

## Christmas Letter

*The following document is a personal letter (the author must remain anonymous) written last Christmas. It describes some of the difficulties facing the Romanian Baptist Church today.*

Since my brave and good friends have offered me this opportunity to write to you, I would like to inform you of the most recent events here and, in particular, to give you my assessment of those events.

You, together with other brethren in England, have done us a great service in making known in the West the facts about our situation. We do not know what echo these facts may produce, but we are glad that you are aware of our situation in the West and that there are hearts which beat for us, pray for us and speak about us – however infrequently that may be at times. I heard recently of the position of Christians in the Soviet Union. Someone told me about Georgi Vins and the 85 Baptist prisoners in that country, and also about the restrictions there. It is true that in Romania, up till now, the communist authorities have not employed open persecution against us as Christians. At first sight anyone comparing our situation with that of Christians in Russia would say that there is a good deal of freedom here. With a few exceptions our authorities have not applied such rough methods on us. Yet if we leave on one side the formal and purely juridical aspect of the problem and consider the spiritual aspect of the religious problem in Romania, then it may be concluded that the situation is not much better here than in the Soviet Union, perhaps it is even worse.

In the Soviet Union the power of the communists is great. The USSR is a large country. It is a powerful political and economic organization compared to us. The Soviet authorities can use violence, arrests and even the laws against Christians. For us it is not so easy. Romania is still a small developing country. Her political system, both in organization and in power, is weaker than that of the giant in the East. We depend a great deal economically on the West.

We have many economic obligations to the West. In addition, the spirit of national independence which we insist on has led us to build friendly relations with "others" and not only with the East. All these factors have determined the adoption of a policy towards the religious problem which differs from the policy adopted in the Soviet Union. Our authorities do not use violence or arrests or the written law. This does not mean, however, that the Romanian communists are indifferent to the problem of the Christian Churches in Romania.

One of the most important and most effective methods of the communists in Romania has been and still is that of attempting to corrupt or win over the leaders of the Christian denominations. The very thing which the authorities failed to do with the apostolic Church, and which the authorities in Poland today are failing to achieve with their own Catholic Church leaders, our own atheist communists have easily succeeded in doing in Romania. Through certain reactionary, fearful, profiteering and vain men (many of them without much education) the atheist authorities have managed to introduce into our Churches restrictions and regulations which have particularly affected the religious movement. Who can directly accuse the authorities for these denials of rights when they stem from the actions of our own organization or Union?

Another method employed here in Romania to restrict the religious movement is that of closing theological schools in the country and reducing to a minimum the number of available places in the seminaries. Only a special selection of candidates for the theological schools is permitted and then they become pastors only after enduring an exacting process – their development is spied on.

There are other factors which show what religious freedom means in Romania. For example, the refined but methodical discrimination against Christian pupils (particularly evangelicals) at primary and secondary schools,

the barring of many university faculties to Christian young people because they do not have the necessary qualifications or recommendations from the Young Communist League and the Communist Party, and the open sabotage of Sunday and religious festivals.

Workers and clerical staff who are Christian may not receive any promotion to positions of responsibility in the factory or industry. They may even be denied pay rises because they lack an "advanced political-social conscience". This discrimination goes together with mass-scale atheist teaching and the attempt to indoctrinate children from four upwards with Marxist ideals, through the press, publications, radio, television and school curricula. From this it is clear that we Christians in Romania are free, but free within a cage.

Over the years we have had pastors who have possessed a worthy and courageous character. They have sought to speak the truth bravely, and the atheist authorities have hastily told our Union leaders what to do. Then the machinery of repression goes into action. The Union calls in the Association for its instructions; the Association gets to work on the case with the other pastors immediately; then "the unfortunate heretic" has his licence taken away, or if necessary, is expelled from the denomination. To whom and against whom should one protest? Certainly not the authorities, for their excuse is: "We did not punish you; it was your own people".

In addition, the system of orientation conferences, Association meetings in the presence of the Inspector of Cults, the periodical audiences in the office of the local regional Inspector with the regular reports, requests and approvals necessary for every major activity within the Church are greatly promoted in our denomination. Against whom can we protest? No laws state that the above meetings are binding, but if you do not step into line quickly, the machinery of repression, namely the Baptist Union, comes into action.

Another method used intelligently by the atheist authorities in Romania is to try and separate Christians and even churches within the same denomination. This is achieved by enforcing unwritten

laws which restrict movement between one church and another. The Church is thus deprived of her biblical and holy right to receive and enjoy the ministry of guests in her midst.

