



MINISTER GENERALIS

ORDINIS FRATRUM MINORUM CONVENTUALIUM

Prot N. 0464/2021

Rome, May 1, 2021

Friar Damian-Gheorghe Pătrașcu and the Provincial Fraternity
Province of St. Joseph, Spouse of the B.V.M. in Romania

Celebratory Letter

on the occasion of the 125th Anniversary of the foundation of the Province of St. Joseph, Spouse of the B.V.M. in Romania, which began with the decree of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith on July 26, 1895.

Dear Brothers,

It is with joy and great gratitude that I write to all of you in celebration of the 125th anniversary of the founding of the Province of St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and in honor of our Order's history in today's Romania, a land of ancient cultures; a nation with a rich human, spiritual, and religious legacy.

Just as the Carpathian Mountains cross most of Romania, so too, does the religious identity of the Romanians cross time and space. Missionaries felt welcomed amidst the religious sensibility of the people. Thus, as early as the thirteenth century, Franciscan missionaries began to evangelize what was then Moldavia-Cumania, northern Wallachia and other parts of Danubian Europe.

A land historically battered by all kinds of events, Romania has nevertheless experienced times of peace and prosperity. Romania's social, civil and religious troubles did not weaken the population. Rather, they forged a people of profound faith, particular character and well-known spiritual strength—all characteristics that shape the identity of Romanians today.

The jubilee, which began in 2020, celebrates the last major milestone in that history—the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the “new” Province. I enclose a brief description prepared by Friar Francisc-Lucian Ghervase on the activity undertaken by the Conventual Franciscans in this area until now.

I am not able to adequately describe the wealth of activities that our Conventual Franciscans have performed there. Instead, I would like to point out their lived witness of strength and holiness, even (or especially!), during times of persecution; adverse situations which forced our confreres into hiding, solitude, and suffering. My respect goes to these confreres, who not only in spite of their suffering, but in the midst of their suffering, transmitted the faith to the new generations, making possible your Province's re-foundation (if one can call it that) in the last few decades.

The Order is coming to know and appreciate the many fruits of holiness that have arisen among your friars, along with the other equally important fruits that have matured around our presences. A clear example of this is the recent beatification of the martyr Veronica Antal in 2018.

The whole Order is also aware of the great “boom” that God wanted to give us during the last vocational flowering of the Province of Romania. In fact, your friars are present almost all over the world. Thus, in a very special way, your Provincial fraternity is fulfilling a very important missionary role as it offers brothers for various services. Your Province's commitment to the

Custody of the Orient and the Holy Land is yet another sign of your maturity. I am sure that your Province would like to continue to deepen its missionary service to the Order and to the whole Church.

In addition to looking at the Province's recent past with gratitude, the 125th anniversary celebration is an opportunity to contemplate the present and look towards the future. Faith, witness and valiant apostolicity—even martyrdom—these have been the lived experience of many friars placed in difficult situations and in the uncomfortable position of being a religious minority. These experiences are the foundation that will make it possible—like a supportive memory—to advance with hope in the years to come.

In addition to being grateful to God and the friars, this anniversary is also an opportune reason to undertake an evaluation of our wonderful charism, identifying what aspects should be renewed, changed or simply strengthened. I am confident that the whole Province will carry out this process of renewal and improvement.

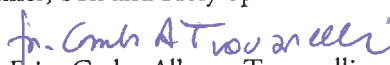
As I understand it, the times we are living in present new and unexpected challenges for Romania, as well as for Europe and our whole Western model in general. These challenges include the notable and growing phenomenon of secularization, the predominance of making everything immediate and convenient, the global dictatorship of new social media, etc. These reflect cultural changes associated with society's rapid modernization, a process we call "progress," but one which is not always accompanied by a parallel process of humanization.

