

THE ACTIVITY OF THE “RENAȘTEREA” PRIESTHOOD SOCIETY FROM OLTENIA, IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT FROM 1938-1940 AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SOCIAL SERVICE INSTITUTION

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Abstract: This paper approaches one of the faces of transposition into practice mechanism of inter-institutional cooperation, enforced thru the Social Service law, in October, 1938. The case of the Priesthood Society “Renașterea”, socio-professional society that united the active and retired priests and deacons from Oltenia, of which social activity interfered/intersected, mostly, with the activity of the new institution, can be considered a similar pattern also for the integration of other institutions and associations that activated prior to 1938 in the socio-cultural field. The analysis has in the centre the idea that the politic register of Carol II royal dictatorship was a reference point that should have been considered by all public institutions and organisations to operate. Based on the analysis of some archive documents (consisting in the reports of the “Renașterea” Society, the correspondence between the representatives of the society and the administrative and cultural authorities), the two parts of the article highlights the organisational and functional complications the Social Service law caused to the “Renașterea” Priesthood Society, and also the efforts of this socio-professional association to keep the continuity of its existence, and also the place earned over time within local communities. In this matter, the necessity of integration/connection of its activity with the newly formed institution appeared as a forced compromise solution, determined by the restrictive limits of the Carlist regime.

Keywords: “Renașterea” Priesthood Society, royal dictatorship, Social Service, 1938-1940, Oltenia.

INTRODUCTION

The activity of the “Renașterea” Priesthood Society from Oltenia, in the socio-cultural and political context from 1938–1940 represents a subject that was built starting from the idea that “rebirth/regeneration of the nation” – understood as solution

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to the multilateral crisis in the Romanian society in the 1930s of the 20th century¹ imposed and lay out within the limits of the royal dictatorship, was a reference point that all public institutions and organisations had to take into account to be able to operate. The article approaches one of the faces of the transposition into practice mechanism of inter-institutional cooperation, enforced thru the Social Service law, in October, 1938. The case of the Priesthood Society “Renașterea”, socio-professional society that united the active and retired priests and deacons from Oltenia, of which social activity interfered/ intersected, mostly, with the activity of the new institution, can be considered a similar pattern also for the integration of other institutions and associations that activated prior to 1938 in the socio-cultural field. The particularity of the case we chose is the fact that the “Renașterea” Society, reunited, at Oltenia level, a professional category that belong to one of the important institution of the Romanian state, the priests and deacons of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

To realise the theme, we used various documentary materials, but the main analysis sources were archive documents like reports of the “Renașterea” Society, correspondence between the representatives of the society and administrative and cultural authorities’ etc.². The structure of the article has main two parts. In the first part the objective was to highlight the specific of the activity of Priesthood Society “Renașterea” and to reconstruct a general image regarding its activity from the establishment until 1938, when the political regime of King Carol II was enforced. The period is relevant because highlights the activities and achievements of the society in the direction of developing and supporting its members economically and professionally, and also the achievements obtained thru its specific structures (cultural committees, moralising advices etc.), established to solve various social problems of local communities. Both highlight the importance of priests in Romanian society around 1938, and also some mutual points with the objectives of Social Service institution.

The first part opens the analysis frame for the second section of the article, where we focused on highlighting the fact that the activity of priesthood in Oltenia was “disrupted” by the change of the political regime, in the way that it had to

¹ “The moral recovery/regeneration of the nation” had to be done, in the vision of King Carol IInd and the supporters of the political regime from 1938–1940, through the combined action of all state institutions according to the strict frameworks imposed by the new regime (Diana-Mihaela Păunoiu, “Aspects regarding the Official Speech about the Interwar Romanian Crisis”, in “Journal of Romanian Literary Studies”, Issue 24/2021, International Romanian Humanities Journal, Published by Arhipelag XXI Press, Târgu Mureș, pp. 385–392; Idem, *Sărbătoare și propagandă în timpul regelui Carol al II-lea (1938–1940)*, Bucharest, Academia Română Publishing House, 2013, *passim*).

² In the analysis of the theme of the article, we also integrated the conclusions of some personal researches of older or more recent date. That is why we did not detail certain aspects, such as the socio-political context of the establishment of the royal dictatorship regime, the ideological limits established around the concept of “moral regeneration of the nation” or about certain aspects related to the Romanian Orthodox Church and the “Renașterea” Priestly Society, etc. To signal this, we have made the strict mentions in the footnotes, the bibliographic references can also be found at the end of the article.

integrate and/or subordinate its socio-professional activity (similar situation also for other social and professional institutions or associations) within the institutional structures specific to the carlist regime. In the second part of our research, we highlight and analyse a few aspects that marked the activity of “Renașterea” Society in the period of 1938–1940, at the speech level, with the occasion of various events (public conferences, diocesan gatherings etc.), but also at the level of actual activity. A central place in our analysis is occupied by the steps taken by the ecclesiastic authorities next to the laic authorities to integrate the important experience in the socio-cultural field – “of the social Christianity” – of the “Renașterea” Society within the limits of the Social Service law. In essence, the last section of the article highlights, in part, the conditions in which the Oltenian priesthood operated between 1938–1940, that despite the restrictive political frame, searched for solutions to keep its place and purpose within the local communities.

1. GENERAL VIEW REGARDING THE ESTABLISHMENT AND ACTIVITY UNTIL 1938

The Priesthood Society “Renașterea” established in 1922, with juridical and moral personality from May 23, 1923, included the active and retired priests and deacons of Râmnicului Nou Severin Diocese, forming “together an evangelic community built on social Christianity principles”³ – a concept seen as “transposing into practice the evangelic teachings in social, economic and political life”⁴.

