



## NEW PILGRIMAGE DESTINATION IN ROMANIA-THE TOMB OF FATHER ARSENIE BOCA AT PRISLOP MONASTERY

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### Abstract

*The emergence of new pilgrimage destinations enriches the cultural heritage of a country and sets in motion the economic growth locally, regionally and nationally. One of the best known pilgrimage destinations in Romania is the tomb of Father Arsenie Boca located in Prislop. The information provided by the media shows us that the number of pilgrims who come to Prislop is annually growing. The possible canonization of Father Arsenie Boca and implicitly the official recognition of this pilgrimage destination will have multiple implications in terms of culture and religion, but especially economically. The development of infrastructure to support the development of tourism flows in the area, involves the development of a medium and long term strategy regionally and locally. Tourism development will have a significant economic and image impact on the area*

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Religious communication, religious tourism, pilgrimage, marketing

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### Introduction

The pilgrimage is considered a powerful pastoral instrument due its outstanding capacity to motivate believers to start the journey. The quality of the religious act takes on special significance through pilgrimage, so they are able to generate and gather around them a complex religious activity offering unique identity to the site. In the hearts of believers, pilgrimages have a special place, which has been evidenced by the large number of believers who depart on such journeys worldwide. Statistics show that, annually about 240 million believers start on pilgrimage, and popularity of this phenomenon is still growing (Apostol M.S., 2012, p. 23).

In Romania, the collapse of communism marked a revival of the Church presence in the public space. Religion was no longer taboo and turned into a true spiritual support to thousands of believers. Touching the sacred places, the physical presence of believers in these spaces blessed by the Divine is a goal to be reached.

The pilgrimage is not an ordinary journey; it has a specific purpose and a well defined path to the sacred place. The pilgrim is not wandering aimless on the road in search of adventure, but travels to a miraculous place that has the power to transform him/her. The pilgrimage involves leaving the everyday reality of the known world, and going on a trip to an uncertain and unknown reality, the psycho -emotional pressure

increases as the distance between the known world and the unknown world is greater. Touching the sacred place, the "coveted trophy" is achieved after completing the initiatory journey through an unknown territory (Coman M., 2008, p. 53).

The sacred place is the core around which revolves the whole approach of the pilgrim, sacrality being supported by facts, events, and miracles manifested in time and revealed to pilgrims through the divine grace.

In the Romanian space there are well known pilgrimage destinations such as for example: pilgrimage to Saint Paraskeva in Iasi, pilgrimage to Saint Dimitrie of Bucharest, pilgrimage to Nicula on August 15. The need for spirituality, the power and the miracles manifested in different places of worship or at the graves of grace priests have given birth to new places of pilgrimage. One of the newest pilgrimage destinations in Romania is the tomb of Father Arsenie Boca located in Prislop.

### Biographical details of the life of Father Arsenie Boca

Father Arsenie Boca born in September 29, 1910 in the village Vața de Sus, Hunedoara County in the parental house. His parents Creștina and Iosif Boca baptized him Zian - Vălean Boca (Corlean N., 2012, p. 79).

Zian Boca is very studious and draws his teacher's attention by his many talents. In 1929-1933 is attending

the Theological Institute of Sibiu, where he is noted by the teachers and helped in 1933 to join the Institute of Fine Arts of Bucharest, which he graduates in 1938.

In 1939 goes to Mount Athos for a period of three months to experience the spiritual life. The following year he became a monk and received the name of Arsenie, and in 1942 is ordained priest at Sâmbăta de Sus Monastery.

Father Arsenie Boca is investigated and arrested on many occasions due to the religious effervescence which is lit by his presence. The magnitude of the spiritual movement is noticed by Antonescu regime for the alleged links with the Legionnaires, and during the communist period due to his speeches.

In 1948, the Metropolitan Nicolae Balan, in order to protect him sends him abbot to Prislop, a deserted monastery. In Prislop Dometie Manoloache and Antonie Plămădeală became monks.

In 1950, Prislop becomes a convent and Father Arsenie Boca becomes the confessor of the monastery.

Since 1951 Father Arsenie Boca is investigated repeatedly by the Security services, confined sent to the Canal and passes through many areas of detention: Timișoara, Jilava and Oradea. He is released in 1956 without being convicted for his charges.

In 1959 under pressure from the communist authorities Monastery Prislop is abolished, the nuns are banished and Father Arsenie Boca is forbidden to serve as priest.

In 1968, he is ordered to create the interior painting of the church of Drăgănescu where he will work for 15 years.

Since 1969 Father Arsenie Boca is set at Sinaia where the nuns banished from Prislop reorganized a monastic settlement. This is where the Father spent the last years of his life years and passed away on November 28, 1989. He will be buried in the December 4, 1989 at Prislop.

#### **Historical importance of Prislop Monastery**

Prislop Monastery is located in Hunedoara, 3 kilometres from the village Silvașul de Sus. The monastery church, historical monument, documented in the sixteenth century was rebuilt over the foundations of an old church. It is assumed that this area was a hermitage from XIII century, but there is no historical supporting document. It was not until the XV century that the monastery was recorded in documents (1405) due to a record of St. Nicodemus of Tismana.

In 1564 at the command of Zamfira, daughter of Moise Voievod of Wallahia, the monastery's church is built from scratch over the foundations of a much older ruined church.

In 1992, St. John of Prislop, hermit monk who lived in the eighteenth century, is canonized by the

Romanian Orthodox Church. At Prislop, not far from the monastery church, is the cave cut in the rock where the hermit lived and which is accessible to pilgrims.