Adopting an attitude that "demonizes" today's cultural changes is not helpful, even if those changes seem to be speeding us away from the solid humanistic and religious reference points of the recent past. Instead, I believe that the prophetic attitude for Romania should be one of knowing and recognizing the challenges and possibilities in this present-day situation so that the Provincial fraternity can imagine the near future with creativity and thus, trusting in the Holy Spirit, find appropriate responses and proposals.

Thus, the Lord calls you to take up those challenges and respond to them with the same strength and faith that your predecessors so passionately demonstrated. With the plentiful experience you have already acquired, both nationally and interculturally, combined with suitable human and academic preparation, I am sure you friars of the Province of St. Joseph will be more than able to respond to today's circumstances. During this "Year of St. Joseph," I entrust each of you, your communities, your projects, your lives and your dreams to the protection of your Patron Saint.

I thank God again for your Province and for all you offer to our Order, and I invoke upon all of you the blessing of the Lord in the way of St. Francis.

- + May the Lord bless you and keep you.
- + May He show His face to you and be merciful to you.
- + May He turn His countenance to you and give you peace.
- + May the Lord bless you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.


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ATTACHMENT

The Presence of the Friars Minor Conventual in Romania Friar Francisc-Lucian Ghervase Romania

The activity undertaken and conducted by the Franciscans in the Eastern Carpathians as early as 1239 is little known and is often presented in the literature in very general terms, sometimes leaving the reader without clear answers.

The Franciscan groups closest to Moldavia-Cumania at the time had been organized into Provinces at the General Chapter of 1239. Starting that year, the friaries in Hungary became an autonomous Province under the obedience of their Minister Provincial. Also, the Polish friaries scattered north of the Carpathians, together with some Bohemian friaries, were grouped together under a single Minister Provincial based in Prague.

The first written document attesting to the presence of the Franciscans in Moldavia was a request from Pope Gregory IX, in 1238, addressed to the Dominicans and Franciscans, in which he urged them to preach a crusade against Tsar Ionița Asan II, who reigned over the Romanian - Bulgarian principality. He had been persecuting Christians of the Latin rite. One can thus deduce that the Franciscans arrived in Moldavia with the army of the King of Hungary, Bela IV.

The first mention of Cumania in the papal documents was found in a letter by Pope Gregory IX, entitled *Cum hora undecima*, and dated June 11, 1239. In it, the pope sent a group of Franciscans, with many privileges and faculties, to the *terras Saracenorum, Peganorum, Graecorum, Bulgarorum, Cumanorum, aliorumque infidelium*.

Another document that mentions the presence of Franciscan friars in Cumania and northern Wallachia is a letter from King Bela IV of Hungary, to King Konrad IV of Germany. In it, King Bela recounts the disasters caused by the Tatars. He also mentions the massacre of archbishops, bishops, Friars Minor and Dominicans in Hungary, Bulgaria and Russia.

However, we find no trace of friars in that region until 1245, when Pope Innocent IV sent a minorite scholar, one Giovanni del Carpine, as his ambassador to the Great Khan of the Tartars. Due to the difficulties and unstable situations in which the mendicants had to work, and in the desire to make their apostolate more effective, in 1252 Innocent IV founded the famous Society of Pilgrim Friars for Jesus Christ. It was established to travel from one border to the next through the known world. It was comprised of Dominicans and Friars Minor and the Holy See gave it extensive privileges, which were indispensable for effective evangelization. Moldavia was recognized as a missionary region subject to the Society of Pilgrim Friars.

On January 14, 1622, Pope Gregory XV founded the Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* [Propagation of the Faith], which launched its first mission on April 25, 1623. It was entrusted to the Conventual Franciscans, under the title, "The Mission of the Friars Minor Conventual in Moldavia and Wallachia." In fact, the pope referred to this mission as his "firstborn". The first Conventual Franciscan mentioned in the "*Acta S. Congr. de Prop. Fide*" to serve as a missionary in Wallachia and Moldavia, was Friar Andrea Bogoslavich of Dalmatia. The first Apostolic Prefect of the mission of Moldavia and Wallachia was Friar Guglielmo Foca of Perugia, Vicar of Constantinople. He assumed the post in 1629.

