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USAGE OF THE ST BASIL PRAYERS IN TRANSYLVANIA BY THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

VALER SIMION COSMA

ABSTRACT

The Christian Churches provide their ministers and believers with a complex set of prayers, rituals, and practices, intended to solve the various problems that an individual, family, or community may encounter in everyday life. An analysis of these services in their social and cultural contexts reveals fundamental aspects of religious life, as well as their role in explaining and dealing with issues such as diseases, marriage, thefts, and other woes. This paper aims to discuss the use of the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great in dealing with a wide range of problems that can be encountered by a believer. I will focus on the case of a Greek Catholic priest from Blaj (Transylvania) Monastery, who kept a diary about his liturgical activity in the final decades of the 19th century. In the first part of my paper, I intend to examine his records, in order to reveal which were the most required and recommended prayers and rituals, which were the most frequent situations and problems that required the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great, and which were the most frequent combinations of rituals, prayers, and practices either required by the believers, or recommended by the priest himself. Based on the conclusions drawn in the first part, I will discuss the relation between the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great and the complex set of charms and maledictions that, according to folk beliefs and Church tradition, could harm people in various ways and degrees – from a simple disease, or misfortune, to demonic possession and death.

Keywords: Priest, prayers, healing, charms, Transylvania.

On the 23rd of August 1892, Ana Tartiu from Turdasiu told the priest Elie Domşa from Blaj that she cannot sleep and asked him to perform the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great, to read for her the prayer for the one who cannot sleep and to mention her name in 5 Liturgies. On the 31st of January 1893, Maria Darbatu, “60 years old, from Sâncelu, had something inside her and the doctors couldn’t heal her. She asked for Saint Basil the Great’s prayers. She paid a lot of money”. On the 18th of May 1893, the same prayers were asked to be performed for little Saveta

from Ohaba, 2 years old, “who is tiny and does not grow”. On the 10th of June 1895, the priest performed the prayers of Saint Basil the Great for Toldi Bardan Zingara din Orăștie who was crazy when getting drunk and beat his wife and kids. On the 12th of October 1897, Ana, wife of Stoica Petru from Maierii, Alba Iulia, asked for Saint Basil the Great’s prayers for his husband to leave Anutia, the 13 years old daughter of Lică Ioanu din Panca. On the 18th of November 1897, Ana (46) “asked for the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great because she’s afraid of dying.” On the 18th of June 1898, the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great were asked to be performed for “Petru Tinca (21) from Cergăul Mare, who is angry with people and with his parents, does not work, does not like to participate in the village dances and parties, but is staying at home and reading all the time”.

These quotations are selected from the three notebooks¹ of Father Elie Domșa, which are kept at the Romanian National Archives in Cluj-Napoca. Two of these notebooks cover two decades, between 1887 and 1908, and contain records about prayers and services requested by the believers or recommended to them, by the priest. The notations refer to a wide range of health issues and domestic or social issues faced by the rural and urban population of Blaj and its surroundings, highlighting the role of the priest as healer and mediator of the divine power ascribed to the clergy.² This case illustrates the resilience and vitality of the peasant medical culture in an era in which the medicalization of society, as part of the complex process of modernization carried out largely through state intervention, makes significant progress, seeking to spread throughout the social body. The clergy and a series of prayers and church rituals were part of the gallery of healers and medicines specific to pre-industrial European peasant societies, which until late in the nineteenth century did not know doctor or modern medicine.³

The analysis of these documents allows the decipherment of both the internal dynamics of the peasant medical culture, that is, the relation with other folk healers, as well as the relations with institutionalised medicine. Many parishioners turned to the priest parallel with recourse to interventions from doctors or having previously resorted to their services. According to the historian Constantin Bărbulescu, “medicalization can only be understood through the grid of opposition

¹ *Carnete de însemnări dintre 1875-1930 despre slujbele cerute de credincioși; poezii copiate, cheltuieli zilnice* [Booknotes from 1875-1930 about the services requested by believers; copied poems, daily expenses], No. 102 - Fond Biblioteca Centrală Blaj, VIII Acte Culturale, Manuscrise [Blaj Central Library Collection, VIII Cultural Documents, Manuscripts], Romanian National Archives Cluj County. From now on, Ms VIII/102.

² “Religion and medicine originally shared a common orientation – both *holiness* and *healing* are words adopted from a common Latin origin meaning *that which must be preserved intact*. Such concepts ensured unity of medicine and faith –physician-priest-philosopher – the curer of bodies and the healer of souls. The delineations between the body, mind, and soul were nonexistent for our forbearers. (...) Most physicians in ancient times were temple priests who *knew* the reasons why things happened in nature, particularly to humanity” (Kurapati, 2018: 41-42).

