

THE ITALIAN CHURCH OF BUCHAREST

EMANUELA COSTANTINI*

Abstract

The Italian church is the most visible symbol of Italian culture in the center of Bucharest. It was built between 1915 and 1916 due to the will of the Italian head of delegation, Carlo Fasciotti. The church's construction is one of the most representative monuments of the relationship between Italy and Romania before and during the First World War. Fasciotti obtained a piece of land in the center, mediating between the Austrian bishop Netzhhammer and the Romanian government, reassuring them that it would be a small building dedicated to the Most Holy Redeemer and not to a "national" saint. The church was inaugurated in 1916, but the events of the war interrupted its internal completion. Fasciotti and the Italian delegation fled to Iași during the Central Empires' occupation. The contrast with Netzhhammer worsened, as it involved the national conflict between Italy and Austria. Yet, the bishop was the official referent of the Catholic communities in the capital city, and therefore also of the Italian one, so Fasciotti had to deal with him. At the end of the conflict, Fasciotti tried to have him replaced with an Italian bishop, but in vain. The church was completed with the addition of furnishings and paintings in the 1920s

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The Italian Colony in Bucharest

The birth of national states was also accompanied by the development of internal and external propaganda. Internally, the state needed instruments for educating the populace in values that would promote national identity; externally it needed to increase its political and cultural influence. The means used at home (according to the definition of Alberto Maria Banti: "school, army and public rituals"¹) could be valid, in a different form, also abroad. Excluding the army, employed only in case of war, school and public rituals were a part of cultural diplomacy, a useful instrument of foreign policy, as several of Europe's most important states had well understood. Italy became aware of the effectiveness of these means belatedly compared to other states, and did not succeed in putting

* Emanuela Costantini, PhD, assistant professor at Perugia University, emanuela.costantini@unipg.it. Author, among others, of the vol. *Nae Ionescu, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran. Antiliberalismo nazionalista alla periferia d'Europa* (Perugia, 2005); *La capitale immaginata. L'evoluzione di Bucarest nella fase di costruzione e consolidamento dello Stato nazionale romeno (1830–1940)* (Soveria Mannelli, 2016).

¹ Alberto Maria Banti, *L'età contemporanea. Dalle rivoluzioni settecentesche all'imperialismo* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2012), 445.

together a broad-based strategy. According to Luciano Tosi, that fact was probably due to the scarce regard given by Italian governments² to public opinion, which meant that any promotion of Italian culture was left to generic good will or to the efforts of a few “enlightened ambassadors”: these were “diplomatic observers abroad, who frequently prodded the government to act to establish cultural relations with other countries, similar to and in competition with other powers”³. In effect, the main part of the diplomatic class generally only reacted in certain circumstances to attempts at “cultural colonization” on the part of another state.

According to Stefano Santoro, in the first few decades of existence of the Italian monarchy, the only effective form of cultural activity in other countries was the maintenance of stable ties with Italian communities residing abroad⁴. For this reason, the diplomatic class tended to be receptive to their requests. For their part, the Italian colonies wanted above all to have the means to cultivate their cultural identity, first of all by having the possibility of spiritual assistance and the guarantee of an education for their children in their own language. Thus, despite the lack of reciprocal recognition between state and church, in numerous instances members of the Italian diplomatic corps found themselves requesting the arrival of Italian priests. Less frequently, the presence of members of the clergy of Italian origin was used to exercise a political influence on the host country.

A similar situation existed with regard to schools, but also in that case the disparity between Italy and other European states in terms of resources and presence was evident⁵. Frequently the establishment of Italian-language schools was left to the good will of individual communities, to the existence of religious institutions, or to enlightened intellectuals or cultural circles. In sum, the state benefited from these private spontaneous initiatives and merely offered a certain support, if requested.

The case of Romania illustrates this situation perfectly. The spread of schools and churches in which Italian was used was the result of a centuries-old presence of Italian colonies. It would be inaccurate, obviously, to talk of “Italian communities” before the Italian state existed, or at least before the formation of a national consciousness. Nonetheless, the Modern Age had already seen people arriving from the Italian peninsula to Bucharest in search of work and fortune⁶. Their main

² Luciano Tosi, *La propaganda italiana all'estero nella prima guerra mondiale. Rivendicazioni territoriali e politica delle nazionalità* (Pordenone: Del Bianco Editore, 1977), 12.

³ Stefano Santoro, *L'Italia e l'Europa orientale. Diplomazia culturale e propaganda. 1918–1943* (Rome: Franco Angeli), 52.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ That was the case of Albania, where Austria-Hungary had encouraged the presence of Jesuits, especially in areas such as that of Scutari, as long as Italy, though in a less organized manner, promoted that of Franciscans. See Alessandro Duce, *L'Albania nei rapporti italo-austriaci 1897–1913* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1983), 25.

