

# THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN SOCIETY

## THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE PRIESTS WHEN FOUNDING THE ECONOMIC SOCIETIES FROM OLTENIA (1899-1948)\*

Georgeta GHIONEA\*\*

**Abstract:** The village dwellers have always regarded respectful the activities administrated by the priest, from the usual services on each Sunday, or holidays, to the most important events that leave their mark on the individual's existence. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the priest has been considered the main factor in the modernisation of the rural world. He got involved in the restoration and endowment of churches, in the founding of parish libraries, school canteens, cultural clubs, he coordinated the educational activity, becoming concerned about the proper functioning of this process. In order to support the common expenses of the parish and the economic growth of the villager, the priest encouraged the believers to found economic societies, vegetable gardens, small orchards, to cultivate flax, hemp and cotton, to raise silkworms and keep bees.

**Keywords:** Oltenia, priest, economic societies, popular banks, mutual aid.

In order to diminish the effects of the extortionate practices and to supply the necessary capital for the farmers, craftsmen, clerks and small land owners, under circumstances that would allow the rentable use of the contracting loans, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there appeared the first *economic societies, co-operative societies or loaning and keeping societies*, as *popular banks* were called in their initial phase. The initiatives for association from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century expressed – as Spiru Haret voiced his consideration – the need for credits of the small rural and urban producers. Therefore, in the development of *the economic societies*, the minister of Cults and Public Instruction, got involved directly. In the autumn of 1900, he published, in the magazine “Convorbiri Literare”, an article-programme, in which he approached the topic of the co-operative societies. That topic represented the subject of a brochure that, in the same year (1900), he sent to

---

\* This article is part of the research project: *Economic clerical institutions. Clergy's Banks in Southwestern Romania (XIX-XX centuries)* [*Instituții economice clericale. Băncile clerului în sud-vestul României (sec. XIX-XX)*], in the program: *the Church and Society in Southwestern Romania (XIV-XX centuries)* [*Biserică și societate în sud-vestul României (secolele XIV-XX)*].

\*\* 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree Researcher, Georgeta Ghionea, PhD, “C. S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor” Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities of the Romanian Academy, Craiova; Email: getaghionea@yahoo.com

the teachers, metropolitans and bishops, through which they required the collaboration of priests and teachers for the improvement of the villagers' material and moral condition.

The results obtained from the first *rural associations*, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, encouraged Spiru Haret to make a decision, in which he asked three travelling teachers, to go through the villages and to promote the idea of founding them. The teachers were advised to find in each *organisational centre* a priest, a teacher, a mayor, all having authority among the villagers<sup>1</sup> etc.

The involvement of the priests in founding the economic associations had existed, in Oltenia, since 1899. For example, in the mentioned year, it was founded in Gorj County, at the initiative of priest Diaconescu and primary school teacher Gh. Dobrescu, a “credit society with limited liability”, whose purpose was: “to help the villagers in their needs and in obtaining low interest loans”<sup>2</sup>. In 1904, the society with the centre in commune of Copăcioasa was transformed into a popular bank, named “Stupina”<sup>3</sup>. The initiative of priests Diaconescu was taken by priest V. Aposteanu too. In 1900, he founded in commune Runcu, an economic society, named “Isvorul Jaleşului”. Four years later, it legally became a popular bank, being managed, appointed as a president, by the founder, priest A. Aposteanu<sup>4</sup>. In 1900 too, the priest-teacher G. Nicolaescu, founded in commune Pietrarii de Sus, from Vâlcea County, an economic association. Nicolaescu was not convinced “that such associations will contribute to the modernisation of agriculture and the spiritual improvement of villagers”<sup>5</sup>. The society had as purpose “to remove the exploitation of the usurers”. “Sărata” Popular Bank, a naming that the society used, was the first popular bank from Vâlcea County, and started its activity with 6 members and a social capital of 25 lei<sup>6</sup>.

