

# The History of Ecclesiastical Conflict within the Armenian Community of Transylvania (1697–1700): Bishop Oxendio Virziresco and the ‘Elia Mendrul’ Case<sup>1</sup>

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1. Introduction; 2. The ‘Elia Mendrul’ Case; 3. Conclusion

## *I. Introduction*

The Hungarian-speaking intellectuals of Armenian descent of Transylvania in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries regarded Uniate Bishop Oxendio Virziresco Stefanowicz<sup>3</sup> (1654–1715) as an ‘Apostle’ of impeccable morality and unwavering faith. They praised his clerical leadership skills and his determination with which he fought for the interests of his people. On the other hand, they provided some useful information regarding the Bishop’s pastoral (missionary) proselytisation, and ecclesiastical-organisation-related activities.

- 1 Scholarly investigations on the subject of the present study were conducted in Rome and Vatican City thanks to the Klebelsberg Kunó Scholarships granted in the years 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2018. The author wishes to express his gratitude for the support provided. Furthermore, special thanks are also due to Kornélia Vargha and Dr Boldizsár Fejérvári for the English translation.
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- 3 Hereafter referred him as (Bishop) Oxendio Virziresco in the main text.

In the Armenian community of Transylvania, the dominant view was that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's episcopate was devoid of any problems or conflicts, and the ecclesiastical union he accomplished in Transylvania happened seamlessly. The 'Elia Mendrul' Case in 1697, however, cast a dark shadow over this predominantly idyllic image. It is worth noting that the literature does not discuss this story at all, and the question arises whether historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries knew about it at all. If they did, they avoided this subject intentionally so as not to tarnish the Bishop's good reputation. Recently, a more complete and clearer picture of the conflict has emerged through studying some documents found at the Historical Archives of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* = APF)<sup>4</sup> in Rome and at the Apostolic (Secret) Archives in Vatican City (*Archivio Apostolico/Segreto Vaticano* = AAV). Research in the past decade has helped to refine, modify, and rethink this idealistic image of the Bishop and provided new data on the case.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, important historical data that later proved to

- 4 The Sacred (Holy) Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) as a missionary institution/body of the Holy See will hereafter be referred to as *Propaganda Fide*. This institution was founded by the Bull called *Inscrutabili divinae providentiae*, promulgated by Pope Gregory XV (1621–1623) on 6<sup>th</sup> of January in 1622. APF (= Archivio storico della Sacra Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli o de "Propaganda Fide", Roma) Coll. Urb (= Collegio Urbano). Vol. 1. Fol. 11.-27/v.
- 5 T. Vanyó, *A bécsi pápai követség levéltárának iratai Magyarországról 1611–1786*, Budapest 1986, (Fontes Historiae Hungaricae Aevi Recentioris.), 180; B. Kovács, *Az erdélyi örménykatolikus egyház és a Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide a 18. század első évtizedében*, in S. Óze – B. Kovács (eds.), *Örmény diaszpóra a Kárpát-medencében*, Művelődéstörténeti műhely–Felekezet és identitás 1, Piliscsaba 2006, 57–58, 67; K. Nagy, „Az erdélyi örmény egyházhoz kapcsolódó olaszországi forrásokról”, in *Lymbus–Magyarságtudományi Közlemények* (2008), 411–428.

be incorrect hindered the historical study of the 'Elia Mendrul' Case. The few writings that dealt with Oxendio Virzirescos's life mentioned that the Bishop was captured by the Tartars of Crimea, who were allies of the Ottoman Empire when they attacked Transylvania in 1697, during the liberation war against the Ottoman Turks (1683–1699). They took him to the Ottoman Empire, where he was imprisoned for three years in Constantinople. He was released from his captivity following the Treaty of Karlowitz (*Sremski/Srjemski Karlovci, Karlóca*) in 1699. Scholarship has demonstrated absurdity of this story since Bishop Oxendio Virziresco sent many hand-written letters and reports on the 'Elia Mendrul' Case from Transylvania to the *Propaganda Fide*, the institution for missionary co-ordination of the Holy See, between 1697 and 1700. Thus, it seems impossible that, in the above mentioned period, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco could send hand-written letters and reports from his captivity when the place of writing was Transylvania.<sup>6</sup>

For almost twenty years, the idea of Catholic missions initiated by the Holy See among the Armenians who had escaped from Principality of Moldavia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to Transylvania between 1668 and 1672 under the leadership of Armenian Apostolic Bishop Minas Aléksanean T'oxat'eci,<sup>7</sup> could not be on the agenda at all.<sup>8</sup> In other words, not until the early 1680s

6 Ch. Lukácsy, *Historia Armenorum Transylvaniae e primordiis gentis usque nostram memoriam e fontibus authenticis et documentis antea ineditis elaborata*, Vienna 1859, 72; L. Bárány, „Verzirescul Auxendus I”, in *Armenia* 4/3 (1888), 101; G. Éble, *A szamosujvári Verzár család*, Budapest 1915, 15; G. Heckenast, *Ki kicsoda a Rákóczi-szabadságharcban?*, K. Mészáros (ed.), Budapest 2005, 455.

7 In the transliteration of Armenian names and terms in this article, the internationally accepted academic norms approved and mandated by the International Association of Armenian Studies (*Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes* = AIEA) were applied.

8 APF SC (= Scritture riferite nei Congressi) Fondo Moldavia. Vol. 1. Fol. 106r., Fol. 146r.–v.+ Fol. 149v., Fol. 155r.–156v., Fol. 358r.; APF SC Fondo

could the recently united Armenian (Uniate) Archiepiscopate in Lviv (*Lemberg, Lwów, Leopoli, Leopolis, L'vov, Ilov*) and the Holy See undertake Catholicising missions in this community.<sup>9</sup> Lviv had attempted to support its positions by stating that the Armenian refugees to Transylvania had always been under the jurisdiction of the Archiepiscopate, the jurisdiction of which could be enforced even after the ecclesiastical union in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1627–1652) during the tenure of Archbishop Nikol Torosowicz (1603–1681).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Francesco Martelli (1633–1708), Titular (*in partibus infidelium*) Archbishop of Corinth, and Opizio Pallavicini (1632–1700), Titular Archbishop of Ephesus, Apostolic Nuncios in

- Moldavia. Vol. 2. Fol. 120/r.–v., Fol. 121/r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Moscovia Polonia e Rutheni. Vol. 2. Fol. 179/r.–v.; APF FV (= Fondo di Vienna). Vol. 8. Fol. 74r.–77/v., Fol. 80/r.–v.; AAV (= Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Città del Vaticano) ANVAR (= Archivio della Nunziatura Apostolica in Varsavia). Vol. 98. Fol. 641r.–644/v.; APMV (= Archivio dei Padri Mechitaristi di Venezia, Venezia) MS (= Manuscripta). No. 771. Fol. 124/r.–v.; BMK (= Bibliothek des Mechitaristenklosters, Wien) MS (= Manuscripta). No. 331. Fol. 1/v.–2r.; MAMAT (= Surb Mesrop Maštoc' i Anwan Matenadaran, Erewan/ Armenian National Archive called Saint Mesrop Maštoc') MS (= Manuscripta). No. 9484. Fol. 304r.
- 9 APF Acta SC (= Acta Sacrae Congregationis). Vol. 52. Fol. 122/r.–v., Fol. 155r.–156/v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 53. Fol. 248r.; APF SOCG (= Scritture Originali riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali). Vol. 471. Fol. 324r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 482. Fol. 132/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 487. Fol. 64/r.–v.+ Fol. 70/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 488. Fol. 79r., Fol. 174r.–175r., Fol. 274/r.–v., Fol. 275r.–276/v., Fol. 283r.–284/v., Fol. 285r., Fol. 286r.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 1. Fol. 265r.–267/v., Fol. 525r.–526/v., Fol. 602r.–608/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 3. Fol. 377r.–381r.; APF SC Fondo Moldavia. Vol. 2. Fol. 126r.–127/v., Fol. 128r.–131/v., Fol. 134r.–135/v.; APF SC Fondo Moldavia. Vol. 3. Fol. 3/r.–v., Fol. 7/r.–v.
- 10 E. Schütz, *An Armenian-Kiptchak Document of 1640 from Lvov and its Background in Armenian and in the Diaspora*, in Gy. Kara (ed.), *Between the Danube and the Caucasus, A Collection of Papers concerning Oriental Sources on the History of Peoples of Central and South-Eastern Europe*, Budapest 1987, 247–330.

Warsaw, as well as Theatine Father Francesco Giambattista Bonesana CR (1649–1709), Rector of the Armenian College (*Collegium Armenum*) in Lviv founded by the Holy See in 1664, also reported to Rome that the Catholic missions among the Armenians in Transylvania should be seen as of prominent importance. The main co-ordinating body of the Holy See for mission work, the *Propaganda Fide*, did not raise objections in this regard.<sup>11</sup>

Before long, senior officials at the Holy See found the suitable clergyman in Oxendio Virziresco's person for Catholicising the Armenians of Transylvania.<sup>12</sup> He was a Moldavian-born Armenian, who had been educated at the Pontifical Urban College<sup>13</sup> (*Collegium Urbanum*) of the *Propaganda Fide* in Rome and spoke a number of languages fluently besides his native Armenian. His election was partly motivated by the indisputable fact that his family had escaped from Moldavia to Transylvania back in the year of 1668 together with Bishop Minas Alēksanean T'oxat'ec'i. For Oxendio Virziresco, the main aim of his missionary task was evident and simple from the perspective of the authorities of the Holy See: to implement the ecclesiastical union of the Armenians and organise the Armenian Uniate (Catholic) Church in Transylvania.<sup>14</sup>

11 APF SOCG. Vol. 496. Fol. 503r.; APF Lettere SC (= Lettere e Decreti della Sacra Congregazione). Vol. 72. Fol. 1/v.–2r.; AAV SSP (= Segretaria di Stato. Polonia). Vol. 101. Fol. 498r.–499/v.

12 APF Acta SC. Vol. 51. Fol. 81r., Fol. 114r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 70. Fol. 2/r.–v., Fol. 42r., Fol. 53/r.–v., Fol. 54r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 73. Fol. 252/r.–v.

13 Urban College (*Collegium Urbanum*, *Collegio Urbano*) in Rome was founded by Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644) with his Bull *Immortalis Dei Filii* promulgated on 1<sup>st</sup> of August in 1627. APF Coll. Urb. Vol. 1. Fol. 36r., Fol. 37r., Fol. 103r.–120/v., Fol. 131r.–139/v., Fol. 141r.–142/v., Fol. 161r.

14 APF Acta SC. Vol. 51. Fol. 154/r.–v., Fol. 232r., Fol. 255/v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 53. Fol. 248/r.–v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 54. Fol. 207/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 490. Fol. 110r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 491. Fol. 12/r.–v., Fol. 13/v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 74.