On December 4, 1989, Father Arsenie Boca was buried at monastery Prislop where he was abbot of the monastery. The death of Father Arsenie Boca was followed by the fall of the communism and the unrestricted access to a religious life. The religious effervescence made Prislop Monastery reborn spiritually and become a popular destination for pilgrims.

#### **The pilgrimage impact on Hațeg area**

*"Two villages of Hunedoara, Silvașu de Sus and Silvașiu de Jos, nearby Prislop Monastery, revived economically in the recent years due to the popularity of the place where Father Arsenie Boca was buried"* (Daniel G., 2014). The two villages are located a few kilometres from the monastery and are the only access to the center of pilgrimage. The monastery does not offer accommodation which implicitly made pilgrims to seek accommodation in these villages. The villagers have gradually specialized in offering rural accommodation, local cuisine products and handmade objects that they sell at stalls located in front of the houses. The locals recognize: *Monastery and Father Arsenie Boca are a blessing to us*" (Guță D., 2014). The number of pilgrims crossing the area is large, the locals are surprised by the range of vehicles crossing the villages: "On weekends, the line of cars heading towards Prislop and returns from there seems endless" (Guță D., 2014). The winter village is crossed by hundreds of cars, during summer the number of pilgrims exceeds the capacity of localities. The accommodation offered by the villagers is closely related to the area's problems, lack of water and sewerage. The lack of comfort offered by some locals determines low prices; there are villagers who built guesthouses with an offer according to the industry standards. However within a radius of 10 kilometres, the guesthouses of Hațeg area are taken by storm on weekends.

*"In summer, all the 300 seats in hostels offered in the Hațeg and Silvas area, are occupied most of the time, on weekends, for those going to Prislop. The tourism demand is sometimes greater than the possibility of boarding accommodation"* says the mayor of Hațeg, Marcel Goia ( Guță D., 2014).

#### **Development of pilgrimage to the tomb of Father Arsenie Boca**

Father Arsenie Boca died on 28 November 1989 and according to the Christian faith this is the date when he ascended to heaven. The time is recorded and for all saints it is being marked in the religious calendar

and celebrated each year in churches. Father Arsenie Boca was not canonized a saint by the Romanian Orthodox Church, the believers expect the time when the Orthodox Church decides that his holiness actions comply with the canon.

Father Arsenie Boca during lifetime and after his death gave comfort to all believers. The need for spiritual help made the number of visitors to increase every year, and after 24 years, on the feast day the number of pilgrims reaches 50,000.

The journalists, the police and the local authorities noted that from year to year, the multitude of pilgrims is surprising. "The Saint of Transylvania" manages to motivate increasingly more believers to start the pilgrimage.

The information provided by media show us that in 2009" more than 40,000 people were at the monastery. Many came with the car, but there were also many organized groups. There are no parking places, so the cars were parked on one driving way and the other remained free for access of ambulances and firemen, if necessary. At one point the blockage was about 15 kilometers and people had to walk to the monastery" (Corlean N. 2012, p.109). In the next year "around 30,000 pilgrims came to the monastic settlement to commemorate Father Arsenie Boca, 21 years after his death." (Corlean N., 2012, p.115)

In 2014, "during holidays, the number of those who reach Prislop exceeds 50,000 people" (Guță D., 2014).

### **Prislop Monastery, a new destination of pilgrimage in Romania**

Specialists in the field of religion consider that new pilgrimage destinations may appear at any time, some may have a rapid evolution with a significant impact on the area, others may develop slowly growth or others may disappear completely as being unattractive.

Pilgrims arrive throughout the year, but the important events celebrated in the Monastery of Prislop are motivating believers to come. Thus, the stories of pilgrims tell us that "we come to Prislop on May 8, when it is the monastery's patron commemoration, on September 14 on the Cross Day and Father Arsenie Boca memorial meal on November 28. I come here every year for the past 24 years" (Daniel Guță, 2014).

The impact on the area is significant economically, from tourism and cultural point of view. The economic growth of the area is visible, by the number of pensions and emerging activities that open. Local authorities and locals admit they are overwhelmed by the number of people who visit them and find it difficult to cope with the infrastructure problems: roads congestion, lack of parking places, limited accommodation places, lack of facilities, minimum standard accommodation conditions, lack of running water and sewerage etc.

These problems will worsen if the local authorities fail to develop a strategy for the development of the infrastructure specific to tourism development. It is possible that after the canonization of Father Arsenie Boca the number of pilgrims increases, especially since it is noted the presence of pilgrims coming from far away in the country and abroad.

Tourism development will have a significant economic and image impact on the area. An important component of development policy is to support local people to build new guesthouses. The implementation of European funded projects can ensure the development of tourism infrastructure, the training of staff in the tourism industry and promoting the area as a tourist attraction with cultural values.

### **Conclusions**

The increase in the number of pilgrims and popularization of the miracles revealed among those who pray at the grave of Father Arsenie Boca in Prislop will result in his possible canonization and hence to the official recognition of this pilgrimage destination. This will have multiple implications in terms of culture and religion, but especially economically. The development of infrastructure to support the development of tourism flows in the area, involves the development of a medium and long term strategy regionally and locally. The emergence of new pilgrimage destinations enriches the Romanian cultural heritage and sets in motion the economic growth locally, regionally and nationally. Ensuring accessibility to the destination determines a steady increase in the number of pilgrims as seen in the case of Romania devoted pilgrimages.

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