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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
Father Ciprian Grădinaru, Belgium*

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value, Father Sophrony said. That is because, as was mentioned at the beginning, history needs to be understood in a theological way. Hence, everything will find its rightful purpose and place only on the great day of the final Judgment.

This book is about the immortal value of man that has reached its fullness in the holy being of one of those who loved God to the end. A book to stimulate, to comfort, to set an example, written with love for all our brothers who are, even without knowing, seeking the true Joy: our Christ the Lord.

Father Ciprian Grădinaru

Before Prison

Valeriu Gafencu was born on January 24, 1921, in Bessarabia, in the town of Sângera, near the city of Bălți. His parents, Vasile and Elena, were wealthy peasants. After completing high school, his father took classes at a technical school for electricians, and after World War I enrolled in the College of Electro-Technology in Iași. He did not follow the coursework through to graduation, but returned to his native village to teach. During World War I he was mobilized into the Russian Navy. On March 27, 1918, the National Council voted to unite Bessarabia with Romania; Vasile was a member of the Council.

In his notes from the colony at Galda,¹⁸ Valeriu says a few words about his parents. "When she married, Mama was about 24 years old. Tuța¹⁹ was about ten years older than she was and had loved her in secret for a long time. Mama was a simple girl with an elementary school education, without any wealth other than her spiritual and physical purity. Tuța was an honest man, healthy and robust, with a good upbringing; he was a student at the Polytechnic University, well-regarded by all men of value in Bessarabia. With a little more schooling he would have become an engineer, but after coming into contact

¹⁸In 1946-1947, Valeriu was taken to the colony of Galda for forced labor (Ianolide's *Intoarcerea la Hristos*, 60). Gafencu and Ianolide, his friend, could enjoy an increase in freedom, since they were working outside, in nature. (O.G. note)

¹⁹Tuța (pronounced TOOT-sah), an affectionate nickname for one's father, equivalent to the English "Dad" or "Daddy." (Translator's note)

with 'high society' and realizing its decadence, he renounced all prospects opened for him and went back to the village to farm and teach. He wanted to establish a pure, beautiful home, to have a wife, children, a farm.... And he married Mama. Mama once asked him: 'Why are you taking me as your wife since I have no education, no money... while you...? Why didn't you choose an educated girl from Iași, since so many girls wanted you for a husband?'

"He answered her, 'Lena, so many times I look at you and I think that I am not worthy of you. You have something special. You have purity. And that's why I love you.'

"Before marriage, Tuța had sinned with other women. He had, however, a sense of spiritual honor. He was totally sincere in recognizing his own sinfulness. That's why he was so dear to me. In my last year of high school, I was troubled by thoughts and anxieties regarding relations with women. I asked him one night: 'Tuța, I'm a bit embarrassed but please tell me honestly, what's the best way to deal with women? Among my friends I advocate abstinence, but I meet with great opposition. The environment in the schools is very bad.' Tuța answered me: 'The best thing is to abstain. I sinned in my youth because of a misunderstanding. I had reached the age of 21 and was still a virgin, still pure, but it was rumored among the boys and girls my age that I was impotent and that that was why I didn't have relations with women. I was angry, and I tried to find out who had invented this rumor. I discovered that it had started with a girl who was intrigued by my honorable and pure behavior. I sinned with her, out of spite. Later on, I was sorry.'

"Oh, how much my father's confession helped me! His advice protected me from so many temptations and falls.

"After you were arrested, Valeriu," my mother recounted, "I was home alone. One night during the winter of 1944, I left Bălți on foot for Sângerei. The frost was terrible. A man driving a sled caught up with me. I prayed him to take me into his sled, and he did. He was from a village farther away. We arrived in Sângerei late at night. Since it was winter, I put him up in our house. After I fed him, I thought, 'Now I must prepare the bed so that he can sleep.'"

