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Catholic minority in modern Azerbaijan¹

The question of the Catholic Christianity in Azerbaijan recently has been deeply worked out, analyzed and discussed in numerous publications, both printed and digitally widespread in the Internet, in Azerbaijan and abroad. Among them there are books and papers prepared on the academic level as well as publicistic, informative and also sensational media texts. This focus on the mentioned topic could be caused by many factors, among them the most significant are: stable, constant and good cooperation between the Azerbaijani government or its specialised agendas and the Holy See, two visits of the pontiff, Bishop of Rome and the leader of Worldwide Catholic Church, John Paul II in 2002 and Francis in 2016, increasing number of parishioners of the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Baku, few years-perspective distance of the history of renewed Catholic community in Azerbaijan, the phenomenon of governmental support for non-Muslim religious communities in the traditionally Muslim country, legal guarantee of the freedom of religious beliefs etc.

Methodology, aim

The aim of this paper is to broaden some observations and add new ones concerning the subject of the Azerbaijani Catholics, the history of the community, experiences and reflexions of its members. Presented data was gathered and formulated during the fieldwork research undertaking in August 2017 by the paper's author.

The author analyzed several printed and online publications about the Azerbaijani Catholic minority before the conversations with Azerbaijani Catholics attending religious service kept at church and chapel in Baku. The research was also broadened by the few conversations with specialists in that subject. The history of Catholic community till its disappearing under Bolshevik regime in the 30s of 20th century is described in detail in

¹ The article was written during the scholarship of Visiting Research Fellowship Program of AIDA (Azerbaijan International Development Agency) in August 2017.

publication of Anar Elizade *Azərbaycanda Xristianlıq: keçmişdən bu günə from 2016 (Christianity in Azerbaijan: from past to present)*². The rich bibliography presented in the end of that book refers to numeral sources also treating, in detail or in general, the question of Azerbaijani Catholicism. The informations about material heritage of Catholic Church in Baku are widely described in several books written by a historian of art, Shamil Fethullayev³. The websites dedicated to Catholicism in Azerbaijan, presented in wide range from the publicistic, through informative till even sensational points of view, have a great representation, mainly in Azerbaijani, English, Russian languages. The futile analysis of all mentioned sources enabled to notice the permanent lack of informations providing the answer of question: How is, after all, to be a Catholic in modern Azerbaijan? Than, on the base of gathered knowledge and found postulates, the helpful questions directed to Azerbaijani Catholics were formulated. The list of questions, prepared by the author of this paper, were presented to the Catholics via emails (if they expressed the will), or in the conversations face to face. The questions were formulated in Azerbaijani and the answers received in the same language. Still, after analyzing various sources, there are same unresponded questions concerning the question of Azerbaijani Catholicism.

Christianity was probably the first Monotheistic religion which appeared on the territory of today's Azerbaijan, already at the first century of the new era. But it is still unknown the origin of so-called Mountain Jews living in he region of Dagestan and North-East Azerbaijan. The possible date of their appearance is still a matter of issue⁴. But their appearance on the Azerbaijani lands probably dates on 5th century AD, so about 4 centuries later after Christianity.

It is suspected that the Apostoles of Jesus Christ or their disciples arrived personally there and started to sermon and teach about the principles of new faith. According to legend, apostle Bartholomeo operated at this area as a wandering teacher and beared martyr death on the place

² A. Əlizadə, *Azərbaycanda Xristianlıq – keçmişdən bu günə*, Bakı 2016.

³ Check Bibliography for Fatullaev-Figarov, Fatullayev-Figarov, Fetullayev – Figarov, Figarov-Fatullaev.

⁴ S. Marcus, *Mountain Jews*, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/42649/mountain-jews> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

right next to the *Qız Qala*, Maiden Tower, in the center of Baku⁵. There are several assumptions about the apostle's death. Medieval authors wrote vaguely about Great Armenia, but the geographic scope of this concept remained vague and varied in different ages. If they noted about Great Armenia, it could mean also the territory of today Azerbaijan. It should be noted that many of the large urban centers in the first centuries of Christianity were in fact, and often legendary, linked to the place of teaching and death of the apostles of Christ. For example, Constantinople, later Istanbul, is the site of the activity of the apostle Saint Andrew⁶, Rome – with Saint Peter, Santiago de Compostela in Spain – with Saint James the Great. The Christian missionaries were sent to the Azerbaijani lands directly from the Jerusalem Patriarchate⁷.

