

# PILGRIMAGES IN TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** In 2020, religious celebrations in Romania were greatly affected by restrictions meant to control the COVID-19 pandemic. Easter, the highlight of the Orthodox Christian ritual year, was celebrated in empty churches during the spring lockdown. Participation in religious activities was later progressively permitted. During autumn, pilgrimages were allowed, but only in compliance with strict regulations. This article focuses on the restrictions imposed by public authorities, the solutions found by church representatives, and the faithful's reaction to the new situation. The Orthodox liturgical year begins in Romania on the 1st of September, marked by a series of pilgrimages, occasioned by feasts for several saints whose relics are venerated in local churches. Some of them, centuries old, attract thousands of people. The celebrations last several days, during which people wait patiently, for hours, to touch the holy relics. In 2020, governmental measures limited participation to local residents, without previous consultation with the church authorities. This caused great discontent. Still, the number of pilgrims was not substantially less than in previous years, in large part due to the direct negotiations between the faithful and the local law forces.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, Orthodox liturgical year, Orthodox pilgrimage, relics, religion, Saint Demetrius, Saint Nektarios, Saint Paraskeva

## INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the Orthodox liturgical year (1st of September) is marked in Romania by a series of pilgrimages, occasioned by the feasts of several saints whose relics are preserved and venerated in local churches. The oldest and largest pilgrimage takes place in Iași and is dedicated to Saint Paraskeva (Rom. *Sfânta Cuvioasa Parascheva de la Iași*<sup>1</sup>), celebrated on the 14th of October. The

saint, venerated throughout the Balkans, is a tenth-century saint, originating from Thrace.<sup>2</sup> Her relics arrived in Iași, the capital of the historical Romanian province of Moldavia, in 1641. Since then, she has been the protector of the province.

This annual pilgrimage is followed, less than two weeks later, by another one, in Bucharest, dedicated to Saint Demetrius the New (Rom. *Sfântul Cuvios Dimitrie cel Nou*). Celebrated on the 27th of October, Saint Demetrius the New is a thirteenth-century saint, whose relics were brought from across the Danube, in Bulgaria, in 1774. The saint is the protector of Bucharest, capital city of Romania.

These two major historical pilgrimages are followed by a relatively new one, occasioned by the celebration of Saint Nektarios of Aegina (Rom. *Sfântul Ierarh Nectarie de la Eghina*), on the 9th of November. Saint Nektarios is a recent Greek saint, canonized in 1961. In 2002, a piece of his relics was brought to Bucharest, starting one of the fastest growing cults in Romania since the fall of communism. While both Paraskeva's and Demetrius' relics contain most body parts, the relic of Saint Nektarios consists of only a small piece of bone. The size of the relics, however, seems to have no influence on pilgrims' veneration.

Before the end of the calendric year, two more pilgrimages take place in Bucharest: one is dedicated to Saint Menas (Rom. *Sfântul Mare Mucenic Mina*, the 11th of November), and the other to Saint Nicholas (Rom. *Sfântul Ierarh Nicolae*, the 6th of December).

In 2020, the exceptional measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic had a heavy impact on the liturgical year. The restrictions varied. The most restraining and sudden ones were enforced during lockdown, in early spring, when people were not allowed to celebrate Easter in church. By autumn, restrictions were considerably relaxed, but still had an impact on the annual pilgrimages. This article describes the changes that occurred in the local pilgrimages during the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania. A particular focus will be given to restrictions imposed by state and local authorities, the response of religious authorities as well as the public reaction to the newly created situation. Although all pilgrimages marking the beginning of the liturgical year are interesting, having their own particularity, for the purpose of this article only changes in the first three mentioned pilgrimages will be developed. The first two pilgrimages with centuries-long history served as experimental grounds for the measures taken by political authorities. The conflicts and the discontent registered among the clergy and the population established new grounds for dialogue between state and church authorities, which later led to a suitable compromise. After the first experiences, the pilgrimage to Saint Nektarios was an example of success, illustrating the fact that when there is will, solutions can be found. The evolution of

the measures, and the constant trial and error, as well as negotiations between the three parties involved (State, Church, and the faithful) are at the centre of this article. The last two pilgrimages (to Saint Menas and Saint Nicholas) are not addressed. By the time they took place, the discord had been resolved and the situation entered into a pandemic-routine. The new normal had been assimilated and accepted by the population, the clergy knew how to anticipate and avoid potential problems, while law enforcement officers were more prone to bend the rules, as long as public order was maintained.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) research methodology, combined with a variety of media sources. The pilgrimage to Saint Paraskeva, in Iași, was analysed by using the data collected via TV, radio, and internet sources (articles, press releases, laws and regulations, photographs, videos, etc.). Data on the pilgrimages to Saint Demetrius the New and Saint Nektarios were gathered by ethnological observation, supplemented by media sources.

The author has conducted fieldwork on these two pilgrimages since 2016 and has made systematic estimations of the pilgrims in attendance. Some of these data were used for comparison with the attendance data collected in 2020, during the pandemic. Due to the restrictions, the author was constrained in the same manner as the pilgrims, requiring a spontaneous adaptation of the methodology previously employed and perfected over the years. European and national surveys provided insight into Romanian religious practices, beliefs, and values, demonstrating the impact of the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE PANDEMIC**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, state and local authorities took various measures to reduce the number of people in public spaces. The intention was to slow the contamination rate and thus avoid overburdening the hospitals. The circulation of people was restricted, and public gatherings were limited. Although churches were never closed, the presence of the faithful was closely regulated: at first, churchgoers were only allowed to attend the services from outside of the edifice; later, the presence of believers at services was completely banned. New measures were announced weekly, depending on the number of

new contaminations. While authorities focused on maintaining “social distancing” – an incorrect term used worldwide, and later replaced, at the recommendation of the World Health Organization, with “physical distancing” (Sarbu 2020) – the Orthodox Church authorities focused on maintaining the “spiritual communion” (Ionițe 2020a) of its members.

