

Article

# “Old Church Women”: An Insight into the Less Understood and Their Contribution to the Life of the Orthodox Church

Lavinia Țănculescu <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hyperion University of Bucharest, 030615 Bucharest, Romania; lavinia.tanculescu@thewings.ro

<sup>2</sup> National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, 012244 Bucharest, Romania

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**Abstract:** In this study, I aim to explore the role of old women in the life of the Christian Orthodox Church in the Romanian space. The analysis is based on empirical evidence (qualitative fieldwork and case studies) gathered between 2017 and 2019, and it mainly employs the framework of theory of tradition, and theories of attachment and of parent–infant relationship. I will show that old women going to church have a double role: To educate the community in keeping the religious tradition, and to initiate other members, especially the very young ones (blood-related or not), in the Romanian Orthodox faith. The paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages offered by both aforementioned roles, putting forth possible explanations for the tensions arising between generations. I conclude by underlining the crucial role that old women have in today’s struggle for survival of the Romanian Orthodox Church and in its spiritual identity.

**Keywords:** old women; the Romanian Orthodox Church; implicit and explicit roles in church; theory of tradition; attachment theory; knowledge/attitudes transmission

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## 1. Introduction

Firstly, I would like to clarify three crucial points regarding this paper.

I have chosen to discuss “old church-going women” while borrowing and at the same time appropriating the derogatory dimension of this phrase. I have made this choice in order to create a point of contrast with the extreme significance of the multiple roles that these women fulfill. These roles are, on the one hand, accepted and consciously employed. In other cases, they are unpremeditated and played without previous planning.

Secondly, my interest for this subject was also kindled by the polarized spectrum of perceptions it seems to generate, due to the positive and negative connotations which accompany the typical figure of the “old church woman”. Culturally, one can find, in Romanian space, that there is a stereotype associated with the old women going to church. This can be seen expressed also in the discussions with the informants of this study. Mainly, these stereotypical ideas have a negative connotation related to (fixed) tradition transmission and (forcefully) imposing to others on one side, and superstitions, witchcraft, and connection with the death on the other side. Therefore, my intention was also that of deconstructing a stereotype regarding the negative image that this group is normally associated with.

Thirdly, I believe that the subject is less studied than it should be, with regards to Romanian reality, from the depth and breadth of its complex approach point of view. Even if understanding old women’s role in church could and should be a mix of data coming from different humanities and social sciences, in my analysis I have restricted my approach to psychological and cultural anthropological theories.

In many regions and cultures of the world, old women have an active role in the life of the community, of which the church seldom is an integral part. For example, in the case of older African

Americans, church is seen as a space where important and effective stress coping resources can be mobilized when facing discrimination [1]. Also, older African Americans are more likely to link going to church, apart from attendance of religious services, to participating in congregational activities, and reading religious materials [2,3].

As a point of difference, in a study conducted on religiousness and values in Romania, where 86.5% of the participants declared themselves as Orthodox, it was found that the perceived roles of the church were less a social role (44.9% of respondents agreed with this perceived role) or a family role (69.6%), but rather the church played an important role from the moral (79.0%) and spiritual (88.9%) point of view [4]. I need to point out that the constitution of the Orthodox Church is, by its nature, teandric (gr. *theos*—God, *aner*—man), keeping the distinct existence of the united, God and people, as the communion in the core of the Holy Trinity preserves distinct Divine Persons. “The love with whom Thou hast loved You shall be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). In other words, “in the church, the Son unites with grace so much with the people, as He is united and the same with the Father, having the same love for them. The Son gathering the people in Himself, the Father loving Him, loves them with the same love” [5].

This article aims at advancing the discussion on old women’s role in Eastern Europe, mainly dominated by the Byzantine Orthodox Church. After presenting the main theoretical points of view that fueled my research (i.e., theory of tradition [6], elements from the theory of attachment [7] and from the theory of the parent–infant relationship [8]), I will explain the methodological framework, followed by results and discussions. The conclusion underlines that one of the main contributions attributed to old women, in Romanian contemporary society, goes much further than just keeping traditions, in the broad sense of this expression and has to do with keeping the spiritual identity of the Orthodox Christian church.

## 2. Psychological and Theological Theoretical Intersections

### 2.1. *The Living Church—Between Being the Body, the Mother and the Body of the Mother*

I found it important to mention this teandric aspect of the Orthodox Church especially because one of my aims is to deconstruct a stereotype related to old women as being connected with the primitive, less evolved, part of the church. But, if we were to understand the Church as a body, even if some of its members could be less educated or less able to do certain activities (but are sometimes exactly the opposite), that does not mean that they are not equal with the most educated and most able of these members. The people in the Orthodox Church are granted with this equality, even if the roles of the members of the church are different: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. [ . . . ] For the body does not consist of one member but of many” (I Corinthians 12:12, 14). For just as the human body is one and yet has many parts, and all its parts, many as they are, constitute but one body, so it is with the Church of Christ. For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. And also, like in Church, everyone could contribute in their own way, even if one—the priest—could be perceived as a stronger and more important member compared with the people, who could be seen as a much weaker part. That is because, “the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable” (I Corinthians 12, 22) and also because having their own identity, “there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (I Corinthians 12, 24–26).