In 313 the king of Caucassian Albania, known also as Kolchida, accepted Christianity as his own and his kingdom's religion⁸. In 8th troops of Arabs arrived and forced the local population to convert to Islam. But some of Albanian Christians' groups survived, hidden in high mountains during centuries. When Russian troops conquered and joined Caucasus into tsar's empire, finally at the beginning of 19th century, Albanian Church was subordinated into protection of Armenian Apostolic Church. Till nowadays the few examples of early Christian architecture have been preserved on the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Among them there are sanctuaries known in the academic discourse as Caucasian Albanian churches. Two of them, newly renovated, are now in religious use: in Kish (azer. *Kiş*) near Sheki (*Şəki*) and Nij (*Nic*) near Qabala (*Qəbələ*). There are many of them waiting for renovation, such as examples from Sheki, Qakh (*Qax*), Genceser (*Gəncəsər*). Even if now the Albanian-Udin Church is under control and protection of Russian Orthodox Church, its history comes back to the beginning of Christianity at all on this territory, making it one of the very first Christian community in the world, also the ancestor of today Catholic Church.

⁵ file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/atr_paytaxt.pdf, p. 10 [accessed: 15.08.2017].

⁶ http://www.catholicbridge.com/orthodox/did_the_apostle_andrew_establish_the_church_at%20_constantinople.php [accessed: 15.08.2017].

⁷ <http://www.catholic.az/en/church/church-azerbaijan> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

⁸ <https://stacja7.pl/papiez-franciszek/papiez-odwiedzi-muzulmanski-azerbejdzan/> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

Even if the formal division of the Church started in 4th century AC, the date of 1054 is considered as the official break-up of one Church into Orthodox and Catholic parts. In 13th century the powerful empire of Il-lhanate (House of Hulagu), heirs of Genghis Khan, covering vast areas of Central Asia and also Azerbaijan, established close political and economic relations with the republic of Venice and the Holy See, the highest power under worldwide Catholic Church. As early as 1289, messengers of Dominican and Franciscan orders appeared in Tebriz⁹, than under the Mongolian control. There was also the custody, the unit of the church administration, covering vast Asian territory. The lands of Azerbaijan were the place where missionaries operated and departed to the far East with the intention of teaching and promoting the Catholic faith. It is known that missionaries working in this area came mainly from Italy and France.

Since 14th century, precisely since 1320 the missions, operated by Franciscan congregation, were established on the territory of North and South Azerbaijan, having one of their own centres in Baku. Missionaries worked and thought mainly in the large cities. In that century only in Nakhchivan operated 12 missions led by Dominicans. It is known, the missionary effort in Nakhchivan resulted with conversion of 28 settlements into Catholicism. Finally the missionary work was destroyed and went to waste because of depopulation caused by epidemic of plague and invasion of Tamerlan's army.

The new beginning for Catholicism on the Azerbaijani territory dated to time of rule of Shah Abbas (1571–1629)¹⁰. Then the Holy See was rivalizing with Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean region and looking for allies in the East. Persian Empire, also competing with Ottomans, became the natural, although surprising ally. After a number of diplomatic talks and the course of time other congregations started their missions. Between them there were: Carmelitans, Capuchins, Augustians, Jesuits. The superior of Capuchins in Isfahan reported in 1660 the existence of their mission also in Baku and Shamakhi (*Şamaxı*). Twenty years later the Jesuits started to operate in Ganja (*Gəncə*). The missionaries arrived mainly from France, Germany and Poland. Persian diplomatic of Azerbai-

⁹ A. Əlizadə, op.cit., p. 127.

¹⁰ A. Əlizadə, op.cit., p. 130.

jani descent, known as Oruc bey Beyat, sent by shah to Spain with political mission, converted to Catholicism and never turned back to his homeland. He published a book under the title „Relations of Persian Don Juan”, reporting his experience and observations made during his travel through various Middle Eastern and European lands¹¹.