As a simple missionary and priest, Oxendio Virziresco set out from Rome and, via Lviv, arrived in Transylvania in 1685.<sup>15</sup> Soon he managed to convert many Armenians to Catholicism in the Gheorghen (*Gyergyó*) region, with its centre in the town of Gheorgheni (*Niklasmarkt, Gyergyószentmiklós*).<sup>16</sup> However, the newcomer missionary from Rome was not wholeheartedly welcomed by the local Armenian Apostolic community: The beginning of his mission was marked by fervent conflicts with Bishop Minas and his clergy. It was reported that, during his initial mission, Oxendio Virziresco was hit gravely on two occasions by the clergy and was titled ‘a Frankish heretic’ (Western Latin) priest ‘from the Lands of the Franks (i.e. Rome)’.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, Oxendio Virziresco had a contradictory relationship with Bishop Minas Alëksanean T’oxat’ec’i, the Apostolic Bishop of the Armenians in Transylvania. He knew that with full certainty that the key to uniting the Armenians in Transylvania with the Roman Catholic Church was persuading Bishop Minas into joining Catholicism. Although Oxendio Virziresco was not able to obtain the elderly Armenian Bishop’s consent to uniting with Rome, he succeeded in convince the Bishop to come with him to Lviv and start negotiations with Armenian Uniate Archbishop

Fol. 19/r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 1. Fol. 525r.–526/v., Fol. 602r.–610/v.; APF Coll. Urb. Vol. 1. Fol. 269r.

- 15 APF Acta SC. Vol. 55. Fol. 60/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 492. Fol. 310/v., Fol. 313/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 493. Fol. 30r.+ Fol. 31/v., Fol. 376r.+ Fol. 377/v.+ Fol. 378/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 495B. Fol. 232r.–234/v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 73. Fol. 252/r.–v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 74. Fol. 19/r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 3. Fol. 417r., Fol. 418r., Fol. 465/r.–v.
- 16 *Step’anosi Rōšk’ay Žamanakagrut’iwn kam tarekank’ ekelec’akank’* [An Ecclesiastical Annal Known as Chronology Written by Step’anos Rōšk’ay], ašx. (ed.) Hamazasp Anton Oskean OMeck, Vienna 1964, 185.
- 17 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 3. Fol. 462/r.–v., Fol. 464r., Fol. 465/r.–v., Fol. 468r.–469/v., Fol. 488r., Fol. 490r.

Vardan Hunanean (1644–1715) about a possible ecclesiastical union in November 1686.<sup>18</sup>

According to retrospective interpretations, due to Oxendio Virziresco's persuasion, Bishop Minas Aléksanean T'oxat'ec'i declared his adherence to the Catholic faith and officially pronounced ecclesiastical union with Rome on behalf of the whole Armenian community of Transylvania.<sup>19</sup> This event was attested by some scholarly unelaborated documents by the Jesuit fathers, Rudolf Bzensky SJ (1651–1715) from Czecho-Moravia and István Csete (1648–1718) SJ from Hungary in the mid-1690s.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, sources – missionary letters, reports, and relations – kept in the National Archives of Armenia in Yerevan (*Matenadaran*), the Archives of the Holy See in Rome have clearly disproved the fact that Bishop Minas Aléksanean

18 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 3. Fol. 370r.; APF SC Fondo Moldavia. Vol. 2. Fol. 345r.–346.; BMK MS. No. 511. Fol. 199r.; AAV ANVAR. Vol. 98. Fol. 661r.; ELTE EKK (= Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Egyetemi Könyv- és Kézirattár/University Library and Manuscript Collection, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest) Coll. Hev (= Collectio Hevenesiana). Cod. 21. Pag. 81.; A. Molnár, *Lehetetlen küldetés? Jezsuiták Erdélyben és Felső-Magyarországon a 16–17. században*, TDI Könyvek 8, Budapest 2009, 213–215.

19 Lukácsy, *Historia Armenorum*, 68; *Kamenic': Taregirk' Hayoc' Lebastani ew Rumenioy* [Chronicle of Kamieniec: The Annals of the Armenians in Poland and Romania], ařx. (ed.) Łewond Aliřan OMech, Venetik 1896, 126–127, 197; G. Petrowicz, *La chiesa armena in Polonia e nei paesi limitrofi, Parte Terza (1686–1951)*, Roma 1988, 78; K. Nagy, „Did Vardapet Minas Tokhatetsi, Bishop of the Armenians in Transylvania, Make a Confession of Faith in Roman Catholic Church?“, in *Haigazian – Armenological Review* 31 (2011), 427–442; K. Nagy, *The Church-Union of the Armenians in Transylvania: A Portrait of the Uniate Bishop Oxendio Virziresco*, in E. Pál – B. Kovács (eds.), *Far away from Mount Ararat. Armenian Culture in the Carpathian Basin*, Budapest 2013, 18–19.

20 APF SOCG. Vol. 537. Fol. 418/r.–v.; ARSI (= Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Roma) Fondo Austria. Historia. Vol. 155. Fol. 81/r.–v.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 16. Pag.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 21. Pag. 82; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 29. Pag. 346.; ELTE EKK Coll. Kapr (= Collectio Kaprinayana). A (= Első Sorozat/ First Series). Cod. 11. Pag. 112.

T'oxat'ec'i' could have pledged allegiance or declared the ecclesiastical union with Rome.<sup>21</sup> However, these documents have only yielded (the most detailed) accounts of Bishop Minas Alēksanean T'oxat'ec'i's sudden death and its circumstances at the very end of the year 1686.<sup>22</sup>

At any rate, the death of Bishop Minas had facilitated Oxendio Virziresco's further missionary efforts in Transylvania. His strongest adversary was now out of his way, so he was able to devote himself to the task of Catholicising the Apostolic (Oriental) Armenians, who had lost their spiritual and – of course – secular leader. As a result of his missionary activity and efforts, in February 1689, a large Armenian delegation led by members of the clergy, – Arch-Dean (*awagerēc'*) Elia Mendrul (ca. 1630–1701), Andrea Alacz (ca. 1631–1698), Astwacatur Nigošean, and Vardan Martinus Potoczky (ca. 1640–1702) – arrived in Lviv from Bistrița (*Bistritz, Nösen, Bistrizzi, Beszterce*), Transylvania. On behalf of the whole community, the group officially accepted the ecclesiastical union and made a formal declaration of their adherence to the Catholic faith to Archbishop Vardan Hunanean.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the Armenians in Transylvania consented to the

- 21 APF Acta SC. Vol. 55. Fol. 207r.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 70. Fol. 103r.–105/v., Fol. 341r.–346/v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 71. Fol. 69r.–70/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 494. Fol. 370r.–371/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 456r.–457r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 76. Fol. 40/r.–v., Fol. 90/v.–91r.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 3. Fol. 434/r.–v.+ Fol. 435/v., Fol. 498/r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 13/r.–v., Fol. 374r.–375/v.; APF Coll. Urb. Vol. 3. Fol. 472/r.–v.; AAV ANV (= Archivio della Nunziatura Apostolica in Vienna). Vol. 196. Fol. 219r.–220r.; MAMAT MS. No. 9478. Fol. 60r., Fol. 61/v.
- 22 APF Acta SC. Vol. 56. Fol. 148/r.–v., Fol. 256r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 495/A. Fol. 232r.–234/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 496. Fol. 503r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 497. Fol. 337/r.–v., Fol. 338/r.–v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 76. Fol. 33/v.–34/v.; AAV ANVAR. Vol. 177. Fol. 161/v.–162/v.; AAV SSP. Vol. 100. Fol. 74r.–75r.; Rōšk'ay, *Žamanakagrut'iw*n, 186.
- 23 APF Acta SC. Vol. 59. Fol. 165r.–169/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 504. Fol. 103r., Fol. 104r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 78. Fol. 36/v.–37/v., Fol. 37/v.–38r.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 105/r.–v., Fol. 124r.; MAMAT MS. No. 1512. Fol. 557r.–



ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Armenian Uniate Archiepiscopacy in Lviv. The 1689 ecclesiastical union of the Armenians of Transylvania greatly contributed to Oxendio Virziresco's appointment by Pope Alexander VIII (1689–1691) as Titular Bishop of Aladia and Apostolic Vicar of the Armenians in Transylvania on 2<sup>nd</sup> of October in 1690. Moreover, an annual stipend of 100 Roman *scudi* was granted to him by the Holy See.<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, Rome placed the Armenians of Transylvania under its own direct ecclesiastical jurisdiction in spite of considerable protest by the Armenian Uniate Archiepiscopate.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, many unanswered questions remained concerning the ecclesiastical union of the Armenians of Transylvania concluded in Lviv in 1689. It was not clear which former (mediaeval) ecclesiastical-union model the union of the Armenians in Transylvania was based upon. The ecclesiastical union was confined to the acknowledgement of the Pope's primacy and did not affect such important questions as the marital status of Armenian Uniate priests, the teaching of

560r.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 15. Pag. 251.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 16. Pag. 34.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 21. Pag. 83.

24 Finally, Oxendio Virziresco was consecrated bishop at the Armenian Uniate Cathedral dedicated to the Assumption of Holy Theotokos in Lviv on 30 July 1691. His principal consecrator was Archbishop Vardan Hunanean. Furthermore, his principal co-consecrators were Konstantyn Samuel Lipski (1625–1698), Roman Catholic (Latin-rite) Archbishop of Lviv, and Andrea Santacroce (1655–1712), Apostolic Nuncio in Warsaw (later in Vienna), Titular Archbishop of Seleucia in Isauria. APF Acta SC. Vol. 61. Fol. 84r.–87v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 507. Fol. 87r.–88v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 510. Fol. 94r., Fol. 101r.–v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 80. Fol. 64r.–v., Fol. 65r.–v., Fol. 74r.–v., Fol. 86v.–87v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 81. Fol. 18r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 140r., Fol. 146r.–v.; PL (= Prímási Levéltár/ Primate's Archives, Esztergom) AEV (= Archivum Ecclesiasticum Vetus) SPSZ (= Sub Primate Széchényi). No. 273/2.; Lukácsy, *Historia Armenorum*, 70; Rõšk'ay, *Žamanakagrut' iwn*, 187; Petrowicz, *La chiesa armena in Polonia*, 94.

