

**THE HIGH REPUTATION OF PRIEST NICULAE M. POPESCU,
MEMBER OF THE ROMANIAN ACADEMY,
IN THE ROMANIAN CULTURAL LIFE**

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Abstract: Niculae M. Popescu was an important Romania theologian and Church historian. He studied history in Vienna and he was remarked by professor Nicolae Iorga, the most important Romanian historian. The young deacon Popescu taught at Iorga's Summer University in Valenii de Munte. In 1925, he became member of the Romanian Academy, with the support on Nicolae Iorga. Later, Father Popescu taught Prince Michael religion and he was appreciated by the King Carol II. After the communists came into power, Father Popescu was expelled from The Romanian Academy. In 1990, after the fall of the communist regime, he was rehabilitated by the Romanian Academy.

Keywords: Niculae M. Popescu, priest, The Romanian Academy, Church history, Nicolae Iorga.

Priest Niculae M. Popescu's personality – a remarkable historian and full member of the Academy of Romania – was a first rank personality of the Orthodox Church of Romania within the period of World War I and World War II. After the end of the "Great War" and the unification of Transylvania, Bessarabia and Bukovina with the mother-country, the future of the cultural evolution was going to play a very particular place in the education of the society. During this period, more than never before, scholars and men of science were granted the right and deserved consideration they were worth of in strengthening the elite of the younger state.

Priest Niculae M. Popescu was one of those who – through his scientific activity and the competency of his studies – brought his contribution to the improvement of the theological education. He would soon be known in both clerical and, especially, in the lay circles, as well.

Soon after having obtained his doctor's degree in Vienna, Nae Popescu, the deacon, drew Nicolae Iorga's attention. A summer university was inaugurated in Vălenii-de-Munte under the latter's aegis where many famous personalities,

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belonging to different domains of culture, delivered speeches on various topics of interest. In 1914, a year after having ended his doctoral studies, Nae Popescu delivered four lectures on: Byzantine Studies on the History of the Romanians, The Influence of the Byzantines over the West, The Influence of the Byzantines over the Romanian countries, Catholicism and Byzantium, Attempts of Unifying the Eastern and the Western Church. In the same year, N. Iorga delivered 2 courses, Constantin Moisil 1, P.N. Panaitescu 1 and Al. Demetrescu 1¹.

A very important period in Priest Nae Popescu's life was marked by his attitude against the Nazi occupation of Romania (1916-1918); it became a turning point concerning the relationship between those who had to suffer from the consequences of Mackensen's troops and those accused to have made a pact with the enemy. In such an unstable atmosphere the betrayal accusations were very acute. Among those accused by such a behavior was Priest Nae Popescu as well. King Ferdinand, himself, was much interested in his attitude and behavior. Al. Tzigara-Samurcaș, chief commissioner of the Municipal Police at the time of the Sovereign's refuge in Iași and His Majesty agent, registered all the discussions between the Sovereign and himself in his memories: "His Majesty particularly asked me about the behavior Priest Popescu had in Cotroceni, as his information about the Priest were not very favorable. I contested everything"². In the course of time Priest Nae would never forget Al. Tzigara-Samurcaș's gesture of having protected him in front of the unjust accusations. So, the art historian wrote that "I felt a great satisfaction to further renew the honorific delegation granted to me, that of «General Inspector of the museums all over the country» by decision 19125 of April 19, 1938, signed by the new under secretary, Priest N.M. Popescu"³. It was Nicolae Iorga who offered the most important testimonies about Nicolae M. Popescu in as far as the impact with the academic life was concerned. He wrote in his memories of November 21, 1919: church service at Mihai Vodă for the customary commemoration. Moldavia Metropolitan Bishop (Pimen Georgescu), Bishop Cristea, and other bishops (Mustea, Bădescu) from the other side, deputies and senators from Transylvania and Bukovina were present at the ceremony. From the pulpit the deacon Nicolae Popescu is speaking in a thundering voice, impetuously⁴. On March 30, 1922 Iorga wrote: "The University Senate [...] recommend Priest N. Popescu in the quality of professor of History of the Romanian Church"⁵. The great historian also promoted and sustained Priest Nae to

¹ Ion Sân-Giorgiu, *O cetate culturală: Vălenii de munte 1908-1928*, Vălenii de Munte, Tiparul Așezământului tipografic "Datina Românească", 1928, p. 15.