The society was organised on three levels of execution: parochial centres – groups of 8–12 neighbouring parishes (in 1939 there were 84 centres in Oltenia), with monthly meetings, by rotation in each parish; county gatherings with 2 meetings per year and diocese gatherings – the congress, with one annual meeting.

From the beginning had double purpose being established: 1) as professional association – for “cultivation of solidarity sense amongst priests, to create own funding to help them, to stimulate and encourage in the pastoral activity, and also to train in theology”, but also 2) as association of which program had the applicability in the area of social Christianity: “a program of deepening – in vertical sense – of the Gospel in the large mass of the people thru a sustained action, with social character”⁵.

³ Cătălin Raiu, *Democrație și statolatricie. Creștinismul social la Bartolomeu Stănescu, episcopul Râmnicului Nou Severin (1875–1954)*, Bucharest, Universitatea din București Publishing House, 2013, pp. 140–141.

⁴ See, for an analysis of the concept of social Christianity, *Ibidem*, p. 29 and the following.

⁵ Serviciul Județean Dolj al Arhivelor Naționale (S.J.A.N. Dolj), *Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt, Serviciul Administrativ Fund*, file no. 115/1939, f. 1. For the socio-cultural (especially the period before 1938), philanthropic and economic activity of the “Renașterea” Society, see in detail, Georgeta

The objectives of the society were the following: “a) explaining the faith to those lost from its path; b) spiritual recovery of those in prisons; c) spiritual strengthening of those in hospitals and asylums; d) leading orphanages; f) assistance thru support and labour of those in needs; g) publications of all kind with cultural and educative character and church press”⁶.

The Priesthood Society “Renașterea” had, in the period from its establishment until the instauration of the Carlist regime, a considerable importance within local oltenian communities, the place and prestige gained in this time interval being a consequence of its socio-cultural and moral-religious activity. An important document in revealing a synthesis of this activity is the statement issued by the priest V. Marghescu, the president of the central committee of the “Renașterea” Society, on June 19, 1939 to the royal resident of Olt County⁷.

In order to fulfil the first goal, the society recorded, from the establishment until 1938, the following achievements:

- Theological training and education of its members thru public conferences and intimate meetings:

- Regular appearance of the “Renașterea” magazine⁸, that was in its 18th year of publication;

- The annual publication, for 18 years, of the “Church Calendar” (in approximate 200.000 copies), that served as “guidance to the priests and people alike in religious practices, and in many houses being the only icon on the wall”⁹;

- Starting in 1927 a factory of clean wax candles named “Renașterea” (purpose: saving the church pictures affected by the smoke coming from counterfeit candles and creating a financial fund to sustain priest’s activities);

- Acquisition of places needed for priest’s cultural houses, one for each county resident-city;

- Creation of theological library from Craiova in the building of “Renașterea” cultural house from Craiova (over 3000 volumes);

- Starting a printing house (1927);

- Initiating five priest credit houses – clerical banks, after the system of popular banks, one in each county (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Romanați and Vâlcea)¹⁰, etc.

Ghionea, *Societatea “Renașterea”, proiect social în Oltenia interbelică*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane «C.S. Nicolăescu-Ploșor»”, Craiova, XIV, 2013, pp. 113–125.

⁶ Cătălin Raiu, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁷ S.J.A.N. Dolj, *Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt*, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 115/1939, ff. 1–4.

⁸ For details on the “Renașterea” magazine, see Georgeta Ghionea, *Presa ecleziastică din Oltenia, reper economic și social*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, new series, no. 31, 2017, pp. 121–122.

⁹ S.J.A.N. Dolj, *Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt*, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 115/1939, f. 1. For details on clerical banks, see Georgeta Ghionea, *art. cit.*, in loc. cit. (2013), pp. 121–125.

¹⁰ S.J.A.N. Dolj, *Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt*, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 115/1939, f. 2. About the establishment and activity of clerical banks in Oltenia, a good analysis

Also, regarding the second goal of the society, from the establishment until 1939, thru its organisms created for specific *social domains* (cultural committees, moralizing advises, parochial patronage, cultural distribution, public and dorm libraries). The “Renașterea” Priesthood Society had numerous important achievements – “results were unique in Romanian orthodoxy”¹¹ –; amongst these we mention the following:

- Conferences for the people;
- Donations for the war orphans students and for helping those in need, in general;
- Cultural gatherings led by the priests to develop the taste for reading of local communities;
- Cultural committees and moralizing advises, where divorces were mediated, trying thru advises to reduce concubinage amongst youth, the Sunday rest was established in the parochial communities, disputes amongst people were mediated; money were raised for funerals;
- Converting the lost;
- Correcting the vicious, etc.¹²

To complete the reconstitution and the highlight of diversity and importance of the socio-cultural and morale-religious activity of Oltenian priesthood¹³, we consider useful also the report for the year 1937 of the “Renașterea” Society, which gives us also numerous statistic data:

- 1) In the field of social activity:
 - Parochial cultural committees held 3,567 meetings and 6.590 gatherings;
 - The 755 parochial libraries had 236,284 volumes; 48,021 readers;
 - In 671 parishes were 11,797 cultural houses libraries (287,156 volumes);
 - 13,786 lessons of catechism were held – “meant to perform religious training of the people” – in 675 parishes (102,200 auditors);
 - Cultural distribution: were sold 39,022 books and brochures and 2,315 icons, with a total value of 400,791 lei;
 - Parochial choirs, formed out of children and adults, operated in 290 parishes;

can be found in the works written by Georgeta Ghionea: *Istoria băncilor populare din Oltenia (1880–1948)*, Craiova, Aius Printed, 2009, pp. 247–248, 256; *Instituții economice clericale. Banca populară Clerul Mehedințean*, in “Mehedinți – istorie, cultură și spiritualitate”, VI, Drobeta Turnu Severin, Didahia Severin Publishing House, 2013, pp. 1163–1168; *Instituții economice clericale. Banca populară “Ajutorul”*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, new series, no. 28/2014, pp. 137–149; *Istoria băncilor populare din Oltenia în date, statistici și corespondență (1880–1948)*, Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, 2015, pp. 278–279, 282–283, 285–286.

