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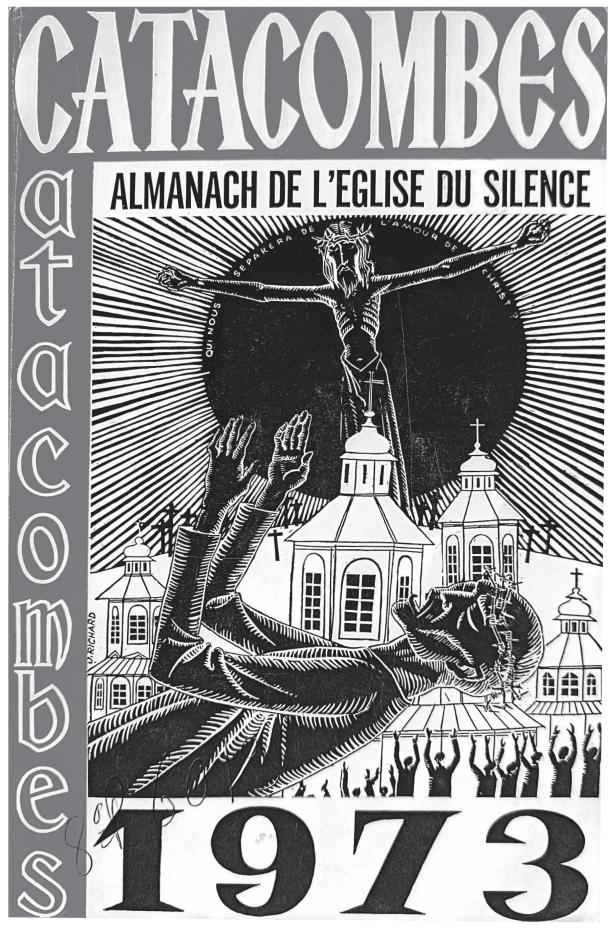
Echoes of the Silent Church: Exile, Memory and Spiritual Resistance in the journal Catacombes (1971-1992)

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atacombes, a bi-monthly journal which was published in French by the Romanian exiles Sergiu and Nicole Grossu in Paris from 1971-1992, has received relatively little attention in histories of the Eastern European exile¹. Yet, the journal's story offers a valuable insight into some of the political concerns of certain Eastern European exile communities in Western Europe, and the ways in which their experiences were drawn into larger transnational Christian anti-communist politics. As a journal that focussed on experiences of Christians in the communist world, and the threat that communism posed to Christians around the world, Catacombes represented an important link in a global network of associations and journals circulating memories of Christian suffering under communism and of "spiritual resistance". Such stories of religious suffering and resistance from behind the "Iron and Bamboo Curtains" helped invigorate broader transnational anti-communist discourses, while also responding to wider political and intellectual reconfigurations in the West. By examining Catacombes's production, circulation and history, this paper aims to highlight how the distinctive politics of religious anti-communism promoted by Catacombes during the 1970s and 1980s represented a site of convergence between different strands of traditionalist, anti-liberal Christian politics which collectively appealed to Eastern European experiences.

Although a relatively small journal, Catacombes provides a useful insight into the role some exile communities played in the politics of Christian anti-communism during the late Cold War. Catacombes (subtitled: "Messager supraconfessionnel de l'Église du Silence") was founded and edited by the Romanian couple Sergiu and Nicole Grossu, and was published in French as a monthly (later bi-monthly) journal from their small flat in Paris between 1971 and 1992. While the journal captured the different voices of its various contributing authors, it was sustained by the dedication and vision of the Grossus, whose editorial voices continued to shape the journal's outlook throughout the two decades of its existence. The history of the journal therefore cannot be understood apart from the history of the Grossus' lives. Sergiu Grossu, a journalist, theologian and poet, and his wife, the writer and journalist Nicoleta Valeria (Nicole Valéry) Grossu, moved to Paris in 1969. Both had been imprisoned in Romania for their political and religious activities: Nicole for her involvement in the National Peasants' Party, and Sergiu for his involvement in the banned Orthodox renewal movement, the Lord's Army (Oastea Domnului). While the journal Catacombes occupied a significant proportion of their later lives and has come to be an important source for investigating histories of religious minorities in Romania², the couple have received greater scholarly attention today for their literary work – in particular Nicole's 1976 book Bénie sois-tu, prison3 and Sergiu's pre-exile poetry4. However, closer examination of the story of Catacombes and the less wellknown dimensions of their anti-communist activism in Paris sheds light on how the experience of exile shaped both the Grossus' representations of the past and their continued political engagement.

