

Trivent Publishing

© The Authors, 2015

Available online at <http://trivent-publishing.eu/>



Philosophy, Communication, Media sciences Series

Volume Saint Gerard of Cenad: Tradition and Innovation

The Metropolitan Bishop and Academy Member Nicolae Corneanu (1923-2014) Patristic Scholar and Tireless Promoter of the Inter-Religious Dialogue

Ionel Popescu

Vicar General of the Archbishopric of Timișoara, Romania, prionelpopescu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu served the Church for 52 years, from 1943 until his death in 2014, as the archbishop of Timisoara and metropolitan bishop of Banat. Nicolae Corneanu had a particular interest in studying The Holy Fathers, the patristic spirituality, a field which was very difficult to research in the atheistic communist years. In addition to being a patristic scholar, he was also a very well known and appreciated ecumenist. His authority and competence in this area were confirmed by his participation in numerous theological and ecumenical meetings in Romania and abroad.

Keywords

Metropolitan Bishop; Corneanu; patristics; ecumenist; translator; Member of the Academy

This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) license, which permits others to copy or share the article, provided original work is properly cited and that this is not done for commercial purposes. Users may not remix, transform, or build upon the material and may not distribute the modified material (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

DOI: 10.22618/TP.PCMS.20151.176016

Born on the 21st of November 1923 in Caransebeș (Romania), into a priest's family (to father Liviu and mother Elena), Mihai Nicolae Corneanu walked on the church paths from early childhood, just like the Holy Fathers, whose works he will study later on. After he finished the courses of the renowned "Traian Doda" High School in his hometown, he went on to study at the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest. Parallel to his undergraduate studies, he enriched his cultural horizon by studying classical philology and philosophy.¹ Consequently, starting with his early years at the university, he acquired a solid knowledge in classical and modern languages, specializing in philology and philosophy, which helped him in his research, stretching over a period of 70 years. Furthermore, the Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu also served the Church from 1943 until his death in 2014, as the archbishop of Timisoara and metropolitan bishop of Banat for 52 years.

The will he wrote on the 8th of September 2011 is a straightforward, impressive, and moving testimony, with a profound spiritual character. The archbishop first of all expressed his "gratitude to The Almighty God, who gave me a long life, to my parents who cared for me all this time, to all my teachers and bishops who guided me on my earthly path, to the Church which held me in its arms and to the good Christians who loved me and whom I represented..." He then emphasizes on the fact that he always tried "to do good to everybody," asking forgiveness "for all my trespasses to God and to anyone of my people." He continued: "All my life, I have gathered only things I needed and especially books of all kind, which made me wiser and enlightened the path of my life. In fact, they were the only things which belonged to me, I gave up freely everything else..."²

The inventory done at the metropolitan residence revealed nearly 13.000 volumes which the metropolitan father had left, belonging to various fields: theology with all its branches (biblical, historical, practical, and systematic), history, philosophy, philology, ecumenism, secular and religious art, monographs, etc. The registered documents were placed into 141 archive boxes, containing manuscripts of published and unpublished works, translations, correspondence, book extracts, newspapers, and magazines in various fields.

The life of the Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae was filled with hard work related to the Church and in the fields of theology and humanities, as he testified himself: "All these years, except in my activities as a teacher, official ecclesiastical, priest and bishop, I have felt like an ordinary Church member, concerned with the challenges of life, with all the questions that every believer is asking himself and I was not less interested in the solutions from the Church to our various problems, as we were all a community, [...], I was passionate about writing, I was interested in the most various things and I felt the need to get closer to people, to their needs and hopes [...] When I went through everything I published in the various magazines and newspapers, through the studies and the volumes, I nearly could not understand where I found the time and energy needed to put all that together. With the help of our Merciful Lord, everything becomes possible. May He be glorified forever!"³

The Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu had a particular interest in studying The Holy Fathers, the patristic spirituality, a field which was very difficult to research in the atheistic communist years.