¹¹ Catălin Raiu, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹² *Ibidem*; S.J.A.N. Dolj, Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 115/1939, f. 2.

¹³ See, for statistical data on the societiy's results for the years 1935 and 1936, Catălin Raiu, *op. cit.*, pp. 142–143.

– The moralizing advises held: 2,802 guidance meetings; 1,682 judgement meetings, and, thru the slums they held 3,345 moralizing meetings. The results were the following: solving 1,726 cases; they wed 3,345 concubines; straighten 486 addicts; requested the removal of 26 outlaws from the church that refused to straighten up;

– collected for charity 2,829,129 lei, out of which 2,330,263 lei were donated to widows, orphans and poor people.

2) The results in the 84 parochial centres:

– held 982 private meetings (1,014 sermons of the divine service and 915 speeches at the heroes requiems);

– held 970 private meetings, where they approached 333 subjects and performed 882 reviews. In the afternoons of those days, they held public meetings where they treated 2.505 conferences by the members of the centres and 385 speeches of various assistants;

– Out of the centres incomes they performed charity valued at 220,461 lei.

– The clerical banks performed in good conditions.

3) The 5 sections of the “Renaşterea” Society (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinţi, Romanati and Vâlcea) held their regular spring and autumn meetings¹⁴.

Representing a statutory activity, public conferences were a common practice in the activity of priests, the subjects being from various fields: theological, social, economic and political. According to a report of the Craiova Regional Gendarmerie Inspectorate, from January 1937: “The very successful conferences in the city of Craiova, organized [in] the “Renaşterea” Priest’s Cultural House, give a remarkable boost to the cultural and national movement through the variety of topics and the personality of the lecturers”¹⁵.

Around the year 1938, through all the activities carried out and the results obtained by the “Renaşterea” Society, it became obvious that the priest, leaving the area of ritualism, had gained an important place within the local communities, as well as among the cultural elites.

2. THE ROYAL DICTATORSHIP REGIME (1938–1940)

The socio-cultural and political context of the 30s of the 20th century and, especially from the years 1938–1940 – the period of the royal dictatorship regime – allowed the involvement of the Church in Romanian society, the strengthening of the Christian-Orthodox faith among human communities and the affirmation of the social aspects of Christian teaching, all this, however, under the dome of the bodies/organizations or institutions that symbolized and were the fruit of the new political regime.

¹⁴ S.J.A.N. Dolj, Rezidenţa Regală a Ținutului Olt, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 7/1938, ff. 393–397.

¹⁵ Idem, Inspectoratul Regional de Jandarmi Craiova Fund, file no. 3/1937, f. 25.

In order to solve the social problems of the era, the “moral regeneration of the nation” was imposed through a joint action of the state institutions, so that the activity of the priest took place both in the places of worship and in the school, cultural houses and the Social Service, The National Guard, the Pre-Military and even within the “ideological limits” of the single party, “Frontul Renașterii Naționale” (F.R.N. / The National Renaissance Front)¹⁶.

During the period 1938–1940, the “Renașterea” Priestly Society (as well as other public institutions and organizations) had to carry out its activity within the limits and frameworks imposed by the royal dictatorship of King Carol IInd. At the discursive level, this is also reflected in the topics of conferences held by priests within their own assemblies/congresses; in various public conferences; in the appeals made by the representatives of the Oltenian priesthood to the members of the society to carry out their activity within the institutions created by the new political regime or to support the activity of the Carlist institutions (Social Service, F.R.N., “Straja Țării”, etc.) etc.

Regarding the topics of the conferences, in addition to those intended to help priests in their work (Examples: “How a sermon should be delivered to bring the greatest benefit to those who listen to it”, “How religion can be used so that morals can bears all its fruits, it being the source of morality”, “The Divine and human foundations of love towards [our] neighbor and how it could be carried out with more benefit for our fellows at the present time”, “The total means that the priest can moralize his worst parishioners”, etc.), subjects were also inserted that had to develop and explain the role of priests in the new cultural, social and political bodies of the state; the importance of newly created or reformed institutions and organizations, etc.

Thus, in the pastoral conferences of 1939, organized by the “Renașterea” Society, there are topics related to the new institutions created (Social Service and F.R.N.) or reorganized (“Garda Națională”/ National Guard), such as: “On the role of the Church and the Priest within the Social Service”¹⁷, “Interpretation of a biblical text at the raising of the national flag” during the “Straja Țării” activities¹⁸, etc. In 1940, during the spring county meetings of the “Renașterea” Society, in all 5 counties, the subject with the title “The priest in the service of the spiritual and national Renaissance of the nation” had to be developed¹⁹.

¹⁶ *Enciclopedia României*, vol. I, *Statul*, the steering committee: Dimitrie Gusti, Constantin Orghidan, Mircea Vulcănescu, Virgiliu Leonte, 1st edition, București, Imprimeria Națională, 1938, p. 489.

¹⁷ Along with others, the subject was the theme of the autumn conferences of the “Renașterea” Priesthood Society, Mehedinți, Vâlcea, Dolj sections since 1939 (*Ibidem*, files no.: 51/1939, f. 13v.; 9/1939, f. 236–236v., 246).

