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Between Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy:  
The Religious Underground in the Twentieth Century  
East-Central Europe

Zwischen Orthodoxie und Heterodoxie:  
Untergrundreligion in Ostmitteleuropa im 20. Jahrhundert

| Review of Ecumenical Studies |



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# The Heterodoxy of Female Mysticism Before and During State Socialism: Vasilica Barbu and the Vladimirești Convent\*

ROLAND CLARK\*\*

*Vasilica Barbu, also known as Mother Veronica, a seer and then an abbess in mid-twentieth century Romania, had visions of Jesus, Mary, and a variety of angels and saints, beginning in 1937. Supported by her parish priest and other local believers, she published an account of her visions and founded a convent for adolescent girls. The Vladimirești convent proved to be very successful, but the Securitate (secret police) decided to close it down on the grounds that it was harbouring fascist fugitives. A close reading of how Barbu navigated the challenges of poverty, patriarchy, and the rise of state socialism reveals not only a story of incredible tenacity in the face of adversity but also how fundamentally religious values changed following the Second World War. Whereas in the late 1930s Barbu's visions enabled her to bring together a strong community of supporters and to attract the attention of the most powerful men in the country, in the early 1950s both Church leaders and the Securitate attacked "mysticism" as heterodox and socially deviant.*

**Keywords:** Romania; Visionaries; Gender; Women; Sexism; Orthodox; Monasticism; Communism.

In October 1937, a seventeen-year-old girl known as Vasilica Barbu (1920-2005) had a dream, she said,

in which I saw a young man of unusual beauty, dressed as a shepherd (*mocan*). He said to me, "Vasilica, go to the priests and the mayor in your village and tell the villagers to erect a cross with the image of the Savior, Jesus Christ, on it, for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>1</sup>

A week later, when she was harvesting in the fields with her younger sister, Barbu felt a fire blaze coming towards her. She panicked, made the sign of the cross, and saw the young man from her dream coming

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<sup>1</sup> Vasilica Barbu-Barbu, *Minunile din comuna Tudor Vladimirescu, Jud. Tecuci*, 2nd Edition (Galați: Tipografia "Cultura Poporului", 1940), 24. A typewritten transcript of the book can also be found in the Archives of the Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (Henceforth: ACNSAS), Fond Informativ, Dosar nr. 234104, f. 110–25.

towards her from the east. The young man, who later identified himself as St. Simeon the Stylite (c. 390–459), spoke to her, asking whether the girls were working alone, as it was improper for a girl to be out in the fields by herself. When she said that her father had just left with a cart full of pumpkins, the young man approved. He told her to look at a bright light that appeared in the clouds, and Jesus came down to her out of the light. Like Petrache Lupu, a shepherd from Maglavit, on the other side of the country, who had had visions of God in 1935, Barbu called Jesus “Old man” (Moşule).<sup>2</sup> “His appearance was that of an old man,” she said, “with a big beard, a curly moustache that disappeared into his beard, with silky hair down his back, and his clothing was long and white, such that only the toes of his feet could be seen, and large at the sleeves.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus too expressed concern that the girls were alone in the fields, he checked to make sure that she knew the young man she was talking to and investigated her lunch basket to see whether she was eating sweets on a Friday, when she should have been fasting. Jesus told her to tell everyone to observe three days of fasting a week instead of two, warning her that he would have destroyed the world long ago were it not for the prayers of his mother, the Virgin Mary, whose knees were marred from interceding for the world. Barbu objected that people would not believe her, and Jesus replied, “Don’t worry, they’ll see for themselves when death comes with all its terrors along with the horrors of the end of the world. Then they will cry out: ‘Oh, why did we not listen to the words of Petrache Lupu from Maglavit and Gheorghe M. Enică from Vlad Țepeş-Ialomiţa?’ But then it will be too late.”<sup>4</sup>

More visions followed, in which the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, the apostle Paul, the Archangel Michael, and other angels gave her various messages. In the second vision, St. Simeon instructed her,

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<sup>2</sup> Petrache Lupu, “Cum mi s-a arătat și ce mi-a poruncit Dumnezeu,” *Maglavit* 1, no. 1 (16 October 1935): 4–8. On Lupu’s visions, see Florin Müller, “Das Wunder von Maglavit,” in *Religion im Nationalstaat zwischen den Weltkriegen 1918–1939: Polen, Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn, Rumänien*, eds. Hans-Christian Maner and Martin Schulze Wessel (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 189–97; and Oliver Jens Schmitt, “Das «rumänische Lourdes»: Der gute Hirte von Maglavit zwischen Medialisierung und Politisierung,” in *Religionsgeschichtliche Studien zum östlichen Europa: Festschrift für Ludwig Steindorff zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Martina Thomsen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017), 263–75.

<sup>3</sup> Barbu-Barbu, *Minunile*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 28–29.

Tell people this: “That anyone who is fighting with his family, with his neighbour, to make peace and no longer live with hatred and enmity, to love one another. Tell them not to steal from each other anymore, not to work on Sundays and holy days, not to harness horses and steers to their carts anymore, going on with their work, for it is a sin, for animals should rest on holy days too. Tell them not to swear about holy things anymore, for it is a deadly sin. Tell them to keep the four fasts each year and the three each week.”<sup>5</sup>

Later visions condemned infanticide (“*copii aruncați de mamele lor*”), cohabitation outside of marriage (“*oameni care trăesc ca câinii necununăți*”), monks who drank in taverns, women who cast love spells (“*femei, care, când la Biserică se face Sfânta Leturghie, ele umblă cu necuratul în mână, să facă pe ficele lor să se mărite*”), and Christians who did not respect holy days but drank, smoke, and blasphemed (“*Creștinii în Duminici și sărbători, în loc să meargă la Biserică, se înfundă în crâșme, bând, fumând și înjurând numele Meu Cel Sfânt*”).<sup>6</sup> Barbu had only attended school for two years, so her parish priest, Gheorghe S. Dumitriu, recorded and published this and fourteen other visions in 1939 as part of an attempt to raise money to establish a convent.

Barbu’s presentation of her visions and her campaign to establish and manage a convent exhibits the variety of strategies a young female visionary could pursue if she hoped to attract popular support. The first published account of her visions repeatedly emphasised that she was not breaking any social conventions and was morally above reproach. Communicating with a host of heavenly messengers, she could not be accused of promoting one particular cult over another. Receiving divine endorsement for other visionaries such as Petrache Lupu and Gheorghe Enică, she placed herself in a supporting role as but one of several messengers God had chosen to speak through. By including the names of respectable men in the pamphlet, she demonstrated that she had no intention of upsetting social hierarchies. And the focus in her preaching on sins associated with the peasantry, such as alcoholism, petty theft, sexual immorality, and working on Sundays, meant that she was echoing the same messages being taught by moral crusaders among the urban elites.<sup>7</sup> Abortion was legalised in 1937, months before

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem.*, 34–37.

