



Tralês

1951 - 1984

CHAPTER I

In his acceptance speech at the Church Congress in Chicago, July 4, 1951, the young Bishop-Vicar Elect Viorel Trifa said: "I'm aware of the Episcopate's difficulties and I know that many problems await a resolution." He then added: "I give you all that God has given me. However, to successfully carry out my mission, I'll need your help and cooperation."

Therein, in a nutshell, lies the key to Bishop Valerian's tremendous success story that would develop over the next 33 years.

Viorel Trifa did not submit his candidature for the position of Bishop-Vicar of the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America on his own; he was drafted by the Episcopate Council, who saw in him the qualities they wanted in the prospective Bishop-Vicar.

For three months he debated with himself whether to accept or not to accept. As editor of the diocesan newspaper *Solia*, he was fully aware of the Episcopate's problems. He finally sent in his acceptance on the last day, barely beating the deadline for submitting it.

Fortunately for the Episcopate, one of Bishop Valerian's characteristics seems to have decided the issue, namely, never to stand aside when there was work to be done in something he believed in. The Bishop seems to have been born with a mission in life, to be a leader as he proved to be throughout his educational years, and to dedicate his life to a cause, which happened to be the Church.

Bishop Valerian was elected at a time when the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America was going through a most critical period in its life. It was divided amongst itself and involved in a struggle for independence with the Patriarchate in Bucharest who wanted to control it not only spiritually, but administratively as well. The loyal faithful of the Episcopate could not see themselves, as American citizens, being dominated by a godless regime that had taken control of the Patriarchate.

As if to confirm the low, moral fiber of the new masters of Romania, the newly-elected Bishop-Vicar would immediately become the object of the most vicious personal attacks and slanders directed by the Communists in Romania through some of their unwitting and docile followers in the United States, in the

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During the immediate years that followed, barns, haylofts and stables became meeting halls, kitchens and dormitories. The transformation of the Vatra from a farm into a true center for the Diocese will take many years, demanding the Bishop's continuous attention. In the process, the Vatra became not only the Bishop's headquarters but also his recreational ground. Instead of golfing, the Bishop spent his free time trimming trees, planting flowers and cutting the grass.

Another problem the newly-installed Bishop had to address was the strengthening of the canonical dependence and of the spiritual relationship between the parishes and the Episcopate.

The parishes in America were not organized by Church authorities, but by the people themselves, who then asked the Church authorities to send them the priests to do their church services.

When the priest arrived, he found no guidance from above, but plenty of directions and say-so from those that paid him! In time, the instinct of self-preservation came first and the priests adjusted to this unnatural arrangement and made the best of a bad situation. Their parish became their diocese.

Under these conditions, it's no wonder that it took 25 years before the idea of a Romanian Orthodox Episcopate in America took hold, and another 25 years for the people and the priests to get used to the idea of an Episcopate and of a Bishop. When Bishop Valerian took over, the Episcopate had had a Bishop for only four years in its 23-year history.

In some parishes this problem of local independence continued to exist. Probably the Bishop's biggest problems came from those priests and parishes that could not accept the authority of a Bishop, or any authority for that matter.

To be fair, we must also state that the people had generally no idea about the purposes of an Episcopate. Many felt that it was some kind of federation, with the visible relationship being the \$1.00 a year per capita tax. The canonical dependence of the parishes on the Episcopate and the spiritual relationship between the parishes and the Episcopate did not enter their mind.

Some parishes still couldn't see the function and the importance of an Episcopate. They were easy prey to adverse propaganda that the Episcopate wanted to take control of their properties. In the discussions about the new bylaws, these parishes, with their priests up front, fought to keep the Episcopate from having any say-so in their internal affairs, as if the Episcopate was the greatest enemy to their religious life. Some churches in the Episcopate were organized and functioned on a congregational basis, denying any outside authority.

Aware of such un-Orthodox charters, the Church Bylaws voted at the 1953 Church Congress were specifically directed to protect the property of the parishes from any undue interference and to keep them for posterity for the purpose they had been intended. They further defined more clearly the relations between bishop and clergy, as well as between the Episcopate and the parishes, and designated the administrative procedures by which the local parishes should conduct their affairs.

