

NATIA NATSVLISHVILI

George Chubinashvili National Research Centre for
Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation

Ilia State University

STRUGGLING FOR IDENTITY:
GEORGIAN CATHOLICS AND THEIR MONASTERY IN ISTANBUL

Catholicism has a long history in Georgia.¹ After the East-West Schism and mutual excommunication in 1054 by the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Georgian Church sided with Constantinople, to which it was closely linked; however it remained in communion with Rome until the end of the Fourth Crusade, i.e. until 1204.² In the thirteenth century, Catholic missionaries began to work in the Georgian Kingdom. Dominican and Franciscan friars first appeared there during the reign of Queen Rusudan (1223-1240).³ In 1328, by order of Pope John XXII, a Latin diocese was established in Tbilisi and the Cathedral of St John the Baptist was built. The diocese existed until 1507.⁴

In the late Middle Ages, there were small Catholic communities in almost all of the regions of Georgia. In 1661, the Holy See entrusted missionary work among Georgians to Capuchin priests. They worked vigorously in semi-independent kingdoms and principalities in east and west Georgia and usually received a friendly welcome from the local population and rulers. In south Georgia, the situation was more complicated. The Ottomans conquered the region between 1551 and 1578 and soon fully incorporated it into the Empire. From the seventeenth century, local Catholic Georgians were ministered to by the Unifying Friars of St Gregory the Illuminator, the Armenian branch of the Dominican Order that had adopted the Armenian rite and language in church worship.⁵ Owing to their activity, a strong Armenian tradition had been formed among the

¹ Surprisingly little has been written in European languages on the history of Catholicism in Georgia. M. Tamarati, *L'Eglise géorgienne des origines jusqu' à nos jours* (Rome, 1910) is still the most comprehensive work on the subject, whole chapters of which are devoted to the aspects of the forming and development of Catholic communities in Georgia, the activities of missionaries and their relations with Georgian kings and princes, communication with Rome, etc. Michel Tamarati (Tamarashvili, 1858-1911) was a Georgian Catholic priest who spent most of his life in Rome. What makes his book particularly valuable is that he explored and first published numerous documents from the archives of the *Propaganda Fide* that shed more light on the history of Catholicism in Georgia. Modern Western authors mainly focus on the history of the Soviet period. See, for instance: K. Lorenz (ed.), *Die Römisch-Katolische Kirche in der Sowjetunion* (München-Luzern-Wien-Brixen 1990), pp. 79-80; L. Zugger, *The Forgotten: Catholics of the Soviet Empire from Lenin Through Stalin* (Cyracuse, NY, 2001), p. 55-57, 130-131, 213-224. There are also several works in the Georgian language: S. Lomsadze, *Gviani shuasaukuneebis sakartvelos istoriidan: akhaltsikhuri kronikebi* (Tbilisi, 1979); M. Papashvili, *Sakartvelo-romis urtiertoba VI-XX ss.* (Tbilisi, 1995); T. Ivelashvili, *Katolikoba sakartveloshi* (Tbilisi, 2009).

² R. G. Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Churches: A Brief Survey*, (Rome, 1985), p. 37.

³ In 1245, a member of the Dominican monastery in Tbilisi, Guichardus of Cremona, joined Pope IV's mission to the Mongols. See: G. G. Guzman, "Simon of Saint-Quentin and the Dominican Mission to the Mongol Baiju: A Reappraisal," *Speculum*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (April, 1971), pp. 232-249.

⁴ R. G. Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Church*, p. 187.

⁵ On the Unifying Friars see: G. Petrowicz, "I Fratres Unitores nella Chiesa Armena," *Euntus Docete* XXII, 1969, pp. 309-347; B. L. Zekiyan, "La formazione e gli sviluppi tra gli armeni di correnti ecclesiali simpatizzanti per

Catholics of the region of both Georgian and Armenian origin that was zealously upheld by the local clergy. Only in the 1730s, the capuchins managed to establish their mission in Akhatsikhe, the capital of south Georgia with a significant Catholic community.