⁶ Roberto Scagno, Paolo Tomasella, Corina Tuci, *Veneti in Romania* (Ravenna, Longo: 2008); Renzo Francesconi, Paolo Tomasella, *Emigranti friulani in Romania dal 1860 a oggi. Un protagonista ritrovato: Geniale Fabbro maestro costruttore* (Pordenone: L'Omino rosso, 2007).

activities were construction and commerce⁷, and the main region of emigration was from the northeast areas, controlled by the Habsburg Empire.

With the creation of the Romanian and Italian states this phenomenon increased, taking on a specifically national connotation. The new political reality contributed to create conditions favorable to economic activity. No longer bound by commercial ties to the Ottoman Empire, new enterprises sprang up that were aimed at production for exchange. In Romania, contracts by public tender and the need for new networks of communication throughout the various regions had attracted enterprises from all over Europe, and with them came manpower.

The construction of the railways, in particular, offered ample opportunities for workers, many of whom came from Italy⁸. Manual laborers arrived, transferred by their companies which had won the contracts, or because they sought higher wages; but before long they were joined by a more specialized type of worker. Engineers, architects and technicians, and even doctors and chemists were needed by the Romanian municipal and state authorities to set up new public services for which no qualified local personnel existed due to a lack of higher education (as noted, the first Romanian university was founded in Iași in 1860). Although the sons of the wealthiest Romanian families could frequently study abroad, for a long time their numbers were far from sufficient for the needs of the young state. Moreover, the new political situation had created the economic conditions favorable to the development of businesses which previously had not existed.

The prospect of political and cultural integration into Western Europe, and especially the creation of a more diversified society interested in new forms of entertainment and new kinds of goods, made Romania a magnet for artists on the one hand and service-sector workers on the other. Singers, theater directors, playwrights and even hoteliers arrived in Bucharest from throughout Western Europe, and Italy was among the beneficiaries. Architects such as Giulio Magni or Francesco Bonomelli, intellectuals like Luigi Cazzavillan and even restaurateurs like Franco Bruzzesi or Giovanni Fieschi arrived in Bucharest in the late 1800s. At the end of the nineteenth century the Romanian capital counted some 2,000 Italians, half of whom had arrived between 1890 and 1899. It was by far the largest Italian community in Romania; the second, in Cataloi, numbered 476 people while the third, in Constanța, had 349⁹.

The new political situation determined not only a quantitative and qualitative transformation for the Italian community, but produced new level of self-awareness as well. In the terminology dear to scholars of nationalism, one would say that belonging to the Italian colony shifted from an “objective” to a “subjective” factor. In

⁷ Alina Dorojan, *L'emigrazione italiana nelle terre romene (1861–1916)*, Tesi di dottorato, Università di Roma Tre, a. a. 2012/2013, p. 38.

⁸ Dorojan, “L'emigrazione italiana,” 57.

⁹ Dorojan, “L'emigrazione italiana,” 118.

other words, its members became conscious of being part of a group whose point of reference was a national state and a specific culture. In fact, following the creation of the two national states, it was the Italian residents in Romania who requested the establishment of institutions to cultivate and conserve their identity; and it was the Church, first of all, to respond to their request. Often, in fact, the colonies ended up with religious buildings as their first gathering place, and it was the priests who concerned themselves with creating schools in which Italian would be either the sole language or one of the languages of instruction. This interconnection of language and religion therefore was the first answer to the request for forms of aggregation and national identification by the representatives of the Italian colonies. In lack of a synergy between Church and state—on the one hand due to the still-tense relations between the two institutions (the *Non Expedit* was still in full force), on the other hand due to the absence of a real cultural diplomacy—the role of the Italian state in this phase had been marginal, if not actually absent.

In the rare cases in which the Church did not take on the job of instruction in the colonies, Italian-language schools, or courses in Italian in Romanian schools, were handled by cultural institutions like the Dante Alighieri, or by “enlightened intellectuals” such as Gian Luigi Frollo¹⁰ or Luigi Cazzavillan. Cazzavillan¹¹ had an important role for the Italian community of Bucharest. Arriving in Romania at the end of the 1870s, he had managed to become part of the social fabric of the capital, becoming a respected publisher (he was to found *Universul*, one of the most important dailies of the period), and working to improve the appreciation of Italian culture. In 1901, he financed the building of the Regina Margherita school, an institution open to all nationalities but whose language of instruction was Italian. The school was turned over to the state¹², but the fact that it had been founded and financed in large part by a private citizen illustrates the lack of a program of cultural diplomacy on the part of the Italian state.

