly in cities is strongly related to the fact that they simply were able to reach a larger audience in cities rather than villages. For this reason, it is also acceptable that the theory that paganism survived in villages was because of isolation, but at the same time, there is evidence that a pagan elite, which was very apologetic and anti-Christian survived in big cities of the Roman Empire.⁶

Because the witness of the Church Fathers is so important in the Orthodox tradition, I would like to highlight here two examples from the patristics, in which the rural areas and their inhabitants are specially valued and appreciated by some Church fathers. There are many examples in this sense, but in a fair ecumenical way, I intentionally give you one example of an important Church Father from the East and another equally important Church Father from the West. St. John Chrysostom (†407) was born and spent a good time part of his life in the big city of Antioch⁷, in the

⁵ Diarmair MacCulloch, *Christianity. The First Three Thousands Years*, Penguin Books, New York, 2009, p. 156.

⁶ See Peter Brown, *Die letzten Heiden. Eine kleine Geschichte der Spätantike*, Frankfurt a. M., 1995.

⁷ In the time of St. John Chrysostom, Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. See Adolf Martin Ritter, *Studia Chrysostomica. Aufsätze zu Weg, Werk und Wirkung des Johannes Chrysostomus (ca. 349-407)*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 71, Tübingen, 2012, p. 185 with recommended bibliography.

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Eastern part of the Roman Empire. While he was teaching the candidates for Baptism about the meaning of being Christian, an unusual event took place in the respective urban church: people living in the neighbouring villages around Antioch entered the church building, listening to St. John Chrysostom's sermon.⁸ They spoke Syriac as their mother tongue and probably just a little broken Greek, which enabled them to sell their products on the market of the big metropolis. They were committed Christians, and perhaps some of them monks, however there existed animosities between rural and urban inhabitants, further added to by the ethnical division and by the different social statuses. St. John Chrysostom refers to them with the following words:

“Because today country people came to us and they conferred to our gathering a bigger gloss, we want, because of them, cover richer our spiritual table, which is also full of bigger love, as the love that they showed to us. So, we want to reward them and to recognize the sentiments which they elevate for us and strive our efforts in order to be particularly hospitable with them. They did not hesitate to lay back such a long way in order to delight us with their presence ... They are our brothers and sisters. We embrace them as our members and show them sincere love. We shall not be stopped in doing this by the fact that they speak differently, but we shall consider their spiritual state. We would not like to know their barbaric language, but their internal attitude. The Christian way of life that we try to learn with words, they show it to us in their action: they really follow the prescription of the Apostles to earn our daily bread with the work of our own hands.”⁹

It is remarkable to see how St. John Chrysostom tries to overcome the existing mentality regarding “country people.” From his sermon we

⁸ For a detailed description of the context of this paragraph see Martin Illert, *Johannes Chrysostomus und das antiochenisch-syrische Mönchtum. Studien zu Theologie, Rhetorik und Kirchenpolitik im antiochenischen Schriftum des Johannes Chrysostomus*, Zürich, p. 28-31. Martin Illert thinks that the visiting group described by St. John Chrysostom contented Syriac monks who visited Antioch at a certain occasion. Even if they were really monks and not simple farmers, I believe that this story offers a good example of the way how St. John Chrysostom understands to treat people coming from villages.

⁹ Johannes Chrysostomus, *Catecheses Baptismales, Taufkatechesen*, trans. by Reiner Kaczynski, *Fontes Christiani* 6/1, Freiburg, 1992, p. 465-468 (my own translation from German into English).