<sup>7</sup> Compare, for example, the topics discussed in Iuliu Groșurean, *Scrieri pentru popor* (Arad: Tiparul Tipografiei diecezană gr.-or. Rom., 1906) and Gheorghe Chirișescu, *Otrava vieții* (Mănăstirea Neamț: Tipografia Monastirii Neamțu, 1924).

Barbu had her visions condemning infanticide, but only for very specific medical reasons. It nonetheless appears to have been a relatively common practice and one that was frowned upon.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, these were the same types of sins and the same discourses about sin found in confessions written to Father John Sergiev of Kronstadt by poor women just before the First World War, suggesting that Barbu's way of talking about sin was typical for poor Orthodox women in the wider region.<sup>9</sup>

Barbu's self-presentation emphasised that she was not a threat to anyone but the Devil, yet she still faced hostility and scepticism from men at all levels of society. At the same time, her tenacity, persuasiveness, and the backing of key supporters enabled her to achieve the incredible feat of building a thriving convent from scratch at a time when very few resources were being invested in new monasteries. Visionaries were a relatively well-known commodity in interwar Romania, but few managed to capitalise on their visions and use them as the basis for new religious communities. Still fewer poor women were able to enter into positions of leadership and responsibility at a time when the majority of women could not vote, and in 1932 had only just gained the right to sign contracts or for married women to work in paid employment.<sup>10</sup> Barbu's stunning success, followed by the closure of the convent in 1956 and the nature of the attacks on her credibility as a seer and religious leader, reveal how dramatically attitudes towards mysticism and religious authority changed after the Second World War.

## Women and Religion

The study of women and gender in relation to modern Orthodox Christianity is a relatively new field but one that is growing quickly. Although scholars have noted that women are more involved in some spheres of religious life than others, they are yet to identify a particular "women's religiosity" or what Bernard McGinn has called "a distinctive women's mysticism" in the sense of drawing "general conclusions about the differences between how men and women use language and symbol

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<sup>8</sup> Cristina Sircuța, *Viața femeilor în România interbelică* (Bucharest: Oscar Print, 2016), 176–79. For Barbu's vision, see Barbu, *Minunile*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Nadieszda Kizenko, "Written Confessions to Father John of Kondstadt, 1898–1908," in *Orthodox Christianity in Imperial Russia: A Source Book on Lived Religion*, ed. Heather J. Coleman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 155–57, 164–66.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Bucur, "The Economics of Citizenship: Gender Regimes and Property Rights in Romania in the 20th Century," in *Gender and Citizenship in Historical and Transnational Perspective: Agency, Space, Borders*, eds. Anne Epstein and Rachel Fuchs (London: Palgrave, 2017), 143–65.

on the basis of any one pattern, form of language, symbol, or the like.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, gendered differences between men’s and women’s religiosity usually come down to the extent to which men and women have equal access to power within religious communities. Focusing on what women do rather than what they are excluded from, feminist theologians have argued that even while Tradition and church governance limit women’s access to leadership roles and exclude them from taking an active role in the liturgy, Orthodox women embody the church in practice because their community-building activities are central to transforming people’s lives.<sup>12</sup>

Anthropologists looking at Orthodox women’s religious practices in Eastern Europe and North Africa note that women discover independent spaces for their own creative expressions of worship through song, dance, or pilgrimage, grounding them in orthodox teaching, national identity, rituals related to reproduction and coming of age, and in devotion to the Virgin Mary or other saints.<sup>13</sup> In this vein, James Kapaló has noted that Gagauz women in Moldova are able to make money through healing rituals, and thus achieve limited economic independence, and that by performing charms and reading out dreams about the Mother of God they “transgress certain patriarchal religious boundaries whilst also confirming certain other social roles as mothers, carers and domestic providers.”<sup>14</sup> Performing female religiosity in marginal spaces such as outside or at the back of a church, on pilgrimage, or within women’s organisations protects them from accusations of heterodoxy or that they are challenging (male) church leaders. Galia Valtchinova, for example, has shown how under state socialism Bulgarian women explained their religious practices as purely devotional and as inspired by dreams and

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard McGinn, “The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism,” *Church History* 65, no. 2 (December 1996): 202.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Gwyn McDowell, “Seeing Gender: Orthodox Liturgy, Orthodox Personhood, Unorthodox Exclusion,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (2013): 73–92. See also Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald, *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the “Signs of the Times”* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999); Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, [1987] 2004); Leonie Liveris, *Ancient Taboos and Gender Prejudice: Challenges for Orthodox Women and the Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Cressida Marcus, “The Production of Patriotic Spirituality: Ethiopian Orthodox Women’s Experience of War and Social Crisis,” *Northeast African Studies* 8, no. 3 (2001): 179–208; Juliet du Boulay, *Cosmos, Life, and Liturgy in a Greek Orthodox Village* (Limni: Denise Harvey, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> James Alexander Kapaló, “She read me a prayer and I read it back to her: Gagauz Women, Miraculous Literacy and the Dreaming of Charms,” *Religion and Gender* 4, no. 1 (2014): 3–20.

revelations from saints as a way of rendering them politically safe from repression.<sup>15</sup> Historians of medieval Europe have described similar situations, where religious women “consciously created a liminal space” for themselves between secular society and the institutional church, “transcending” official structures in order to live religiously meaningful lives.<sup>16</sup>

In contexts where Orthodox Christianity is seen as the national religion and functions as what Matthew Engelke has called an “ambient faith”, women’s religious practices can contain potent political meanings that speak directly to large-scale political processes.<sup>17</sup> Without directly challenging the patriarchy or specific theological positions, women are able to create quiet sea changes in Orthodox beliefs and practices by virtue of their sheer numbers.<sup>18</sup> In 1939 Paraschiva, a nun at the Sămurcășești-Ciorogârla monastery, wrote *Testimony of a Nun*, describing her life story and the development of her spiritual journey. It involved trusting God, obeying her superiors, venerating icons, prayer, and pious dreams, but her holiness was enough that people sent her gifts and made pilgrimages to visit her, demonstrating the power of humble and self-effacing religiosity.<sup>19</sup> Pious Orthodox women also do not necessarily experience subordination as limiting in ways many Western feminists might expect. They sometimes argue that subordination to a male confessor allows them to reach greater spiritual heights than they are able to on their own, and that it is really the confessor who is supporting them in their spiritual journeys, not the women elevating the confessor to a

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<sup>15</sup> Galia Valtchinova, “State Management of the Seer Vanga: Power, Medicine, and the «Remaking» of Religion in Socialist Bulgaria,” in *Christianity and Modernity in Eastern Europe*, eds. Brian Porter-Szűcs and Bruce R. Berglund (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 245–67. See also Vihra Baeva and Galia Valtchinova, “A Women’s Religious Organization in Southern Bulgaria: From Miracle Stories to History,” *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (August 2009): 317–38.