A New Phase: The Role of Carlo Fasciotti

The second decade of the twentieth century represented a turning point for the attitude of Italian diplomacy concerning the Italian community in Romania, as Italian diplomats, whose attitude had been mainly passive, began instead to actively promote initiatives. To a large degree, this change was owed to Carlo Fasciotti, minister plenipotentiary in Bucharest from 1911 to 1919.

Fasciotti was the son of a diplomat, the descendant of a convert family of Jewish origin. Before arriving in Romania he had served in the legations of Vienna,

¹⁰ Frollo lived for a long time in Brăila. As a philologist, he helped spread the study of Italian language. See Dorojan, “L’emigrazione italiana,” 428.

¹¹ Ion Cârja, Ion Aurel Pop, *Un italiano a Bucarest: Luigi Cazzavillan (1852–1903)* (Rome: Viella, 2012).

¹² Dorojan, “L’emigrazione italiana,” 226.

Athens and Crete¹³. His skill as an intermediary in a crucial phase of Romanian history, as the nation completed its unification, had already been evident during the Balkan wars, when Fasciotti had helped define Italy's position, favorable to Romania's annexation of Silistra but nonetheless prepared to make concessions to Bulgaria against the Greeks¹⁴. He proved equally able in the delicate period between the outbreak of World War I and Romania's entry into the war, guiding first the attempts at coordination by Rome and Bucharest, and later the decision of Italy to enter the war with no previous agreement with its Balkan partner¹⁵.

Fasciotti was also the first diplomat in Romania to conceive of his role in a broad sense, going beyond the mere management of bilateral relations between the two countries. He was aware that, in international terms, the notion of a possible Italian-Romanian alliance would not play a decisive role. At the outbreak of World War I, for instance, contrary to a large part of Romanian public opinion and of some political figures as well, he was skeptical of the idea that a coordinated and simultaneous entrance of the two countries into the conflict would be able to determine the outcome and hasten the end of the war¹⁶. In short, his goals went beyond simply gaining Romania's support for Italian foreign policy. For Fasciotti to promote Italy's interests in Romania meant increasing his country's influence, acting on the economic and social fabric more than acting on political choices determined by external events. For this reason, during the Balkan wars and the first phase of the World War he acted mainly to favor Italian businesses in selling materiel for the armed forces and to mediate between Romanian and Italian officials so that Romania would see Italy as a loyal ally, yet without compromising Italy's own interests.

In this framework, furthering Italian culture was logical and promoting the presence and the role of the Italian colonies, indispensable¹⁷. To this end Fasciotti acted on numerous occasions as a representative of the requests made by his compatriots to the Romanian government, pointing out that the Italians were the largest group after the Austrians and the Hungarians, and an improvement of their living and working conditions could have in a short time a beneficial effect on Romanian interests.

¹³ Patrizia Mengarelli, "Carlo Fasciotti," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, XLV (Rome: Treccani, 1993), 224; Rudolf Dinu, "Plenipotenziari italiani la București (1879-1914). Note biografice și profesionale," in *Diplomați, societate și modernități. Sfârșit de "Belle Époque" în lumea românească*, eds. Claudiu-Lucian Topor, Alexandru Istrate, Daniel Cain (Iași: Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2015).

¹⁴ Gianpaolo Ferraioli, *Politica e diplomazia in Italia tra XIX e XX secolo. Vita di Antonino di San Giuliano (1852-1914)* (Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino, 2007).

¹⁵ Emanuela Costantini, Rudolf Dinu, "Romania. Che farà 'la nostra sorella maggiore'? La stampa romena e la neutralità italiana (1914-1915)," in *Osservata speciale. La neutralità italiana nella Prima guerra mondiale e l'opinione pubblica internazionale (1914-1915)*, ed. Riccardo Brizzi (Florence: Le Monnier, 2015), 225-242.

¹⁶ Costantini, Dinu, "Romania."

¹⁷ Dorojan, "L'emigrazione italiana," 229.

To this end he had supported the request to create Italian schools or to bring Italian teachers to Romania, and in 1912, at the end of the school year, he gave a lecture at the Regina Margherita school in Bucharest, highlighting such education as a means of disseminating Italian culture and recognizing the importance of a virtuous integration between the role of the Church and that of the school. This not only meant not placing obstacles in the path of the clergy's work, but using every means to encourage it, considering it part of a strategy of cultural diplomacy which was frequently presented as being in "competition" with other countries.