For the improvement of the economic condition of the villager, during 1900-1904, there were founded, in Vâlcea County, at the initiative of priests and primary school teachers, 62 popular banks<sup>7</sup>. The involvement of the priest is proven, as well, by his presence and activity in each of the banks. More than once, we encountered cases in which he was both the president of the bank and a clerk (secretary, accountant, or cashier). From the statistic data studied in the mentioned county, in the interval 1900-1904, 15 priests held the position of bank president; 13

<sup>1</sup> Gheorghe Dumitraşcu, *Haretismul în cultura românească (judeţul Vâlcea)*, Rm. Vâlcea, Fântâna lui Manole Publishing, 2008, pp. 475-476.

<sup>2</sup> I. Mateiescu, P. Popeangă, V. Uscătescu, *Istoricul băncilor populare din judeţul Gorj*, Craiova, Ramuri Publishing, w.y., p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 318.

<sup>5</sup> Gheorghe Dumitraşcu, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> The statistic data were collected from the archive documents of Vâlcea County Service of National Archives (further cited as SJAN).

of censor; one was a bookkeeping secretary, and three were cashiers. In this type of work, which did not involve a personal profit, were distinguished the priests: D. Mateescu (from commune Bălcești); I. Magoreanu, I. Ionescu and I. Pintroșeanu (Bătășani); N. Popescu (Bodești); Ilie Popescu (Broșteni); Gh. Folescu (Călina); Gh. Prunescu (Călinești); I. Negoescu (Cîineni-Greblești); P. Nicolăescu and Constantin Popescu (Cermeghești); Constantin Petruțianu, N. Lăzărescu and I. Mihăilescu (Costești); Dumitru Nicolăescu (Crețeni); D-tru Pietrariu (Bărbătești); Marin Constantinescu (Orlești); Nicolae Dărvărescu (Oteșani); C. Duiă (Păușești-Măglași); N. Dăescu (Șirineasa); Gr. Marinescu (Slăvești); P. Stănescu (Stănești); Dimitrie Băescu (Vaideeni), and others. The activity performed by the priests from Vâlcea County, in favour for the extension of the co-operative institutions, was often noticed during the clerical conferences and in cultural circles. Thus, it was noticed the activity of priest Petre Petroșanu, from the parish of Mihăiești, who was administrating, besides the three churches, three cemeteries and three schools, a popular bank with a shows room, a dairy, a parish house and a charity society ("Prince Mircea" society)<sup>8</sup>. It was not ignored, as well, the activity of priest I. Georgescu, from the parish Păușești-Otăsău, who, concerned with the living situation of the parishioners, "he popularised the idea of a popular bank and a consumers' co-operative society"<sup>9</sup>.

An interest for the founding of popular banks, organisations, unions and rural associations, we also discovered at the priests from the other counties of Oltenia. For Gorj County, during the time interval 1900-1904, there were constituted 52 popular banks<sup>10</sup>, among which, 24 were founded by priests, 16 being administrated by them, as presidents. The historiography recorded the activity of the following priests: Al. Popescu, founding member and president of "Principele Nicolae și Speranța" Popular Bank, din commune Andreiești<sup>11</sup>; Ilie Roșoga, considered a "pioneer of the co-operative movement from Gorjiu County", founder of "Scumpa Dinastie Hohenzolern" Popular Bank, din commune Turburea, member of the administration board Federal Gorjul<sup>12</sup>; I. D. Popescu, founder of "Sf. Gheorghe" Popular Bank, from Târgu-Logrești<sup>13</sup>; C. Cernăianu, Anghel Tăscău, I. Constantinescu (Brănești), I. Călniceanu (Călnicu); Ilie Ciocănescu (Gruiu); Toma Vălăreanu (Sâmbotin); I. C. Davițoiu (Stroești); P. Roventă (Stejerei); M. Popescu (Tismana); D-tru Florescu (Turcenii de Jos), etc. The accomplishments of priest T. Gureanu, from parish Brădiceni-Gorj, who worked at the local bank, for the co-operative society, taught Religion without receiving a salary, he was a primary school teacher for 18 years, he administrated the school canteen, and supported the

<sup>8</sup> *Dare de seamă*, in "Renașterea", Year XXII, No. 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> /July-August 1944, p. 398.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 408.

