

Review of the movie 21 Rubies

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Motto:

**"There is no democracy in the Church...
only obedience!"**

The movie *21 Rubies* represents, as a cinematic genre, a drama released on November 3, 2023, directed by the Romanian priest and filmmaker Ciprian Mega. I chose to write this review because watching this film made me reflect on my relatively recent past, specifically my high school years. There are many films that evoke various emotions in people's hearts, with some of the most well-known being *Titanic* and *Gladiator* and what *21 Rubies* has in common with these two cinematic masterpieces is that it draws inspiration from reality, even though there is an apparent intent to maintain silence regarding the functioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) as an institution.

The subject of the film is relevant because it aims to highlight the situation within the hierarchy and educational system of the Romanian Orthodox Church, on one hand, and the political games at the top levels of the state, on the other hand, and how all these lead to the inefficiency of justice and the failure of the rule of law. The two-and-a-half-hour film unfolds on two timelines: one set chronologically at the end of 2022, and the other during the governance of the Romanian Democratic Convention (1996-2000). Although the two developments of the action seem initially entirely distinct, they intersect notably in a symbolic moment when one of the film characters hands to Nina, the film main prosecutor a watch with 21 rubies, this act triggers a wave of sorrowful memories for her, recalling the tragic events that happened during the Convention's governance, where her parents and brother were among the victims.

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As I mentioned earlier, this production took me back in time. The reason lies within my graduation from the Orthodox Theological Seminary in Caransebeș and, implicitly, the contact I had with the lower clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Orthodox Church since my teenage years. Currently, in addition to being a master's student at the Faculty of History and Philosophy, I am also a newly enrolled undergraduate student in pastoral Orthodox theology, a decision that brings me back to the Church's courtyard after a three-year hiatus. Unlike the storyline of the film, I chose this path on my own, despite opposition from those around me who believed I deserved a better high school where more academic rigor could be found. Through this film, I rediscovered many moments from my adolescence, such as my admission to the Orthodox Seminary, my first interactions with the new colleagues, the favoritism shown to some for reasons that had to remain strictly confidential, the lack of freedom to express contrary opinions, and the role of the protopope in the selection process. These were not entirely pleasant experiences but certainly shaped my perspective on the Church as an institution.

Returning to the film chronicle, a main event is represented by the speeches delivered at the beginning of the cinematic screening, which focus on the main issues around which Romania's current domestic and foreign policies revolve: combating fundamentalism, intolerance, and extremism; fostering diversity; supporting democracy; and, perhaps most importantly, motivating the aid for Ukraine. These themes remain as significant as ever, perhaps even more relevant today. Romania has recently faced unprecedented events in its post-communist history, namely the recounting of votes from the presidential election and the annulment of these elections due to Russian interference aimed to influence the voting process. In the current political and electoral context, the message from the U.S. Secretary of State highlights the primary criticism of those opposing to the aid for Ukraine - that the conflict is not our concern - while emphasizing that a negative outcome would not only be disastrous for Ukraine, but also for Romania and the entire free world ("we will smell the same poison"). Back to the film, all the speeches during the National Day reception, held at a synagogue, were addressed to an audience that included the Patriarch, who, in his characteristic manner, maintained throughout the evening an uncertain and slightly disapproving demeanor toward what he heard.

During Radu Vasile's government (1998-1999), the main character, Nina, was a student, while her parents lived in a rural area. Their wish was to enroll Nina's younger brother in the theological seminary, despite being aware of the challenges this endeavor would entail. The young boy and his close friend were advised by the retired village priest, Alexie, who was not in agreement with the way of church hierarchy, that attending the seminary would bring them no benefit. This stance later triggered a conflict between the father and the priest. The father's limited familiarity with the church environment led him to seek help from the Mideni village mayor. The mayor, displaying a phlegmatic attitude, contacted the protopope to assist the father in finding a solution for his son.

At a party organized by the mayor to celebrate his election victory, the protopope is also invited. At the end of his speech, the mayor praises the church's support for his re-election, further suggesting that the Orthodox Church is now in a position of power unlike ever before in its relationship with the State. Politicians are now the ones who need the clergy, rather than the other way around, as it was the case during the interwar period, when the principle of symphony between Church and State was invoked, and the Church was in a subordinate position - a reality that became even more evident with the inauguration of right-wing dictatorial regimes before and during the Second World War. The protopope is nothing more than a free spirit, indulging in life's small pleasures, such as music, drinking, and smoking. Nevertheless, he has an honest conversation with the family of the aspiring theology student, mentioning the "law of obedience," which operates as follows: the orders in the Church come from the top to down and are treated as law, while money flows from the bottom up to the higher up, representing the submission of the lower clergy to the hierarchy.

The protopope does not teach at the seminary, which leads him to direct the family toward the music teacher-priest from there. The young man's path to the seminary becomes a burden; his father falls into the vice of alcoholism and doesn't know where to find more money to make his son a priest. During the audition, the young man has no musical talent, but he is taken under the protection of the music teacher because of the money provided by the family, which is a reality in many cases. The increasing number of theological seminaries within the Romanian Orthodox Church and the decreasing interest of adolescents in this profession have led to the admission of many students with little knowledge of the field, and who had modest

grades during middle school, but who can enter at vocational high schools without being conditioned by their National Evaluation scores. Even if they will graduate from the theological seminary and possibly enrolling in a theology faculty, most of them remain with deficiencies in both theologically and, unfortunately, spiritually knowledge.

