

# From the history of the presence of Christianity and the Catholic Church in Turkmenistan

This text is developed on the basis of articles by Wojciech Kluj<sup>1</sup>

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Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

This area was part of a number of eastern states and empires: the Parthians (from the III century B.C. to the III century A.D. the Iranian Sassanid State (from III to VII A.D.). In the next period Arabic influences were strong, then Turkish and, finally, in the second half of the nineteenth century Turkmenistan became part of the Russian empire.

Many armies conquered the land on their way to richer areas. Alexander the Great conquered the territories of Turkmenistan in the fourth century BC on the way to South Asia, at a time when the Silk Road was built, the main trade route between Asia and the countries of the Mediterranean region. About 150 years later, Arsaces I, the king of the Parthians, founded the capital in Nissa, which is now an archaeological site on the outskirts of the present capital, Ashgabat, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Through the area of today's Turkmenistan ran the Silk Road, on which the merchants and armies moved around, carrying with them, in addition to material goods also their faith and beliefs.

In the second chapter of Acts, we read the description of Pentecost. The presentation of the representatives of the nations present at this event begins with the Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia (cf. Acts 2.9). Thinking about Parthians inadvertently raises the question of whether they did not come to Jerusalem from Nissa and Merv, a city on the river Murgab near the present town of Mary (other ancient names of the city: Margian Antiochia, Margian Alexandria).

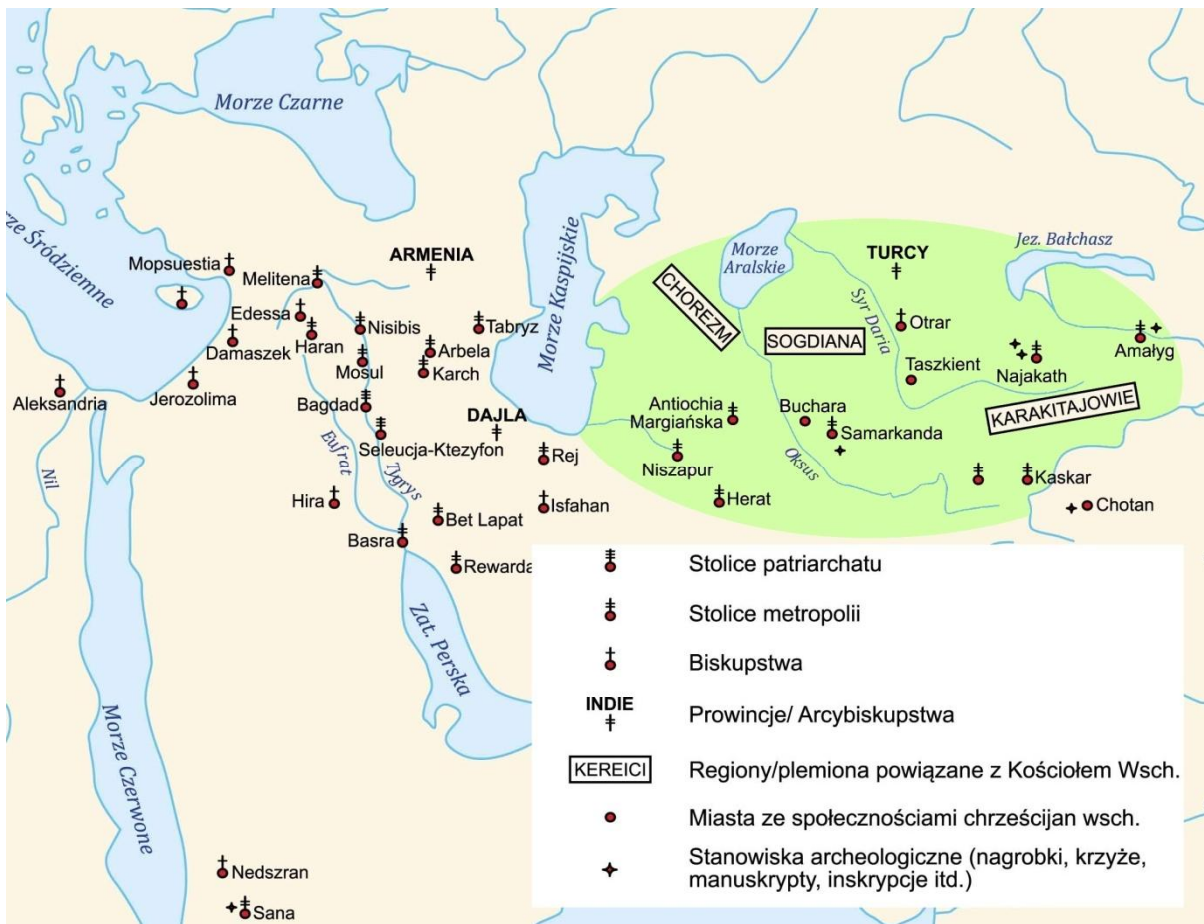
According to ancient tradition the Parthian state was evangelized by St. Jude, Apostle. Also Thomas the Apostle is said to have preached the Gospel, not only in India, but also among the Parthians, Medes and Persians<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>The Church of India and China, the electronic version of the magazine Civitas Christiana <http://e-civitas.pl/kosciol-po-indie-i-chiny/>;