In Nakhchivan the Catholic groups existed, despite of difficulties and pressure from „rival” Armenian Apostolic Church, till the beginning of 19th century but the last information about bishoprics comes from 1746. The French-British traveler, Jean Chardin, described in his book „The journal of the travel of Cavalier Chardin” villages in Nakhchivan, totally converted to Catholicism by Dominicans and the intolerance and pressure from the Armenian Apostolic Church’s side made on Azerbaijani Catholics living there¹².

After several wars Russians finally managed to incorporate the North Azerbaijan into the tsarist empire at the beginning of 19th century and formally their full reign started after the Russian-Persian war of 1826–1828 ended in 1828 with the Treaty of Turkmenchay¹³. During their rule under Azerbaijani lands the Catholicism also existed there but mainly was represented by Polish political exiles. In the last quarter of 18th weakend Kingdom of Poland, after few rolling wars, was finally divided into Prussia, Austria and Russia and disappeared from the map of Europe. The first wave of exiled patriots from the part of previous Poland incorporated to Russia was sent to Caucasus at the beginning of 19th century. That region was the another destination of exile and prison after the Siberia¹⁴. After every Polish uprising in 19th century new groups of exiles and prisoners were sent, also on the Azerbaijani lands. In the course of time the troops formed by Polish officers and soldiers, were also sent to keep order in restless Caucasus. These Poles started to organize their religious life there. Two Catholic churches, in Zaqatala and Qusar, that means in the place of stationary location of troops formed by Poles, were built. Their buildings are preserved till nowadays but in changed forms, in advance losing their

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 132.

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Chardin> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

¹³ B. Baranowski, K. Baranowski, *Historia Azerbejdżanu*, Wrocław 1987, p. 130.

¹⁴ E. Siemienieć-Golaś, *Azerbaijan in the Eyes of Polish Travellers and Exiles to the Caucasus*, „Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences” 2011, vol. 14, no. 2, p. 71.

religious application¹⁵. One of them (in Zaqatala) is today in private hands and the second one is used as the city gallery of art (in Qusar). Also in Shamakhi, that means in the administrative center of the local gubernia till 1859, there was a group of about 200 Catholics. In the 60s of 19th century when Baku became the capital of gubernia after the huge scale damages of earthquake in Shamakhi, the Catholics also started to settle in Baku and even had a small place to practise their worship.

The general demographic situation of Baku changed very much after 1873, the beginning of the “boom” of oil. Year after year, there was a growing demand for engineering specialists, originally associated only with the oil industry, but gradually and rapidly also for architects, officials, postmen, doctors, railroaders etc. The city underwent rapid, accelerated urbanization, expansion of territory and modernization. There was also a huge crowd of Poles, in majority Catholics, graduates of Russian universities, arriving to Baku in search of job and place to live. Under the post-uprising repression (after the so-called January Uprising in 1863–1864), the activities of all higher education institutions in Poland were banned. Baku became a place of exile for political prisoners. The city, newly converted into the capital of gubernia, Eldorado-specific, where the place where the educated and non-educated man could count on gaining financial success and career. In this way, too, the Catholic community, traditionally created in Baku mostly by Poles, grew to such an extent that the community began to think of the construction of its own temple.

After several years of waiting and many applications for the construction of a larger temple finally the allocation of land at the intersection of streets, today called Azerbaijan Avenue and Reshid Bedbudov, was given by the municipality. Works started in 1909 and lasted several years. According to various sources ended in 1911, 1913 or 1915. One of the main founders of the temple was the family of Rylski, Baku magnates of Polish origin. The author of the project was an architect Józef Płoszko. The temple was built on the plan of 30x50m and gained the features of Polish neo-Gothic¹⁶. Baku Catholic Community also organized the Roman

¹⁵ <http://wap.today.az/84197/> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

¹⁶ R. Əbdülrəhimov, N. Abdullayeva, *Ərkən kapitalizm dövrünün məmarlığı (XIX–XX əsrin əvvəli) = Architecture in the early period of capitalism (the XIX–beginning of the XX c.c.)*, Bakı 2013, s. 257.