In fact, after the outbreak of the World War, religion took on an increased value as it became the grounds for a political standoff. Competition with Austria-Hungary played out on this terrain as well, since the Italians and the Austro-Hungarians were the largest Catholic communities in Romania. So it is that the correspondence between Fasciotti and the Foreign Ministry shows some telling cases, such as one concerning the repatriation of two friars to Italy, in which Fasciotti suggested sending them not via Austria-Hungary but via Russia, in order to avoid recognizing that "Austria-Hungary is the principal interested party in matters concerning Catholicism in Romania"¹⁸. It was precisely at this time that the Italian diplomat was most active in answering requests by the colonies for the state to intercede to send Italian parish priests; the request was justified by the need to guarantee the running of the schools, but in fact it also reinforced the presence of Italian clergy in Romania¹⁹. On various occasions Fasciotti pointed out to the Italian government the possibility of a virtuous collaboration between state and Church, demonstrating the case of the parish priest at Cataloi, Father Di Benedetto, for whom Fasciotti requested a subsidy. The priest was praised for his contribution to the patriotic cause at a time when the members of his Italian colony were drafted into the army. It was the priest, wrote Fasciotti in a letter, who had urged the Italians in his colony "to answer the call of the Motherland; it was he who accompanied them personally here, and who was present at their departure for Italy"²⁰. Father Di Benedetto had gathered the Italian community around his church, promoting cultural activities as well as discharging his religious duties. He had built a school, had set up a space for recreational activities, and had established a musical band—all things which strengthened the bonds among the families of Italian origin. His activity in effect paralleled that of the Italian state: "Moreover he handled all the matters concerning personal documents, military service and

¹⁸ Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 167, Carlo Fasciotti to the Cabinet of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, telegram, 20 May 1916.

¹⁹ It was like this insofar as the request of the colony living in the small village of Greci to have an Italian priest was concerned. See ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 167, fasc. 3, Carlo Fasciotti to the Foreign Affairs minister, 23 September 1915.

²⁰ ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 167, fasc. 3, Carlo Fasciotti to the Foreign Affairs minister, 12 August 1915.

matters [referring] to that colony of which [he was] the sole civil authority, who in fact considered that parish to all effects as a consular office”²¹. Fasciotti also pointed out that help from the Italian state was all the more important since the priest’s sole financial resources were contributions from the parishioners, whereas support for the bishopric was “insignificant . . . [since] the person of Father Di Benedetto, as well as his actions, [were] far from popular among the upper levels of the Church hierarchy”²².

The Idea of an Italian Church

Well aware of the cultural and also political value of religion, Fasciotti embarked on one of the most ambitious initiatives of his stay in Bucharest: a project dear to his heart, the construction of an Italian church. The Italian community contributed significantly to the undertaking, but it was Fasciotti who turned the plan into reality. According to the memoirs of Raymund Netzhammer, Catholic bishop of Bucharest in that period, Fasciotti had begun to sound out the possibility of an Italian church already in 1913. At first the bishop had taken a cautious stance, for fear that the Catholic community would begin to divide along national lines. Citing the prospect that the Hungarians might follow the Italian example, the prelate at first managed to dissuade Fasciotti from his idea²³.

Fasciotti, however, was not easily discouraged. The following year he returned to the Church authorities, citing the spontaneous request for a church by Bucharest’s Italian community²⁴. This time Bishop Netzhammer replied that it was not necessary to have a special building for the Italian Catholic community since all the priests in the capital were able to speak Italian and could therefore serve the Italian colony. The Italian delegation, however, pressed its case, bringing pressure to bear on the Romanian government as well. In November 1914 Titu Maiorescu interceded to convince the bishop to accept Italian priests and allow the building of the church. In a page of his diary, Netzhammer made a sharp comment on these pressures, pointing out that in the nine years of his mandate in Bucharest he had noted a complete lack of interest in religious matters on the part of the Italian state. The only occasions offered for collaboration had been thwarted by the diplomatic representatives; in fact the Italian school had made no provisions for religious instruction by Italian-speaking priests. He was, therefore, surprised by the sudden

²¹ ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 167, fasc. 3, Carlo Fasciotti to the Foreign Affairs minister, 9 July 1915.

²² ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 167, fasc. 3, Carlo Fasciotti to the Foreign Affairs minister, 9 July 1915.

²³ Raymund Netzhammer, *Episcop în România, într-o epocă a conflictelor naționale și religioase*, vol. I (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2005), 474.

²⁴ “Who has really requested the priest, you or the colony? Of course it was the colony!” That was the way Netzhammer quoted his discussion with Fasciotti. Netzhammer, *Episcop în România*, 477.

interest shown by Fasciotti. However, Netzhammer wrote in his memoirs, he did not share his surprise with Maiorescu and in the end consented to the Italians' request²⁵.