<sup>10</sup> The statistic data was collected from the archive documents of SJAN Gorj.

<sup>11</sup> I. Mateiescu, P. Popeangă, V. Uscătescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 402-403.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 391.

rights of the widows and orphans from the locality, and they were the examples discussed in the clerical circles<sup>14</sup>.

The initiative of the people mentioned above was followed by the priests from communes: Drănic<sup>15</sup>, Breasta<sup>16</sup>, Ciupercenii Vechi<sup>17</sup>, Mielești<sup>18</sup>, Amărăști<sup>19</sup>, Mălăeșcu<sup>20</sup> (Dolj County), Podeni (Mehedinți County), Cioroi<sup>21</sup>, Osica de Sus (Romanați County), and others, between 1900-1904, as a consequence of an activity sustained in organised conferences, among the villagers, succeeded in attracting and convincing them to participate to the foundation of the co-operative societies.

The model offered by the first priests, who got involved in forming the economic associations, was followed in the subsequent years too. From a statistic analysis made on a number of 720 rural and urban popular bank banks from Oltenia<sup>22</sup>, which had submitted the balance sheet until the end of 1919, we noticed, as regarding the number of priests among the founders and the members of the society, the next situation: in Dolj County, there were 189 priests; in Gorj County – 151, in Mehedinți County – 156; in Romanța County – 125; in Vâlcea County – 148<sup>23</sup>, from a total number of 1.187 of available positions in the administration boards, 101 were held by priests; at the same date, from the 483 censor positions, 19 were held by priests; in the category of clerks, the statistics registers: 12 cashiers, 4 accountants, 4 bookkeeping-cashiers<sup>24</sup>; in Gorj County, from a total number of 908 positions, available in the administration board, 48 were held by priests; the statistics records 2 cashiers and three bookkeeping-cashiers; in Mehedinți County, from a total number of 1,330 available positions in the administration boards, 60 were held by priests; from the 550 positions of censors, 9

<sup>14</sup> *Dare de seamă*, in “Renașterea”, Year XXIII, No. 10<sup>th</sup> of October 1944, p. 583.

<sup>15</sup> “Drănic” Popular Bank was founded in 1904, by Priest N. Voinescu. He held the position of president until 1912, in SJAN Dolj, fund Chamber of Commerce and Industry from Craiova, file 185/1931, f. 4.

<sup>16</sup> “Beșugul” Popular Bank was founded in 1904 by Priest Mihai B. Popescu, in SJAN Dolj, fund Chamber of Commerce and Industry from Craiova, file 59/1931, f. 16.

<sup>17</sup> “Ajutorința” Popular Bank was founded in 1904 by Priest Atanasie Popescu, in SJAN Dolj, fund Chamber of Commerce and Industry from Craiova, file 249/1931, f. 3.

<sup>18</sup> “Ridicarea Plugarului” Popular Bank was founded by Priest Sachelarie on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 1902, in SJAN Dolj, fund Chamber of Commerce and Industry from Craiova, file 230/1931, f. 9.

<sup>19</sup> “Unirea Face Puterea” Popular Bank was founded in 1904 by Priest Constantin Popilian. He held the position of vice president until 1908, in SJAN Dolj, fund Chamber of Commerce and Industry from Craiova, file 181/1931, f. 7.

<sup>20</sup> “Ridicarea Plugarului” Popular Bank was founded in 1902 by Priests S. Georgescu and C. Vladimirescu, in SJAN Dolj, fund Protoeria Dolj County, file 2/1902, f. 23.

<sup>21</sup> “Ajutorul” Popular Bank was founded in 1904 by Priest Arist. Popescu. He held the position of president until 1908.

<sup>22</sup> The distribution on counties of the 720 popular banks, was as following: 165 – in Dolj County; 141 – Gorj; 189 – Mehedinți; 121 – Romanța; 104 – Vâlcea, in *Anuarul băncilor populare și federaledor din Vechiul Regat al României pe anul 1919*, Bucharest, 1921, p. 256.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 249.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 250.

were held by priests; the statistic data registers 7 cashiers, 2 accountants, 2 bookkeeping-cashiers; for Romanați County, from a total number of 884 available positions in the administration board, 40 were held by priests; from the 353 of censor positions, 9 were held by priests; the year book records: 3 cashiers, 4 accountants, 9 bookkeeping-cashiers; in Vâlcea County, from 814 available positions in the administration board, 35 were held by priests; from the 273 censor positions, 9 were held by priests; the year book registers: 6 cashiers and 4 accountants<sup>25</sup>.