Since the early days of the pandemic, the Orthodox Church provided constant guidelines to the clergy and the faithful, anticipating, adapting, and clarifying regulations imposed by the State. One day after the first COVID-19 case was reported in Romania (27th of February 2020), the church authorities gave their first press release (Dumitrașcu 2020a).<sup>3</sup> Concerned by the situation, they advised the faithful, fearing contamination with the new virus, to use their own spoon when receiving Holy Communion and to temporarily avoid kissing icons in the church. These simple recommendations raised an intense debate in the media, reviving the old rift between believers and non-believers, religion and science. The following week, a special prayer, meant to stop the pandemic, was transmitted to all eparchies for daily public reading (Totorcea 2020a). Specific instructions were given to priests to disinfect and aerate indoor spaces, and to avoid crowding (Anghel 2020a). They were also advised to install loudspeakers outside of the edifice, so the faithful could listen to the service taking place inside, without entering; or, if possible, to celebrate religious services outdoors. Many started to build summer altars outdoors. Beginning in March, the Church initiated a series of charitable actions: from donations of sheets, sanitary masks, and medical equipment to hospitals, to laptops and tablets for children with no financial means to connect to the online school system and spiritual counselling.

The first measure taken by the state authorities came much later, on the 17th of March, when it was decreed that people could only attend outdoor church services, and even this in a limited number (Ordonanța militară 2020a). Days later, the first restrictions of movement were imposed by the government. People were allowed to leave their home only under specific conditions and with a travel declaration, which did not include church attendance (Ordonanța militară 2020b; 2020c). After consultation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Chancellery of the Holy Synod formulated a set of guidelines addressing the clergy and the faithful (Dumitrașcu 2020b). Churches remained open, but the services were held in the absence of the public, confined at home. The faithful were advised to maintain contact with the clergy and continue their prayers.

The lockdown in Romania lasted from the 24th of March until the 14th of May. The peak coincided with Orthodox Easter (19th of April), which was celebrated in empty churches by the clergy and in front of the computer or TV screens by the faithful. In a country where 99% of the population celebrate Easter, and 84% attend the Resurrection midnight service in church (IRES

2012), the shockwave was profound. In addition, family reunions were forbidden. Easter preparations (colouring of eggs, cooking and baking traditional foods) and the Easter meal took place within the close family unit. The perturbation of Easter traditions was a heavy burden for Romanians, already stressed by the daily reports of COVID deaths. The Church issued new guidelines, instructing priests how to deal with the unique situation (Dumitrașcu 2020c). Simultaneously, new consultations took place with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ionițe 2020b), resulting in permission for people to go to church for receiving consecrated bread (Rom. *paști*<sup>4</sup>) during the two days preceding Easter.<sup>5</sup> The Ministry also agreed to allow priests and volunteers to distribute the Holy Light after the Resurrection service. Furthermore, public police and other officers subordinate to the Ministry would distribute the light to people in transit. These exceptions were, however, quickly withdrawn, after the Chief of State, President Klaus Iohannis, publicly criticized the agreement. Changes were made, allowing only the clergy and volunteers to distribute consecrated bread and the Holy Light to the faithful (Totorcea 2020b).

In compensation for the lockdown, local religious services as well as those in Jerusalem were broadcast during the entire Holy Week. On Holy Saturday, the Resurrection service from the Holy Sepulchre, followed by the service at the Patriarchal Cathedral in Bucharest, were televised. In his sermon, Patriarch Daniel thanked the priests and volunteers who took the holy light and the consecrated bread to the faithful, allowing them to commune with the Universal Church: “Through the Holy Light we have been, this year once more, in communion,” he said (TRINITAS TV 2020).

During lockdown, miraculous icons and holy relics were driven around regions, cities, towns, and villages in so-called “processions”, though in the absence of people.<sup>6</sup> The cars carrying the precious cargo stopped in front of churches and hospitals, while prayers for the cessation of the pandemic were read.

In early May, the National Institute for Public Health issued a list of recommendations for the post-lockdown period. Among others, people were advised to avoid kissing the icons, to avoid taking Communion in any other way than from a single-use utensil, and to avoid taking part in pilgrimages. Within hours, the Church replied that the matter of Communion belongs exclusively to the Church (Anghel 2020b). Summoned to debate it, on the 11th of May, the Holy Synod rejected replacing the Communion chalice with single-use spoons or cups and chose instead to cancel the administration of the collective Communion, until the 1st of June (Mihăescu 2020). Announcing the decision, the spokesman for the Patriarchate invoked similarities with the plague in 1829, when the collective Communion was not administered for two months (Popescu 2020a). The same day, the Patriarch addressed the faithful with a spiritual message

in which he encouraged them not to lose faith and to stay connected with God and the Church through continuous prayer (Dumitraşcu 2020d).

Prior to the end of the lockdown, on the 14th of May, the Romanian Patriarchate issued detailed instructions meant to prepare priests and the faithful to return to church (Anghel 2020c). Among others, the faithful were asked to maintain proper physical distancing inside and outside of the church, to wear sanitary masks, and to avoid touching and kissing icons, relics as well as the hand of priests. For more safety, the services were to be held outside of the church.

On the 15th of May, the lockdown in Romania ended (Legea 2020). People were allowed to leave their homes and travel under specific circumstances. On the 1st of June, all travel restrictions, national and international, were raised (Hotărârea 2020a). Public transportation was reinstated. A few days later, on the 5th of June, Basilica Travel, the travel agency of the Romanian Patriarchate, resumed its pilgrimages (Ionişte 2020c).