The first thing Fasciotti did was to get an Italian prelate for the colony in Bucharest. Father Antonio Mantica arrived in the Romanian capital in 1914²⁶. By the end of that year a temporary chapel had been established on Cazzavillan Street, near the Italian school; once it was consecrated by the bishop, Father Mantica celebrated the first Mass for the Italian community²⁷.

Italy's involvement in World War I against Austria-Hungary further complicated relations between the Italian diplomat and the bishop. National antagonisms took on a significance that went beyond the mere occupation of space in Romanian society, to include implications for Romania's place in international affairs. Fasciotti therefore resumed even more insistently his efforts to obtain permission to build the church. To avoid having his initiative interpreted as a heavy-handed presence on Romanian territory, resulting in a possible rivalry among Catholic states, he specified that the building should be small, in line with the bishop's suggestion that Fasciotti consider the size of the Italian colony²⁸. In a certain sense, the opposing positions of Italy and the Habsburg Empire worked in favor of Fasciotti. Netzhammer, in fact, was aware that continuing to place obstacles to the project would be interpreted as taking the side of his country of origin; having frequently declared that the Catholic community was a single and supranational entity, he was especially concerned not to be seen as partisan.

Fasciotti's pressure had the desired effect. In 1914 he began to collect money from the Italian colony to build the church²⁹. In the end, 20,000 lire were offered by the community, 10,000 were donated personally by Victor Emmanuel III, 40,000 came from the General Fund for Religion³⁰, 5,000 from the Foreign Ministry, and 5,000 were donated personally by Fasciotti.

The Building and the War

In March 1915, the Romanian parliament gave Italy a piece of land for building the chapel in the center of the capital, on the current Nicolae Bălcescu Boulevard³¹. The cornerstone was laid in August of that year³². The name of Most

²⁵ Netzhammer, *Episcop în România*, 549.

²⁶ Netzhammer, *Episcop în România*, 516 and Danuț Doboș, Tereza Sinigalia, *Biserica italiană Preasfântul Mântuitor din București* (Bucharest: Editura Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice București 2006), 21.

²⁷ Doboș, Sinigalia, *Biserica italiană*, 24.

²⁸ Netzhammer, *Episcop în România*, 524.

²⁹ Netzhammer, *Episcop în România*, 516.

³⁰ ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 167, the director of the General Fund for Religion to the Foreign Affairs minister, 19 October 1915.

³¹ Arhiva Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice București (AARCB), b. 1924–1936, f. 35. See also Doboș, Sinigalia, *Biserica italiană*, 27.

³² AARCB, b. 1924–1936, f. 35.

Holy Redeemer, as explained in documents in the archives of the archbishopric, was a choice that resulted from the desire to avoid a national connotation, as a saint's name would have done. The church was consecrated in July 1916³³. In a document on the history of the church, also held in the episcopal archives, there is an amusing episode concerning a certain Vloska, who apparently promised to “eat a dog, alive and including its fur” if the Italian church were actually built. He “received a benevolent dispensation from his vow”³⁴.

The church was inaugurated just a month before Romania entered World War I. Subsequently, the underlying national dispute between Fasciotti and Netzhammer hardened. In November 1916, an article appeared in the newspaper *Adevarul*, criticizing the high-level Catholic clergy for damaging the interests of the Italian community in favor of the Austrians and Magyars; proof of this was the fact that Netzhammer had resisted the building of an Italian chapel³⁵. A few days later, the armed forces of the Central Empires and their allies entered Bucharest. The representatives of various institutions, including many ambassadors, abandoned the capital for Iași. Among them were numerous Catholic prelates, including Father Mantica, leaving Bishop Netzhammer as the sole possible point of reference for Fasciotti and the entire Italian community. The diplomat was reluctantly forced to appeal to the German bishop to place the Italian church under his protection³⁶.

Nonetheless, for the duration of the war Fasciotti continued to interfere directly in the nomination of clerics, viewing the religious field as a terrain of competition with Italy's enemies³⁷. Though he could not interfere in the occupied territories, he attempted to exploit the difficult situation of Romania to gain space in the free region of Moldavia. He therefore requested the appointment of two Italians in the area of Iași, respectively a parish priest in an important diocese and an assistant, emphasizing: “Concerning the appointment of the acting bishop, I confirm plots by our enemies”. The “national” vision held by Fasciotti with regard to the church's activities resulted, unsurprisingly, in a growing distrust of Bishop Netzhammer during the war.

In the difficult circumstances of enemy occupation, the completion of the Italian church was delayed. In April 1918 Fasciotti noted that the pews had been purchased but not yet delivered, since the capital was under occupation³⁸. The sums of money collected for the building but not yet spent were set aside by Fasciotti, to await the return to Bucharest of the political and ecclesiastical authorities.