### 2.2. *The Church as Mother Archetype*

The Church was also seen as a mother archetype [9], a mother that gives a place to all her children, containing them all and will not play favorites among them. Also, a previous authority figure that

makes this assertion is Saint Paul who calls the heavenly Jerusalem 'our mother' while at the same time saying that the heavenly Jerusalem is, the church (see Galatians 4:26).

Also, as in the case of one's relationship with their mother, people may have expected the Church to solve almost every type of problem one may have [4]. And one could say that, indeed, in Church one's problems were solved, but not by the Church's mere existence, but only by the person's presence in the Church and interior labor in relation with the Church (in praying, for instance, you meet and experience God). One of the major differences one will find between people and the way they further build relationships in life, including with images of authority such as the (external) institution of the Church and the internal, interior, personal Church everyone has inside themselves, is the relationship to the mother and the relationship with her.

Right at the beginning of his life, the child (in this case I use this metaphor for the believer) does not differentiate from the maternal body to which he clings and with which he identifies himself [10] (p. 184). But "a good enough mother" [11] (p. 10) is also one that helps the child differentiate from this initial, all-containing and including mother, "teaching" the child to be close to and apart from the mother, sometimes forcing the child to experience the separation from her and the loss, in order to detach and, in this way, to experience himself as a different person, still keeping a close eye on the child to make sure he/she is ok. It is obvious that this "making sure the child is ok" is a subjective judgment on the mother's part. It's more linked with the maternal instinct, rather than to scientific books, namely to the primitive aspect of the mother rather than to the cultural aspect of her.

In her motherly capacity, the Church, as an archetypal maternal image, (with its teachers, priests, and old women included) can be perceived as both loving and able to apply punishment in order to correct, when the child will not follow the righteous path. But what is this righteous path? I am now discussing about traditions and the distinction between various sources of the knowledge of how to act: The mere activities of daily life, or certain heightened rituals which depend on "deep knowledge", or the third source, "the higher powers" (see [6,12]). This "deep knowledge" and "higher powers", the child should conquer and master in order to free himself and to feel as a separate individual.

Jung [9] proposes an interesting, yet incomplete, parallel between the Church as the mother archetype (*Mater Ecclesia*) and the Christians: "The Christians are children of the Higher City, not sons of the earthly city-mother, who is to be cast out." He points towards the fact that "when the city appears in place of the mother: The infantile attachment (whether primary or secondary) is a crippling limitation for the adult, whereas attachment to the city fosters his civic virtues and at least enables him to lead a useful existence" [9] (para. 313).

Jung's observation could be seen as partially true if we consider keepers of tradition, not at all a fixed element of one's personal identity, but a permanent one. Therefore, I will not consider the permanence of a ritual a sign of infantile attachment, since rituals are not something that would be imposed to the child, in their fixed form, but transmitted in their spirit, with the living, forever moving and changing with the context characteristics. In other words, traditions, including the tradition of the church, preserve the spirit of things, not their letter (canon). Namely, traditions are living traditions, not fixed ones. Tradition keepers and transmitters can indeed ensure for the future generations the benefits that the elders have already enjoyed by experiencing a certain ritual with its rules, but, at the same time, being sensitive to the changes in the internal and external environments (see A.B. case, presented further) and the limitations of the concrete situations in life (see C.D. case). In other words, there is no regression into the infantile attachment, but the consciousness of the permanence of the object, which is, in this context, the accepted and assumed bias towards pro-social information that leads to morally good content being transmitted [13].

### 2.3. Old Women's Explicit and, Most Importantly, Implicit Roles in Church

The lay tradition of the church, or, to put it differently, old women's lore, does not necessarily have a connection with the theological dimension of the Church Fathers, namely it represents more of the continuous element of the tradition rather than the canonical one (see [6]). On the other hand, it

provides a great advantage, which might in fact be helping the child (metaphorically, the person going to the church but not as often as the old women) detach himself from the power of the mother-archetype, namely the power invested in the Church. This is possible by managing to place these teachings in a context, adapting them to people's abilities, to the places, to the people of those places, so as to make, at least in part, the Church's mysteries and the Holy Writ (as I mentioned above, the "deep knowledge" and the "higher powers") accessible to those people.