Even though the bishop had his favorites who were to be admitted and wished to reject the priest music teacher protégé, he quickly understands from the priest music teacher's gestures what the situation is and requests the addition of one more spot to the available positions from that year, to admit him as well. By chance, the theology aspirant overhears a conversation between his parents and some relatives, from which he observes their desperation, the deepening debt, and the lack of solutions. This leads him to leave for the train station to return home. He loses his father's watch with 21 rubies, which he had received from him when he left to take the seminary entrance exam, during a gamble, then spends a night in a police station, but ultimately reaches the retired priest, who informs his family. The panic caused by the burden he placed on his family's shoulders and the loss of the gift his father had given him leads him to take his own life.

The topic of corruption takes place on two levels: first is represented by the BOR simoniacal practices in relation with some priesthood candidates, that presuppose offering various material benefits, including bribes, in order to obtain a position as a church servant; second one is represented by the prosecutor analysis of files certifying this kind of practices, a fact well-known to the patriarch. The desire to attain a higher position leads her to confront with the corruption that exists within the state system. It is necessary to pass through the political filter, then by the American diplomatic mission in Bucharest, headed by Mickey Mandovanis, and last but not least, through the Church.

If there is no significant opposition from the first two, the Patriarch wishes to find another person, precisely because of the files she was investigating, emphasizing that she did not have the friendliest attitude toward the Church, being therefore distrusted. In delicate matters, the Orthodox Church seeks, through the voice of the Patriarch, to remain cautious and consistent. For example, in the interview held in the final part of the film, the Patriarch responds briefly and concisely regarding the vaccination campaign against Covid-19 and aid for the Ukrainian people. However, when the issue of supporting the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church is raised, he becomes extremely reserved and offers no response, mentioning only that this matter pertains to the

politics within the Autocephalous Churches, which include both the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarchate. The subject has been on the agenda since 2017, when the Ukrainian Church was granted autocephaly by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and it was further intensified by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

There are certain subtleties over time that deserve to be highlighted. Mickey Mandovanis, although at first glance he doesn't resemble a diplomat at all, represents the American society distorted by the fierce struggle between various political ideologies that have emerged in recent years. His discourse represents the vision of the Democratic Party and the Biden administration on the Eastern conflict, even though he is originally from Texas, a stronghold of the Republican Party. The hunting trip brings him as a trophy a deer, which is a symbol of dignity and harmony in human relationships, values that he disregards throughout the two and a half hours of the film.

Given the lack of electoral scrutiny in the proximity of the time in which the action takes place, the discussion about the right to abortion is brought back into the spotlight, a sensitive subject both for Romanian society and for the one across the Atlantic. While in Romania, the wounds caused by the banning of abortion during national-communism period are still felt, in the United States, which serves as a model for Romania in many ways, the question arises whether women's right to abortion should fall under presidential administration or be decided at the state level, another bone of contention between Democrats and Republicans.

The involvement of Patriarch Daniel in state politics, well outlined during the film in his meetings with political and diplomatic figures, represent another key point. The title of the latest work by Swiss historian Oliver Jens Schmitt begins with the question "State Church or Church in the State?" The answer seems to be "Church in the State," as the official position of the BOR is sought in the context of important political events on the Romanian stage. For example, in recent days, the Orthodox Church's stance on the presidential elections was eagerly awaited. The response pleased some and disappointed others, as the Church institution limited itself to merely stating that it supports Romania's membership in Western structures (EU, NATO). This recent event is compounded by the fact that at each government meeting with religious representatives, the Patriarch's figure is by far the most prominent, always sitting at the center, which for many is not defining, but not for a theologian. The priest who stands *protos* (serving in front of the Holy Altar) coordinates

the unfolding of the religious service. The same applies to a service with bishops if their administrative positions are the same.

The participation of the prosecutor, together with her husband, at a party organized by a politician, with the attendance of the American secretary, leads her to take a step back, abandoning her promotion, not because of the demands made, which she had tacitly accepted, but because she caught her own husband with another woman. The fact that she knew how the system worked and was no longer susceptible to blackmail this posed as a danger to those at the top of the state's pyramid, which is why she is carefully searched, loses her job, and ends up living in seclusion.

From the files she analyzed, the only one who admitted to offering a bribe to become a priest was the friend of her brother, the other disciple of priest Alexie. Another symbolic parallel with the past is represented by her meeting with the mayor, who gives back to her the watch with 21 rubies, the one which the young brother had lost in the past. The film ends with a call for reflection: the watch ends up back in the hands of its original owner, who, at the beginning of the film, was a woman in power, but by the end, she is admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

I would like to commend the fact that priest and filmmaker Ciprian Mega portrays in this cinematic production a simplistic and schematic representation of the relationships between the institutions of the Romanian State and its Western allies, alongside the power dynamics and the hierarchy-lower clergy relationship within the Romanian Orthodox Church. Many priests are aware of these issues but only speak about them in whispers, and only to trusted individuals, such as church cantors or sacristans, who essentially belong to the same category of Church servants. Until now, I have not seen a film that highlights these aspects of Church life; I have only read some articles and books that discuss the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Romanian State and how Romanian political life has influenced the situation within BOR.

The theme of this film remains relevant and could even serve as a starting point for initiating other similar projects. I was pleasantly impressed, particularly by its focus on the behind-the-scenes dynamics of the relationship between bishops and the priests under their authority.

In this review, I aimed to highlight the main events depicted during the film, correlating their concise presentation with insights from prior readings or personal experiences. I sought to organize them in chronological order for

greater clarity of those reading this review. Finally, I believe that the Orthodox Church should take note of the issues raised by this production, ensuring that access to its archives is not restricted solely to insiders—a point advocated by researchers and historians. The hierarchs in question should acknowledge their collaboration with the Romanian State Security Department, following the example of the late Metropolitan bishop of Banat, Nicolae Corneanu, and should reconsider the "law of obedience."