The churches were reopened to the public (in- and outdoors) on the 16th of June. Maintaining physical distance and masks were required (Hotărârea 2020e). Stealing the start, the first public liturgies were held outdoors on Sunday, the 15th of June. Once again, the Patriarchate issued new instructions, reinforcing the main sanitary requirements: physical distancing, aeration of the church, and disinfection of the liturgical objects after each service (Dumitraşcu 2020e). Taking advantage of the summer, many priests preferred to continue the services outdoors. The grounds around churchyards were marked with white paint, indicating where people were to stand, in such a way as to keep a safe physical distance between each other.

## **PILGRIMAGES IN ROMANIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

By the autumn of 2020, the COVID-19 restrictions were considerably relaxed, and the faithful were looking forward to visiting their beloved saints. The Church, which by now had become accustomed to the sanitary requirements, started preparations for the annual pilgrimages.

### **Saint Paraskeva, Iaşi, 14th of October**

In September, a new liturgical year started, and the Metropolitanate of Iaşi prepared to receive hundreds of thousands of pilgrims expected to attend the

feast of Saint Paraskeva. Precautions were taken to comply with the safety regulations. The programme was announced three weeks before the event (Malache 2020; Arhiepiscopia Iaşilor 2020). Contrary to previous years, no relics were invited from abroad.<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid crowds, the traditional procession called the Path of the Saints was to be carried out in the absence of the public. As with previous processions held during and after the lockdown, relics were to be driven around the city in an open car, before being laid in the canopy prepared outside of the Metropolitan Cathedral. The pilgrimage was planned to take place between the 8th and 15th of October. Nearly twice as many days were allocated for the celebration; compared to the average of past years, a reasonable decision, considering the required sanitary measures. All precautions were taken: physical distancing between pilgrims was to be maintained as they were directed through a one-way corridor; sanitizing dispensers and mats were to be placed along the way; free masks were to be distributed; the gifts for the pilgrims were to be pre-packed (small icons, prayer booklets, and a bottle of holy water). However, an unexpected announcement by local authorities radically changed these plans. On the 5th of October 2020, three days before the celebration, the National Committee of Emergency Situations announced that only local residents would be allowed to attend religious feasts (Hotărârea 2020c). The next morning, the Iaşi County Committee of Emergency Situations issued detailed measures for Saint Paraskeva's celebration: the area around the Metropolitan Cathedral was to be enclosed and only pilgrims residing in Iaşi County were to be allowed to enter (identity cards were required). In addition, the pilgrims were not allowed to touch the relics (Hotărârea 2020b). The announcements caused a shock wave. Although free circulation was permitted, and pilgrims could travel to Iaşi, they were not allowed to take part in the celebration. After all the efforts to adapt to the sanitary recommendations since the beginning of the pandemic, the Church felt betrayed.

Disbelief and incomprehension were followed by resentment and anger. The press release of the Iaşi Archbishopric gave expression to the general feelings amongst the clergy (Totorcea 2020c). Reminded of the fact that the pilgrimage had been held since 1641, the text highlighted its role during difficult times, such as the pandemic:

*The duty of the Church is to take care of the spiritual health of its faithful in all times, but especially in times like these, when more and more forms of inner unrest, despair, fear and confusion are rising. Taking part in Saint Paraskeva's feast is for many an opportunity to strengthen themselves, in times of great difficulties. (Totorcea 2020c)*

The statement continued pointing out that given the experience of the past few months, when all restrictions had been respected, the authorities should have trusted the faithful to demonstrate the same responsible behaviour during the pilgrimage, as they had shown during the recent political elections:<sup>8</sup>

*It is necessary for everybody to understand that the freedom to manifest one's religious convictions freely and unhindered is one of the fundamental liberties of individuals. ... It is difficult to ignore the grief of those who realize they are free to travel to Iași for any other reason but to attend the pilgrimage occasioned by the feast of Saint Paraskeva. (Totorcea 2020c)*

In the end, the Archbishopric asked the forgiveness of the pilgrims who could not be present during the celebration, due to the restrictions.

A few days later, the Romanian Patriarchate released a statement that endorsed the Archbishopric of Iași, demanding renegotiation of the new restrictions. The text pointed out that while the previous rules referred to all the faithful, the latest measure, denying access to some pilgrims, is “a disproportionate and discriminatory measure, taken without prior consultation with the Romanian Orthodox Church”. The thorough preparations of the two forthcoming pilgrimages (Saint Paraskeva and Saint Demetrius) and the close cooperation with the local authorities were, continued the message, “an exercise of responsible health protection and the manifestation of the religious freedom of an eminently religious nation” (Dumitrașcu 2020f). The call of the Church remained without an answer, at least not an official one.

By the time the new interdictions were announced, and despite the effort of the local prefect to stop the influx of pilgrims to Iași (Europa Liberă România 2020), the first pilgrims had already arrived. Since the first days of October, people patiently waited to enter the Metropolitan Cathedral and pray at the saint's relics. The line was considerably shorter (Fig. 1) than in previous years (Fig. 2), when it frequently exceeded three kilometres. Although already enacted, the proof of residency was not enforced until later. As for the interdiction to touch the relics, most pilgrims did not comply (Batcu 2020; Hopulele 2020). Because of the low flow of people, the relics remained inside the cathedral until the 14th of October.

In preparation for the feast and according to the law limiting the number of participants in public events, 500 spaced chairs were positioned on the pedestrian street near the Metropolitan Cathedral for the use of the pilgrims. Two hundred and fifty more chairs were placed in other central areas of the city, where pilgrims could watch and listen to the religious service transmitted live, on large screens (Iancu 2020).



