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For present edition - 2019

For orders:

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+32476505884

ISBN 978-2-931030-00-4

The Saint of the Prisons

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The Saint of the Prisons

*Notes on the life of Valeriu Gafencu,
collected and annotated by
the monk Moise*

*With foreword and afterword by
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« Read and spread »¹

¹ Phrase used at the end of all communist manifests, during the period when Communism was illegal.

For your Understanding

To be adequately understood, world history must be theologically judged.

Alongside all the social, political or military conflicts that history has recorded in chronicles and archives, ever since man's creation, there is another war taking place (much more important, yet invisible to the human eye): the devil's war against God. The battlefield of this war is man's heart. As a result of man's choice, recorded history emerges.

The history of the Church is a history of oppression, of martyrdom for Christ. The oppression, initiated in the first century after Christ by the Roman Empire, continued afterwards by the barbarians and then by the Ottoman Empire. However, the twentieth century remains beyond doubt the most atrocious period in the history of Christianity, due to the bloodiest persecution that it had to endure: the communist oppression.

From an ideological standpoint, Communism aimed to build a world without social classes or private property by claiming that the wealth of the country belongs to everyone equally. The communist ideal was an egalitarian society, led by a single political party. Communists deceptively asserted that state power belonged to the workers. In reality, power, just like all other resources of the country, was concentrated in the hands of a small group of party leaders.

Many things have been said and written about Communism. Regardless of the arguments in favor of or against Communism as an ideology, its implementation will remain in history as the incarnation of Satan's presence in and among people. Indeed, Satan created and

used Communism as a means to conquer as many souls as rapidly and permanently as possible.

Communism found itself clearly as an antichristic materialization in history; its metaphysical character is more than obvious. Murder, as a political weapon, and as the basis of all communist "achievements," puts an end to life: "the murderer", as Jesus Christ calls him (John 8: 44), wants to take revenge on the Giver of Life. The violence and terror² which Communism imposed on people are opposite to the love and kindness preached by the Gospel.

The general feelings of distrust,³ fear—of constantly induced by Communism in the whole society—are in opposition to the faith that God, and anyone who wants to resemble Him, has in man. Christ came to set us free, whilst Communism is characterized by an unprecedented restriction of human freedom. Christ is the Truth and He wants us to know Him; in Communism, deception is the daily bread for the sons of "the Father of lies" (John 8: 44). Besides the deep hatred for anyone and anything resembling Christ, Communism's highest ideal—the creation of the "new man" (an idea of Christian origin, but perverted by the devil)—was proven by history to be exactly the opposite of the new man reborn and healed in the Church. The new man of the Church is the one who gains the highest form of freedom: freedom in Christ, which cannot be restrained by the barriers of time or space.

Last but not least, all communist forerunners, ideologists and leaders (Marx, Engels, Bauer, Feuerbach, Tkacev, Neceaev, Bakunin, Lenin, Stalin) were under an

² Karl Marx (1964), *The Class Struggle in France 1848-1850*, New York: International Publishers.

³ One of Stalin's slogans was "vigilance and distrust."

obvious satanic influence, some even declaring themselves inspired by the "prince of the dark," while others demonstrated this state of mind and soul and through their behavior.⁴

The undeniable genius who used Communism to enslave over a third of the world population so rapidly, the genius whose "generous" and "humanitarian" ideas appealed and continue to appeal to many recent or contemporary "intellectuals,"⁵ cannot belong to a man or an interest group. It belongs to Antichrist himself, who, according to all prophecies, will initially be a gentleman, an "enlightened being" serving the peoples of the world.

The devil laid the foundation of Communism, suggesting once again to man that he could build Heaven on earth through mankind's joined power, excluding God (Adam's eternal trap—the temptation of the proud man: to achieve divinization without the presence of God). Essentially, this heresy (named chiliasm or millennialism) appears at several points in time throughout Christian history. It is typical of the man who rejects Christ's message, of he who refuses the Mystery of the Cross. This was truly the ultimate dream of Marx, Engels, and their disciples. As they stated, at the end of the total Revolution aimed at destroying the "Old World", the communists dreamed to bring on earth the Kingdom of Heaven—the

⁴ Alain Besancon (2007) *Originile intelectuale ale leninismului* (*Intellectual Origins of communism*), Bucuresti: Humanitas or Nikolai Berdiaev (1997) *Marele inchizitor* (*The Great Inquisitor*). Dostoevski - lecture teologice (*Theological Reading*), Polirom.

⁵ Unfortunately, even nowadays many people in the Western world continue to believe that Communism is a wonderful ideology, that has just been poorly implemented in the former communist countries.

place where the new man (perfect and re-educated) could live eternal and complete happiness.

Therefore, all those who chose to reach Heaven by following Jesus Christ's path (by turning away from sins and fighting the devil), became obstacles in the achievement of the "mighty goal" and, consequently, had to be eliminated. Their mere existence became a mirror that reflected the madness of the Marxist ideology.⁶

Hence, for the majority of those who suffered under Communism, the fight was carried out at the personal and the spiritual level. This fight did not occur primarily in prisons, mountains, or against Communism as system or ideology, but against the Evil present inside the people themselves (as passions or as disbeliefs), or the personified evil of Satan—who acted through those who fell prey to him.