understand that the Antiochians developed a mentality that excluded those living in villages around the metropolis. A “we” versus “they” mentality was clearly there. St. John Chrysostom invites his urban audience to abandon this way of thinking and to accept their rural Christians fellows as brothers and sisters. This warm invitation to overcome such a division has a strong ecclesial background: as a Church man and theologian, St. John was fully aware that no division is permitted between people of the same belief. But his call for overcoming divisions between rural and urban inhabitants is based not only on ecclesiological-theological arguments, but it has something to do with the way in which St. John understood society. He was strongly convinced that we as human beings need each other in our daily life. As he specifically mentioned in his extensive writings, no society can function without hand workers or without those who live in villages and produce food. In other words, he was aware that the comfortable urban life of his fellows was possible only because they were able to benefit from the work of the peasants. The fact that people are interrelated in their daily life was for St. John evidence that communitarian life which reaches its highest expression in the Church of Jesus Christ is something that genuinely belongs to human nature.¹⁰

St. Augustine (†430) was a bishop in the North-African city of Hippo. His tremendous pastoral activity is well-known. I would like only to underline an aspect of his misiological strategy for the rural areas which surrounded the city of Hippo. Part of that rural reality were the Puns, an ethnic group of Phoenician origin which colonized large areas of North-African territory centuries ago. Some of them, especially those living in large Punic communities, spoke just a little broken Latin. Being aware of this reality, St. Augustine tried, without great success, to find Punic speaking clergy for these communities.¹¹ One of Augustine’s lecturers¹² Antoninus spoke Punic.¹³ As a good preacher, Augustine learned basic elements of the Punic language which enabled him, when a significant numbers of Puns were part of his auditorium, to speak out in Punic language

¹⁰ For more details see Adolf Martin Ritter (as Foot note 7), p. 34-94.

¹¹ Volker Henning Drecoll (ed.), *Augustin Handbuch*, Tübingen, 2007, p. 25.

¹² In latin *lector*= reader. A lector is a member of the small clergy, being responsible for the lecture of the sacred texts during the liturgical services.

¹³ Volker Henning Drecoll (ed.), *Augustin Handbuch*, Tübingen, 2007, p. 221.

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the most important messages of his sermons.¹⁴ I promised to offer you just two examples from the patristics which emphasize the importance given to rural communities by our Church Fathers. There are many other examples of this kind, so that, with a certain effort and a close look to the sources of church history it would be possible to write a history of rural Christianity.

Let me go back to the Christian rural spirituality of Romania. Some theologians in Romania are very enthusiastic in presenting and encouraging an orthodox spirituality that is connected only with a rural way of life. They present the Romanian traditional orthodox village as the ideal place to live and experience authentic Orthodoxy. Some of them idealize the Christian life that was experienced by our forefathers in the traditional Romanian village and consider that the only one way to rebuild a healthy Romanian Orthodox society is to go back to this traditional way of life. Such extreme tendencies have strong nationalistic links. I am personally against such an idealistic approach which I believe is based also on a strong polarization city/town – village. We need to promote a spirituality that is applicable everywhere and does not depend on the place at which are believers are living. The era of globalization we are living in postulates such an approach. However, the values of rural spirituality can be very helpful in building an authentic Christian spirituality of universal applicability. I will underline here a few aspects of Christian rural spirituality which could be relevant for our globalized world.

1. Identity and belonging. Life in a traditional Romanian village gives a strong sense of identity. A person is not only part of a rural community with its beliefs, customs and traditions, but is part of a family (clan) with its forefathers and its descendants. Belonging to such a family and community implies privileges and responsibilities. A person receives and provides support and protection. His actions build or destroy the image and reputation of its own, but also of the family he or she belongs to. This strong feeling of identity is missing in migrants. A migrant necessarily asks him or herself: “Who am I”; and “To whom do I belong.” The same question is extended to the children. Part of identity building is the ethnical and confessional belonging. In a traditional Romanian village, all these

¹⁴ Wilhelm Geerlings, *Augustinus*, Freiburg i. B., Basel, Wien, 1999, p. 57. See also Claude Lepelley, *Témoignage et attitude de S augustin devant la vie et la société rurales dans l'Afrique de son temps* in *Miscellanea historiae ecclesiasticae*, VI, 1983, p. 73-83.

features are part of the identity building of a person. It is very important to underline that all these elements of identity building: family/clan, ethnicity, and confession are not exclusive or racial. While being part of such an identity, Romanians know at the same time how to integrate other people into their own context or to let themselves become integrated in other contexts. Such an approach has certainly contributed in the good integration of Romanian migrants in the very different context in which they live.

