

## Article

# The Phenomenon of Eucharistic Renewal in the Romanian Orthodox Church from the Twentieth Century into the Early Twenty-First

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## Abstract

This article investigates the theological and pastoral debate on the frequency of eucharistic communion in the Romanian Orthodox Church during the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. At the center of this discussion was a movement that promoted a return to the ethos of the early Church through the practice of frequent, even daily, participation in the Eucharist. Emerging in a period marked by communist repression, this initiative sparked both enthusiasm and controversy, as it challenged established patterns of ascetic discipline and sacramental preparation. The study analyzes the spectrum of responses that arose within Romanian Orthodoxy. On one side stood voices emphasizing strict preparation, prolonged fasting, and confession as indispensable prerequisites for communion. On the other side were those who regarded frequent participation as a recovery of authentic ecclesial life and a vital source of spiritual renewal. Between these poles, additional perspectives sought to balance reverence with accessibility, proposing nuanced forms of pastoral discernment that could adapt to contemporary conditions without undermining tradition. These debates, far from being resolved, remain relevant for contemporary Orthodox discussions on the pastoral meaning of communion and its role in renewing ecclesial life.



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## 1. Introduction

Historical testimonies from the early eighteenth century indicate that the common practice among Romanians was to receive the Eucharist only during Great Lent, while only the most devout partook during the other fasting periods (Del Chiaro 1914, p. 95; Simonescu 1939, pp. 291–92). The efforts of the Wallachian Metropolitan Neofit of Crete (1738–1753) to reshape this limited engagement with the Eucharist appear to have had little success (Ică 2006, pp. 91–102). Although the Athonite Kollyvades debates over the frequency of communion eventually crossed the Danube, the practice of extremely infrequent communion continued to dominate throughout the nineteenth century and persisted into the early twentieth century (Ică 2006, pp. 78–79).

The frequency of eucharistic communion emerged as one of the most debated pastoral and theological issues in the Romanian Orthodox Church during the mid-twentieth century, when the eucharistic revival promoted by Hieromonk Ioan Iovan at Vladimireși Monastery (Moldavia) was a means of spiritual rebirth in a Romania exhausted by war

and unsettled by the advent of the atheist Communist regime, which begun the repression of religious life. However, this eucharistic movement faced opposition, especially from conservative church circles. Even after the fall of the Communist regime, the question of the frequency of eucharistic communion is still debated among Romanian theologians and clergy (Vanca 2014; Qaramah 2023, pp. 27–28).

This study investigates the Romanian Orthodox debate over the frequency of eucharistic communion from the 1940s through the post-communist period and up until the first decades of the twenty-first century, focusing on the arguments advanced by key clerical and theological figures. It aims to elucidate how the question of communion frequency functioned as both a theological and pastoral challenge within Romanian Orthodoxy, shaping divergent spiritual models and pastoral practices. Drawing on theological writings, pastoral memoranda, memoirs, interviews, and published sermons, the research reconstructs the arguments and counterarguments of various Orthodox voices, highlighting areas of both convergence and enduring disagreement. In doing so, the study offers a deeper understanding of the Romanian Orthodox eucharistic revival and its significance for the Church's spiritual life in the twentieth century and beyond. Methodologically, the ecclesiastical figures considered in this study were chosen for their public visibility and, more importantly, for their written contributions, which provide both arguments and documentation. In essence, we selected the most prominent personalities in Romanian ecclesiastical life, ensuring representation of the main categories of spiritual leaders: monks, theology professors, parish priests and bishops. Their public positions had a significant impact within their respective spheres of activity, with disciples and followers often rallying to the views of their mentors.

## 2. Roots of the Eucharistic Revival in the Romanian Orthodox Church

The issue of communion frequency emerged as a subject of theological debate within Romanian Orthodoxy in the mid-twentieth century, during the installation of the communist regime. The central figure of the eucharistic revival movement was Father Ioan Iovan (1922–2008), spiritual father of Vladimirești Monastery (in Moldavia)—founded in 1938 by Mother Veronica Gurău (1922–2005), who claimed to possess the charism of divine visions—during the period 1949–1955. A native of Transylvania (Bihor), Father Iovan fostered a remarkable religious movement at Vladimirești through his compelling preaching and the introduction of spiritual practices that had an immediate and profound effect on the faithful: group confession and the frequent, even daily, reception of the Eucharist by both the monastic community and lay pilgrims. Father Ioan Iovan viewed the practice of frequent communion as a restoration of the natural and authentic spiritual life of the early Christians, and as an essential means of strengthening the faithful amid the turbulent socio-political upheavals caused by the establishment of the atheist communist regime.

Father Ioan Iovan was most likely inspired to carry out a Eucharist-centered pastoral ministry by similar concerns found in contemporary Catholic circles in Transylvania (Mihaela Luchian 2020, pp. 193–96). At the turn of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church in Europe witnessed the rise of a broad eucharistic renewal movement, marked especially by a heightened devotional focus on frequent communion. In 1905, during the pontificate of Pope Pius X, the Sacred Congregation of the Council issued the decree *Sacra Tridantina Synodus*, which formally encouraged regular reception of the Eucharist. The Greek-Catholic Church in Transylvania was deeply influenced by this current of spiritual revitalization (Rusal 2020a, pp. 68–72). Within the Greek-Catholic monastic environment of Transylvania—particularly among the Basilian communities of the time—there was an intense eucharistic devotion, expressed through frequent, even daily, communion, devotional writings and publications, and the practice of eucharistic adoration. The mis-

sionary monks of the Basilian Order of Saint Josaphat, who resided in the Greek-Catholic monasteries of Nicula, Moisei, Prislop, and Bixad, carried out vibrant pastoral activity that extended beyond their monasteries into the parishes of Transylvanian villages: they promoted frequent communion, celebrated the Divine Liturgy daily, preached regularly, and performed various liturgical services (Rusal 2020b; Pekar 1993). This liturgical-sacramental vitality, sustained by a strong missionary and homiletic vocation, continued until the Greek-Catholic Church was outlawed by the Romanian communist regime. It is inconceivable that Father Ioan—whether during his student years in Cluj or in his family home in Bihor—would have remained unaware of the eucharistic apostolate carried out by Greek-Catholic monastics in Transylvania. Ioan Iovan shared with members of Greek-Catholic clergy a common commitment to eucharistic revival, visionary spirituality, and mystical resistance under communism.

In addition, a clear parallel exists between Mother Veronica, the abbess of Vladimirești Monastery during Father Ioan Iovan's tenure as spiritual father, and Sister Ionela Cotoi (1927–2018), founder of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart, dedicated to eucharistic adoration under the guidance of Greek-Catholic Bishop Ioan Suciu (Andru 2013, pp. 86–94). Both Mother Veronica's work at Vladimirești and Sister Ionela's leadership within her congregation were distinguished by visionary spirituality, profound eucharistic devotion, and a resolute opposition to the communist regime.

Similar sacramental–eucharistic concerns also existed within Orthodoxy. The frequency of communion became a theological concern during the spiritual revival promoted in Greece by the *Zoe* Brotherhood, founded in 1907 by Eusebius Matthopoulos as a continuation of the Kollyvades movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Hovorun 2011; Logotheti 2017), as well as in Russia during the final decades of the nineteenth century, around the charismatic figure of Protopriest John of Kronstadt (1829–1908), who encouraged frequent communion for the faithful and, for pastoral reasons, practiced collective confession (Belovolov et al. 2010).

However, while there is no evidence of a direct connection between the Romanian Orthodox phenomenon of eucharistic revival and the *Zoe* movement, the same cannot be said regarding the link between the pastoral mission of John of Kronstadt and that implemented by Ioan Iovan, who consciously adopted the Russian saint as a model. This influence was further reinforced by that of the Greek-Catholic Basilian monks and the Eucharistic Congregation. Nevertheless, Father Ioan Iovan and the community at Vladimirești did not develop a systematic theoretical framework for implementing the eucharistic revival, leaving room for abuses and, predictably, criticism from opponents (Mihaela Luchian 2020, pp. 109, 190–91, 206).