The issue of the rite to be employed and especially of the service language arose on and off among Georgian Catholics during the eighteenth century. In the 1740s, the Latin Catholic parish of Akhatsikhe ministered by the Capuchins was granted permission by Rome to offer prayer in Georgian in place of Latin.⁶ However, it was the exception rather than the rule. The great majority of Georgian Catholics had to worship using the Latin or Armenian rites. In general, the Holy See was not interested in introducing another rite and service language. Taking into consideration the absence of the Georgian Catholic institutions and lack of Georgian speaking priests, they preferred to keep local Catholics under the ministry of either the Capuchin friars or the well-organized Armenian Catholic Church.

The situation of Catholics did not change for the better after the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire.⁷ Until 1905, no Byzantine rite Catholics were allowed in Imperial Russia that meant also the prohibition of the Georgian rite, which, from the liturgical point of view, was the same as the Byzantine or “Greek” differing only in language. The Russian authorities forbade the holding of Catholic service in Georgian; they should be held only in Latin or in Armenian. Part of the Georgian Catholics actively opposed these prohibitions, but the community in general was not unanimous in its opinion on language matters, being torn by internal dissensions. The controversy was particularly sharp in Akhatsikhe, the stronghold of the Armenian-rite Catholics in Georgia. From the 1840s, there were two opposing groups. The first one rallied around Pavle (Poghos) Shakhkilian, an Armenized Georgian priest, who believed that the Georgian Catholics should keep to the Armenian rite, while the other, led by the priest Petre Kharischirashvili,⁸ demanded that the church service be held in their native language, or at least in Latin.

The attitude towards the Roman missions also became the subject of a heated controversy. Unlike Georgians, the Armenian Catholic clergy harshly opposed the Western missions, considering them as a challenge to their ethnic interests. They exerted every effort to persuade their Georgian parishioners to support local church leadership. Alexander Araratian, an Armenian priest, stated in the address to his parish written in Georgian in 1846 and entitled *The Things Our Ecclesiastical and Lay Persons Should Know*:

We know very well that our future generation will not stay without a spiritual leader, so we must take care to choose him from our race, since he will be as a good as true mother to us because of his ancestral obligations, no matter how cruel he is; but if we have a coreligionist leader from another race, no matter how good he is to us, he will still have a step-mother’s heart and eye on us.⁹

la comunione romana,” in: V. Ruggieri and L. Pieralli (eds), *Eukosmia: Studi miscellanei per il 75 di Vincenzo Poggi S. J.* (Soveria Mannelli, Catanzaro, 2003), p. 649.

⁶ L. Zugger, *The Forgotten*, p. 471, note 76.

⁷ The Russian Empire annexed the Kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti (east Georgia) in 1801. The Kingdom of Imereti (west Georgia) was conquered and annexed in 1810. Western Georgian principalities maintained formal autonomy for some time before being fully absorbed into the Empire (Guria – until 1829, Svanetia – until 1857, Abkhazia – until 1864, Samegrelo – until 1867). In 1828 and 1878, as a result of Russo-Turkish wars, Russia appropriated a part of historic south Georgia from the Ottoman Empire. See: N. K. Gvosdev, *Imperial Politics and Perspectives towards Georgia, 1760-1819* (London – New York, 2000), pp. 77-140; D. Rayfield, *Edge of Empires. A History of Georgia* (London, 2012), pp. 250-283.

⁸ Another form of his surname is Kharischiaranti, also spelt as Karischiaranti, Carisciaranti, Kharischarianti, etc.

⁹ National Centre of Manuscripts (Tbilisi), Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 4159.

This extract clearly shows that the controversy between the two groups was not limited to merely religious issues. In fact, it included a discussion on the cultural orientation, in which Kharischirashvili's group took a pro-European stand. Besides being a fundamental choice, it was also a pragmatic consideration of the Georgian Catholics, who tried to defend their ethnic interests by the strengthening of their, ties to Europe.

