

CHURCH IN CROATIA

Historical overview

A short historical overview will help us understand better the condition of the Church in Croatia.

The region of today's Croatia was the home to a lot of hermits in as early as the first centuries after Christ, especially across the Adriatic islands, and it became the home of a community of cenobitic monks (cenobites) from the 4th century. The best-known monk from these regions must be St. Jerome. He was born in Dalmatia, in the town of Stridon, although it remains unclear where precisely Stridon was located.

Croats were the first among the Slavic peoples to accept Christianity. They had their first contact with the Holy See in as early as 641, when they received the papal envoy Abbot Martin, who came to buy off from them the Christian slaves and the bones of martyrs. The information on the christening of Croats is rather scarce but it is known that it was going on peacefully and freely between the 8th and the early 9th century. Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenet testifies that his predecessor on the Byzantine throne, emperor Heraclius (610-641), during whose reign the Croats had already reached the Adriatic Sea, „sent and brought from Rome the priests, whom he made into the archbishop, bishop, priests and deacons, and christened the Croats“.

In the 9th century the Croats were already part of the large community of Christian nations. The fact that Christianity was already deeply rooted in the people could be seen by churches and monasteries built in the 9th century by the Croatian rulers Mislav and Trpimir. In the year 879, the Croatian ruler Branimir writes to Pope John VIII, pledging fidelity and obedience and the Pope replies that he celebrated a Mass on St. Peter's tomb and invoked God's blessing onto Branimir's land and his people.

The precious correspondence between Pope John X (914-928) and Croatian king Tomislav on the occasion of the first Synod in Split (925) has also been preserved. Croatian king Zvonimir was crowned by Abbot Gebizon, the legate of pope Gregory VII, in the year 1075. At this time of the schism between the East Church and West Church, Zvonimir also pledges fidelity to the Pope and undertakes to have a church reform implemented in his kingdom, protect widows and take care of justice „so that the strong would not oppress the weak“.

Among the first missionaries active in Croatia there were monks from Aquileia. By the Frankish saints whose worship they spread and the German names they had, we can conclude these were Frankish monks.

At the time of the Croatian kingdom led by national sovereigns, the Benedictines were particularly active, leaving an indelible imprint in the field of ecclesial and cultural life of the time. In the Croatia of the 11th century there were about 50 Benedictine monasteries. All events of some significance in the Croatian state up to the 12th century were, one way or the other, related to the Benedictine monks.

From the 13th century a special imprint on the religious life of the Croats was left by the mendicant orders, primarily Franciscans, but also Dominicans. After that, the religious and cultural formation of the Croats was strongly influenced by Jesuits. The church writers from northern Croatia and Dubrovnik in particular, which was a free centre of Croatian culture, contributed a lot to the standardization and expansion of the Croatian standard language.

From the 12th century, the Croats lived in various states with other nations: with the Hungarians from the 12th century, southern Croatia with Venice from the 14th century, and the Catholics in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the Turkish rule. France ruled over a shorter period of time, and Austria over a longer one.

After the World War I the first state of Yugoslavia was established, in which the Croatian people and the Catholic Church were discriminated. This led to a lot of innocent victims during the World War II. The post-war Yugoslav communist regime came down particularly on the Catholic Church, which was through nationalization deprived of the material base for its activity, and the members of the church hierarchy, led by the Zagreb archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, were exposed to overt persecution. Bishops, priests and believers experienced different trouble, difficulties and pressures, catechesis was thrown out of school, lay organizations had to be dissolved, faith was proclaimed to be a personal matter of each person and the society was exposed to systematic atheisation.

In the Greater-Serbian aggression onto Croatia (1991-1995), the Catholic Church suffered harsh persecutions. Some priests and monks were killed, a lot of them were captured. At the beginning of 1992, among 324,284 displaced persons there were also 226 priests and monks in exile. In last war the number of the church buildings that were either destroyed or damaged amounted to 1426.

In the Republic of Croatia the Catholic Church has lived to have freedom, a defined legal position as autonomous in its area and it has been allowed to have catechesis at state elementary and secondary schools for those pupils having chosen it, it may itself establish Catholic schools, and it has also been allowed to provide pastoral care to the Catholics in the military and police forces.

According to the 2001 census, the Republic of Croatia had a population of 4,437,460, out of whom 88% were declared as Catholics, 4.42% as Orthodox, 1.28% as Muslims, the number of the members of other religious communities respectively not exceeding 1%, while 5.21% were declared as not belonging to a religious community.