Between 1623 and 1650, the Prefects of the Mission, resided in Constantinople, as they were also the Ministers Provincial of the Vicariate of the Orient and the Latin Patriarchal Vicariate. They would be present in the mission starting in 1650. They also held the title of Apostolic Vicar until the 19th century and sometimes were called bishops or apostolic visitators.

The long pilgrimages the friars made increased their knowledge of the country. This represented a great advantage for the missionaries sent by *Propaganda Fide*. Perhaps there was some benefit related to the variety of Provinces from which they came and to which they later returned. The missionaries came from all parts of Italy, from Lombardy to Sicily, but especially from Umbria.

The Italian missionaries sent by the Sacred Congregation were not only focused on assisting Catholics but also on acquiring converts among the “schismatics.” To this end, they learned the language of the country in which they preached and sometimes wrote. There is no doubt that the missionaries gave sermons in the Moldovan language. This is demonstrated by the large volume *Conciones latinae-muldavo*, written by Father Silvestro d’Amelio.

The scholar Ausilia reported that on feast days, before the Mass started, the missionaries would give an explanation of the day’s Gospel in the Moldovan language. Then, in the middle of the Mass, they would deliver a homily, which of course always had to be in Moldovan. Later, the Congregation issued a decree which stated that, following an examination, any missionaries who, after six months in the country, were declared unable to learn the language, were to be sent back.

In addition to pastoral activities carried out in parishes (sermons, catechesis), the missionaries tried to elevate Moldovan culture with various writings, some of which were religious in nature and others civil. The friars produced books on grammar and vocabulary and were particularly involved in founding schools for the education of the youth.

Given their skill in learning the Romanian language, as we have seen, the missionaries were able assist the local Church in performing various pastoral and cultural activities. Moreover, they could also be helpful to Moldovan society.

The great similarity between the Italian and Romanian languages, as we have mentioned, made it easier for missionaries to learn Moldovan. Thus, in a short time they were able to speak it and write it.

The missionaries sent by the Sacred Congregation to Moldavia, in addition to assisting Catholics, had to attract converts from among the Orthodox. Therefore, they had to learn the language of the country in which they preached as soon as possible. Thus, we indicate a couple of homilies written in Moldovan, taken from among a multitude that were either translated or directly composed. The homilies were written using Roman lettering. One in particular was entitled, “Homily for the Souls in Purgatory, Preached on the Day of the Dead and on the Fourth Sunday after Lent” and another was called, “Discourse on the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 14, Preached in Șcheia”.

To promote better understanding on the part of the Moldavians or Catholics, the missionaries translated some of the most commonly used ecclesiastical books such as the Catechism, a work which was greatly important in Romanian literature during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Among the texts of religious literature that used Roman lettering, there was also an Our Father prayer, printed in Frankfurt.

The Prefect of the Conventual Franciscan Mission in Moldova, Nicolaus Iosephus Camilli, was appointed the Apostolic Visitator to Moldavia on September 16, 1881. On December 4, 1881, he was appointed Titular Bishop of Mosynopolis. On April 27, 1883, Pope Leo XIII established the

Archdiocese of Bucharest with his Bull "*Quae in christiani nominis incrementum.*" Shortly after, on June 27, 1884, the Diocese of Iași, Romania, was also founded and the Conventual Franciscan Nicolau Iosephus Camilli was appointed its titular bishop.

On July 2, 1895, the Conventual Franciscan missionary Daniel Pietrobono, then Vicar General, summoned all the Conventual Franciscan missionaries in the region to Bacău, Romania, to decide together about establishing a religious Province in Moldavia. Moreover, the Most Reverend Dominic Jaquet, OFM Conv., Bishop of Iași, asked the Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* to found a regular religious Province. On July 26, 1895, the Sacred Congregation, decided to found the Province of St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Friars Minor Conventual in Moldavia, with Friar Daniele Pietrobono as its first Minister Provincial (1895-1899).