³ Bărbulescu, 2015: 301-304.

between the dominant culture and the subordinate culture, and with the birth of modernity the peasant culture becomes and remains to this day subordinate”⁴. Although they are opposite in the context of the process of medicalization of societies, the two medical cultures communicate in different degrees, the peasant society not being isolated from the socio-cultural ensemble of which it was part of.

On the other hand, by examining these notations we can reconstruct concrete fragments of religious life, thus contributing to the expansion of the understanding of the dynamics of vernacular religion and its relation with the field of witchcraft and popular magic. Vernacular religion is religion as it is lived, “as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it.”⁵ These notes reflect the place and role of prayers and church services in peasant medical culture and, in many cases, the position as combatant of evil and demonic influences, with which the priest is invested, as a representative of the institutionalized sacred. The importance given to charms and demonic influences in causing health or domestic problems stems primarily from the large number of requests and recommendations for the prayers of Saint Basil the Great and other prayers or services that seek to exorcise demons and counteract the effects of their actions or of witchcraft practices.

The fact that these prayers invested with special power and effectiveness are required or recommended in many cases that do not seem to have an explicit connection with any demonic influence, propels them into the position of a true panacea suitable for solving a wide variety of problems, conditions and situations.

Starting from these notations, in this article I intend to discuss the uses of the prayers Saint Basil the Great and their hypostasis of “medication”, strong and effective in combating any disease, suffering or trouble that can harm people. I will start by presenting Father Damian Elia Domșa and his notations, and then I will continue with a quantitative analysis of the parishioners’ requests and of the prayers or services performed by the priest, highlighting their weight by categories, out of the desire to provide an overview of his ritual activity reflected by the notations. In the last part, I will focus on the prayers of Saint Basil the Great and

⁴ Bărbulescu, 2015: 302.

⁵ “Since religion inherently involves interpretation, it is impossible for the religion of an individual not to be vernacular. Vernacular religious theory involves an interdisciplinary approach to the study of religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief. (...) Vernacular religion in relation to a class-structured view of society is neither equatable with popular religion as a religion of the masses, nor should it be juxtaposed to the religion of social leaders or intellectual cognoscenti. The relations of power evident in social divisions of class, economics, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, etc. do profoundly influence communities of religious individuals. The divisions, in fact, are mirrored and often formed by the politics of the religious institution in its internal relations of power. Vernacular religious creativity finds fertile ground to grow as a response to all such social and political environments. In this sense, vernacular religion can develop to contest unequal power relations, to affirm the existence of inequality in the struggle of life, or simply to confirm the social status quo” (Primiano, 1995: 44, 47).

the variety of situations for which they were requested, arguing that their frequency has to do, first of all, with the magical-religious power and efficiency ascribed to them by the believers and by the clergy.

THE PRIEST

Father Damian Elie Domșa was the last monk from the Saint Basil Order (Ordinul Bazilitan), founded in the early eighteenth century, as part of establishing the Greek-Catholic Church (Uniate Church) in Transylvania. Having Saint Basil the Great, who was one of the founders of the Eastern Monachism, as patron saint, this order was imagined as an elite body of the newly established church, combining Eastern monastic tradition with post-Tridentine Catholic reformism and missionary. “They had to be very learned men, both in theological and profane sciences, far inferior to the learned men of the West. Free from material worries, being financed by the secular administration, they were to be propagators of religious and national culture, in writing and orally, among the Romanian people; their mission was to form in the religious and national spirit new generations of priests. Besides, they had to assist the bishop in leading and administering the diocese.”⁶

In the approximately two centuries of activity, future hierarchs and intellectual figures such as Gerontie Cotorea, Samuil Clain sau Timotei Cipariu were part of the order, having a fundamental role in developing the educational system and the Romanian culture.

A very succinct biography of the monk Father Elie Damian Domșa is presented in *Dascălii Blajului* (The teachers of Blaj), a book published in 1940 by Nicolae Comșa. Born in 1843, he was educated in Blaj and Beiuș, and became priest in 1878, as we can also see from a few lapidary notations from the documents discussed in this paper. In 1898 he published in Sibiu a translation of *Filotea* by St. Francisc of Salles. The notations from the first years include brief mentions regarding his didactic activity or his activity as a confessor of the students of the theological seminary, where he taught for a short period in 1879-1880 and later on only occasionally.⁷ Some of his notes show that he was on familiar terms with the church hierarchy, including the Metropolitan Bishop Ioan Vancea and from 1892 the Metropolitan Bishop Victor Mihaly of Apșa, who resided in Blaj.