Before 1948, the bishop published numerous articles and studies, especially in the journal known as *Foaia Diecezană* in Caransebeș. However, the journal ceased to appear after that year and the young theologian had his information and documentation possibilities restricted. As soon as the journal "Altarul Banatului" ["The Banat Altar"] from Caransebeș was transformed into the metropolitan journal newly-

¹ Other information regarding the life and work of the Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu can be found in the following: Mircea Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor Români* [Dictionary of Romanian theologians] (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 1996), 119; Liviu Mărghitan, Iulian Negriță, *Membrii Academiei Române originari din județul Caraș-Severin (Secolele XIX-XX)* [The members of the Romanian Academy born in the Caras-Severin County (Arad: Multimedia International, 2006), 83-91; *Dicționar al Scriitorilor din Banat* [Dictionary of the writers from Banat], ed. Alexandru Ruja (Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest., 2006), 190-196.

² Nicolae Corneanu, *Mărturie testamentară* [Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu, *Testamentary Message*], in the journal "Învierea" [The Resurrection], Timișoara, year XXV, 27 (561), New Series, September 2014, 10

³ Nicolae Corneanu, *Credință și viață. Culegere de studii teologice* [Faith and life. Anthology of theological studies] (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2001), 5.

known as "Mitropolia Banatului" ["Metropolitanate of Timișoara"], the column "Studies" was created and, after 1990, that of "Patristic pages," where numerous articles were published on the life and teachings of the Holy Fathers, but also translations of their works. All this was possible with the support and encouragement of the Metropolitan passionate about patristics, Nicolae Corneanu. Also under his care, the archdiocesan printing house from Timișoara published two important works on Patristic theology, written by his former professor and doctoral supervisor from the Faculty of Theology in Bucharest, priest Dr. Ioan G. Coman: ...*Și Cuvântul Trup s-a făcut* [And the Word was transformed into flesh] (1987)⁴ and *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică* [The beauty of loving the mankind in the patristic spirituality] (1988).⁵

As a patriarchal exarch, the Metropolitan Bishop Corneanu was in charge, for a certain period of time, of the Romanian orthodox communities living abroad. He paid several canonical visits to the USA, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. During this time, he had the opportunity to visit church libraries and book shops rich in theological literature, and to meet theologians, professors, researchers, priests, and bishops who familiarized him with the new directions in the theological research and with recently published works, especially in the patristic field, which he then used in his own works. His long research in patristic studies started when he was 20 with his first article titled "Autoritatea episcopala după Sfântul Ciprian" "The Bishop authority according to Saint Ciprian of Carthage,"⁶ published in the journal "Foaia Diecezană" in Caransebeș and continued with valuable contributions, some pioneering the Romanian patristic spirituality, such as the ones published in the *Cum Patribus* collection: *Studii patristice. Aspecte din vechea literatură patristică*;⁷ *Quo vadis? Studii, note și comentarii teologice*;⁸ *Viața și petrecerea Sfântului Antonie cel Mare*;⁹ *Credință și viață. Culegere de studii teologice*;¹⁰ *Scara raiului precedată de Viața pe scurt a lui Ioan Scolasticul și urmată de Cuvântul către Păstor*¹¹ (followed by other two editions at the same publishing house and seven editions at "Înviearea" Publishing House, belonging to the Archiepiscopate of Timișoara), *Viața Fericitului Pahomie*;¹² *Origen și Celsus. Confruntarea creștinismului cu paganismul*;¹³ *Farmecul scrierilor patristice*;¹⁴ *Patristica – filosofia care mângâie*;¹⁵ *Actualitatea vechii literaturi creștine*.¹⁶

The exceptional contribution of the Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu to the development of Romanian patristic studies, as well as his love and interest for the life and work of the Church Fathers were expressed by his open attitude to the publication of other works of the same kind in the archdiocesan

⁴ Ioan G. Coman, ...*Și Cuvântul Trup s-a făcut* [And the Word was transformed into flesh] (Timișoara, 1987).

⁵ Ioan G. Coman, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică* [The beauty of loving the mankind in the patristic spirituality] (Timișoara, 1988).

⁶ Foaia Diecezană, Caransebeș, year LVI, nr. 34/22nd August, 4-5.

⁷ Nicolae Corneanu, *Studii patristice. Aspecte din vechea literatură patristică* [Patristic studies. Aspects of old patristic literature] (Timișoara: Mitropolia Banatului, 1987).