25 APF SOCG. Vol. 510. Fol. 95r.–v.; APF CP. Vol. 29. Fol. 612r.–613r., Fol. 617v.; APF Coll. Var (= Collegi Vari). Vol. 2. Fol. 704r.–705r.

the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), calendar use, the celebration of the Eucharist, the language of the liturgy, the remuneration of the clergy or the elevation of the clergy to nobility. When the Ecclesiastical Unions of Brest (*Brześć nad Bugiem*) (1596), Užgorod (*Ungwar, Ungvár*) (1646), and Alba Iulia (*Weissenburg, Apulum, Alba Giulia, Gyulaféhevár*) (1697–1701) were signed, these problems were addressed in the respective agreements. As a result of the ecclesiastical union, as could be predicted, a whole battlefield of conflicting interpretations would emerge in the following years.<sup>26</sup>

Unresolved issues would remain constant sources of conflict among the Armenian clergy in Transylvania. Ecclesiastical union was interpreted differently by Oxendio Virziresco and the Uniate Armenian clergy. The Armenian Uniate Church convened a synod

26 P. Tusor, „Lippay György egri püspök (1637–1642) jelentése Felső-Magyarország vallási helyzetéről, (Archivio Santacroce)”, in *Levéltári Közlemények* 73/1-2 (2005), 199–241; G.-M. Miron, *Biserica greco-catolică din Transilvania. Clerșienoriași (1697–1782)*, Cluj–Napoca 2004, 34–75; T. Végshő, „Pálos hittérítők kapcsolatai Északkelet-Magyarország görögkatolikusáival”, in *Athanasiana* 12 (2001), 65–81; Idem, „Benkovich Ágoston váradipüspök működésének görögkatolikus vonatkozásai”, in *Athanasiana* 16 (2003), 99–122; Idem, <*Catholice reformare*>Ágoston Benkovich O. S. P. P. E. *missionario apostolic vescovo di Várad (1631–1702)*, Collectanea Vaticana Hungariae, Classis II. Tom., 3, Budapest–Roma, 2007, 227–244, 291–294; I. Baán, „La pénétration de l’uniatisme en Ukraine au XVII siècle”, in *XVII siècle* 55 (2003), No. 3, 515–526; I. Baán, *Adalékok a jezsuiták tevékenységéhez a magyarországi rutének uniója terén*, in A. Molnár – Cs. Szilágyi – I. Zombori (eds.), *Historicus Societatis Iesu. Szilas László Emlékkönyv*, METEM Könyvek 62, Budapest 2007, 118–129; Idem, *The Process of Dispensation of Péter Parthenus, Greek Rite Bishop of Munkács*, in G. Platania – M. Sanfilippo – P. Tusor, *Gli archivi della Santa Sede e il regno d’Ungheria (secc. 15–20). In memoriam di Lajos Pásztor*, Collectanea Vaticana Hungariae 4, Budapest – Roma 2008, 113–132; T. Végshő, „...mint igazi egyházi ember.” *A történelmi munkácsi egyházmegye létrejötte és a 17. századi fejlődése*, Nyíregyháza 2011, 23–29, 117–126.

in Lviv at the end of October 1689.<sup>27</sup> The Armenians of Transylvania were also invited, but no-one attended the event for unknown reasons. Oxendio Virziresco did not accept the decrees as binding for himself, as has been mentioned before, since the Armenians in Transylvania were directly subordinated to the *Propaganda Fide* from 1690 and were not under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Uniate Archdiocese of Lviv.<sup>28</sup> This proved to be another source of conflict as Oxendio Virziresco's assistants were alumni of the Armenian College (*Collegium Armenum*) in Lviv and sought to honour the decrees of the 1689 Lviv Synod instead of endorsing Oxendio Virziresco's views on ecclesiastical union.<sup>29</sup>

Oxendio Virziresco, who had been studying at Urban College in Rome, intended to achieve total Latinisation of the Armenians of Transylvania following ecclesiastical union. In his understanding, an Armenian could only be a true Christian if he or she observed the traditions, rites and feasts of the Roman Catholic Church, and he considered any Armenian – whether a layperson or a clergyman – a heretic or a schismatic if they continued to adhere to the old Armenian customs and rites despite the ecclesiastical union. Oxendio Virziresco thought the reason for the hardships and sufferings of the Armenian

27 APF Acta SC. Vol. 58. Fol. 95r.-v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 59. Fol. 83r., Fol. 167/r.-v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 503. Fol. 15r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 504. Fol. 104/r.-v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 587. Fol. 47r.-51r.; APF CP (= Congregazioni Particolari). Vol. 29. Fol. 361r.-367/v., Fol. 613r.-616/v., Fol. 629r., Fol. 634r.-635/v., Fol. 636r., Fol. 638r.-640/v., Fol. 643r.-635/v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 79. Fol. 2/v.-3/v., Fol. 94/v., Fol. 110r.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 51r., Fol. 53r., Fol. 56r., Fol. 69/r.-v., Fol. 70r., Fol. 92r.-93/v.; AAV ANVAR. Vol. 107. Fol. 151r.-152/v., Fol. 154r.-155r.; K. Nagy, *Lembergben kezdődött... Az örménykatolikus egyház születése*, Nyíregyháza 2020, 109–115.

28 APF CP. Vol. 29. Fol. 612r.-613/v., Fol. 617/r.-v., Fol. 628/r.-v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 512. Fol. 180r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 79. Fol. 134r.-135/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 140/r.-v.

29 APF SOCG. Vol. 510. Fol. 95r., Fol. 96r.

people was caused by the fact that the Armenians abandoned the Orthodox Catholic faith in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and embraced false and heretic teachings, incurring the constant punishment of God Almighty. Ecclesiastical union with the Roman Catholic Church would, therefore, be the only way for the Armenian people to avoid further ordeals.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the ecclesiastical union of the Armenians of Transylvania left a series of additional questions unanswered, leading to innumerable conflicts within the Armenian community of Transylvania in the 1690s. One had to do with the differences between Latin and Armenian church traditions and customs. Oxendio Virziresco himself was once dedicated to unconditional Latinisation, while the majority of his priests were converts to Catholicism, originally raised or 'socialised' in the cultural *milieu* of the Armenian Apostolic Church. As has been mentioned above, Oxendio Virziresco had been educated at Urban College, where Latin or Western theological training was favoured at the time. Despite his Armenian origins, he always considered himself a man of the Roman Catholic Church. A crucial constituent of that identity must have been the fact that on 9 August in 1681, in the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina in Rome, he was ordained priest according to the Latin Rite by Edoardo/Odoardo Cybo (1619–1705), Titular Archbishop of Seleucia in Isauria and General Secretary of the *Propaganda Fide* at the time (and later Cardinal as well).<sup>31</sup> So, he would celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments in

30 APF SOCG. Vol. 572. Fol. 283r.–285v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 215r.–v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 265r.–268v.; ELTE EKK G (= Res Transylvanica. Historia). Vol. 522. Fol. 96r.–v., Fol. 137r.–v., Fol. 173r.–v.

31 Initially, the Holy See and the *Propaganda Fide* intended newly-Catholicised Archbishop Yovhannēs Tutunĵean Polsec'i (also known as Yovhannēs Šamiramkertac'i or Yovhannēs Vanec'i) (1618–1703), former Armenian Apostolic Patriarch of Constantinople (under the name John V) (1664–1664, 1665–1667), staying in Rome at the time, to perform the priestly ordination of

accordance with the Latin Rite. Consequently, he conducted services in Latin. By contrast, Armenian priests continued to celebrate Mass according to the Armenian Rite even after ecclesiastical union. For them, as has been suggested, ecclesiastical union consisted in more than acknowledging the supremacy of the Pope.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, at the turn of the years 1691 and 1692, a conflict was in progress in Bistrița centred around questions of church discipline and the ancient Armenian customs. Two former Armenian Uniate priests, Vardan Martinus Potoczky and Astwacatur Nigoşean, preached against the ecclesiastical union. Oxendio Virziresco requested the secular authorities in Transylvania to help but could not stop anti-union incidents.<sup>33</sup> Prince Michael Apafi II (1676–1713) offered protection to the resistant Armenians of Bistrița and settled down fifty families led by Priest Vardan Martinus Potoczky in

Oxendio Virziresco. However, the Holy See's authorities finally declined to comply because, in their view, Archbishop Yovhannēs Tutunjian was not a genuine Catholic convert. APF Acta SC. Vol. 51. Fol. 3r.–4v., Fol. 81r., Fol. 114r./v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 493. Fol. 30r.+ Fol. 31v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 70. Fol. 42r., Fol. 54v., Fol. 66r.–67v., Fol. 70r., Fol. 71r.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 3. Fol. 285r.–286v., Fol. 403r.–404v., Fol. 419r.–420v.; APF Ospizi. Vol. 1. Fol. 196r.–200v.; D. Sebouh Aslanian, “Many Have Come Here and Have Deceived Us.” Some Notes on Asateur Vardapet (1644–1728), An Itinerant Armenian Monk in Europe”, in *Handēs Amsōreay – Zeitschrift Für Armenische Philologie* 133 (2019), No. 1–12, 159–168, 173, 181.

<sup>32</sup> APF SOCG. Vol. 493. Fol. 376r.+ Fol. 377v. + Fol. 378/v.

<sup>33</sup> APF Acta SC. Vol. 61. Fol. 84r.–87v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 62. Fol. 125r.–128/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 512. Fol. 180r., Fol. 181r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 520. Fol. 286/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 522. Fol. 453r.–454/v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 81. Fol. 130r.–131/v., Fol. 215r.–216/v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 82. Fol. 24r.–25/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 261r./v., Fol. 262/r.–v., Fol. 263/r.–v., Fol. 265/r.–v., Fol. 266r., Fol. 267r.–268/v.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 21. Pag. 77., Pag. 84.; PL AEV SPSZ. No. 274/4.1., No. 274/4.2., No. 274./8.3., No. 274/8.4.

Dumbrăveni (*Ebbeschdorf, Ebesfalva, Elisabetopoli, Elisabethopolis*).<sup>34</sup> Anger, however, did not subside, but tensions continued to simmer.

## 2. *The 'Elia Mendrul' Case*

The conflict erupted in January 1697, when Bishop Oxendio Virziresco forced four Armenian married priests (three of them from Bistrița) to divorce their wives and leave their families since, due to their sodomite, errant customs (aka heresy), they were a threat to ecclesiastical union and the Uniate Armenian community in Transylvania. Oxendio Virziresco named Elia Mendrul, Andrea Alacz, Elia Teodorowicz and the apostate priest Vardan Martinus Potoczky Dumbrăveni and identified Archdeacon Elia Mendrul as the 'ringleader'.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, only little data is available about Elia Mendrul's life. He fled from Moldavia to Transylvania with Bishop Minas. He was considered head of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Transylvania after Bishop Minas's death as he was Vicar to the deceased Bishop. At the turn of the years 1688 and 1689, the missionary Oxendio Virziresco managed to enlist his support for the cause of ecclesiastical union. From Oxendio Virziresco's perspective, this was a victory because he was worried that after Bishop Minas's death, the Armenian Catholics would appoint Elia Mendrul as Apostolic Bishop of the Armenians

34 APF Acta SC. Vol. 63. Fol. 68r.-70v., Fol. 79r.-v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 514. Fol. 495r.-496v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 517. Fol. 102r.-v., Fol. 103r.-v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 82. Fol. 63v.-64v., Fol. 95v.-96v., Fol. 110r.-111v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 313r.-v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 148r.; K. Nagy, "The Document *Fidelis Relatio* (1693) and the Armenians in Transylvania. (A Memoire about the Armenian Church in Transylvania)", in *Haigazian – Armenological Review* 30 (2010), 379–394.

