

Dăeni Parish Priest was a rebel child: “My ‘religion’ was football.” Read how St Parascheva chose him as her servant



The life and work of Father Alexandru Octavian Balaban from St Parascheva Parish in Dăeni, county of Tulcea, unfolds under St Parascheva’s protection.

The priest, whose story has been recently featured in [Libertatea](#) daily, told Basilica.ro how he transitioned from the “religion of football” to the ministry of priesthood.

He grew up in the village of Ulmu, in the Eastern county of Brăila, on the Lower Danube River. He was born to God-fearing parents, who were not church-goers though. “I was a rebel child. My ‘religion’ was football,” he said. He played in the junior team of Ulmu Oil.

He would wake up at six in the morning and go mark the field with lime powder. He

even played against the brothers of international footballer Bănel Nicoliță.

The saint who chose her servant

When he was a teenager, the future Father Alexandru had an accident and hurt his spine. He slept in pain on an even platform. Then he had dreamed of a venerable old lady who took his hand and led him to a hospital where they treated him. Soon he would become completely healthy.

Everybody has said it was St Parascheva in his dream. He feels the same.

After the miraculous dream, and influenced by a special priest, he got closer to Church life.

“Father Ștefan, the priest from Jugureanu Parish, a village in the town of Ulmu, was my mentor. It was a pleasure to talk to him during the Religion classes. I would talk to him about football, while he slowly led me towards the Church. I would walk more than a mile to participate in the divine services he officiated. He has stood by me for more than 20 years,” he said.

One day, his mother was amazed to find out he had registered to give the admission exam at Tulcea Seminary. And, to her even greater amazement, he was admitted.

In 2012, after he graduated Bucharest’s “Patriarch Justinian” Faculty of Theology, he was ordained a priest on St Parascheva’s feast in a church dedicated to her. So he became the Parish Priest of the St Parascheva Church in Dăeni.

Father Alexandru Balaban shows great devotion to St Parascheva. When he lacked money for the painting of the church, another miracle happened.

He had gone to Aunt Parascheva, who had been tending the church for 30 years, to commune her sick husband. Then he fell asleep with the sad thought that he would not be able to paint the church in time for its second consecration service.

An insistent call woke him up, followed by an SMS: “Maximum discretion, please. I sent you 10,000 Lei”. It was exactly how much he lacked to finish the iconography. The bank transfer was also quicker than usual.

On another occasion, when he could have died in a car accident, he found between

him and the car door hollowed by the impact the saint's icon fallen from the sunshade.

When a dear relative fell severely ill, he took her to St Parascheva's holy relics in the Iași Cathedral. They arrived late in the evening, when the Cathedral should have been closed and got lucky: it seemed the saint had waited for them. At the next X-ray, the doctors told his relative her health problem had disappeared miraculously.

With the help provided by the people the saint sent him, he managed to restore the church and the parish house, he built an external candle stand and extended the social centre provides food for hundreds of adults and children.

On a plot of land donated by a local family, the priest intends to build a support centre for women in pregnancy crisis. He named it the "Give Life" project. The centre will have a medical cabinet and accommodation spaces.

The priest who is also a football trainer

It was not easy to rebuild the community of faithful in this town which now has only 2,000 inhabitants, but a century ago surpassed in population the city of Hârșova.

He won them over through activities for the children. The most important two are the "Nihil sine Deo" Children Choir and the junior football team Dăeni Rocket.

The "Nihil sine Deo" Children Choir is now made of almost 100 children from the neighbouring counties: Tulcea, Brăila and Constanța. They participated in festivals and sang with famous voices such as Andra and Irina Rimes. They currently partner with the famous Romanian choir Madrigal.

A prominent member of the choir is now Elena Lazăr, whom Father Alexandru overheard one day singing in a park. Now she studies at the Art Highschool in Tulcea.

Father Alexandru has a football trainer's license, so he can work with children also on the football field. Often, after the Sunday Divine Liturgy, the children would go with him directly to play a match.

Both the choir and the football team are rather good pretexts to involve children and youth in healthy socializing. The priest helped many of them to continue their studies. Some even chose the “St John Cassian” Seminary in Tulcea.

“I have worked with some of the most problematic children,” the parish priest said. The results were amazing.

At first, the villagers asked him: “Father, why do you mingle with these tramps?” “Birds of a feather flock together,” the priest told them.

He tells to the children: “I used to be like you, I know how it is.”

Father Alexandru Balaban and his wife Georgiana have three children but are also thinking to adopt, especially since the little ones are very attracted to him. And he is very sensitive to the situations of children without a family.

“When you are in a community, the least you can do is change something around you,” he says.

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