Catholic Charity Association and the “Open House – Catholic Association of Poles”. In 1916, the parish numbered 2,250, mostly Polish, but also included the French, Italians, Germans and others.

The end of the activities of the Catholic Church in Baku took place after April 28, 1920, when the Red Army entered Azerbaijan and incorporated its lands into the Soviet Union. In 1931 or 1934 the church building was demolished. At the same time, the Bolsheviks completely destroyed two other important Baku temples: the Russian Orthodox Church of Alexander Nevsky, known as the “Red Temple”, the largest temple building in the Caucasus and the Bibi Heybe mosque¹⁷. Removing from the city landscape three characteristic silhouettes of buildings: Catholic church, Orthodox church and mosque, was also the end of religious activity and the symbolic destruction of the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, religious and cultural mosaic of Baku. The parish priest Stefan Demurov was arrested and shot¹⁸. In the following years, some Poles were deported to Poland, some were subjected to persecutions. The activities of the Catholic Church in Baku ceased for several decades.

The emergence of an independent state of the Republic of Azerbaijan has created conditions for the rebirth of religious life. The 1992 law of “religious freedom” grants the right to every citizen to express his or her religious views and expressions¹⁹. Azerbaijan is a secular state, and the 1996 law guarantees freedom of conscience, limiting the restrictions on religious propaganda in the case of foreigners. However, the activities of the Catholic Church were regulated in further years by additional regulations.

In 1992 a small group of faithfuls from Azerbaijan sent a letter to the Apostolic See asking for sending a cleric who would serve religious ministry. This moment can be considered as the first step into the process of reviving Catholicism in Azerbaijan. In 1997, thanks to the efforts of local Catholics, the secretary of the Apostolic See of Tbilisi, Timon Titus Chmielecki visited Baku²⁰. According to initial plans it was considered to send the Jesuits to Baku, however, that project was not realized. In July

¹⁷ Ibidem, s. 258.

¹⁸ <http://www.polonia-azeri.org/catol.html> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

¹⁹ <http://scwra.gov.az/docs/169/?> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

²⁰ http://www.kaukaz.net/artykuly/gruzja_art1.html [accessed: 15.08.2017].

1997 a Salesian from Poland, Jerzy Piluś, from the Zamość-Lubaczów Diocese, arrived to Baku. He began to look for people who themselves or whose families were linked to the Catholic parish, liquidated almost 70 years ago by the Bolsheviks. Among them were those who waited several decades for various sacraments. The Salesian organized also a canteen for the poor and needy people.

The next step was the efforts leading to official recognition the existence of the Catholic community. At first the bureaucratic procedures were prolonged so finally April 2, 1999, the existence of a Catholic community was recorded in the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the same year, the first catechumens, people preparing for sacrament of baptism, appeared in the Catholic community. When the Pope John Paul II arrived to Tbilisi in November 1999 a group of Catholics from Baku attended the pilgrimage to that city.

In 2000 the Catholic community, which had been established for several years now, reached 47 people, including foreigners. Another Salesian, Friar Daniel Pravda, arrived from Siberia, where he had experience in missionary work. Friar Pravda found that Baku church was not structured and the issue of visas for missionaries was not regulated. The visa situation changed later, only when the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations was formed in 2001.

Earlier, in 2000, a plot of land was purchased aside Memmed Araz avenue for the purpose of the erection of priests' house and a small chapel²¹. Officially, since 11 October 2000, the Salesians took over the leadership of the Catholic mission in Azerbaijan. Friar Pravda was the superintendent of Mission *sui Iuris*. This is a special type of Roman-Catholic jurisdiction, created on the area with the very few members of community. Another Slovak Salesian friar arrived. The mission purchased a house in Dubendi for the purpose of organizing camps for children and youth. On January 31, 2002, the Catholic community was registered by the State Committee on Religious Organizations. In the same year the number of members in the Catholic community reached 120 persons. Preparations for the papal visit began.