From the first notations we learn that his mother died on April 14, 1875, and on February 16, 1879, half a year after he became a monk, his father died also, being buried in the “new” cemetery in Petelca, currently part of the city of Teiuș. On Saint Eliah day, in 1879, he became hieromonk in a ceremony presided over by the

⁶ Pop, 1937: 309.

⁷ Comșa, 1940, 109.

Metropolitan Ioan Vancea.⁸ Until 1887, when notations reflecting interaction with believers began, notes were rare, marking various events, such as the birth of a grandson or the death of a brother-in-law, listening to students, or the consecration of the foundation stone for building of the new clerical seminary in 1883. The first notebook, which is missing a few pages, also includes the transcription of some poems, such as *Dan capitan de plai* by Vasile Alecsandri and a poem about a swallow and *Galileo's Dream* by I. I. Engel. A series of notations shows the record of some expenses made in the context of some trips to Băile Darozék and Reghin. A notation from March 10, 1878 mentions a trip to the doctor Dr. Gras from Sebeş, where he “spent many troubles until Palm Sunday” when he returned to Blaj through Alba Iulia. On May 2 of the same year, he describes a trip to Petelca and complains that he cannot work in the office due to back and eye pain.⁹

Father Elie Damian Domşa died in 1932. One of the obituaries published then in the newspaper *Unirea Poporului* highlights his activity and fame as a healer in a larger area of Transylvania: “Who did not know the Graybeard-Monk? All the students that have studied in Blaj in the last fifty years knew him. All those distressed, ill and helpless knew him, from the villages in the Târnavă area, up to Mureş and the mountains. He was also known by the villages on Secaş and beyond, until Sibiu Area. His stole was their source of comfort in despair, shield against hidden pain and true medicine for the innumerable weakness of their body made of sand.”¹⁰

Therefore, despite the popularity among Romanian historians of the theory that explains the continuity and the resilience of the magical-religious practices and beliefs labeled as “superstitions” due to the contribution of the rural-low-educated clergy along with the pressure from the believers, this case shows us that the opposition between a well-educated clergy and a low-educated (mainly rural) clergy could delude us from understanding how vernacular religion works.

THE RECORDS

The notes regarding the services and prayers requested by the believers or recommended to believers in various situations are mostly short and succinct. In most cases, they only mention the name of the persons requesting the priest's services, age, the village/town where they come from, the prayer/ritual requested and the cause for the request. Some cases, especially those involving disease and physical sufferings, domestic violence and love affairs, thefts and charms are a bit more detailed, as you will see from the examples that I intend to present. At the same time, a large number of the notes are even shorter, such

⁸ Ms VIII/102, I, 68.

⁹ Ms VIII/102, I, 60-73.

¹⁰ Melin, 1932: 1-2.

as: “21st of July 1893, Iulica from Asimpu. Twice the prayers of M.V. (Saint Basil the Great).”¹¹

Often, he only mentions one prayer or ritual, but there are also cases when he mentions combinations of prayers and rituals requested by the believers, such as “Anica, Mateiu M.’s wife. The Prayers of Saint Basil. She has abdominal pain. Plus, to be mentioned during 10 Masses. I also did for her the «Number of the Virgin Mary»”¹²

He also mentions when he received money or other products for his services, or he mentions explicitly if a person did not pay. In other cases, he mentions the performance of only the part of the prayer or the service requested. For example, “half of the Saint Nicholas Akhatist for the family” or three prayers that are part of the Holy Unction. However, most frequently such requests concern half of the prayers of Saint Basil the Great, being registered as ½ M.V. A series of notations mentioning the amount paid suggest the existence of tariffs according to which all or only half of the prayers are read: “Oct. 14 1892. Ana from Deva, born in Ciufudu ½ the MV 50.” Or “May 23, 1891, Anica Cigana from Darlosu, asks MV 50 rests 50.”¹³

The notations that mention payments reflect situations in which the parishioner does not ask for a specific prayer or service but the prayers depend on how much he or she can pay: “June 5, 1901 for Adam Ciurea, 21 years old, *cere o s. Rugăciune de o coroană* [asks for one krone prayer]. The *Paraclisul* [Oratory] of the Virgin Mary”. “June 23, 1901 Susana, a child (one year old), cannot walk, she is crooked. To be performed a holy prayer for her, of 50.”¹⁴