The Bishop would recommend further changes to the Bylaws in 1957 and again in 1967. The 1957 changes, for example, gave the women a right to vote in the parish assemblies, but they could not yet serve on parish councils, or as delegates to the Church Congress. That right was given to them a bit later.

The 1967 amendments to the Bylaws established the procedures by which to elect and ordain the Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America, set limits on the size of parish councils and the length of time members can serve consecutively in the same office. Also, the calling of general assemblies was simplified.

As expected, the early years of the Bishop's administration were full of spiritual and administrative decisions. Between 1954 and 1956, the Bishop's activities were dominated by the printing program for the religious education program, by the reorganization of the Solia and making it self-sustaining, the building of a cemetery and further improvements at the Vatra, and with new plans for the proposed church at the Vatra.

The religious education of young and old alike will be an ongoing and continuous concern of the Bishop. At the Clergy Conference preceding the 1954 Church Congress, he proposed that the 1954-1955 church year be called the Year of the Book, during which the printing of needed religious books should be initiated.

As a result, book No. 1 in the Episcopate's Orthodox

belief that if they destroy the shepherd, they could then conquer the flock. But the young leader, believing in his mission to serve God and His Church, would not be deterred from his resolve to conquer all difficulties thrown in his path. That campaign against the Bishop would be carried on relentlessly by the Communists for the entire 33 years of his Episcopacy.

At the same 1951 Congress it elected Bishop Valerian, the Episcopate had declared itself independent from the Mother Church in Romania. In so doing, it became "de facto" an independent Orthodox unit, a situation not normal in the Orthodox Church. This canonical problem became acute when the need arose to consecrate the newly-elected Bishop-Vicar.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, to which the Episcopate appealed, was unable, or unwilling to do anything to solve the problem. The Patriarchate in Bucharest had intervened at Constantinople and at other Patriarchates, asking them not to immix into what it called an internal affair of the Romanian Patriarchate. Thus, none of the other historical Orthodox Patriarchates to which the Episcopate also appealed for help, would lift a little finger. No one was anxious to help such a small church body in America as the Episcopate, especially since such assistance would probably lead to jurisdictional complications with Bucharest.

In the end, the consecration of the Bishop-Vicar was resolved when the Episcopate accepted the good offices of the Ukrainian Metropolia to perform this service as a gesture of Orthodox goodwill and without any permanent jurisdictional obligations.

Amidst great joy and expectations, the Bishop-Elect was consecrated April 26 and 27, 1952, in the Descent of the Holy Ghost church in Philadelphia, Pa., and assumed the full leadership of the Diocese at the Church Congress held at Detroit, July 4th and 5th of that same year. The Episcopate had a new leader, but the path before the newly-elected bishop would be a most difficult one.

First, there was the mundane problem of where he would reside. There was no official residence for the Bishop. He first resided in Cleveland, then an attempt to locate him in Detroit following his installation failed because the Episcopate could not come up with a \$500.00 downpayment on a house.

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The most important event that year, however, was the canonical affiliation of the Episcopate with the Russian Metropolia.

Two years earlier, in 1958, Bishop Policarp Morusca, titular Bishop of the Episcopate, held in forced domicile in Romania since the end of World War II, had passed away and Bishop-Vicar Valerian now became titular Bishop of the Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America. With Bishop Morusca's passing, all symbolic or real ties with the Mother Church were gone, and the Episcopate began looking elsewhere for a resolution of its remaining canonical problems.

For several years following the break in relations with the Patriarchate in Romania, the Episcopate had hoped that the Romanian Patriarchate might reconsider its attitude toward it. When it became convinced that a reconciliation was no longer possible due to the Patriarchate's contradictory actions of declaring on the one hand through its delegates and emissaries that it wanted only "spiritual ties, peace and understanding" with the Episcopate, while on the other it directed its faction in America to start new legal proceedings to regain the Vatra and all Episcopate's assets, and was continuing its practice of creating problems by sending missionary priests to the United States to start new parishes supported by the Patriarchate in localities where there existed already a parish under the jurisdiction of the Episcopate, it affiliated canonically with the Russian Orthodox Metropolia in March of 1960. The Metropolia was negotiating the resolution of the over-all problem of canonicity through autocephaly and a native American hierarchy, a solution that would come about after 10 years of discussions and negotiations.