No dignitaries from abroad or from other regions of the country were invited to the religious service, which was entirely served by the local hierarchs.



**Figure 1.** Saint Paraskeva pilgrimage in Iași, Metropolitan Cathedral, 2020. Photograph by Ziarul de Iași. Source: <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-cultura-24352933-pozazilei-cum-arata-distantarea-fizica-slujba-cuvioasei-sfanta-parascheva.htm>.



**Figure 2.** Saint Paraskeva pilgrimage in Iași, Metropolitan Cathedral, 2019. Photograph by Liviu Chirica (Inquam Photos). Source: <https://inquam-photos.com/photos/iasi-sfanta-parascheva-pelerinaj-14-oct-2019-149284>.

Early on the morning of the 14th of October, the relics were carried in a brief procession around the Metropolitan Cathedral, after which they were laid in the outdoor canopy prepared for the occasion (Popa 2020). Protests had started the previous evening, when pilgrims from outside of Iași County complained about the local police who were checking their identity cards and stopping them from entering the church to pray at the relics. The protests resumed the next day, when the local metropolitan mentioned the collective Holy Communion would not be administered as usual, due to the pandemic. The turbulences continued throughout the service, to the desolation of the clergy. The media reported the protesters had come prepared. They were not wearing masks, as the law required, and some of them had placards, which read: “You are stealing our saints! You are stealing our liberty!!!” (Pavaluca 2020). Despite some violent acts, no one was arrested; only a few warnings were issued. The protesters were supported by Diana Șoșoacă, a nationalistic politician present at the pilgrimage, known as an anti-mask activist, who later, in December 2020, became a Senator of Iași and was involved in many other anti-restrictions protests, including anti-vaccination riots<sup>9</sup> (Cristian 2020). Under the pressure of the masses, the local police finally compromised, allowing free access to the relics, in disregard of existing regulations. On available recordings, many pilgrims were not wearing masks; most touched the relics, some even kissed them (Digi24 2020). The relics were carried inside the Metropolitan Cathedral the same evening (Pacurar 2020).

### **Saint Demetrius the New, Bucharest, 27th of October**

In the second half of October, the number of new COVID-19 cases continued to rise. Worried about public safety, Prime Minister Ludovic Orban advised against the organization of the Saint Demetrius pilgrimage in Bucharest (Peia 2020). His opinion infuriated the Patriarchate, who, through the voice of its spokesman, accused him of “arrogance, decisional autarchy and moral solipsism” (Popescu 2020b), in other words, superiority, authoritarianism, and selfishness. The Church deplored the distrust of the faithful and of the Church, which was evident at the highest political level, as well as the disregard of the importance of religion in the Romanian society. The Patriarchate denounced “the lack of inter-institutional dialogue” (ibid.) in such an important decision affecting a fundamental individual freedom, which is religious freedom. The immediate social reality is complex, warned the spokesman, which cannot be changed without dialogue and regardless of the consequences.

Against the public discontent of the prime minister but with the approval of local authorities (Marina 2020), on the 22nd of October, the Patriarchate announced the programme of events, followed by a detailed set of restrictions and precautionary measures that were to be taken (Dumitraşcu 2020g). After the experience in Iaşi, the local church officials took care to adjust their plans.

The Saint Demetrius pilgrimage lasted three days, from the 25th to the 27th of October, merely half the time allotted in previous years. It began on Sunday and continued with the feast of the other Greek Demetrius, the saint of Thessaloniki,<sup>10</sup> followed by the feast of Saint Demetrius the New. As in Iaşi, the traditional procession, the Path of the Saints, was cancelled. Instead of being carried around the Patriarchal Hill, as in previous years, the relics were only carried out of the Patriarchal Cathedral to the outdoor pavilion, early on Sunday, the 25th of October (Florescu 2020). No foreign relics were invited. However, several local relics were displayed next to Saint Demetrius': the relics of Saints Emperor Constantine and Empress Helena and those of Saint Nektarios (both hosted by the Patriarchal Cathedral, as Saint Demetrius'), as well as the relics of Saint Cyprian, the protector of children, brought over from a local church.<sup>11</sup> The clergy from the local archbishopric covered all the religious services.

During the pilgrimage, new restrictions were announced by the government: starting with the 26th of October, masks, previously only required in closed public spaces or during large public gatherings, were now mandated in all public spaces, opened or closed (Andronie 2020). The clergy, and even Patriarch Daniel, complied with the rules and wore masks.

In order to ensure the required physical distance between people, the number of the faithful allowed to take part in the outdoor religious services was limited to 200. To make sure the number was respected, taking as an example the pilgrimage in Iaşi, 200 chairs were placed in front of the summer altar. The measure was unprecedented, as in general, people stand during the religious service. By consequence, many attendees chose to stand next to the chair, on which they had put their bags.

Already on the 24th of October, the local police blocked access to the two front alleys leading to the cathedral. Further, all nearby access was forbidden, creating discontent, especially amongst people working or residing in the area. The people who wanted to attend the services, during the three days of the pilgrimage, were allowed to pass early in the morning, after their identity card had been checked. Only residents of Bucharest were allowed access. Once the maximum number of people was reached, the barrier was closed and no one was allowed to pass. There were no exceptions; even the employees of the Patriarchate had a difficult time getting through. Access in the afternoons and evenings was denied, which created confusion amongst the faithful, especially

the first day. In fact, during the pilgrimage, not all the faithful can endure the hours-long wait in the line leading to the relics. Many only attend the services, light a candle, leave a written prayer note, get some blessed flowers, or ask someone to touch an object they have with them against the relics. This was almost impossible in 2020, when access was restricted. These measures also affected the author's annual estimation of pilgrims. Unable to get close to the relics in the second part of the day, the estimation methodology had to be adapted. Instead of counting people passing by the relics, the author counted people exiting the back gate of the Patriarchate. However, observing that, despite the one-way circuit regulations, many people preferred to exit through the front instead, an additional counting was made there. Considering the two consecutive counts, to which were added the foggy glasses due to wearing a mask, the imposed distance, the large number of volunteers (which were not to be included in the count), and the constant spotlights of the ambulance and the police cars, the counting conditions in 2020 were particularly difficult.