\* On Christianity in Central Asia: W. Kluj, The Changing History of the Church in Central Asia, in: Ecclesia in Asia, Selected Problems of the Church in Asia in the Light of the Post-Synodal Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, ed. J. Rozanski, Warsaw 2004, pp. 143- 159;

\* Christianity in Antiquity and the Middle Ages on the Territories of Modern Turkmenistan in: Turkmenistan - History - Society - Politics, ed. Tadeusz Bodio;



From the available written evidence we may conclude that faith in Jesus Christ appeared on the territory of modern Turkmenistan at the end of the second and third century<sup>3</sup>. The earliest mention of Christians in the region are found in the chronicles of Beruni-abu-Raich (973-1048). We learn that the Christian community of Merv each year celebrated the 21 day of the month of cha-ziran as a remembrance of the priest Bereszji (Barachina), who is supposed to have come to the city to herald the new teaching 200 years after the death of the Messiah<sup>4</sup>.

Other historical sources indicate that the Dja Merv Bishop attended the Council of Nicaea in 325. Yet other sources point out that Samarkand and Merv certainly had their bishops in 334. The bishopric of Merv became a metropolis in 420. It was, inter alia, represented at the Council of 424, where the Persian Church became independent of the jurisdiction of the Church of Antioch. At the beginning of the fifth century there were already several bishoprics in the province of Chorem, lying on the border

<sup>2</sup> Wojciech Kluj, Kościół po Indii i Chiny, elektroniczna wersja miesięcznika Civitas Christiana <http://e-civitas.pl/kosciol-po-indie-i-chiny/>

<sup>3</sup> See O chrześcijaństwie w Azji Centralnej: W. Kluj, Zmienne dzieje Kościoła w Azji Środkowej, in: *Ecclesia in Asia, Wybrane problemy Kościoła w Azji w świetle posynodalnej adhortacji Jana Pawła II*, pod red. J. Różańskiego, Warszawa 2004, s. 143-159, and *Chrześcijaństwo w starożytności i średniowieczu na terytoriach współczesnego Turkmenistanu*, in: *Turkmenistan – historia – społeczeństwo – polityka*, ed. Tadeusz Bodio

<sup>4</sup> See *Pamätniki minuvsiech pokolenij, Izbrannye proizvedeniä, Al.-Asar AL-Bakiä, Taškent 1957*

of modern Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan<sup>5</sup>. It is possible that on the area of today's Turkmenistan, there were also other dioceses, and without a doubt the Christian communities were active here. The existence of communities and entire metropolis in the early centuries testifies to a process of diffusion of Christianity in these areas.

#### The Church in Central Asia in the Middle Ages

In the most ancient urban centers of Central Asia, and therefore also in Turkmenistan, the three main streams of Eastern Christians: Melchites, Jacobites (Monophysites) and Nestorians came together. Faruman, bishop of Merv in 486 took part in the Synod of the Church of the East, devoted to the explanation of the differences and the understanding of the various factions within the Church<sup>6</sup>.