Taking care of the funerary feasts, wakes, lighting candles, preparing wafers, preparing Koliva (a type of sweet desert, made of germinated wheat that is served for the soul of a dead person), (just to mention some examples of the explicit roles the old woman assumes in the Orthodox practices) are metaphorically like a solid food the mother chews for her baby. She knows that the baby needs food, but its impossibility to take it as it is gives an implicit role to the mother: To prepare and even to chew the food in small bits so the child can still be nurtured. At the same time, she is aware that certain constitutions may reject a type of food, at a certain moment in time, and she knows how to wait, not forcefully imposing something that she knows worked for other children. But, in case of life endangerment, the mother becomes extremely firm, obliging the child (even through force) to take medicine, for instance, or to take part in a painful medical intervention.

Therefore, it is very well possible that in understanding the profile of the old woman in Church, we move, simultaneously, between the psychology and the metaphysics of the old woman. Starting with the way in which her soul is put together and in which a woman can be perceived when she has reached an old age, we can (partially) begin to understand her life's work. For, naturally, I agree with the distinction between the essence of a person's soul and their behaviors, as they are distinctly studied by psychology and metaphysics [14,15], I could say that the old woman is the representative of a form of tradition, as is the good, containing mother and the terrible mother, at the same time, for her sons and daughters from the church. And, in order for her to fulfill her natural role of protecting and including and in order for the children not to feel abandoned and exposed to a greater bad, she should (or, at least, could) act to prevent this greater bad. Thinking about the attachment behavior and understanding of the response of a child to separation or loss of his mother-figure turns on an understanding of the bond that ties all of the believers to this figure [10] (p. 176) of the Church, that is, whether we want it or not, by the most present and accessible figure: the old woman.

Last, but not least, I would point two other aspects related to the presence of old women in church. One is related to the fact that, as the Orthodox belief states, the Church includes both living and dead and, historically, old women manage to preserve the bare existence of the church by attending the services for them but also for their deceased husbands and sons that did not return from the wars. A second thing is captured in the next paragraph: "a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And He called His disciples to Him, and said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living'." (Mark 12, 42–44). The widow's money is part of the fuel the Church is using to move along, and this statement is not referring to the monetary aspect of the money, but rather to its energetic aspect coming from within these women: they invest everything they own. Ultimately, old women seem (from the interviews with them) to act like this, not so much for the sake of tradition, that is, the letter of the law, but for the benefit that someone could have, if one applies, the one revealed truth that they are loyal to and that tradition includes, namely, the spirit of the law sent to man by the Holy Ghost, therefore, for God.

#### 2.4. Tradition in a Triad

I continue the metaphor with the mother feeding the baby and stopping when the body of the young one does not tolerate that food, or forcing him to take medicine or to take part in a painful medical intervention, even if she is sorry for the pain the child needs to endure. I have to add that the word tradition comes from the Latin *traditio*, in its meaning of "handing over" or "delivery" of

something that needs to be handed over. In proposing a theory of tradition, [6] distinguishes three elements which may be found in traditions—the continuous, canonical, and core elements, making sure that it is mentioned that the main condition of all traditions is that they have continuity and not necessarily canons or cores [6] (p. 6).

The author explains that “traditions are not actions: they frame actions” [6] (p. 10). Also, he refers to “people in traditional societies” and their never-having a concept of tradition in the sense we do in our “post-traditional societies”. Another interesting quote comes from Oakeshott: “such a tradition is neither fixed nor finished; [ . . . ] there is no model to be copied, idea to be realized, or rule to be followed. Some part of it changes more slowly than others, but none is immune from change. Everything is temporary” [16].

There are several points that I would like to underline, related to each of the elements of traditions as explained by Alexander [6]; these were discovered in the interviews taken in this study.

Characterizing the continuity element of the tradition, apart from the “social” and “repeated” characteristics, there is a third element of “psychological salience” [17], that means that traditions “are not merely matters of habits but of some higher significance, [ . . . ] and it is “untenable” to assume that they are intended to conserve some underlying conception of the world” [1,17]. In my comparison of the Church with the mother archetype and of old women as the archetypal image of this mother, this element of continuity is linked with the primitive, natural, maternal instinct, not bound to any fixed, rigid way of acting, but, in the case of the good enough mother, ready to be patient and acted upon not at all individual level (it is almost never about the mother), but about the greater good of the child.

Once the written word appears in history, tradition is the one that adds the next element, that of the canon. And, as Alexander stated, “a canon establishes standards by which we are judged, but at the same time, reflexively, ( . . . ), enables us by our acts to judge those standards, so that the entire canon remains continually critically open to change.” [6] (p. 15).

The third of the elements of a tradition is very much to do with an eternal truth connected to that tradition within which, as in the archetypal aspects case, “there is a core of unchanging truth” [6] (p. 18). And, understood in this way, tradition does not need to be verified or challenged for it is as true as the revealed truth. Josef Pieper states that “acceptance of the *traditum* is very nearly the same as what is meant by the word <<belief>>. As soon as I accept a *traditum* as something verified by myself and rationally known it loses for me its character of tradition.” [18] (p. 473). And he continues by saying that it is something that does not need demonstration, but, at the same time, paradoxically, something that is not imposing to him: “it is not received by me but appropriated and I possess it on my own” [18] (p. 473), it is something of a “divine utterance” [18] (p. 481).