People attending the religious service (Fig. 3) wore protection masks (more or less correctly) or had their faces covered with scarves. They all received a paper bag with a small icon, a prayer book, two consecrated breads (Rom. *anafură*), and a bottle of holy water. The *pomană*, the charity food, traditionally offered to pilgrims at the end of the service, was not given in 2020.



**Figure 3.** People taking part in the religious service during the feast of Saint Demetrius the New, Romanian Patriarchate, Bucharest, 27 October 2020. Photograph by Irina Stahl. Personal archive.

The line of pilgrims was the only continuous stream of people allowed up the Patriarchate's Hill. At the bottom of the hill, the local police and members of the clergy checked identity cards of the pilgrims waiting in line and provided them with various information. Although the identity check existed, one can wonder how the thorough residence-only rule was enforced, as no pilgrim was sent out of the line during the author's fieldwork observation. In the fenced corridor allocated for them, people waited in small groups or at a distance, one behind the other. The police were present along the entire line, directing, spacing out people and imposing the rhythm of the advancement to the relics.

Due to the distance between people, in 2020 the line was longer than ever.<sup>12</sup> At 14:00, on the 27th of October 2020, it reached 1.55 km in length,<sup>13</sup> three times longer than in the previous year. However, the waiting time was five times shorter than in 2019: only a little over one hour, instead of over six hours. The following table (Table 1) compares the author's fieldwork findings in 2019 and 2020.

*Table 1. Comparative parameters of the line of pilgrims waiting to reach the relics during the Saint Demetrius pilgrimage in 2019 and 2020 (based on the author's fieldwork research)*

Parameters of the line	2019	2020
Max. line length	550 m	1.55 km
Waiting time	370 min average	65 min average
Exposure of the relics	90 h (5 days: 25th to 29th of October)	60 h (3 days: 25th to 27th of October)
People	77,100	60,200
Average per hour	857 people/h	1,003 people/h

As compared to 2019, the exposure time of the relics diminished in 2020. Instead of five days, the celebration was shortened to three days. However, the total number of people in 2019 and 2020 is comparable: a total of 77,100 pilgrims, with an average of 857 pilgrims per hour, passed by the relics in 2019, and a total of 60,200 pilgrims, with an average of 1,003 pilgrims per hour, in 2020. The explanation of these differences relies on the speed at which people were moving in the line. The pace was deliberately increased by the police and volunteers, who did not allow people to remain long at the relics (Fig. 4).

In 2020, more volunteers than usual were active during Saint Demetrius pilgrimage. They were particularly careful with the sanitary measures, offering disinfectant to pilgrims entering the pavilion and disinfecting the glass covering the relics after each person. Others assisted the faithful, carrying

various objects they were given back and forth, touching them to the relics before returning them to their owners.

During pilgrimages, people bring flowers<sup>14</sup> to be touched against the relics and be blessed by the saint. Many pilgrims bring extra flowers for the blessing and take away only what they need, leaving the extras to be given to other pilgrims. Contrary to previous years, in 2020, pilgrims came with fewer flowers, and those they had with them, they kept for themselves. The number of objects brought to be touched against the relics was also diminished.



**Figure 4.** Pilgrims touching the relics during the feast of Saint Demetrius the New, Romanian Patriarchate, Bucharest, 27 October 2020. Photograph by Irina Stahl. Personal archive.

In his public sermon, on the 27th of October, Patriarch Daniel reminded people of several historical occasions in which Saint Demetrius the New had protected his adoptive city and its inhabitants: in 1814, during the plague, in 1827, during a severe drought, and in 1831, during the cholera epidemic. In all these cases, the calamity stopped once the relics were carried in procession around the city. The saint has accomplished many miracles, and people honoured him even during the difficult times of communism – the Patriarch continued – when the Church

endured many persecutions. A particular moment took place in autumn 1989, when, for the first time in history, the communist authorities banned the Saint Demetrius celebration at the Patriarchate, arguing that an important political meeting had to take place in the building of the Great National Assembly, next to the cathedral. The Patriarch at the time had to transfer the relics to a nearby church, where the celebration took place, in more humble conditions. Patriarch Daniel concluded:

*This humiliation of the Saint Pious Demetrius the New was soon rewarded, in the sense that [only] a couple of months later, the communist regime fell ... Through this, we see that God does not allow to be mocked ... He is long-tolerant, but he is also fair. (Facebook Basilica.ro 2020)*

In the end, the Patriarch thanked all pilgrims for their patience and wisdom proven during the pilgrimage, showing great discipline and order. He also expressed his regrets that only inhabitants of Bucharest could be present, but he assured everyone that he would pray for all of those who had the intention to come, and that he would ask God to allow all to celebrate Saint Demetrius the New in the years to come.

The words of the Patriarch were reinterpreted by the media as a warning to politicians, a direct reference to the ongoing elections. Just before the Saint Paraskeva pilgrimage, the local elections had confirmed the leading position of the centre-right National Liberal Party in power. However, the victory was at the limit, with a small difference from the centre-left Socio-Democratic Party in opposition. During the parliamentary elections, which took place on the 6th of December 2020, the liberals were defeated by the socio-democrats, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Ludovic Orban (who had opposed the Saint Demetrius pilgrimage). Moreover, a new extreme right party, the Alliance for the Unification of Romanians, entered the political scene (Diana Şoşoacă, who had led the protest in Iaşi, was one of its prominent members). In December, the media recalled the speech given by the Patriarch and interpreted it *post-factum* as a curse thrown upon the resigning prime minister (Oprea 2020; Zavastin 2020).