There are also situations in which the claimant cannot pay, yet the priest fulfills their request, or cases in which they ask for the full prayers but pay the partial fee or promises to bring the payment another time: “November 21, 1901 Ioan Nemeș, 21 years old from Roșia had a pain in the left side of his body. To be performed ½ MV without paying.¹⁵ (...) November 30, 1908 for Marina Almasiu 3xMV. She promised to pay for it when she can.”¹⁶

The requests can be put into three categories:

1. The person requesting the prayer/services/ritual for herself.
2. The person requesting the prayer/services/ritual for another person, usually for a member of the family.
3. The person requesting the prayer/services/ritual for an enemy or to discover the person who is guilty of something.

¹¹ Ms VIII/102, I, 90.

¹² Ms VIII/102, I, 84.

¹³ Ms VIII/102, I, 85, 83.

¹⁴ Ms VIII/102, I, 144, 145.

¹⁵ Ms VIII/102, I, 147.

¹⁶ Ms VIII/102, II, 50.

Most of the prayers and services requested and performed were included in the liturgical books, such as the *Molitfelnic*, being part of the official prayers and rituals established by the church. However, his records also mention three type of prayers that belong to the apocryphal heritage of the Eastern Christianity: The Number of Virgin Mary (38), The Belt of Virgin Mary (18) and, The Prayer of Saint Mary the Little, from the Dream of the Virgin Mary, an apocryphal writing very popular among Romanians (1). Valeriu Bălteanu writes about the *Numeruș* (The Number of Virgin Mary), that it is a kind of amulet, a small book written for kids in order to be protected against *evil eye*.¹⁷ The fact that such prayers were performed by this priest allows us to understand the relation between canonical rituals and prayers and the apocryphal ones among clergy and parishioners. In most cases, such prayers were requested along with prayers and services such as the Prayers of Saint Basil, Liturgy or Oratory (*Paraclis*), as we can see in this example: “February 1st, 1904 for Sofia from Blaj, to be performed for her the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great on 12th, the Number of Virgin and the Oratory (*Paraclis*). On 13th to be read again all these prayers, twice.”¹⁸

Beyond the Church’s negative rhetoric and interdictions, there is a constant interaction between church services, prayers, popular magic, and apocryphal writings. In a book published in 1938, Nicolae Cartoian states that the texts contained in the medical folklore manuscripts were deeply Christianized in order to be tolerated by the Church.¹⁹ As I have discussed previously, this process of Christianizing charms and disenchantments was undertaken mainly by priests and monks, for a long time almost the only literate minority of Romanian society.²⁰ As in the case of charms and disenchantments, the apocryphal writings were copied, transmitted and popularized by the clergy, and later, they were included in the religious books published by the Church.²¹

One last observation concerns the places of origin of the believers and their ethnic and confessional diversity. Villages, such as Veza, Bucerdea,

¹⁷ Bălteanu, 2003: 200.

¹⁸ Ms VIII/102, II, 7.

¹⁹ Cartoian, 1938: 234.

²⁰ Cosma, 2019: 54-55.

²¹ “The first book printed in the Church typography from Alba Iulia in 1639 reveals how the Eastern tradition integrated and perpetuated divinatory and astrological literature up until late in the 19th century. This book is known as *Paraclisul Precistei – Precista’s Oratory*, from Govora (1639), because the first text that it comprised is that respective oratory. Alongside *molitvas* (prayers), psalms, catechetic and canonical texts, the book further comprises the *Păscălie*, the *Gromovnic*, and the *Trepetnic*, in a juxtaposition that seems to suggest how, despite the repeated condemnations of divination, astrology, and magic, these writings can rather be categorized as scientific, in the pre-modern sense, in the way that science was accepted/tolerated by the Orthodox Church and perpetuated especially by means of monks and learned priests” (Cosma, 2018: 140-141).

