

Romanians' Faith Unshaken by Church Scandal

Tragic exorcism fails to dampen enthusiasm for Orthodox church.

For the tens of thousands who come each year to the eastern Romanian city of Iasi, the hours spent queuing to view the remains of Saint Paracheva are worth the long wait.

"It's a moment of great holy joy for us, because we got the chance to see the relics of a saint who can help us to overcome the difficulties of everyday life," said one pilgrim who'd come to catch a glimpse of Paracheva, a healer and protector of the poor who is one of the best known and the most widely revered saints among Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Romanians are perhaps the most faithful people in the Balkan region, and the Orthodox church, to which over 90 per cent of the population belongs, remains the country's most trusted institution.

Under communism, church attendance was frowned upon by the authorities and an urbanisation plan by the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu claimed 18 churches in the capital Bucharest.

But their numbers have grown rapidly in the past decade with a report from the NGO Solidarity for Liberty of Conscience estimating 2,000 have been erected since the end of communism while another 1,000 are still under construction.

The largest is the yet-to-be-built Salvation of the Nation cathedral in Bucharest, which is planned for a six-hectare plot behind the House of the People - the world's second-largest building - which is home to the Romanian parliament.

Many of the Romanians packing into the newly erected churches are increasingly drawn to the more mystical aspects of the Orthodox religion where talk of relics, miracles and exorcisms is not uncommon.

But even an exorcism that went tragically wrong has failed to shake the trust most Romanians have in the church and its practices.

In mid-June, a 23-year-old Romanian nun died after being tied to a cross with a towel stuffed into her mouth then left without food for three days.

Irina Cornici was brought to the Holy Trinity monastery in the northeast village of Tanacu to be cured of schizophrenia. The monk heading the convent, Daniel Corogeanu, said she was possessed by the devil and conducted the exorcism ritual along with four nuns who helped tie her down.

An autopsy later found she'd died of dehydration and lack of oxygen, though Romanian news agencies reported in September she had been exhumed so a second autopsy could be conducted to aid in Corogeanu's defence.

He and the nuns were charged with depriving a person of liberty and aggravated murder. The case received intense scrutiny both in the local press and abroad with Corogeanu described as "the killer priest"

and “the hangman”.

It was later revealed that he had not finished his theological studies, which take up to five years, and had been appointed to his post by the bishop at the insistence of a businessman who’d provided funding to build the monastery.

“The culpable person is the bishop that gave an early blessing to the priest,” said Dan Ciachir, a theology expert and commentator.

The church responded quickly, describing the exorcism as “abominable”. It banned Corogeanu from priesthood and barred the nuns from the monastery. It also promised psychological tests for theologians entering monasteries.

Romanians have seemingly accepted the church’s explanation that the events at Tanacu were an accident. Though many disapprove of the practices carried out at the monastery, church spokesman Constantin Stoica insists the incident hasn’t shaken their faith but has instead sparked useful debates.

“[With] the Tanacu case, every monastery received indirectly a lesson about how important it is to respect liturgical customs,” he said.

One independent analyst suggests, however, that the church has weathered the storm because it personifies authority in times of political and social insecurity.

“I think there is a ... need of authority that explains why people believe in the church,” said Ovidiu Nahoi, a columnist for the leading daily Evenimentul Zilei.

“After years of communism, people need an authority to rely on, the kind of authority that democratic state’s institutions don’t offer, and for this reason they continue to trust mainly in God’s word.”

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