At the same time, it was stipulated that the Province be divided into four Custodies with ten parishes, together with filial churches in Bacău (Prăjești, Bacău, Fărăoani, Luizi-Călugăra), Galați (Galați, Huși), Săbăoani (Săbăoani, Adjudeeni, Hălăucești) and Troțuș (Târgu-Troțuș).

In modern Romania, until 1928, there were no special provisions to regulate the legal status of religious orders. The first law that took the legal status of religious orders into account was the Religious Law of 1928, art. 36. Later, through art. 17 of the Law for the Ratification of the Concordat between the Romanian State and the Holy See (June 12, 1929), the State agreed to recognize the juridical personhood of the Catholic religious Orders and congregations, only if their members were Romanian and their Superiors lived in the country.

On May 17, 1941, the Ministry of Religious Law, issued the following juridical act recognizing the juridical personhood of the Province of St. Joseph: "It is hereby certified that the Order of Friars Minor Conventual (Province of St. Joseph) is registered in the registry of legal entities of the religious Orders of the country on the basis of art. 36 of the religious law."

With the Decree-Law no. 176, dated August 3, 1948, the religious Orders of Romania, including the Province of St. Joseph of the Friars Minor Conventual of Moldavia, were suspended, and many of its members arrested and sentenced to years in prison. Among these were: Friars Petru Albert, Ștefan Apostol, Anton Bișoc, Eugen Blăjuț Sr., Iosif Budău, Ioan Butnaru, Iosif Celante, Iosif Chelaru, Gheorghe Coceanga, Anton Dămoc, Francisc Dămoc, Petru Dâncă, Anton Demeter, Alois Donea, Bishop Ioan Duma, Gheorghe Dumitraș, Iosif Duman, Gheorghe Pătrașcu, Gheorghe Vameșiu, and Iosif Sabău. Other friars who were not arrested continued their activity as shepherds of souls in the diocesan parishes through 1990, when the Province was reborn under the wise guidance of Friar Gheorghe Pătrașcu, who until then had been leading the Province while in hiding, together with other friar-priests who survived with the support of the General Curia, having the approval of the ecclesiastical authority.

Besides the friars who suffered persecution under the Communist regime, I would like to mention four friars who died in fame of holiness, namely:

Friar Francesco Antonio Tasso of Savona, died in fame of holiness in Răchiteni on March 5, 1765. He was initially buried in the church in Răchiteni, but due to the fact that the church was unsafe, his mortal remains were transferred to Iași on June 5, 1782. Friar Francesco Antonio had been sent to Moldova in 1763 and Friar Ioannes Oviller, the Prefect of the Mission, appointed him as the Pastor of the church in Răchiteni. Speaking about the personality of Friar Francesco Antonio, Friar Ioannes said: "He did so much good by living a holy life, being humble and patient, and loving poverty and chastity. He was full of love towards the poor and the sick and was exemplary in doing good works." Friar Barbieri, who unearthed the mortal remains of Friar Francesco Antonio to transfer them to Iași, confessed in the document drawn up for that occasion that even fifty years after Friar Francesco Antonio's death, the people remembered him as a saint. On March 13, 2020,

after some renovation work done in the old church of Iași, the mortal remains of Friar Anthony were transferred back to Răchiteni and buried in the new church.

Friar Anton Demeter was born September 17, 1925, in Butea, Iași District, Romania. Immediately after primary school, he entered our minor seminary in Hălăucești. After his novitiate year in Săbăoani (1945-1946) he made his simple profession and then continued his philosophy and theology studies in Luizi-Călugăra. In 1949, when the communist government suppressed all religious congregations and confiscated their property, he returned to his family. After working for two years as an accountant in a factory, he entered the seminary in Alba Iulia, where, having completed his final year of theology, he was ordained to the priesthood on June 29, 1953, by the Most Reverend Alexandru Cisar, Archbishop of Bucharest. He exercised his ministry as assistant pastor at the church Prăjești and then in the Catholic Cathedral of St. Joseph in Bucharest.