From what Pieper underlines, there are two quotes that I’d like to propose, without further explaining them, for I believe they are at the same time self-explanatory as well as extremely useful in understanding the implicit role of old women. This implicit role is seen as the main voice of the ancients, the holy tradition keepers in church, (a tradition that is revealed, not necessarily written), different from the priest that is the keeper and the translator of the “Holy Word of God” (that could be both revealed and written).

First, as Pieper mentions: “Not every individual has by himself immediate access to the revelation, and, thus, that the ancients have received a message in which the one born later cannot share unless they make contact with the ancients and hear their words.”. Secondly, “it would be too much to require someone simply “to believe”, to ask someone to do a thing so demanding and, as it was, extravagant as to say with all seriousness but with no possibility of rational demonstration: “it is so”. Obviously, such a requirement would be incongruous if the thing to be believed did not pertain to the center of the universe and the totality of existence. But this is actually what is meant by the ‘wisdom of the ancients’.” [18] (p. 481).

This article’s aim is to open up the discussion about the rather implicit roles of women than the explicit, (self)-attributed ones and to break a very powerful, yet unfair stereotype.

### 3. Methods

My methodological design procedures followed both psychological and cultural anthropology perspectives, collecting data about actual human events and behaviors as well as distinctive perspectives of the case study participants, through direct observations, participant observation and semi-structured interviews (see [19] (p. 153)). The data analyzed in this paper come from a set of case studies conducted to reveal the way the role of women, aged 60 and above, is perceived in connection with the life of the church, in urban and rural areas. The data are collected both from the case studies participants as well as other members of the church, such as priests or regular church attendees.

During 2017–2019, I interviewed 73 individuals, from three different groups. The first group (15 individuals) consisted of women aged 60 years and over, the oldest participant was 96 years old. The second group, was formed by 11 priests, serving in urban (6) and rural (5) parishes. The third group, which was the largest, was constituted by people attending church activities on a regular basis, but with no formal role in the church (44 individuals: 18 men and 26 women). I also discussed with 3 anthropologists with deep knowledge in the area of religious beliefs in the Orthodox countries and on rituals that are mostly practiced by Romanian people. Participants were approached by means of a snowball sampling method. The city of Bucharest, two medium size cities, with approximately 150,000 inhabitants, and four rural localities were the places where the study was conducted.

As researchers, it might be difficult to “abandon our own references, to place ourselves in our interlocutors’ shoes” [20], if we think that most of the times we are in fact both in the researcher’s shoes and in the interlocutor’s.

In time I have come to see that, among other roles, these interviews manage to also fulfill the role of “checking whether the meaning of each question is identical both for the interviewer and for the interviewed” [21], since, the presence and significance of these old women’s participation is dictated not just by personal belief but also by expectations from the role that these women might fulfill. A “reflexive posture”, that is “avoiding rash interpretations and inducted projections” [22], was definitely necessary for me to effectively distance myself from the field and to subsequently be able to analyze and interpret the data.

At the end of the 73 interviews I conducted in this study, I ended up by discovering the wealth of perspectives embraced by the roles perceived or desired on the part of old church-women and other participants at the life of the church. This was clear in the language and experience of the persons I interviewed. At the end of collecting all the information, the material grouped according to the similarity of the statements in the voices of the interviewees, reflecting the two study cases that I am going to present further: The rural and the urban reality of old women in church. The research was accompanied by a semi-structured interview guide, with initial questions regarding (1) demographical data, (2) ways of participating and (3) tenure in the church, (4) perceived role in the church community and its different generations, and (5) personal perceived relationship with God. Sometimes, I adapted my questions according to the direction that I felt that the interlocutor wanted to take. This kind of methodology is apparently perceived non-aggressively by respondents, but it is, without doubt, a very delicate point regarding the intimacy of the subject, especially because this could be easily seen as gossiping. This is the reason why direct observation might have been an insufficient method of the study, as it does not allow for a plenary understanding of the life history and inner feelings regarding the subject and participants involved.

An anthropological view was taken on the subject matter, consequently about aspects that have a high degree of subjectivity. Recent studies have demonstrated “a wider interest on the part of society, from the intimate orientation of ego-literature to social minimalism (...). On the other hand, though, it is directed towards a rising interest in *agency* versus *structuring* in the literature” [23] (p. 12).

Apart from the aim of attempting an ethnographic view, the present study proposes to open, in a methodological manner, the way of a multi-situated ethnography. This has the aim of managing “an ethnology placed in multiple spaces of observation” [24], exactly because man is, in himself, a mobile being, in permanent dynamics, living both within and without his being.