35 APF Lettere SC. Vol. 87. Fol. 8r.-9v.

in Transylvania.<sup>36</sup> Elia Mendrul and the apostate Vardan Martinus Potoczky, who would later move from Bistrița to Dumbrăveni, led the delegation of Transylvanian Armenians signing the ecclesiastical union with Archbishop Vardan Hunanean in February 1689.<sup>37</sup> They even requested Giacomo Cantelmi/Cantelmo (1645–1702), Apostolic Nuncio in Warsaw and Titular Archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, to intervene at the Holy See for the appointment of Oxendio Virziresco as their Bishop.<sup>38</sup>

The priests incriminated in 1697 did not leave Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's charges unanswered. Elia Mendrul and Andrea Alacz contacted Giovanni Antonio Davia (1660–1740), Apostolic Nuncio in Warsaw (subsequently in Vienna) and Titular Archbishop of Thebae, and sent him a letter of complaint on behalf of the Armenian community of Bistrița. They described Oxendio Virziresco as a corrupt and tyrannical prelate.<sup>39</sup> They informed Nuncio Davia that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco demanded money for every service. In case the members of the community failed to pay, the Bishop would

36 GYÖKPK (= Gyergyószentmiklósi Örmény Katolikus Plébánia Könyvtára/ Library of the Armenian Catholic Parish of Gheorgheni) PT (= A Plébánia története/ History of the Parish). No. I./1.

37 APF Acta SC. Vol. 59. Fol. 165r.–169v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 60. Fol. 14v.–19v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 504. Fol. 103r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 506. Fol. 61r.–v., Fol. 63r.–64v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 510. Fol. 97r.–98v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 78. Fol. 36v.–37v., Fol. 37v.–38r., Fol. 102r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 69r.–70v., Fol. 82r.–83v., Fol. 124r.–v.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 21. Pag. 77.; Rõšk'ay, *Žamanakagrut'iwn*, 186.

38 APF CP. Vol. 29. Fol. 630r.–631v., Fol. 638r., Fol. 644r.–v., Fol. 645r.–v., Fol. 647r., Fol. 648r.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 15. Pag. 251–252.; ELTE EKK. Coll. Hev. Cod. 16. Pag. 34.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 21. Pag. 77–80; Lukácsy, *Historia Armenorum*, 71; *Symbolae ad illustrandam historiam ecclesiae orientalis in terris Coronae S. Stephani*, ed. Nicolaus Nilles S. J., Vol. 2., Oeniponte, 1885, 921.

39 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 520r., Fol. 523r.–v.

not administer the sacraments to them.<sup>40</sup>

The only information available on Andrea Alacz is that, at the time of the conflict with Vardan Potoczky in 1692, he stood by Bishop Oxendio Virziresco and prepared the report for the Transylvanian *Gubernium* (Governorship) about Armenian religious customs in co-operation with another person. The Nuncio was also informed that, when visiting the Armenian households in Bistrița at feast of Epiphany in 1697, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco demanded money from every head of household. Those who were not willing to pay were threatened with excommunication. Oxendio Virziresco accused the Armenian community of celebrating Christmas not on 25 December but on 6 January 6, according to old Armenian customs. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco also charged the Armenian merchants of the Oriental Apostolic Church of Sibiu (*Hemannstadt, Cibinio, Cibinium, Nagyszeben*) surplice fees.<sup>41</sup> They were reluctant to pay since they were not under the Bishop's jurisdiction and they were not Transylvanians but Armenians from Greater Armenia. Therefore, the merchants 'harassed' by the Bishop contacted the priests who were also accused by Oxendio Virziresco and told them about the Bishop's actions.<sup>42</sup> The merchants called the Bishop a 'fraudulent scoundrel deserving to be hanged'. Elia Mendrul and the other priests believed that Oxendio Virziresco was intent on diverting attention from his obscure financial dealings by accusing them.<sup>43</sup>

News of the incident reached the Apostolic Nunciature in Warsaw thanks to the written complaint dispatched by the incriminated priests to Lviv. Moreover, Theatine Father Sebastiano Maria Accorsi CR (ca. 1640–1704), Rector of the Armenian College in Lviv, confirmed for

40 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 517r., Fol. 518r., Fol. 519r.–v.

41 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 523r.–v.; ELTE EKK. Coll. Hev. Cod. 24. Pag. 289–292.

42 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 523r.–v.

43 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 523r.–v.



the *Propaganda Fide* that, in Bistrița, Transylvania, the Bishop and the Armenian community were embroiled in a conflict not over the question of married priests but Oxendio Virziresco's unclear financial dealings.<sup>44</sup> Father Accorsi attributed the conflict to the poor financial situation of the Bishop, who received his annual remuneration of a hundred Roman *scudi* from the *Propaganda Fide* always with considerable delays. Due to the alleged cases of abuse, the Apostolic Nunciature in Warsaw proposed Oxendio Virziresco's removal to the Holy See. The Rector did not approve the suggestion. He argued that removing Oxendio Virziresco would do damage to the missionary work among the Armenians of Transylvania.<sup>45</sup>

Father Accorsi voiced his concern that the controversies among the Armenians in Transylvania might lead to chaos and, thus, the final outcome could well be the same as with the Lviv ecclesiastical union of the Armenian Archbishop Nikol Torosowicz (1603–1681). Therefore, Accorsi asked the Propaganda Fide to investigate the case of Oxendio Virziresco and the married priests in all its detail.<sup>46</sup>

The discord, however, persisted in Bistrița. Bishop Oxendio declared the married status of Elia Mendrul and his associates heretical, while the accused priests described the Bishop as ungodly and devious. Oxendio Virziresco set up an *ad hoc* commission to investigate the matter in June 1697.<sup>47</sup> Apart from him, Mihály Sorger OFM Conv., Prior of the Monastery of the Order of Friars Minor in Canta (*Szekler-Neumarkt, Kézdivásárhely, Kanta*) and Emmanuel Jakubowicz, a Uniate priest and son of the Armenian

44 APF SOCG. Vol. 488. Fol. 77r., Fol. 81r., Fol. 82r., Fol. 84r., Fol. 87/v., Fol. 91r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 514. Fol. 159r.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 86r.–87r.

45 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 521/r.–v., Fol. 522/r.–v.; AAV SSP. Vol. 116. Fol. 432r.–433/v., Fol. 677/r.–v.; AAV SSP. Vol. 118. Fol. 5/r.–v.; AAV SSP. Vol. 188. Fol. 339r.

46 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 524r.

47 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 531r.

Judge of Bistrița, were members of this commission. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco accused married priests of disobedience to him and the Roman Catholic Church. The incident left the community in Bistrița badly divided. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco spoke about 450 heads of household who were considered Elia Mendrul's loyal followers.<sup>48</sup>

Setting up the commission, however, was not seen as the right move by Oxendio Virziresco's enemies, as well as many of his staunch supporters alike as the Bishop summoned not only Elia Mendrul and his fellow priests but also one of his aids, Lazar Budachowicz (1668–1721).<sup>49</sup> In fact, he openly defended the accused priests and did not condemn them on account of their marital status.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco searched for a pretext to arraign him, too. In the end, he charged him with breaking his vow of chastity and having secret lovers. The accused priests and the majority of the Armenian Uniate clergy did not understand what was going on. Oxendio Virziresco, however, remained adamant in his missionary fervour and maintained his charges against the priests of the Armenian community.<sup>51</sup> When, in June 1697, a young Armenian priest, Sahak Jakubowicz asked to be married to Anna, the daughter of Yovhannēs Serikean, a rich Armenian merchant from Bistrița, Oxendio Virziresco was so outraged by the request that he not only rejected it but he also suspended priest Sahak from his office.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the commission, the legitimacy of which the accused priests questioned from the very beginning, decreed that the Uniate Armenian priests could no longer practise their vocation, celebrate

48 APF Acta SC. Vol. 67. Fol. 303/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 272r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 86. Fol. 267/r.–v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 159r.–160/v., Fol. 161r., Fol. 164/r.–v.

49 APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 267r.; Vanyó, *A bécsi pápai követség*, 180.

50 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 82r.–83r.

51 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 165r.

52 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 166r.

Mass or administer the sacraments unless they divorced their wives. As the priests did not show obedience towards the Bishop, the commission interpreted this as a sign of disrespect not only to Bishop Oxendio Virziresco but also to the Catholic Church and its head, the Pope.<sup>53</sup> Oxendio Virziresco enclosed a hand-written letter to the report about the commission's work, drawing the attention of the Holy See to the conspiracy denounced by Oxendio Virziresco. The Bishop found a connection between the married priests and the apostate priest Vardan Martinus Potoczky in Dumbrăveni, who had successfully defied his intentions five years before. It was, therefore, not by chance that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco named Vardan as the cause of the conflict. He expressed his conviction that Elia Mendrul and his associates under the leadership of Vardan were, in fact, loyal followers of the 'heretical' Catholicos of Ējmiacin in Armenia. As he pointed out, they had remained in Transylvania in order to stir unrest within the Armenian community and destroy the ecclesiastical union and the result of his several-years long missionary work.<sup>54</sup>

It seems that the Bishop could not accept the Dumbrăveni failure of 1692, and this was the reason why he sought to link the 'Elia Mendrul' Case to apostate Vardan. Oxendio Virziresco first intended to settle the account with Vardan. He contacted General Jean Louis Rabutin de Bussy (1642–1717), who put soldiers at his disposal. Oxendio Virziresco arrested Vardan in Dumbrăveni and imprisoned the 'heretic' priest in Sibiu, whose followers – about fifty or sixty Armenian families – were left without a priest in Dumbrăveni.<sup>55</sup>

Elia Mendrul and his fellow priests considered the charges unfounded, hypocritical and unacceptable. Most of the population

53 APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 272r.–273v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 160v., Fol. 166r.

54 APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 267v., Fol. 269r.–v., Fol. 274r.–275v.

55 APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 275r.–v., Fol. 280r.–v., Fol. 281r.; APF CP. Vol. 31. Fol. 469r.–v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 162r.–v., Fol. 164r.–v.

also disapproved of the decrees. This could be due to the fact that the priests living in Bistrița since they had fled to Transylvania had more of an authority among the Armenians than the Bishop, who 'had come directly from Rome' and was seen as overbearing.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the decrees passed by Bishop Oxendio Virziresco did not accomplish their goal. Thus, Oxendio Virziresco attempted to find other pretexts to break the resistance of the priests and the people who supported them. He spread the rumour that Elia Mendrul and his associates denied the existence of Purgatory and the teaching about the two natures of Jesus Christ (Diophysitism) and were the followers of Monophysitism.<sup>57</sup> He divulged that Elia Mendrul and his fellow priests were in fact after his episcopal office, possibly in close cahoots with Catholic Bailiff István Apor (1638–1704), Treasurer of Transylvania.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, the Bishop set up another commission the main task of which was to determine whether Elia Mendrul and his associates were Monophysites. Lazar Budachowicz, who had previously defended the incriminated Armenian priests, was also summoned by the commission. The young priest attacked the Bishop and the legitimacy of his investigation. As the root of the problems, instead of Elia Mendrul, he identified Bishop Oxendio Virziresco himself. In

56 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 167r.–168r.