Five years later, he was arrested on the night of August 20, 1958, and after a sham trial, was sentenced to twenty years hard labor on charges of instructing children and young people on mystical-religious teachings and plotting against the social order. After a few days in prison in Jilava (Bucharest), his denouncers tried extorting him to level charges against other priests. When he steadfastly refused to do so, they struck his spine with a hammer and he became paralyzed for a time. Already gravely ill, he was sent to spend two years at two different labor camps, where he was forced to crawl on all fours to a place where he would be tortured, while other prisoners did his work for him

In 1963, he was pardoned and confined to the Parish of Oțeleni, in Moldova, where, despite many restrictions by the communist authorities, he tried to welcome and listen to those who turned to him. In 1979, he retired due to illness and went to live in a house he bought near the parish church of Barticești. Finally, in 1993, he received an obedience to the St. Francis Friary in Roman, where he had just built the Minor Seminary and the Theological Institute, and where he served as confessor and spiritual director of the young. Highly sought after by people of all faiths, he was visited daily by large crowds to whom he offered advice and spiritual comfort.

After eighty-one years of life, forty-seven of which were spent in a wheelchair for the paralyzed, Father Anton died on the evening of December 20, 2006. His body was buried in the Roman Municipal Cemetery. Since that time, his tomb has become a pilgrimage destination where many faithful seek his help and intercession. On Tuesday, November 29, 2016, the Feast of All Saints of the Franciscan Order, a diocesan inquiry was opened for the beatification of the Servant of God Friar Anton Demeter (1925-2006). The event took place at the chapel of the Conventual Franciscan Theological Institute of Roman in the Province of St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Romania.

Friar Iosif Petru Maria Pal, was born in Nisiporești, Romania, on October 6, 1889. After primary school he entered our seminary in Hălăucești in 1905. In 1909 he was sent to Rome for philosophy and theology studies. At the end of his studies, he was ordained to the priesthood on April 22, 1916. During his studies, he was a good friend of Father Maximilian Kolbe, being the only priest among the group of friars who founded the Association of the Militia of the Immaculata. He blessed the first medals of the Militia of the Immaculate. Being a good friend of Father Maximilian, he was very knowledgeable about the spiritual life of St. Maximilian Kolbe and presented important information for the canonization process. Returning to his country of origin, Friar Iosif served as the administrator of the Hălăucești Orphanage. In 1923, he was appointed Pastor of the church in Luizi-Călugăra where he remained until his death. He built the seminary in Hălăucești, the church in Luizi-Călugăra as well as a seminary in the same locality. He was also a professor of moral and pastoral theology. From 1932 until his death, Friar Iosif served as the Minister Provincial of the Province of Romania. He died in Luizi-Călugăra on June 21, 1947, due

to epidemic typhus which he contracted while he was treating a sick person. He was buried in the parish church of Luizi-Călugăra. He was a good preacher, charitable to the poor, kind, and much loved by the people who even today remember him with veneration.

Friar Martin Benedict, was born in Galbeni, Romania, in 1931, to peasant parents. After attending elementary school in his home town (1938-1945), he entered our seminary in Hălăucești and studied there for three years. Once the communist regime began to persecute the Catholic Church and the schools were nationalized, he completed his high school studies in Bacău and subsequently enrolled in the Medical Faculty of the University of Iași, where he graduated in 1957.

He worked as a doctor in Răducăneni, Tătăreni, Bacău, and finally at the hospital in Onești from 1962 until his death. In 1972, he became seriously ill from an intestinal disease. He underwent three surgeries within a few days. Although the doctors expected that he would soon die, he lived on for fourteen more years. Everyone felt his recovery was miraculous. At that time, his sister Varvara moved in with him. She was also a clandestine religious, like her brother.