Thiuriu, Ohaba, Cergău, Ciufu, Crăciunel, Iclod, Asimpu and Panade, which were closer to Blaj were the most mentioned. But there were also cases when people arrived from far cities and villages such as Aiud, Berghin, Tătârlăua, Alba Iulia, Deva, Turdasiu, Bia, Micăsasa, Gârbova, Spatacu, Hopârța, Ciumbrud, Spini, Orăștie, Mediaș, Șeica Mare, Sân Martin, Roșia, Glogovețiu, Roșia, Bălcaciu, Șomfalău, Ocna Sibiului, and even Oradia Mare. The records contain numerous notations regarding services and prayers requested by Hungarians, Szeklers, Roma and Saxons. For example, on August 22nd, 1897, Németh András, employee of the railway company, asked for a liturgy of Saint Anthony to discover who stole his watch and jacket²² and on November 10th, 1901, Halmen Catarina, married to Seiler Martin from Slimnic, asked for the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great to be performed in order to determine her husband to quit his adulterous love affair with Linerț Catarina.²³ Such examples illustrate the power ascribed to Romanian priests and the magical effects ascribed to the religious services performed by them, over and above ethnic, confessional and social borders. As emphasised by many Hungarian folklorists, Romanian priests have a prominent role in the field of popular magic within the Hungarian and Szekler popular mythology, especially as a healer, bibliomancer and exorcist.²⁴

THE PRAYER OF SAINT BASIL THE GREAT AND OTHER CHURCH SERVICES

Given that Christianity is a religion of healing,²⁵ one of the major roles of a priest, from the early centuries of Christianity, is that of the healer.²⁶ In order to perform these tasks, we can find a series of rituals, prayers, and ordinances performed by priests, designed to bring healing to soul and body, well established in liturgical literature. *Molitfelnic* or *Efhologhion*²⁷ is the fundamental book in the Romanian church tradition, as in other Eastern churches, and it includes the rituals, benedictions and prayers that the priest has to perform on different occasions. These rituals, ordinances and prayers are called *ierurgii* or *evlohoghii*,²⁸ and are much like the “sacramentals” in the tradition of the Roman

²² Ms VIII/102, I, 115.

²³ Ms VIII/102, I, 146.

²⁴ Kádár, 2005; Keszeg, 1997: 335-369; Keszeg, 2007: 68-88; Pócs, 2004: 174-190; Komáromi, 1996: 1-2: 87-98; Komáromi, 2010; Czégényi, 2014: 331-414.

²⁵ Porterfield, 2005: 22.

²⁶ Lebrun, 1995: 17; Kee, 1987: 9; Daunton-Fear, 2009: 14, 151; Cosma, 2013: 18-19.

²⁷ For this article I have used *Euhologiu*, 3rd edition, revăzută după originalul grecesc and blessed by the Arch-Bishop and Metropolitan Victor Mihalyi of Apșa (Blaj: 1913).

²⁸ *Ierurgii*= sacred offices/rituals; *evlohoghii*= prayers or services/rituals with prayer, according to Braniște, 2005: 355.

Catholic Church.²⁹ Furthermore, this book contains rituals and prayers for various issues and situations: special invocations against enchantments and spells, prayers of exorcisms such as that of Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great, other prayers to expel demons and unclean spirits, invocations in case of various diseases for people or animals and rituals for different crises like drought or heavy rainfall.³⁰ According to Christian tradition, sin is the origin of all diseases and miseries that afflict people.³¹ These are also considered divine punishments or effects of demonic attack, enchantments or maledictions, a concept that overlaps with how diseases and misfortunes were explained in popular culture.³² As Christine D. Worobec stated about Russian and Ukrainian peasants from the Imperial Russia, a closer look at peasant beliefs regarding possession and bewitchment reveals that they followed Orthodox teachings regarding demons and the constant struggle between good and evil, the power of the holy cross, the magical properties of the holy water, the authority of saints, as well as faith healing, exorcisms and prayers.³³

As you can observe from Table 1, the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great were the most requested prayers in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and in the first decade of the twentieth century. In total, there were 828 requests of the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great during this period, from a total of 1611 requests. They represent more than 50% of the prayers and services requested every year during this period. On the following positions as a number of requests, comes the category of Akathists (193), then the Paraclis/Oratory (125), the Prayer of Undoing of malediction and charms (66), the Liturgy (57), the Psalter (54), The Number of

²⁹ Teodorescu, 1923: 66.