¹⁸ The subject was developed during the autumn conferences of the “Renașterea” Society of Priests, Vâlcea section, held on November 23–24, 1939, by priest Cumpănașu, who also had the capacity of guard commander (*Ibidem*, file no. 9/1939, f. 237).

¹⁹ “Renașterea”, Year XIX, no. 2, February 1940, pp. 236–237.

Likewise, the intellectuals of the local communities were the ones who, through conferences held every Sunday, had to contribute, along with the local authorities, to explaining the role and developing the population's trust in the single party, the National Renaissance Front. Within these limits, the public conferences of the Oltenian priesthood about the single party are included. An example in this regard is the conference entitled: "National Renaissance Front and Love of Country and Kingdom", held by priest Constantin Necşulescu from Drăgăşani on November 19, 1939, for an audience from various socio-economic categories.

In order to highlight the limits and frameworks imposed by the lay authorities, we reproduce below the following fragment from the circular address, sent by the prefect of Vâlcea County to the priest C. Necşulescu, which shows the manner in which he was "invited" to lecture and how the directions of the speech were drawn:

"(...) For the clarification of the population, as well as for the trust that we must place in the souls of the inhabitants of this country, in relation to the new order in Romania, we have decided that in each commune within the Vâlcea county, a conference will be held every Sunday, from [to] the intellectuals of the villages.

That being the case, we ask that on Sunday November 19, 1939, at 4 p.m., you confer in the presence of all officials, intellectuals and the entire population of your Commune, about the National Renaissance Front and the benefits of this political organization in our state life.

The love of Country and King that all citizens must be imbued with, that every Romanian should show in these moments of National concern. The entire conference will be written and read to the assistant without omitting anything from it or introducing additions. A copy of this conference, written identically to the one you will read to the assistance, will be submitted to the Prefecture three days before the public convocation, that is, on the day when this conference is to be held"²⁰.

In the same context of the limitations of the action within the strict frameworks drawn by the representatives of the secular power, as well as the avoidance of some dissensions and problems that would have been in a position to hinder the natural activity of the priesthood, there are also calls and exhortations to respect the directions of action drawn by the new regime, which the representatives of the management of the "Renaşterea" Society address to the Oltenian priests during priestly meetings and congresses.

Without intending to develop the subject, it should also be mentioned that the "Renaşterea" Society was in the situation of being dissolved, and in the period July 1938 – March 1939 it had a provisional management, the solution of this matter being in a position to hinder the development activity²¹.

²⁰ S.J.A.N. Vâlcea, Prefectura judeţului Vâlcea Fund, file no. 24/1939, f. 185.

²¹ Pr. Florin Bonea, *Un document inedit despre Societatea preoţească Renaşterea*, <http://www.biserica-amaradia.ro> (accessed on May 16, 2021).

2.1. Social Service – steps to connect the activity of the Priesthood Society “Renașterea”

A pressing problem was the framing/connection of the social activity of the “Renașterea” Society within the limits imposed by the Social Service law of October 18, 1938, which no longer allowed the activity of other institutions/organizations to be carried out except within the cultural houses under the auspices of the Social Service institution.

The Social Service institution was established “for the work of uplifting villages and towns” (art. 1). *The Social Service was implemented through the cultural houses*, which had to be established in all urban and local settlements (art. 8–9). The purpose of the cultural house was:

“To help, strengthen and deepen the action of the Church, the School and the State authorities. He will coordinate and unify all the activities carried out in the village by State and social bodies, through harmonious development:

1. of the culture of health, by preventing and fighting diseases, as well as by physical education of the people.
2. of work culture, by guiding it towards better production;
3. of the culture of the mind, the soul and of national education, in all areas of public life” (art. 10)²².

Article 11 of this law stipulates the following:

“*Priests*, members of the teaching staff, administrative officials (the notary, the communal secretary, the mayor, the praetor), as well as any professionals paid by the State, county, county or commune are obliged to *place their social work activity in the frame of the Cultural House’s activity* (author’s emphasis).

Those who evade this obligation will be subject to disciplinary sanctions, at the request of the Social Service, to the heads of the respective authorities.

Every year, the authorities responsible for the states of service will receive the activity sheets of the State, region, county and commune officials who worked in the cultural hostels. The ministries and authorities of the regions, counties and communes will give priority in the appointment and promotion to people who have worked in the Cultural Houses”²³.

In this context, the Oltenian priesthood gave special importance and acted for the integration of its activity in the socio-cultural field – “social Christianity” – within the Social Service.

²² “Monitorul Oficial”, part I, Year CVI, no. 242, Tuesday, October 18, 1938, p. 4952.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 4953.

The establishment of the Social Service institution practically meant the monopolization of all activities that fell within the sphere of social Christianity, which had been the object of activity of the Priestly Society “Renașterea” since its foundation. The Oltenian priesthood, having a vast and significant experience in this field, sought to coordinate its own activity with that imposed by the new law, to clarify the manner in which the connection could have been made between the “Renașterea” Society and the local bodies of the Social Service as follows so that the Oltenian priesthood can make its own contribution in an optimal way.

Practically speaking, through the adoption of the Social Service law, the priest was obliged to carry out within the parish (village) the same work/social activity in two organizations similar in purpose and means. On the one hand, it was about his activity within the bodies of the “Renașterea” Society (the cultural committee, etc.), and on the other hand, about that within the cultural house, the activity body of the program initiated by King Carol II through the Royal Cultural Foundation, which were entrusted with the application of the Social Service law²⁴.