Syrian and Sogdan sources from the Middle Ages testify to the fact that in the fourth century a well known Christian priest, Bar Sabbath, who cured Estassa, the sister of the Persian king Shapur II, came to Merv. According to legend, with her help he built 365 churches around Merv. One of them was built for Estassa<sup>7</sup>.

Archaeological reports certify that in the borough surrounding Merv, under the burial buildings in the third and fourth century there was already a Christian church. To the west of the old Merv a necropolis was found testifying to the fact that Christians were buried there at least from III to VI century<sup>8</sup>. In another part of the great Merv, in the town of Gi курт-Kalla, in the northeastern part of the town, an "oval" house was dug out- the seat of a Christian community, founded at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries. It is believed that this small monastery, built in the late fourth century belonged to the Melchites who left it in the mid-sixth century, under the influence of the Nestorians. Archaeological data indicate Christian memorabilia from IV-VI century, also in other places, eg. in Geok- depe. During this period, Christians were persecuted by the followers of the traditional religion of Persia - the Zoroastrians, but those were not mass persecutions and were temporary<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See G.I. Bogomolov, Ü.F. Burakov, L.I. Zukova, A.A. Musakaeva, G.V. Śískina, Chrestänstvo V Srednej Azii, in: *Iz istorii drevnich kultov Srednej Azii. Chrestänstvo*, Taskent 2002, pp. 9-10; Ü.F. Burakov, L. I. Zukova, V.N. Proskurin, *K istorii chrestänstva v Srednej Azii*, in: *K istorii chrestänstva v Srednej Azii (XIX-XX vj)*, Taskent 1998, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> See G.I Bogomolov, Ü.F. Burakov, L.I. Żukova, A.A. Musakaeva, G.V. Śískina, *Chrestänstvo v Srednej Azii*, in: *Iz istorii drevnich kultov Srednej Azii...*, ed., p. 8; A.S. Atiya, *Historia Kościółów wschodnich*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 215-225.

<sup>7</sup> On the Subject of the diverse legends concerning Bar Szabe and his successors: *Drevnij Mėrv v svidetelstvach pismennykh istoänikov*, Aşchabad 1994, pp. 60-100.

<sup>8</sup> See G.Ä. Dresvänskaä, *Nekropol Starogo Mbva*, Aschabad 1989.

<sup>9</sup> See S.M. Demidoyj *Istoriä religiezných verovanij narodov Turkmenistana*, *Aschabad* 1990, pp. 40-42.

Not all the peoples inhabiting the territory of modern Turkmenistan adopted Christianity, but virtually all the Syrians were Christians. In Merv, there was then a large Syrian colony, from which many famous sages and writers derived, such as the well known Isodad, who lived between the V-VI centuries, the famous doctor Sargis who dedicated his work on the categories of Aristotle to his friend Theodore from Merv<sup>10</sup>.

Christians in the region lived their faith not only for themselves, but also actively engaged in the work of spreading it among neighboring peoples. Christian missionary activity in Central Asia grew substantially along the major caravan routes, especially on the Great Silk Road. Christian merchants traveled with their faith to China, Mongolia, and also to the territory of present day Russia. The documents that have been discovered indicate that the Christian texts were translated mainly from Syrian originals. As a result of missionary activity in the year 529, on the Amudaria, the bishopric of the Huns was founded. This was probably a result of the spread of the Christian faith among the Turks. The conversion to Christianity of large numbers of the Turkish population of several tribes and the Turks Khan along with his entire army, is attributed to the Metropolitan of Merv. In 781 an unnamed Turkish ruler asked for baptism. He then created a metropolis in Samarkand and two new dioceses in Bukhara and Tashkent<sup>11</sup>.

In his book "History of the Prophets and Kings" Muhammad al-Tabari an Arabic author writes about the role of Christianity in the late Sasanid Iran; in the part concerning the burial of the last Shah of Persia - Yazdegerd III in 651. When the Metropolitan Ilya of Merv learned that Jezdegerd was murdered, and that all were afraid to bury him, he gathered the Christians and told them that they need to remember "... of the honor, that the Christians at the time of the reign of his grandfather Kisryla, received. Thanks to the benefits of his predecessors they built some churches and their faith was strengthened"<sup>12</sup>. The Metropolitan ordered to build his tomb in his garden.