"And my good mother thought it would be best to prepare the bed in the bedroom for him while she would sleep on the cot in the kitchen.²⁰ And that's what she did. During the night, Mama heard the doors of the house opening one after the other. Alarmed, she woke up at once. The man opened the door of the kitchen slowly, and Mama asked him, with her gentle voice: 'What do you want, Mister?' 'I thought you might be cold and would like to warm up,' he answered. Mama looked at him and replied: 'I have taken you in and sheltered you in my house, offering you the most honorable place, with my thoughts towards God. And just as I have one God, Jesus Christ, I also have only one husband.' The man cast his eyes to the ground in shame and closing the door behind him, went back to his bed.

"I kissed Mama and she told me that throughout their married life, both she and Tuța were faithful to each other. What a wonderful thing in which God is

²⁰The kitchen was in a separate building in order to minimize the risk of fire. (Translator's note)

well pleased! They lived all their lives so beautifully. They loved each other. And we, their children, never saw them arguing. I know that Tuța loved Mama; he protected her. For example, he would get up early in the morning, prepare everything for the field and prepare the household for the day. Then at sunrise, when he left for the fields, he would wake her up. He always let her sleep in so that she could rest. I can still hear him saying to her affectionately, 'Hey, Lena, lazybones, get up!'"²¹

The fruit of the love of these exceptional people were their four children: Valeriu, Valentina, Eleonora, and Elisabeta. Valeriu started school at Sângerei then went on to Ion Creangă High School in the nearby town of Bălți.

While a student, Valeriu distinguished himself. He received high marks in his classes, was loved by his fellow students, and was highly appreciated by his teachers. He was demanding with himself and also with the education of his sisters. As an older brother, he supervised them closely regarding their friendships, lessons, and such. Being a sensitive person, he loved literature and wrote several pieces that were published in the school's periodical.

He graduated from high school in the summer of 1940 and enrolled in law school in Iași. During this period, Bessarabia was handed over to Soviet troops. The Gafencu family crossed the river Prut and took refuge in Iași. Valeriu, together with his father, went back to Bessarabia in order to resolve matters having to do with their abandoned homestead. When they crossed the river Prut back to Romania, they had to

²¹Nicolae Trifoiu, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-231

keep clear of Soviet troops guarding the border from the river bank. A touching scene recounted by Virgil Maxim occurred here. "After a short rest on the right bank of the river,²² the old man stood up and gave thanks to God for His help in bringing his family to safety. He then embraced his son and made the final confession of his life: 'I brought you here so that you can take care of your mother and sisters. I charge you with this responsibility before God. I have to return to my people, my village.'

"Valeriu was troubled. The old man noticed his emotion and continued. 'What would all of our Bessarabian brothers say? How could I raise my eyes to heaven if I and others like me, who until now have struggled to preserve the Romanian spirit in this land, would now flee from the path of the oppressors and not take part in the suffering that awaits us?' Valeriu understood his father and didn't try to dissuade him. He realized how strong his father's sense of duty was and resolved to be faithful himself, as a son worthy of the same faith in God and in the future of his people.

"'Better times will come, but now we need sacrifices,' added the old man. Once again embracing his son and making the sign of the cross, he headed for the shore and swam across the river into his beloved Bessarabia. A short time later he was arrested and sent with a group of fellow Bessarabians to a camp beyond the Arctic Circle.²³ He died a year later amid horrible conditions, placing his hope in God to Whom he had

²²The two had already crossed from what was now the Soviet Union into Romania.

²³Valeriu Gafencu's father was part of the first waves of deportees to Siberia.

entrusted his loved ones. Someone who had miraculously escaped from the camp later related these things to Valeriu.”²⁴

As a student at the law school in Iași, Valeriu came to the attention of his professors as an honest young man full of decency; fellow peers also appreciated Valeriu for setting an example of benevolence and upstanding behavior.

In the fall of 1941, the reigning political regime declared the Legionnaire movement illegal; Valeriu, a member of the Legionnaires, was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison. He was 20 years old.