In the first part of 1939 (January – July), the actual activity of the society was suspended in order to find the best solutions for effective cooperation with the representatives of the Social Service institution:

“(…) starting from January 1st, the activity of the parish centers was suspended, in order to find a way to fit their activity into the work plan of the Social Service, in compliance with the law on the organization of this Social Service.

Currently, work is being done on the new preparation of these parish centers and on the elaboration of their activity norms, within the social service organizations, to which the Oltenian Priesthood joined with all the energy, out of the unwavering conviction that this institution will contribute decisively to the upliftment of our villages, in all respects”²⁵.

During the XVIth diocesan congress of the “Renașterea” Society of Priests, which took place on March 22, 1939, in Craiova, in the presence of about 300 priests and local administrative authorities, the readiness to cooperate with the Social Service was publicly affirmed, the society offering help through the prism of its experience. A motion was voted, by which, in point 2, the following was stated: “The Oltenian priesthood wants to declare that it is ready to work with all the cultural factors for the upliftment of the people, all the more so since on this ground we bring the experience of 18 years of activity carried out within the “Renașterea” society, experience that we are ready to make available to the welcoming institution of the Social Service”²⁶.

²⁴ S.J.A.N. Dolj, Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 22/1939, f. 165v.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, file no. 60/1939, f. 7.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, file no. 22/1939, f. 165v.

At the same time, in the speech given by priest C. Stănică (Orodel, Dolj County), the president of the central committee of the Society, emphasized that its activity had to take into account the new circumstances and opportunities created by the regime of King Carol II:

“Our society is not a professional society, but a church society, which carries out its activity within the framework provided by the Law and the Organizational Statute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, for the cultural and moral-religious promotion of the people.

However, like any human society, the activity of our Society is in turn influenced by the social circumstances of human life (...).

At the same time, the new organizations created by the high royal initiative reserve a vast field of activity for the priesthood.

We therefore make a strong appeal to the entire priesthood to enroll and activate with enthusiasm in these organizations such as: guard, pre-military and social service, being sure that they will contribute not only to the upliftment of the nation, but also to the valorization of the social role they have in the middle of society”²⁷.

On the same line, at the congress of March 22, 1939, the Society decided to change the statutes in order to fit its socio-cultural activity into the activity of the cultural houses, as execution bodies of the Social Service institution.

In the meeting of March 30, 1939, in which the professional and social activity was analyzed, the central committee of the “Renașterea” Society, chaired by the priest V. Margherescu, decided to reorganize the parishes into new parish centers, a decision that was approved by Bishop Irineu, the protective president of the society, as follows:

– A parish center was reduced to a number of about 5-7 parishes, and in the mountains, where the topographical conditions did not allow this, a center could be made up of 3–4 parishes. The purpose of these reductions was to reduce the distances between priests and singers in a center. They had to reduce their activity to one meeting per quarter, to be held in the afternoon of religious or national holidays.

– The urban parishes in the locality of the county seat, regardless of their number, formed a single parish center.

– The county assemblies were reduced to one per year, organized in the fall, together with the general priestly conferences²⁸.

In the same context, the management committee of the “Renașterea” Society, led from April 1939 by the priest V. Marghescu, initiated a series of steps to be

²⁷ *Ibidem*, file no. 115/1939, f. 34–34v.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 5, 11.

able to optimally integrate/connect the priestly activity from the sphere of social Christianity in the framework of the Social Service:

“Our first work was to agree *Renașterea* [Society] with the Social Service Law, a law that had recently been voted and which somewhat monopolized the activity of all the cultural factors of the villages, including the priest. The program of *Renașterea* was fully contained in this law and expressed in almost the same terms and with identical enforcement bodies”²⁹.

These steps were taken both by the socio-cultural and local administrative authorities (the director of the Social Service of the *Ținutul*³⁰ Olt and the royal resident of the Olt Region), as well as by the episcopal ones (the bishop of the Eparchy of Râmnicului Noului Severin).

On April 15, 1939, the central committee of the “*Renașterea*” Society sent an address to the director of the Social Service of the Olt Region requesting him to inform them “the way in which you think that the activity of the priesthood submitted until today within this Society can be merged with the provisions of the law Social Service”. They informed him about the identity of action in the field of culture and social Christianity (articles 2, 5 and 6 of the Statutes of the “*Renașterea*”) and asked him to give his approval for carrying out the activity, all the more so, in the congress of March 22 1939, it was decided to include this side of the Society’s activity in the activity of the cultural houses, as bodies for the execution of the Social Service law³¹.

On May 9, 1939, the central committee of the “*Renașterea*” Society sent a reply to Lieutenant Bishop Irineu of the Eparchy of Râmnicului Noului Severin, as a result of the latter’s request. The answer presents the controversial situation created by the Social Service law, the concerns of the priesthood regarding their activity and some proposals for priests to acquire a place in the organization and management of cultural houses so that they can contribute in good conditions to the activity carried out through them:

“(…) 2) The main thing is the extent to which the priesthood is admitted to leadership, that is, in the council of the house, because we find from the text of the Social

²⁹ *Ibidem*, file no. 22/1939, f. 165v.

³⁰ *Ținut* was a territorial-administrative unit, created by reform of August 14, 1938. *Ținut* is similar with an administrative region. Dividing the Romanian state in 10 *ținuturi* (*administrative regions*) was the first administrative experimental project regarding the state regionalisation. It’s ended in september 1940, when the dictatorial monarchy of King Carol II is over. Each region was ruled by a royal resident and consisting of a variable number of counties, towns, cities and villages (urban and rural communes). The province Oltenia (composed of five county: Dolj, Gorj, Romanați, Mehedinți and Vâlcea) was included in *Ținutul Olt* (Olt Region), which also included Olt (See, in detail, Diana-Mihaela Păunoiu, *Rezidența regală a ținutului Olt (1938–1940)*, Bucharest, Academia Română Publishing House, 2012, pp. 77 and following)

³¹ S.J.A.N. Dolj, *Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt*, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 115/1939, f. 6.