<sup>16</sup> Alison More, *Fictive Orders and Feminine Religious Identities, 1200–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–2; Sharon T. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Heleen Zorgdrager, “Shaping Public Orthodoxy: Women’s Peace Activism and the Orthodox Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis,” in *Orthodox Christianity and Gender*, eds. Elina Vuola and Helena Kupari (London: Routledge, 2020), 149–70. Zorgdrager is drawing on Matthew Engelke, “Angels in Swindon: Public Religion and Ambient Faith in England,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (February 2012): 155–70.

<sup>18</sup> Kizenko, “Feminized Patriarchy? Orthodoxy and Gender in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 595–621.

<sup>19</sup> Paraschiva, *Mărturisirea unei călugărițe* (Bucharest: Tipografia Ziarului “Universul,” 1939).

leadership role.<sup>20</sup> This is certainly how Barbu described her relationship with the male authority figures around her.

In imperial Russia women's experiences of religion during the nineteenth century, like men's, became increasingly diversified as religious groups from Old Believers to Baptists – and everything in between – differed in their attitudes towards women's roles in the churches and monasteries. There was no single female approach to Christianity in imperial Russia, that is, but women in every confession found ways to worship within their traditions. Robin Bisha et al. argue that,

Exceptionally strict observance of religious ideals, conversely, enabled some women to gain unusual authority or autonomy as Holy Fools, spiritual eldersses, or *chernichki*, i.e., single women who lived pious, ascetic, and celibate lives alone in a peasant village and who supported themselves through craft work, reading the Psalter for the dead, and the performance of other religious functions. At least among the peasantry, women also appear to have played a disproportionate role within the local community in the preservation and transmission of religious culture.<sup>21</sup>

Women's religious leadership in rural communities became particularly pronounced in interwar Ukraine, where villages were deprived of their priests following the Soviet anti-clerical campaigns. Without their priests, women stepped forward and took over the teaching and ritual functions previously performed by the priests. When Romanian priests arrived as part of the occupation regime during the Second World War, locals resisted the reintroduction of a gendered institutional hierarchy and the priests had to fight tooth and nail to restore their authority within the communities.<sup>22</sup>

The tension between being marginalised and subordinated by church teachings and custom while nonetheless finding spaces for creative empowerment and ministry was abundantly clear in Vasilica Barbu's life.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 609–13. See a similar argument about medieval female mystics and their confessors in Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: University Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Robin Bisha, Jehanne M. Gheith, Christine Holden and William G. Wagner, *Russian Women, 1698–1917: Experience & Expression. An Anthology of Sources* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 234.

<sup>22</sup> Ionuț Biliuță, "To Murder or Save Thy Neighbour? Romanian Orthodox Clergymen and Jews during the Holocaust (1941–1945)," in *Religion, Ethnonationalism, and Antisemitism in the Era of the Two World Wars*, eds. Kevin P. Spicer and Rebecca Carter-Chand (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 305–30.

Both James Kapaló and Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy also point out that being female made it easier for men to disparage or curtail women's religious activities by suggesting that they were unorthodox, ignorant, or immoral.<sup>23</sup> In his work on *The Superstitions of the Romanian People* (1908), a seminary student named Gh. F. Ciaușanu (1889-1963) noted that “men are – always and everywhere – the least superstitious and religious, because are they both stronger and better educated than the more beautiful and weaker sex.”<sup>24</sup> Women, he argued, have “more abstract” spirits, are more inclined towards the imaginary and the sensuous, and are more credulous. Anti-sectarian writers in the mid-1930s also argued that women were more credulous and more likely to be deceived by religious charlatans.<sup>25</sup> Religious women were vulnerable to accusations that they invented dreams and visions through ignorance or flights of fancy, that their beliefs contradicted church dogma, and that they were leading others astray. Having to surround themselves with male supporters who could set their messages before a wider audience, or taking men as confessors and spiritual fathers, they also exposed themselves to accusations of impropriety with those men.

Women in mid-twentieth century Romania had few political or economic rights, but nonetheless discovered ways to navigate a patriarchal system that was systematically rigged against them. War widows, for example, travelled across the country to submit their petitions for land and pensions to the appropriate organization in Bucharest when their rights were being denied by local officials. They had to overcome a number of hurdles to do so, and women who claimed veterans' pensions by virtue of their own military exploits during the war were consistently rejected despite overwhelming proof because it was inconceivable to the policy-makers that a woman could have fought like a man.<sup>26</sup> Despite

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<sup>23</sup> Kapaló, “Wise Virgins and Mothers of God: Women, Possession and Sexuality in the Early Inochentist Movement,” in *Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews: Comparative Studies on Contemporary Eurasia, India and South America*, eds. Kapaló and Lidia Guzy (Münster: LIT, 2017), 137–65; Iuliana Cindrea-Nagy, “«... As the Young Girl Told Them So»: Women and Old Calendarism in Interwar Romania,” *Religion and Gender* 11 (2021): 22–24.

<sup>24</sup> Gheorghe F. Ciaușanu, *Superstițiile poporului român: în asemănare cu ale altor popoare vechi și noi* (Bucharest: Saeculum, 2007), 16.

<sup>25</sup> D. Croitoru, 1936, cited in Cindrea-Nagy, “... As the Young Girl,” 22.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Bucur, *The Nation's Gratitude: World War I and Citizenship Rights in Interwar Romania* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 121–22, 145–63.

a concerted effort by feminists to increase female literacy during the nineteenth century, in 1905 still only 32 percent of primary school pupils in rural areas were female, increasing to 37 percent by 1921.<sup>27</sup> Only 38.7 percent of women in rural areas could read according to the 1930 census, and only 36.3 percent of girls aged 13–19 in Moldavia – including in the cities.<sup>28</sup> Many parents in rural areas felt that education was a waste of time for girls, because a girl could apparently learn all she needed to know about housekeeping better from her mother than in a classroom. From the authorities' perspective, girls needed educating because most typists, lithographers, photographers and members of other occupations usually considered "feminine" belonged to ethnic minorities, and nation-builders wanted ethnically Romanian girls doing these jobs. State-funded primary education was extended to girls in 1924, but although a 1928 law stated that boys and girls should receive the same educations, girls' high schools were usually taught exclusively by female teachers with different expectations, as girls were not expected to attend university after graduation.<sup>29</sup> Women were consistently paid less than men for the same work during the interwar period, which was something that feminists struggled to rectify, but with little success. In 1932 a law was even proposed to deal with the economic crisis by forcing women whose husbands were employed by the state into redundancy to open up more jobs for men.<sup>30</sup> Women received new civil rights under state socialism, but at the same time some of the strategies that they had successfully exploited earlier in the twentieth century became irrelevant or less successful after the war. The sort of religious authority that Barbu had drawn on to build her monastery was one of the first victims of the new regime.