The situation of Christians in the lands of the Turkmen changed with the Arab invasions. In the early centuries of the existence of Islam, however, there were not only - as sometimes it is shown - the ruthless and bloody persecutions. By paying a special tribute - a tax for the faith, the Christian communities could live and work in a country ruled by caliphs. These communities could have their

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<sup>10</sup> On the Sirian culture in the area of today's Hirkmenistanu: N.W. Pigulewska, Kul-tura syryjska we wczesnym średniowieczu, Warszawa 1989, pp. 92,176 and 246. See J.M. Fiey, Chritientć syriaques du Horasan et du Scgstan, „Le Museon" 1973, nr 86, pp. 75-104.

<sup>11</sup> See G.J. Bogomolov, Ü.F. Buräkov, LX Žukova, A.A. Musakaeva, G.V. Šískina, Chrestän-stvo v Srednej Azii..., ed., pp. 11-12; Ü.F. Buräkov, L.I. Žukova, VN. Proskurin, K isto-rii chrestänstva v Srednej Azii...,ed., p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> G.L Bogomolov, Ü.F. Buräkov, L.I. Zukova, A.A. Musakaeva, G.V. Šískina, Chrestänstvo v Srednej Azii..., ed., p. 30; S.M. Demidov, Istorä religeznych verovanij..., ed., p. 46.

clergy leaders. They were chosen by their communities and were approved by the Caliph, who determined their lay rights<sup>13</sup>.

In the days of the Muslims, the caliphs of the country valued especially Christians who were doctors. Sometimes Christians held high government offices as clerks, secretaries, and writers. Among them were statesmen, scientists, philosophers, theologians and diplomats. There was also a group of merchants who had close ties with the Western Christian nations of the Sultan of Sandgara (1118-1157), who made it the capital of his empire<sup>14</sup>. Christians were also known in other cities, i. e. Serachs, AI Werda or Nissa, and we can assume that since traces were left in the larger cities, they were probably present in smaller towns as well.

Christianity remains, above all, the religion of the Syrians, and those who have accepted their culture. It's hard to say anything more about the attempts of the Christian faith to inoculate the ancestors of the Turkmens - Oguzows. Missionary activity was also carried out among them, but the proof of its effectiveness did not survive. Perhaps this was so because later, Mongols reached these lands who through their invasions (1162-1227) have done a lot of damage<sup>15</sup>. At first they treated the Christians favourably, especially the more educated and influential ones. Christianity has been present on the steppes of Mongolia before Genghis Khan. Even some local khans were Christians. Genghis Khan himself had married some of his sons to women of Christian religion. Some of his successors tended to adopt Christianity. The area of Central Asia was reached by several diplomatic missions of evangelization carried out by the Dominicans and Franciscans<sup>16</sup>. After a period of relative stability, a new wave of bloody persecution began, especially in the years 1295-1296 and 1316-1335. The greatest persecution of Christians dates back to the reign of Tamerlane (1336-1405)<sup>17</sup>. At that time many of them were killed, others were forced to accept Islam.

Since then, for four centuries, Christians were a minority in the region. Not until the nineteenth century, in 1856, under the pressure from European countries, the sultan guaranteed the right of Christians to practice their faith. Soon after, the Tsar of Russia began the conquest of Turkmen lands.

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<sup>13</sup> See W.G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph. A study of the Church of the East with the Sas*

<sup>14</sup> See T. Khodzhaniazov, *Turkmenistan on the Great Silk Roads*, Ashabad 1990, pp. 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> See S.M. Demidov, *Istoria religiezných verovanijcyt. ed.*, pp. 52-54; S. Żerańska-Kominek, A. Lebeuf, *Opowieść o szalonej Harman i Aşyku zakochanym w księżycu. Postać muzyka i kon-cepcja muzyki w turkmeńskim dessane „Harman Dali”*, Kraków 1998, especially pp. 11-35.