From the studied statistic data, the majority of loan institutions that had been founded by priests – during 1899-1920 – were small and medium sized societies, which functioned in the rural regions, and the benefit obtained from the credit businesses was, generally, reduced. The profit obtained by the shareholders was not a substantial one, but it assured a certain annual capital, which, most of the times, was directed to certain economic sectors or used for charity. The activity of the popular banks was not appreciated according to the numbers from the balance account, but according to the services that they provided for the improvement and the sustainability of the local schools and churches, the organisation of the cultural clubs, the supporting of co-operative education, vegetable gardens etc.

The number of the priests from the administration boards of the popular banks was increasing from 1920. “These institutions – as Vartolomeu Stănescu was writing – are very well established and accustomed, therefore, from this day one, the duty of our Priest as regarding them, will be only to found them in the places that he considers necessary, and to supervise them, anywhere their members will grant this commission”<sup>26</sup>. Vartolomeu requested the priests “to consider an order the need to not work anymore in banks or administrative institutions of the state, because there is a discrepancy between their mission and the working among money”. The occupations allowed for the priests, and actually indicated, were: the cultivation of fruit trees, beekeeping, silkworms raising, medicinal plants growing, cattle raising, sculpture workshops, painting, clothing, sacred things<sup>27</sup> etc.

For the interval 1899-1948, the historiography mentions the existence of *clerical societies* that were created as mutual aid associations. The positive results of them, determine us to mention them in the present material.

For Oltenia, a first project was “Creditul” Society, which belonged to the clergy and the teaching staff from Mehedinți County. The society had as a purpose the facility of the credit, low interest loans, organisation of educative and cultural conferences, the founding of a library, a press body etc. It published regularly “Sfătătorul săteanului” newspaper, with subjects approached by I. V. Raiculescu, the protopop of Mehedinți County. The pages of the journal displayed generously subjects as: “the explanation of the holly liturgy, by showing the importance of

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> Vartolomeu Stănescu, *Munca gospodărească pentru clerici și monahi. Întâiul îndemn către clerul și monahii acestei Episcopii*, Curtea de Argeș, 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1919, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

schools for adults, with health, economic and agricultural advice”<sup>28</sup>. The beginnings of society can be placed around 1906.

In 1907, it was founded, in the commune of Ștefănești-Zlătărei, Vâlcea County, “Dragostea Creștină” Cultural and Mutual Aid Society. The founder of the society, the priest Teodor Bălășel, wished to realise, through it, *the intellectual, moral and economic welfare of the villagers*<sup>29</sup>. The society reached its goals. Among its accomplishments, we mention: it built a school building in Dobrușa de Sus, it gave money, farming tools and fodder plant seeds prizes for the villagers who had proved to be thrifty people; it founded *The Elementary Framing School* and housekeeping school, both inaugurated in 1909, having the centres in the commune of Ștefănești<sup>30</sup> etc. The society contributed to the improvement of the material situation from the commune, during the period of time when it functioned (1907-1918).

We also have to mention the next mutual aid societies, founded and coordinated by priests: “Înfrățirea” mutual aid society from Calafat, sustained by priest D. Rudăreanu; “Principele Mircea” philanthropic society from Băilești, sustained by priest M. C. Șegărceanu; “Iubirea Aproapelui” society from the commune of Raci, Tg. Jiu, initiate and sustained by priest Gh. A. Răceanu, societies that, besides the help for the poor, also supported school canteens.