Service law and its regulations that the Church is completely excluded from any leadership and administration (art. 2 of the law and 165 of the regulation, etc.), and the Section entitled “The culture of the soul” announced with art. 91 of the regulation – disappears in art. 98 – it means that this action could be delayed, perhaps that is why it is announced as the last of the [Cultural] House’s concerns, although it should be the first.

3) Until a definitive form of this connection is reached, for which we also requested the approval of the Social Service (...) we are of the opinion that now that the advice of the Cultural House of all kinds is being constituted to make known to the Director of the Social Service Craiova the following, as a minimum requirement for priesthood:

a) In the council of the urban cultural houses, the priest should be among the 14 appointed members.

b) In the council of the county [cultural] house, among the 14 appointed members, there should also be the president of the county section, in addition to the protoer of the county.

[c)] In the regional committee of the [Olt] Region, among the 14 appointed members, there should also be the president of the Central Committee of the “Renașterea”, as one who represents the priesthood from all Oltenia.

In all these councils of the cultural houses – communal, county, Region, the priest should not remain a filler element but should be part of the permanent delegation at least.

In this way, the “Renașterea” Society would bring its word and experience of 18 years in this field of activity to all management positions, and now being subject to another law” (author’s emphasis).

Only in this way can the goal set by the Social Service law through article 10 *to deepen the action of the church* be fulfilled³².

On May 11, 1939, Lieutenant Bishop Irineu of the Eparchy of Râmnicului Noului Severin sent an address to the director of the Social Service of the Olt Region, by which he announced that he agreed to be part of the Regional Committee of the Social Service of the Olt Region, “with the role that it shows us the dignity we hold, as the spiritual leader of the whole Oltenia”. In this address, he informed the director of the Social Service that: “on the social side, our activity is carried out through the “Renașterea” Priestly Society, of which we are the honorary president, in collaboration with all the bodies subordinate to this Society”³³.

At the same time, he requested that the representatives of the Society from all 5 county sections “also be part of the councils of the communal, county and region [cultural] houses”, making proposals to the members of the “Renașterea” Society for these bodies of the local cultural houses. He argued his request as follows:

“The reasons that entitle us to this request are, on the one hand, *the leading role of the priest as a social factor in our villages*; and on the other hand, the

³² *Ibidem*, ff. 7–8.

³³ *Ibidem*, f. 9.

experience and results acquired by the “Renașterea” Society in the 18 years of uninterrupted experience through the parish organizations of the “Renașterea” Society, such as the Parish Cultural Committees equivalent to the Cultural Houses, the moralizing advice equivalent to the village courts and the parish patronages, for supporting the needy, equivalent to the public work obligation resulting from the entire legislation of the Social Service, results of experience that the new public guidance organizations, through the cultural houses, cannot dispense with, especially now at the beginning of the functioning of these organizations” (author’s emphasis)³⁴.

Bishop Irineu stated in the conclusion that, in a future address, he will explain in detail the possibilities of harmonization and collaboration between the organizations of the “Renașterea” Society and the organizations of the Social Service.

On July 19, 1939, priest V. Margherescu, president of the Central Committee of the “Renașterea” Society, as a result of the clarifications requested by the royal resident of the Olten Region, sent the latter a memorandum and 7 annexes, including the steps they had taken, mentioned above, including the reorganization and change of the Company’s statutes. The availability and desire of the Society to integrate its own activity in the social field within the framework of the cultural houses and the Social Service is reaffirmed. At the same time, he expressed his regret for the procrastination of solving this matter: “We regret that we cannot give the answer to the Director [of the Social Service of the Olten Region] because until today, even though it has been 4 months, we have not been honored with this answer”³⁵.

The efforts of the “Renașterea” Society finally bore fruit, according to the statements of the president of the central committee, priest V. Margherescu, on the occasion of the eparchial congress in September 1940, when he specified the following: “I made the necessary steps and negotiations in time for an intimate collaboration between the “Renașterea” [Society] and the enforcement bodies of this [Social Service] law, proposals that were accepted and give us an honorable role in leadership, from the village cultural house to that of the Region”³⁶.

The concerns, worries and actions initiated by the “Renașterea” Society reveal, in essence, the attempts to clarify the place of the priest within the newly created institution of the Social Service; of (re)gaining the important social role that the priest had within the Olten communities over time, as well as the availability of the Olten priesthood to contribute, based on the accumulated experience, to the implementation of the moral regeneration program and the modernization of the Romanian society – “raising the villages” – monopolized by the Social Service institution.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 10.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 3.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, file no. 12/1940, f. 563v.

The procrastination of the resolution of the steps taken by the “Renașterea” Society by the competent local authorities, combined with the suspension of the Social Service Law in the fall of 1939, practically put the priesthood of Oltenia in the impossibility of making the most of the experience accumulated in almost two decades in the area of social Christianity and of making an important contribution from the beginning within the cultural houses and the Social Service.

Relevant for highlighting the directions of activity for the year 1940, is the meeting of January 18, 1940 that Metropolitan Nifon³⁷ had with the presidents of the county sections of the “Renașterea” priestly society³⁸ in order to reorganize the society. Priest V. Marghescu presented the program through which the central committee of the society agreed to coordinate and capitalize on all the action that the Oltenian priesthood had to carry out in the religious-moral and professional-corporate fields.

After its debate, several conclusions were reached³⁹, among which we mention the following:

The statutes of the “Renașterea” Society had to be modified in accordance with the new legislation in force at that time regarding the national, cultural and religious life of the people, especially the villages.