² Al. Tzigara-Samurcaș, *Memorii*, vol. II (1910-1918), Bucharest, "Grai și suflet-cultura națională" Publishing, 1999, p. 235.

³ Idem, *Memorii. Lupta vieții unui octogenar 1937-1941*, Bucharest, Vitruviu Publishing, 2008, p. 140.

⁴ N. Iorga, *Memorii*, vol. II. *Însemnări zilnice maiu 1917-1939, mart 1920. Războiul național. Lupta pentru o nouă viață politică*, Bucharest, Editura "Națională" S. Ciornei (withant year) p. 269.

⁵ Idem, *Memorii*, vol. III, *Tristețea și sfârșitul unei domnii (1920-1922)*, Bucharest, Editura "Națională" S. Ciornei, 1939, p. 291.

become a professor in the Bucharest Faculty of Theology. Nevertheless, there were persons who tried to encumber the priest's promotion. "April 7, 1922. I am contested by the University Senate the right to participate in the debates in my quality of a deputy-dean. The reason is that of failing the recommendation for Priest Popescu. The servants told me that «I was invited there by mistake»"⁶.

Iorga's appreciations extended even more: "November 16, 1922 opens the course of Priest N. Popescu with a beautiful and courageous speech. At the opening there were present the Bishop of Râmnic together with many priests"⁷.

The First World Congress on Byzantine studies took place in Bucharest on April 14, 1924. French, Italian, English, Spanish, Belgian, Serbian and Russian scholars had been invited on the occasion. N. Iorga presided over the organizing committee and Priest N. Popescu was appointed secretary general⁸.

On June 3, 1925 Priest N. Popescu delivered a speech on the occasion of his being called to be a member of the Academy of Romania. Iorga wrote in his memories that "in the afternoon, Priest N. Popescu's membership will be accepted by the Academy. He, very cautiously speaks about Onciu, alongside with very courageous appreciations regarding other personalities who answer his questions. Patriarch and Metropolitan Bishop Pimen are also present"⁹.

Priest Nae Popescu was grateful to Iorga for supporting him. So, on July 15, 1931 the great historian wrote about the "opening of the courses. Not many from among the old friends are present. Bishop Leu and Bishop Simeonia are there. Priest N. Popescu endearingly speaks about my influence over his generation"¹⁰.

By the royal decree no. 1687 of June 15, 1934 Priest Nicolae M. Popescu was appointed member of the "Crown of Romania" Order in rank of Great Cross¹¹.

On April 28, 1937, King Carol II wrote in his diary that "at 6, priest Nae Popescu, would come for the confession"¹²; this is a proof that the sovereign was the Priest spiritual son.

On July 18, 1938 Queen Mary left for eternity. The one chosen to perform the funeral service was Priest Nae. "These kinds of performances are tedious and unpleasant – wrote King Carol II on July 22 – no matter of how much do the priests involve in them. I decided that tomorrow it will be Priest Nae Popescu to

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 295.

⁷ *Idem*, *Memorii*, vol. IV, *Încoronarea și boala regelui (1922-1925)*, Bucharest, Editura "Națională" S. Ciornei, 1939, p. 16.

⁸ The National Archives of Romania (it will be further quoted ANR), fund Ministerul Instrucțiunii, file 461/1924, f. 2.

⁹ *Idem*, *Memorii*, vol. V, *Agonia regală și regența (1925-1930)*, Bucharest, Editura "Națională" S. Ciornei, 1939, p. 30.

¹⁰ *Idem*, *Memorii*, vol. VI, *Încercarea guvernării peste partide (1930-1932)*, Bucharest, Editura "Națională" S. Ciornei, 1939, p. 141.

¹¹ *Monitorul Oficial*, Part I, no. 144, 26 June 1934, p. 4122.

¹² *Carol al II-lea, Între datorie și pasiune. Însemnări zilnice, (1904-1939)*, vol. I, edited by Marcel Dumitru Ciucă, Narcis Dorin Ion, Bucharest, Silex Publishing, 1995, p. 174.

perform it and make everything in dignity¹³. The coffin with the dead body was brought from the Peleş Castle to Bucharest. The King wrote: “from the railway station we will immediately arrive the Cotroceni Palace where the customary service is performed. The main celebrant priest is Nae «Popescu», he who is mostly dignified, he who has such a warm and beautiful voice and properly celebrates without that nasal singing of Greek origin”¹⁴.