³⁰ “To emphasize the importance of this liturgical book in the sacerdotal activity, it is necessary to mention that no other religious book has had more editions than this. (Bejan 1936, 687). The analysis of the editions published from sixteenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century, preserved at the Library of the Romanian Academy, shows that they do not always contain the same texts, but usually they contain the texts of the church services and rituals important in the life of every Christian as the ordinance of birth, baptism, marriage, confession, enter a monastery, unction, and death; texts of the services regarding certain community feasts as the mass when founding a new church, and the 'Great Blessing of the Waters' during the celebration of Epiphany or Christ's Baptism. Alongside these there were a series of “prayers useful for different things”, as the prayer for postpartum female, for midwife, for the woman who lost a child, prayer of blessing a trip or a new house, prayer for purifying wells, salt bowls, oil bowls etc., or quasi healing and apotropaic prayers, for those who cannot sleep, against charms, or for the haunted house. There were also manuscript versions of the *Molitfelnic*, and usually they were different, because they were out of the ecclesiastical control, they were composed according to the needs of the copyist or of its user, and sometimes they contained prayers which are not included in the later issued editions” (Timotin 2011, 10). For a wide discussion on *Molitfelnic*, see Cosma, 2019: 50-58, and Cosma, 2017: 171-175.

³¹ Stancu, 2012: 9; Porterfield, 2005: 22; Daunton-Fear, 2009: 15;

³² Coşbuc, 1909: 12; Stahl, 1983: 207; Olteanu, 1997: 6; Worobec, 2001: 64; Pócs, 2004: 175; Lebrun, 1995: 12; Tătăran, 2016: 122.

³³ Worobec, 2001: 70.

Virgin Mary (38) and the Prayers for the one who cannot sleep (34). Within the category of Akathists, especially in the years beginning with the first decade of twentieth century, the Akathist of Saint Nicholas was the most requested, followed by the Akathist of Saint George. Another important observation concerning the akathists, as you can observe from the table, is that the number of requests grew considerably starting from 1900.

Table 1

Year	The Prayers of Great Basil	Liturgy*	Psalter	Paraclis/Oratory	Undoing of malediction and charms	Prayer for reconciliation enmity	Prayer for the one who cannot sleep	Prayer for any kind of helplessness	Prayer for the one who cannot die	The Number of Virgin Mary	The Belt of Virgin Mary	Akathist Hymn**	Prayers and Rites to course an enemy and/or to discover a thief	Uncion	Others	Total
1886						1										1
1887	5			1						1						7
1891	13	3	3	7	1	0	2	1	0	0		2	0	0	1	33
1892	33	7	0	9	3	0	2	0	3	1	1	1	0	1	2	64
1893	45	8	8	7	4	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	1	0	5	82
1894	50	3	6	6	1	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	1	0	6	77
1895	49	1	7	9	1	2	3	2	3	0	0	0	2	2	10	93
1896	53	6	7	7	5	0	1	0	4	1	1	1	3	2	10	101
1897	37	6	4	6	2	2	4	3	0	3	0	2	5	0	6	80
1898	42	2	1	6	3	0	3	0	3	2	0	0	2	1	7	72

1899	49	5	1	5	2	5	1	0	3	1	0	1	0	4	8	85
1900	43	3	3	9	2	2	1		2	5		11	2		1	84
1901	36			8	1	1	1			6		14	1	4	6	78
1902	18		3	6	2	1		1			3	9		4	3	50
1903	14		2	4	3	2					2	7	1	1	2	33
1904	71	1	5	13	8	1	3	1	2	4	1	25		2	1	138
1905	60			6	2		2			1	1	7		1	2	82
1906	53	5	2	3	3		2	1		6	2	30		1	2	110
1907	50	4	1	5	7	3	3	2	1	1	2	28		2	4	113
1908	55	2	1	4	12	7	3	2		2	2	29	2	2	2	125
1909	52	1		4	4	2	3	2		2	1	26	2	1	3	103
Total	828	57	54	125	66	29	34	17	23	38	18	193	22	28	81	1611

* It includes two categories of requests regarding the Liturgy: 1. the performance of a Liturgy for those who request. 2. to be mentioned during Liturgy.

** The most requested Akathists, by the number of requests, were the Akathist of Saint Nicholas, the Akathist of Saint John the Baptizer, the Akathist of Saint George, the Akathist of Santa Barbara, the Akathist of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, and the Akathist of the Holy Archangels.