³³ AARCB, b. 1924–1936, f. 35.

³⁴ AARCB, b. 1924–1936, f. 35.

³⁵ *Adevarul*, 7 November 1916. Quoted in Doboș, Sinigalia, *Biserica italiană*, 38.

³⁶ Netzhammer, *Episcop în România*, 673.

³⁷ ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 167, telegram from Carlo Fasciotti to the Cabinet of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, 10 May 1916.

³⁸ ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 168, Carlo Fasciotti to the Foreign Affairs minister, 3 April 1918.

The Church Building After the War

After the war the church, in the center of Bucharest, remained a visible symbol of the Italian community. At first the plans of Fasciotti, who remained in Romania until 1919, did not change. On their return to the capital, both Fasciotti and Father Mantica expressed their gratitude to Netzhammer for having protected the church and having used it for the spiritual needs of the Italian community³⁹. Such official declarations, however, disguised a firm desire to be rid of the archbishop. A few days after the return to Bucharest of the Romanian authorities, and while Romania's participation in the war had not yet been concluded, Fasciotti resumed his fight to obtain space for "italianità" in the church, emphasizing the need to replace Netzhammer—who had clearly been compromised by the relation with the enemy occupiers—with an Italian bishop⁴⁰. This time the antagonism played out with France, the other Catholic power friendly to Romania, which could play its religious card to strengthen its already considerable cultural influence. On the other hand, in postwar Romania the religious question assumed a role far more important than previously. Romania, despite the objective difficulties encountered during the war, emerged with a territory and a population that had more than doubled; above all, it became a multicultural state in which Romanian-speaking citizens of Orthodox or Eastern Catholic faith represented 71.9 percent of the total population, while the remainder was made up of Hungarian-speaking Catholics and Calvinists, Saxon Lutherans and Jews, as well as other small minorities⁴¹. The Catholic component, therefore, was no longer linked to the presence of minority or immigrant communities or their descendants, but instead became the second religion among Romanians themselves.

Italy could still boast the largest Catholic community in Romania, after Austria's and Hungary's. The latter group, however, remained in line with the position of their states during the war, a fact which caused Fasciotti to claim the right of Italy to have its own representative as bishop⁴². As it turned out, his pleas had no effect. Fasciotti had already left Bucharest when, in 1919, Msgr. Cisor, a Czechoslovak of Romanian origin, was appointed as bishop of Iași despite protests from the Italians⁴³. In Bucharest Netzhammer remained at his post⁴⁴, the objections to his past loyalties having been dropped. The decision was accepted

³⁹ Netzhammer, *Episcop în România*, 825

⁴⁰ ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 168, the Foreign Affairs minister to the general director of the Fund for Religion, 12 December 1918.

⁴¹ Keith Hitchins, *România 1866–1947* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), 362.

⁴² ASDMAE, *Gabinetto politico e ordinario*, b. 168, the minister of Foreign Affairs to the general director of the Fund for Religion, 11 December 1918.

⁴³ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1504, Saluzzo to the general director of the Fund for Religion, 3 August 1920.

⁴⁴ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1504, the Foreign Affairs minister to the Italian Legation in Bucharest, 15 August 1920.

by the Italian government: after the wartime controversy, the high prelate, now a naturalized Swiss citizen, was to move more cautiously, avoiding national favoritisms—all the more so because both France and Germany were pressing for a successor from their own nations. Even when Netzhammer finally left his post in 1924, transferred to the Abbey of Einsiedeln, the pressures from Italy had no effect. In fact, negotiations were under way between the Holy See and the Romanian government to establish a concordat; and for that reason the Vatican was inclined to favor the Romanian position over the Italian one⁴⁵. Increasingly after the war, the presence of church representatives was perceived as a political question, to the point that Falcioni's successor, Martin Franklin, urged the Fund for Religion to do its best to send Salesians and Giuseppinians to Romania, well known in the field of education and pastoral work⁴⁶. The strategy of bringing parish priests from Italy continued in part because of the mediation of the apostolic nuncio in Bucharest, Msgr. Marmaggi, who gave his support to the Italian community's request⁴⁷.

In a few cases, nonetheless, the intervention of the Italian state was perceived as interference in matters that were the business of the Holy See. This was particularly true of the Italian church. As work resumed to complete the building, a small diplomatic incident took place when Martin Franklin was accused of having initiated negotiations with the archbishop of Bucharest to place the Italian church under his authority. Martin Franklin answered by noting his well-known "national sentiments" and contending that the rumor had been started by the National Association of Italian Missionaries, eager to get control of the church⁴⁸—a move to which, among other things, he had no objections. On the contrary, in a document dated July 1922 it emerges that there was a certain disagreement between the Italian colony and the embassy due to an insufficient financial donation for the church by the former, and to the growing dissatisfaction over the interference of the embassy in the church administration⁴⁹.