### 3. Eucharistic Debate and Practice Under Communist Rule

#### 3.1. Hieromonk Ioan Iovan and the Encouragement of Frequent Eucharistic Communion

A prominent ecclesiastical figure of the time who left a lasting mark on Iovan's theological formation and his relationship to the Eucharist was Father Arsenie Boca, abbot of Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery and one of the most charismatic personalities of Romanian Orthodoxy in that era. Beginning in 1940, he launched at Sâmbăta de Sus the 'spiritual revival movement of Sâmbăta,' which had a considerable national impact, and he soon came to be regarded as one of the most important spiritual fathers in Romania. In a pastoral conference delivered on 26 September 1942, Father Arsenie asserted that the degeneration of the Romanian people stemmed from their disregard for the sacraments of the Church, above all for holy communion (Archives of the Metropolis of Transylvania, file III-26-1942, no. 11343/9.10.1942; Pomană 2022, p. 45):

“The degeneration of the human race, and in particular of us Romanians, is caused not so much by material needs and deprivations as by the devaluation of spiritual realities. This arises, of course, from the decline of religious sensibility, manifest in the neglect of the sacraments of the Church, foremost among them holy communion. For how long, and by how many of the sons of the Romanian nation, has holy communion been entirely neglected? And of those who do receive it, the majority do so unworthily, as both priests and laypeople disregard the judgments of Holy Scripture, which declares that those who partake of the Body and Blood of the Savior while impure in body and dishonorable in soul do so unto their own condemnation.”

Hieromonk Arsenie Boca became the spiritual father of Mother Veronica in 1944, and later met Iovan, also a disciple of Arsenie, at Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery in 1947. Furthermore, it was Arsenie who recommended Iovan to serve as priest at Vladimirești Monastery (Nicolae 2014, pp. 332, 336).

Father Ioan Iovan’s commitment to the practice of frequent communion was likely reinforced by Orthodox Bishop Nicolae Popovici of Oradea, who is reported to have told him at his ordination: “I command you to open heaven to the people, not to close it” (Chichernea 2010, p. 22), and who remained his mentor and supporter throughout his ministry. His theological formation was also shaped by Father Professor Florea Mureșan (1907–1963), who encouraged him to commune frequently and under whose supervision he completed a licentiate thesis at the Faculty of Theology in Sibiu, examining the role of the Eucharist in the mystical life (Mihaela Luchian 2020, p. 193). In his thesis, Ioan Iovan contrasts the eucharistic practice of the early Church—where the faithful partook of communion at every Divine Liturgy—with the custom of his own time, which limited participation to four times a year, except for those advanced in the spiritual life, who were permitted to commune monthly. He argues that the Orthodox Church does not, in principle, reject frequent communion; on the contrary, it encourages it when received with piety and a conscious awareness of its spiritual benefit. Iovan further contends that opposition to this view stems either from ill intent or from a limited understanding of Orthodox liturgical and canonical tradition (Iovan n.d., p. 16). Moreover, he argues that it is mistaken for someone to abstain from holy communion out of false reverence or excessive fear, as the rejection of Christ’s gifts constitutes, in his view, an affront to the Redeemer Himself (Iovan n.d., p. 88). In support of his advocacy for frequent communion, Ioan Iovan draws upon three principal sources: (a) the Gospel passage John 6:54–56, which he interprets as indicating that continuous spiritual growth requires ongoing nourishment from the holy chalice; (b) selected passages from *De Imitatione Christi* by Thomas à Kempis (Thomas Hemerken, 1380–1471); and (c) the spiritual example of mystics, particularly Saints Symeon the New Theologian and John of Kronstadt. Iovan emphasizes that mystics partook frequently in the Eucharist, fully aware that only this divine Sacrament could sustain the divine life within them (Iovan n.d., pp. 109–18).

In a memorandum dated 25 January 1955, addressed to the communist authorities and the leadership of the Romanian Orthodox Church—a document that ultimately led to his defrocking and imprisonment—Father Ioan Iovan asserted that the central spiritual work of Vladimirești Monastery was the confession of sins and the frequent communion of the faithful. He further denounced the arrest and expulsion of monks from the Sihăstru and Sâmbăta de Sus monasteries, sanctioned by their own bishops, for engaging in similar eucharistic practices. Rejecting accusations that he was a “Catholic agent” or that Vladimirești functioned as a “Catholic fifth column” or a “mystical outpost near the Soviet border,” he defended daily communion by grounding it in the words of Christ from John 6:53–56. On the issue of collective confession, he noted that no dogma mandates a

fixed form and that the Church has allowed such practices in pastoral contexts—such as with military personnel. He questioned how it would have been possible for him and a single concelebrant to hear. He questioned how he and one fellow priest could have otherwise confessed the 30,000 pilgrims attending the monastery feast, seeking communion (Iovan 2009, pp. 44, 55–57, 78–83).

It is noteworthy that during his imprisonment under the Communist regime, following his defrocking imposed under pressure from the atheist authorities, Father Ioan Iovan continued to pursue his work of eucharistic renewal among political prisoners. In this capacity, he came to be regarded as one of the most prominent and emblematic clerics of spiritual resistance within the Communist prison system. A particularly revealing example is a note concerning Father Ioan Iovan, recorded under the conspiratorial name *Bucur Dumitru* on 2 December 1959, at the Gherla penitentiary (Arhiva Consiliul National pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, Informative fund, file 211014, vol. 1, ff. 234–236):

“[Ioan Iovan] constantly maintains a mystical and uplifting religious atmosphere through liturgical services twice a day, daily communion and confession and daily talks on the lives of saints. Every morning 30–40 prisoners receive holy communion, and last Sunday the number reached 45 out of the 55 in the room. At any hour of the day or night he is ready to hear someone’s confession, or to give communion to someone. For this, he is credited with a saintly life that places him above all the priests in the prison. Even believers of other denominations have a sense of awe for this man, which is why his word carries great weight among the inmates. Among the most ardent followers of Father Iovan are the following: Mussat Radu, Berdena S. Mihai, Barbu Stan, Chelșoiu Nicanor and Rociu. They take daily communion and fully approve of the mystical aspect of Father Iovan’s activities.”

In order to celebrate the Eucharist at Galați penitentiary, where he was imprisoned in 1955, Father Ioan Iovan had sewn on the back of his tank top the antimension, and as a chalice he used an ebonite medicine box, which he had consecrated (Chichernea 2010, p. 42). Another particularly significant aspect is that, despite confessional differences, political prisoners from various Christian traditions—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—demonstrated unity and solidarity in suffering. In this context, Father Ioan Iovan even administered holy communion to Catholic inmates, as in the case of the Paschal liturgy celebrated in 1956 at the Văcărești penitentiary, with the assistance of a Roman Catholic and a Greek Catholic cleric, when, according to his own testimony, all those present partook of the Eucharist (Nistea 1998). Nicolae Balotă, a Greek-Catholic writer, also recalls receiving communion while in detention from Father Iovan (Balotă 2013, pp. 80–81). On another occasion, when he was in Gherla penitentiary, Father Iovan celebrated the Eucharist assisted by the Greek-Catholic priest Nicolae Opreș, who offered him the liturgical answers of the psalter (Chichernea 2010, p. 54).

Following Father Ioan Iovan’s rehabilitation by the Holy Synod after the fall of the Communist regime and his settlement in the newly founded Recea Monastery, Father Ioan brought the eucharistic movement into the very heart of Transylvania. Yet numerous voices still recalled the interrogations and accusations of the 1950s. Father Ioan, however, never abandoned his eucharistic conviction, which he cultivated both among the students of the Faculty of Theology in Alba Iulia—where he briefly served as professor—and among the faithful of the Mureș region, where the Recea Monastery soon emerged as a center of spiritual and eucharistic renewal.

Father Ioan Iovan’s revival of the practice of frequent communion in the aftermath of the communist regime’s collapse, which once again drew large numbers of faithful around him, suggests that opposition to the eucharistic devotion he promoted was driven less by



the practice itself than by the long-standing controversy over the private revelations and alleged charismata of Abbess Veronica, which had come to dominate and justify much of what occurred at Vladimirești (Mihaela Luchian 2020, p. 234).

