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## Romania “A religious country?” Survey on the state of health of religious belief

It would seem that the fact that Romania is a "religious country" is no longer a myth but a fact, evidenced by the findings of a "barometer" presented at the Romanian Academy in Bucharest. The survey was conducted by the LARICS Centre for Sociological Research, in partnership with the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs and the Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Romanian Academy. **Greater trust in the Church.** Opinion polls conducted in the past few years show that Romanians consistently consider the Church among the most trusted institutions. However, as compared to a survey carried out in February 2019 by the National Institute of Statistics, the findings of the new survey indicate a marked increase in trust in the Churches: while last year the Church as an institution ranked second behind the military with 54.5% of multiple preferences, the figure increased up to 71.2% in the current barometer. For Msgr. **Cornel Damian**, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Bucharest, President of the Juridical Commission of the Romanian Bishops' Conference, the increased trust is connected with the pandemic emergency. "Over this difficult period the Church strove to remain close to the faithful, to the people. *The helpfulness of clergy, the efforts of volunteers, the prayers, for those killed by COVID-19 and their families, and for those on the front lines of the pandemic, meant a lot.* Pope Francis' words resounded here too, despite having an Orthodox majority population: the image of the Pope, alone, praying in an empty and rainy square, carrying not only the weight of the years, but also that of the situation afflicting the entire world, touched the hearts of many people." **Prayers but not much liturgy.** Paradoxically, while 90% of Romanians said they believe in God and 68% pray every day, only 36.1% go to church every week, while 56.9% once a month or occasionally. "The number of faithful attending church services dropped dramatically with the pandemic. The Holy Mass is broadcast by various media channels on TV, radio or the Internet, and out of caution or perhaps out of habit, people prefer attending remotely. Yet the Christian faith is lived in the community and participation in the sacraments is essential. It's something we often point out," Msgr. Damian told SIR.

### **The ongoing low church attendance builds on a practice inherited from the Communist era,**

remarked Msgr. **Virgil Bercea**, Greek Catholic bishop of Oradea Mare, President of the Bishops' Conference Commission for the Laity. "At the time, the faithful used to avoid going to church, they were afraid of being spied on, and so many of them created an 'inner church'. That situation applied to everyone. Times have changed now, but in Romania the changes occurred at a much more rapid pace than in Western countries, with the contribution of mass media. In fact the decline in religious practices, which occurred over a period of 50 to 70 years in the West, took place much more rapidly in Romania." **Religious education, social engagement.** The barometer also found that Romanians regard religion as very important to their lives (85.8%), that the parents of respondents were believers (93.6%), that adults want their children to be taught religion in school, either as a compulsory subject (72.8%) or upon parents' specific request (22.3%). Moreover, respondents regarded inter-religious relations in Romania as good and very good (78%), and agreed with living near people of other religions (93.6%) or having their children marry members of other denominations or religions (78.9%).

### **They would also like the Churches to become more involved in the social sphere (92.8%), health and education (75.5%).**

"Church-State separation is extremely important, and it's equally important for politics not to interfere

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in the life of the Church, nor to consider it as something marginal, pertaining to the private sphere", said Msgr. Bercea, commenting on the findings of the barometer. With regard to the social domain, he said: "The Catholic Church developed not only a social doctrine, but also significant social activity worldwide as well as in Romania. Our Orthodox brothers have also now started to promote social work, and their engagement in this area is commendable. Indeed, some Orthodox priests have given an extraordinary contribution to this field and to the field of education." **Attacks from news media and politicians.** "Over the last period, all faiths and the Orthodox Church in particular were victims of venomous attacks", said the Secretary of State for Religious Affairs, **Victor Opaschi**, presenting the findings of the barometer with reference to the current pandemic period. According to public perception news media portray the Church in a negative way (46.5%), either by magnifying certain issues in the churches' daily life (47.3%) or because most journalists and opinion leaders are not believers (15.9%). "I greatly respect the work carried out by news media and journalists in general," said Msgr. Bercea, "they can do great good, but at the same time they can also do great harm by taking some negative events out of context and magnifying them. The Church is subjected to criticism by the political world, but 36% of Romanians perceive it as a normal part of democracy. **Religious freedom and the pandemic.** As in all countries, the pandemic impacted the life of the Churches in Romania, and public authorities have taken a number of measures to prevent the spread of the disease. Religious services were restricted to a limited number of worshippers or held online and on television, with compulsory use of masks and social distancing in places of worship. The Churches have generally complied with the new regulations, yet a number of Romanians believe that the State has violated religious freedom (47.3%). "While there have been some occasional incidents of abuse by State authorities, constant dialogue between the Romanian government and the Churches has been taking place throughout this period," said Msgr. Damian. *In his presentation of the barometer, Secretary of State Opaschi clarified that "the measures taken during the pandemic relating to religious freedoms were based on careful discernment of people's sensitivities and the gravity of the situation."* **Research Methodology.** The Barometer of Religious Life in Romania is the first survey of this kind conducted in recent years. A sample of 1,000 people aged 18 or over - deemed representative of the Romanian population - responded to a telephone survey held between November 30 and December 7. The survey was carried out in all Romanian provinces and the sample was validated based on official data from the National Institute of Statistics.

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