President Heydar Aliyev issued an invitation to the Pope John Paul II who, despite poor health, accepted it and arrived to Baku. The pilgrimage

²¹ <http://www.catholic.az/en/church/church-azerbaijan> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

took place on May 22, 2002. The head of the Catholic Church was greeted with the highest honor. The Pope celebrated Holy Mass attended also by representatives of non-Catholics²².

After the pilgrimage of the Pope Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev donated the parcel of land in the district of Black City (*Qara Şəhər*) in Baku for the Catholic community to build a new temple. It was impossible to rebuild the church on the parcel where the first Catholic temple in Baku was erected about 90 years ago. During the Soviet era the seat of Dzierjinski Club was erected (today there the Sehriyar Club is located). The Socrealist, imponent building still stands today at the crossroads of Azerbaijan and Reshid Bedbudov Avenues. Funds for the construction of the church were donated by the Pope, various Christian organizations, as well as other religious organizations from Azerbaijan itself, including Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The church was completed in the spring of 2007 and was given the same call that the previous temple was carrying: the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The building was designed by the Italian architect Paolo Ruceiro and the chief architect of Baku Akif Abdullayev²³. The consecration of the church was given in April 2007 by the Apostolic Nuncio to the Southern Caucasus Archbishop Claudio Guderotti. On the other hand, the formal official opening of the church took place in March 2008, lead by the Vatican Secretary Cardinal Tarcizio Bertoni. The ceremony was attended by representatives of Azerbaijani authorities, various religious groups including Orthodox Christians and Muslims and the diplomatic corps.

Priest Jan Czapla was designed to be the head of the mission in 2003. The most important accomplishment for his community was the opening of the Mother Teresa of Calcutta Maternity Care House, run by the nuns, in the suburban Zyk (Zığ) in 2006. On 26 September 2008 a Memorandum of Friendship was signed between the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and the Azerbaijani Catholic Church. The foundation funded stained glass and ceramic panels in the parish church²⁴.

²² <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2002-05-23-14-pope-67426647/277959.html> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

²³ R. Efendizadeh, *Azerbaijan's architecture of late 19th–early 21st century*, Baku 2012, p. 357.

²⁴ A. Əlizade, *op.cit.*, s. 147.

In 2009 Vladimir Fekete was designed to be the head of the mission. Two years later, in 2011, a Mutual Agreement between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Holy See was signed with respect to the legal status of the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan. Thanks to the Pope Benedict XVI's decision of 7 July 2011 the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan gained a form of the Apostolic Prefect, directly subject to the Vatican, precisely to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The head of the Prefecture is called the Ordinary, who is precisely from 2011 till today (2017) father Vladimir Fekete. The Apostolic Prefecture is a unit of church administration in areas where there are no dioceses. The apostolic nuncio is the representative of the Apostolic See. That function was held by Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti between 2001 and 2011 and in 2012 Archbishop Marek Solczyński replaced him, working on that place till 2017²⁵.

At present the main building of the Catholic community is the Church of Immaculate Conception, located in the Black City (*Qara Şəhər*) district. In the Genclik (*Gənclik*) district there is still the Salesian house and the small chapel dedicated to Christ the Healer. Both at the church and the chapel the liturgy and religious service are held in Russian and English. Also a small chapel is located in the Care Home in Baku's suburban village Zyk²⁶.

There are also several charitable institutions in the parish in Baku. The Salesians lead Caritas, which provides free legal advice, meetings, talks, and summer camps for children and youth. There is also the Charity Educational Center Holy Mary providing education to children from poorer families. Since May 2006 there is also the previously mentioned Mother Teresa of Calcutta Maternity Care House in Zyk, run by the Daughters of Charity. The House provides a care for about 40 persons in difficult living conditions during maximally 3 months. Residents of the House are provided with a daily meal 3 times per day, medical assistance and help with finding a job and regulation the house situation. Sisters also give help to the elderly, left and unattended people. The House provides separate rooms for men and women. According to data from 2016, 5 Sisters worked in the House. Help

²⁵ http://pl.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/04/25/abp_solczy%C5%84ski_nuncjuszem_apostolskim_w_tanzanii_/1308016 [accessed: 15.08.2017].