### 3.2. Traditional Monastic Caution: Elder Ilie Cleopa

The monastic life at Vladimirești Monastery and its satellites—Sihăstru, Podul Bulgarului, and Buciumeni Monasteries—who claimed their spiritual lineage from the visionary spirituality of Mother Veronica and the sacramental practices proposed by Father Ioan, provoked a series of controversies and tensions with more conservative monastic communities in Moldavia, among them Sihăstria and Slatina Monasteries. Nonetheless, the work at Vladimirești received the support of Bishop Nicolae Popovici of Oradea, who was one of Father Ioan’s mentors. On 20 December 1951, Bishop Nicolae addressed a letter to Hieromonk Ilie Cleopa (1912–1998)—an eminent figure of Romanian monasticism, around whom the spiritual life of numerous Moldavian monasteries revolved during the mid-twentieth century, and who, in 1949, at the request of Patriarch Justinian I, had departed from Sihăstria Monastery to assume the abbacy of Slatina Monastery—urging him to preserve ecclesial unity with Vladimirești Monastery (Giosanu 2017, Appendix 1, pp. 173–84).

On 10 January 1952, Elder Cleopa replied to the bishop, pointing out that Vladimirești Monastery, drawing from the example of the early Church, administered holy communion with excessive frequency—both to monastics and laypeople—without adequate regard for spiritual preparation or canonical discipline. In his response, Cleopa made several key points:

- (a) communion must be preceded by confession for both laity and clergy;
- (b) while frequent communion was common in the first millennium, it remains acceptable for the faithful or monastics to receive communion daily or even in their cells, in cases of necessity, provided they are worthy, have confessed, and fulfilled their canonical obligations;
- (c) sanctification does not depend on the frequency of communion, but on receiving it with a clean conscience and proper spiritual preparation;
- (d) the revival of early Christian practices is welcomed, as long as it adheres to the canonical norms established by the Church Fathers.
- (e) practicing frequent communion without proper discernment poses a spiritual danger to both the clergy and the faithful, potentially leading to adverse consequences for the monastic community and the Church (Giosanu 2017, pp. 185–208).

In addition, Father Cleopa recounts the confession and communion practices established at Sihăstria Monastery by Abbot Ioanichie Moroi (1858–1944), following the Athonite tradition, later continued at Slatina. During Abbot Ioanichie’s 35-year tenure, monks confessed daily after Compline; as the community grew, weekly confession was held on Fridays. Communion was received every 30 days by monks, hermits, and the most devout brothers. Altar attendants communed every Saturday, if they had abstained from oil for three days; hermits refrained from oil for a week. Cleopa notes that Abbot Ioanichie taught that although one should always desire communion, “for humility’s sake, it is better to receive the Holy Mysteries less often, lest frequent communion diminish our reverence and lead us to approach the holy without fear or contrition” (Giosanu 2017, Appendix 1, p. 204).

In 1962, Father Cleopa Ilie completed a manuscript in which he forcefully denounced the practices associated with the Vladimirești Monastery, though the work was only published in 1993, after the fall of the communist regime. Without explicitly naming the monastery, Cleopa condemned what he perceived as serious departures from Orthodox canonical and sacramental norms, including false visionary claims, the exclusive admission of virgins into monasticism, collective confession, and frequent communion. Particularly alarming to him were instances of daily communion without prior confession or the fulfilment of penance, as well as reports of laypeople carrying the Holy Gifts on their

persons and communing themselves at will, without spiritual preparation. Cleopa regarded such practices as innovations foreign to the spirit of Orthodoxy that profaned the sanctity of the sacraments and posed grave risks to the spiritual well-being of the faithful (Cleopa 2001, p. 67). His critique reflects a deeply traditionalist perspective, sharply contrasting with Father Ioan Iovan's Eucharist-centered pastoral theology, and highlights the profound internal tensions within Romanian Orthodoxy during the mid-twentieth century.

Father Cleopa remained faithful to this ascetic approach regarding the frequency of receiving communion. In a series of interviews conducted shortly after the 1989 Romanian Revolution with Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan, he continued to advocate a conservative and restrictive stance. He stated that no one may receive communion without fulfilling the following conditions:

- (a) prior confession of sins, mandatory even for clergy (only children under seven are exempt);
- (b) reconciliation with all others;
- (c) fasting for three to seven days and marital abstinence for seven days before and three days after communion;
- (d) completion of the penance prescribed by one's spiritual father;
- (e) observance of a rule of prayer, including prostrations, bows, almsgiving, and other good deeds (Bălan 1993, pp. 63–64).

Children up to the age of seven may receive communion without confession, at intervals of 30 to 40 days. A similar frequency is recommended for the elderly and the sick, provided they have not committed serious sins. Regarding monastics, Father Cleopa held that they should commune more often than laypeople—generally once a month—while elderly or ill schema-monks may receive communion once a week (Bălan 1993, p. 66).

His detailed prerequisites for receiving communion reflect a persistent resistance to what he viewed as liturgical laxity and spiritual enthusiasm unmoored from ecclesial discipline. Yet, the exceptions allowed for children under seven, as well as for the elderly and the infirm, underscore the pastoral discernment and flexibility woven into an otherwise rigorous framework.

Finally, Father Ilie Cleopa's vehement reaction, following Father Ioan Iovan's appointment to Recea Monastery (after 1990), is encapsulated in a blunt remark frequently cited by those who oppose receiving communion more often than every forty days: "The Eucharist is not cabbage soup with polenta" (Vanca 2007, p. 544).

### 3.3. Academic Theological Approaches: Father Petre Vintilescu, Father Dumitru Stăniloae, and Father Ene Braniște

Amid the eucharistic and sacramental revival at Vladimirești, Romanian theologians also engaged the topic in academic publications. Father Petre Vintilescu (1887–1974)—the most prominent Romanian liturgist of the time—published a 1953 article examining the historical evolution of communion frequency, from the early Church to the example of John of Kronstadt (Vintilescu 1953). Seeking a balanced theological perspective, Father Vintilescu articulated several key conclusions: (a) in Orthodox theology, the fruits of the Holy Eucharist and the attainment of spiritual perfection are not measured by the frequency of communion, but by the spiritual disposition of the communicant; (b) the rhythm of receiving communion should reflect each believer's personal commitment and progress in the spiritual life; (c) the Church's approach to eucharistic discipline is characterized by freedom, and the regularization of frequent—even daily—communion has never constituted a general or officially prescribed rule in Orthodox tradition.

Father Vintilescu argues that the Divine Liturgy cannot be conceived without communion, as it is through eucharistic participation that the faithful are sanctified and brought into union with Christ and one another. At the same time, he attributes the decline in

frequent lay communion to the growing number of weekday Liturgies and the increasing difficulty of fulfilling the spiritual preparations required for reception. He acknowledges this as a sign of diminished Christian zeal and laments that, in most Liturgies, only the celebrants commune. While he affirms the spiritual participation of the faithful, he concedes that this remains incomplete: as a psychosomatic being, the human person longs for full union with God, which finds its proper fulfillment in the tangible reception of Christ's Body and Blood.

Father Vintilescu adopts a balanced view: while not prescribing frequent communion as a rule, he affirms its value when received with proper spiritual readiness. He critiques the rarity of lay participation as a sign of diminished zeal, suggesting that more frequent communion aligns with Orthodox theology when approached rightly.

In his turn, in a 1955 article, Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1903–1993) expressed strong criticism of several liturgical and pastoral innovations introduced at the Vladimirești and Sihăstru monasteries. Among the practices he condemned were: (a) the collective confession of sins; (b) the absence of penance following confession and the indiscriminate admission of all to communion; (c) the distribution of holy communion by laypeople to other laypeople, even in parishes where a priest was present; (d) the promotion of daily communion; and (e) the continued liturgical ministry of defrocked hieromonks (Stăniloae 1955, pp. 219–20).