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<sup>27</sup> Ministerul Industriei și Comerțului, *Anuarul statistic al României 1922* (Bucharest: Tipografia Curții Regale, 1923), 285. On feminist efforts to support education for girls, see Bucur, "Between Liberal and Republican Citizenship: Feminism and Nationalism in Romania, 1880–1918," *Aspasia* 1, no. 1 (March 2007): 84–103.

<sup>28</sup> Sabin Manuilă, *Recensământul general al populației României din decembrie 1930*, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Institutul Central de Statistică, 1938), xiv, xxii.

<sup>29</sup> Sircuța, *Viața femeilor*, 118, 120–21, 130–31.

<sup>30</sup> Ghizela Cosma, "Aspecte privind mișcarea feministă din România în perioada interbelică. Anii '30," in *Condiția femeii în România în secolul XX: studii de caz*, eds. Cosma and Virgiliu Țârău (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2002), 86–90.

## Visionaries

Vasilica Barbu was not the only person to claim to have seen God in interwar Romania. Ion Popa Gheorghe, for example, a worker from Cuca in Argeş county, received a vision of heaven and hell, guided by the Archangel Michael.<sup>31</sup> In 1928, Bănică Doleanu, a shepherd from Cassota in Buzău county, had a vision of the end of the world. His vision fitted clearly into the Christian apocalyptic tradition taught by the Church yet was striking enough that a theologian from Bucharest wrote a pamphlet about him, basically arguing that more people needed to go to church and to take religious devotion more seriously.<sup>32</sup> In 1930 Nicodim Codrea, a peasant from Drăguş, a small village in the Făgăraş mountains, was taken up into heaven where he saw Jesus bind the Devil and cast him into the pit.<sup>33</sup> Writing in 1940, the architect and skeptic Mihail Urzică listed reports of

“Miracles” performed by Gheorghe Enică from Vlad-Ţepeş-Ialomiţa, by the woman Veta from Ferentari-Bucharest; by the girl Sorica from Prahova, and other similar cases. One also hears of other presumed miracles performed by the girl from Sodomeni, Baia county, by the child from Pungeşti, Vaslui county, by the man from Tecuci, by the villager from Bălţaţi-Iaşi, by the woman from Satul Nou, Tecuci county, by a child from Corni, Botoşani county, by a woman from the village of Plopi in Fălciu county, and by two other women; one from Iaşi and the other from Gruia-Oreviţa, Mehedinţi county.<sup>34</sup>

Tecuci county featured prominently on Urzică’s list, with two other miracle-workers alongside Barbu, who also came from here. So did women and children, who made up three quarters of the visionaries Urzică mentioned. Elsewhere in Moldavia, young girls in Old Calendarist (*Stilist*) communities had dreams in which God told them that the country should return to using the old calendar, eventually becoming regular conduits between God and their community.<sup>35</sup> In Inochentist communities around Balta,

<sup>31</sup> Mihail Urzică, *Minuni și false minuni* (Bucharest: Imprimeriile “Curentul”, 1940), 130–48.

<sup>32</sup> Grigore D. Cruceanu, *Minunea din Buzău*, quoted in Urzică, *Minuni și false minuni*, 149–61.

<sup>33</sup> Gheorghe Focşa, “Aspectele spiritualității sătești,” *Sociologie românească* 2, no. 5–6 (1937): 202–03.

<sup>34</sup> Urzică, *Minuni și false minuni*, 230.

<sup>35</sup> Cindrea-Nagy, “... As the Young Girl,” 22–23.

just across the border in the Soviet Union, Nicolae Popovschi wrote in 1926, “women appeared to be leading the whole movement: collecting money, gathering people together for prayer at night, helping to dig ‘miraculous’ wells, intervening with the local parish to conduct communal memorial liturgies.”<sup>36</sup> In addition to female proselytisers and community leaders, a woman by the name of Glikeria held the title of “Prophetess” and was apparently capable of seeing evil spirits possessing others.<sup>37</sup>

The most prominent visionary in 1930s Romania was Petrache Lupu, a shepherd from the village of Maglavit, who had his visions in 1935. After a series of visions and divine messages, Lupu began preaching and healing people. His success and the media frenzy that surrounded his preaching encouraged large crowds to descend on Maglavit for the next few years, and Lupu’s name became synonymous with belief in visionaries, miracles, and superstition.<sup>38</sup> Lupu’s celebrity was significant for Barbu; in her first vision Jesus explicitly mentioned Petrache Lupu alongside Barbu who was preaching the authentic words of God. Moreover, Barbu’s description of Jesus in her vision was almost identical to Lupu’s description, her warnings about divine judgement were the same, and her calls to repentance covered many of the same themes. In 1935 Lupu had told his hearers:

If you don’t repent, if you don’t keep the holy days, if you don’t go to the priest, if you don’t go to church, if you don’t go to the town hall, give up evil deeds, if people don’t stop throwing newborn babies into the fields, to the mercy of the cornfields, into the wells. Children shouldn’t laugh at their elders; no one should laugh at his brother. Stop stealing, stop quarrelling. The priest rings the bell, everyone stays home for the holidays. Don’t go and steal the corn from the poor. Don’t cut the fasts, don’t cut our holidays. When the priest rings the bell, when the semantron sounds, people go to church. Don’t swear, don’t fight, don’t set fires, don’t quarrel and feud. If you don’t, it’s coming; if you don’t, fire; if you don’t, we will destroy our work in all of Romania. And nothing will be left.<sup>39</sup>

Also, like Lupu, Barbu saw the devil, saw a vision of a cross, and received the supernatural ability to heal. During one of her visions Jesus told her,

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<sup>36</sup> Nicolae Popovschi, *The Balta Movement or Inochentism in Bessarabia* (1926), quoted in Kapaló, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity: Religious Dissent in the Russian and Romanian Borderlands* (London: Routledge, 2019), 84.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 85–87.

<sup>38</sup> Schmitt, “Das «rumänische Lourdes»,” 263–75.

<sup>39</sup> Lupu, “Cum mi s-a arătat,” 4.