In as early as the 9th century Croatia saw a unique phenomenon in all of the Roman Catholic world, the Roman Catholic liturgy in the national language with a special glagolitic script. In spite of various differences of opinion and protests, Pope Innocent IV allowed to the bishop of Senj, Filip the use of the Slavic language and glagolitic script in church and the Croats thus remained until the II Vatican Council the only people that did not have to use exclusively Latin as the language of the liturgy.

Church in Croatia today

Today, the Catholic Church in the area of the Republic of Croatia is territorially divided into 15 (arch)dioceses which in turn form four metropolitans: the **Zagreb, Split and Makarska, Đakovo and Osijek** and **Rijeka** metropolitans, one independent archdiocese - of **Zadar**, and the **Military Ordinariate**.

Monks. Monastic life in Croatia appeared along with the arrival of Christianity among the Croats. The Benedictines were the first to arrive and were active along the Croatian coast and on the islands during the reign of the Croatian national princes and kings. Much credit for the improvement of spiritual and cultural life in Croatia goes to them.

The most numerous monks in Croatia are Franciscans, followed in number by Jesuits, Dominicans and Carmelites, and among the so-called „new institutes“ Salesians.

Franciscans formed their monasteries across Croatia as far back as during the lifetime of St. Francis himself (the early 13th century). The Franciscan family in Croatia acts in four branches: Friars Minor (OFM), Conventuals, Capuchins and the Third Order Regular (or the Franciscan Friars). The Friars Minor in Croatia have three provinces with their central houses in Zagreb (15 monasteries), Split (13 monasteries) and Zadar (5 monasteries).

The Franciscan Conventuals in Croatia only have one province with the seat in Zagreb and 12 monasteries across Croatia, the Franciscan Capuchins one province with 10 monasteries, the Third Order Regular also one with the seat in Zagreb and 14 monasteries.

Jesuits also reached Croatia as far back as during the lifetime of St. Ignatius. In 1552 Dubrovnik tried to bring them and succeeded in doing so as soon as in 1559, when they also came to Zadar. A lot of credit for opening schools and publishing activity goes to them, as well as for establishing popular congregations and fraternities in Croatia. A separate Croatian Mission of the Society of Jesus has existed since 1909, an independent province since 1963. Jesuits live in twelve houses in Croatia.

The Carmelite province was formed in Croatia in 1969. They have several monasteries.

Salesians came to Croatia in 1922. In the year 1972 they formed the independent Province of Don Bosco with their seat in Zagreb. They deal with pastoral activities and are very active in working with the youth.

Nuns. In the region of Croatia four orders of cloistered nuns are active: Benedictines (the first nuns on the Croatian territory, now living in eight monasteries), Carmelites (three monasteries), the Poor Clares (in 3 monasteries) and one monastery of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary.

Croatia also has 23 female religious communities, or congregations, that live and do pastoral work here. The most numerous among them are the Sisters of Charity with three provinces. Following them in number are the School Sisters of St. Francis, the Sisters of the Holy Cross, , the Servants of the Holy Child Jesus, etc.

A Look Into the Future

The fall of totalitarian regimes about 20 years ago brought certain freedom of public activity to a lot of countries of eastern and south-eastern Europe. The result of it was return to the Church, even by some of those who had persecuted it by then. The times came when one did not suffer for their belonging to the Church any more, but – quite contrary – profited from it. Croatia saw a change, similar to the one taking place in the 4th century, following the Edict of Milan: the number of church attendants went up dramatically, but not quite of those living by the Gospel. In the past two decades the Church in Croatia has lived to see the freedom of its pastoral activity in different areas – education, economy, army and police – but the expected growth in more consistent Christian living has failed to accompany it.

In some areas, it has been noticed that also certain church institutions and religious communities manifest confusion or a failure to adapt. For example, larger and larger monastery facilities are being

built but with no clear vision as to what purpose they will serve; whole new monasteries are being built, although the monastic communities are getting older and scarcer.

We know how the monks in the 4th century responded to an inconsistent life of many Christians: they tried by their own more consistent life, in harmony with the Gospel, to be a sign, as clear as possible, showing that God has to be in the centre of our life. In Croatia too, this should be the task or mission of the monastic and other religious communities, but also of the Church as a whole. The greater freedom the Church obtained requires also a greater maturity of Christians, that is – a greater responsibility before God and people. The Benedictine communities should be clearer in demonstrating that they are really searching for God, that they really wish to put God in the centre and glorify Him in all things.

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