While the central focus of his critique was the practice of collective confession, Stăniloae also addressed the issue of frequent communion. He argued that the practice of frequent communion for all, without regard for penance in the case of grave sins, may align with the spirit of Catholicism, but not with that of Orthodoxy. From his perspective, sin causes a deep wounding of human nature that requires a process of healing—one that unfolds over time—before a person is spiritually ready to receive the Eucharist, which is meant as nourishment for those who are already healed or on the path to healing. Stăniloae argues that in order to unite ourselves with the sacrificed Christ through the Eucharist, we too must be in a state of sacrifice, mortifying our selfishness through fasting, repentance, and almsgiving, thereby strengthening the new man of the Resurrection. With regard to the practice of allowing laypersons to distribute the Eucharist to others or to self-commune, Stăniloae asserts that such actions blur the essential distinction between clergy and laity. He argues that the sacramental expression of unity in Christ is diminished when communion is received in isolation without compelling pastoral necessity. According to Stăniloae, the monastics of the two monasteries fall into a dual error: on one hand, they suppress personal responsibility and spiritual individuality through collective confession and absolution; on the other, they fracture communal unity by permitting private communion. Both practices, he concludes, are incompatible with the ethos of Orthodox spirituality (Stăniloae 1955, pp. 247–49).

Nevertheless, Father Stăniloae does not endorse the imposition of fixed intervals between communions, as advocated by Cleopa, but emphasizes instead that access to the Eucharist should be determined by the spiritual readiness of the faithful.

However, in an interview given shortly after the 1989 Romanian Revolution, Father Stăniloae adopts a sharper stance. He contends that the laity must not be allowed to receive communion without prior confession. Given the invitation to communion in the Divine Liturgy, he says, “a few believers—those leading a pure life—should partake at every celebration.” Yet, he insists, “it is not good for all or even most of the faithful to commune at every Divine Liturgy without confession and fasting, even if they consider themselves free of grave sins; this can reduce the reception of holy communion to a feeling-less automatism.” Habitual sins—whether in thoughts, resentments, or criticisms—can, in his view, dull the awe that should accompany frequent communion (Bălan and Stăniloae 1993, p. 95).



Another contemporary renowned Romanian liturgist who addressed the question of frequent communion was Father Ene Braniște (1913–1984). Although not directly involved in the controversy surrounding the liturgical practices of Vladimirești Monastery, Father Braniște—then an assistant professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Bucharest—authored an article in 1949—the year Father Iovan began his mission at Vladimirești—in which he explored the active participation of the faithful in the Divine Liturgy.

Father Braniște lists several factors that contributed to the weakening of attachment to the Divine Liturgy, such as the disappearance of the catechumenate and the increasingly complex structure of the Liturgy. He argues that the decline in the frequency of approaching the Eucharist led both to a diminished sense of communal ecclesiological identity and to a diminished concern for serious moral preparation, ultimately resulting in lower overall participation of the faithful in the weekly Sunday celebration. In fact, Father Braniște interprets liturgical logic in a way that is the exact inverse of monastic moral-ascetical rigorism: it is not the weakening of morality and spiritual preparation that causes a decline in the Church's ecclesiological and liturgical consciousness and a lower frequency of communion, but rather the rarity of eucharistic participation that leads to the weakening of communal ecclesiological awareness:

“We can observe a gradual decline in the liturgical life of the Church—a decline that has steadily deepened up to the present day and has become particularly pronounced in Orthodoxy, especially over the past century. The first and most telling sign of this decline is the weakening of the ecclesiological or communal spirit, the very spirit that once represented the crown and glory of the ancient ecumenical Church. The primary cause of this weakening is the disappearance of the once-universal and regular practice of receiving communion. Whether due to excessively rigorist attitudes or to a general decline in piety, the number of faithful approaching the Holy Body and Blood gradually diminished. And as this number decreased, so too did the sense of unity that bound the faithful together as one body and, collectively, to Christ Himself. With communion being received less and less frequently, the very bond that generated, sustained, and strengthened the Church's cohesion and communal spirit was progressively eroded. . . . The decline—and eventual near disappearance—of the understanding of the Divine Liturgy as a sacrificial act in which all are obliged to participate through communion has produced immeasurable and far-reaching consequences for the Church's religious and moral life. When approaching the holy altar ceased to be felt as a spiritual necessity by the majority of believers, the sense of obligation for serious bodily and spiritual preparation also faded away. As zeal for receiving communion waned, so too did the faithful's interest and engagement in the Liturgy as a whole, beginning with something as basic as the diminishing of the bread and wine offerings they once regularly brought for the Proskomide”. (Braniște 1949, pp. 576–77)

Concerned with liturgical and spiritual renewal, Father Braniște believes that the revitalization of interest in the Divine Liturgy can come only through the re-engagement of the faithful in the dynamic of the Divine Liturgy. This involves rediscovering the sense of sacrifice and—most relevant to our discussion—participating actively in the fruits of Christ's sacrifice by partaking of His Body and Blood (Braniște 1949, p. 597). According to Father Braniște, these steps will bring about a genuine liturgical renaissance and a revitalization of both the Church's cohesion and the faithful's consciousness of belonging to the mystical Body of Christ. Consequently, even though he was not a vocal activist on the debate regarding the sacramental practice promoted by Father Ioan Iovan, Father Braniște

unequivocally declares that the foremost duty of every priest is to work for the “revival of the general and frequent communion of the faithful:

“Therefore, the ultimate purpose and fullest expression of participation in divine worship can be considered truly realized only when the priest succeeds in gathering all his parishioners around the altar and distributing communion to them during the Liturgies celebrated on feast days. Consequently, a primary duty of the priest is to do everything in his power to restore the practice of general and frequent (as often as possible) communion among his faithful”. (Branîște 1949, pp. 629–30)

Even though there may be other means by which the priest can spiritually awaken his parishioners, Father Branîște insists that frequent and general communion is the binding force that can restore the enthusiasm of former times and revive the sense of ecclesial and communal belonging:

“Alongside Christian love, communion serves as the cement that binds together the living ‘bricks’ of Christ’s Church on earth. The stronger and more resilient this unifying element, the sturdier and more enduring the entire spiritual edifice becomes. For this reason, the spiritual unification of all Christians into a single living organism—beating with one heart and sharing one mind—cannot be achieved today without reviving the general and frequent communion of earlier times. Ultimately, this constitutes the supreme goal of pastoral work, often expressed in the fitting—but not always fully grasped—term of the ‘ecclesialization’ of the world. This entails not merely bringing people to church, but restoring to each believer a profound awareness of being a member of the Body of Christ, enabling them to experience deeply and intensely the sense of communion with fellow faithful, and consciously and actively integrate into the parish community to which they belong”. (Branîște 1949, pp. 631–32)

Unfortunately, Father Branîște’s theologically grounded reflections on frequent communion, which highlighted its communal and spiritual benefits, were largely overlooked due to entrenched clerical conservatism and the broader religious repression under the communist regime. It can be argued that, given his influence on clerical circles through his long academic career, the trajectory of eucharistic renewal might have been markedly different had the communist regime not suppressed the spiritual revival initiated at Vladimirești.

### *3.4. Controversies Surrounding Charismatic Missionary Activity and Frequent Communion: The Case of Father Nil Dorobanțu*

After the closure of Vladimirești Monastery and the arrest of Father Ioan Iovan, new “spiritual leaders” emerged who promoted liturgical and mystical practices at odds with the order of the Church. They justified their activities through the visionary phenomena associated with Vladimirești, presenting themselves as heirs of Mother Veronica and Father Iovan (Mihaela Luchian 2020, pp. 207–22). These groups practiced frequent communion, administered the Eucharist at home, consumed it several times a day as their only food, and even allowed laypeople to distribute it, often carrying it in unsuitable containers. Such practices drew the attention of both the communist authorities and the church hierarchy. The situation gave the communists—and the conservative hierarchy—a convenient pretext to equate frequent communion with heterodox excesses, thereby discrediting the eucharistic renewal movement. Yet such associations were not always justified and often served merely as slander.

A controversial case to this day is that of Hieromonk Nil Dorobanțu (1920–1977), a wandering monk regarded as a ‘fool for Christ,’ who admired and was decisively influenced

by the spiritual revival movement at Vladimirești—where he also served for 20 days in 1949 (Ciocârlan 2024, p. 113; Mihaela Luchian 2020, p. 217). In turn, he generated a mass religious phenomenon through continuous revelations, rigorous asceticism, missionary zeal, and by reviving certain practices from Vladimirești Monastery, including frequent communion. His highly unusual manifestations—visionary experiences, charismatic gifts, a spirit of protest against the hierarchy and political authority, and fervent eucharistic devotion—soon drew the attention of the communist authorities, who were intent on suppressing any religious phenomenon. He was therefore arrested multiple times and kept under lifelong surveillance by the Securitate. At the same time, he incurred the hostility of the church hierarchy, which he sharply criticized for its obedience to the communist regime, leading to his defrocking in 1956. Nevertheless, he continued to celebrate the Eucharist in the homes of various believers.