The decision to launch a new journal dedicated to the experience of Christians living under communism arose in the context of the Grossus' adjustment to life in France. As Sergiu Grossu later described it, they had arrived in Paris expecting to experience an affinity between French and Romanian histories and cultures, "so connected ... by a long series of links of friendship and common interests5". Instead, they found that "the France of 1969 was no longer the "eldest daughter of the Church", which we had cradled in our dreams. It was instead the France of Jean-Paul Sartre, of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the communist explosion...". It was



 $\textbf{Fig. 1. } \textit{Catacombes. Almanach de l'Église du Silence}, \textbf{Supplément du mensuel } \textit{Catacombes}, \textbf{n}^{\circ} \textbf{16, 1973.} \textbf{ Rédigé par Sergiu Grossu, Éditions des Catacombes.} \\ \textbf{Coll. La contemporaine}, \textbf{8P 60 19}.$

against this perception of the "spiritual alienation" of the free world that the Grossus felt they needed "to shake the French and wake their conscience" and to "continue the spiritual combat that was no longer possible [in Romania]". At the same time, however, the Grossus also encountered new vocabularies and networks that provided them with the resources to undertake their "spiritual combat". They took on the phrase "Church of Silence" ("the name of a strange church"), for instance, after having come across it in use amongst Catholic networks in France⁶. In doing so, they helped reinvigorate older paradigms of anti-communist martyrdom that were already in circulation⁷.

The first issue of *Catacombes* appeared in France in October 1971, and was sold at kiosks and through a subscription service; its initial circulation was reported to be around 15,000, but by 1980 circulation had dropped to 10,0008, half of which were bought by Christian organisations and distributed freely. Most of the circulation was in France, but the journal also had regular subscribers in Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Canada and Francophone Africa (where it was for a short period distributed freely, with the support of subscribers and other Christian organisations9). In July 1972, a journalist from the Toronto Globe and Mail reported on the new journal after visiting the Grossus at their flat in Paris. The article stressed the homemade nature of the journal, describing how the "editorial room" was "the small bedroom, with total equipment of one typewriter", and the "photography lab" was "the sink in the bathroom or the kitchen, whichever is unoccupied". The Grossus were shown doing "everything from licking stamps to page make-up to publish Catacombes¹⁰". While the production of the journal occupied much of their time, the Grossus also undertook other activities, including setting up a small publishing house of the same name, and for several years, a weekly radio programme broadcast in both French and Romanian ("La chaine"; "În duh şi adevăr"). The work of the journal Catacombes was also promoted through Sergiu Grossu's own books, published variously in French, Romanian and English from the 1970s until the early 2000s.

The journal itself focussed on stories of Christian life in the communist world, as well as commentary on the incompatibility between Christianity and Marxism and the necessity for anti-communist action globally. The journal typically included a striking cover image (either a photograph or an illustration), a "calendar of the catacombs", a summary of the radio broadcast "La chaine", reviews of books on religion and communism, and an editorial from Sergiu Grossu, usually positioned next to an article by a more prominent French academician or theologian. There were around 150 contributors to Catacombes over its lifetime, mostly Central and Eastern European and French Christian writers; amongst its more regular contributors were figures such as Gabriel

Marcel, Jean Daniélou, Pierre Courthial, Michel Slavinsky, André Laforge, J.G.H. Hoffman, Suzanne Labin and Pierre de Villemarest, Pierre Pascal¹¹. The articles in the main body of the journal included pieces written especially for the journal, but also material re-printed from other Christian journals, including samizdat and open letters to politicians and Christians around the world. Article titles often employed dramatic anti-communist rhetoric, such as "While the atheists sleep12", "Marxist corruption of French Protestantism¹³", and "Religious genocide in Czechoslovakia¹⁴".

During the 1980s, circulation numbers and Catacombes's finances struggled, with Sergiu Grossu requesting and receiving financial assistance from the international catholic foundation Aide à l'Église en détresse¹⁵. At the same time, however, the work of the Grossus gradually gained increasing recognition and visibility in France from the late 1970s and into the 1980s. By the late 1980s amongst the Romanian community in France, Catacombes was reported to be "well regarded among the faithful¹⁶", and Sergiu Grossu's 1987 book Le calvaire de la Roumanie chrétienne described as "a work we have not seen in 40 years of exile" and through which "the free world understood and discovered the truth¹⁷". The attention given to the Grossus amongst French editors and publishers had also changed: where in 1969 the Grossus felt disappointed and confronted with a media environment that had unanimously rejected their attempts to publish their first article in France¹⁸, by May 1978 a programme entitled "The journal Catacombes and the problems of the Church of Silence" had been broadcast on the TV station FR3.