⁸ Nicolae Corneanu, *Quo vadis? Studii, note și comentarii teologice* [Quo vadis? Theological studies, notes and commentaries] (Timișoara: Mitropolia Banatului, 1990).

⁹ Nicolae Corneanu, *Viața și petrecerea Sfântului Antonie cel Mare* [The life and path of Saint Anthony the Great] (Timișoara: Amarcord, 2001).

¹⁰ Corneanu, *Credință și viață*.

¹¹ Nicolae Corneanu, *Scara raiului precedată de Viața pe scurt a lui Ioan Scolasticul și urmată de Cuvântul către Păstor* [The ladder of Devine Ascent, preceded by the life in brief of John Scholasticus and followed by the word to the Sheppard] (Timișoara: Amarcord, 1994).

¹² Nicolae Corneanu, *Viața Fericitului Pahomie* [The life of the blessed Pachomius] (Bucharest: Anastasia, 1995).

¹³ Nicolae Corneanu, *Origen și Celsus. Confruntarea creștinismului cu paganismul* [Origen and Celsus. Christianity versus paganism] (Bucharest: Anastasia, 1999).

¹⁴ Nicolae Corneanu, *Farmecul studiilor patristice* [The Charm of Patristic studies] (Bucharest: Anastasia, 2002).

¹⁵ Nicolae Corneanu, *Patristica – filosofia care mângâie* [Patristics - the comforting philosophy], (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2004).

¹⁶ Nicolae Corneanu, *Actualitatea vechii literaturi creștine* [The actuality of the ancient Christian literature] (Timișoara: Înviearea, 2007).

publishing house in Timișoara. Here are some of them: Lactantius, *Instituțiile divine*;¹⁷ Lactantius, *Despre mânia lui Dumnezeu*;¹⁸ Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Predici despre viața de familie*;¹⁹ Patericul sau apoftegmele Parinților din pustia Egiptului.²⁰ The reputed and respected patristic scholar was also the initiator and coordinator of the collection "The treasures of wilderness", published by Anastasia house in Bucharest.²¹

The Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu is therefore one of the most worthy Romanian patristic scholars who gave the Church a richly documented work, extremely useful to theologians, ordinary Christians, and to whomever might be interested in the patristic spirituality.

The Metropolitan Bishop was not only a patristic scholar, but also a very well known and appreciated ecumenist. In his message addressed to His Eminence on his 90th birthday, the Patriarch Daniel said that "the rich theological and cultural work, the administrative rigor and his openness to cooperation in the religious and social field with other faith representatives are the major characteristics of his activity."²²

Thus, he was known in the international theological world for his openness towards other denominations and his permanent dialogue with all the Christian cults in Banat and the Jewish community. The Bishop promoted, for over fifty years, a practical ecumenism based on meetings for prayer and on the cooperation with all religious representatives for the organisation of events oriented towards the knowledge and the confession of the Gospel nowadays. He was the initiator of prayer sessions at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Timișoara, at the Catholic Dome in the Union Square in Timișoara, in the Greek-Catholic cathedral in Lugoj, at the synagogues in Timișoara and in the Prayer houses of the protestant and evangelical cults. At the same time, he participated together with other Christian representatives at the week of prayer for the unity of Christianity at the Orphans' Christmas and he always invited all the religious leaders in town to the Christmas and Easter receptions at the metropolitan residence.

His authority and competence in this area were confirmed by his participation in numerous theological and ecumenical meetings in Romania and abroad, where he presented lectures, dissertations, and reviews published in Romanian or foreign journals. In 1962 he was elected permanent member of The Patristic Study Group founded by the "Faith and constitution" Board of the European Churches Ecumenical Council. Between 1978 and 1981, he was a member of the Central Board of the European Churches Ecumenical Council and he represented the Romanian Patriarch at the installation of Pope John Paul I and John Paul II. He was also part of the Romanian legations which visited the Bulgarian Patriarchy (1966), the Ancient Oriental Churches from Armenia, Egypt, Ethiopia and Syria (1969, 1979, 1997), the Russian Patriarchy (1971), the Greek Church (1971), the Roman-Catholic Church in Belgium (1972), the Lutheran Church in Sweden (1987), the Ecumenical Patriarch (1978, 1981, 1989), the Serbian Patriarchy (1981, 1995), the Patriarchy in Alexandria (1998), the Patriarchy in Jerusalem (2000).

