

CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Over its entire history, Belarus has been at the junction where two worlds, two cultures and ideologies met. This has defined its unique cultural and historical position in Europe. The Belarusian nation's culture has been enriched with achievements of other cultures absorbing primarily the values that could be adapted to the local environment. Traditional religions played an important role in developing general culture of the Belarusian nation. Interrelations between two major religions in Belarus — Orthodoxy and Catholicism — as a rule, was characterized by tolerance.

ORTHODOX CHURCH

The indigenous population — Belarusians — obviously prevails among the Orthodox believers. The process of the Orthodox Church revival began since the late 1990s. In 1989, Polotsk, Mogilev and Pinsk Eparchies were revived, in 1990, Gomel Eparchial Cathedra was restored and Brest Eparchial Cathedra was founded, Novogrudok and Grodno and Turov and Vitebsk Cathedras were founded in 1991 and 1992, respectively. Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church founded in 1990 comprises Minsk Eparchy and all 10 Eparchies. It is administered by the Synod headed by Minsk and Slutsk Metropolitan Filaret — Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus. Bobruisk Eparchy was founded in 2004.

1,349 religious communities, 1,159 Orthodox churches were available in Belarus and 188 were under construction as of 1.1.2006. In 1990s, the monasteries began to revive and their number increased to 26 by the beginning of 2006. By this time, organizations of the Belarusian Orthodox Church numbered 1,289 clergymen (399 in 1988). Since 1989, the Minsk Theological Orthodox Seminary at the Zhirovichy Holy Assumption Monastery has been educating clergymen. Since 1995, the Minsk Theological Academy began its activity. Minsk, Vitebsk and Slonem Theological Colleges also function in the Eparchies. Minsk, Gomel, Grodno and Mogilev Eparchies established catechist courses. A bell-ringers school and icon-painting school are available in Minsk. The churches of the Belarusian Orthodox Church managed 400 Sunday schools.

One of the most significant events in the activity of the Belarusian Orthodox Church in the last years was the recreation of the Cross of St. Efrasinnia of Polacak (a precise replica of the famous Cross made by the master Lazar Bogsha in the 12th century). This Cross was consecrated with great honors on September 27th 1997 and delivered to the Holy-Cross Day Cathedral of the Polacak Saviour-Efrasinnia Nunnery. The recreation of the Belarusian nation's object of worship has become the symbol of spirituality of the Belarusian land and revival and prosperity of Belarus.

22 communities of Russian Old Believers were registered in Belarus in 1988, 33 as of 1.1. 2006, 18 of them are located in Vitebsk Region.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH is among traditional religions in Belarus. Catholicism began to actively disseminate in Belarus since the late 14th century. 438 parafiyas (communities) were registered, 427 Roman Catholic Churches were available for believers and 45 were under construction as of 1.1.2006. Reorganization of the administrative structure of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus has contributed to the increase in the number of Catholic communities. 3 Eparchies — Grodno, Pinsk and Minsk, Mogilev — were founded in 1991 and Vitebsk Eparchy — in 1999 in Belarus with blessing of the Pope. Cardinal K. Svyontek was appointed by Vatican to be the Roman Catholic Church leader in Belarus. To train its own clergymen, the Higher Theological Catholic Seminary with 6-year education term opened in Grodno in 1990. St. Thomas Aquinas Inter-diocesan Theological Seminary was opened in Pinsk in September 2001. Since the number of priests is far from being enough, 198 clergymen from Poland, Lithuania, Germany and other countries were granted the right to exercise rites in Belarus in 2006.

Many Roman Catholic Churches have restored their former reputation of religious centers and pilgrimage in Belarus. This includes the 16th century Bernardine Monk Roman Catholic

Church in Budslav, Myadel Di-strict, Minsk Region, where the miracle-working Icon of Our Lady is kept. The Pope John Paul II issued the Decree on Coronation of the Budslav and also Brest and Logishin Icons of Our Lady in 1995.

Many Roman Catholic Churches in Belarus are the centers of not only religious, but also cultural and educational life. The Church of Saint Simon and Helena in Minsk became one of such centers. The historical library named after A. Mitskevich, Sunday school for children and adults, youth society Light of Life and children choir Voice of Soul and solo performance Znich and Angel and student youth theatre were set up in the temple. The Roman Catholic Church began to issue the Catholic journal Faith and Life. The publishing center issues the Christian literature in the Belarusian and Polish languages. The Catholic Christian Society of Charity was organized in 1995.

Since 1993, the International Festival of Church (Christian) Music Almighty God is held in Mogilev by the initiative of its Roman Catholic community. The Uniate is also associated with Christian confessional trends in Belarus. 13 Uniate communities are available as of 1.1.2006.

OTHER RELIGIONS

The specific feature of the modern confessional development is a high rate of emergence of Protestant Churches. 25 Lutheran, 488 Evangelistic Christians (EC) communities, 265 Evangelistic Baptist Christians (EBC) communities, 9 communities of Apostolic Christians were registered as of 1.1.2006 in Belarus. 72 communities of the Seventh-Day Adventists and 54 Christians of Full Gospel are also registered. The remaining Protestant confessions available currently in Belarus are comparatively small. They include a religious association of the New Apostolic Church, communities of the Christ's Church, Messianic Service, the Church of Jesus Christ, and Holy Last Days (Mormons).

The clergymen for Protestant communities are trained in two EC institutions of education, while EBC, Christians of Full Gospel and Seventh-Day Adventists have one institution of education each. EC had 183 churches, and 25 under construction, EBC — 139 and 12, Seventh-Day Adventists — 32 and 1 and Christians of Full Gospel – 6 and 1, respectively as of 1.1.2006.

28 communities of Orthodox and 17 communities of Progressive Judaism were available in Belarus as of 1.1.2006. 8 sinagogues are available in which 27 clergymen offer services for believers, among them, 7 foreign clergymen.

The wave of religious revival in Belarus brought to life new confessional trends. 5 Krishnaites communities and 5 Bahai communities were registered.

Last years are characterized by the increased attention of the society to Islam that is conditioned by both escalation of the Middle-East conflict and terrorist attack on the USA on September 11th 2001. The Tatars who moved to Belarus in the XIV century form the ethnic foundation of Islam. The 600th anniversary of this event was celebrated in Belarus in 1997. While 1 Muslim community functioned in Belarus in 1989, 24 communities and 6 Mosques were available as of 1.1.2006. In addition to Tatars, this religion is practiced by Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Tajiks, Afghans and other nationalities residing in Belarus. Representatives of these ethnic communities protested against caricature of Islam that appeared in the western press and reprinted by the Belarusian newspaper Zgoda, and supported the decision to close this newspaper.

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Additional information:

- Roman Catholic Church in Belarus
<http://www.catholic.by>
- Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church
<http://www.pravoslavie.by>