Catacombes's afterlife following its final issue in winter 1992 also offers a helpful insight into the attempts that were made to bring exile experiences into post-communist histories of the period, shedding light on the contribution of exile publications and archives to post-communist debates about collective memory of the communist past. While the journal was included in early histories of the exile written in the 1980s, such as the column entitled "35 years of the Romanian exile" in the journal BIRE (Bulletin d'informations pour les Roumains en exil/Buletin de informație pentru Români în exil)19, it was through the later writings of Sergiu Grossu that the activities of the journal came to be more widely known. Grossu's books, articles and interviews (mostly in Romanian magazines and newspapers) – which again were published in French, Romanian and English, and many of which quoted extensively from Catacombes's articles - played a key role in recounting the history of Catacombes. They provide an important lens into how Grossu himself perceived and chose to represent his work in exile, as well as some of the ways in which anti-communist exile activism transitioned into the

post-communist period. For instance, in Grossu's 2002 memoir, L'Église persécutée²⁰, which described the journey of the journal and showcased its key achievements in the course of its 21 years existence, he stressed the notion of mission. Rejecting the accusation that they had moved to Paris for a better life, he emphasised that it had been "the will of God that they were there, at the heart of Europe, in order to be his ambassadors and witnesses, able to talk in the name of those who did not have the legitimacy to oppose... the anti-Christian ideological suffocation²¹". This mission, as he perceived it, continued after Catacombes ended in 1992 and after Grossu returned to live in Romania following the death of Nicole in 1996. It included the founding of Grossu's own association, "Le devoir du souvenir", but also involvement in other memorialisation projects in Romania ranging from Fundația Academia Civică to Nicolae Mărgineanu's 2002 film adaptation of Bénie sois-tu, prison. Such post-history helps inform how the continued experience of marginalisation and new possibilities for publicity in the post-communist period shaped representations of anti-communist activism and the efforts to memorialise that history. Spiritual Resistance to Communism

A fuller history of Catacombes cannot be told, however, without examining more closely the ideas and discourses circulating in the journal, and how these related to the context in which the journal was produced. One of the key ideas present in the pages of Catacombes was the notion of a "spiritual combat" or "spiritual resistance" on the part of the Church of Silence against communism. Similar to other accounts of the Underground Church (e.g. Richard Wurmbrand's Christian Missions to the Communist World), Catacombes aimed to show how the Church was undergoing a spiritual renaissance in the communist world and represented a real force of opposition to communism. The history of such "spiritual resistance" - of acts of Christian opposition or resistance to communism - is a complex topic that is still being explored22. The focus here, by contrast, is on how discourses of spiritual resistance operated in Catacombes, and the broader political networks and ideas that converged around the concept of spiritual resistance. This concept was expressed as a broad politics of religious freedom which stressed atheism as the core tenet of communism, and which constructed communism as being essentially predicated on "a phobia of the spiritual realm²³" and engaged in an "all-out war against Christendom²⁴". The idea of spiritual resistance to communism was produced and promoted in Catacombes in large part through practices of memory making and history writing, which were key themes of the journal, as they were for other exile publications and groups. Each issue of Catacombes began with a section entitled the "calendar of the cata-

combs", which commemorated events (such as trials

against Christians, the publication of open letters of Christian opposition, and enactment of laws against religious practices) that had taken place that month in previous years. This created a pattern of commemoration that collected experiences from different times and places together. Similarly, stories of individual Christians or communities' resistance to communism and stories of "spiritual renaissance" helped build up a body of names, places and events that represented a broader phenomenon of spiritual resistance which was intended to be embedded in readers' memories through practices such as prayer. Such descriptions of spiritual resistance were not intended simply to document events neutrally, but as Grossu put it in an interview in 1972, Catacombes was intended to be "not a publication but a cry²⁵". This cry was part of that same spiritual resistance.