Father Nil Dorobanțu celebrated the Eucharist daily (Ciocârlan 2024, pp. 375–76, 379). He strongly criticized the tendency of some clergy to use the canons as a pretext for preventing the faithful from receiving communion. In his view, given the continuous and overt religious persecution carried out by the communist regime, participation in the Eucharist was an ongoing necessity for believers (Ciocârlan 2024, p. 378). For this reason, he distributed the Holy Gifts to laypeople so that they might commune in times of need (Ciocârlan 2024, p. 357). He required only two conditions for admission to the eucharistic chalice: individual confession and sincere repentance (Ciocârlan 2024, p. 350). Unlike Father Ioan Iovan, however, he never supported the practice of general confession (Ciocârlan 2024, p. 356).

In the respective historical context, the Romanian monastic and theological environment proved unreceptive to the form of eucharistic devotion advanced by the Vladimirești movement, in which Father Nil Dorobanțu was also involved. The association of these practices with a controversial visionary phenomenon further conferred upon the eucharistic revival a potentially schismatic character, a perception intensified by the intervention of political authorities intent on neutralizing any spiritual movement capable of mobilizing the masses (Mihaela Luchian 2020, p. 225).

### 3.5. *A Parish Priest's Eucharistic Mission Under the Atheist Regime: Father Miron Mihăilescu*

In Transylvania, during Iovan's formative years as a theologian, another priest with a similar eucharistic orientation was active in a parish in Ocna Sibiului: Father Miron Mihăilescu (1914–1998). A student, disciple, and later collaborator of Father Dumitru Stăniloae as his assistant at the Faculty of Theology in Sibiu, Father Mihăilescu went on to serve as parish priest in the same church for over 58 years. There, through the daily celebration of the Eucharist, he nurtured a strong parish community, which became a spiritual landmark in the Sibiu region during the Communist period. His teaching and counsel spread widely, particularly among theology students. Two central themes defined his ministry: the alignment of human thought with the mind of Christ, and steadfast devotion to the Eucharist. He described his mission in the following words:

“In our parish I began a work that the faithful readily embraced, coming regularly to holy communion. I realized that this work could take root in souls if its value were presented in the proper way. The people understood and entered into it. They show great spiritual sensitivity, yet we sometimes treat them as though they were paralyzed. We must make, with all seriousness, the effort to reach their hearts. Once a person becomes convinced that, in the Sacrament of confession, he is speaking directly with God, he comes and reveals what lies on his soul with fear and trembling. I do not impose penances in the usual manner, for what I insistently require I consider to be at once the most difficult and the most

beautiful canon: namely, that each morning, upon waking, one should remember that he is alive—in other words, immediately resume the watchfulness of heart with which he went to sleep. For this reason one should fall asleep in prayer, since Christ is at work in one's life. A communion of thoughts and feelings with Him must be cultivated, so that each person may know that he is not alone, but a bearer of Christ. This is the canon I give: that no one should forget that he is a partaker of the Eucharist". (Mihăilescu 2005, pp. 111–12)

The spiritual renewal through the Eucharist that he advocated, however, brought him into open disagreement with the church authorities, as he himself testifies (Mihăilescu 2004, pp. 221–22). Contrary to the prevailing trend, Father Miron lamented the widespread indifference toward the Eucharist and strongly opposed the monastic practice of receiving communion only every forty days:

"If the Church, through the Holy Fathers, prescribed a program of communion throughout the entirety of Lent, why is it recommended today—even in monasteries—that communion be received only every forty days? Not to mention the laity, who are being led into indifference toward holy communion, under the impression that it is tied exclusively to the four great fasts. To receive communion every Sunday is seen as excessive, while daily communion is regarded as a genuine scandal". (Mihăilescu 2005, pp. 77–78)

Father Miron lamented the lack of continuity of the evangelical spirit in daily life. For this reason, he advocated for ongoing communion, rather than sporadic participation, and firmly rejected the notion promoted by many priests that the faithful should receive communion 'at least once a year':

"A priest who visited our church today said, among other things, 'At least once a year the faithful should receive communion.' Unfortunately, he completely overturned the meaning of Pascha. . . . The entire Paschal feast loses its significance if celebrated in ignorance. When Pascha arrives, of course, I receive communion, but only on the condition that without communion throughout the year, I cannot conceive of living even a single day. Without the repeated paschal communion, my life lacks meaning. This is precisely what that priest should have clarified". (Mihăilescu 2007, p. 150)

When a nun asked whether frequent communion might risk becoming mere formalism, lacking the awe of union with Christ, Father Miron Mihăilescu replied:

"It is precisely so that we may grow accustomed to the awareness that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us, that we receive communion daily. Otherwise, this truth fades, and even good habits weaken. Should we be reminded of it only every forty days? Is that the only time to realize that Christ dwells within us? 'Without Me you can do nothing.' At every moment, we ought to tremble before this reality, convinced that without Him we cannot even begin the day. This is not a dangerous habit but a vital one". (Mihăilescu 2004, p. 172)

Naturally, the practice of frequent communion raised the question of preparation, traditionally understood as obligatory confession, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines. Father Mihăilescu did not deny the value of regular confession, even for those who communed often (Mihăilescu 2004, p. 260). Yet, with regard to other requirements, he insisted above all on love of neighbor: "to look upon your neighbor as you wish Christ to look upon you. Otherwise, do not approach communion" (Mihăilescu 2004, p. 232).

#### 4. Pastoral Perspectives on Frequent Communion Across the Orthodox World

Debates regarding the frequency of lay communion are not specific to the Romanian Orthodox Church; the issue is also of interest within the clerical and theological circles of other Autocephalous Orthodox Churches. In this section, we briefly review how the tendency toward more frequent communion among the laypeople has been addressed in other Orthodox Churches, which helps to situate Romania's practice within the broader Orthodox tradition.

At the start of the twentieth century, the rise of liturgiology in the Russian Orthodox Church and the influence of St. John of Kronstadt sparked debates on liturgical reform and the Eucharist, gradually changing attitudes toward communion. Pastoral and liturgical issues were addressed at the 1917–1918 Moscow Local Council, including the promotion of more frequent communion among parishioners (D'Aloisio 2018, p. 42), but discussions were silenced by the Bolshevik Revolution. However, amid communist persecution, the Eucharist became the spiritual heart of Church life, celebrated secretly in labour camps, prisons, and homes. Despite these circumstances, strict preparation rules persisted for most of the century, including a three-day fast, attendance at services, a complex prayer rule, and confession (Zheltov 2020, pp. 91–96).

Nevertheless, Russian émigré theologians in Western Europe—particularly in Paris—continued to develop the principles set forth by the 1917–1918 Moscow Council. Father Sergej Bulgakov (1871–1944) argued that frequent communion for laypeople is both canonically valid and rooted in the practice of the early Church, with no dogmatic objections. Priests, he maintained, should actively encourage it to the fullest extent for each person, without imposing formal restrictions. However, he insisted that confession remain obligatory, even while acknowledging that this requirement was not part of ancient practice. He distinguished clergy—exempt through ordination from fasting and confession—from laypeople, noting that the latter could also participate in the Eucharist through “spiritual communion.” Bulgakov recognized the use of general confession in exceptional circumstances but cautioned that it could risk a decline in church discipline (Bulgakov 1929).

Father Nicholas Afanasiev (1893–1966) took a sharply different view. He criticized the traditional Russian ascetical preparation for communion, known as *govenie*, which required up to seven days of strict fasting and intense prayer. He opposed the notion of “spiritual communion” (Afanasiev 2007, p. 57), seeing it as discouraging actual participation of the lay faithful, and criticized the exclusion of laity from the chalice as a historical and theological error (Afanasiev 2007, pp. 50–57; Afanasiev 2003, pp. 106–7; Denysenko 2015, p. 96).

