

Fr. Bernard Stef Stefan, A.A. (1916-2010)
Leader in the Rebirth of the Romanian Church
Prisoner in the Communist Gulag

Ştefan Ştef was born on October 22, 1916 in Lăscud (region of Mures, Romania). He completed his elementary school education in his home town, then his early high school years in Târnăveni (1927-1930), and finally completed his secondary education in Blaj (1930-1934).

Having received his diploma, he entered the Assumptionists at Casa Domnului (Blaj) on July 20, 1934. The same year he began his novitiate in Beiuş-Bihor.

On September 8, 1935, he made his first profession and took the name Bernard; so it was that he celebrated his 75th anniversary of religious life this year.

Between 1935 and 1941, he studied philosophy and theology in France, following the order of studies of the day: first, a preparatory year at Layrac (1935-1936), then philosophy at Scy-Chazelles (1936-1948), and finally theology at Lormoy (1938-1941). On December 8, 1941, he made his final profession. As a result of the Second World War, he had to return to Romania in order complete his final year of theology.

Ordained a priest in the Greco-Catholic Church on July 27, 1941 at Casa Domnului (Blaj) by Most Rev. Vasile Aftenie, Fr. Bernard was first assigned to Beiuş as a formator at the diocesan high school seminary, while he also served as prefect of studies at the diocesan boarding school in Beiuş (1941-1944).

He was then asked to teach French at the Lycée Samuil-Vulcan in Beiuş and to be the confessor of the Oblates of the Assumption between 1944 and 1948.

During this time he did graduate studies at the seminary/teaching college of Cluj, where he studied the pedagogy of St. John Bosco. Having obtained his licentiate in theology at Blaj in 1946, he was named the superior of the community in Beiuş and rector of the boarding school in 1947.

At that time the Communist regime came to power in Romania. Because this new regime nationalized all schools in August 1948 (at the same time the Greco-Catholic Church of Romania was suppressed by the Communist authorities and forcibly integrated into the Orthodox Church), Fr. Ştef remained in the community of the Oblates of the Assumption in Beiuş. Eventually, the situation required that he return to his family in Lăscud.

There he was forced to follow the program of religious life as he had come to know it in the various houses of formation he attended and to carry out pastoral work in secret.

It was this work that led to his arrest on the night of July 26/27 1951. He was kept for questioning until February 1952, when he was transferred, with other Greco-Catholic priests from the region, to the prison in Cluj to be judged. His sentence came on April 18, 1952, which ironically happened to be Good Friday.

During an expedited trial, Fr. Bernard was condemned to a five-year sentence for having "plotted against the public order." Deemed capable of working, he was sent, along with other priests, to forced labor at a work-site along the Danube-Black Sea canal.

After two weeks, he was transferred from the prison of Jilava, near Bucharest, with others, to Poarta Albă (department of Constanţa), to work making bricks. Nearly 11,000 prisoners unloaded clay from wagons and transformed it into bricks.

The work was heavy and the food meager: a bowl of dirty cabbage and a piece of bread. After three weeks he was sent to the Colonia Peninsula work-site, in Team F (the priests' unit).

For the 62 Churchmen gathered there, the labor was extremely severe. In the beginning they worked to lay the bed for the railroad. They were not allowed to talk to each other; they were not allowed to pray. Even if one was caught praying individually, he was punished. So it was that Fr. Bernard was thrown into jail several times because he was caught in the act of praying.

Once the unit had completed the rail-bed, Team F was transferred to a stone quarry near the road where a canal was being built. They worked 8-12 hours a day carrying stones in large baskets to a site where soldiers would empty them.

In 1953, this group of priests was sent to an even more severe regime and punishments were increased. At the Easter Vigil they were forced to work till 11 P.M.

The death of Stalin (summer 1953) ushered in a period of great change: the canal work was suspended, the bulldozers halted their work, and shovels were set aside. The detained priests praised God with hymns and psalms and no one could stop them.

They were given permission to receive mail and the quality and quantity of food improved. Since the prisoners were no longer under tight surveillance, Fr. Bernard began to celebrate Mass, to hear confessions, and to give religious instructions. Further restrictions were slowly lifted. On October 8, 1855, his sentence was commuted and he was allowed to return to his family in Lăscud, where he took up once again a life of prayer, of study, and secret pastoral ministry, even if he was under state surveillance: a translation of the Confessions of Saint Augustine, reflections on the work of St. Theresa of Avila, catechism classes for children and adults, celebration of Masses in homes, spiritual direction, visits to his Assumptionist confrères, spiritual exercises for religious and faithful alike, whether young or old. Fr. Bernard also remained the only Assumptionist who would receive, in secret, young candidates for religious

life, under the Communist regime's downfall in 1989.

On June 30, 1990, with Fr. Teophil Pop and Br. Gavril, Fr. Ştef returned to Blaj, first in a house near Casa Domnului, then in an apartment, and finally in the residence where the congregation is today. This was the beginning of Assumption's rebirth in Romania after Communism, one which allowed for a rich pastoral and liturgical activity.

Between 1990 and 1999, since the Greco-Catholic Church had been re-established, Fr. Bernard also became professor at the major seminary of this rite in Blaj. He taught fundamental theology, patristics, and pastoral theology. He set out to re-organize any number of movements that had once existed in this local Church before their suppression: the Third Order of St. Augustine, the Marian Circle, Agru, Kolping, etc. He became the advisor of the archbishop on several fronts, was named director of the diocesan Marian Circle, and was asked to preach numerous retreats to priests and seminarians.

Thanks to his literary skills, Fr. Ştef was able to edit a number of books: a translation into Romanian of The Confessions of St. Augustine, A Guide for the Christian Life, Saint Augustine: The Man, His Work, and His Teaching; Saint Theresa of Avila: Her Life, Her Work, and Her Teaching; a handbook for the pilgrimage to Our Lady of the Poor (Carbunari, near Blaj); Thy Kingdom Come to commemorate 80 years of Assumptionist presence in Romania ; Meditations on and Union with the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of Men; Serving the Holy Spirit, a collection of meditations; Consecration to Our Lord; The Marian Circles, and Meditations for the Spiritual Exercises. He also wrote many, many articles in different diocesan publications of the Greco-Catholic Church in Romania.

Most Rev. Lucian Mureşan, the major archbishop of this Church, said of Fr. Bernard, on the occasion of his 65th anniversary of priesthood:

"What shall we call you, Fr. Bernard ? We shall call you: Priest, because you have found happiness in serving Our Lord; Monk, for you have allowed the way you think and act to be shaped by the Virgin Mary; Doctor of Souls, because you have healed so many souls in the Sacrament of Confession; Theologian, because you have spoken of the love of God; Friend, because you never refused to advise anyone who came to you; Witness of Jesus Christ, because you were mistreated and humiliated for the sake of his name and for the Church; Beloved of God, a man in whom the Holy Spirit was pleased to dwell: were you not the one who taught us all the "Chaplet of the Holy Spirit"?



With the death of Fr. Bernard Ştef, who died on the morning of September 11, 2010 in the hospital of Blaj, the Assumption and the entire Greco-Catholic Church mourn the loss of a great figure, one who contributed wholeheartedly to the rebirth of the Assumption in Romania as well as of the Greco-Catholic Church . Now we are filled with hope because we are convinced that Fr. Bernard with continue to intercede for us before our Heavenly Father. May he rest in peace.

Ionel Antoci, AA