After continuous contacts with the Conventual Franciscans, especially Friar Gheorghe Patrașcu, he decided to continue his preparation for religious life and the priesthood. Under the guidance of Friar Gheorghe, the then incognito Minister Provincial of Romania, Martin secretly completed his novitiate year. He made his temporary profession in 1976 and his solemn profession some time in 1979. Due the historical circumstances, no records were kept, so the precise date is unknown. On September 14, 1980, in Slănic, Moldova, he was ordained a priest by the Greek Catholic Bishop, Alexandru Todea.

During all this time, Friar Martin continued working at the hospital, without agents of the “Securitate” (secret police) discovering his religious profession and priestly status. He created a small chapel in his apartment, where he would celebrate daily Mass. The faithful used to call him “the doctor who prays a lot” because of his continuous prayers and “our fatherly doctor.” He was not only concerned with the physical health of his patients but also with their souls, urging them to pray, to confess and to regularize their married life. He particularly fought against abortion and defended the dignity and inalienable rights of all human beings. He also contributed toward the construction of some churches despite the hostility of the communist regime which was then in power.

He made a pilgrimage to Rome for the beatification of the Romanian Capuchin Franciscan, Friar Geremia da Valacchia. During the beatification Mass, on October 30, 1983, Friar Martin participated disguised as a layman. He read some intentions of the prayers of the faithful, and added some improvised reflections, that constituted a warning to everyone in the audience. He was thus recognized as a priest by the secret police and started being persecuted, suffering arrests, interrogations, attempts to poison him and efforts to run him over with a car. These persecutions lasted until his death, on July 12, 1986.

A year later, water from a well next to his family house in his hometown began to smell and taste of roses. Galbeni soon became a pilgrimage destination and this development was deeply troubling to the secret police. However, all attempts to stop the flow of the faithful failed. Rumors of miracles and inexplicable healings were spreading and people started to pray to Friar Martin, with great devotion, to ask for his help and grace. Friar Martin’s memory remains very much alive among the lay faithful and the friars of the Province Friar Martin’s process for canonization began on April 14, 2007.

The reorganization of the Province took place in Nisiporești, where the pastor at the time, Father Albert Petru, reopened the pre-theology school and starting in May of 1990, he received sixty young aspirants who would be formed to enter the Order. In the autumn of the same year, the

first novices began their formation in Luizi-Călugăra, and in 1991, he sent the first group of simply professed friars to study abroad in Italy, Germany and Austria. Also that year, work began on the current Conventual Franciscan Theological Institute in Roman and the novitiate house in Prăjești was renovated.

In 1993, the first friars resumed their activities in the Eastern rite and built the friary in Oradea, followed by friaries in Holod and Carei. In 1994, the Conventual Franciscan Postulancy House was built in Huși. The Bishop of Iași re-entrusted the friars with the parish communities of Luizi-Călugăra, Prăjești, Târgu Trotuș, Galați, Huși and Hălăucești, to which the communities of Buruienesti, Nisiporești and Cacica were added.

On June 25, 2010, the Province was enriched with the Custody of the Orient and the Holy Land with its headquarters at the St. Anthony Friary in Istanbul. The territory of the Custody includes the area called the Middle East, and currently consists of four fraternities active in Lebanon and Turkey, namely: the St. Mary Friary in Büyükdere, the St. Anthony of Padua Friary in Istanbul, the St. Anthony of Padua Friary in Sin-El-Fil and the St. Francis of Assisi Friary in Zahle. Currently the Custody has eighteen solemnly professed friars and three simply professed friars.

Today, the Province of St. Joseph, Spouse of the B.V.M. in Romania has 215 solemnly professed friars and eighteen simply professed friars in eighty-seven communities on four continents.

From this brief chronological presentation, the historical testimony of the apostolic zeal of our predecessor friars clearly emerges. It is a testimony that obliges all of us friars of the present day to commit ourselves to work for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.