



PERSPECTIVES AND LIMITS IN DEVELOPMENT OF PRISLOP PILGRIMAGE

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Abstract Pilgrimages are capable of gathering together and bringing about one complex religious revitalization, while providing the holy place with one unique identity and having a strong impact on the community. In order to become a cultural – religious tourist product, the Prislop Pilgrimage requires for its destination to meet a couple of conditions, such as: existence, the relevant attestation of the cultural – religious tourist potential, providing for such potential elements accessibility, means of communication, accommodation infrastructure, food upon destination as well as while on the route, providing for establishments and tourists security, a commercial network, maintaining a low pollution level, aggressive promotion of the relevant destination, providing for public quality services and the available of qualified labor force.

Key words:

Pilgrimage, mass-media, communication

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1. Introduction

In terms of the Romanian government, the church stands for the first institution as relates to the degree of trust at the population level. One of the most frequent and common ways to express one's religious feelings is represented by pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage stands for one strong pastoral instrument succeeding by means of its qualities, in motivating millions of believers one year after another to start their journey to the sacred locations. "That force of attraction displayed by such holy places has often puzzled both the specialists and the non – specialists. The impressive number of people starting their journey, the latter's motivations, the feelings that they live and share with other pilgrims, the routes, locations, local communities at the pilgrimage location, all of these make up the scientific subject matter for research in various fields" (Turner, V., Turner, E., 1978 p. 75).

Pilgrimages are capable of gathering together and triggering one complex religious revitalization action, while providing the holy place with one unique identity with a strong impact on the community. Pilgrimages hold a very special place in believers' hearts, and this is no news. Saints worship and pilgrimages, despite being deemed as ancient religious practices, are the ones mobilizing millions of believers who start their religious journey. This has drawn the attention on the part of researchers, public opinion and mass – media, all the latter turning their attention and eyes towards these forms of religious manifestation that has been so little

studied so far. Researchers from various cultural fields have begun studying the pilgrimage phenomenon and have managed to come up with and propose a series of debates on the pilgrimage issue topic (Apostle M., S., 2012. p. 67). In Romania, pilgrims use to travel either independently, or more often and particularly in an organized manner, in groups, the transport by coach being preferred to this end. In most localities there are various travel agencies that organize such pilgrimages to holy places either upon their own initiative, or in cooperation with the church. The most frequent ones are the one day pilgrimages.

2. Religious market structure

The way how nowadays man regards religion is quite different from the traditional way, where divinity lies only in churches. Nowadays, in order to get believers' attention, churches use to "fight", by help of mass-media, and challenge themselves in terms of rating and number of views. All these seem to be some bizarre and unconceivable facts as far as the beginning of 20th century religious market is concerned, yet the occurrence of the new means of communication has triggered various changes at the society level and has forced the world religions to keep up with the new emerging technologies.

Based on statistic data, 86% of Romanian population is deeply religious and 6 % of them state they use to go to church on a weekly basis, of which 2 % state they are going on a daily basis. In the West,

people think God does exist and they believe in Him and state they are deeply religious, thus in Great Britain 72 % of population is Christian, in the US the rate is 80 % and in France is 78 %. And yet, researchers' opinion is that religion is declining due to the fact that people state their being believers, yet they are unwilling to go to church or to belong to any such church for that matter. At the same time, if one tries to find more about the theological knowledge that respondents have, the same are as close to zero and they only limit to the notion of ethics, namely to value judgments in terms of good and evil. Charity is a noble gesture of good will, a humanitarian act and not an act for sins redemption, as it used to be in some cases in the past. (Apostle M., S., 2012. p. 67).

Studies show that this behavioral evolution is just common, yet the church decline pattern is not identical in each and every single country, as concerned. Every single Christian country has its personal rate of such decline. Sociologists and historians believe that church decline is visible, predictable and they debate a number of possible causes and effects, and even the time of the Christian church decay as an institution.

By the ethical power of beliefs and religious concepts, the church defends the very center of the social structure, while preaching for a conservative behavior guided by norms and prescriptions. The moral sermons given by the church stand for the central pillar in believers' life and for a significant reason for sympathy. Yet, the factors triggering the religious involvement are different from one religion to another and from one country to the other. The issue relating to the Eastern Europe church is unique, by the very way how the latter has modeled the contemporary religious landscape and has reshaped society (Smith G., 2008, p.15).