In only one fragment of my research did I make use of direct observation, namely when participating to the life of a parish's community in the center of Bucharest, where the author of this paper feels at home and is an active participant. These activities included (almost) weekly Sunday service (from 8:30–12:00 a.m.), other weekly church services (on Fridays, starting from 5 p. m.) and activities (i.e., catecheses, on Thursdays, starting with 6 pm or preparing for a certain religious holiday, in which various activities needed to be performed by women (i.e., cutting the bread and preparing the alms gifts for the community members).

#### 4. Results

It has been underlined both in the interviews I conducted and my participant observation that old women have various roles in the church, because, at first, they need a role. One of my informants, S.P., woman, 39 years old, explains that, in her view, the need for a role is connected with the fact that, during their life, women have active roles in their families and, as time passes, the role (for instance of a guide) was lost:

*“They have lost a sense of hierarchy in their families. It is related to the natural authority an elder is supposed to have. Grandparents who have grandchildren that they are raising, the ones with an active role, do not interfere to scold other people. It might also be because they have a higher degree of understanding and tolerance as they are in closer contact with younger generations. It is the lack of permanent/personal contact with younger generations that makes them do that.”*. (S.P., 39 years old)

Being present in the church is a role in itself. Old women are considered true keepers of traditions by members of the community:

*“They contribute with their experience of life; they keep religious traditions inherited from our ancestors, the rites and old customs”*. (F.S., 41 years old, woman)

As summarized in the above statements, a first manner in which women might contribute could be related to their natural call, coming from their personal experience and their maternal instinct, that drives them to be connected to the Church as to a mother and to become, as their ancestors that initiate them in the Church life, the continuous representatives of this Mother. They are acting like good mothers with children (in religious practices), in the beginning of their journeys. A second manner could be the connection that they have with the collective voice of the core of tradition that old women may be able to touch by constant praying and, maybe through a virtuous way of life, with the access to the eternal truth. One statement was particularly impressive. It came from a 59-year old woman, that said:

*“My grandmother couldn't read. She went to school for a single year in her entire life. But she struggled to learn how to read, letter by letter, so she could read the prayers. And, still, there were things that we learnt in school, reading a lot of literature and she seemed to already have known them. And not necessarily old things, new things as well. If this information had been revealed to her ... ”*

In the urban area, participation of women in church was highly influenced by their daily personal and professional related activities, as well as by characteristics of the city (long distances, fluid communities, and higher dynamics of the daily life). Like younger women with an active professional life, old women are also engaged in family activities in roles such as grandmothers or house holders for large families. Thus, they found difficult to attend the church services more than once per week, sometimes only twice a month. Also, in the same situation, there were found old women that reported health problems that made it impossible or, at least, very difficult for them to go to church. Still, invalidating situations have not led to the cessation of certain rituals related to certain church holidays.

For example, on the Saturday of Souls, a holiday which precedes the Pentecostal Feast, in some cities in Romania, there is a ritual of giving rice with milk (a sort of a rice pudding) as alms gifts. A.B., an old woman from an urban area church, 83 years old, was not feeling able to go to church that day.

She prepared the rice pudding and visited all her neighbors in the condominium she was living in and gave alms on a walnut leaf. When asked why she insisted to do so, even if she was not feeling good and unable to go to church for this moment and action, she said:

*“Tradition says (and that is not a superstition!) that in Heavens there is a huge pot with rice and milk and each of our ancestors stays in a queue to receive their rice with milk holding a walnut leaf in one’s hands. Those whose living family did not offer today the rice and milk as alms in the name of their ancestors’ soul, leave the people in the queue with bare leaves. And since my granny told me, “My dear, please, don’t ever let me walk away empty-handed”, even when I was living for a while in Canada and I couldn’t find walnut leaves, I made rice with milk and I gave alms on a maple leaf.”*

In the urban areas there are also differences between parishes, depending on the neighborhood, level of education, other demographical characteristics, such as birth rate and average age of population, industrialization of the area, even closeness to other objectives such as markets, stores, parks, that could distract people from going to church.

One of my informants, I.E., 58 years old, who did not yet see herself as old, said that, even in the city, in each parish, one can find “the custom of the place” in connection to the role of old women:

*“Their role is to bring the young to church, to deal with organizational problems, about organizing certain church events, to strengthen the prayers of the young, to take tradition further. But there are many negative behaviors, related to what “you should or shouldn’t do”. You are not allowed this or that, but there’s no argument to support their rules. Even if priests admit that there is no written rule for this kind of thing, these women keep saying that this is how they learned it. Tradition comes from hearsay. Besides, there are also the habits of the respective place. For instance: Funerary feasts, wedding traditions, they are all different from one place to another. And God forbid that you may not observe the law of that place.”*

In rural areas, as well as in some Diaspora parishes, going to church on Sunday is a way of keeping the community together. This was underlined, many times, in the interviews. In Diaspora (we refer here to Romanians from the Western European Countries), for example, the nostalgia for the roles that old women used to have is intertwined with a general nostalgia for the home country. P.D., 42 years old, a Romanian Orthodox priest from a small parish in Diaspora, underlined that:

*“Their role is to be always praying, whether in private or in church. The experience shows that old women are much more patient and will keep praying (maybe because they went through the ordeal of communism but also because technology and mass media did not affect them as much as they affected younger generations. These women used to have a more natural life). These women help the parish with a lot of household work: they prepare the church, they tend to the parish garden, they lay the tables in church. They sing in the choir. Sometimes they help with the catechism for the young and for grown-ups (if they have schooling). They keep a balance between tradition and renewal. They do not change in the twinkling of an eye (which might be a plus but also a minus if they become too obtuse)”*.