Father Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983), a disciple of Father Nicholas Afanasiev and one of the most influential liturgical theologians of the twentieth century, developed an ecclesiology in which the Eucharist is understood as the Sacrament of the assembly. During his time, most Orthodox laypeople in America communed only once a year. As dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, Father Schmemmann authored the report *Confession and Communion*, approved by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America on 17 February 1972. This document encouraged frequent communion in parishes and introduced the practice of general confession, similar to that used by Father Ioan in mid-twentieth-century Romania at Vladimirești Monastery to facilitate communion for large numbers of faithful. In Father Schmemmann's model, those desiring private confession could do so after the communal one. The general confession was not meant to replace private confession, but, in his words, was intended only for those “who, receiving communion often and regularly confessing their sins, realize the self-evident need for purifying their conscience, for repentance, for that spiritual concentration and attention, which is so difficult to achieve in our modern life” (Schmemmann 1972; Denysenko 2015, pp. 133–34).



Father Schmemmann's reforms had a profound impact on eucharistic practice in the Orthodox Church in America (Denysenko 2015, p. 140). By 1996, 95% of priests encouraged frequent communion among their parishioners (Meyendorff 1996, p. 52).

As noted earlier, in the Church of Greece, interest in frequent communion among the faithful began in the eighteenth century, promoted by the Philokalic Kollyvades movement, and was later supported in the twentieth century by the *Zoe* movement. From 1959, the eucharistic theology of Father Alexander Schmemmann also influenced Greek theological circles (Alexopoulos 2009, pp. 274–76). At an inter-Orthodox symposium on liturgical reform held in Thessaloniki in 1972, a key focus was placing the Eucharist at the center of liturgical life (Mojzeš 2005, pp. 183–202).

A major step forward came with the Special Synodal Commission for Liturgical Rebirth, established by Archbishop Christodoulos (1939–2008), which organized a series of symposia on liturgical reform (Koumarianos 2007). The 2001 symposium was dedicated to the Eucharist. Its findings highlighted both the need for frequent communion and the equal importance of respecting canonical regulations concerning the celebration of the Liturgy and the faithful's approach to the chalice (Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2001).

In 2004, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece issued an encyclical affirming that the authentic Orthodox tradition supports frequent communion, while the prevailing custom—where most Greek faithful commune only at Pascha and Christmas—was described as an “obvious loss” (απώλεια προφανής). Laypeople were encouraged to commune often, but always with repentance and confession (Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2004).

Some Greek theologians, however, have taken more open positions than the Holy Synod. For instance, Petros Vassiliadis advocates for the participation of the entire community in holy communion, without juridical or legalistic preconditions such as strict preparation or linking the Eucharist to confession (Vassiliadis n.d.).

After the fall of communism, the Russian Church largely retained the traditional practice of infrequent communion among the faithful. However, a new approach has emerged emphasizing frequent communion with shortened pre-communion fasting and prayer rule. In 2015, the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church issued *On the Participation of Christians in the Eucharist*, recommending frequent communion and allowing the preparatory fast and prayer rule to be optional. Even confession, traditionally required before communion, may be dispensed with for those under a spiritual father's guidance (Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church 2015; Zheltov 2020, pp. 96–97).

A similar shift toward frequent communion has also been observed in the Orthodox Church in Serbia (Glibetić 2012, pp. 400–2; Aleksov and Lackenby 2022), as well as in the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria (Romanov 2008; Pavlov 2008). However, to date, no comprehensive study has examined the development of this trend or provided a systematic analysis of the diverse positions within the relevant theological circles of these Churches. The available evidence is limited to scattered reports from pastoral practice or individual statements by theologians and clerics, which are largely independent of the institutional frameworks of the respective Synods.

From the survey of other Orthodox Local Churches, a consistent tension emerges between traditional, restrictive pre-communion disciplines and the movement toward frequent communion. Efforts to encourage frequent participation among the laity are driven by liturgical and theological reflection as well as pastoral concerns, particularly the need to adapt to changing social and spiritual circumstances. The greater progress in encouraging frequent communion among the laity in Orthodox communities in America and in the Church of Greece can be attributed to closer collaboration between the Church's high hierarchy and the academic theological community, which generally supports the revi-

talization of church life. At the same time, synodal authorities must safeguard unity within the Church, which often leads them to adopt cautious or middle-ground official positions.

## 5. Emerging Debates in Romanian Orthodoxy After 1989

### 5.1. Advocacy for Eucharistic Revival: Bishop Serafim Joantă and Hieromonk Roman Braga

Following the 1989 Romanian Revolution, the question of communion frequency reemerged amid broader efforts to revitalize Orthodox spiritual life after decades of communist repression. In this context, Bishop Serafim Joantă (currently he is the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan of Germany, Central and Northern Europe) published an article in the church press in 1991 (*Telegraful Român*, no. 33–36)—later republished as the preface to the first Romanian translation of Nicodemus the Hagiorite’s work *On frequent communion* (Joantă 2001)—condemning the practice of infrequent communion as a distortion of the authentic Christian ethos. Bishop Serafim warns that without participation in the Eucharist, the Christian life is reduced to pietism—a disembodied sentimentalism and an individualism that destroys the real and living communion of the faithful with God. This communion is made possible only through the One of the Trinity, Christ—the incarnate Word of God—who is truly present in the Eucharist and given to all for union with the Holy Trinity (Joantă 2001, pp. 9–10). He argues that a deeper understanding of early eucharistic theology and the historical evolution of communion practices—often shaped more by custom than doctrine—can help dispel many prejudices and or false traditions about the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Bishop Serafim laments the loss of the early Church’s eucharistic and communal ethos—where the Eucharist was understood as both constituting and manifesting Christ’s ecclesial Body—and its replacement with a view of communion as merely an act of personal piety or a reward for individual “worthiness.” Recognizing the gravity of current communion practice in the Romanian Church, Bishop Serafim urges priests to teach the faithful the importance of more frequent participation in the Holy Mysteries. A Divine Liturgy without communicants, he warns, contradicts its very prayers and hymns. As a first step, he emphasizes encouraging children (who may commune without confession or fasting until age seven) and the elderly to receive regularly, ensuring every eucharistic celebration includes participation. Also, to foster deeper engagement in the Divine Liturgy and its sacrificial character, he recommends reading aloud key eucharistic prayers—especially the Anaphora—so the faithful can follow, understand, and more actively participate in the Liturgy.

On the same side, Father Roman Braga (1922–2015)—a former political prisoner in Romania’s communist prisons and later a missionary priest in the United States—in an article published in 2002 and suggestively titled *The Cerberuses of the holy chalice*, strongly criticized a superstitious approach to Christianity that relies on sacramental-eucharistic surrogates, reducing liturgical acts to magical rites meant to satisfy religious formalism. He recalled a 1994 Divine Liturgy at the Patriarchal Cathedral in Bucharest, where, despite a large clerical presence, no layperson received communion except for a few children—an outcome he finds entirely senseless.

He identified the requirement of prior confession—which he considers unfeasible—and a mandatory three-day fast as major obstacles to frequent communion, noting that these are not grounded in canon law and are inconsistently applied—strictly to laity, but not to clergy. He thus criticizes those priests who act as “Cerberuses” of the chalice, obstructing access to communion. He argues that the sacraments of confession and communion, though both essential, are not conditionally dependent on one another. Sins, he maintains, are forgiven not only through confession but also through the preparatory prayers, the prayers of the Divine Liturgy, and the very act of receiving communion—hence the repeated formula for each communicant: “... for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life.” While not rejecting

the need for preparation, he stressed it should consist of refraining from food beforehand, reading the preparatory prayers, approaching with humility and reverence, and reconciling with both one's neighbour and with God (Braga 2002).

### 5.2. Polemical Counterpoint: Father Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa

On the other hand, Father Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa (1925–2006)—himself a former Romanian political prisoner, a powerful symbol of anti-communist resistance, and later a missionary priest in the United States—finds Father Roman's position deeply troubling, particularly the suggestion that believers may receive communion without prior confession. He sees this as a dangerous erosion of canonical and spiritual safeguards. Calciu strongly critiques the rhetoric that labels priests who uphold the tradition of confession before communion as “Cerberuses of the holy chalice.”