3. Limitations in terms of Prislop pilgrimage development

Within the recent years, Prislop Monastery shows an increased interest among pilgrims due to the presence in this particular location of several attraction points that believers find to be significant and enriched with holy grace. Coming to Prislop as a pilgrim is already a national scale religious habit. Pilgrims all over Romania and not only from Romania come to bow at priest Arsenie Boca's grave, to see the rock – dug cell having belonged to Saint John from Prislop, to drink the holy water from the spring inside the monastery, to bow in the small monastery church and to admire the wonderful landscape existing in Prislop.

In our study we have aimed to make up an overview of the limitations we have encountered while trying to research this matter online. Some of these limitations

may also be valid for a very large number of Romanian monasteries and churches, on which grounds the very Romanian Patriarch advises priests to talk to their parishioners online and, implicitly to create their own Facebook accounts, as well as a series of websites for the said monasteries and parishes. "Change of Mentality in the Romanian Orthodox Church. The Patriarch Daniel encourages priests to get closer to their parishioners by Internet as well. More precisely, the head of the Church advises altar servants to also "conduct their missionary activity" on socialization networks as well" (7).

While researching the online environment, one finds that Prislop monastery does not own its official Facebook account. Yet, there are various websites and Facebook addresses stating they do not stand for the unofficial point of view of the monastery or of the Romanian Orthodox Church. The lack of some well – structured information, the absence of any official source disseminating the issue stand for one adverse consequence. The fact that the Romanian Orthodox Church, in its capacity of an official authority, has failed to take the decision of communicating by modern means, to the laymen's understanding, on the Arsenie Boca phenomenon, on the priest's life, on the latter's miracles, shows a lack of involvement on the part of the church. The absence of building one acknowledged theological point of view leads to a proliferation of those voices attempting to understand and generate a myth, which fact may also create a lot of confusion. The online environment is loaded with blogs, testimonials, opinions and personal points of view on such pilgrimage, life experiences that one cannot deny, personal revelations, etc. One may notice a certain lack of reaction or involvement in the spiritual experience lived by pilgrims coming to Prislop, which eventually materializes under the form of the absence of any spiritual support to this end. As a consequence, each pilgrim is left to understand whatever he or she may find to be relevant following his or her experience in Prislop.

Arsenie Boca priest's sanctification process stands for another hot topic for so many believers having constantly pressured the church for taking a decision to this end. After a long waiting period, the Romanian Orthodox Church has finally decided that the sanctification process should also start for Arsenie Boca priest as well.

"The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) has initiated the sanctification process in terms of Arsenie Boca, through the Diocese in Deva and Hunedoara, which gathers elements of proof as well as confessions regarding the priest's life, and that is a process requiring several years to be achieved" (4). Newspapers also show a series of sensational

information aimed at impressing the audience, such as for instance a story about: "the man held in custody for profaning Arsenie Boca priest's grave in Prislop Monastery, after having dug a hole over the grave, and then claimed to having done so in order to accelerate the sanctification process, has been released on Sunday, following that he shall be committed into a mental hospital in Maramures" (5).

Pilgrims' involvement is getting more and more obvious one year after another, by the latter's massive presence in Prislop. The number of pilgrims showing up at Arsenie Boca priest's grave on the 28th of November increases from 35.000, 40.000 and to 95.000. These are only estimates, since one has mounted no monitoring system for the people visiting the area. Journalists or people telling the stories and making statements regarding the number of such pilgrims rely on the information provided by peace officers and by local officials.

"We can only say that there have been thousands of people in Prislop Monastery, at Arsenie Boca priest's grave. One cannot make an accurate estimate since there is always a great number of people coming in and going out. While some of these pilgrims are coming, some others are leaving, and so it's quite difficult to tell how many people attend the pilgrimage these days. There have been people coming here from all over the country" (6).

During the three days of the mini – holiday on the 1st of May, according to official estimates coming from Hunedoara Peace Officers Department, "the weekend has brought an impressive number of pilgrims coming to Prislop Monastery, the latter's number being around 95.000. By the due care and contribution on the part of the attending order forces, peace officers, traffic police and SMURD teams, the event has been duly managed", stated the spokesman of the County Peace Officers Department Inspectorate (IJJ) in Hunedoara, sub – lieutenant Lucian Stoichițoiu" (1).