<sup>16</sup> The best known is the mission of Wilhelma of Robrouck. On the subject of the situation of Christians at that time, see: J. Dauvillier, *Guillaume de Robrouck et les communautés chaldéennes d'Asie centrale au Moyen Age*, „L'Orient Syrien” 1957. nr 2, pp. 223-242.

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<sup>17</sup> See J.M. Fiey, *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Mongols (l'Khanat de Perse XIII-XIV siècle)*, Louvain 1975.

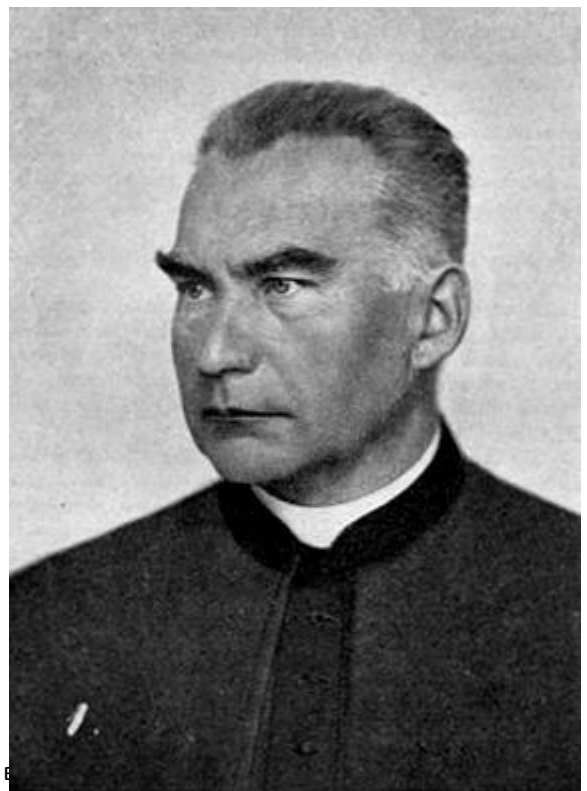
The presence of Christianity and the Catholic Church in Turkmenistan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russian influence increased more and more by the Caspian Sea. After the end of the Crimean War in 1856 Tsarist Russia launched an offensive in Central Asia. The Krasnovodsk fort was built in 1874 and the Zakaspijska Military District was created. Among the officers and soldiers of the multinational Russia serving in these areas, there were mainly Orthodox Christians. But there were also Catholics; soldiers of Polish, Lithuanian, German and French origin and their families. Next, merchants, government workers, and engineers appeared on these areas. Many of them arrived on Turkmen lands against their will.

According to the census of 1897, on the territory of the "Land of Turkestan", there were 11,056 Catholics<sup>18</sup>. District (oblast) Zakaspijska became a part of the Archdiocese of Mohylov. Due to the fact that military law was compulsory, the military chaplains, who came to the district were important. In the eighties, Fr. Stanczykowski Ferdinand stayed in Tashkent in 1885. Father Cajetan Warpucjanski, a military chaplain visited Turkestan. In 1886 Father Vasily Mutanov came here from Tbilisi. In 1897, the Minister of War gave official permission for the annual visit to the Zakaspijska oblast and the Turkiestan Military District to the Catholic military chaplains from the Caucasus. In 1897, Fr. Mikhail Antonov arrived.

In 1899 Archbishop Simon Martin Kozlowski (1819-1899) of Mohylov sent to the "Land of Zakaspijskie" **Father Justin Prinajtisa Bonaventure (1961-1917)**. He became a key figure for the Catholic Church in the area. In 1902, he was officially named "The curator of the Nation of Turkestan". He resided permanently in Tashkent. There also was a Catholic parish. The Church in Ashgabat had the status of a branch of the parish in Tashkent.

Catholics from Ashgabat asked the steward of the Zakaspijska oblast for permission to build a church as



КАНОНИКЪ ПРАНАЙТИСЪ

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<sup>18</sup> А. Л. Спиридонова, В. Б. Заславский, Католики в Туркестане, в Ташкент 1998, р. 213.

early as 1890. The request was rejected due to a small number of Catholics<sup>19</sup>. In 1903 in Ashgabat there were 1,563 Catholics, and when they repeated the request for permission to build a church, the answer was positive. The plot for the construction of a church of 200 fathoms in the center of Ashgabat, in the quarter between the streets Lebaszewskoj<sup>20</sup> and Owrażnoj was donated by the family Budkiewicz.