Also, when asked, P. D. expressed his belief that one of the negative aspects related to old women’s role in church is their being vocal and imposing their presence on the others, which is why “local tradition” is often promoted “to the detriment of the Church”:

*“They should do few things in church, but do them well (not to tire themselves but to be efficient and this way they will not lag)”*.

He also thinks (an opinion shared, according to him, with many colleagues who are priests) that old women should be given a certain status and, in this way, valued more:

*“I would like to see lower clergy reinforced: dean women for instance, that should be ordained so as to help priests with some of the work (this is the case in some parishes, as for instance in Egypt, Alexandria). So, the status of women in church might and must be improved”*.



For the majority of the old women interviewed and observed, coming to church and performing different roles for the community has a major role in their life. Even if there are situations where one's house is very far away from the church (scattered villages, or people living in the wilderness), these women are constantly walking large distances. One of my interviewees, C.D., a woman over 80 years old, would walk for 3 h to reach church every Sunday. She rarely missed a service, and this only when there were floods or very heavy snow.

As in the rural areas everyone knew everyone, social interaction is much more present. "Meeting and chatting in church", can be negatively perceived, because it often disturbs other participants to the service.

One of the main special roles is in connection with rites of passage. They are mourners, taking care of the funerary feasts, wakes, as well as of other passage rituals such as births, marriages:

*"Old church-women in the rural area fulfill a legacy from their forbears. It was the duty of these women to take care of the church. Funerary feasts, wakes etc. They are the keepers of holy days. They go to church events. They are involved in the life of the congregation. They are obedient and will observe all the church's rules". (E.F., man, 43 y.o.)*

As stated above, they are as follows:

In parishes situated between rural and urban areas, the educational role for the new generation is very important for old women. The old woman is an adviser for younger members of the family and for her neighbors "to turn to the church for comfort" (G.H., woman, 40 years old). She persuades the community to do voluntary work in church, for instance "to clean and prepare food for the needy". (idem) Also, she gathers "children of all ages" and helps them "create something artistic, embroider, paint, play an instrument" (idem). Thus, the relation between generations is strengthened, even if, not always, equal: "Now it is the turn of the younger people, only they have to be persuaded by the older people so as to contribute" (idem).

For the younger generations, old women's behavior is, sometimes, perceived negatively:

*"They might appear as nagging and superstitious at times. There is no rule that says that you DO NOT HAVE TO extinguish the candle after you have taken the sacrament in church. It's also them who give you the evil eye if you come to church with a baby who starts crying and will see you out of the church. Or if you are bare headed, or if you sit in a pew (which one of them has paid for), but sometimes you come exhausted from work and your feet hurt so badly that you will just sit down anywhere". (idem)*

Another important point raised was the connection with the values and the manner they value the presence and the loss of the loved ones. Here is a very conclusive statement of D.P., a 45-year-old woman:

*"The difference between us, younger women and older women is provided by a different outlook on values and life. They have been through times in which the role of a woman, family, faith were key points, well defined, well respected, and they took these as reference points with much more responsibility than we do today. Moreover, these older women have been through hard times, wars, losing their husbands, their fathers. They were made stronger through their pain and took God as their ally in all this. This is exactly why I see these women as more attached to church and tradition—I am impressed how they remember their dead, how faithful and religious they are when doing so. There is a way and a meaning in everything. As for negative behavior: sometimes, some of them do not have enough patience for younger people who are trying to come to church. However, I have seen many older women speaking kindly and considerately to these young men".*

As always, such subject would benefit of more visibility if all the parties involved (priests, men and middle-aged women, old women) would reflect on the importance of this role of the "old woman". It is rather obvious that this role has an importance for the life of the Church. But the way in which this is important is given by the experience of living together, in the heart of the Church. The ultimate

goal of all these old women is, as I finally understood it from talking with them, bringing the people together, in unity, inside the Church, the same way as they unite their families. Therefore, a future state of this research, should all be closer to and more present into the spiritual aspect of life, could be hearing old women's voice by feeling with them in prayer.

## 5. Discussion

For my analysis, I used the systematic theory of traditions proposed by [6], as well as elements from the theory of attachment [7] and the theory of the parent–infant relationship [8]. The results explained, in part, common and different practices between the two study cases, the urban parishes and the rural parishes, and were structured along two axes of discussion.

