CONCLUSION:
THE QUESTION OF THE “SANCTA ECCLESIA MARABENESIS” REVISITED

The first evidence of papal interest in the Danubian Slavs is found during the pontificate of Nicholas I and is more pronounced during the pontificate of Hadrian II. Chronologically, it coincides with the full involvement of the Apostolic See in the matter of the nascent Bulgarian church. The analysis of the Roman sources leads us to judge that the issue of the Bulgarian church was considered a high priority on the papal agenda. It was the testing ground whose outcome would result in a redefinition of the power relations between the church of Rome and the church of Constantinople. The Bulgarian priority has probably obscured the story of Roman intervention into the Christianization of the Danubian Slavs in the sources.

During the pontificates of Nicholas I and Hadrian II, the silence of the Roman sources and the elusiveness of the scant information about Constantine and Methodius in some of them, also suggest a papal strategy of intervention which differs profoundly from that used in the establishing of the church of Bulgaria.

Around 862, Rastislav, chief of the Moravians, had turned to Rome to solicit the intervention of the Apostolic See to establish a church in Moravia, and had received no reply. Four years later, Boris, khan of the Bulgarians, turned to Rome with the same application. This time Nicholas I was quick to respond, sending the letter *Responsa ad consulta Bulgarorum* and setting up, without hesitation, a prestigious diplomatic team led by Formosus, bishop of Porto, to be sent into the field. From this one can clearly recognize the will of the Apostolic See not to interfere in ecclesiastical matters in the border region of the eastern Frankish kingdom, momentarily leaving a free hand to the Bavarian churches. The choice was undoubtedly dictated by the inconvenience of opening at the same time a jurisdictional dispute with the powerful Bavarian churches. Carolingian support was vital to Roman success in Bulgaria.

In subsequent years, however, Pope Nicholas I was forced to intervene in the affairs of the Danube region when he perceived the risks arising from the activity of Constantine and Methodius, the Byzantine missionaries, in the Bavarian missionary territories. The possibility of a Byzantine ecclesiastical province in central Europe, as the mirror image of a Roman church in Bulgaria, had to be avoided. Circumstances favored Nicholas I
who was able to contact Constantine and Methodius just as they were about to take the initiative for the establishment of a new ecclesiastical province. The change in the court elite as a result of the coup d’État of the Byzantine Emperor Basil I had deprived Constantine and Methodius of their protectors and of their contacts for their mission to Rastislav.

An important success in Roman policy can be attributed to Hadrian II. He managed to neutralize the threat of Constantine and Methodius, the men of Photius, patriarch of Constantinople, at the border of Carolingian Europe, convincing Methodius to be a spokesman for the interests of the Apostolic See in the Bavarian missionary territories. Papal support for the Slavonic liturgy is the central theme of the Slavic Cyrillic-Methodian sources. This topic is an ideological argument which is difficult to place in time. At the same time, it also provides important marginal traces of the delicate negotiations between Hadrian II and Methodius.

The solitary return of Methodius to Moravia and Pannonia, and the absence of any official sources attesting to the new ‘Romanized’ dimension of Methodius provide the opportunity for some considerations about Hadrian II’s conduct. The pope was well aware of the difficulties faced by Constantine and Methodius during their missionary activity, because of the Bavarian clergy’s absolute intolerance of missionaries who had not been sent by Bavarian bishops, yet he did not disclose his collaboration with Methodius.

The most reasonable hypothesis is that Hadrian II had begun to evaluate the possibility of Roman intervention in the region of the mid-Danube, but had chosen to operate in a discreet manner: he used Methodius, the Byzantine missionary already known to both the local political leaders and the Carolingian authorities, without advertising that Methodius was now a Roman bishop and legate. Thanks to Methodius, Hadrian II was informed about the plurality of the new powers in the region. He began to treat secretly with Kocel, ruler of Lower Pannonia, and, above all, he was able to experience the violence of the Carolingian response to a Roman intervention in the Bavarian missionary territories, without compromising the Apostolic See’s authority.

Methodius was tried and condemned to imprisonment by the Bavarian bishops, with the approval of King Louis the German, when he had already been consecrated as bishop by Hadrian II. It is therefore doubtful whether this news was known in Bavaria. What is certain is that Hadrian II did not care for the fate of Methodius, displaying a total lack of involvement. In addition, the pope interrupted the initiative in the Danubian