Professor Augustin Z. N. Pop considered, in 1943, that “in the conclave of the Academy of Romania, where – through the voice of Priest Nae Popescu, the faithful historian of monasteries and of our old ecclesiastical servants – the ancestral voice of Orthodoxy finds out the worthy remembrances of the priests of the Iași synod. His Reverence was “the most proper immortal” person meant to speak in the sweet patriarchal language about the synod assembly of September 15-October 27, 1642, under the protection of Vasile Lupu, for both his soul born from a spiritual texture and from the efforts spread around, in lections and interpretations and without any foreign aids, a history of a national ecclesiastical school, a friendly and forerunning apprentice. It is a known fact! that the teachings of his mentor were not in vain, planted in dry rocks and meant to not bear fruit. The Church and, alongside with it our aboriginal spirit, were met together as friends of the Academy, the one which it itself, protected the printings and the norms all over Romania and towards all the Romanians.

Re-establishing, in the course of centuries, the merit of initiating the Petru Movilă’s synod of Iași (whose grandfather died as a monk: Ioanichie, and whose consanguine uncle was Gheorghe, the Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia), Priest Nae Popescu makes a deep analysis over the theological substance of *The Orthodox Testifying*, the catechetical “constitution” of our Holy Spirit. His Reverence also speaks about the original Greek manuscript of the normative work sent in 1673 by interpreter Panait Nicussios to Louis XIV with the express wish to be kept in the French Royal Library; that was a direct response against all the impostors and the *Westerns* who, mercilessly in their confessional disputes, denied the Orthodox paternity of the manuscript – *manuscris parisianus* [Parisian Manuscript] – which was also printed in Romania, after 300 years since the Iași Assembly, with the aid of His Most Blessed Tit the Metropolitan Bishop of Bukovina¹⁵.

Referring to the book “The Fallen Asleep in the Lord Parish Priests” written by priest Nae Popescu, professor Aurel Sacerdoțeanu who, at that time, was a General Director of the State Archives appreciated that “it is not enough to recommend the idea of collecting a bunch of so many studies lost in unimportant periodicals. Priest Popescu’s writings, rarely presented to the readers, are to be noticed in his only one guiding line: his concern for the *people* of our Church. [...] Historical testimonies accompany each name. There where such testimonies were

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 285.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 286.

¹⁵ “Revista fundațiilor regale”, year X, nr. 12, 1 December 1943, p. 717.

less convincing Father Popescu knew how to fill the loss with the help of his talent or with the help of the evocative history. I have read them with an obvious interest but, at the same time, with a great regret: Priest Popescu rarely unfasten his sack with precious things!”¹⁶

In the dossier of informative prosecution opened in the name of Priest N.M. Popescu, the intelligence agents drew the following conclusion: “he was a teacher of religious sciences and of classical languages in the time of ex-king Michael, a friend of the ex royal family until the royal family left the country”¹⁷, underlining the fact that “he performed church services in the ex-royal palace”¹⁸.

Father Nae Popescu was a scholar recognized by the entire cultural and intellectual élite since the communist régime had been set up in Romania. Excluded from the Academy of Romania by the new power submitted to the Moscow leaders, Priest Nae lived the last period of his life in patience and piety passing through two great ordeals: his son’s, Michael, and his wife, Eufrosina’s passing to the Lord after only two years.

In a letter of September 4, 1956, addressed to G.T.Kirileanu, professor Aurelian Sacerdoțeanu wrote: “I sent to Father Popescu your message, which he received it with gladness, I think; he told me that he had three more volumes of sermons translated from Russian, which you have probably heard about. Yet, he is unable to write any more now, he told me regretfully. I told him not to be overwhelmed by that idea especially when it is not about writings addressed to a scientific apparatus but about a totally different thing. I could certainly not convince him as it was a known fact that he was writing with difficulty even in the past. This is a pity. So few things remain behind him, of him who knows so may! He also and again told me about the many mistakes of the Romanian nation; I consider this is one of the mistakes His Reverence fell too deep in”¹⁹.

In 1990 Father Nae Popescu was rehabilitated by the Academy of Romania. In the session of July 3, the academician Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, when referring to electing Father Dumitru Stăniloae to become a member of that forum, she referred to the fact that it was established a tradition in the Academy “to always include distinguished prelates bishops or professors”. This very select gallery included Priest Nicolae M. Popescu, as well”²⁰.