²⁴*Ibid*, pg. 88

Valeriu and Legionnaire Education

Before discussing what happened with Valeriu during his imprisonment, one must clarify an aspect that remains difficult for many: his involvement with the Legionary Movement.²⁵ It must be said from the onset that, before all else, the Legionary phenomenon was a wave of feeling or sentiment, a state of spirit. It has been observed that Romanians are generally not receptive to doctrines but to spiritual states. This is certainly true with respect to the Legionnaire movement. According to those who experienced it, it was rather a spontaneous phenomenon, a state of spiritual resonance, a response to internal searching, than a collective adherence to a doctrine.²⁶ The Legionnaires were convincing to others

²⁵The historical sources on the Legionary Movement are few and often written from a partisan perspective. Communism demonized the movement, identifying it with Nazism, even if the movement was exonerated in the Nuremberg Trials. On the other hand, the legionnaires present it in legendary terms. The task to clarify the role of the Legionary Movement during the 20th century remains difficult, but much is needed to understand a troubled period during the history of Romania and of Europe. (note OG).

²⁶ Strictly speaking, the Legionnaires did not have a doctrine or a program in the sense in which we speak of a political party having a doctrine, an ideology, or a program. Their point of departure was something else. From the very beginning they defined themselves as a community united in feeling and sentiment. Codreanu himself said, “Another characteristic of our beginning, beside the lack of money, was the lack of a program. We did not have a program. And this fact, of course, will give rise to a big question. A political organization without any organized program, conceived in the mind of one man or also in the minds of others? *But we did not bond with those who thought as we did, but with those who felt as we did. Not with those who had the same way of thinking, but with those adhering to the same spiritual framework.* It was significant that the statue of

through their manner of living, through their example, through what they transmitted. They had a faith and a decisiveness that others found stimulating.

But where did this manner of living come from? What gave rise to this spiritual state that “contaminated” thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people? What exactly kept up their zeal? Historical, sociological, or political explanations have been offered, speaking of a localized echo of European unrest and upheaval,²⁷ partially referring to long-standing repression of the Romanian people, who were growing dissatisfied with corruption in politics. Without disputing the fact that these did play a role in the sense that the Legionnaires had their origins in the problems of the day, the response they had vis-à-vis these concerns was rooted in their faith in God. Although they departed from historical causes, if we consider things from a spiritual perspective, their orientation toward God and toward Christian values – although admittedly not always affirmed or defended by the most evangelical methods – as well as their yearning for renewal and purification could not have been merely a social phenomenon. I believe that it was also a spiritual phenomenon, a spiritual calling addressed to this nation to return to

another goddess – Reason – would be shattered [by the Legionnaires]. In the service of God and for the meaning of life and instead of that which the world has raised up against God, we, without throwing it out or despising it, put something else in its place... If we, therefore, had neither money nor program, we had, rather, God in our souls, and He inspired us with the invincible power of faith.” (Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *Pentru Legionari*, ninth edition, Ed. Scara, Bucharest, 1999, pg. 232)

²⁷ It was often seen as a local echo of Nazism or Fascism. Codreanu of the Legionnaire movement distinguished it from the other political trends.

God, a deepening of certain meanings, an incentive toward Christian renewal, and especially the call of this generation of Romanians to martyrdom.²⁸

It is true that not everyone – and especially not from the beginning – was aware of the spiritual finality of this calling. Many were left behind on the way, at different stages, according to the measure of their capacity for spiritual understanding and growth. But a good number of them were enlightened, they were purified, and through suffering – like Gafencu – penetrated deeper into the sense of this calling and proceeded toward martyrdom. The road was not easy; there were slips and falls, but also enlightenment and moments of spiritual uplift. Demonstrating a virtue dear to Paisios the Athonite, self-sacrifice with soulful boldness, Legionnairism was, from a spiritual point of view and in spite of all human shortcomings, a preparation for martyrdom. This was clearly reflected in the Legionnaires’ behavior in Communist prisons, where they showed the true measure of their worth. Of the hundreds of thousands of political prisoners, a significant number came from among their ranks. In any case, the finest and largest number of Orthodox prisoners were Legionnaires.²⁹ For all of these men,