A special category of requests is that of prayers and rites to curse an enemy and/or to discover a thief. There are 22 requests for such services, but in many

cases, believers asked for the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great or the Akhatist of Saint Nicholas in order to discover thieves or persons guilty of homicide or other crimes, as we can see from the following examples: “On 15th of December 1904, Theodor Bunea Căpâlna, did not live well with his wife Ona Buneathe Akhatist of Saint Nicholas and a prayer to find out who hurt him.”³⁴ “On 19th of September 1904, Anica Burnete, employed at the confectionery, lost a golden ring and a pair of scissors. To discover the thief. MV (The Prayers of Saint Basil the Great)”³⁵ “On 30th of June 1904, Rosdasiu Danca and Rosdasiu Petre from Ciugudul de Sus asked for the Akhatist of Saint Nicholas in order to discover his son’s killers. 3 orphan children and a widow. Both are gypsy (Roma).”³⁶

From the second table we can observe which are the most common problems mentioned by the believers when they are requesting the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great or other prayers and rituals. Beyond the 645 notations, which do not mention a cause for the request, the category of Health issues and physical disabilities are providing the highest number of requests (180), followed by the category of Domestic life, alcohol, violence and social conflicts (108), insomnia, bad dreams, hallucinations and trembles (60), and then the category of Demonic possession/Charms and maledictions (33). Gathered together, the category of Health issues and physical disabilities, with Mental disorder (29) and Insomnia, bad dreams, hallucinations and trembles, there are 269 requests that deal with medical issues. This fact highlights the importance of the thaumaturgical function attributed to the priest, as well as the services and prayers performed by him, even if at the beginning of the twentieth century modern medicine and the public medical system made significant progress compared to previous eras, becoming more accessible to the population. The doctor and midwives are becoming more and more familiar, especially in urban areas, providing the population with access to specialized medical care.³⁷ The recourse to the priest for medical care has to do both with the limited access to specialized doctors for a large part of the rural population, and with the resilience of a worldview that understood healing and diseases as part of a system based on amalgamation of “many different systems of thought”, mixing religion and witchcraft, pagan and Christian, and learned and popular notions.³⁸ On the other hand, the notations also shows cases in which people use both types of medical services, as can be seen from these two examples: “Nov. 2nd, 1903, for Niculiță from Cricău, who has a severe headache and spent a lot on doctors from Alba Iulia and Teiuș, to be done the Prayer of Saint Basil the Great and an Undoing of Charms and Maledictions”³⁹ “Nov, 16th, 1903 Sinefta

³⁴ Ms VIII/102, II, 19.

³⁵ Ms VIII/102, II, 17.

³⁶ Ms VIII/102, II, 14.

³⁷ Bogătean, 2013.

³⁸ Bever, 2008: 274.

³⁹ Ms VIII/102, II, 1.

Rusu married to Simu from Monor, 52 years old, mother without kids, has a swelling on her chest, which the doctor could not cure. She asked for the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great and the Belt of the Virgin Mary.”⁴⁰

Father Domșa’s cultural horizon intersects the two medical cultures, both as a patient, attending doctors for various medical problems, and as a healer, as evidenced by the diagnoses he makes to some of his “patients”. In his notations, he alternates or combines modern medical language with peasant magical-religious medical language, terms such as *călcătură* (tread),⁴¹ *lovit de vânt* (hit by the wind),⁴² *agâmbă* (dizzy) or *smintit* (crazy) sharing the same pages with terms such as “epilepsy” or “menstruation”.

In approximately twenty years there were only 4 cases which involve the performance of the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great for demonic possession explicitly mentioned, along with other 4 cases which requested the “Prayers for those bewildered and oppressed by Unclean Spirits” and one case when a Psalter is asked “for Mihailă, who is haunted by bad spirits.” The Prayers of Saint Basil the Great are twice requested also against charms, “for Gligoru Onica, the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great twice. He is 60 years old and is from Sâncel. His daughter did some charms upon him,” and “for the young Ioan Irimie, twenty years old, from Panade, who was charmed again.”

Table 2

Year	1886	1887	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	Total
No specification		5	7	27	37	43	36	34	18	18	20	25	32	3	19	57	24	70	73	50	47	645
Domestic life, alcohol & violence, social conflicts	1		1	1	2			4	5	3	1	5	9	3	5	18	5	5	8	16	16	108
Insomnia /bad dreams, hallucinations, trembles			2	2	2	1	3	3	3	4	8	3	6	1	1	7	2	2	4	3	3	60
Mental disorder		2		1		1	3			2	2	1	2	2	2	5		3	2	1		29

⁴⁰ Ms VIII/102, II, 2.

⁴¹ Sick of *călcătură* means epileptic, according to Bob, 1821: 121.

⁴² “The winds spread the disease around the world, many people hit by the wind remain with bone disease all their lives” according to Gherman, 2002: 105.