Such ideas of spiritual resistance reflected the deeply transnational nature of the exile experience and the larger Christian networks and political cultures that the Grossus connected with. Catacombes formed part of a wider network of other journals, organisations and associations circulating memories of Christian suffering under communism and of their "spiritual resistance". From its beginning, the Grossus were able to tap into broader, informal exile networks to spread the journal across different cities, including Paris, Port-Marly and Rome; for example, Grossu wrote that "the Ukrainians in France distributed 500 copies of Catacombes during Brezhnev's stay [in France in 1971]; the Hungarians nearly 400²⁶". Many of the networks that the journal tapped into, however, were united by a shared interest in anti-communist activism. Catacombes re-printed material from organisations and journals whose aims it shared, such as Richard Wurmbrand's Christian Missions to the Communist World and Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania (LKB Kronika). Amongst its contributors were other exiles involved in larger anti-communist activism, such as Georges Lodygensky from the International Anticommunist Entente and Georges Sauge, better known for his work with the anti-communist Centre d'études supérieures de psychologie sociale. In maintaining these wide-ranging links, Catacombes bridged denominational differences. One of the longest serving contributors to *Catacombes* was the French Protestant pastor Pierre Courthial, whom Sergiu Grossu came across through his involvement in the small, far-right Protestant journal Tant qu'il fait jour (which recommended the first issue of Catacombes to its readers, claiming that it "pursues its fight in the difficult conditions which are the lot of all free and courageous organs directed against taboos, and what taboos!... [it] needs to be helped with the greatest energy: you must read it, subscribe to it, get it read, lead your friends to subscribe to it²⁷"). The Grossus also drew inspiration from transnational

Catholic anti-communist networks, particularly Traditionalist ones (many of which he identified as "fraternal" organisations), and Sergiu Grossu later stated that he had modelled his ambitions on the Club du livre civique, which was run by the Office international des oeuvres de formation civique et d'action culturelle selon le droit naturel et chrétien (OI, formerly Cité catholique), a group founded by the far-right monarchist Jean Ousset. Similarly, OI in turn were interested in him, and in 1973, invited Grossu to speak and host a stall at their seventh Congress of Lausanne. Interest in Catacombes also reached Brazil, where the branch of Tradition, Family and Property, a global Traditionalist, counter-revolutionary, anti-Marxist movement founded by Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira in 1960, promised to distribute copies of Catacombes to its network of 1,500 journalists in Brazil, claiming that "Your journal will be of great use for us who fight communism in all domains", and that they would use it "for the formation of our people²⁸". Such networks not only shaped the way in which the idea of spiritual resistance was understood, but were also important as a way of displaying diversity of support and appeal, which helped *Catacombes* appeal to a broader shared Christian identity rooted in the experiences of Christians in communist countries across the world.

The way in which Catacombes embraced these networks displayed the concern at the heart of the journal, as its subtitle ("Messager supraconfessionnel de l'Église du Silence") made clear, to be "supraconfessional", reflecting the perceived need for an ecumenism that contrasted the "official" ecumenism represented by the World Council of Churches. There were, as one article put it, "two Ecumenisms. One is represented by the World Council of Churches... The other, the Ecumenism of suffering²⁹"; this second ecumenism, in contrast to the first, represented a return to "the unity of the early Church³⁰". Whereas " 'the ecumenical movement' represent[ed] the greatest failure of Christianity in the twentieth century31" and revealed the communist infiltration at the heart of the Church³², the "supraconfessional" spirit of Catacombes reflected the true unity of the Body of Christ that the New Testament spoke of. The Church of Silence provided a model for such unity, because it had "realized spiritual unification of all believers under the crushing law of sufferings", and displayed an ecumenicity "so fervently desired by us in the Free World³³". In contrasting this supraconfessional identity with the "official" ecumenical movement, Catacombes at times took on an anti-elite tone, opposing Church officials and hierarchies with the faith of "the most humble peasant of Lithuania or the Ukraine³⁴" and "obscure ministers and monks35".

Such supraconfessional unity, which lay at the heart of the Grossus' "spiritual fight", was presented as a form of anti-communism that remained non-political. Like