At the beginning of 1904 Fr. Pranajtis asked the Archdiocese of Mohylovska for blessing for the construction of houses of worship with altars, organs and bells, and all other attributes. The Ministry of War turned to the "Department of Foreign Forms of Cults" with a request to support the permission to build. After completing all the formalities the construction work began, which lasted about five years. In September 1909, Fr. Pronajtis communicated to the Archdiocese of Mogilev that enough funds were collected for the construction of three churches: in Ashgabat, Kyzyl Arwat and Skobieliev (Margielana, today the name is Fergana, the city is located on the territory of Uzbekistan)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> See A. Л. Спиридонова, В. Б. Заславский, p.2014.

<sup>20</sup> The Central State Archives of Uzbekistan, Ф.И-1, оп.2, д.2759.

<sup>21</sup> Руслан Мурадов, Католический костел в Ашхабаде, РГИА (Российский государственный исторический архив, Санкт-Петербург), Ф.826, оп.3, д.43, л.128.; РГИА, Ф.821, оп.125, д.1166; РГИА, Ф.826, оп.3, д.43, л.150., Directorium Divini officii et Missarum pro Archidioecesi Mohiloviensi nec non pro Dioecesi Minscensi in annum domini 1917, electronical version on site: Podlaskia Biblioteka Cyfrowa: [https://www.google.com/search?q=a&rls=com.microsoft:pl-PL&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&startIndex=&startPage=1&rlz=117RNTN\\_enKZ362&gws\\_rd=ssl](https://www.google.com/search?q=a&rls=com.microsoft:pl-PL&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&startIndex=&startPage=1&rlz=117RNTN_enKZ362&gws_rd=ssl), 16.12.2014.

3. Владивостокъ (Прим. обл., почт., тел. и ж.-д. ст. тамъ же). Прих. церк. Рожд. Пр. Д. Маріи, дер., постр. 1902 г., нынѣ стр. камен. . . . . 10440  
 Кур. *Карлъ Сливовскій*, М. Б., им. орд. Св. Стан. 3 ст. и зол. нап. кр.
4. Николаевскъ-Пріамурскій. Каплица, при коей прежде преб. наст. „Амурскаго Края“.  
 Кап. (вак.).
5. Никольскъ-Уссурійскій (Примор. обл.) каплица. 6000  
 Кап. и д. *Станиславъ Колодзейчикъ*.
6. Хабаровскъ (Приморск. обл. почт.-тел. и ж.-д. ст. тамъ же). Фил. церк. Непороч. Зач. Д. М., дер., соор. 1905 г. . . . . 1700  
 Капел. *Георгій Юркевичъ*, онъ же законоучит. въ Кадетскомъ корпусѣ, Реальномъ училищѣ и женск. гимн.  
 Воен. капел. *Доминикъ Микшицъ*.
7. Харбинъ (Маньчжурія). Филиал. церк. Св. Станислава М., камен., постр. изъ добр. пож. 1909 г., осв. Еп. Іоанномъ Цеплякомъ въ томъ-же г. 7000  
 Кап. *Владиславъ Островскій*.
8. Ташкентъ (почт.-тел. и ж.-д. ст. тамъ же). Прих. церк. Тѣла Господня, бетонная, соор. 1902 г. стар. кс. Пранайтиса изъ добр. пожер. . . . . 9000  
 Кур. *Юстинъ Пранайтисъ*, М. Б., им. зол. нап. кр. и орд. св. Ст. 2 ст.  
 Вик. *Витольдъ Шикшиель*.
- Школы: Мужск. и женск. гимн.  
 Кадетскій корп., реальн. учил.
- Филіи: 1) Асхабадъ, Закасп. обл., Преображ. Госп., кам., соор. 1903 г.  
 2) Низиль-Арватъ, св. Экспедита М., кам., соор. 1905 г.  
 3) Скобелевъ (Маргеланъ), Успен. Пр. Д. М., соор. 1905 г.
- Каплицы: 1) Вѣрный — св. Михаила Арханг., дер., 1905 г.  
 2) Джаркендъ — Пресв. Д. М., кам., 1902 г.