Health issues and physical disabilities		2	3	1	4	5	8	11	10	12	17	8	24	3	5	27	3	12	7	12	6	180
Annoyances, losses				1								1	4		1	6	1	9	1	4	2	32
Demonic possession/- Charms and maledictions								1	1		1		1	1	3	8		3	5	5	1	33

Besides the requests to solve domestic problems such as violent husbands and inter-generational tensions, there are some cases when the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great are requested to solve problems caused by love affairs: “Marisca from Asimpu asks for the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great to be performed upon her husband János and A. Zsusza from Aiud, with whom he is living in Hopârța.”⁴³ “On 10th of May 1900, Michaila Vintila, 30 years old, has a relationship with Maria Rotariu, who has 3 kids and is separated from her husband, because he also started an illicit relationship with another woman. The Prayers of Saint Basil the Great to be performed in order to separate them, because Michaila’s father has been sick for 13 years, laying in bed, and the household is pledged to Maria, his custodian, for 200 f.”⁴⁴

If such cases could be connected to the idea that the issues were provoked by the devil or by charms, which justify the request of such prayers, there were cases when the priest described rituals that could be labeled as “black magic” or harmful magic, as we can see in this example: “On the 4th of April 1897, Floare Moldovanu from Făgărașiu brought 4 candles tied with black in their middle, because Șandor George left her pregnant but now is getting married with another woman in Alba Iulia.”⁴⁵

There were also a few situations when church services were perverted into harmful magic, as in these two cases: “Johan Fleps from Bălcaciu, to be cursed due to his many sins. A Liturgy.” and “Upon Ștefan C., Ceterașiu Marișca, Mailatu Vuia, Pozsonyi Fira and Pozsonyi Lina, to be cursed through reading the Psalter.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Ms VIII/102, I, 123.

⁴⁴ Ms VIII/102, I, 135.

⁴⁵ Ms VIII/102, I, 121.

⁴⁶ Ms. VIII/102, I, 101.

Such practices, as I have discussed at length in the paper *Curses, Incantations and the Undoing of Spells: The Romanian Priest as Enchanter (Transylvania, 19th Century)*, emphasize the ambiguity of the sacred, and illustrates the power ascribed to the priest, to bless or to curse, to heal or bring down diseases and misfortune. The priest actively participates in the popular witchcraft system; he can steer away, or bring about, ill fate.⁴⁷ Paying the priest to read the Psalter could be used as a mean of punishing rivals or enemies, as we see in the fragment presented above, or in the case of Sava Oniga from Geoagiu de Sus, who, on the 3rd of November 1896, requested a Psalter on Antoniu and Nicolae, because they brought her to trial.⁴⁸ In these cases, priests act more as an enchanter and the rituals and prayers performed by him are closer to the category of witchcraft, than religion, as described by the Christian doctrine and the Church normative discourse.

CONCLUSIONS

Feared due to their reputation as the strongest weapon in fighting demons and unclean spirits, the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great were requested by the believers or recommended by the priest for a wide range of issues, such as health issues, insomnia, mental illness, charms, or domestic violence, because it was perceived as a strong “medicine”, a panacea for physical, psychological, spiritual and social issues. The same disease or issue could be also treated with different prayers or services, and not just because people were asking different prayers, but also because in many situations when the believer asked the priest to read a prayer/to perform a service that the priest considered to be adequate for the issue, he did not recommend the same prayer. Usually, he recommended the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great, as if it were his specialty, as a member of the order of Saint Basil the Great. Even if according to the Eastern tradition all priests were entitled to perform exorcism, the monks and old priests were usually those who accepted to engage in this ritual in order to expel demons, due to the belief that such an action required experience and involved the risk of becoming the target for the demons expelled from those previously possessed by them. But, as we noticed from his notations, the Prayers of Saint Basil the Great were not read just in cases of demonic possession.

Father Domșa did not write anything about the magical/illicit/malefic aspect of some requests, and there is only one case in his notations when he mentions a refusal to perform the prayers, without any explanation. The fact that people from far cities and villages (Oradia Mare, Deva, Alba Iulia, Făgăraș, Bergin etc.), of different confessions and nationalities, travelled to Blaj in order to ask for Father Domșa’s services, allows us to conclude that he

⁴⁷ Pócs, 2004: 174.

⁴⁸ Ms. VIII/102, I 111.

was well known for his activity. His activity and popularity reflect the central role played by the priests and church services in the field of magic and witchcraft as part of the peasant medical culture.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ This article was realized in a grant of the Ministry of Education and Research, UEFISCDI PN-II-P1.1-TE-2016-0067, contract no. 135/2018, under the title *Iconography of Witchcraft, an Anthropological Approach: Cinema, Theatre, Visual Arts*, project manager Ioan Pop-Curșeu.

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