A society from Oltenia, whose results were considered “unique in the Romanian Orthodoxy of all the times”, was “**Renașterea**” Clerical Society. In a period when the bank credits were hardly accessed, the novelty of this society was the founding, according to the model of the popular banks, of five clerical banks, which represented, from the economic point of view, a form of survival of *the church servants*. For the clergy from Oltenia, they had a double advantage. On one side, the priests escaped from the control of particular banks, and, on the other side, they could benefit from lower interests loans, on short and medium terms (3-9 months), asking an interest that varied between 6% and 10% a month, with a commission of 1.25% of the loan value<sup>31</sup>. The purpose of these clerical societies, was better explained in the founding regulations of “Clerul Gorjan” Popular Bank, from which we extract the next information:

“The society was founded to save the clergy from the humility and theft of the merciless usurers, by helping the church people to satisfy their numerous needs; the building and restoration of households, the training and education of children, the increasing of patrimony and farming inventory, the continuation of the university education etc.”<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> *Sfătuitorul sateanului*, in “Luminătorul”, church document, Year I, Nr. 12/1910, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Gheorghe Dumitrașcu, *op. cit.*, pp. 475-476.

<sup>30</sup> *Dare de seamă de mersul societății Dragostea Creștină din Ștefănești, Vâlcea*, in “Albina”, Year XV, No. 3/16 October 1911, pp. 126-127.

<sup>31</sup> SJAN Mehedinți, fund “Clerul Mehedințean”, file 1/1932, f. 6; Georgeta Ghionea, *Societatea preoțească “Renașterea”, proiect social în Oltenia Interbelică*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane C. S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor”, No. XIV/2013, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing, p. 123.

<sup>32</sup> SJAN Gorj, fund Chamber of Commerce and Industry from Craiova, department of Tg. Jiu, file 10/1931-1946, f. 2.

The leadership and the administration of these credit institutions was due to: the general board of the shareholders, convoked annually, in the last decade of February, or the first decade of March; the administration board, which acted for the application of the general decisions and the censors' committee. As regarding the clerks from the five credit institutions, their appointing was done if the person had previously had the position of cashier or accountant in a bank, because they had gained experience in the financial activity, and were representing the appropriate employees for carrying out their attributions. There were noticed, due to their excellent activity, the priests: D. Pătrașcu, P. Cernăianu (cashiers), Gh. C. Ștefănescu, D. I. Popescu and Gr. Prejbeanu (accountants). The president was the most significant person from a bank's leadership. At the internal level, he was the person who was controlling and approving the actions of the director and those of the clerks.

Founded in 1922, "Renașterea" Clerical Society was generously implied in the life of clergy and parishioners from Oltenia, both through its economic preoccupations, and the cultural, spiritual, religious and philanthropic ones. The parochial libraries, the canteens for the poor, the cultural clubs, the churches and the schools built then, are a testimony for the social preoccupations of the clergy, gathered under the protection of this society. The activity of the society, diversified and constantly growing, continued until 1949, when it was dissolved.

Not always did the clerical society fulfil their goal, for which they had been founded. Such a case is that from Rm. Vâlcea. From the report of judge D. Titu Gârboviceanu, commissioned with the adjudging of bankruptcy operations, for "Providența" Clerical Society, we find the next: "The records were in a great disorder...the insolvency of the society is because, at the general meetings, held every year, the administration board had been hidden the truth about the condition of the society, giving fictive dividends and presenting balance sheets that did not correspond to the reality". The bankruptcy of the bank was due – as the prosecutor's office declared – "to outraging stealing, committed by the priests, for their own and their relatives' profit and interest"<sup>33</sup>.

The involvement of the priest in the economic activities – and especially in founding co-operative societies (popular banks, co-operative societies of consumption, production, supplying and selling) – was explained, in time, through the fact that the administration of the parishes and their own properties required certain financial knowledge. Belonging to the category of "the educated", the priests held, in the economic societies, administrative positions, when the adequate clerks were missing. The economic training of the priest was most of the times insignificant, and its involvement in the financial-banking activities was, on one side, the result of the *mutual help* desire, and, on the other side, it was determined by the necessity to obtain supplementary income.

---

<sup>33</sup> C. Cernăianu, *Biserica din Regat 1908-1918*, Bucharest, 1920, pp. 238-240.