Despite criticisms by some members of the colony, the role of the embassy continued to be fundamental in raising funds for the completion of the church. In March 1919 the engineer Vignali-Gambara and the architect Belfio, responsible for the church building, sent a memorandum to the General Directorate of the Fund

⁴⁵ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1509, the Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs minister, 24 July 1924.

⁴⁶ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1505, the Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs minister, 26 November 1920.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, the arrival of Father Virgilio Gabriele in Brăila. Cfr. ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1506, the Royal Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs minister, 24 January 1922.

⁴⁸ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1506, the Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs minister, 28 December 1921.

⁴⁹ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1506, the Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs minister, 21 July 1922.

and to the Ministry of Justice and of Religious Affairs with a list of the work still to be done:

Plaster the interior; repair roof broken by enemy installation of wireless telegraph. Build the parapet for the stairway leading to the organ; refinish an auxiliary altar; two wooden compasses on the front door; pews and numerous small repairs.

Interior decoration: many items were stolen during the enemy occupation; liturgical vestments have disappeared and some hangings removed, others in poor condition.

Interior painting and decorative detail is complete.

External gate of church. Base already exists⁵⁰

In support of the memorandum was a report to the Foreign Ministry and to the General Directorate for Religious Affairs on the condition of the church after the war, on the need to repair damage and to complete liturgical furnishings and decoration. Emphasis was placed on the need for a greater contribution by the ministry, since a number of the wealthiest members of the Italian colony had departed for the war and had lost part of their property. It was therefore impossible to consider completing the project solely with funds procured locally⁵¹. Father Mantica himself requested supplies of wax and cloth from the Italian government to complete the interior furnishings, and the embassy asked for an additional 50,000 lire to be able to complete the structure⁵². In the years that followed, work proceeded steadily, if slowly. The bells were made only at the end of 1922, once the artillery factory in Trieste was able to furnish bronze obtained from cannon scrap⁵³. Finances remained a problem; on 21 July 1922 the royal consul, referring to the interior decoration, stated: "It is really not the moment to consider it. Far better to leave the walls whitewashed rather than to give them a mediocre money-saving decoration which would probably be in poor taste. Certain colored statues whose placement I was unable to prevent give an idea of how it could end up".⁵⁴ In contrast, the diplomat favored the chandelier, donated by the Pirelli company, "in wrought iron, which resembles the crown of Monza and is well

⁵⁰ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1503, the masons of the national church to the General Direction for Religion, 25 March 1919.

⁵¹ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1503, report of the General Direction for Religion to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, 22 May 1919.

⁵² ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1503, Father Antonio Mantica to the director of the General Fund for Religion, 30 March 1919, and the general director of the Fund for Religion to the Foreign Affairs minister, 18 May 1919. The amount of money was bestowed and the Government later asked for a receipt of the funds given. See ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1503, note of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, without date and ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1504, the Foreign Affairs Ministry to the Royal Italian Legation in Bucharest, 21 July 1920.

⁵³ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1506, the Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, 9 July 1922.

⁵⁴ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1506, the Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, 21 July 1922.

suited to the Lombard style of the church.”⁵⁵ The decoration was completed beginning with 1924, as ministerial records show in approving the request by the new plenipotentiary Aloisi (appointed in 1923) for a contribution of 8,000 lire for the decorations⁵⁶. Ministerial documents do not name the painter, but numerous sources mention an artist from Verona, Carlo Donati.

The Church as Artistic Expression of Italian Culture

Archival documents provide little information about the artistic aspects of the church. However, several studies on this topic do exist: the most complete may be the one by Tereza Sinigalia in the volume by Dănuț Doboș on the Italian church. In this paper reference will be made to the existing bibliography, with no claim to being exhaustive and with no attempt to condense material handled more competently by art historians. Here we will simply present the elements of architecture and interior decoration which make the Church of the Most Holy Redeemer an expression of Italian culture.