¹⁷ Lactantius, *Instituțiile divine* [The Divine institutions] (Timișoara: Înviearea, 2004), translation and notes by Petru Pistol and introduction by the Metropolitan bishop Nicolae Corneanu, introductory study by Claudiu T. Arieșan.

¹⁸ Lactantius, *Despre mânia lui Dumnezeu* [About our Lord's vexation (De ira Dei)], trans. Petru Pistol (Timișoara: Înviearea, 2006).

¹⁹ Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Predici despre viața de familie* [Saint John Chrysostom, Preaches about family life], (Timișoara: Înviearea, 2008), translated by the priest Marcel Hancheș and introduction by Lucian Lugojanul, vicar Bishop at Timisoara Archiepiscopate, with a bibliographical study by dr. Claudiu T. Arieșan).

²⁰ *Patericul sau apoftegmele Parinților din pustia Egiptului* [The Paterikon or the apothegms of the Fathers from the Egyptian desert] (Timișoara: Înviearea, 2009).

²¹ Aquilina Birăescu and Diana Zărie, *Scriitori și lingviști timișoreni (1945- 1999)* [Writers and linguists from Timișoara (1945-1999)] (Timișoara: Marineasa, 2000 61).

²² Patriarch Daniel, *The gift of life as time to grow one's spiritual gifts, His Eminence, Father Nicolae, Metropolitan Bishop of Banat at 90 years of life*, in the volume *His Eminence Nicolae Corneanu, Archbishop of Timișoara and Metropolitan Bishop of Banat, Honorary member of the Romanian Academy, The Man and his work* (Timișoara: Înviearea, 2013), 8.

He also participated to various meetings, congresses, and conferences with theological and ecumenical character in the USA, Germany, United Kingdom, Denmark, France, Finland, Switzerland, and Czechoslovakia.

In 1961, he went to the General Assembly of The Christian Conference for peace in Prague, and in 1980, to the International Symposium on "Search for peace beyond ideological differences." The Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae was then elected vice-president of the Christian Conference for peace, member of the committee work and participant to all the general meetings of this organisation. He took part in the General Assembly of the Ecumenical Council of Churches (Uppsala, July 1968), where he had a speech on Dr. Visser't Hoof's conference: "The Ecumenical movement mandate." Also, after the General Assembly in Nairobi (1975), he became a member of the Churches Commission for International Affairs and after 1977 he was a member in its Central Committee. On the same line of ecumenical contacts, his collaboration with the Ecumenical Institute "Pro Oriente" in Vienna must be mentioned, where he presented several essays and built a friendship with the cardinal Franz König. Furthermore, he was delegated to be a member in the international orthodox-catholic and orthodox-Lutheran committees. His important contributions to the ecumenical field were published, together with other materials, in *Quo vadis? Studii, note și comentarii teologice*. Two sections of this volume, "*Bisericile creștine și ecumenismul*" [Ecumenism and the Christian Churches] and "*Terminologia ecumenistă*" [Ecumenical terminology] are the result of the Metropolitan Bishop's participation in various "pan orthodox meetings, inter-churches and inter-religious dialogue committees, congresses, conferences, colloquia, and symposia" and highlight "the necessity of dialogue between the world's greatest religions and the joint efforts of their adherents to support the hope for better of the humanity."²³

In his published ecumenical work, the Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu showed a "moderate but thorough perspective, based on a realistic vision of restoring Church unity [...], his contribution in this area being, undoubtedly, one of the most important Romanian input, which could be a valuable inheritance for the present and the next generations of theologians."²⁴

After 1948, the Greek-Catholic churches of Timișoara were estranged. However, after 1990, he Metropolitan Bishop decided to return all these churches to their rightful holders, an initiative which may be included in his line of practical ecumenism. Based on the same brotherly relationships with the Roman-Catholic Bishopric of Timișoara, several orthodox priests in villages which did not have an Orthodox church, perform their religious service in Catholic churches. It is worth mentioning that His Eminence published some of his works in specialized journals of other Christian confessions from Banat: *Egyik, Románia teriileté levő, régi baptisztérium teológiai bizonysága*, in the journal "Református Szemle",²⁵ "*Goana după senzațional (Evangelhia Sfântului Toma)*",²⁶ and *Felfedeztek egy új Evangéliumot?*²⁷

Nicolae Corneanu was also bishop to the Romanians living in the Serbian Banat, therefore he visited them numerous times and contributed to the setting up of the Orthodox Episcopates in Serbia and Hungary, which were suffragan to the Metropolitan of Banat for a period of time.