3) Красноводскъ — Пресв. Д. Маріи,  
кам., соор. въ 1905 г.

4) Копаль — св. Рафаила Арханг.  
1905 г.

Молитв. дома: Кокандъ, Чарджуй,  
Самаркандъ, Мервъ,  
Термезъ,

Итого въ Могил. Архіепарх. . . . 867689

## По Минской губерніи.

### 1. Минскаго деканата.

#### Въ Минскомъ уѣздѣ.

1. Минскъ (почт.-тел. и ж.-д. ст. тамъ же). Каѳедр.  
и прих. церк. имени Пр. Д. Маріи (1 кл.), кам.,  
соор. 1710 г. о.о. Іезуитами, а послѣ пожара  
1798 г. новоб. Еп. Дедеркою. . . . . 15700

Адм. и деканъ *Болеславъ Ягелловичъ.*

Вик. 1) *Викентій Годлевскій, М. В.*

2) (вак.)

Законоучители:

*Іосифъ Мицевичъ, К. В.*

*Витольдъ Ежковскій, К. В. (Богадѣльная ул.,  
№ 32).*

*Евгеній Круликовскій.*

*Іосифъ Хергетъ.*

Резид. *Адольфъ Малаховскій, М. В., Пр. Дв. Е.  
Св., П. К., Команд. Гр. Господ., им.  
орд. св. Ст. и св. Ан. 2 и 3 ст. и  
нап. кр.*

Школы: Мужская гимн.

Реальное уч.

Коммерч. уч.

Женская гимн. Мар.

Женская гимн. мин.

Каплицы: въ Госпиталѣ,  
въ Благотворительномъ Обществѣ.

Филіи.

Pages from: Divini Directorium officii et Missarum pro Archidioecesi Mohiloviensi nec non pro Dioecesi domini annum Minscensi in 1917, the liturgical calendar of the Diocese of Mogilev at the end of which there is a "schematic" - a list of parishes and priests working in the archdiocese.

According to the information set out in the said Mohylowska Archdiocese liturgical calendar for 1917, about 9,000 Catholics lived in the states of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In addition to the three churches: The Transfiguration of the Lord in Ashgabat, St. Expeditus in Kyzyl Arwat and Fergana (Uzbekistan, other names of the cities: Skobieliw, Margielanie), the Assumption of the BVM there existed: a stone chapel in the church in Krasnovodsk of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Star of the Sea, a wooden chapel in Wierny (now Almaty, Kazakhstan) of St. Michael, a stone chapel in Dżarkienit (Kazakhstan, near the border with China) the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Raphael the Archangel in Kopal.

The Schematic, in a separate group, places houses of worship in: Kokand (Uzbekistan, Fergana valley 88 km from Ferghana), Samarkand (Uzbekistan), Temerez (Uzbekistan), Czardzui (Turkmenistan) and Merv (Mary - Turkmenistan).



The Mogilev Archdiocese schematic of 1917 shows the structures of the Catholic Church at the peak of development. With the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution, an era of fighting with the faith and the Church began. Steadily, the number of Catholics decreased, both as a result of emigration, as well as due to the pressure exerted by the authorities not to declare their faith. In 1921 Ruslan Muradov writes, that in Ashgabat there was a population of about one hundred Catholics. The Church of the Transfiguration was still in operation in the twenties. In 1932, by the decision of the local authorities it was completely destroyed, as "totally foreign to secular ideology." In its place a cinema "Art"

(кинотеатр "Художественный"), was built which collapsed during the earthquake of October 6, 1948. Later, a "house of political enlightenment" now called "Mekan palace" (дворец Мекан) was built. The location of the auditorium is supposed to coincide with the position of the Church<sup>22</sup>.

Inside the building of the church in Kyzyl Arwat there is now a restaurant. The fate of the other buildings that once belonged to the Catholic Church is unknown to us at this point.

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<sup>22</sup> See Руслан Мурадов, Католический костел в Ашхабаде.