We ask then whether, even without violence, arrests and open persecution, we can admit that there is freedom in Romania? The general situation, though ambiguous and indefinable at first sight, brings us much harm, and produces great confusion for those in the West. Open persecution has always been painful but beneficial to the spiritual life of the Christian Church. When it is a matter of suffering, all opportunists and false characters flee from the Christian Church. This, to my mind, is the great advantage of the Churches in the Soviet Union.

At the moment in Romania a new tactic is being employed: certain "dissidents" are being excluded from the denomination so that later the authorities can intervene at will. Thus there are no grounds for speaking of religious persecution but simply of the arrest (under any pretext) of some private citizen who has had a disagreement with the law. The present most celebrated case of this procedure is that of Pavel Nicolescu. Three Associations (Arad, Timisoara and Brasov) have already voted for his exclusion from the denomination.

Personally I believe that we have before us two principal tasks:

1. To hold on strongly to the truth, to endeavour to open the eyes of all Christians in our country and abroad to the realities of religious "freedom" in Romania.
2. To strive for unity among all Christians of every denomination and of all ages in our land against the common enemy, which is atheism (and especially an atheism with such power).

For the next few weeks we will remain quiet until the Congress takes place. We do not know what the Congress will signify. We do not know whether it will be a real juridical and administrative gain for us, but we know that the Congress is not the final point.

We know that it will not be easy. But today is easier than it was yesterday and tomorrow will be easier still. There are some wonderful men in our country today. Josif Ton has thrown himself into

this fight with a spirit of great sacrifice; Vasile Talos is growing in moral and intellectual stature; Pavel Nicolescu is a man who stands firm like a rock; and Liviu Olah, bearing the cross on his back, is a tireless preacher who is drawing all of us after him into a deeper spiritual life. As we are all engaged in this spiritual struggle for our fundamental rights, we ask for your help.

We do not seek material things or personal advantages, but we beg you to inform as many people as possible in the West about our exact situation in Romania.

We pray for you all! A Merry Christmas with our Lord Jesus Christ and a Happy New Year!

25 December, 1976.

### Josif Ton Fasts

*The following letter, written by Josif Ton, was sent to the Council of the Baptist Union in Romania.*

I am writing this letter to you in the love of the Saviour who suffered and prayed for those whom He loved. I want to bring to your attention a decision which I have made after considerable thought and prayer before my heavenly Father for His light and guidance.

I have been deeply disturbed and pained to hear that you intend to dismiss two third year students from the Seminary. Having talked to the two concerned and others, I am convinced that they do not deserve such a penalty. On the contrary, I was persuaded that they were in fact victims chosen by you for punishment in place of the 20 students who have asked for more substantial teaching at the Seminary, including my own incorporation into its teaching staff. Although the injustice done at your hands to these two dedicated workers of God cries out to heaven, I felt powerless to counsel them in any other way than to ask them to accept the injustice, to endure the suffering, return home and demonstrate by their lives that they have indeed been treated with terrible injustice. That is what I said to one of them on 22 October 1976.

On 28 October 1976 I heard, however, that one of their colleagues, Viorel Clintoc, having been disturbed by what had happened, was led by the Lord to begin a period of fasting and prayer for the leadership of the Union which had committed this unjust act. He weeps in silence on his knees in the Seminary

chapel, pouring out his pain before God at the deplorable spiritual state into which all the students of the third year of the Seminary have been thrown by the arbitrary act of victimization against these two from among them.

When I heard of this action of Clintoc's, I exclaimed: "This boy has had to do this so that we might realize the full measure of our shame". At the same time I understood that the reproving finger of the Lord was pointing towards me and that His voice was saying: "You should not stay unmoved in the face of injustice. You, too, should suffer for these two boys who are in a sense suffering for you. You ought to be praying and fasting for those who have done them this injustice and who have oppressed them!"

I did not rush into a decision immediately, but waited to understand well all that had happened and to gain some understanding of the reasons behind the present deplorable situation in the Seminary. This is how I came to see things.

The real cause of the crisis at the Seminary is the greater and deeper crisis in which our Baptist Union finds itself at present. It is almost 18 months since the present leadership of the Union completed the term of office given to them at the last Congress in 1972. They should have made room for those who had been chosen by the brotherhood to succeed them. Furthermore, it is almost a year since the brotherhood actually elected other leaders, but still the old leadership has stubbornly continued to hang on to the helm of the denomination. They have refused to give way to