other dissident movements which stressed their "anti-political" nature, Catacombes rejected the idea that it was engaged in political activity. In his first editorial, Sergiu Grossu claimed that "the goal of our journal is spiritual combat, in the name of Jesus Christ. It is therefore not a question of political combat - it is towards Christ that our thoughts and daily efforts converge³⁶". However, the claim to be non-political did not mean that Catacombes was not interested in politics; in fact, the authors of Catacombes were acutely interested in political threats to religion, while also conceptualising "religion" as a domain that could not be entirely separate from politics. Catacombes therefore represented a discourse of alternative politics in which social change could "not happen mechanically, through laws and human decrees, as the socialist Mitterrand promises", but was "only possible through the law of Spirit of life in Christ³⁷". The idea of this supraconfessional, anti-political "spiritual resistance" to communism depicted in Catacombes, also helped construct Eastern Europe as a model of hope and way of resisting the West's "corrupt[ion] by secularism, materialism, and the surrounding immorality that flows from these³⁸". "The more we see the disfigured face of the Churches of the free world", Sergiu Grossu later wrote, "the more we appreciate the incomparable beauty of the Church of Silence, forged in the fire of prisons...³⁹". This idea was picked up by French contributors to Catacombes such as Achille Dauphin Meunier, who wrote that "for me, the Church of Silence is the Church of Hope⁴⁰". Similarly, Gabriel Marcel, another Catacombes contributor, argued that "how can we fail to see the first streaks of a dawn that doubtless, one day when we have left this world, will renew and enlighten the West - a sick world, victim of its own victories...41". The experience of Christians under communism was explicitly drawn out as a warning for the West in articles with titles such as "From laïcité to atheism: the example of the churches under the cross teaches us our possible future⁴²". Such critique of materialist atheism (a critique that extended back to the French Revolution)⁴³ therefore came to function as a wider critique of French laïcité and of the secular, liberal West and its roots in an atheist, materialist logic.

As a journal that reflected and promoted such politics, Catacombes shows how memory of suffering and resistance to communism, which was shared and promoted by Eastern European exiles, was drawn into and helped construct new types of transnational anti-liberal politics that circulated globally. Exile experiences of cultural and political alienation in France joined with older, wider traditions of anti-liberalism, and stories of the Church of Silence became an attractive alternative to the secularised liberal culture of the West. The story of Catacombes therefore offers a valuable insight into how concerns of some Eastern European exile communities in Western Europe fed into the development of right wing political

formations in the late Cold War and following period. A fuller history of Catacombes, and the types of exile activities and networks found in it, still remains to be told. Today, full archival records of the journal can be found in several archives (including at La contemporaine)44, while Sergiu Grossu's personal archive remains in the National Library of Moldova⁴⁵, a more complex, deeper history of the journal might also be told through the scattered correspondence and article clippings kept in

the personal archives of various contributors and readers. The journal's story also points to the need to consider the complex nature of the role of Christianity in exile identity and politics. A better history of the journal may therefore help broaden our understanding of the diverse nature of the Eastern European exile, its interactions with French political culture and broader transnational Christian networks, and the ways in which histories of the exile remain politically charged and contested.

Notes

- 1. See e.g. Eva Behring, Scriitori români din exil: 1945-1989; o perspectivă istorico-literară, Bucharest, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 2001, 258 p. (first ed. Rumänische Schriftsteller im Exil, 1945-1989, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002, 209 p.); Galina Florea, "L'exil politique roumain-Pont historique entre deux cultures", La Francopolyphonie, n° 7, 2012, p. 321-326.
- 2. E.g. Paul E. Michelson, "The History of Romanian Evangelicals, 1918-1989: A Bibliographical Excursus", Archiva Moldaviae, vol. 9, nº 9, 2017, p. 191-233.
- 3. Nicole Valéry Grossu, Bénie sois-tu, prison, Paris, Plon, 1976, 233 p.
- 4. See Elena Melania Vrabie, "O monografie a singurătății și feminității", Revista Transilvania, nº 4, April 2013, p. 71-75; Diana Vrabie, "Literatura detenției: Sergiu Grossu", Limba Română 200, n° 1-2, 2012, p. 104-11.
- 5. Sergiu Grossu, L'église persécutée : entre goulag et société opulente: chronique de deux Roumains à Paris, Catacombes, septembre 1971 - décembre 1992, Paris, L'Âge d'Homme, 2002, 330 p.
- **6.** Ibid., p. 18, 284, 22, 47, 278; Ibid., p. 278.
- 7. See Stéphanie Roulin, "A Martyr Factory? Roman Catholic Crusade, Protestant Missions and Anti-Communist Propaganda against Soviet Anti-Religious Policies, 1929-37", Twentieth Century Communism, vol. 7, nº 7, November 2014, p. 153-73.
- 8. Letter from Sergiu Grossu to Father Janos Szoke, Aide à l'Église en détresse (24 March 1980). Biblioteca Națională a Republicii Moldova, personal archive of Sergiu Grossu.
- 9. Catacombes nº 132-133, September-October 1982.
- 10. Leo Ryan, "Battling communism in an unusual way", The Globe and Mail, 28 July 1972.
- 11. See Sophie Cœuré, Pierre Pascal. La Russie entre christianisme et communisme, Lausanne, Noir sur Blanc, 2014, p. 370.
- 12. Michael Bourdeaux, "Pendant que les athées dorment...", Catacombes, nº 1, October 1971.
- 13. J.G.H. Hoffmann, "Corruption marxiste du protestantisme français", Catacombes, nº 142-143, July-August 1983.
- 14. Janice Broun, "Le génocide religieux en Tchécoslovaquie", Catacombes, nº 212-213, May-June 1989.
- 15. Letter from Sergiu Grossu to Father Janos Szoke, Aide à l'Église en détresse (19 January 1982). Biblioteca Națională a Republicii Moldova, personal archive of Sergiu Grossu.
- 16. René Théo, "Treizeci și cinci de ani de exil românesc", Bulletin d'informations pour les Roumains en exil/Buletin de informatie pentru Români în exil (BIRE), nº 814, 16 May 1985.
- 17. René Théo, "O nouă carte a lui Sergiu Grossu: 'Calvarul României creștine' ", BIRE, nº 856, 16 June 1987.
- 18. See Grossu, L'Église persécutée, op. cit., p. 2226.
- 19. René Théo, "Treizeci și cinci de ani de exil românesc", BIRE, nº 805, 25 December 1984, onwards.
- 20. Sergiu Grossu, L'Église persécutée, op. cit.