Tereza Sinigalia’s work opens with a consideration of the esthetic impact of the church’s placement. Bălcescu Boulevard is a thoroughfare of Romanian modernism, and the presence of a small building in neo-Lombard style provides an eclectic element. The eccentricity of the church in this location is due to the fact that at the time of its construction, as Sinigalia points out, the boulevard had not yet been built, the surrounding streets were narrower, and the façade was placed at the end of Vienna Street, which led to Calea Victoriei. Moreover, the surrounding buildings were far less imposing⁵⁷. In short, the urban context in which the church was placed was more harmonious, yet the overall effect was of a monument whose proportions, while not overbearing, set it apart from its surroundings. As both Fasciotti and Netzhammer had anticipated, this was the real objective: not so much to demonstrate grandeur and strength as to draw attention to the presence of Italian culture in the Romanian capital. The choice of a neo-Lombard style by Mario Stoppa and Giuseppe Tiraboschi, the two architects who used Milan’s church of Santa Maria delle Grazie as their model, followed this guideline. The material itself—Lombard brick—and the technique of *sgraffito* on the main façade are explicit references to the Renaissance tradition⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1506, Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, 21 July 1922.

⁵⁶ ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1506, the Italian Legation in Bucharest to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, 13 December 1924, and ASDMAE, *Affari Politici 1919–1930*, b. 1508, the Foreign Affairs Ministry to the Italian Legation in Bucharest, 27 December 1924.

⁵⁷ Tereza Sinigalia, “Eu sunt vița, voi sunteți mlădițele,” in Doboș, Sinigalia, *Biserica italiană*, 133–134.

⁵⁸ Tereza Sinigalia, “Eu sunt vița, voi sunteți mlădițele,” in Doboș, Sinigalia, *Biserica italiană*, 140.

Changes in the surrounding urban context, far from diminishing this characteristic, actually served to accentuate it. The contrast with the high-rise rationalistic buildings surrounding it makes the church even more noticeable.

The plan of the church is a Roman cross. Sinigalia points out that the arches located at the opening of the two lateral arms create the image of a basilica structure. Its dimensions and structure make for a perspective in height, rather than depth; the most original element, in fact, is the elevated block in which the altar is placed. Despite the spiritual atmosphere evident in the interior of the building, the Italian aspect is clearly present in this part of the church as well. Not only the specific references connected to the Italian state, such as the coats of arms of Italy's main cities and of the Republic, but also the building technique and decorative elements in mosaic added more recently are indications, according to Sinigalia, of the presence of Italian master craftsmen in the undertaking headed and carried out by the engineer Gambarà⁵⁹.

The most salient expression of Italian art may be the paintings done by Carlo Donati of Verona. Donati, already established as a painter, had worked in various chapels and churches in the Veneto region as well as in Milan and Piacenza, showing a "natural disposition for mysticism"⁶⁰ perfectly in tune with the atmosphere of the church. The fact that he had previously been criticized for not being sufficiently "modern"⁶¹ is no drawback; on the contrary, it made him more suited to the traditional style of painting envisioned for the Italian church. The very fact that Donati came from Verona is a detail worth remembering, considering that, as mentioned previously, it was Italy's northeastern regions that had historically provided the most significant emigration to Romania. Donati's paintings are "unique in Romania, both because of the subject, dealing with war, and for the art deco style"⁶².

Not Only a Church

The Italian church in Bucharest was built over a period of about ten years, a decade fundamental to the history of Italy and Romania. Its importance must be considered in the light of the two countries' history. For both, the moment in which the church was built represented the height of affirmation of the national ideal. The

⁵⁹ Tereza Sinigalia, "Eu sunt vița, voi sunteți mlădițele," in Doboș, Sinigalia, *Biserica italiană*, 137–138.

⁶⁰ Francesco Butturini, "Gli affreschi di Carlo Donati: un maestro nel Novecento," in L'Arena, 11 November 2016.

⁶¹ Francesco Butturini, "Gli affreschi di Carlo Donati: un maestro nel Novecento," in L'Arena, 11 November 2016.

⁶² Ida Libera Valicenti, "La memoria della Grande Guerra nei dipinti della chiesa italiana di Bucarest," in *Il Sud Est europeo e l'Adriatico. Studi italiani. Contributi al XII Congresso Internazionale dell'Association Internationale d'Études du Sud-Est Européen (Bucarest, 2–7 settembre 2019)*, ed. Francesco Guida (Rome: Aracne, 2019), 159.

favorable attitude of the Romanian governments toward the construction of the church was mainly incidental: Romania very much wanted Italian support in the war and until the end hoped in a simultaneous entry into the conflict. The concession of a piece of land in a central part of the capital, and the pressure brought to bear on the archbishop, must be interpreted in this context. For Italy, the construction of a church for its own colony had a far greater value: in the short term, it served as a counterbalance to the influence of other states upon Romania; on a longer term it represented a monument “in stone” to the Italian presence in the nation on the Danube. Its main promoter, Carlo Fasciotti, had the merit of understanding that diplomacy went beyond bilateral relations and could leave marks that were deeper and more enduring, drawing on the cultural aspect which, until then, politicians and diplomats had ignored.