



PROTECTING AND PROMOTING CHRISTIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ROMANIA

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Intro: In the next minutes, I will present to you a brief overview of the current status of religious and cultural heritage in Romania, focussing on the way the Orthodox Church is approaching this subject and highlighting a concrete example of a completed restoration project.

1. Facts about the religious and cultural heritage in Romania

More than 60% of the architectural monuments listed in the National Register of Historic Monuments in Romania belong to orthodox local parishes, monasteries or dioceses. Among the most valuable and well-known are the churches with external and internal mural paintings in northern Romania from the 15th and 16th centuries, unique masterpieces inspired by Byzantine art. Beyond the Carpathians, to the west, the wooden churches of Maramureș are outstanding examples of traditional religious wooden architecture, showing a high level of artistic maturity and craftsmanship. All these are UNESCO heritage sites, highly appreciated by tourists from all over the world.

Other mediaeval fortified monastic sites such as Cetățuia, Neamț, Horezu or Cozia stand out both as valuable architectural monuments and as places of worship, some of them with uninterrupted monastic life since they were founded.

A distinct and original category of monuments in Romania are the small wooden churches - most of them parish churches. Built in the last two or three centuries, scattered all over the country, they bear a significant testimony to the faith of the simple people living in rural areas throughout

history. A significant number of these churches are being maintained and restored, but there are still many in need of immediate intervention.

Apart from these monuments there is a rich mobile heritage consisting in icons painted on wood or glass, old books or manuscripts, liturgical objects made of precious metals, embroideries, liturgical vestments, sculpted or painted furniture, etc. Being used for decades and sometimes centuries as liturgical objects or adornments, the most valuable of these pieces were collected beginning with the nineteenth century in private church collections, many of them being taken afterwards by state cultural institutions (museums, libraries, archives, etc.)

Beyond the architectural value of the monuments or the ingenuity and expressiveness of the frescoes, there is a rich intangible patrimony associated with the religious life in these places: the church byzantine music, sung without instruments – the so-called psaltic music; the habit of fasting or ceaseless prayer done by most devout monks in monasteries; or the significant social phenomenon of pilgrimages. For instance, in Iași, Romania, one of the most important pilgrimages in Eastern Europe is taking place each year on the 14th of October, on the Feast of St. Paraskeve. Tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over Romania and some of the neighbouring countries like Bulgaria, Serbia or Greece come and meet St. Paraskeve - a saint known and venerated in all Eastern Europe in the last 9 centuries.

2. How does the ROC protect and promote its patrimony?

As a consequence of the spiritual and cultural value of this heritage, the Romanian Orthodox Church began especially in the second half of the 20th century organising museums and church museum collections open to the public. At present, there are more than 300 museums with approximately 700 specialised employees (guides, curators, restorers, museum attendants, etc.) Most of these persons have been trained either at the Centre for Cultural Patrimony “St. Constantin Brâncoveanu” of the Romanian Patriarchate or in the academic sections of Cultural Heritage Restoration within the Faculties of Theology in Romania.

During the communist regime, when historical churches and monasteries of great cultural value from Bucharest were demolished by the communist authorities, some of them were saved due to an ingenious method put forth by a Romanian engineer. The method used was an outstanding technical procedure which involved the effective rolling away of churches tens or hundreds of meters away from their initial place. That is

why today we can see in Bucharest some impressive architectural jewels hiding awkwardly behind massive blocks of flats.

3. Major restoration projects completed in the last 5 years

Beyond the chance of owning historical buildings or listed monuments, the church has also the responsibility of caring for, maintaining and restoring these buildings. Unfortunately, restoring heritage is generally a quite costly endeavour, as the specialists involved both in the design and execution of restoration works must be certified by the Ministry of Culture and prove a significant number of years of previous experience.

A major restoration project implemented by the Orthodox Church in the last 5 years in Romania was carried out in Bucharest, where the Palace of the Patriarchate – a 16.000 m² historical monument was consolidated, restored and opened to the public at the end of the intervention works.

Probably the most complex restoration project of the last decade *was completed in 2016, in Iași, Romania, and had* as objective the **Restoration of the Metropolitan Ensemble** – an architectural complex of historical monuments – churches and administrative edifices erected in the last 3 centuries.

The project had as starting point the necessity of consolidating the Metropolitan Cathedral - the largest Orthodox Church in Romania, built in the nineteenth century according to a design inspired by late Italian Renaissance. Due to soil stability problems, a specialised expertise warned that the Cathedral needs immediate consolidation works. The technical solution found was to complement the old foundations of the edifice with a new system of anchoring the weight of the Cathedral. The implementation of this solution led to the creation of a new empty space at the basement with the main purpose of technical supervision of the foundations over time.

The innovative idea was to transform this technical, newly created and non-usable space at the basement of the Cathedral into a visiting space for exhibiting pieces of mobile cultural heritage from monasteries and local parishes all over the region. **The challenge** was to find a way to make this space securely accessible for the public.

In a project supported by ERDF and co-financed by the Metropolitanate of Moldavia and Bukovina, this unused basement of the Cathedral was made accessible and expanded, thus resulting a generous available space, ready for a new usage.

A team of architects and museum designers decorated the space in an archaic mediaeval style using handmade bricks for the vaults and sculpted stone ornaments.

During the decoration works, the specialists from the Metropolitan Research Centre TABOR in close cooperation with the Restoration Section at the Theological Faculty in Iași selected the most valuable pieces of art, manuscripts, liturgical books and vestments, embroideries or pieces of furniture to be exhibited in the newly created museum. These specialists are still continuously selecting and restoring pieces for temporary or permanent exhibitions.

Soon after the opening, the Metropolitan Museum, besides being visited as a museum, became one of the most highly rated places in the City of Iași for cultural events like seminars, conferences, book launches, concerts or youth meetings.

4. Challenges and perspectives

At present, there are in Romania more than 50 mediaeval monumental sites in process of restoration, each of them setting up also exhibition spaces, museums or galleries. Being located mostly in rural areas, these projects are welcome especially by the local communities as they bring a consistent contribution to jobs creation and to the flourishing of the local economic environment.

Nevertheless, the religious and cultural monuments in Romania are still threatened by some serious challenges:

- The lack of a coherent strategy and a shortage of funds for saving the religious and cultural monuments of local interest, especially in the rural area.
- The bureaucracy in accessing structural funds and implementing restoration projects for these monuments.

Apart from their religious, historical or cultural significance, the monuments prove to be a living part of a local community, being continuously a source of wellness and inspiration for the present, as well as for the future.

As a living part of the European identity, the Christian heritage must be conserved, protected and promoted in order to bring its contribution to the European family and to the national or local communities. Protecting and promoting heritage in Romania has an even more profound meaning this year, as we celebrate both 100 years of National Unity and the European Year of Cultural heritage.