“Call Dumitru from Cahul, who is deaf and mute, as well as Marița from Siliștea, who is possessed by an evil spirit, and Domnica from Slobozia Conache. Stretch your hand out over these three people and tell them: Your faith will heal you.”<sup>40</sup> At another time she healed a two-year-old child who was paralysed and a nine-month-old baby suffering from epilepsy. Both children came from Bucharest, which suggests that her fame was enough to convince people to travel significant distances to ask her to pray for them.<sup>41</sup> Those surrounding Barbu argued that the similarities between her visions and Lupu’s was evidence that they both belonged to a single movement of God across the country. One of her supporters, a Lieutenant Colonel Coman Ionescu, wrote that “it is a great blessing for us that He has chosen our Romanian people to speak with Him. This fact is a great comfort and joy for us, but let us pay attention not to lose our election as the Jewish people did. God has chosen to save our nation, and through Him to save other nations as well.”<sup>42</sup>

Ionescu was one of several men who surrounded Barbu during the late 1930s, encouraging her and helping to persuade others to obey her message. Intentionally or not, his suggestion that the Jews had lost their election also helped align Barbu with the strong nationalist and antisemitic currents at play within interwar Romanian Orthodoxy.<sup>43</sup> Alongside Ionescu, the account from 1939 mentioned Father Dumitru, the parish priest in Tudor Vladimirescu, Constantin Rotaru, a clerk at the tax office in Tecuci, the lawyer Traian P. Corodeanu, who was a lay member of the diocesan council, and the hieromonk Clement Cucu, who was the superior of Sihastru Monastery in nearby Buciumeni. In a later autobiography, Barbu also mentioned two plowmen from the village of Pechea, Ilie Badiu and Iordache Grigoraș, who she said “accompanied me everywhere during the two years I went through the world.”<sup>44</sup> Both eventually became monks, entering a monastery in Bogdana, Bacău county. The support of these men was crucial in

<sup>40</sup> Barbu-Barbu, *Minunile*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Coman Ionescu, “Semne și vindecări, spre adevierea sfintei lucrări de la Tudor Vladimirescu,” in *Minunile din comuna Tudor Vladimirescu, Jud. Tecuci*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Galați: Tipografia “Cultura Poporului”, 1940), 49.

<sup>42</sup> Coman Ionescu, “Dumnezeu vorbește mereu poporului nostru,” in *Minunile din comuna Tudor Vladimirescu, Jud. Tecuci*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Galați: Tipografia “Cultura Poporului”, 1940), 19.

<sup>43</sup> Biliuță, “Antisemitism in Orthodox Guise: Accommodating Fascist Antisemitism with Newspaper Rhetoric in Interwar Romania,” *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane Gh. Șincai* 22 (2019): 180–206.

<sup>44</sup> Barbu, *Viața Măicuței Veronica*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Editura Arhetip, 1992), 50.

allowing a barely literate girl to obtain the support of senior church leaders and to collect enough money to start a convent.

### Hard Times

In addition to the account of Barbu's visions edited by these men and published in 1939, we also have her autobiography from 1953 and a second volume completed in 1977. Whereas the account from the 1930s presented Barbu as a pious and respectful but otherwise unremarkable girl, the first volume of her autobiography revealed significant problems that she had had to face before becoming a famous seer. The purpose of the earlier account was to establish the truth of her visions and to raise her public profile. It therefore focused primarily on the content of the visions and revealed very little about her background or personal life. The later account, written after she was an established abbess, presented her within a hagiographical tradition where an innocent suffers but is rewarded with supernatural grace. Barbu, whose surname was originally Gurău, wrote that her mother's first husband had died in the First World War, leaving her an impoverished widow who had no way to take care of her children other than to marry her daughters off as quickly as possible. A love affair with a school inspector from a nearby city did not help her much, as he refused to acknowledge paternity of their child and provided no support for raising the young Vasilica. Her mother died when she was only six or seven years old, leaving her without a legal guardian. Instead, her mother pointed Vasilica to an icon of the Virgin Mary and told her "You see her? Pray to her from now on, for she is your true mother, and don't expect mercy from anyone except from her."<sup>45</sup> She was taken in by her brother and his wife, who beat her, locked her up, starved her, and badly mistreated her for two years until she escaped and was taken in by kind neighbours, Ionică and Maria Barbu, who treated her as their own daughter.<sup>46</sup> Barbu's story underscores how precarious her situation was as an orphan, a woman, and as a survivor of abuse. It resonates with similar accounts from the archives of the veteran's administration about the difficult situations many widows and orphans found themselves in after the war, with some widows being denied pensions and unable to support

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 13–30.

their children, and orphans having their allowances and land stolen by their legal guardians.<sup>47</sup>

Barbu writes that she prayed frequently to the Virgin Mary as a child and repeatedly received supernatural comfort. Barbu was a very religious child who reveled in going to church, including attending meetings of the Lord's Army (Oastea Domnului), a revival movement that encouraged temperance, communal prayer, singing, and Bible reading.<sup>48</sup> She reported having had dreams and visions from the time of her mother's death until she turned seventeen. Stories about her being born out of wedlock, having suffered severe childhood trauma, and having had religious visions since childhood would probably not have encouraged her listeners to believe in her as a seer, so it is unsurprising that they were omitted from the earlier account. One text from 1904, for example, taught that "only marriage is able to properly form children, to allow one to make his offspring happy, for their good and for the good of the nation and the country." A "badly raised" child, on the other hand, "is not good for anything but is a burden on others."<sup>49</sup> Despite later being welcomed into a loving family, being born out of wedlock and her history of loss and abuse would have made it difficult for anyone to argue that she was "well raised" according to the standards of contemporary Orthodoxy.

Barbu's family was apparently not very religious and did not believe in her visions at first. Others in the village claimed that she was mentally unsound, but a doctor examined her and said that she was sane, and her father became one of her strongest supporters after he had a conversion experience of his own.<sup>50</sup> Stories about divine retribution on unbelievers feature prominently in Barbu's autobiography, as they did in some published accounts of Petrache Lupu's visions.<sup>51</sup> People were struck dumb for disbelieving her, and she tells one story of a demon-possessed priest who tried to have her killed. Accompanied by a couple of male supporters, she visited Vlad Tepeș in Ialomița county, presumably to meet the visionary Gheorghe Enică. Here a gendarme assaulted her. He beat her badly, but she did not feel a thing.

<sup>47</sup> Bucur, *The Nation's Gratitude*, 145–88.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, 39–40. On the Lord's Army, see Roland Clark, *Sectarianism and Renewal in 1920s Romania: The Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation Building* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 143–67.

<sup>49</sup> Ștefan Călinescu, *Dialog între Moș Dragne și Logofătul Stoica Călinănu explicând întregul organism liturgic* (Bucharest: Tipografia Gutenberg, 1904), 141.

<sup>50</sup> Barbu, *Viața Măicuței Veronica*, vol. 1, 43–47.

<sup>51</sup> "Semne nouă la Maglavit," *Lumina satelor* 14, no. 38 (15 Sept 1935): 1; "Minuni și pedepse Dumnezești la Maglavit," *Cuvântul Maglavitului* 1, no. 2 (25 Dec 1935): 4.

