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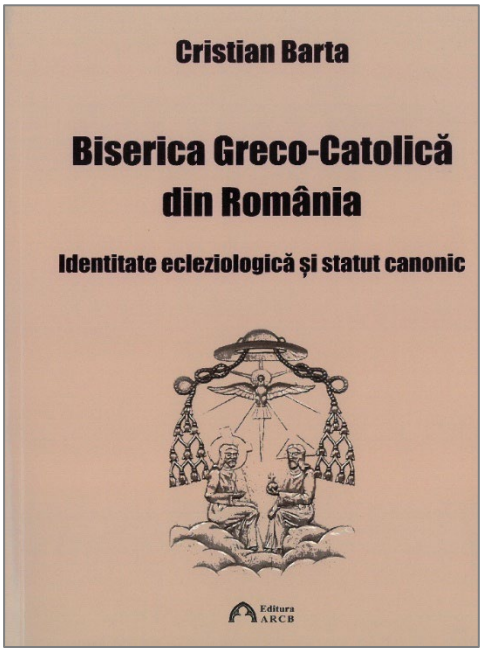
Cristian BARTA, *Biserica Greco-Catolică din România. Identitate ecleziologică și statut canonic* [The Romanian Greek Catholic Church. Ecclesiological Identity and Canonical Status], Bucharest: Editura Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice, 2023, 302 p.



Cristian Barta's *The Romanian Greek Catholic Church. Ecclesiological Identity and Canonical Status* is a careful, balanced, and thorough scholarly investigation into a topic with far-reaching ecumenical implications. The book is undoubtedly an original contribution to the Romanian theological discourse, as it combines historical chronicle, canonical analysis, and systematic reflection on, practically, the *meaning* of the Romanian United Church with Rome, in its passage through time and in its present situation.

The first part is concerned with the history of the Romanian Church, more specifically with the complicated game of perceptions belonging to

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different actors throughout the timeframe that began with the Unification Synods of 1698–1700. Barta, through an appeal both to the original sources and to the most recent scholarship, aims to show that the Romanian clergy had a constant wish to preserve the autonomy of its Church along the ecclesiological framework of the brief but hugely significant Union of Ferrara-Florence (1439). As a proof, Barta conducts a case study on the stubborn project of the local clergy to obtain official recognition of the status of "Metropolis" for the Eparchy of Făgăraș, which would have ensured a far greater autonomy than in the case of a simple eparchy – juridically subordinated to the Holy See but also under the nominal authority of the Roman Catholic primate of Hungary, the Archbishop of Esztergom. The fact that this entire three-hundred-year history would witness not only this recognition in 1853 but also the promotion of the entire church to the title of Major Archbishopric is a testimony – according to Barta – of the solid self-identification of the Romanian Greek Catholics as truly a *Church*, a particular body with a distinct rite, canonical organization, and spiritual universe, united with Rome with a double aim: being part of the Universal Church and bearing witness to its fidelity towards its own tradition.

The most important part of the book is where Barta makes a case for the "ecclesiality" of the Romanian Church. He argues that this status is not only a canonical concept – even though the juridical title of *Ecclesia sui iuris* 'Church of one's own right' is an indispensable step in this discussion – but also, and most importantly, a recognition of the "ecclesiophany" of the Church of Christ in this particular Church. In other words, based on the presence of apostolic succession and sacramental integrity in each eparchy, of the common Creed and the communion, through the Holy See, with the entire Catholic Church, the Romanian Greek Catholic Church can truly claim to be a manifestation of the *katholike ekklesia*, of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Cristian Barta shows a great deal of sensitivity towards a multi-nuanced perspective, especially in the latter part of the work, in which he attempts to sketch a systematic reflection on the future of the Romanian Church. Conscious that the Orthodox Churches do maintain their critiques with regard to the mere existence of the Oriental Catholic Churches and to what they see as an insufficient attempt of Rome to integrate oriental church-law into its relatively new *CCEO* (*Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, 1991), the author is nevertheless optimistic about the possibility of a theological defence of the "ecclesiality" of the Oriental Catholic Churches, whose legitimation comes first of all from their very "ontological-ecclesial" dimension (p. 204) and which, according to him, is ignored by the Orthodox.