Father Nicolae M. Popescu was a model. The prestige he achieved did not make him proud of himself but, according to the saying of the much regretted Academician Florin Constantiniu, history helped him become meek and pious.

¹⁶ “Hrisovul. Buletinul Școalei de Arhivistică”, III, 1943, pp. 141-142.

¹⁷ National Archives of the Council for Studying the “Securitate” Archives (A.C.N.S.A.S.), Information fund, file 375907, f. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 3.

¹⁹ Romanian National Archives (ANR), “Sacerdoțeanu Aurelian” personal fund, file 824, f. 35.

²⁰ Romanian Academy Archives, Chancellery Service, file 4/1990, p. 10.

Ministry of National Education
Upper Education Department
No. 73941/1945

We are honored to acknowledge you that the Ministry in conformity with the dispositions of Art. 58 of the Law on Upper Education award Priest N. Popescu, the full professor on the History of the Romanian Church, a certificate of merit on April 1, 1945.

The payment will be made from the omission gradation fund stipulated by the budget in art 56 of the accounting period 1945/1946.

Minister,
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Director,
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[marginal notes:]

Oct 1, 1945. Father Professor, in agreement with the Rector will be included in the pay roll.

Ministry of National Education
Upper Education Department
No. 81884/1947

We are honored to inform you that according to decree no. 333/ 1947, Priest Popescu Nicolae, full Professor in the Chair on History of Romanian Church, within the Bucharest Faculty of Theology is maintained in position in the Chair of Upper Education until October 1, 1947, according to the decision taken in the University Senate and in conformity with art 89 paragraph 2 of the Law concerning the organization of the Upper Educational System

Minister,
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Director,
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[marginal notes:]

March 20, 1947. Note is taken and communicated to Father Professor Nicolae M. Popescu.

Father Professor P. Vintilescu.



Fig. 1 – Priest Nicolae M. Popescu Member of the Romanian Academy.



Fig. 2 – Nicolae M. Popescu at the opening ceremony of the courses at Vălenii de Munte.

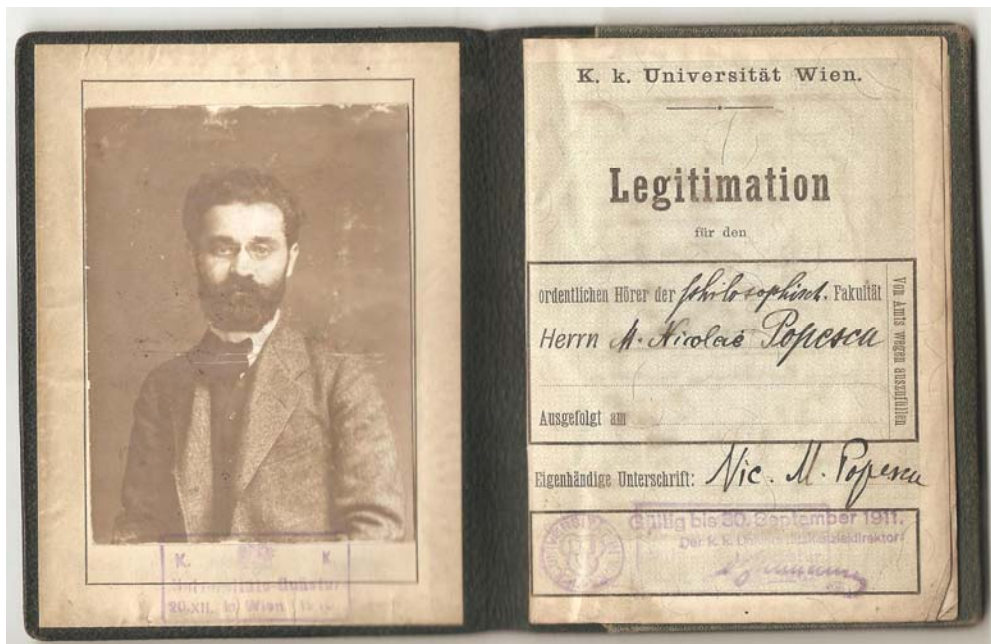


Fig. 3 – Viena University membership card.
Source: Priest Nicolae M. Popescu Archive.



Fig. 4 – Mirăușilor Church. Front view. The Great Voivode with his colleagues discussing about religion.

Source: Priest Nicolae M. Popescu Archive.