57 APF Acta SC. Vol. 66. Fol. 201r.–202/v.

58 APF Acta SC. Vol. 82. Fol. 144r.–147/v., Fol. 443/r.–v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 96. Fol. 143/v.–144r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 572. Fol. 278r.–280r.+ Fol. 281/v., Fol. 282/r.–v., Fol. 283r.–284/v., Fol. 285r., Fol. 287r.–288/v., Fol. 289r., Fol. 290r.–292r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 580. Fol. 559r., Fol. 560r.–565/v., Fol. 566r.–569/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 9. Fol. 601r.; GYFL (= Gyulafehérvári Főegyházmegyei Levéltár/The Archives of the Arch-Diocese of Alba Iulia/ Gyulafehérvár) I/4. (= Canonica Visitationes). Vol. 3. Fol. 107/r.–v.; MNL-OL (= Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára/The Central Collection of the National Archives of Hungary, Budapest) ) F 234 (= Erdélyi Fiscalis Levéltár/ Fiscal Archives of Transylvania) XII ½ Fasc. 2. Litt. A.

his view, with this case, the Bishop diverted attention from the real issues that concerned the community, and the investigation was a conscious effort to engender confusion.<sup>59</sup>

Father Budachowicz's standpoint stemmed from his conviction and not from selfish defiance. He was an Armenian born in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, painstakingly observant of ancient customs and unwilling to side with Oxendio Virziresco. He was aware that the decrees of the Synod of Lviv in 1689 declared that priests were free to marry prior to ordination and members of the Armenian clergy who had been married before the ecclesiastical union could continue in their vocation.<sup>60</sup>

Lazar Budachowicz was not content with criticising the Bishop's activities but also sent a report to the *Propaganda Fide*. In that report, he objected to Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's disregard for the teachings proclaimed at the Synod of Lviv in 1689. He noted that, with this pugnacious attitude, Oxendio Virziresco had created discord and division in the Armenian community of Bistrița. He confirmed the rumours of Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's dubious finance and stressed that the Armenian Uniate prelate sought to divert attention from himself by accusing others. Lazar Budachowicz added that the conflict generated by the Bishop Oxendio Virziresco might result in wrecking the ecclesiastical union of the Armenians and suggested that many Armenians could refuse to accept the ecclesiastical union signed in 1689.<sup>61</sup>

Despite Father Lazar Budachowicz's charges and disapproval, Oxendio Virziresco persevered with the procedure he had started. He considered celibacy important and, in his view, it was indispensable

59 APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 272r.–273/v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 160r.–161/v., Fol. 163r.

60 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Miscellanea. Vol. 14. Fol. 15/v.–18/v., Fol. 24/v.–27/v.; Petrowicz, *La chiesa armena in Polonia*, 20–22.

61 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 525/r.–v.

for priests to follow Christ's teaching on chastity. He called Lazar Budachowicz a trouble-maker, who was influenced by married priests, and questioned his Catholic faith.<sup>62</sup> Due to the aggravated situation, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco turned to Comte György Bánffy (1661–1708), Governor (*Gubernator*) of Transylvania and the Viennese Imperial Court for help and had to admit that he was no longer able to keep developments under control.<sup>63</sup>

Elia Mendrul and his associates launched a counter-attack and, in response to Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's charges, they attempted to discredit him with Vardan Hunanean, the Armenian Uniate Bishop of Lviv. They called Oxendio Virziresco's gravest sin the fact that, instead of defending his own community in Bistrița against the daily harassments of the German-speaking Saxons, he terrorised members of the community accusing them and their followers with unfounded charges at the secular authorities of Transylvania.<sup>64</sup> They also made it clear that, in discharging his office, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco was only motivated by money, and his greed for wealth was more and more insatiable. They informed Archbishop Vardan Hunanean that Oxendio Virziresco had lost the community's trust and was entirely unfit to hold the episcopal office. Therefore, they demanded to see a new Uniate Bishop in Transylvania. The incriminated priests did not have the faintest idea why being married posed a problem as, in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Uniate priests were allowed to marry.<sup>65</sup>

Presumably at Elia Mendrul's urging, leaders of the community also voiced their opinion on the matter and sent a delegation of three to Lviv in the autumn of 1697, informing Uniate Archbishop Vardan Hunanean of the war waged within the community.<sup>66</sup> The

62 APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 266r.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 162r.

63 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 164r.

64 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 526/r.–v.

65 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 520/r.–v.

66 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 521/r.–v.

delegation primarily pleaded for protection for the Armenians against the abuse of Bishop Oxendio Virziresco. They also disapproved of the investigations under-way and the sanctions against married priests. They refuted Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's allegations that they were Monophysite heretics who acknowledged only the one divine nature of Jesus Christ.<sup>67</sup> They voiced their concern reporting that, as a result of Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's attitude and activities, many Armenian families returned to Moldavia, thus jeopardising the ecclesiastical union in Transylvania. The delegation's arguments must have been convincing because Archbishop Vardan Hunanean notified the Holy See of the Bishop's abusive behaviour and exclusively blamed Bishop Oxendio Virziresco for the conflict in Transylvania.<sup>68</sup>

Oxendio Virziresco became aware of the community and the priests' move and, as he was intent on gaining time, he contacted the Holy See as well. He defended himself by saying that, in Bistrița, the secular community and Elia Mendrul, who had pushed several families into becoming apostates, conspired against him. Furthermore, he accused Elia Mendrul of wanting to secure the episcopacy for himself and he also tried to ruin his reputation in the eyes of the Armenian Uniate Archbishop of Lviv. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco considered István Apor's attitude especially unfair because he suspected that it was Treasurer István Apor who had turned the community against him by pulling strings behind the scenes. Finally, he suggested setting up a new commission of inquiry to rectify the situation.<sup>69</sup>

The polemic about the 'Elia Mendrul' Case would not cease in the following months. Tensions were on the rise within the community when Andrea Alacz died under controversial circumstances in January 1698. It was rumoured in the community that Andrea Alacz's death

67 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 282r., Fol. 283r.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 170r.–171r.

68 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 521r.–v., Fol. 526r.–v.

69 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 172r.–v.

was in way or another linked to Oxendio Virziresco. It was pointed out that Oxendio Virziresco did not leave his house from the time the priest's death and had lived in seclusion ever since.<sup>70</sup>

Oxendio Virziresco contacted the Apostolic Nunciature in Vienna and stated his position on the matter. At this point, he was critical not only of the priests on account of their married status but also objected to inappropriate calendar use, for Elia Mendrul and his followers observed major feasts according to the old Armenian calendar. To illustrate his point, Oxendio Virziresco referred to the much-deprecated practice of celebrating Christmas and Epiphany on the same day, 6 January. The charge of Monophysitism resurfaced among Oxendio Virziresco's allegations: In his view, the community continued to follow the false teachings of the Archimandrite Eutyches (378–456), although these had been refuted at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, so that these Armenians rejected the Orthodox (Dyophysite) dogma of the two natures of Jesus Christ (Dyophysitism).<sup>71</sup> Therefore, the Bishop urged that the *Propaganda Fide* allow the Holy See and Holy Office of the Inquisition (*Sanctum Officium*) to investigate the case of Elia Mendrul and his associates.<sup>72</sup>

70 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 517r., Fol. 518r., Fol. 525r.

71 In fact, according to contemporary sources, the Armenian Apostolic (Oriental) Church never accepted the dogmas and teachings of Archimandrite Eutyches on the Monophysitism. Moreover, the Church itself harshly condemned these views at its National Synods held in Dwin (in 505 and 555) and Manazkert (*Manzikert, Malazgirt*) (in 719 and 728). The accusation of Monophysitism against the Armenians arose due to the fact that they were unwilling to recognise the jurisdiction of either Constantinople or Rome over them. K. Sarkissian, *The Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church*, London 1975, 194–215; M. K. Krikorian, *L'operazione di rifiuto del Concilio di Calcedonia da parte della Chiesa Armena*, in A. Ducay (ed.), *Il Concilio di Calcedonia 1550 anni dopo*, Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, Città del Vaticano 2003, 127–131.

72 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 175r.–176/v.



On the other hand, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's suspicious dealings were cited again not by Elia Mendrul or his associates but by Armenian merchants of the Oriental Apostolic faith, who had commercial bases in Braşov (*Kronstadt, Brassovia, Corona, Brassó*) and Sibiu. At the time when the conflict began, they had disagreements with Oxendio about financial matters. The four merchants, Melk'ior Mač'ewan, Israyēl Eriwanc'i, Aṛak'el Yerusaḷēmc'i and Azaria Mazarec'i, were of the opinion that it was not disobedience in ecclesiastical matters that caused the discord but business dealings and instances of disputed inheritance. They referenced the example from 1696, the previous year, when one of their business partners, one Gaspar, a wealthy Armenian merchant from Constantinople, died in Sibiu; his assets worth 6000 Rhenish guilders (*Rheingulden*) would be acquired by Oxendio Virziresco. The latter would use this amount to buy an estate for himself in Gurghiu (*Görgen, Görgényszentimre*).<sup>73</sup>

Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's excessive assertiveness attenuated the loyalty even of his closest associates. He had an argument with his staunchest supporter, the Theatine Father and missionary Giuseppe Maria Bonalini CR (1650–1703), who had a different interpretation of the conflict and deemed Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's moves exaggerated. The missionary disagreed with Oxendio Virziresco's aggressive campaigns to obtain money. He also disapproved of the inappropriate rites used by Armenian priests. For Holy Communion, for example, Armenian priests did not add water to the holy wine, which, in his view, represented a continuation of the old Armenian ecclesiastical tradition. The Theatine father saw that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's accusations and actions generated antipathy in the community, and this sense of dislike affected his followers as well. Father Bonalini considered it a mistake on the Bishop's part to insist

73 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 177r.+ Fol. 180v.

on his principles so much, endangering his mission started in 1685.<sup>74</sup> He was unable to convince the obstinate Bishop to use more gentle and diplomatic methods in the community. The decrees made by the commissions of inquiry of dubious legitimacy set up by Oxendio Virziresco triggered counter-reactions from the priests accused.<sup>75</sup>

Elia Mendrul and his colleagues turned to the Holy See for justice when they saw that their letters had not produced the desired effect. In their letter, they went as far as to suggesting that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco turned the Saxons against the Armenian community. As for their conflict with the Bishop, they pointed to Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's corruption cases, his intolerance and tyrannical methods.<sup>76</sup> They mentioned Vardan Martinus Potoczky's case of apostasy in 1692, blaming Bishop Oxendio Virziresco for the incident. They confirmed that many Armenian families from Bistrița and its neighbourhood left Transylvania due to the feud, many of them moving back to Moldavia, where they reverted to the Armenian Apostolic Church.<sup>77</sup> The report was written by Efiay T'orossean, Armenian Prefect of Bistrița, who requested legal protection from the *Propaganda Fide*, and Treasurer István Apor, Oxendio Virziresco's opponent in Transylvania.<sup>78</sup> Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's position became more precarious when Giovanni Antonio Davia, the Apostolic Nuncio in Warsaw – based on the complaints received – urged the *Propaganda Fide* to permit him to launch an investigation

74 APF Lettere SC. Vol. 80. Fol. 143/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 519/r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Moscovia, Polonia e Rutheni. Vol. 2. Fol. 315/r.–v., Fol. 335r., Fol. 386/r.–v.+ Fol. 388/v.; AGT (= Archivio Generale dei Teatini, Roma) CL (= Collegio di Leopoli). Portfolio No. 2. (Without folio numbers.); *Litterae episcoporum historiam Ucrainiae illustrantes*, Vol. 4. (1681–1710), Athanasius Welikyj (ed.), Romae 1976, 79–80.