²⁶ <http://www.catholic.az/en/parish/temlechapels> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

for the needy is provided regardless of their confession and there is no obligation to change religious beliefs. In turn, the Family Social Support works to provide temporary maternity aid to single mothers.

In 2016 10 Salesians worked in the parish of Baku. Since 2015, 2 Sisters from the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco are working in Baku. They are responsible for conducting Family Social Support and Sunday School. In Baku there are also Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul who lead the previously mentioned House.

At present the Catholic parish in Baku has about 300 Azerbaijani citizens. Most of them are mixed-race people whose ancestors came from Poland, Ukraine, Belarus or Germany. Also foreign Catholics live in Baku. On average every year there are about 10 ceremonies of the baptism's sacrament. Adults, deciding to receive baptism, pass even a several-year catechumenal period – preparatory.

The regenerated Catholic community in Baku could boast the first vocation of priest. Behbud Mustafayev, Azerbaijani born in Baku, was ordained a deacon on May 29, 2017 and later a priest on 7 May 2017 by Pope Francis in Rome. The young priest remained in the Vatican²⁷.

The Catholic community in Baku was once again visited by the head of the Church, Pope Francis, on October 2, 2016²⁸. In 20 years of revival of the community, it was the second visit of the supreme head of the Catholic Church in this country.

Financing of the activities of the Apostolic Precinct in Azerbaijan has two main sources. One of them is a donation from various church organizations and institutions from all over the world. The second source are funds from the government of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Since 2011 all religious communities are financed by the state.

The Prefecture issues a weekly Russian-language newsletter titled “Voskresnoye slovo”. The bulletin consists of 4 pages and includes Sunday Mass readings, the most important news from the Vatican Radio, parish announcements and a schedule of church services and celebrations for the coming week.

²⁷ <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Pope-tells-ten-new-priests-that-they-were-elected-by-the-Lord,-not-for-a-career,-but-for-service-40669.html> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

²⁸ <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/09/30/pope-francis-sets-off-on-three-day-visit-to-georgia-and-azerbaijan/> [accessed: 15.08.2017].

The State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations has the task of supervision and regulation of activities taken by these organizations, ensuring the freedom of religious beliefs for every citizen. In Azerbaijan there are 425 registered religious organizations, 408 of them are Muslim (96%). There are also 9 Christian organizations, between them one Roman Catholic. At the office one person directly cooperates with all non-Muslim organizations²⁹. This person's task is to respond to the current needs of these communities, seek the solutions to legal issues, etc. Religious organizations receive state funds at a certain amount. The Committee also does not expect detailed reports on the organization's activities. They have a guaranteed freedom of action, of course with regard to the law of the Republic of Azerbaijan. As the law stipulates that religious propaganda can not be practiced by a non-citizen of the Republic, Catholic missionaries – foreigners – would have a difficult task in order to perform religious ministry. However, the situation of the Catholic Church is regulated by additional agreements, guaranteeing for Catholicism in Azerbaijan a special privileged position. In general, the Azerbaijani law of religious freedom does not apply because the situation is governed by special agreements between the Government of the Republic and the Vatican.

The Catholic Church in Azerbaijan does not need to submit a detailed report about the administration of received amounts. In turn social projects, including exhibitions, conferences, meetings – should be reported.

The definition of religious propaganda in Azerbaijan should be explained. Any religious ceremony, worship, preaching, teaching in public places are considered propaganda. The usage of religious elements in the outfit – for example, religious symbols hung around the neck, clothes of religious orders, etc. is not considered as the religious propaganda. The religious activity can not be carried out outside the place of registration. Therefore, community services can be conducted only at the address where their activity was reported to the office and registered. Currently the visa situation of priests – foreigners – has been regulated so that they stay in Azerbaijan receiving a diplomatic visa.

²⁹ Based on the informations gathered during the interview with representant of State Committee in August, 2017.