A first axis is constituted of the explicit, concrete, visible role of old women in church that could be invested both positively and negatively when analyzing the displayed behaviors (some of them concretely, self-assumed, some of them unconsciously performed). This first point is connected with the fact that old women need to have a role in the church since having a significant role in managing difficult matters was a constant fact in their life. Managing the passage between stages in life could be quite difficult (especially when dealing with death), therefore, the church is perceived as the appropriate and significant space for their role of tradition keepers and transmitters.

A second axis of discussion is derived from an opinion shared by a majority of participants (89% of the respondents explicitly mentioning it in their statements): *“The old women keep tradition, transmit it further, they pray, they are the most present people in church”* (S.A., 38 years old, woman). This second point of discussion is connected with that fact that, especially because they feed themselves with what the church gives them (as a “spiritual food”), they can and, somehow, have to feed the others. In this way, the educational role for the community members becomes visible. As I mentioned, there is also a positive and a negative perspective, related to the educational aspect old women may fulfill. The potential negative role that is attributed to old women when they criticize, penalize and try to correct the less experienced ones in the name of the experience they hold. Another aspect related to the old tradition understanding and transmitting is that the practices, old women do and/or believe in, could be seen as superstition by the young members of the church. In both cases, this sense of attachment to the church's traditions and to holding these traditions alive is not reduced to the “physical dimension” of the place (of church); it includes also a “social insideness” [25].

And, as I mentioned earlier, the church tradition is implicit, not always written, but continuous and having in its core the revealed truth which is the word of God, therefore, which makes it eternal. In other cultures and religions, it could be very much the case that church relationships are an important stress-coping resource and are linked to better mental health and church activities may provide elderly persons with a structure within which to maintain social contact and spiritual support into old age [26]. Also, some authors underline that individuals, in their old age, often exit familiar roles but are presented with few well-defined new roles to replace them [27]. That, indeed, could be also the case of the Romanian Orthodox environment.

### 5.1. Connection with the Church as to a Mother, Through a Mother or a Grandmother

I believe that, in the Orthodox space, it is this very ritual of coming to church that offers meaning and new roles to elder women. More often than not, these persons grow and develop in church from childhood. These women are the very same little girls who were brought to church by their grandmothers and who will keep their ancestors' customs, by observing an unwritten testament. Since scarcity in studying these relationships in the Romanian Orthodox Church is a fact, I believe that the old women's voices are the best to document and justify the discussion related to the points of view my research wants to underline. Being brought to the church and “coming of age” in the church's life was explained by C.B., a 90-year-old woman, who told us:

*“Personally, I had been brought to church by my grandmother since I was a little girl. Now, I come to pray for myself and to help the others around me. I point to them that it is not good to cross legs or keep your hands crossed or your jacket on your shoulder. I, myself, was taught in a monastery. It was August and very hot. I was young, for the first time in that monastery. A nun asked me if it was my first time there and I said yes. I wanted to order an embroidered girdle. And the nun asked me, apologizing in advance, so as not to upset me: “If you were to come in front of Ceaușescu (our former president during the communist era), would you look like this?” “No, of course not”, I said. “So, why should you come in front of our Lord looking like that? Please, remember that when you enter the Holy Church, you need to first pay respect to God and secondly to the people there.”. And I remembered, especially because my priest confessor told me: Do not forget: “Where there is no guidance, there is no salvation!””.*

But it is also the difficulties of these women’s lives that brought them in church, even if this happened later in their life. In her statement, a 73-year-old woman, mother of three, grandmother of seven, told us that she started to come to church on a more constant basis, even if she was initially brought there by her grandmother, because of a disease her daughter had 25 years ago. Even now she said that she felt a miracle happened to her daughter, miracle that she could feel and is certain of.

A greater good was accessed in Church intermediated, at first, by the grandmother in the case of C.N., a 49 years old man:

*“I had a grandmother to teach me. Her personal example made me search for meaning in Christian religion more seriously. I was somehow set to reject religion by my atheist education, provided in state school. I was ready to see it as a negative thing. But my grandmother’s example helped me go beyond the barriers of my prejudice. I was more open to the religious topics that sprouted after the ‘90s”.*

“The *consensus gentium* that expresses itself through the religions is [ . . . ] more in accord with the collective psyche of humanity” [28] (p. 807), therefore with the mother archetype. The belief is that, in Church, as if you were near a forever living mother, if you ask for help and are conscious of the help you need, she will take care of all your problems. Not the institution of the Church, but the energy that flows within.