75 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 527/r.–v.

76 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 181/r.–v.

77 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 181/r.–v.

78 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 185/r.–v.

inspecting every detail in the case of Oxendio Virziresco and the priests accused.<sup>79</sup>

The *Propaganda Fide* approached Theatine Father Accorsi, Rector of the Armenian College in Lviv, with a request to gather information about the Armenians of Transylvania. Father Accorsi would collect such information from Father Bonalini, who was critical of Oxendio Virziresco. Accordingly, it was established that the Armenian Uniate Catholics had bitter complaints about the Bishop. Their chief grievance had to do with the way he had been transformed from a benevolent priest full of good intentions at the beginning of his mission into a merciless and tyrannical clergyman driven by ill will following his episcopal appointment. As a consequence of his ruthlessly fanatic faith, he was in constant conflict with his priests and fellow missionaries and lost the support of his flock. This resulted in a considerable part of the Armenian community leaving Transylvania. The Rector concluded that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco was no longer in control of the situation due to the incessant tensions and was unable to remedy the situation. Archbishop Vardan Hunanean corroborated Father Accorsi's report. Oxendio Virziresco, however, repudiated the charges brought against him. In his assessment, all that was the fabrication of the priests accused, including Elia Mendrul, alleging that many of them had been displeased with his appointment as bishop by the Holy See in 1690.<sup>80</sup>

Having studied all the letters and reports received and after long debates, the *Propaganda Fide* made its decision on the 'Elia Mendrul' Case on 3 March 1698. Oxendio Virziresco was not removed from his office but Andrea Santacroce, Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna (1696–1700) (earlier in Warsaw between 1690 and 1696), Titular Archbishop of

79 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 186/r.–v.

80 APF SOCG. Vol. 529. Fol. 266r.–269/v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 162/r.–v., Fol. 164r.–165r.

Seleucia in Isauria, was requested to conduct further investigation on the matter.<sup>81</sup> The reason why they did not Oxendio Virziresco to more severe condemnation was the fact that they highly appreciated what the Bishop had achieved previously in his missionary work promoting the cause of Armenian ecclesiastical union in Transylvania. In the *Propaganda Fide*, the cardinals who had unanimously endorsed Oxendio Virziresco's episcopal appointment eight years before still constituted the majority.<sup>82</sup>

Apostolic Nuncio Santacroce authorised Bertalan Szebellébi (1631–1707), Episcopal Vicar of the Roman Catholic Church in Transylvania, with friendly ties with Bishop Oxendio Virziresco, to investigate the case. Jesuit Father Kristóf Gebhardt SJ (1657–1720) from Sibiu and Father Luca Fracano OFM Conv., General of the Franciscans in Bosnia, were also members of the commission of inquiry. Their report was completed on July 25 1698, concluding that, due to the conflict and the unfavourable situation, further investigation and interviews were needed.<sup>83</sup>

The members of the commission questioned Bishop Oxendio Virziresco, who named Elia Mendrul as solely responsible for the feud. The Bishop had one-to-one discussions with members of the commission and persuaded them that he was a victim in the story. The commission was of course biased towards Oxendio Virziresco because the Bishop had maintained excellent relations with its members from his appointment. Therefore, the result of the investigation was easy to predict. Elia Mendrul also realised that, given the composition of the commission, the conclusion would not be amenable to him or his associates, so he fled from Bistrița with his followers before

81 APF Acta SC. Vol. 66. Fol. 185/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 525. Fol. Fol. 57/r.–v., Fol. 68/r.–v.; ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 13. Pag. 108–152.; PL AEV SPK (= Sub Primate Kollonich). No. 303.

82 APF Acta SC. Vol. 68. Fol. 62r.–67/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 531. Fol. 368/r.–v.

83 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 187/r.–v.

the interrogations and deliberations began. In Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's view, Treasurer István Apor played a part in his escape.<sup>84</sup>

Afterwards, Oxendio Virziresco took the initiative and advocated the creation of a new commission to investigate Elia Mendrul and his followers' case in all the Armenian communities of Transylvania. Oxendio Virziresco's intentions in this respect were earnest, so he sent Father Bonalini, with whom he had been reconciled in the meantime, to Cluj-Napoca (*Clausenburg, Claudiopoli, Claudiopolis, Kolozsvár*) to negotiate about the 'Elia Mendrul' Case.<sup>85</sup>

Father Bonalini had discussions with Jesuit Father István Csete SJ, Roman Catholic parish priest of Cluj-Napoca, who bore the pseudonym 'Jesuit Zsigmond Vizkeleti' during the talks.<sup>86</sup> In line with the Bishop's intentions, they decided on the members of the new commission of inquiry. Although doubts about the need for this new commission must have been justifiable, it began operating within a month. The commission's single goal was to pass judgement on the question of innocence and guilt in relation to Elia Mendrul and Bishop Oxendio Virziresco. The composition of the commission was more advantageous for Bishop Oxendio Virziresco as he was on good terms with the members. Apart from Jesuit Father István Csete, Father Giuseppe Bonalini, a Theatine missionary, Bertalan Szebellébi, Roman Catholic Episcopal Vicar in Transylvania, János Antalffy (1644–1728), a Parish Priest from Ciucsângeorgiu (*Sankt Georg, Csikszentgyörgy*), and later Roman Catholic Bishop of Transylvania (1724–1728), Jesuit Father Tamás Merczis SJ (1648–1705), a Parish Priest

84 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 191r.–v.

85 AAV ANV. Vol. 31. Fol. 103r., Fol. 106r.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 192r.–v.

86 APF SC Fondo Ungheria e Transilvania. Vol. 3. Fol. 46r.–52/v.; M. Cserei, *Erdély históriája (1661–1711)*, I. Bánkúti (ed.), Bibliotheca Historica 274, Budapest 1983; *Litterae missionariorum de Hungaria et Transylvania (1572–1717)*, I. Gy. Tóth (ed.), Bibliotheca Academiae Hungariae–Roma, Fontes 4, Roma–Budapest 2005, 2931; Molnár, *Lehetetlen küldetés?*, 227–228.

from Gheorgheni, working under the pseudonym ‘István Halászi’ and Pál Székes SJ, an enigmatic Jesuit father from Transylvania, also participated in the commission’s work.<sup>87</sup>

Under the new circumstances, Oxendio Virziresco became even more demanding. He accused Treasurer István Apor of aiding Elia Mendrul’s escape. He even discovered that Elia Mendrul had fled to Petelea (*Birk, Petele*) with his followers. He was concerned that Elia Mendrul would antagonise the Uniate Armenian community against him and the cause of ecclesiastical union.<sup>88</sup> Before the new investigations in the ‘Elia Mendrul’ Case began, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco meant to give the priest one last chance to return to the Roman Catholic Church and give up his heretical customs. The Bishop sent Father Bonalini to Petelea to put psychological pressure on Elia Mendrul and his followers. Father Bonalini told them that a new commission conducted an inquiry into their case. However, Elia Mendrul was not impressed by Father Bonalini’s arguments and refused to recognise Bishop Oxendio Virziresco as his bishop and denied the charges against him.<sup>89</sup>

The commission of inquiry started its work in October 1698. The members of the commission visited all the Armenian colonies in Transylvania in search of Elia Mendrul and his followers. The authorities

87 There are no further references to Jesuit Father Székes’s life or ecclesiastical carrier in contemporary sources or documents kept in the Hungarian or in foreign archives. APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 472r.; L. Balla, *Csete István kéziratoss predikációi és Gyalogi János-félekiadásai: eredetiség, fordítás, közvetítés a koraujkori jezsuita predikációkban*, Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca 2017, 42–45; K. Nagy, “Andrea Santacroce bécsi apostoli nuncius és az erdélyi örmények egyháza”, in *Erdélyi Múzeum* 79/1 (2017), 102–117; K. Nagy, “Andrea Santacroce bécsi apostoli nuncius 1698. évi kiadatlan levele az erdélyi örmény egyházi vizsály kivizsgálása ügyében”, in *Lymbus – Magyarságtudományi Közlemények* 18 (2020), 317–334.

88 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 194/r.–v.

89 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 195/r.–v.

and the army fully supported them in their work. They began their investigation in Dumbrăveni because it was a well-known fact that it was almost exclusively inhabited by Armenians of the Oriental Apostolic faith. Jesuit father István Csete employed intimidation and arrested the ten wealthiest heads of household. He forced them to testify against Elia Mendrul and his associates by means of torture.<sup>90</sup> He was willing to pardon them only if they agreed to convert to the Roman Catholic faith in the presence of the Bishop Oxendio Virziresco. In order to save their lives and wealth, they accepted the deal and officially condemned Elia Mendrul and his views.<sup>91</sup>

The commission then went to Petelea because Father Bonalini heard that it was the village in which Elia Mendrul was hiding. When the commission arrived there, the Armenian inhabitants of the place informed them that the renegade Armenian priest and his followers had left for Suseni (*Pränzdorf/Oberdorf, Marosfalfalu*). Obviously out of fear, the majority of the residents of Petelea declared their allegiance to the Uniate Catholic faith and condemned Elia Mendrul.<sup>92</sup>

Subsequently, the members of the commission went to Bistrița, where they interrogated Lazar Budachowicz. After the questioning, Father István Csete acquitted him of Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's previous charges and described him as a true Catholic Armenian firmly loyal to Rome. They did not find a single Armenian in Bistrița then who would be a follower of Elia Mendrul's or a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Next, the commission conducted an investigation in Tirgu Mureș (*Neumarkt am Mieresch, Novum Forum Siculorum, Marosvásárhely*) similar to the one in Bistrița. The outcome was also similar: Only Uniate Armenians vehemently opposed to Elia Mendrul's actions were to be found.

90 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 466r.

91 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 467r.–468/v.

92 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 469r., Fol. 470r.–471/v.

In the end, the investigations concluded that the only one to blame within the Armenian community was Elia Mendrul. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco was found innocent, and they declared that his controversial financial dealings were a mere fabrication by the priest condemned. Although they did not manage to arrest Elia Mendrul, he was suspended from his office, excommunicated from the Catholic Church and handed over to the secular authorities *in absentia*. Oxendio Virziresco was intent on launching a manhunt to capture Elia Mendrul.<sup>93</sup> In the meantime, he heard that Elia Mendrul had left Suseni and found refuge in Gurghiu, where the Virziresco family lived at the time. The Bishop was still suspicious that someone from higher circles was helping the priest to evade him and the authorities.