### **Saint Nektarios, Bucharest, 9th of November**

Contrary to the historical saints, such as Saint Demetrius the New and Saint Paraskeva, venerated by locals for centuries, Saint Nektarios is a new addition to the Romanian religious culture. Due to many factors (Stahl 2022), mainly

because he is known as a saint thaumaturge (especially as a healer of cancer), and a miracle-worker, the Greek saint has quickly been adopted by Romanians. This is demonstrated by the progressive increase in the number of pilgrims, present each year, on the 9th of November, at Radu Vodă Monastery<sup>15</sup> in Bucharest, where the saint's relics first arrived. The pilgrimage to Saint Nektarios has recently become the second largest pilgrimage in Bucharest, after the one to Saint Demetrius, the protector of the city.

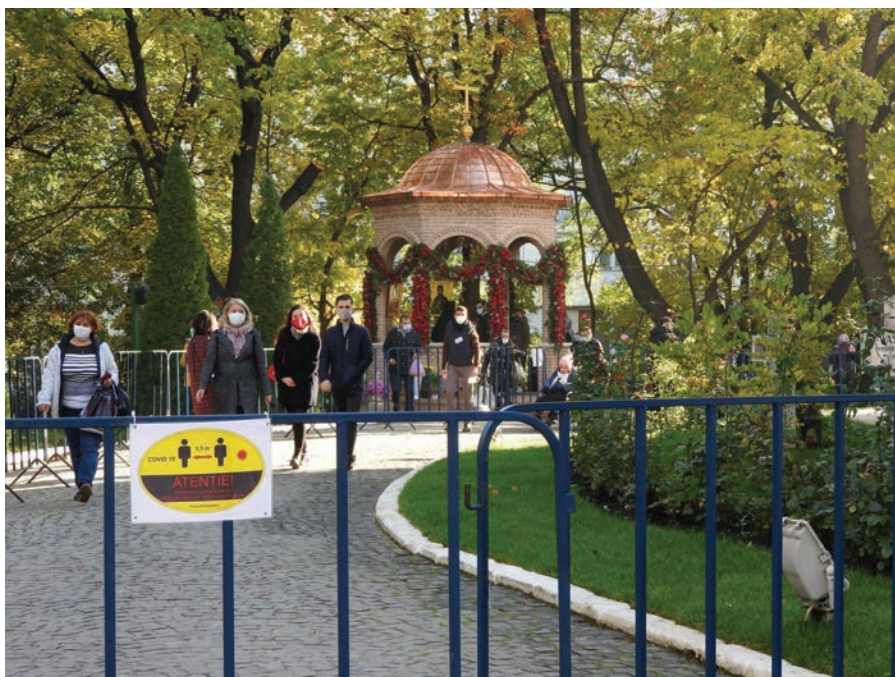
The COVID-19 pandemic has been connected to Saint Nektarios in the most peculiar way. By a coincidence, which many could call of divine origin, the first year of the pandemic, 2020, concurred with the one hundred-years' anniversary of the saint's death (1920), while the second year, 2021, with the sixty-years' anniversary of the saint's canonization (1961). On the occasion of the centennial, the Greek Orthodox Church declared 2020 the Homage Year of Saint Nektarios from Aegina. The decision was made in February 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the first year of the pandemic was placed under the protection of the healing saint.

The relics of Saint Nektarios, displayed during Saint Demetrius pilgrimage, were, in 2020, again offered for veneration, this time during his own celebration, at Radu Vodă Monastery. As in the case of the first two pilgrimages of the liturgical year, the pilgrimage occasioned by the celebration of Saint Nektarios underwent considerable changes in 2020. Due to the increasing number of new contaminations in the weeks prior to the event, Saint Nektarios' feast coincided with the reintroduction of the lockdown, this time only partial, during nighttime, from 23:00 until 05:00 (Hotărârea 2020d). The measure was to take effect on the 9th of November, in the evening. The announcement urged the monastic leadership to advance the celebration by one day. The exceptional programme was announced on the monastery's internet site,<sup>16</sup> on its Facebook page,<sup>17</sup> and through the official religious news agency (Ionițe 2020d). Pilgrims were asked to respect the official sanitary measures (wear a mask and keep a safe distance from one another). Although still effective, the restriction granting access to Bucharest residents only was never mentioned.

The celebration began on the 7th of November, instead of the 8th, as in previous years. In the morning, the relics were taken out of the church and carried in a brief procession around the edifice, before being placed in the recently finished brick pavilion (Fig. 5) in the churchyard. Situated behind the altar, the new pavilion replaced the mobile canopy in use in previous years. The relics were taken back into the church on the 9th, in the evening, to allow people time to reach their homes before the lockdown. Although a few hours shorter, the length of the celebration remained relatively the same as in the previous year.



In 2020, the local monastic authorities took early and exceptional measures to ensure compliance with the sanitary measures. Favoured by the monastery's unique geographical location (on top of a small hill, surrounded by stone walls, with two gates, one on each side), a one-way fenced circuit was set up for the pilgrims (Fig. 6). The churchyard as well as the sidewalk leading to the monastery was marked with white paint every 1.5 meters. Announcements reminding the pilgrims to wear a mask and to keep the distance were displayed on the walls surrounding the monastery and on fences. Dispensers with disinfectant were located near the pavilion, for people to sanitize their hands before reaching the relics. A large number of volunteers assisted and directed the pilgrims, imposing a quick pace of the crowd (reducing the waiting time to 51 minutes, from an average of 5 hours and 30 minutes in the previous four years). Volunteers also disinfected the relics after each person.