His remarkable contribution to the modern ecumenical movement and especially his articles, essays, translations, and scholarly researches published in Romania and abroad place the "scholar bishop from

²³ Corneanu, *Quo vadis?*, 109.

²⁴ Robert Lazu, *Î.P.S. Mitropolit dr. Nicolae Corneanu – membru de onoare al Academiei Române* [His Eminence, Metropolitan Bishop dr. Nicolae Corneanu- honorary member of the Romanian Academy], in the volume *Academia Română, filiala Timișoara. Istoric, 1951-1999* [The Romanian Academy, Timișoara branch. History, 1951-1999] (Timișoara, 1999, p. 142-143).

²⁵ *Egyik, Románia teriileté levő, régi baptisztérium teológiai bizonysága* [The theological confession of an old baptistery in Romania], in the journal "Református Szemle", Cluj, year LXX, no. 1, (January-February 1977): 8-10.

²⁶ See paper *Goana după senzațional (Evangelhia Sfântului Toma)* [Chasing the sensational (St. Thomas's Gospel)], in the journal "Metropolitanate of Timișoara", Timișoara, year XXV, No. 4-6 (April-June 1975), 271-274.

²⁷ "Felfedeztek egy új Evangéliumot?" [Did they find a new Gospel?], *Református Szemle* 4 (July-August 1976): 269-272.

Banat"²⁸ amongst the theologians, scholars and ecumenists of international fame. His research in the patristic literature and spirituality were rewarded with his election as a member of the "International Association of Patristic Studies" in Paris. As a result of his activity, he was invited, together with professor Ioan G. Coman, to the fourth International Congress of Patristic Studies in Oxford (16th-21st of September 1963), where he presented the paper titled *The Romanian translators' contribution to the spreading of Saint John Climacus's "Ladder."* On the 27th of May 1970, he was a guest at the Evangelical College of Humboldt University (Berlin), where he presented a lecture on *The Bishop and missionary Ulfila, translator of the Bible.*²⁹ His vast contribution to the ecumenical field was rewarded by universities from Romania and abroad with the title of *doctor honoris causa*, amongst them, the Protestant Institute in Cluj-Napoca.

In conclusion, the Metropolitan Bishop Nicolae Corneanu is rightfully placed among the Banat bishops of high moral and academic conduct, as the creator of an impressive academic work, which is still waiting to be analyzed and systematized. The dignified bishop from Banat is regarded as an leading personality of our Church and contemporary society, a man of exemplary kindness, modesty, and piety, given to his mission with body and soul, an ecumenist and "a scholar of national significance, whose studies have an obvious international interest."³⁰

²⁸ Stefan C. Alexe, "Preocupări patristice ale Î.P.S. Mitropolit Dr. Nicolae Corneanu" [His Eminence Metropolitan Bishop Dr. Nicolae Corneanu's patristic interest] *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, Bucharest, year CV 3-4 (1987): 19.

²⁹ Ioan G. Coman, "Participarea delegației Bisericii Ortodoxe Române la lucrările Congresului al IV-lea Internațional de Studii Patristice de la Oxford" [The Romanian Orthodox Church participation at the fourth International Congress of Patristic Studies in Oxford] *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, Bucharest, year LXXXI 11-12 (1963): 1109. The papers presented on this occasion were also published in the Berlin Congress papers, "Studia Patristica," in the collection *Texte und Untersuchungen* and in the journal "Zeiken der Zeit", Berlin, no.10/October 1970: 375-379.

³⁰ Virgil Nemoianu, *Jocurile divinității* [Divinity games] (Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1977), 38.