## 5.2. In God’s Presence

As I heard the old women interviewed talking about their role and presence in church, I could hear, on one hand, the conviction given by the power and the necessity of the constancy of the object (here, God is the living object). On the other hand, I heard in their voices the humble doubt that they are ever worthy of getting anywhere near the Divine. Somehow, they hope for themselves to be the wise maidens and fear that, by their recklessness, they will be found by Christ, their bridegroom, as foolish, without of the light of the law when the time comes (see Mathew 25, 1–12). Therefore, they try to observe the law at all times, for one knows “neither the day nor the hour” (Mathew 25:13).

This is what A.R., 96 years old, says in her interview:

*“For me, the Church means constantly praying for my soul to our Savior, to His Mother and all the saints. Take a look at what I have here: Look here, I have the book of all saints.”.*

And she shows me on the table, next to two bottles of vitamins and two cups, three books, one of which is the *Acatistier* (All prayers’ book). Surprisingly, the pages that have been read thousands of times are almost torn. She knows almost by heart all the prayers dedicated to the Mother of God, for which she has a godly piety, especially the one dedicated to the Celebration of the Annunciation.

She acknowledges that the treatment she seeks is less of a medicinal nature and more of a spiritual nature: “When I was strong, I went to church. I did not desert the church. And now, I need to prepare to go and always I need to be ready.” (A.R., 96 years old).

God’s presence prevails even if this could mean losing the connections with one’s dear ones or sacrificing their own comfort.

I was surprised at the coherence of her thoughts and at her daily discipline at least regarding the facts of faith. From everything she says, humility and fear of God transpire. Fear that she might disappoint Jesus and the desire to always seek the help of the Mother of God. The fact that, in her opinion, each person's life is tailored in a special way, is obvious in this discussion in which authentic and unscheduled eternal truths are revealed:

*"The Mother of God took care of me, and I was afraid that I might disappoint the Lord. As a little child, I used to fast. My mother would boil for me, separately (because no one else in the house fasted along with me), a pot full with beans and I would eat from that clay pot for a week. My father was fond of me, poor man, and my mother the same, but I did not want to eat even if this would have made my mother's life easier. They tried to feed me their food, but I did not want it."*

And, also, the conscience of the presence of God and of the Divine obliges her to admit the truth, even if painful:

*"Yeah, what do you think? Do you think I'm good? I admit I am sinful. Jesus Christ knows what mischief I have done. I pray that the Mother of God is with me at all times"*.

And she tried to serve Her as well all her life, for instance, by making beeswax candles and the rod (a special candle) for the funeral of many people in the village. Also, she did it, in advance, for her own funeral.

*"- Are not you afraid to die?"*

*- Why should I be afraid? Of the Mother of God? No, I'm not afraid to die and meet Her."*  
(A.R., 96 years old)

The imminence of the final journey helps old women to stay in touch with the holy law, as this gives them the conscience of the presence of God and in touch with tradition, as this gives them the conscience of the presence of their ancestors. Therefore, both attitudes enable them to have the possibility of togetherness.

## 6. Conclusions

The present study's aim was to present the profiles of old women in church along with the roles they play. The underlying objective was to present both positive and negative aspects one could perceive in relation to old women in church and their involvement, so as to finally start deconstructing an unfair stereotype on an insufficiently studied subject. My research provides support for the "theory of tradition" [6], showing that the three elements included in this theory as characterizing the traditions: continuity, cannon, and core, were found to be present in relation to old women. Old women ensure continuity through their constant presence, they obey and guard the cannon (one of the interviewed priests told us that "during his preaching he seeks approval in the eyes of elders in the church") and are convinced of the core of the tradition of the Church, feeling it from inside and not questioning it, not because of a lack of education, but because of their strong belief and an internal state which is stronger than any rational argument.

Also, I saw that, irrespective of the collective contemporary voice of the people that one could feel were forced to adapt to some new societal requirements, old women are inclined to be in contact with and respect the voice of tradition (the old collective voice) and, also, an internal voice. In this way, they are in accord with their own, implicit ethic, that does not come from their will, but is connected with the voice of the Conscience, namely of God and all the Divine.

One important implication of talking about old women's role is that I could make the readers aware that, through these women's presence in church, churches are never left empty, the service will never seem meaningless, each of the people is never alone, when searching for another human being to identify themselves with. Also, when one is suffering, one's spiritual life is not dry of hope, since

these women find their way to church through any means possible, so as to search for, find and be in a communion with God.

One of the main conclusions is that, weak or wise, as old women may seem to the outside members of the community, they will always manage, through their presence, to communicate voluntarily with people, from the young ones to their peers. Voluntarily or not, they will manage to communicate to the divine through being an active, constant presence in the activities of the church, as well as in their personal program of preparing themselves for what, a great voice of our Romanian culture, Zoe Dumitrescu Buşulenga, that became Nun Benedicta, called to be “The Great Journey”. Therefore, means of communication may be diverse and at our disposal, should we choose to connect not only with our rational part in ourselves. We may think about tailoring them to each of our inner journey, personal histories and assumed meaning of life in order to be constantly in touch with the best version of ourselves.

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