**Figure 5.** *New pavilion for the relics of Saint Nektarios during the celebration, Radu Vodă Monastery, Bucharest, 9 November 2020. Photograph by Irina Stahl. Personal archive.*



**Figure 6.** *The line of the pilgrims waiting to reach the relics, keeping required distance during Saint Nektarios feast, Radu Vodă Monastery, Bucharest, 9 November 2020. Photograph by Irina Stahl. Personal archive.*

With the exception of a brief time, in the morning, when the only access way to the church was through the pilgrim line, the local police did not check people's identity cards and did not limit their access. Most of the time the gates were open, and people were allowed in without restriction. The police were, however, diligent in keeping the required physical distance, and they prompted the people who were not wearing a mask or were wearing it improperly. No concessions were made to the one-way flow of pilgrims; people were only allowed to enter through the front gate and exit through the back gate. After passing by the relics, the faithful were allowed to remain on the church ground, to enter the church or take part in the outdoor liturgy. During the celebration, religious services were held outdoors, at the summer altar (built in the same style as the pavilion carrying the relic). The faithful took part, standing on the white marks painted on the cobblestones, at a safe distance from one another.

During the 2020 Saint Nektarios pilgrimage, the author's yearly fieldwork methodology estimating the number of pilgrims suffered a few, although not substantial, changes. Fearing that the pilgrimage time on the 9th would be cut short or even cancelled, the author decided to make the counts on the 8th,

instead of the 9th of November. As the celebration continued without interruptions, an additional count was made on the 9th and added to the data. As in earlier pilgrimages, the foggy eyeglasses were an impediment, as was the fenced area around the pavilion that kept the author from approaching.

Due to the required physical distancing, the line of pilgrims waiting to reach Saint Nektarios' relics in 2020 was longer than ever before: at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, on the 8th of November, it reached 600 meters. Comparing the data on 2020 with the data on 2019, the same tendency previously observed is visible: while the length of the line increased, the waiting time decreased (compared to 2019, up to four times). The number of people attending the celebration diminished here as well. However, it was higher than in 2016, despite the cold weather (+8°C, daily average) and the restrictions. The number of participating children also decreased, which is easily understood given the pandemic. The only unexpected datum is the number of pilgrims per hour in 2020. While the pace of the line was visibly accelerated in 2020 (especially in the last day), compared to the previous year, the number of people per hour did not increase. The fact can only be explained by the additional time necessary to clean the relics after each pilgrim and could be a proof of the thorough job the volunteers did.

*Table 2. Comparative parameters of the line of pilgrims waiting to reach the relics of the saint during the Saint Nektarios pilgrimage in 2019 and 2020 (based on the author's fieldwork research)*

Parameters of the line	2019	2020
Max. line length	250 m	600 m
Waiting time	288 min average	51 min average
Exposure of the relics	56 h 30 min (3 days: 8th to 10th of November)	53 h 45 min (3 days: 7th to 9th of November)
People	25,200	17,390
Average per hour	446 people/h	324 people/h

As in the earlier two pilgrimages, people brought fewer flowers to Saint Nektarios in 2020 as compared to previous years. Consequently, no flowers were offered to pilgrims passing the relics. The quantity of objects brought to be touched against the relics and thus be blessed by the saint also diminished.

## CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious celebrations in Romania, particularly the pilgrimages from the beginning of the Orthodox liturgical year in 2020, leads to several conclusions regarding the institution of the Church, as well as the role of religion in contemporary Romanian society.

The Romanian Orthodox Church had a strong voice during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Immediately after the first case of the virus was reported in the country, and before the State intervened, the Church proactively took measures to prepare the clergy and the faithful, both spiritually and physically, and protect them from the new threat. When the first governmental restrictions were introduced, the Church clarified the general regulations, adapting them to religious activity. Its communication was continuous, instructive, advising, and encouraging.

In addition to its engagement in protecting and comforting the faithful through its own specific means (prayers, processions, etc.), the Church intensified its social work, helping people cope with their everyday life by providing food, clothing, and educational materials to those in need. It even went as far as to help state institutions (hospitals, care centres, schools) overwhelmed by the new challenges they faced. In this regard, the Church not only increased its own religious activity but also replaced the State in many of its duties. Nevertheless, it received little appreciation from state officials.

The church authorities anticipated that the dialogue between the Church and the State, engaged in during Easter, would continue during the annual pilgrimages, events of great importance for the faithful. The results were, from the Church's perspective, disappointing. The governmental regulations were not negotiated but announced and enforced, without any regard to the way they would affect people. Even more, the measures were inconsistent and contradictory, leading to discontent and frustration both from the Church and the faithful. While political elections were held nationwide without constraint, pilgrimages organized in the same timeframe were restricted. The general feeling was that politicians treated the faithful and the Church with disregard. The incomprehension resided in the incapacity of the political leaders to understand the importance of religious rituals in people's life. While the hierarchs of the Church continuously stressed the healing and protective properties of faith, the importance of religious practices and customs was completely ignored by politicians. The solution finally came from the bottom-up, in the direct negotiations between the faithful and the local police, who finally relented and decided to bend some of the rules. Beginning with the first confrontations in Iași, law forces avoided conflict by turning the other way. During her fieldwork, the author

often witnessed this kind of behaviour, police officers fluctuating between their official duty and their personal feelings, taken over by what has been called “cultural emotions” in cultural theory (Peterson 2006). It is not uncommon, during pilgrimages, to see the police walk young children to the front of the line to touch the relics, hand blessed flowers to elderly women, take their written prayer notes to the relics, or kiss the relics themselves at the end of their work shift. They not only did their duty during pilgrimages; they also became active participants. The same behaviours were observed in paramedics.