The Communist regime in Romania and its aim

On 23 August 1944, Romania was occupied by the Soviet forces. As a result, a political and economic regime subservient to the Soviet Union was established in Romania. This was possible with the tacit agreement of Western powers and through a secret agreement between Churchill and Stalin concerning the division of spheres of influence. Indeed, the trajectory of the country was one contrary to Romania's national interests.

One of the first things done by the Soviets was to help the communists take over the political leadership of the country by falsifying the 1946 elections and by imposing foreign leaders. Furthermore, they disbanded

all political parties and arrested their leaders. Afterwards, in December 1947, they forced the king Mihai I (Michael I) to resign and established the Popular Republic, opening the way towards a totalitarian state, based on a single party.

As of 1947, the Communist terror had been imposed on the whole country. In 1948, the security service called *Securitate* was established. This was the equivalent of the Soviet NKVD/KGB. Its main mission was to establish absolute control so as to utterly destroy those opposing the regime. The *Securitate* used all possible means to fulfill its objectives.

From the onset, according to the model already implemented in the USSR, Romanian communists chiefly followed a number of objectives that, according to their line of thought, would have allowed them to create the "new man," re-educated:

- to destroy the traditional social order, fundamental to Christian values, in order to separate people from their past and to remove their roots. It is known that a man with no roots is a man without identity and thus easy to manipulate. Only by employing this strategy could the Communists have hoped to replace traditional society with A. Huxley's "Brave New World" and to establish a new religion - atheism.

- to modify the content of the notion of morality (Lenin argued in one of his speeches that the true morality of the new man—the Communist—is not the traditional morality which is rooted in Christianity, but one according to which "good" is defined by the ideals of the Communist Revolution. Therefore, according to the Communist ideology, if a man or an idea serves those ideals, she/he/it is good, and if not, she/he/it is evil.

⁶ "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God" (Psalms 52:

- to introduce a feeling of distrust and insecurity in all strata of society by promoting generalized lying, corruption and treason. The *Securitate* imposed its collaborators everywhere. These were people convinced—voluntarily or by force—to continuously monitor their relatives and friends and to write reports about the alleged anti-system activities of those observed. If somebody dared to speak against the regime, that person would be arrested, charged, and imprisoned.

- to alter knowledge and to limit the thought horizons by manipulating and confiscating the language. "Of all the monopolies enjoyed by the Soviet State, none would be so crucial as its monopoly on the definition of words. The ultimate weapon of political control would be the dictionary"⁷. It is interesting to note the out-of-the-ordinary intensive activity to write and re-write dictionaries taking place in the USSR after 1950.

Indeed, on a deeper level, namely on a spiritual level (the unseen war between good and evil), the main objective was to remove Christianity from society and to dehumanize people.

I am convinced that only by reading this book through a spiritual and historical lens (presented concisely until now) will emphasize its importance. Otherwise, it will only be standard literature, and the person we will discuss next—the new martyr Valeriu Gafencu—will remain just one of the many venerable figures of our Church history.

But only those who study and know history, only those who strive to understand it in a spiritual light, and

⁷ Robert C. Tucker (1956) "Stalin and the Uses of Psychology" in *World Politics* 8: 4 July, 477.

not in that of the rulers of the world, may understand the present. It is the only way to hope to survive as a Christian in these present days, characterized by the spirit of antichrist who becomes more and more powerful, whose cold tentacles reach out silently and greedily towards everybody's hearts.

Following the example of the martyrs across two thousand years of Church history, the martyrs of the prisons also preferred renouncing this perishable life, together with all it may seem to offer, rather than renouncing Christ by collaborating with the Communist regime and becoming traitors to the credo of their brothers.

Rady Gyr, one of the most well-known among the poets persecuted by the Communists, said something extraordinary: "in prisons, I learned in my own flesh what it truly means to be a Christian." It is within this paradigm, between "in my own flesh" and "truly" that the drama of the life and of the death of those imprisoned consumed itself. And in truth, it is within this fine distinction that the salvation is worked out for us, Christians; the path from the moral sphere to the spiritual one.

We think about the rich man (Matthew 19:16-30) who accomplished everything according to the Law, that is, the exterior, moral deeds, but could not renounce a life that found peace in the self-sufficient, legalistic accomplishment of the Lord's commandments. He suspected he had shortcomings, but he could not admit to them by following Christ and thus letting Him heal them. And this young person, tempted as he was to refuse the truth about himself, afraid of the daily perspective of assuming his own cross and following the Lord, is hidden within each one of us.

Many people could ask, how did these people become martyrs for God? Where did they find the strength to resist such tortures, internal as well as physical? What about the enormous weight on their conscience? How did they rise after apostasy and treason? How did they arrive to Christ, when for many, their previous ideals had been social and political, rather than spiritual?

Firstly, until their arrival in prison, they cultivated an extreme awareness of the value of their own existence. They deeply yearned to give their life a higher purpose, for which they should be prepared to die for, and the One Who named Himself "The Way" of our lives granted them even death for Him.