Bishop Oxendio Virziresco prepared a detailed memorandum about the conflict for the *Propaganda Fide*. Naturally, he claimed to be clean and innocent. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco regarded Elia Mendrul and his associates as mere instruments in fomenting conflict and believed that, in fact, it had been masterminded by Treasurer István Apor and the ‘heretical’ Armenian Catholicos Nahapet I (*Nahapet Ur̄hayec’i*) (1691–1705), engaged in a conspiracy against him. This supposition was highly unrealistic as it is not probable that the Catholic Treasurer Apor and the Armenian Patriarch could be in any contact with each other.<sup>94</sup>

Oxendio Virziresco thus was cleared of the charges of corruption, though no-one was able to substantiate innocence. The closure of the investigation did not mean that tensions within the community were quelled. Soon afterwards, an unknown person accused the Bishop at the *Propaganda Fide* of corruption and heresy.<sup>95</sup> It cannot be established who worded the letter, but it is not impossible that

93 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 44or., Fol. 442r.–443r., Fol. 444/r.–v.

94 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 445r.–448r.

95 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 45or.–451/v.



its author was the Bishop's enemy, Treasurer István Apor, since the letter included charges that had previously been mentioned only in István Apor's and Elia Mendrul's letters. As has pointed out above repeatedly, the Armenians in Bistrița were not on good terms with the local Saxons.<sup>96</sup> The Treasurer might have taken advantage of the animosity and extracted incriminating testimonies from the Saxons against the Bishop. The Saxons conducted an investigation, led by Johannes Klein, Royal Saxon Judge of Bistrița, against the Bishop and heard seven wealthy Saxon burghers in the 'Elia Mendrul' Case. All the seven burghers confirmed that the person who ignited the Armenian feud was not Elia Mendrul but Bishop Oxendio Virziresco by stealing from both the Armenian and the German-speaking Saxon communities.<sup>97</sup> Roman Catholic Episcopal Vicar Bertalan Szebellébi denied the Saxons' charges against the Bishop. In his letter written to István Apor, he called the charges made by Saxons on 'higher orders' – as he put it – despicable lies fuelled by jealousy.<sup>98</sup> He considered the Bishop a true champion of the Roman Catholic faith and rejected all allegations of corruption or heresy about Bishop Oxendio Virziresco.<sup>99</sup>

The Bishop's relationship with Treasurer István Apor, whom he suspected of conspiring with his enemies against him in investigating his dubious financial dealings, remained strained. Oxendio Virziresco assumed István Apor may have supported the discontent priest to undermine his authority as a Bishop and weaken his position within the Catholic Church.<sup>100</sup>

The 'Elia Mendrul' Case had its toll on the Bishop as well, which is illustrated by his letter written to the *Propaganda Fide* before the

96 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 461r.–463/v.

97 APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 449r., Fol. 459/r.–v.

98 APF SOCG. Vol. 531. Fol. 237r.–238r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 455r.–458/v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 218r.+ Fol. 221/v., Fol. 219r., Fol. 220r.

99 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 203/r.–v., Fol. 204r., Fol. 206/r.–v.

100 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 153r., Fol. 199r.–200r., Fol. 201r.–202r.

Christmas of 1698, hinting at his own responsibility in the matter for the first time. He admitted that it was his rash temperament and conservatism that had led to the eruption of the conflict among the Armenians. He did not, however, say anything about his dubious financial issues. He continued to consider Elia Mendrul a heretic and did not renounce his intention to arrest him.<sup>101</sup>

The conclusions of the commission of inquiry gave Bishop Oxendio Virziresco renewed impetus. After his visits to Petelea, Suseni and Gurghiu, he stated that the communities in these locations were almost entirely Roman Catholic, except for the ones that followed the renegade priest. The Bishop and Father Bonalini suspected that Elia Mendrul was closely connected to the Armenian Apostolic clergy in Moldavia and, through them, to the Armenian Catholicos. They believed that plans approved by the Armenian Catholicos for sending Armenian priests from Moldavia and Wallachia to Transylvania were under way aimed at undermining ecclesiastical union. They also informed the Holy See that Elia Mendrul had allegedly managed to convince a Uniate priest, Yovhannēs Naxšun, to be his associate in this effort. The Bishop notified the Holy See that a ‘legate’ (*nwirakn*) of the Armenian Catholicos arrived in Transylvania *incognito* in January 1699 and, ordained twelve young Armenian priests according to the tradition of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the presence of Elia Mendrul and Yovhannēs Naxšun in Suseni. They were about to confront them, but Elia Mendrul, his follower and the mysterious ‘legate’ fled back to Moldavia. Therefore, he and Father Bonalini raised the possibility of missionary work to be carried out in Moldavia among the Armenians living there. The *Propaganda Fide* would not deal with the issue at that time.

101 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 208r.+ Fol. 210/v., Fol. 209r., Fol. 211r.; MNL-OL F 46 (= Gubernium Transylvanicum Levéltára/ Archives of the *Gubernium* of Transylvania – Ügyiratok/ Dossiers). 1698: 238.

The *Propaganda Fide* held a session about the ‘Elia Mendrul’ Case on 6 April 1699, with the involvement of Andrea Santacroce, Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna, as well. Although Oxendio Virziresco was cleared of the charges, the documents and the tone used clearly indicated that the Holy See no longer trusted him. Another circumstance also had an impact on the situation: From 1698, The Prefect of the *Propaganda Fide* was no longer Cardinal Angelo Paluzzo Altieri degli Albertoni (1623–1698), Bishop Oxendio Virziresco’s main patron in Rome, but Cardinal Carlo Barberini Jr. (1630–1704), who had previously recommended Deodatus Nersesowicz (1644–1709), Titular Bishop of Traianopolis in Rhodope, alumnus of the Armenian College of Lviv, as the Uniate Bishop in Transylvania in 1689 and 1690.<sup>102</sup> Cardinal Barberini proposed Oxendio Virziresco be removed from his office in connection with the ‘Elia Mendrul’ Case and sought to replace him with Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz. As coadjutor to Archbishop Vardan Hunanean, he had headed the Armenian Archdiocese of Lviv from 1683 to 1686 and provided the initiative for missionary work among the Armenians of Transylvania.<sup>103</sup>

Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz, who had not maintained amicable ties with Bishop Oxendio Virziresco since his episcopal appointment in 1690, seized the opportunity and did all he could to vilify the Bishop at the Holy See. His goal was to bring about Bishop Oxendio

102 APF Acta SC. Vol. 53. Fol. 245r.–248/v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 54. Fol. 17/r.–v., Fol. 98/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 488. Fol. 277r.–281r.; APF CP. Vol. 29. Fol. 159r.–160r.+ Fol. 161/v., Fol. 165/r.–v., Fol. 166/v., Fol. 636r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 72. Fol. 199/v.–200r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 79. Fol. 15/r.–v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni Vol. 2. Fol. 209r.–211/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 3. Fol. 318r., Fol. 325r.; APF SC Fondo Moscovia Polonia e Rutheni. Vol. 2. Fol. 195/r.–v.; APF FV. Vol. 42. Fol. 49/r.–v.; AAV ANVAR. Vol. 177. Fol. 109r., Fol. 129/v.

103 APF Acta SC. Vol. 69. Fol. 107r.–116/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 532. Fol. 434r.–440r.; APF SC Fondo Moscovia, Polonia e Rutheni. Vol. 2. Fol. 520/r.–v.

Virziresco's removal.<sup>104</sup> He suggested that the Cardinals summon Oxendio Virziresco to Rome to rebuke him for his inefficient church-organisational work over the preceding years. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco was saved from removal thanks to a report by the Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna. Andrea Santacroce, Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna, clarified that Oxendio Virziresco had not committed any crime.<sup>105</sup> After reading this report, the *Propaganda Fide* did not relieve him of his office but reprimanded him for mishandling the 'Elia Mendrul' Case and causing considerable damage to the Catholic Church among The Armenians in Transylvania. They thought the strict investigations had been unnecessary and were particularly critical of the fact that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco had not attempted to resolve the conflict in a peaceful manner through talks, resulting in clashes with his flock (e.g., involving Father Budachowicz and Father Bonalini, at the beginning of the conflict). The corruption charges were not mentioned during the session, but it was stated that these charges were not substantiated and were consequently seen as empty fabrications. In the end, the decision was favourable for Bishop Oxendio Virziresco.<sup>106</sup>

At Easter 1699, one of the followers of Elia Mendrul, the priest Yovhannēs Naxšun arrived in Bistrița from Moldavia with a few men. The reason for his return is unclear, but the Bishop believed that the apostate priest could not have any other motive than converting the Armenians from the Roman Catholic faith back to the Armenian Apostolic Church. With the help of General Jean Louis Rabutin de Bussy, the priest was arrested and imprisoned in Sibiu. Oxendio Virziresco declared that he intended to charge the priest with apostasy

104 APF SOCG. Vol. 563. Fol. 185/r.-v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 85. Fol. 26/r.-v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 98. Fol. 247r.-248/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 592/r.-v.; APF SC Fondo Moscovia, Polonia e Rutheni. Vol. 3. Fol. 280/r.-v.

105 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 212/r.-v.

106 APF Lettere SC. Vol. 88. Fol. 30r.-31r., Fol. 58r.

and sodomy.<sup>107</sup>

In the meantime, Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz conducted a private investigation about Oxendio Virziresco and sent a report about the abuses the Bishop allegedly committed. Upon the intervention by Father Accorsi and Archbishop Vardan Hunanean, the *Propaganda Fide*, however, checked his manoeuvres. At the request of the Uniate Archbishop, Bishop Nersesowicz was called back to Lviv in the summer of 1699 to assist the ailing Archbishop as his coadjutor.<sup>108</sup> Cardinal-Prefect Barberini, however, asked Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz to keep an eye on Oxendio Virziresco and to send him a report as soon as he heard of any maladministration. He summoned the Bishop to Cluj-Napoca in July 1699 for the investigation of his dubious financial dealings. At the hearing of the commission in the city of Cluj-Napoca, Treasurer István Apor called Bishop Oxendio Virziresco to account regarding his unclear financial matters and sudden growth of fortune in 1696. Treasurer István Apor also remarked that the commission in the autumn of 1698 had been biased towards the Bishop Oxendio Virziresco because his right-hand man, Father Bonalini, had been involved in its decision making. In fact, the activities of that commission was but a farce to cover up the Bishop's dishonest actions, casting doubt on the commission's legitimacy.<sup>109</sup>

107 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 207/r.–v.

108 APF SOCG. Vol. 531. Fol. 298r., Fol. 308r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 533. Fol. 483/r.–v., Fol. 484r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 85. Fol. 61/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 542/r.–v.

109 Relations between the two Armenian Uniate Bishops were strained by tensions. Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz left no stone unturned to remove Bishop Oxendio Virziresco from his office in Transylvania. In fact, Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz was unable to forgive Bishop Oxendio Virziresco for the refusal of the Holy See and the *Propaganda Fide* to appoint him as Armenian Uniate Bishop of Transylvania. APF Acta SC. Vol. 56. Fol. 138r.–140/v., Fol. 254/v.–256/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 495B. Fol. 231r., Fol. 235r.; APF SOCG. Vol. 496. Fol.