When he got home that night, he discovered that all of his blows had actually fallen on his baby son instead. He wrote to her the next day apologizing and asking for forgiveness.<sup>52</sup> Barbu had established quite a reputation for herself by this time, and pious young women travelled over 100 miles to gather with her to pray, sing, and read the Bible.<sup>53</sup> Many of these women were at an age when they should have been getting married and having children, but doing so would have tied them to a life of difficult domestic and farming duties in a world that had little time for the things of God.

In the summer of 1938 Barbu travelled to Bucharest “to present God’s will to the country’s great men, according to Jesus’ command.”<sup>54</sup> Her first stop was to see the patriarch, Miron Cristea (1868-1939). She was accompanied by Coman Ionescu and a priest who she met for the first time on this journey. The priest’s name was Irineu Mihălcescu (1874-1948). Barbu’s autobiography gives no indication of how she met Mihălcescu, but she could not have found a better spokesperson. Mihălcescu was a renowned theologian and teacher who was close to the patriarch.<sup>55</sup> The patriarch refused to see her but did allow her to speak at a meeting of the “Miron Cristea” Society. Her speech was broadcast over the radio, but she left disappointed and did not attempt to meet with other important people because, she writes, “if the head of the church did not receive me, who else would?”<sup>56</sup> Her attitude towards Miron Cristea suggests that she did not fully appreciate that he was also the prime minister at the time. She had in fact gone to one of the most powerful men in the country.

In August 1938, Jesus appeared to Barbu in a vision and told her to build a convent in the field where he had first appeared to her. She went to the bishop in Roman who gave her permission to build a convent for virgin girls, but he would not help her because he said that there were already too many monasteries which were falling down and he did not have the funds to build a new one for a group of adolescent girls. There was widespread scepticism about how much monasteries contributed to the community at this time, and the church was working hard to convince the public that monks and nuns did earn their keep. According to the author and former monk Damian Stănoiu (1893-1956), nuns “work fifteen and even twenty

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<sup>52</sup> Barbu, *Viața Măicuței Veronica*, vol. 1, 47–50.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, 57–58.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Ion Vicovan, *Ioan Irineu Mihălcescu - “Apostol al Teologiei românești”*, vol. 1 (Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Barbu, *Viața Măicuței Veronica*, vol. 1, 65.

hours a day without even a little rest,” embroidering lace for sale on the open market.<sup>57</sup> It took time to establish a convent as a profitable business though, and Barbu records her biological father’s incredulity when he heard that they were planning to start a convent when none of them knew how to farm.<sup>58</sup> It is possible that behind the bishop’s hesitancy lay a scepticism about the girls’ ability to manage the property when even grown men were finding it difficult to run established monasteries. In the end Barbu’s adopted father donated some land, saying that “the place is not mine, but God’s,” and other girls contributed their dowries in land or money.<sup>59</sup> She took her vows in August 1940, taking the name Veronica. She spent the next three years travelling around the country begging for money, especially through southern Transylvania. Construction began on the convent in September 1939, but progress was slow due to lack of funds and the church was not consecrated until August 1943.<sup>60</sup> Barbu’s account of the convent’s early years is one of continuous hardships and danger, including an encounter with Soviet troops when they conquered the area in 1944. Throughout she emphasized that the Virgin Mary was watching over them and prevented any harm coming to them.<sup>61</sup> Despite these challenges, the convent had become a well-functioning community by the late 1940s, and Mother Veronica was able to complete her schooling, graduating in 1951 with eight years of education and three hectares of land to her name.<sup>62</sup>

### Mother Veronica and the Securitate

The success of the convent increasingly attracted pilgrims, some of whom came for healing or confession. According to one report, 15,000 people gathered “from all corners of the country” to hear Ioan Silviu Iovan (1922-2008), the convent’s priest, preach on 15 August 1954.<sup>63</sup> Iovan later recalled healing a demon-possessed woman and told a story about two

<sup>57</sup> Damian Stănoiu, *Cum se vizitează o mănăstire* (Bucharest: Tip. “Convorbiri Literare”, 1923), 17.

<sup>58</sup> Barbu, *Viața Măicuței Veronica*, vol. 1, 121.

<sup>59</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Informativ, Dosar nr. 160128, vol. 1, f. 75–76, quoted in Cristina Plămădeală, “The Vladimirești Monastery in Securitate Files”, *Arhiva Moldaviei*, 13 (2021): 202.

<sup>60</sup> Barbu, *Viața Măicuței Veronica*, vol. 1, 75–172.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 126–203.

<sup>62</sup> ANCSAS, Fond Penal, Dosar nr. 160, vol. 3, f. 364.

<sup>63</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Informativ, Dosar nr. 60128, vol. 1, f. 45; Plămădeală, “Antonie Plămădeală and the Securitate in the years 1940s–1950s,” *Arhiva Moldaviei* 8 (2016): 226.

blind children who were healed during a church service there.<sup>64</sup> Artists produced photo-collages, postcards, and devotional objects that were sold as mementos of pilgrim's visits to the site.<sup>65</sup> Concerned about the convent's success, the communist regime approached Mother Veronica in 1948 asking her to convert it into a commune run by the Central Committee. She refused.<sup>66</sup> That year the Securitate decided that Orthodox monasteries represented a serious security problem. In the words of one report,

There are 176 monasteries with 5,941 monks. These monasteries are either situated in towns, close to churches, schools, or other public places, which makes surveillance difficult, or are situated in isolated regions which allow fugitives from the law shelter. The experience of neighbouring popular democracies as well as the experience of our secret services has proven that many monasteries have become sanctuaries for legionary elements or members of the resistance or clandestine arms deposits.<sup>67</sup>

Over the next ten years the Securitate made examples first of Vladimirești convent and then of Silastra and Antim monasteries as the part of a sustained campaign to undermine the strength of monasticism.<sup>68</sup> When it did so, however, it did not attack "religion" or "mysticism" directly, but attempted to discredit leading mystics as insufficiently orthodox. As one document explained,

Dissolving religion through administrative measures rather than through the fight towards the gradual unmasking of its reactionary and idealistic nature would hurt the cause of the proletariat, it would distract some less conscious proletarian and working peasantry [sic] elements from their class struggle. It must not be forgotten either that the class enemy hides behind the mask of piety, in order to artificially cause religious agitation and to alienate the working men from the

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<sup>64</sup> Cristina Stavrofora, *Părintele Ioan Iovan de la Mănăstirea "Nașterea Maicii Domnului" – Recea de Mureș* (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2002), 30–32.

<sup>65</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Informativ, Dosar nr. 60128, vol. 1, f. 228; Gabriel Hanganu, "«Photo-Cross»: The Political and Devotional Lives of a Romanian Orthodox Photograph," in *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, eds. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (London: Routledge, 2004), 156–74.

<sup>66</sup> Hanganu, "Photo-Cross," 160.

<sup>67</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, Dosar nr. 74, vol. 3, quoted in Cristian Vasile, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română în primul deceniu comunist* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2005), 247.