Secondly, they had continuously fought with sin, struggling for a clean conscience. They had tried to get rid of egotism, endeavoring to live in brotherly communion, by renouncing their own wishes and striving to enlarge their hearts to welcome others in them.

Thirdly, one cannot help noticing the deep intuition of those who did not possess any kind of spiritual enlightenment before suffering for Christ but who cultivated the spirit of sacrifice as a way of living. Their sacrifice for the Christian faith and for the country made them close to Him, Him Who sacrificed Himself for the salvation of human kind. Christ received the Cross and took upon Himself Adam and Eve's sin after their fall from obedience. By willingly receiving the shame and suffering of the Cross – for which they suffered so much – the martyrs proved themselves the followers of the Lord. And because they had endured the torture, the blame, the mutilation of both soul and body, for Christ's name, Christ offered those who

suffered through to the end His Spirit, by reviving them spiritually, healing them and offering them the salvation of their souls. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." (Matthew 5: 11).

The sacrifice of those in the Communist prisons was an authentic one, assumed in Christ. It was not the result of their political options, which put them in opposition with the new regime, imposed by force. It was the sacrifice for God and for the people in whose midst they were born, and for which they felt responsible (Corinthians 15: 23). This was what gave Valeriu Gafencu the conviction that he confessed before his death: that their sacrifices will not be in vain⁸. As Father Seraphim Rose said: "there is one law of spiritual life which says that where there is Golgotha – which means, where there is real sacrifice for Christ – there is also Resurrection. This Resurrection first takes place in our hearts and one should not think too much about the exterior form it will take, by God's providence"⁹.

Valeriu Gafencu

Among those who understood that the only chance to withstand evil was to be filled with Christ was a man called Valeriu Gafencu, the one to whom this book has been dedicated. When asked about Communism, he replied that "there is no doubt that man's imprisonment inside the system is a bad thing, but nothing is more

⁸ Ioan Ianolide (2006) *Ioan Ianolide, Intoarcerea la Hristos (Return To Christ)*, Bucuresti: Editura Christiana, 80.

⁹ Ierom. Damaschin, *Viața și lucrările Părintelui Serafim Rose (The life and Works of Father Serafim Rose)*, Bucuresti: Editura Sophia, 851.

frightening than the conditioning of the consciousness, which transforms man into a controlled tool"¹⁰. Satan's tool, one would add. For the hater of mankind wanted man to be his servant in order to take to perdition as many as possible among "the children of the most High" (Psalms 81: 6), by taking advantage of God's dispensation of passing them through the sieve: "but this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22: 53).

Due to reasons known only by God's providence, although "a cloud of testimonies" emerged from the Communist prison cells, the one mentioned the most is "Valeriu Gafencu". All those who knew Valeriu mention him with great piety, considering him a saint. Indeed, Father Nicolae Steinhardt, a Jew converted to Christianity in prison, called him in his evocations "the saint of the prisons."

Through his sacrificial love, springing forth from the complete dedication of his life to Christ, the image of his life was deeply imprinted in the hearts of those who met him. It was impossible otherwise: at the end of his life, when, being very sick, any effort (even talking) was causing him a great deal of pain, his friends advised him to spare himself. But he told them: "Do not take this joy from me, because confessing Christ is the only thing I am living for!"

Father Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa, another important Orthodox witness of the communist period¹¹ exiled by Romanian communist authorities to the USA, said, "I have no doubt he is a saint; he lived God's word

¹⁰Ianolide, op. cit., 500.

¹¹Author of the famous Lenten sermons "Seven Words to Young People".

at a height incomprehensible for us."¹² Another fellow in suffering, Father Constantin Voicescu, was sure that "sooner or later, the Orthodox Church will canonize him."¹³

His most accurate portrayal of the detention period is offered in the book *The Return to Christ* ¹⁴ by his best friend, Ioan Ianolide, a survivor of the prisons, who also reached great spiritual heights. Indeed, only a spiritually advanced person, one that leads a holy life, can truly understand and present to others the image and likeness of a saint.

How did Valeriu become this giant of the Spirit?

First of all, his conviction was that only a man who lives in the presence of God acquires the true measure of himself, of life and of the world. In other words, faithful to the Church's Tradition, his fight reaches back through the centuries to reply to Protagoras' atheistic attitude, namely that man was the measure of all things. For Valeriu not man, but Christ is the measure of all things. Indeed, his deep belief, manifested in his actions and attitudes, had prepared a fertile ground for the coming of God's grace. He was aware that it is not enough to follow God's commandments in order to be saved. A deeper understanding of life in Christ was needed.

The Lord never ceased to look upon him. This moment of consciousness (mentioned in the chapter

¹²Confession given in October 2005 to Monk Moise.

¹³Multiple authors (2002) *Parintele Voicescu: Un duhovnic al cetatii* (Father Voiculescu: A spiritual father of the realm), Bucuresti: Editura Bizantina, 28.

¹⁴Ioan Ianolide (2006) *The Return to Christ*, Bucuresti : Editura Christiana.