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THE CLERICAL AND CHURCH ISSUES OF THE ARMENIAN CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN RUSSIA

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One of the confessional communities retrieved in the Diaspora over the recent century is the Armenian Catholic community in Russia. Its organizations take special place in Russia and it is an integral part of the Armenianness of Russia. The history of the Armenian Catholic Community in Russia is rich in tragic pages in history. Over different periods they were compelled to adapt and struggle for survival first in the Russian Empire, then in the USSR and finally in the Russian Federation. All those three historical periods were special for the Catholic Armenians – the communities has constantly been reviving and decaying in consequence of different political developments.

The Catholic Armenian communities in Russia today face problems connected with both the scarcity of the clergy and state registration of the church. In two recent years Armenian Catholic St. Grigor the Illuminator church in Moscow has been at a serious suit. It brought a suit against the municipality of Moscow in 2009 following its wish to be registered as a religious community. But they were rejected without review [1]. This is however, the most serious problem, which drew a wide response among the organizations dealing with the religious and legal issues in the Russian Federation and which was the least covered by the Armenian mass media.

Firstly, different criteria are set in different countries for receiving special status: prevalence over the country, reputation among the population for their good deeds, not hiding their activity and teaching from the state, deep roots in the country, non-contradiction of the religious practice to the social policy of the state and etc [2]. And in the Russian Federation only Russian Orthodox Church may have special status; other churches can have other statuses.

Does the Armenian Catholic Church have a chance to be registered? To answer this question it is firstly necessary to consider the confessional picture in the RF and the legal side of the religious sphere. On the situation of January 1, 2009 the traditional Christian churches, as well as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are registered in the Russian Federation as confessional units. Sectarian organizations and the adherents of shamanism, which also have state registration, can

also be reckoned among them. Among the Catholic confessional groups only Roman and Greek Catholic Churches are registered [3]. And in 2004 in Russia Roman Catholic Church has 235 parishes while the Greek Catholic Church has only 5 [4].

One may think that the institutions dealing with the legal issues in the RF consider the ACC as a constituent part of the Roman Catholic Church. But in this case question arises why the Greek Catholic Church is registered as a separate church union. Any religious union or confessional group can be registered by the state or receive any status according to the federal law “On Freedom of Conscience and Concerning Religious Associations”. According to the paragraph 5 of article 11 of the law to receive state registration the founders of the religious organizations should submit the following documents to the appropriate local authority:

- Registration application,
- the list of the founders of the religious organization, in accordance with their citizenship, place of residence and date of birth,
- the Charter of the religious organization
- document provided by the local authority, which proves that the given religious group has been present at the aforementioned territory for at least fifteen years or the document provided by the guidance center, which approves that the given religious group is a part of a centered religious organization.
- Document showing the place (legal address) where the religious organization being formed exists [5].

All those terms were observed but the appropriate bodies of the Ministry of Justice of Russia were partial, saying that the church did not submit the document proving that the Armenian Catholics had lived in the region (Moscow) for 15 years. Thus the issue has not been resolved yet, and its resolution by the court was postponed to March of this year. However the appropriate bodies did not come to the process and the case was delayed. According to the lawyer of the Armenian Catholics Vladimir Ryakhovski if the issue of the registration is rejected once more this will provide an opportunity to turn to the Constitutional Court of the RF, in order to litigate law on religion. In the opinion of Inna Zagrebina such a restriction of the rights once more come to prove that the illegal meddling of authorities into the internal affairs of the community is an inseparable part of the life of the religious organizations [6]. And in the opinion of the Armenian Catholic priest Noratunkyan they would rather firstly establish boards of trustees and priests in the big cities and only after that think about the registration [7].

The Armenian Catholic Church has all the factual rights for the registration unless the process is managed by some “invisible power”. In particular, the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church may possibly be concerned that after the registration of the Armenian Catholic Church the number of the Catholic parishes in Russia will increase, taking into consideration the fact that the Armenian Catholics life in many cities. On the other hand,

registration would be a good opportunity for the ACC to manage its own community life by opening churches and community organizations, which may displease the Russian Orthodox Church, as any “success of the Catholics” means for them weakening of their own positions. At the same time it should be mentioned that the Armenian Catholics are in the country which is considered “risk zone” in the context of ethnic and confessional variety, where the confessional differences may be used to the damage of us, unless there some personalities and healthy relations between the groups, which form a “confessional core”. The scarcity of the priests stands separately among the issues regarding the Armenian Catholic Community of Russia. Over the Soviet period, after the annihilation of the Armenian Catholic communities, Russia was never considered a “prospective” country and no priests speaking Russian were prepared. And when patriarch offers stewardship in Russia, many refuse it due to that very reason [8]. According to a newly appointed Archbishop of Armenia, Georgia and Eastern Europe Rafael Minasyan all the priests of the ACC are from the Diaspora – Syria or Lebanon, and they do not speak Russian, while most of the local Armenian Catholics are Russian speaking and do not speak Western Armenian [9].

It is clear that over the years of the Soviet “clerical hunger” when the Catholic churches did not work at all, the practice of the religious ceremony was absent. Correspondingly, it is difficult for them to reconcile themselves, especially when they are constantly visiting Roman Catholic churches where the ceremonies are hold in Latin by an unknown rite. The Armenian Catholic Church in Russia has only four priests and is obliged to handle the matter in other way: the priests visit cities where approximately 100 families live.

In this case four priests for the centered and scattered communities in boundless Russia are definitely not enough. Two of them are in Moscow, one in Krasnodar and one in Novorossiysk. The new Archbishop made it his mission to prepare new generation of priests which will be able to solve the problems the communities face. The point is that Catholic priests are prepared in Petersburg but for the communities where ceremonies are served according to the Latin (Roman) rite. For all those years only one Catholic Armenian priest was prepared in seminary in Petersburg and after the graduation he had to learn Armenian so he could read and understand texts regarding the rites. There is hope that a separate Armenian department will be opened in the seminary. In this direction serious work should be done by the representatives of the ACC. Thus, the Armenian Catholic communities which disappeared from the “religious map” of Russia in the Soviet period make new history and are hopeful for a bright future.

So, it can be stated that the Armenian Catholics who underwent the historical ordeals, ups and downs, living in the country with different cultural environment and system of values, associating with the representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church still preserve their “Catholic identity” “inherently”. After the collapse of the USSR new community is reviving which, not being in contradictions with different religious and ethnic groups in the RF, tries by means of self-organization to restore all it was deprived of over the Soviet period. The most

important task, which will remain topical for the community, is the status of the church and the scarcity of the priests.

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