The activity of the priest in the parish had to take place within the cultural house, in close collaboration with the educational, cultural and administrative factors, reserving for the priest the role of initiator and executor of the religious-moral side. All the activity carried out by the priest within the cultural house, in guarding, in pre-military education, social assistance, communal courts, the Renaissance National Front⁴⁰, primary school, etc. had to be recorded in writing and communicated to the management bodies of the “Renașterea” Society.

Social assistance had to be one of the priest’s main concerns, both for general and parish needs.

³⁷ See, for details about the establishment of the Metropolitanate of Oltenia in November 1939 and the personality and activity of Metropolitan Nifon Criveanu, Diana-Mihaela Păunoiu, *Nifon Criveanu – primul mitropolit al Olteniei, Râmnicului și Severinului*, in the volume “Mehedinți – istorie, cultură și spiritualitate”, vol. 3, cared for by Pr. PhD st. Iulian Nedelcu, Drobeta Turnu Severin, Didahia Severin Publishing, 2010, pp. 248–259; Lucian Dindirică, *O filă de istorie ecleziastică românească: Mitropolitul Nifon Criveanu*, in “Misiunea. Revista Centrului de Cercetare a Conlucrării Bisericii Ortodoxe cu Armata României « General Paul Teodorescu »”, IInd year, nr. 1(2)/2015, pp. 75–79.

³⁸ At this meeting, chaired by the Metropolitan of Oltenia, were present: Pr. V. Marghescu, president of the Central Committee of the Society, Pr. M. Pretorian, president of the Dolj section, Pr. I. Sachelarie – Mehedinți, Pr. Gh. Opreșescu – Gorj, Pr. C. Cazangiu – Romanați, Pr. Gh. Ionescu-Cheia – Vâlcea, Pr. M. Pâslaru, referring advisor and Pr. Fl. Mihăescu, referring advisor.

³⁹ “Renașterea”, festive number, year XIX, nr. 1, January 1940, pp. 146, 152–155.

⁴⁰ See, Mihaela Buzatu (Ilie), *Anul 1938 și înființarea Frontului Renașterii Naționale – context european și context național*, in “Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques”, no. 21–22, 2009, pp. 25–31.

The parish center, one of the “Renașterea” activity bodies, was to be composed of 4–8 parishes or 3, depending on the topographical situation. Each center was to be led by a “first standing” (president) chosen by the Center’s members and confirmed by the chiriarchal authority. Each parish center was to be grouped into constituencies, each constituency comprising, as far as possible, all the centers in an administrative subdivision (“*plasă*”), in order to maintain a close connection with the organization of the state administration.

Each parish in a center had to hold an annual meeting, a parish center having to have, therefore, a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 8 annual meetings. The program of a meeting had to include:

“a) Holy Liturgy in the Cathedral (...); b) a procession at appropriate times and places, such as: the beginning of agricultural work in the spring, the harvest, the picking of corn, of vineyards, drought or too much rain, etc.; c) a purely professional meeting; d) a public meeting within the cultural house held in the afternoon of the respective day (at the latest at 2 ½ in the winter and 3 in the summer), consisting of: a single conference for the benefit of the soul and the economy of the people; church, religious and national songs, performed either by the religious singers, or by the guard or pre-military units, readings or recitations with religious and national content, a diary announcing the meritorious deeds of the parish priests and various news of an educational and informative nature, which happened in the meantime, a cinematographic representation of an instructive and educational character, where there is an apparatus, agricultural, sanitary, household advice and guidance, etc., given by the competent factors, who will be asked to contribute with their knowledge to the complete success of the meeting”⁴¹.

On the occasion of the public meetings, brochures, “Church sheet for the people”, crucifixes, etc. had to be distributed, and the sums collected were to be given to a needy family.

The county section, as the third action organ of the “Renașterea” Society, was to hold a single annual meeting, towards the end of February and the beginning of March, and the program was to have a religious culture side and an administrative one. Along with this, the general meeting of the popular bench of the priesthood in the respective section had to be held.

The Congress, as the action organ of the society, was held annually, in June.

The “Renașterea” magazine was supposed to appear twice a month and also include an official part, which until then had been published separately in the “Official Bulletin of the Diocese”, which ceased publication in January 1940⁴².

⁴¹ “Renașterea”, festive number, year XIX, no. 1, January 1940, pp. 154–155.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 156–157.

2.2. The achievements of the “Renașterea” Society in the period 1938–1940

Beyond the various difficulties that the “Renașterea” Society faced in the period 1938-1940 (including the temporary, *de facto* suspension of the statutory activity), the Oltenian priesthood was active and fulfilled its duties. This fact is recorded and emphasized in the documents of the eparchial congress of September 24-25, 1940, held in Craiova:

„However, this suspension does not mean a stagnation of the Oltenian [society] activity. The priest was and is, due to his duty, both a pious person endowed with the power to teach, lead and sanctify the lives of his believers, as well as a cultural, national and social factor in the role entrusted to him by the laws of the country”⁴³.