At the hearing, Bertalan Szebellébi, Apostolic Vicar, and the Jesuits of Cluj-Napoca headed by Father István Csete and Father Gábor Kapi SJ (1658–1728) came to Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's defence.<sup>110</sup> It was especially Vicar Bertalan Szebellébi who stood by the Bishop and let the Treasurer know with absolute clarity that the investigations of 1697 and 1699 had cleared the Bishop and acquitted him of corruption charges. Therefore, he could not see a reason for launching a new investigation. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco himself replied to István Apor's charges vehemently. In his view, the Treasurer hindered him in his activities all along and intended to ruin his reputation. To him, István Apor was a heretic because he defended and supported heretical Armenians. He also expressed his astonishment that the Treasurer had not been brought to justice yet. In August 1699, the commission of inquiry closed its operations without any tangible results.<sup>111</sup>

This news reached Lviv as well. Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz hoped to remove Oxendio Virziresco as head of the Uniate Armenian Church in Transylvania and sent a report to the *Propaganda Fide*. He informed Congregation that, due to his alleged corruption cases, an investigation was under-way against Bishop Oxendio Virziresco, whom he described in rather negative terms.<sup>112</sup> In the autumn of 1699, he intended to travel to Transylvania to investigate the Bishop's case. As Bishop Deodatus Nersesowicz did not request authorisation for this step, the Apostolic Nuncios in Warsaw and Vienna, as well as Archbishop Vardan Hunanean forbade him to do so.<sup>113</sup> Nuncio Andrea Santacroce declared that the cases of Elia Mendrul and Bishop Oxendio Virziresco had been closed, and the right decision had

503r.–v., Fol. 505r.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 76. Fol. 90v.–91r.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 217r.; Petrowicz, *La chiesa armena in Polonia*, 79.

110 Cserei, *Erdély históriája*, 273, 276, 296–301, 308.

111 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 213r.–214v., Fol. 223r.–v.

112 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 231r.

113 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 237r., Fol. 251r.

been made. The Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna asked Cardinal-Prefect Barberini in particular not to remove Bishop Oxendio Virziresco from his office. Nuncio Andrea Santacroce agreed with the stance of Nuncio Giovanni Antonio Davia and Archbishop Vardan Hunanean on the matter, and recommended that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's financial situation be resolved because, in his view, that was the cause of all the problems among the Armenians in Transylvania. On the other hand, he also promised to closely watch the Bishop's work.<sup>114</sup>

The case of Elia Mendrul's associate, Yovhannēs Naxšun, was heard in Sibiu in October 1699. Bishop Oxendio Virziresco realised that there was no point in generating further conflicts within the community.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, he offered a deal to the priest and his followers: If they returned to the Catholic faith, he would ensure that the charges against them would be dropped and they could live in Transylvania as free men. Furthermore, he proposed that, in case Yovhannēs Naxšun converted to Catholicism, he could continue to be a priest. The priest accepted the offer and, after his release on 3 November 1699, with his followers, he ceremonially endorsed ecclesiastical union in Petelea along.<sup>116</sup>

At this point, a question arises what could motivate Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's gentle and generous attitude. Perhaps he grew tired of the endless controversies and wished to avoid another example of his merciless rigour as he did with Elia Mendrul in the summer of 1697 increasing tension within the Armenian communities in Bistrița and elsewhere and leading to even greater division. However, his conduct this time could be explained by a more likely reason.<sup>117</sup> In 1692, at

114 APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 601r.-v.

115 APF Acta SC. Vol. 69. Fol. 396r.-397v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 534. Fol. 426r.-v. + Fol. 427v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 88. Fol. 259r.-260v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 224r., Fol. 225r.

116 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 226r.-227r.

117 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 232r.-233r., Fol. 251r.

the time of Vardan Martinus Potoczky's apostasy, Yovhannēs Naxšun took Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's side. He rejected Vardan's anti-ecclesiastical-union sermons and, together with another incriminated priest, Andrea Alacz, he prepared a report for the Gubernium in attempt to prove that the Armenians in Transylvania were of the Roman Catholic faith and not of the Oriental Apostolic one.<sup>118</sup>

After the resolution of the dispute, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco made a visit to Dumbrăveni to see whether the Armenians there were indeed devout Catholics. He noticed that no trace of heresy among them and concluded that the men of the Armenian Catholicos were not engaged in any missionary work in that community.<sup>119</sup>

Oxendio Virziresco put the organisation of a missionary campaign among the Armenians of Moldavia on his agenda again.<sup>120</sup> He contacted Giovanni Antonio Davia, Apostolic Nuncio in Warsaw.<sup>121</sup> He thought that, by organising successful missionary activities in the Principality, they might be able to stop heretical efforts from spreading from Moldavia to Transylvania and could solve the problem posed by Elia Mendrul once and for all.<sup>122</sup> The Nuncio accepted Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's suggestion and reported the intentions of the Armenian Uniate hierarch to the *Propaganda Fide*. When visiting Petelea in March 1700, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco advocated the missionary campaign with determination and urged that the Holy

118 ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 21. Pag. 77–80.

119 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 241/r.–v.

120 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 235/r.–v.

121 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 236r., Fol. 237r.

122 APF Acta SC. Vol. 70. Fol. 103r.–106/v., Fol. 166/r.–v., Fol. 175/r.–v., Fol. 267r.–269/v., Fol. 341r.–346/v.; APF Acta SC. Vol. 71. Fol. 69r.–70/v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 535. Fol. 346/r.–v., Fol. 347/r.–v., Fol. 350/r.–v., Fol. 352/r.–v.; APF SOCG. Vol. 536. Fol. 318r.–329/v., Fol. 416r.–417/v., Fol. 418r.–419/v.; APF Lettere SC. Vol. 89. Fol. 116r.–117/v., Fol. 224r.–225/v.; APF SC Fondo Armeni. Vol. 4. Fol. 610/r.–v., Fol. 615/r.–v., Fol. 708r.–709/v.; APF Coll. Urb. Vol. 3. Fol. 613r.–614/v.; AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 245r.–246/v., Fol. 248/r.–v.



See authorise the implementation of missionary activities in Moldavia in order to prevent Elia Mendrul's return.<sup>123</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Behind the Uniate Bishop's conflict with Elia Mendrul and his associates lay a different interpretation of the ecclesiastical union signed in Lviv in 1689, unconditional acceptance of the Latin Rite, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's sudden gain in wealth (the acquisition of an estate in Gurghiu) and the married status of Uniate priests. The Bishop labelled the last of this heresy, which he illogically linked to Monophysitism. In any case, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco sought to expel such priests and used their married status as a pretext against them. It was only in Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's letter that the possibility of Elia Mendrul as a candidate for the episcopate after (Armenian Apostolic) Bishop Minas Alēksanean T'oxat'ec'i's death was raised. The Uniate Bishop of course overlooked the fact that a married priest was not eligible to be a bishop even according to Oriental Armenian Canon Law as the office was available only to monastics. It is reasonable to assume that Bishop Oxendio Virziresco saw a potential rival in the old Armenian priest since Elia Mendrul was a figure of authority both in the Armenian Uniate Church of Transylvania and within the Armenian community at large. Furthermore, he was obsessed with the idea that the married priest and his followers were intent on depriving him of his episcopal office, so he levelled such accusations at the Armenian priests who were in disagreement with him. It cannot be ruled out that the conflict was also fuelled by the struggle to secure the top position within the Armenian community of Transylvania.

123 AAV ANV. Vol. 196. Fol. 242r.+ Fol. 249v.

The 'Elia Mendrul' Case was a turning point in the history of the Armenian Church in Transylvania. Thanks to the resolution of the feud, the ecclesiastical union of the Armenians in Transylvania was complete and the whole of the Armenian community of Transylvania became irrevocably Uniate or Catholic. Due to the conflict, however, Transylvanian Armenians weakened substantially, and their number decreased in Transylvania primarily because large groups of those opposing Bishop Oxendio Virziresco moved to Moldavia between 1697 and 1700. The Bishop, however, prevailed in the end. Although the size of the Uniate Armenian community shrank, Oxendio Virziresco came to have a more compact and confessionally more homogeneous community. In the conflict, the Catholic Church stood by him, while Elia Mendrul's supporters dwindled due to a series of excommunications.<sup>124</sup>

Finally, inappropriate handling of the conflict in the Armenian community of Bistrița did a lot of damage to Bishop Oxendio Virziresco's authority. For example, after the 1699 investigations, his relationship with Jesuit Father István Csete would become strained because, before the Roman Catholic Status (*Status Catholicus*), the superior state organisation of Roman Catholics in Transylvania, the most important body of self-government of Transylvanian Catholics, István Csete SJ did not give him the respect due to a Bishop, and, according to Oxendio Virziresco's account, Csete even humiliated him in the presence of other Catholic clergymen. Therefore, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco addressed his complaint to Cardinal Lipót Kollonich (1631–1707), Archbishop of Esztergom, accusing Father Csete of disrespectful behaviour towards him in the presence of other clergymen and the faithful. In the absence of relevant data, it cannot

124 ELTE EKK Coll. Hev. Cod. 29. Pag. 346.; ELTE EEK Coll. Kapr. A. Cod. 11. Pag. 112.

be reconstructed how case was resolved in the end.<sup>125</sup> At the same time, this indicates that the authority of the Uniate Armenian Bishop was perceived differently after the Armenian religious conflict erupting among the Catholics of Transylvania in 1697.

Last but not least, prior to his studies at Urban College in Rome, Oxendio Virziresco had been a staunch supporter of complete Latinisation. In his view, the Uniate Armenian clergy of Transylvania were to have the same rights and obligations as the Latin-rite clergy. As the 'Elia Mendrul' Case illustrates, however, the Armenian clergy in Transylvania continued to embrace ancient Armenian (Oriental) liturgical traditions despite the ecclesiastical union concluded in Lviv in 1689. In the eyes of the Uniate clergy, ecclesiastical union was limited only to recognising the primacy of the Pope. Different interpretations of ecclesiastical union culminated in a case of apostasy spearheaded by Archdeacon Elia Mendrul in city of Bistrița in 1697. In addition, the exploration of this event considerably challenges the earlier academic view widely held throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that the ecclesiastical union of the Armenians of Transylvania as a process happened without any major difficulties, conflicts or incidents. Instead, it would seem more appropriate to suggest that ecclesiastical union would in fact be achieved only in 1699–1700, when, with the aid of his assistants, as well as thanks to Andrea Santacroce, Apostolic Nuncio in Vienna, Bishop Oxendio Virziresco, forced the apostate Armenians to accept ecclesiastical union in Transylvania. His opponent, accompanied by large numbers of Armenians, left Transylvania forever and returned to Moldavia, renouncing their Uniate (Catholic) faith.

125 ELTE EKK Coll. Pray (= Collectio Prayana). Cod. 20. Pag. 283–284., Pag. 285.; Nagy, *Andrea Santacroce bécsi apostoli nuncius és az erdélyi örmények egyháza*, 116–117.