2. *Ecology.* We have all grown in our understanding of our planets risks. Without taking care of our environment, the future of next generations is endangered. People living in rural area are closer to nature than those living in towns and cities and therefore understand better and respect nature. Producing food, they realize how important it is to have a healthy nature that is able to feed us. In a traditional rural life nature is also respected because as God`s creation. As human beings, we received nature as a gift from god that we are allowed to use, but not to misuse. As a sign of respect for nature and its essential elements, Romanian peasants used to call, for instance, the sun or the moon “holly.” Many ethnologists consider this approach regarding nature as being reminiscent of a pagan Pre-Christian religion whose elements survived in rural areas in spite of all the efforts conducted by the clergy to abolish them. There is no space here to build an extensive argument. I would only express here my serious doubt that such an approach regarding nature in a traditional Christian rural believe has pagan roots. I am certain that our peasants call the sun and the moon “holy” because there are God`s creation and everything that God`s creates can be called “holy.”

3. *Ecumenism.* In villages where an ethnic and confessional diversity is present, a sincere and simple ecumenism that is not conceptualized but is expressed in concrete action is normally practiced: participation in the feasts of the other community, as well as in the most important events of life: baptisms, weddings, funerals. What I very much like about this “rural ecumenism” is its naturalism and authenticity: nothing is staged; everything is natural and genuine. Transylvania is one of the very few places in Europe where all mainline Christian confessions lived together, also in the rural areas. In many Transylvanian villages Romanians, Hungarians and German-Saxonians lived peacefully together. They learnt to respect each other`s confession, traditions and ways of life and were ready to learn

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from each other. Such a lived and practical ecumenism is certainly a value that needs more exposure.

Concluding remarks

1. I began my description of the characteristics of rural areas of Romania by underlying that there is still a huge difference between rural and urban infrastructure in Romania. We have to be aware that rural inhabitants will only choose to stay in their native villages if they are able to have a similar standard of life as they would be able to in urban areas. It is essential to build a sustainable rural infrastructure that currently exists in Western Europe, where there are no big differences between the infrastructures of villages and those in towns or cities. I am happy to see that since Romania became part of the European Union, many villages have been endowed with a modern infrastructure. I only hope that this modernization has not come too late, because many Romanian villages are unfortunately depopulated.

2. I mentioned that the economic crisis slowed down the flux of migration. I hope that we all learned also that basic principles which are valued in a Romanian rural mentality like “do not consume more than you are able to produce”, “make savings regardless of how low your income is” or “hard work is the key to success” should guide our lives today, even though we may no longer live in the same village as our forefathers.

3. As theologians and clergy, we are not allowed to create or encourage any division or polarization between Christians living in rural or urban areas. In the face of our Lord Jesus Christ all are equal. There are historical evidences – and I presented some examples – that the Church never undermined but also never privileged its believers based on the place where they live.

4. It is legitimate to speak about a “rural spirituality” which is linked in a specific context and puts emphasis on certain values, however, an authentic Christian rural spirituality would not claim to have its own autonomy or applicability which is limited to a certain area. Authentic Christian rural spirituality is based on the same sources as the general Christian spirituality. It is mainly the experience over the centuries which made the Christian rural spirituality develop specific values.

5. The specific values of Christian rural spirituality as those that were mentioned earlier are applicable also in other contexts. In this sense they

have a universal dimension and can inspire Christians living in urban areas.

6. The Church of Jesus Christ is called to overcome all kind of divisions, also those artificially created division between rural and urban areas. I am strongly convinced that a harmonious future belongs to communities in which our villages have modern and ecological sustainable infrastructures and transform our towns, cities and big metropolis into “big villages” where green nature is omnipresent.