- 21. Ibid., p. 20.
- 22. See James A. Kapaló and Kinga Povedák, The Secret Police and the Religious Underground in Communist and Post-Communist Eastern Europe, London, Routledge, 2021, 354 p.
- 23. Norbert Tournoux, "Hecatomb of Church Structures", in Sergiu Grossu (ed.), Janet L. Johnson (trans.), The Church in Today's Catacombs, New Rochelle, Arlington House Publishers, 1975, p. 44-45 (first edition: Sergiu Grossu (ed.), Catacombes 1973 : almanach de l'Eglise du silence, Paris, Editions des Catacombes, 1973, 191 p.).
- 24. Freddy Durrlemann, "Memento", in Grossu, The Church in Today's Catacombs, op. cit., p. 143.
- 25. Sergiu Grossu, L'Église persécutée, op. cit., p. 42.
- **26.** Ibid., p. 59.
- 27. Ibid., p. 60.
- 28. Ibid., p. 60.
- 29. Élie Olivier, "L'Œcuménisme de la souffrance", Catacombes, nº 132-133, September-October 1982.
- 30. Sergiu Grossu, "Nous attendons une nouvelle terre", in Sergiu Grossu, The Church in Today's Catacombs, op. cit., p. 149.
- 31. Sergiu Grossu, "L'impératif de l'unité", Catacombes, nº 4, 15 January
- 32. "Infiltrations communistes au sein des Églises", Catacombes, nº 8, 15 May 1972.
- 33. Sergiu Grossu, "Nous attendons une nouvelle terre", op. cit., p. 150.
- 34. Roland Caucher, "Modern Forms of Persecution", in Grossu, The Church in Today's Catacombs, op. cit., p. 27.
- 35. Sergiu Grossu, L'Église persécutée, op. cit., p. 2.
- **36.** Sergiu Grossu, "Pour défendre la vérité", *Catacombes*, nº 1, October 37. Sergiu Grossu, L'Église persécutée, op. cit., p. 310.
- 38. Gabriel Auphan, "The Christian Obligation", in Grossu, The Church
- in Today's Catacombs, op.cit., p. 17-18.
- 39. Sergiu Grossu, L'Église persécutée, op. cit., p. 290.
- 40. Achille Dauphin-Meunier, cited in Sergiu Grossu, L'Église persécutée, op. cit., p. 287.
- 41. Marcel, "The First Streaks of Dawn", in Sergiu Grossu, The Church in Today's Catacombs, op. cit., p. 13
- 42. J.G.H. Hoffman, "De la laïcité à l'athéisme : l'exemple des églises sous la croix enseigne notre possible avenir", Catacombes, nº 128, May 1982.
- 43. E.g. Pierre de Villemarest, "De 1789 à 1989, la route va de Kronstadt à la place Tien an Men", Catacombes, n° 214-215, July-August 1989.
- 44. La contemporaine, "Catacombes : Église du silence ; 1971-1992", ISSN: 1169-9019.
- 45. Biblioteca Națională a Republicii Moldova, Secția Carte veche și rară, Arhiva lui Sergiu Grossu.