²⁸Gheorghe was asked whether he saw the Legionnaire movement as being from God or from men, he replied, “Considering how many martyrs came from among their ranks, I believe that it was from God; but being human, they also made mistakes.” When asked the same question, Father Papacioc

²⁹Out of the 207 martyrs commemorated in the publication of the Biblical Institute and Mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church, entitled *Martiri din România perioada comunistă (Martyrs for Christ in Romania During the Communist Regime)*, Legionnaires constitute a significant percentage.

training in the Legionnaire movement was a preparation for the difficult trials to which they would later be subjected.

After wandering off in different directions, Codreanu and other young people, troubled by the need to do something for their country, realized that what was needed to instigate a profound change in society was not so much a new party or a new political program – as they themselves had been tempted to believe – but rather an education of a Christian and national character that would lead to moral renewal. “This country is perishing from a lack of people, not from a lack of programs. This is our opinion. It is not programs that we must create, but people, new people.... Therefore, the cornerstone from which the Legion sets out is humankind, not political programs. The reform of people, not the reform of political programs. Therefore, the Legion of the Archangel Michael³⁰ will be a school and an army rather than a political party. The Romanian people, at this point in history, do not need a great politician, as some mistakenly believe, but a great educator and leader to vanquish the powers of evil and shatter the ranks of evildoers. In order to do this, however, he must first overcome the evil in himself and in his brethren.”³¹

³⁰ One of the official names of the Legionnaire organization. (Translator’s note)

³¹ Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, *op cit.*, pp. 238-239. Codreanu considered Jewish social and political activities to be the true cause of the moral decadence and the majority of the misfortunes which had befallen the Romanian people. Although this generalization may well be exaggerated, the significantly disproportionate involvement of Jewish individuals and organizations controlling commerce and the press, involved in Freemasonry, in the spread of Communist

In order to form a Legionnaire elite, the best from among the youth were selected, beginning with those of high school age. This organization of young men was named *Frăția de Cruce* (FDC), the *Brotherhood of the*

ideas, in the influencing of political decisions and other anti-Romanian activities cannot be denied. For example in 1944, 30% of the Communist Party was Jewish according to historian Dennis Deleant, although they represented less than 4% of the population. During the height of the terror camps, the highest office in the parliament (Ana Pauker), the head of security service (Alexandru Nicholschi), Moscow ambassador and later Pauker’s replacement (Simion Bughici) and the head of finance (Vasile Luca) were all held by Jews. Moreover, long before the Legionnaires, scholars such as Mihail Kogălniceanu, Vasile Alecsandri, Vasile Conta, Mihai Eminescu, Nicolae Iorga – to mention only a few – had sounded an alarm regarding the pernicious role that Jews were playing in Romanian society. It is difficult to believe that all these people, and many others, were all afflicted for no good reason with irrational anti-Semitism. Considering the anti-Semitic sentiments prevalent in the first half of the 20th century, real but absurdly exaggerated (see the report by the Wiesel commission on the Holocaust in Romania), it is natural for us to wonder if the behavior of Jews themselves did not play a role in provoking them. Romanians, generally a tolerant people, have never been known to be aggressive or resentful even towards those peoples with whom they have been in conflict for centuries, such as the Turks or Hungarians! Why would they suddenly and inexplicably turn against the Jews, who had settled among them in significant numbers only since the 19th century? This question acquires even more legitimacy when one considers the fact that anti-Semitic sentiments have appeared not only in Romania, but in every country in which Jews have dwelt. Was their own behavior not a factor? Of course, speaking in a Christian manner, the excuse of provocation does not exempt one from guilt, but it does modify responsibility. At the same time, as far as we, Romanians, are concerned, we ought to consider whether this domination by another people was permitted by God because of our sins. In this sense, even the history of the Jewish people themselves in the Old Testament, led into slavery for having departed from the ways of God, is full of significance.