<sup>68</sup> Vasile, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 248.

vital issues of revolutionary class struggle, from the fulfilment of the great tasks that lie before our People's Republic.<sup>69</sup>

The Securitate's attack on Vladimirești convent was made possible by two individuals in particular. The first was Maria Iordache (1914-1963), who had joined the convent in mid-1942. Six years older than Barbu, Iordache had been a sympathizer of the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael since high school, and several of her family members were active in the movement. She joined herself when she started university in 1934 but was arrested in 1938 for protesting the arrest of the Legion's leader, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (1899–1938). Iordache daringly escaped from prison, injuring her back in the process, and lived in hiding until the Legion came to power in September 1940. She witnessed the exhumation of Codreanu's corpse in November 1940, and apparently lost faith in fascism when she realised that he really was dead.<sup>70</sup> Interrogated in prison in 1955, Iordache said that she had visited the Vladimirești convent in 1940 and liked it, returning in 1942 to become a nun herself. "The abbess, Mother Veronica, accepted my wish," she said, "on the condition that I completely obey the monastic discipline in the convent without engaging in other activities, particularly not political activities, which I accepted."<sup>71</sup> She spent the first three years as an ordinary nun and became the convent's secretary in 1945, a position that she held for the next ten years. Iordache's presence in the convent allowed the Securitate to assert that Mother Veronica was harbouring legionaries and cultivating an attitude hostile to the regime.

Iordache appears to have kept her promise about not engaging in politics, but she did receive visits from old friends in the Legion, who brought her clothing and helped carry out repairs on the property.<sup>72</sup> She also sang legionary songs together with her visitors and other nuns.<sup>73</sup> Other legionaries found their way to the convent too, perhaps because

<sup>69</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, Dosar no. 195, vol. 2, f. 2–3, quoted in Ioana Ursu, "Perceiving Religious Mysticism in the Key of Political Repression: The «Burning Bush» Group," *Museikon* 3, no. 3 (2018): 57.

<sup>70</sup> Clark, "Die Damen der Legion: Frauen in rumäisichen faschistischen Gruppierungen," trans. Andreas Rathberger, in *Inszenierte Gegenmacht von rechts: Die "Legion Erzengel Michael" in Rumänien 1918–1938*, eds. Armin Heinen and Oliver Jens Schmitt (Munich: Oldenberg, 2013), 207–09.

<sup>71</sup> ANCSAS, Fond Penal, Dosar nr. 160, vol. 3, f. 199–201.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 3, f. 199–205, 364–367; vol. 14, f. 274–81.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 15, f. 110.

news that Iordache was living there had spread through clandestine networks. When the Securitate tried to build a case proving that the convent was “infested” with legionaries in 1955, they stated that, among other things, Iordache and other nuns had provided food and shelter to a handful of German soldiers in 1945, an anti-communist activist by the name of Păiș Giță had received shelter there in 1950, a legionary from Tecuci named Aurel Tacu had attended a church service there in 1954, another legionary had stayed for a month before deciding to become a monk himself, and a fugitive by the name of Ioan Lupeș had hidden there after shooting two policemen. Iordache also confessed to numerous short visits from old friends from the Legion, with whom she said she mostly spoke about “religious matters”.<sup>74</sup> For her part, Mother Veronica admitted to having given money to support the families of imprisoned legionaries, but placed the responsibility on Iordache and Iovan, saying that Iordache had “insisted” that they contribute to the cause.<sup>75</sup> Neither the Securitate’s “evidence” nor the women’s confessions, which may have been extracted under torture, are completely reliable, but the number of confessions from a variety of different people suggest that people with legionary pasts did indeed visit the convent between 1942 and 1955 and that some of the nuns were sympathetic to the Legion. It is doubtful, however, that there was an organised legionary network there carrying out political activities.<sup>76</sup>

According to the Securitate, the hieromonk Ioan Iovan also encouraged legionary connections with the convent. Iovan had studied theology in Cluj between 1942 and 1946, before beginning a PhD on Orthodox mysticism under the direction of the renowned theologian Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993). He abandoned his studies in 1948, however, becoming a monk and Mother Veronica’s confessor at the Vladimirești convent.<sup>77</sup> While looking for evidence of “counter-revolutionary activities in monasteries,” Securitate officers suggested that Father Iovan and Mother Veronica must have been lovers. They subjected Mother Veronica and her

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 1, 22–27, 108–09; vol. 2, f. 104–12; vol. 3, f. 364–67; vol. 13, f. 171–72.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 3, f. 366, 373–74.

<sup>76</sup> Historians disagree on exactly how much truth there was to the accusations against the convent. See: Vasile, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 251–57; Plămădeală, “Antonie Plămădeală,” 225.

<sup>77</sup> ANCSAS, Fond Penal, Dosar nr. 160, vol. 3, f. 8–10; Stavrofora, *Părintele Ioan Iovan*.

nuns to gynaecological examinations to check if they were still virgins.<sup>78</sup> Anca Şincan and others have noted that Securitate (Communist-era secret police) officers often applied their own moral frameworks to their investigations. Without clearly defining what counted as moral, they nonetheless recorded and sometimes invented accusations of immorality to discredit their subjects.<sup>79</sup> Insofar as such accusations were effective against men, they were doubly so when directed against women such as Barbu.

Iovan's sermons and religious practices also caused concern both for the Securitate and for leaders within the Orthodox Church. According to a confession by one of the nuns, Ileana Aurica (Epiharia),

In the beginning Fr. IOAN did not preach against the party as far as I can remember. But after these sermons which had a strongly religious character, more and more people became to come. Many people came and these two priests could not satisfy the wishes of them all. In 1952 he began to introduce new methods in the convent which stood out from the other monasteries and churches. These new methods which Fr. IOAN practiced were communal confession, when everyone receives the Eucharist together at once after confession.<sup>80</sup>

Concerned both about his popularity and his unusual innovations, in 1954 the Holy Synod, which by now was dominated by clergy willing to collaborate with the communists, ordered Iovan either to stop preaching or to leave the convent. He refused, accusing the Patriarch of behaving as a puppet for the Ministry of the Interior. For its part, the Synod declared the convent to be “infected, lost, and dangerous to the rest of the Church.”<sup>81</sup> The Synod's condemnation of the convent was compounded by criticisms from other leading monastic voices. During her interrogations in 1955, Mother Veronica mentioned being visited by “three monks who had been legionaries” – Antonie Plămădeală (1926–2005),

<sup>78</sup> Petre Pandrea, “Călugărul alb“ 50, 90, [http://ioaniovan.ro/cartii/\(Pandrea%20Petre\)%20Calugarul%20Alb.pdf](http://ioaniovan.ro/cartii/(Pandrea%20Petre)%20Calugarul%20Alb.pdf), accessed: 9 March 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Anca Şincan, “If Sex were a Factor... The Securitate Archives and Issues of Morality in Documents Related to Religious Life,” in *The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, eds. Kapaló and Kinga Povedák (London: Routledge, 2022), 302–16; Plămădeală and Cristian Tileaga, “The Moral Career of a Suspected Legionary: Psychological Language in the Securitate Archives,” *East European Politics and Societies*, Published online October 2021. Doi:10.1177/08883254211025603.