Yet the interplay of perceptions remains a strong force, and Barta adequately portrays it. The Greek Catholic Churches themselves are conscious that their current canonical and ecclesial status is not definitive in the sense that they perceive themselves as part of a dynamic development towards an ever greater autonomy and, perhaps in the boldest of moves, their eventual recognition as patriarchates, in communion both with Rome and with other Orthodox, non-united patriarchates (see the recent Melkite and Ukrainian proposals, which were, however, received by Rome with prudence and a call for a "further study" of the topic).

Towards the end of the book, Barta tries to address these issues, which are basically the essential questions of the future, by returning to the Romanian context. He proposes – granted, of course, that would be a change of heart in both camps – a common, Orthodox and Greek Catholic, reflection on the "common origins" (pp. 226–227) of the Churches, an origin which can be traced all the way back to the early apostolic Church, but also a revisiting of the Florentine model of union, which can still be, according to Barta, a valid, general framework for a future meeting in love of the "Sister Churches". Applying also Călin Săplăcan's interesting paradigm of the "Frontier", Cristian Barta argues that the "frontier" between the Churches need not be a closed one, a guarded, impenetrable border, but rather a revolving door, facilitating communication and communion. Thus, the Great Schism of 1054 could be seen as a mere contingent wall erected between two realities whose common belonging to the One Church of Christ could not be annulled (p. 234). But unless they regard that wall as an "ecclesiological anomaly" (p. 214), as a closed border erected by human sin, and therefore acknowledging each other's "ecclesiality" – their eternal being-part of the Body of Christ –, they will not walk together on the path of unity.

Of course, Barta offers a fairly standard Catholic view of the whole debate, and this risks burdening the argument with an attempt to reconcile past and present, tradition and innovation, dogma and speculation. This could explain why he does not appear to see any contradiction between the famous Vatican II affirmation about the Church of Jesus Christ, which "subsists" in the Catholic Church, and the new, radical ecclesiology of the "Sister Churches", which now dominates the Orthodox–Catholic dialogue and has become more or less normative. For how could one harmonize the first statement, with its clear affirmation of the superiority of the Catholic Church and its corollaries found in other documents of the Council that acknowledge only "elements of sanctification and truth"

in other Churches, and the second, which implicitly recognizes the perfect equality of the Orthodox and Catholic worlds? It could also explain why he still proposes the Union of Florence as, at least in a formal, general sense, a model for today, even though the definition of papal primacy present in the unification bull *Laetantur Caeli* – namely that the pope enjoys "the full power [*plenam potestatem*] of feeding, ruling, and governing [*pascendi, regendi ac gubernandi*] the whole Church" and even "a primacy over the whole world" –, is alien to the concept of primacy as it was universally shared in the first millennium. So, although Barta is aware of the interplay of reciprocal perceptions, he himself exhibits some of the intrinsic limits of the subjective perplexity of Catholics, who, with all honesty, do not understand why the Orthodox rejected Florence, the partial unions of Brest or Alba-Iulia, the openings of the Vatican II, or the new Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches.

So, the main problem in the final part of this otherwise meticulous piece of scholarship is that the author, in his fidelity towards the entire Catholic tradition, does not go far enough in his intellectual explorations. As proof stands his proposal for a common reappropriation of the "common origins of the Churches" or the non-critical restatement of the idea of the Church of Jesus Christ subsisting in the Catholic Church – in other words, valiant attempts of bringing the *past* of the Catholic Church into the fore. But how about bringing the *future* into the discussion, that infinite apocalyptical horizon of possibility and meaning which might well make us challenge *all* our assumptions? How about discerning the "signs of the times" and dare to embrace what seems as the most rational and sensible theological trend – the concept of "Sister Churches" – and propose a common ecclesial pilgrimage of "accompaniment" in which all actors make themselves ready for the unthinkable? How about contemplating the idea of the subsistence of the Church of Jesus Christ in *all* Christian traditions and critically revisiting the concepts of "apostolic succession" and of the "integrity" of the sacramental system? Or at least having a little more modest, a little more… "apophatic" attitude towards such exclusive claims?

To conclude, Cristian Barta's book is an excellent work of research into a sensitive topic. As both a serious scholarly exploration and a careful theological defence of the Greek Catholic projects, the work succeeds in being an intellectual reference point and a source of faith and hope for Greek Catholics. And while the author could have dared more and his standpoint remains existentially engaged in his own Church, the final message of the book – a call for all sides to ask for the grace of repentance and the healing of wounds – will stand the test of time.