The Oltenian priesthood made efforts to be able to continue its activity at the standards up to 1938 and, despite all the limitations imposed by the Carlist regime, managed to carry out its pastoral, missionary, philanthropic and social assistance activities, recording, during the period 1938–1940, remarkable results. Among these, we briefly mention the following:

– made an important contribution to the establishment and operation of school canteens in Oltenia. On the initiative of the Metropolitan of Oltenia, Râmnic and Severin, Nifon Criveanu, in the first part of 1940, school canteens were established in the residential localities of the five counties of Oltenia: “Cantina Bisericii” (“Church Canteen”) in Caracal (Romanați County); “Iubirea Aproapelui” (“Neighborly Love”) of the Archdiocese of Craiova (Dolj County); “Clerul Gorjean” (“Gorjean Clergy”) from Târgu Jiu (Gorj County), “Iubirea Aproapelui” (“Love of Neighbor”) from Turnu Severin (Mehedinți County) and “Iubirea de copii” (“Love of children”) from Râmnicu-Vâlcea (Vâlcea County). Also, with the help of local priests, in the 1940-1941 school year, school canteens also functioned in the rest of the localities in all the counties of Oltenia⁴⁴.

– contributed to the activities regarding the collection of material and financial aid necessary to support the families of the concentration camps and those in need, as well as the refugees from the occupied territories in the summer and autumn of 1940.

⁴³ S.J.A.N. Dolj, fond Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt, Serviciul Administrativ, file no. 12/1940, f. 563.

⁴⁴ See, “Viața Bisericească în Oltenia. Anuarul Mitropoliei Olteniei”, Craiova, Tipografia Sf. Mitropoliei a Olteniei, Râmnicului și Severinului, 1941, pp. 63–69; Narcisa Maria Mitu, *The Contribution of the Church for the founding of School Canteens in Oltenia*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane «C.S. Nicolăescu-Ploșșor»”, XVI/2015, pp. 237–240; Diana-Mihaela Păunoiu, “*School canteens established by Mitropoly of Oltenia (1940–1941)*”, in Iulian Boldea, Cornel Sigmirean (eds.), *Identities in Globalisation. Intercultural Perspectives*, Section: History, Political Sciences, International Relations, edited by: The Alpha Institute for Multicultural Studies Târgu Mureș, “Arhipeleag XXI Press” Publishing House, 2020, pp. 176–184.

- contributed to the endowment of the Romanian army (for example, the clergy, led by the metropolitan, subscribed, in 1940, their salary for one month).
 - carried out sustained missionary activity⁴⁵.
 - had various initiatives to preserve good morals among the youth and local communities⁴⁶.
 - contributed to the good running of the school, the priests being the ones who replaced the teachers concentrated in the army⁴⁷.
 - granted, from its own funds, aid to the widows and orphans of clerics.
 - continued the tradition of maintaining the link with the Oltenian cultural environment. In the “Renașterea” Cultural House in Craiova, representatives of the following organizations held conferences and cultural meetings: Craiova parish center; The „Prietenii Științei” Society (“Friends of Science”), the Dolj Teachers’ Association, the “Gând și Slovă Oltenească” Association (Oltenian Thought and Slova) and the Dolj Student Circle⁴⁸.
 - The “Renașterea” Central Library benefited from the donation made, in 1939, by priest Grigore Popescu-Breasta, consisting of 836 volumes with theological, literary, pedagogical content, etc. and the “Romanian Orthodox Church” („Biserica Ortodoxă Română”) magazine (1874–1915). The Central Library had over 2,100 volumes, plus magazines and publications from the country and abroad.
 - The “Renașterea” magazine appeared regularly, and the new management committee (Gh. Ghia, C. Zamfirescu and I. Popescu-Cilieni), elected in 1939, strove to raise the theological level of the magazine.
 - The annual church calendar was printed (in 1940, it was printed in 250,000 copies).
 - The candle factory worked normally.
 - As a result of the interventions made by the management, the “Renașterea” Society was included in the residential protocol regarding the persons who were invited to the national solemnities and festivities⁴⁹.
- All these results, without pretending that we managed to include/mention them all, show the diversity and importance of the activity of the priests within the

⁴⁵ See: Valentin Ciorbea, *Mitropolia Olteniei – primul an de istorie (21 decembrie 1939 – 21 decembrie 1940)*, in “Misiunea”, Revista Centrului de Cercetare a Conlucrării Bisericii Ortodoxe cu Armata României «General Paul Teodorescu», IInd year, no. 1(2)/2015, p. 28; Diana-Mihaela Păunoiu, *Activitatea misionară a preoților din Oltenia în perioada 1939-1940*, in the volume “Mehedinți – istorie, cultură și spiritualitate”, XIV, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Mitropolia Olteniei Publishing House și Didahia Severin Publishing House, 2022, pp. 386–398.

⁴⁶ See Diana-Mihaela Păunoiu, *Aspecte privind reformarea conduitei moral-religioase a comunităților oltene (1938–1940)*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, new series, no. 30, 2016, pp. 113–123.

⁴⁷ S.J.A.N. Dolj, Rezidența Regală a Ținutului Olt, Serviciul Administrativ Fund, file no. 6/1940, f. 47.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, file no. 115/1939, f. 34v.–35.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, file no. 12/1940, f. 564–565v.

“Renașterea” Society, who, regardless of certain difficulties, continued to carry out their activity during the period 1938-1940, both within the places of worship and outside them, fulfilling both their old and usual duties, as well as the extended tasks in which they were engaged by the social-cultural program initiated by the state authorities.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the documents analyzed and exposed in this article, we can affirm that, for the “Renașterea” Priestly Society, which had an important experience in the activities in the sphere of social Christianity and which enjoyed popularity among the Oltenian communities, the integration of this segment of its activity in the Social Service had additional consequences and complications, because it had to reformulate its Statute of Operation in order to reorganize its local structures and to redefine its objectives so that it could carry out its activity under the conditions and within the limits drawn by the secular authorities. The inter-institutional collaboration within the Social Service meant, *de facto*, a compromise forced by the limits and demands of a dictatorial political regime, which no longer allowed social and cultural activities to appear other than as a result of the effort and initiative of King Carol II and his regime.

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