While acknowledging that frequent communion was indeed practiced in the early Church (as seen, for instance, in the writings of St. Basil), Calciu insists that such practices must be understood within the framework of living Tradition—a Tradition that discerns what is spiritually edifying and rejects what fosters laxity or abuse. Referring critically to Father Iovan's practice of mass confession followed by mass communion, Father Calciu considers it a populist and potentially manipulative approach that emphasizes numbers over genuine spiritual depth, thereby diminishing the integrity of both sacraments. He also voices concern over the growing influence of Roman Catholic customs, particularly the routine administration of communion without prior confession (Calciu-Dumitreasa 2008).

### 5.3. A Nuanced Monastic Conservatism: Elder Arsenie Papacioc

Archimandrite Arsenie Papacioc (1914–2011), a renowned and deeply respected spiritual father, was shaped within the monastic life of Sihăstria Monastery, where he was tonsured, and later served as abbot of Slatina Monastery. Following his years of detention in communist prisons, he became in 1976 the spiritual father of “St. Mary” Monastery in Techirghiol, where he oversaw its spiritual growth and formation until his repose.

The general approach to sacramental practice regarding the Holy Eucharist does not differ substantially from the milieu in which he was formed, though at times he appears more lenient than Father Ilie Cleopa, particularly in not regarding the 30–40 day interval between communions as obligatory. In an interview from 2003, reflecting on the rhythm of communion, he seemed to lean toward a reconciliatory stance: “neither too often nor too seldom, but with worthiness,” an expression often used by those who avoid taking sides. He argues that

“It is not the calendar that decides. That is a mistake. What truly matters is the intensity of your faith. We do not receive communion merely because Easter or Christmas has arrived. We commune in order to remain always with Christ. For there is not only sacramental communion with the Holy Mysteries, but also a spiritual communion—this continuous dwelling of our heart in God's presence”. (Papacioc 2003, pp. 48–49)

In an interview with Father Iulian Nistea, Father Arsenie Papacioc remarked:

“Holy communion should not be approached according to fixed patterns—whether necessarily frequent or rare. Rare, because God is too great and His grace too abundant, requiring serious preparation. If one does not wear the wedding garment, Scripture says he will be bound and cast out. Therefore, proper readiness is essential. Yet if one communes too often, there is the danger—as an unrefined and unpolished human being—of reducing the Mystery to a habit, rather than approaching it with reverence and fear of God. If, however, you truly carry this fear of God and consider the profound significance of communion, then you

are indeed prepared to receive more frequently. But if you do so merely out of routine, or even daily, as I have heard practiced in some places, this is a very grave error". (Papacioc n.d.)

Thus, Father Arsenie neither absolutizes infrequency nor endorses daily communion as a rule, but frames eucharistic participation within the inner state of the believer, emphasizing responsibility in approaching the Holy Sacrament. In any case, he consistently emphasizes the essential role of the spiritual father, whom he regards as the only one truly qualified to determine how frequently each person may receive communion (Papacioc 2003, p. 94). Although he rejects the idea of receiving communion without prior confession (Papacioc 2003, p. 95), Father Arsenie Papacioc is not a proponent of rigid asceticism. He opposes those who too readily deny access to the chalice, applying ancient canons literally, since contemporary social, familial, and historical circumstances are different (Papacioc 2003, p. 58).

#### 5.4. Pastoral-Mystical Mediation: Hieromonk Rafail Noica and Metropolitan Bartolomeu Anania

Father Rafail Noica (disciple of St. Sophrony of Essex, now living in seclusion in a hermitage in the Apuseni Mountains of Transylvania) cautions against the polarization of the Church into rigid camps or schools of thought regarding communion practices. Instead, he proposes that differing approaches reflect distinct spiritual needs and should not be viewed in opposition, but rather as complementary expressions of pastoral care (Noica 2002, p. 154). He highlights the paradox that, while communion is always salvific, abstaining can sometimes be more spiritually constructive depending on a person's state (Noica 2002, p. 160). This tension between the soteriological and the pedagogical gives rise to two tendencies in Church life: one favoring frequent communion, the other emphasizing deeper preparation.

Drawing from his experience in the West—where he felt like a “branch cut from the trunk”—he expresses a deep longing for more frequent communion. In his monastic community at Essex, the Eucharist was celebrated multiple times weekly, and the brethren would receive communion at each Liturgy. He affirms that, if possible, they would have communed daily, as is practiced during Bright Week (Noica 2002, pp. 163–65). Thus, he advises that communion should be received as frequently as possible, but always under the guidance of one's spiritual father, since each person is unique and cannot be bound by a uniform rule (Noica 2002, pp. 140–41). For him, frequent communion does not lead to the routinization or trivialization of the Mystery; rather, its repetition fosters a gradual ascent in grace (Noica 2002, p. 156).

In his turn, Metropolitan Bartolomeu Anania of Cluj (1921–2011), in his catechetical writings on the Divine Liturgy, advocates a balanced approach to the frequency of receiving communion. He stated:

“Personally, I do not believe that the discretionary administration of the Holy Mysteries is a spiritually edifying spectacle, nor one that avoids the risk of banalization. At the same time, I lament the spiritual void faced by the priest who, chalice in hand, cries out ‘Draw near!’—and no one moves. Between these two extremes—uncensored frequency and pious absence—the truth, as is often the case, likely lies somewhere in the middle” (Anania 2011, p. 221)

The middle way, in his view, would consist of several measures that, according to him, could be formalized in a synodal directive. He suggests that (a) all major feasts, including those of great saints, are appropriate days for communion; (b) depending on the size of the parish, the priest may organize, in mutual agreement, groups of parishioners to approach the Holy Mysteries with the awareness and conviction that communion is truly a festive moment—both in itself and within the broader context of the feast day; (c) children should

partake more frequently, as determined by their confessor, since their fasting requirements are minimal; (d) participation of parishioners in congregational singing, as members the royal priesthood, could help integrate the faithful more deeply into the eucharistic rhythm; (e) For the sake of truth and as encouragement, he proposes that the liturgical responses “We have seen the true light. . .” and “Let our mouths be filled with Your praise. . .” be sung only by those who have received communion that day (Anania 2011, pp. 221–22).

### 5.5. Eucharistic Tendencies in the Romanian Diaspora

Official data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicate that Romanian migration comprises about 5.7 million people (Ministerul Afacerilor Externe 2021), while unofficial estimates raise the figure to as many as 10 million (Departamentul pentru Românii de Pretutindeni n.d.). This reality justifies both the Romanian Patriarchate’s pastoral concern for diaspora Orthodox communities and the government’s support for religious groups as a means of preserving national identity.

In general, Romanians abroad have carried their religious practices with them, and their approach to the Eucharist has remained largely unchanged. By contrast, contact with other Orthodox communities—particularly the very active Russian diaspora in Western Europe and the Greek diaspora—has encouraged a greater “liturgical boldness” among Romanian clergy in the diaspora than is typically seen in Romania. Institutions such as the College of the Holy Cross and St. Vladimir’s Seminary in the United States, and especially the Saint Serge Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, became key centers of theological and pastoral exchange for Romanians. Through exposure to Greek and Russian diaspora influences, which were more open to frequent eucharistic communion than the traditional “four times a year,” Romanian clergy and theologians were encouraged to rethink older practices.

Without formal synodal norms or regulations, the liturgical life of diaspora communities—shaped by the need to find solutions to challenges unknown in their homeland—developed in a more flexible and dynamic way. The desire to express unity and solidarity among Romanians abroad fostered a deeper appreciation of the Eucharist as the true cohesive force of parish life and of the Church as a whole.

This trend has been reinforced by the active involvement of Romanian Orthodox hierarchs in the diaspora, such as Bishop Siluan of Italy and Metropolitan Serafim Joantă, Metropolitan of Germany, Central, and Northern Europe (Qaramah 2019, pp. 239–40). In several pastoral letters, they have encouraged the faithful to receive communion more frequently and have criticized the practice of conditioning access to the chalice on obligatory fasting or prior confession (Joantă n.d.; Șpan n.d.). Unfortunately, systematic studies on the frequency of communion among diaspora communities are virtually nonexistent, leaving personal testimonies and direct observation as the main sources of information.