Holidays in the Republic of Azerbaijan are state and religious. The amount of days of public holidays is permanent, it contains 14 days (including the holiday of Nowruz, which has a fixed date), Ramadan and the Feast of the Sacrifice (different dates each year). Thus, the official calendar of the country provides holidays, in addition to the state ones, include Muslim holidays. It is a result results of the fact that the majority of citizens has a traditional background based on the Islam. However, there is the 5-day working week from Friday to Friday with free weekend (Saturday and Sunday) for public institutions. So when the Christian would like to participate in religious ceremonies on Sunday, there are no formal obstacles.

The Parish Catholic Church is also visited by non-Catholics and non-Christians and is treated as a place of pilgrimage, worship and prayer. The figure of the Virgin, placed at the entrance of the church, acts as a so-called *pir*³⁰. In Azerbaijan the sacred places, especially tombs of someones who died in opinion of sanctity, places of worship and miracles are called *pir*. Sometimes women having difficulty in getting pregnant visit the yard in front of the church and pray in front of the statue of Virgin. Thus, the place became the similar *pir* like a tomb in Suvelan (Süvəlan) and Bibi Heybet Mosque. This statue refers in its form and location to a similar figure of the Virgin Mary which was placed high above the main entrance to the former church, destroyed by the Bolsheviks³¹.

As mentioned above, a great number of worshipers are foreigners permanently or temporarily residing in Baku. Another part of the Catholic community consists of the people of mixed origin whose ancestors professed Catholicism. A small group of Catholics are of pure Azerbaijani origin. They are converts who as adults decided to choose Catholicism as their religion.

It may be interesting to know what influenced on their decision to join the Catholic community. Catholicism was present almost from the beginning of its existence on the territory of today Azerbaijan, and never gained a dominant position. Interruption in the existence and development of

³⁰ *Azərbaycan dilinin izahlı lüğəti, dörd cildə*, QLMNOÖPR, ed. Azərbaycan Milli Elmlər Akademiyası, Bakı 2006, p. 604.

³¹ Ş. Fetullayev – Figarov, *Məmar İ.K. Ploşko – „İsmailiyyə”nin Müəllifi = Architect I.K. Ploshko – Author of „İsmailiyyə”*, Bakı 2013, p. 35.

Catholicism in Azerbaijan were the years of the country's membership in the Soviet Union. In the independent Republic the Catholic Church, thanks to the many efforts, was regenerated, and the signed agreements at the highest level assured him not only the equal status to other religious groups but even privileged one. The author of the paper led discussions with Azerbaijani Catholics, with an intention to gather information about their motivation to become a Catholic and to check how the religious freedom is practically guaranteed. It should be noted that the interviewed persons preferred to stay anonymous. They also asked not to be quoted in the form of translated quotations, but in the form of dependent speech. The Azerbaijani Catholics group is relatively small and its members could be possibly recognized.

All interviewed people were adults when decided to convert to Catholicism. The questions were: is Catholicism an ancestor religion or a conscious choice for an adult? If so, what motivated? In the case of people of pure Azerbaijan origin, this was a deliberate choice preceded by several years of consideration. One of them, young woman, knew the Christianity as a child thanks to Bible (printed in Russian) found in the house of aunt. The text impressed the 9-year-old. In addition, in her childhood she had the opportunity to listen to Christian religious cassettes for children (also in Russian). Also these records influenced her imagination and left in the memory. As an adult, she decided to get closer to the Church. That decision resulted in family dissatisfaction, misunderstanding and in the case of further relatives even retreat. In her opinion the Catholic religion expresses above all the idea of love, gentleness, understanding of intercourse with other people, the right for committing error and forgiveness. As the speaker insisted, Islam did not teach her but rather emphasized values such as tradition, invariability, domination. Another person answered that question in a similar way. The knowledge of Catholicism also appeared in the childhood and came from mother's story. The content of childhood conversations lasted for years in the memory and occasionally forced to seek further knowledge, mainly on the Internet. After 20 years he felt deep intention of conversion and after a year of intensive meditations decided to step forward. Another Catholic said about "sudden illumination" and the understanding that this confession expresses real spiritual needs.