In 2020, TV channels broadcasted more religious services than usual, media outlets re-transmitted press releases from the Basilica News Agency, thus spreading the messages of the Church, and made religion more present in the public sphere than ever. This, as well as the way in which the first pilgrimages took place, reminds one of the importance of religion in Romanian society, an idea highlighted by the Patriarch. This became more obvious once many rituals, feasts, and celebrations were banned.

Religion has played a significant role in Romanians' lives for generations. As early as the 1899 census, 99% of the population professed a religious preference (Negruți 2014: 32). This high degree of religious profession has remained consistent for more than one hundred years, with the 2011 census revealing a 99% religious participation (ibid.: 37). Perhaps more important is the rate of church attendance and frequency rate of prayer. In 2015, 82% stated they prayed weekly, with 69% offering a prayer daily (Stahl 2018: 91). Slightly less than half of the population reported participation in regular religious services three or more times monthly, while 76% attended multiple times per year (ibid.: 89).

Just one week before the lockdown, in March 2020, 76% of the people stated they prayed weekly, with 64% offering a prayer daily; 28% admitted they prayed more often than usual during those times (IRES 2020). When asked how much prayer had helped them during their lifetime, 80% said it had helped them in great measure. As for church attendance, 12% stated they went to church in the past week and 14% had talked with their priest about what was going on in the world.

No doubt, religious customs are still important for a large portion of the Romanian population, and the events of 2020 confirm it. Whether prayer and rituals actually heal is of less importance than the belief that people put in them. Admitting, as in the case of the Communion chalice, that a ritual could transmit the virus, would have shattered the belief. In this resided the dilemma of the Orthodox churches, who chose to deal with the situation in various manners (Crețu 2020). Faith helped many cope with the psychological pressure and daily difficulties encountered during the pandemic. Therefore, keeping it alive was perhaps more important for them than not getting the virus.

The discussions about religion during the pandemic revived the deep rift within Romanian society, in which the cultural roots of religion are often denied in the name of modernity. Many intellectuals and the governmental elite were critical of maintaining the religious rituals, which emotionally sustained the faithful. This failure to recognize the centrality of religion in Romanian society went hand in hand with the lack of dialogue. Nevertheless, facts show that religion is still an important element of contemporary society, as the pilgrimages illustrate.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Although, as mentioned in the text, Saint Paraskeva is not originally from Iași, in Romania she is known as Saint Paraskeva of Iași. Due to the centuries-old pilgrimage tradition, the place hosting the relics has been identified with the place of origin of the saint. The case is not singular (cf., e.g., Saint Philothea of Argeș).
- <sup>2</sup> Today this historical region in Southeast Europe is split between Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey.
- <sup>3</sup> This was nineteen days before the Romanian political authorities issued the first statement regarding church attendance, on 17th of March 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> *Paști* is special bread, imprinted with the icon of the Resurrection, consecrated through a special prayer, sprinkled with wine and holy water, usually on Saturday before Easter. In 2020, the bread was exceptionally consecrated on Holy Thursday.
- <sup>5</sup> In 2012, 79% of Romanians went to church for Easter to receive the consecrated Easter bread (IRES 2012).
- <sup>6</sup> The author recorded 23 processions in Romania and the neighbouring Republic of Moldova.
- <sup>7</sup> Each year, since the beginning of the new millennium, relics of various saints have been invited to join the celebration of Saint Paraskeva in Iași. The feast begins with a procession around town called the Path of the Saints, during which the relics, arriving from different directions, meet before the arrival at the Metropolitan Cathedral. Saint Paraskeva receives her holy guest(s) and walks them through the last part of the way. This tradition was initiated by Patriarch Daniel, at the time he occupied the position of the Metropolitan of Moldova and was brought to Bucharest, for Saint Demetrius feast in 2008, once he became the new patriarch.
- <sup>8</sup> Despite the pandemic, local elections were held on the 27th of September 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> The COVID-19 vaccination campaign started in Romania on the 27th of December 2020.
- <sup>10</sup> Demetrius of Thessaloniki, also known as the Holy Great-Martyr Demetrius the Myroblyte, is a Greek Christian martyr of the early fourth century. His feast is celebrated on the 26th of October.
- <sup>11</sup> The decision to bring Saint Cyprian's relics from Saint Stelian–Lucaci Church, in Bucharest, is explained by the fact that 2020 was declared Homage Year of the Pastoral Care for Parents and Children and Commemorative Year of the Romanian Orthodox

Philanthropists. Saint Cyprian is known as the protector of children especially during severe epidemics, such as the plague.

<sup>12</sup> This is the longest line of pilgrims recorded since 2016, when the author started observing the Saint Demetrius pilgrimage.

<sup>13</sup> The length of the line is based on the author's own observations and Google Maps.

<sup>14</sup> Before, people brought medicinal plants to touch against the relics, thus increasing their healing properties. Nowadays people bring ornamental flowers and basil.

<sup>15</sup> In 2011, the monastery received a second relic of Saint Nektarios and offered the initial relic, received in 2002, to the Patriarchate. Today, the latter is kept in the Patriarchal Cathedral in Bucharest. The relic received in 2011 is displayed in a larger and more impressive reliquary and continues to be venerated at Radu Vodă Monastery.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://manastirearaduvoda.ro/>, last accessed on 9 November 2022. The last post in the Recent Events section is dated the 1st of April 2020. The liturgical programme section is updated weekly and is not saved in the history of the website.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/ManastireaRaduVodaOficial/posts/1039608146485033>, last accessed on 9 November 2022..

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