By contrast, some Romanian theologians and clergy remain reluctant to endorse frequent communion without rigorous ascetical requirements, viewing it as linked to liturgical reform movements perceived to have Catholic origins. For example, Fr. Ioan Ică, a renowned Romanian dogmatist, argues that “[t]he claim, arising from Catholic and Protestant influence, that participation in the Divine Liturgy is useless for those who do not receive communion does not correspond to reality,” since Christ is present and active throughout the entire celebration and “all who participate benefit . . . not only those who partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord.” (Ică 1993, p. 343) Following Sergius Bulgakov, Fr. Ică also promotes the notion of “spiritual communion,” through which the faithful are nourished by the liturgy and Christ’s presence without physically receiving the Gifts (Ică 1993, p. 352). He further contends that the frequency of communion is determined by “the purity of one’s heart,” “each person’s worthiness,” and “the permission of the spiritual



father” (Ică 1993, p. 356). This view has been adopted by some Romanian clergy as a middle way between rare communion and the encouragement of very frequent communion.

In the same vein, a recent encyclical from the leadership of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Maramureş and Sătmar (no. 175, 25 January 2022), addressed to the clergy of the diocese, declares that “some priests, lured by Western practices foreign to the spirit of the Orthodox Church and to the prescriptions of the holy canons (sic!), administer the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist without the faithful first going to confession.” The document reaffirms the traditional ascetic-rigorous approach, warning that clergy who fail to uphold these conditions risk ecclesiastical sanctions and even “the wrath of God.”

The claim that Orthodox advocates of frequent communion are implicitly promoting a Catholic practice modeled on Vatican II liturgical reforms is unfounded. Indeed, the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14 famously calls for the “full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebration,” where active participation naturally entails receiving communion (Pope Paul VI 1963). However, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, who strongly promoted the faithful’s active participation in the Liturgy, firmly rejected both the platform and rationale of the Vatican II reforms (Denysenko 2015, pp. 84–87). His advocacy of frequent communion was instead a continuation of theological developments within pre-revolutionary Russian Orthodoxy.

Although the Maramureş and Sătmar encyclical appeals to canonical authority, it does not cite specific canons. At the same time, Apostolic Canon 9—which prescribes the excommunication of those who attend the eucharistic celebration without receiving communion (unless they have a valid reason)—is ignored entirely. This omission highlights how, in the absence of synodal decisions, efforts at eucharistic renewal within the Romanian Orthodox Church are left to the subjective interpretations and judgments of individual clergy.

#### 5.6. Eucharistic Practice in the Romanian Orthodox Church During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, during the lockdown imposed by the Romanian Government because of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to the Eucharist within the Romanian Orthodox Church was significantly restricted. Although the Patriarchate supported the preventive health measures mandated by the authorities, a widespread public controversy emerged when health officials suggested altering the practice of communion by replacing the traditional communion spoon with single-use plastic utensils (Dascalu et al. 2021).

On 28 February 2020, the Romanian Patriarchate clarified that believers concerned about contracting illness from sharing the holy chalice could request communion from the eucharistic reserve (normally reserved for the sick) at any time, administered with a personal spoon brought from home and used exclusively by that individual. Moreover, those unable to receive communion due to illness, hospitalization, quarantine, or isolation were encouraged to drink holy water from the feast of Epiphany at home (Basilica News Agency 2020). These measures, however, drew criticism from certain clergy and laypeople (Leustean 2023, pp. 39–41).

Because of these restrictions, Easter in 2020 was celebrated without the faithful present in churches. Instead, under a protocol signed between the Romanian Patriarchate and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, volunteers distributed to households both the Paschal holy light and a piece of blessed bread sprinkled with wine, known as *paşti* (*pascha*)—a practice perceived by many as a eucharistic substitute (Qaramah 2024)—since believers could not receive communion on the night of the Resurrection (Libertatea 2020).

The drop in eucharistic frequency during the COVID-19 pandemic should therefore be regarded as an anomaly—though one that was experienced with deep pain, particularly by practicing Christians. At the same time, the inability to attend services or to receive communion awakened a stronger spiritual longing among many faithful and a heightened

awareness of the Eucharist as God's gift imparted at every Divine Liturgy. Yet the fact that the Romanian Patriarchate did not firmly defend the right of believers to receive the Eucharist—the center of their Christian life—indirectly confirmed a deeper issue: the frequency of eucharistic communion is not a priority for the synodal authority (Vanca 2020).

To date, no sociological studies have examined how the pandemic has shaped Eucharistic frequency within the Romanian Orthodox Church in the longer term. Nonetheless, unofficial testimonies suggest a mixed picture: in some communities, the faithful's desire for more frequent communion has grown, while for others, the shock of the pandemic has made reintegration into parish Eucharistic life more difficult.

## 6. Conclusions

The leading figure of the eucharistic renewal movement in the Romanian Orthodox Church during the mid-twentieth century was Father Ioan Iovan of Vladimirești. Yet several factors impeded its broader development: the association of eucharistic missionary fervor with the controversial visionary claims of Mother Veronica, abbess of Vladimirești, and of those who styled themselves as her successors after the monastery's dissolution by the communist authorities; the political repression of any form of spiritual revival; the hierarchy's reticence and suspicion under totalitarian pressure; and the monastic conservatism of traditional monasteries, particularly in Moldavia.

While the party advocating frequent communion grounded its position in scriptural, historical, and liturgical arguments, the more conservative side focused on safeguarding the faithful's spiritual preparation before receiving the Holy Sacrament. Their concerns centered on preserving a sense of awe and mystery, guarding against the danger of banalization, and maintaining what they regarded as the traditional link between confession and the Eucharist. Evidently, the obligations of observing several days of fasting and confessing beforehand were difficult to fulfill for those who sought to commune frequently, thus creating a pastoral tension between the ideal of frequent participation and the practical realities of spiritual discipline. The tension was further amplified by the differing expectations placed upon various categories within the Church. It was difficult for many to understand why clergy were exempt from certain ascetical requirements—such as extended fasting or mandatory confession before each communion—while the laity were strictly bound to them, creating a sense of imbalance and, at times, resentment.

Frequent communion was regarded by some as both a restoration of the original Christian eucharistic tradition—when receiving the Eucharist was understood as an essential ecclesiological act—and a vital source of spiritual strength at a time when the communist regime severely restricted religious freedom. Despite the obstacles, isolated local initiatives quietly continued to promote more frequent participation in the Eucharist.

After the fall of communism, voices advocating frequent communion were able to speak openly. Nevertheless, the unresolved controversies surrounding Vladimirești and the even more contentious case of Father Nil Dorobanțu continue to foster caution among segments of the hierarchy and clergy, who tend to associate frequent communion with deviations from ecclesiastical norms. Also contributing to the reluctance toward this practice is the unwarranted association with Catholic liturgical reform—particularly since, within Romanian theological circles, the increased frequency of communion in the diaspora is often viewed as a Western Catholic or Protestant influence.

In the Romanian Orthodox Church, as in other Orthodox Churches of the former communist states of Eastern Europe (such as Serbia or Bulgaria), the liturgical reform movement aimed at active participation of the faithful through frequent communion does not operate within an institutionalized synodal framework, unlike the Church of Greece with its dedicated synodal commission. The Holy Synod of the Russian Church

seems to display a somewhat greater concern for this issue than that of the Romanian Church. Instead, the liturgical renewal movement in the Romanian Church is spontaneous, unsystematic, and dependent on the approach of individual ministers. While some voices within the Synod support frequent communion and the non-obligatory nature of fasting and confession beforehand, this has not been formalized as official policy, unlike in the Russian Church, where such practices are officially recognized, although not imposed. In Romania, pastoral discretion remains with bishops and parish priests, who may encourage different approaches in their communities.

Although progress has been made, a definitive assessment of the strengthening of eucharistic life within the pastoral and monastic communities of the Romanian Orthodox Church requires future comprehensive sociological investigation. Such research would not only clarify the actual frequency of communion and its theological understanding among the faithful but also shed light on the pastoral strategies and liturgical reforms needed to nurture a vibrant eucharistic ethos for future generations.

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