During the memorial service, there have been more than 15.000 believers in Prislop Monastery and during the two days of prayers, according to the Peace Officers Department, more than 40.000 pilgrims have been queuing for several kilometers in order to get to touch the cross on the priest's grave (2).

Arsenie Boca priest's image is abusively used by misinterpreting the sacred image in order to get political capital. Thus, we find it from the news that the Patriarchy spokesman, Mr. Constantin Stoica, has announced on Thursday that the Romanian Orthodox Church is in no way related to the action by which one spreads pictures of Arsenie Boca priest bearing the PSD sign and the name of Victor Ponta on them. "the Church disclaims such practices. Canons are crystal clear. We give our parishioners no indication

whatsoever as to whom they should vote with", stated Constantin Stoica, at RealitateaTV station. He classified the action displayed by ACL as being "an exaggerated electing campaign initiative, probably on the part of certain party members or followers, that enjoyed neither the church blessing nor the latter's approval" (3).

In addition to the limitative matters in terms of the information on Prislop Monastery to those who may be concerned, one may also notice an inadequate level of the tourist infrastructure. We are speaking of one isolated destination with a difficult access road to the monastery, passing through localities where specific signs for such destination are actually missing. The access road through the locality is very narrow and does not allow for the simultaneously passing of two cars on both traffic ways. Immediately close to the monastery there is a parking lot that fails to provide for enough parking spaces. The limited number of parking spaces so often leads to the access road being blocked. The pilgrims exodus has done so that for several kilometers around the monastery there shall appear a real commercialization network for flowers and many other objects bearing the Arsenie Boca priest's signs. Local authorities take no dynamic involvement in the building of one coherent strategy for supporting small entrepreneurs and for developing the area.

Two villages of Hunedoara, Silvașu de Sus and Silvașiu de Jos, nearby Prislop Monastery, revived economically in the recent years due to the popularity of the place where Father Arsenie Boca was buried" (Daniel G., 2014). The two villages are located a few kilometers from the monastery and are the only access to the center of pilgrimage. The monastery does not offer accommodation which implicitly made pilgrims to seek accommodation in these villages. The villagers have gradually specialized in offering rural accommodation, local cuisine products and handmade objects that they sell at stalls located in front of the houses. The locals recognize: Monastery and Father Arsenie Boca are a blessing to us" (Guță D., 2014). The number of pilgrims crossing the area is large, the locals are surprised by the range of vehicles crossing the villages: "On weekends, the line of cars heading towards Prislop and returns from there seems endless" (Guță D., 2014). The winter village is crossed by hundreds of cars, during summer the number of pilgrims exceeds the capacity of localities. The accommodation offered by the villagers is closely related to the area's problems, lack of water and sewerage. The lack of comfort offered by some locals determines low prices, there are villagers who built guesthouses with an offer according to the industry standards. However within a radius of 10 kilometers,

the guesthouses of Hațeg area are taken by storm on weekends.

"In summer, all the 300 seats in hostels offered in the Hațeg and Silvas area, are occupied most of the time, on weekends, for those going to Prislop. The tourism demand is sometimes greater than the possibility of boarding accommodation" says the mayor of Hațeg, Marcel Goia (Guță D., 2014).

Conclusion:

The perspectives in terms of the pilgrimage to Arsenie Boca priest's grave, are not pretty clearly shaped in terms of the development strategy from an administrative perspective. The Romanian Orthodox Church has stated its intention to begin Arsenie Boca priest's sanctification process. Yet, in order to become a cultural – religious tourist product, the destination has to meet other conditions as well: providing for these potential elements accessibility, means of communication, accommodation infrastructure, food on destination and while on the move, providing for establishments and tourists security, a commercial network, a low pollution level, the aggressive promotion of the destination, quality public services, qualified labor force (Busuioc F.M., 2008, p. 123).

Out of the data being herein displayed it follows that at present not even one of the aforementioned items has been reached. Despite the fact that each year this particular destination attracts a huge number of pilgrims arriving from very faraway places in order to find an answer to a bunch of soul and body issues, local authorities have failed to take necessary actions so as to facilitate and increase access. One such potential turned into tourist flows should be turned to account in order to display itself in the local economy growth.

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