Asked about sources of knowledge about Catholicism, the Azerbaijani Catholics pointed out above all the Internet where they could find answers to every question and doubt, without risking anyone's comments or criticism. On the other hand, the sources of the first knowledge about Catholicism are accidental readings from the Bible, references gathered from family members, the cassettes with religious recordings for children. Some people emphasized that since childhood they knew the Orthodox Church, had icons at home, etc. Thus, Christianity as such was not completely foreign for them but only further personal search directed them towards Catholicism.

It is an important question about the reaction of family and friends after decision to become a Catholic. Some people do not admit even to their closest family about being a Catholic. There were situations of family retirement, cessation of contacts and conversations, banning of playing with neighbours' children. The rebuilding of contacts in some cases occurred after a long time. Sometimes Azerbaijani Catholics feel accused of becoming "like the Russians" or "like Armenians". The lack of general knowledge of Azerbaijanis about Christianity and its differentiation led to the stereotypic identification of Catholics with other Christian groups, more well known and settled in the general awareness of the Azerbaijani population: Orthodox Russians and Armenian rites. The Azerbaijani Catholics also experienced complete acceptance from their loved ones, as well as indifference and lack of interest in their decision to convert. The respondents acknowledged the importance of recognizing the Catholic community at the state and government level, as well as a number of documents and agreements that ensured continuity and activity of Catholic community.

Asked about the impact of other Catholic countries on the shape of Catholicism in Azerbaijan the questioners could not give a clear answer. According to them, the influence on the form of Azerbaijani Catholicism has local Orthodox Church. The influence manifests itself in the type of songs sung during the choir formation.

The regenerated Catholic Church in independent Azerbaijan today has more than 25 years of new history. Over the course of the last century, a great effort was made to create a well-functioning unit within the Catholic Church. There was no orderly structure of the emerging community,

the form of *Sui Iuris* Mission was given in 2000 and in 2011 it changed into a higher form, Apostolic Prefecture. The Prefecture exists in areas where it is impossible for various reasons to create a diocese. Thus, the Church in Azerbaijan systematically transforms itself into ever more complex and advanced administrative and organizational structures.

The Catholic Church in Azerbaijan is subject to the Apostolic Nuncio residing in Tbilisi in Georgia. In recent times on average every five years the Pope goes to the Caucasus with an apostolic visit. The Pope visited Baku twice: in 2002 John Paul II arrived, and in 2016 Francis. Two papal visits in a constitutionally secular but traditionally Muslim country where there is only one but rapidly developing parish mean the success of the local Church.

The Catholic community consists also of foreigners living and working in Baku. However there is a group of Catholics of Azerbaijan origin who have decided to convert. It is difficult to say whether their number will increase significantly in the years to come. From the parish of Baku there was also the first appointment to the priesthood. The priest of Azerbaijani origin ordained in May 2017, although in his interviews expressed his desire to return to his family and pastoral work, was sent to work in Italy.

The Catholic Church's activity in the Republic of Azerbaijan defines number of agreements signed between the country's authorities and the Vatican, as well as the republic's laws. These frames guarantee the existence and development of the Catholic community. Material support is also important: in the form of land allocated for church construction or the annual funding provided by the government through the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations.

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Catholic minority in modern Azerbaijan

Abstract

This article outlines the history of Catholicism in present-day Azerbaijan and discusses the contemporary legal, statistical and social situation of this religion in mentioned country. In addition to the informations collected from printed and virtual sources, the data gathered during the interviews with representatives of state institutions as well as native Catholics living in Baku was also used.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Catholicism, Azerbaijan, Baku, religious minority

Католическое меньшинство в современном Азербайджане

Абстракт

Статья представляет историю католицизма на территории современной Азербайджанской Республики, с особым учетом города Баку, и обсуждает современную правовую и социальную ситуацию этого религиозного меньшинства. Текст был создан, главным образом, на основании печатных источников и Интернет-ресурсов. Важные сведения были получены также в ходе бесед автора текста, проведенных в Баку в августе 2017 года, как с представителями государственных учреждений, ответственных за сотрудничество государства с религиозными организациями, так и с предста-

вителями научного сообщества, а также с азербайджанскими католиками, священниками и светскими.

Ключевые слова: католицизм, Католическая Церковь, Азербайджан, Баку, религиозное меньшинство

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