<sup>80</sup> ANCSAS, Fond Penal, Dosar nr. 160, vol. 15, f. 131.

<sup>81</sup> Ioan Iovan, “Memoriul adresat membrilor Sinodului BOR la 25 ianuarie 1955,” in *A fost frumos la Gherla!*, Iovan (Cluj-Napoca: Patmos, 2009), 36.

Arsenie Papacioc (1913-2011), both from Slatina monastery, and a monk from Iași, Roman [Braga] (1922-2015).<sup>82</sup> All three were critical of Vladimirești convent. Another monk from Slatina, Vasile Gavril, later told the Securitate that the entire community at Slatina had been “sons of Vladimirești because that was where we grew up spiritually.” He also said, however, that Mother Veronica had received a vision that “when the whole Romanian nation had passed through that holy place, and all partake of the Holy Mysteries, those who believe will go to the right and those who do not believe will go to the left,” a reference to Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), in which those on the right receive eternal life and those on the left eternal punishment.<sup>83</sup>

The monks at Slatina had become concerned that the success of Vladimirești and Mother Veronica’s insistence on her divine calling was putting them all at risk. Talking to his fellow prisoners in 1960, Papacioc said that Iovan “erred very badly, not only because he broke old traditions and fixed canons, but because he sought popularity out of pride, narrowly, for that convent of nuns, without taking into account the common effort which must be made today with great prudence against a much greater danger which threatens all churches and not just that convent there.”<sup>84</sup> At the urging of the inspector of monasteries from the Archbishop of Bucharest (who had the support of the secret police behind him), Papacioc, Plămădeală, and their abbot, Cleopa Ilie (1912-1998), composed a letter to Mother Veronica complaining that by forgiving sins collectively they were putting the other monks, who followed canon law properly, in a bad light.<sup>85</sup> “Some believers,” they wrote, “testify that they were terrified from the sermons that if they do not receive the Holy Mysteries they are enemies of God and sons of the Devil, and they received the Eucharist out of fear.” They also claimed that they had seen pamphlets circulating with Mother Veronica’s visions and miracles that were “sometimes contradictory, at other times filled with incorrect teachings and very far from ideas that we are used to having about divine revelations.”<sup>86</sup> The Sibiu-based theologian Dumitru Stăniloae published a biting condemnation of collective confession in the Church’s leading

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<sup>82</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Penal, Dosar nr. 160, vol. 3, f. 373–74.

<sup>83</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Informativ, Dosar nr. 1015, vol. 1, f. 43–44.

<sup>84</sup> Arsenie Papacioc, in *Am înțeles rostul meu... Părintele Arsenie Papacioc în dosarele Securității*, ed. Iuliana Conovici (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014), 154.

<sup>85</sup> ACNSAS, Fond Informativ, Dosar nr. 1015, vol. 1, f. 212–13.

<sup>86</sup> “Scrisoare către Sfânta Mănăstire Vladimirești,” in *Iată duhovnicul: Părintele Arsenie Papacioc*, Benedict Stancu (Bucharest: Editura Sofia, 2010), 230–31.

theological journal: “How can a crowd of hundreds and thousands of people answering yes and no to a list of sins being read out by a priest be called confession?” Stăniloae asked rhetorically.

Confession is a personal act, just as sin is a personal act. . . . Man must answer for his own sins alone before God through a confessor; must have the courage to appear alone, with his spiritual image muddled with sin but also moved by repentance, not remain hidden within the crowd.<sup>87</sup>

After their arrest, both Plămădeală and Braga wrote lengthy theological critiques of Mother Veronica’s visions, presumably at the urging of the Securitate. Braga suggested that Iovan should have known better than to write down and publicize everything that Mother Veronica told him, mocking her visions as ridiculous.

What is the point of it snowing only on a small group of people praying without the rest of the ground being touched (vision from 28 January 1938) or for God to appear on a branch, in the form of a gosling with a human head (vision from 10 July 1939)? And Mother Veronica cries “What a beautiful bird”? What is beautiful about such a monster! (the same vision).<sup>88</sup>

“Mother Veronica’s visions,” he concluded, “do not meet the Church’s criteria for true theophanies or visions.”<sup>89</sup> Thus condemned by trained theologians, respected monks, and the Holy Synod, the convent became an easy target for the Securitate. In February 1956 a group of 220 officers stormed the convent which was defended by the girls’ families and sympathisers. They arrested the 304 nuns, sending most back to their families and imprisoning the convent’s leaders for several years.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

The Securitate’s ability to co-opt the Holy Synod, previously sympathetic monks, and young theologians in its endeavour to close the convent and to discredit Mother Veronica lay both in its monopoly on force and on a newfound scepticism towards mysticism and visionaries, both inside and outside the Church. Whereas Church leaders and theologians had

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<sup>87</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, “Mărturisirea păcatelor și pocăința în trecutul Bisericii,” *Biserica Ortodoxă Română* 83, no. 3–4 (1955): 218–50.

<sup>88</sup> Roman Braga, “Declarație,” ACNSAS, Fond Penal, Dosar nr. 160, vol. 13, f. 1–8.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>90</sup> Vasile, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 255–56.

been at worst ambivalent towards Barbu's visions during the 1930s, in the 1950s they actively turned against her, mobilising both the administrative and theological weight of the institution against her. Barbu had always been careful when establishing her reputation. During her early years she surrounded herself with respectable male supporters who could read and write, who could accompany her on her travels, and who could help finance the printing of her pamphlet and the building of her convent. She necessarily hid the misfortunes of her early life when publicizing her early visions, and emphasized her connections to Petrache Lupu, a well-known seer whose reputation was beyond doubt. Only after she had established herself as an abbess and had completed her education did she pen her hagiographical autobiography and portray herself as a suffering saint. Neither the image of her as an innocent mystic or as a suffering saint were sufficient to save her once the political tide turned against monasticism after the rise of state socialism. New theological criteria were now marshalled against her to discredit her visions, with a newfound scepticism towards the supernatural animating Church documents. Rather than attacking religion per se, the Securitate discredited Mother Veronica as an illegitimate, heterodox religious leader whose visions could not be trusted. Using the writings of young theologians and monks they had in their prison cells or under threat of arrest, Securitate officers argued that Mother Veronica's convent was a hotbed of heresy and treason, allowing them to stage a military action that resulted in the first closure of a major monastery and setting the stage for the attacks on other churches and monasteries that followed.