The controversy had one more aspect. In the Russian Empire, the issue of rite was closely linked with the problem of the ethnic identity of Catholics. When taking a census of the population, the Russian authorities assumed the language and order of service as a basis for ethnic identification. Consequently, they registered ethnic Georgian Catholics of the Armenian rite as Armenians. Those of them who had Georgian self-consciousness showed their discontent with these regulations. Actually, their struggle for their traditional rite and native liturgical language became a struggle for identity.

The emergence of the national movement in Georgia gave a new impetus to Petre Kharischirashvili and his followers. Their aspirations echoed Georgian nationalism, which was deeply rooted in language and history. They made great efforts to promote their patriotic project, but faced insurmountable obstacles. Seeing that he had failed to achieve his goals in Georgia, Kharischirashvili decided to establish a Georgian-rite Catholic monastery abroad. In 1861, he built a church in Feriköy, one of the districts of Istanbul.¹⁰ Along with the church, he founded monasteries for both male and female congregations, which were confirmed by Pope Pius IX in 1864. From the beginning, the priests in Feriköy used the Georgian rite, i. e. the Greko-Byzantine rite in the Georgian language. Officially it was approved in 1875 - only for use in these particular monasteries. Thus, it became possible for Georgians to worship according to their ancestral traditions, in their native language, and yet be Catholic.

The first church built in 1861 was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception (Fig. 1). A few years later it was re-consecrated to Our Lady of Lourdes, a title of the Virgin Mary connected with her apparitions said to have occurred in 1858 in the environs of Lourdes. In 1862, Pius IX authorized the cult of Our Lady of Lourdes for the local diocese and very soon it became overwhelmingly popular in the Catholic world. As far as the main idea of the veneration of Our Lady of Lourdes is the Immaculate Conception, these two titles are essentially one and the same. Later on, the Georgian Catholic monasteries in Feriköy have usually been referred to as the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception.

Kharischirashvili attached special importance to the raising of the educational level among Georgian Catholics. In 1840, while living in Akhaltsikhe he tried to promote the project of the foundation of a Georgian Catholic Seminary in the city. Later when he served in Kutaisi he devoted much time to teaching children reading and writing in Georgian and Latin.¹¹ The foundation of the monastery in Feriköy gave Kharischirashvili the chance to establish a religious school as well. He started to educate Georgian students who later returned to Georgia and

¹⁰ The construction of the church became possible owing to crucial changes in Ottoman politics. The Tanzimat Charter issued in 1839 proclaimed the equality of the non-Muslim community and the Muslims on a legal basis, which along with other religious groups allowed Catholics to implement bold architectural projects (S. S. Darnault, *Latin Catholic Buildings in Istanbul, a Historical Perspective (1839-1923)*, (Istanbul, 2004), p. 15). The *Islahat Firmani* ratified in 1856 legitimated religious rights of the non-Muslim communities of Istanbul. These political changes enabled Catholics to build churches on sites with no pre-existing religious structures (P. Girardeli, "Architecture, Identity, and Liminality: on the Use and Meaning of Catholic Spaces in Late Ottoman Istanbul," *Muqarnas*, Vol. 22 (2005), p. 240).

¹¹ For the biography of P. Kharischirashvili, see: S. Lomsadze, *Gviani shuasaukuneebis sakartvelos istoriidan*, pp. 66-84.

ministered to local Catholics. Apparently, they fully adopted the ideas and values of their master. In 1890s, when Georgian Catholics in the Akhaltsikhe region (historic Samtskhe and Javakheti provinces) intensified their efforts for the recognition of their ethnic identity, the movement was led by priests educated in the school of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception at Feriköy. Kharischirashvili well understood the importance of modern education. The school of the Congregation taught not only religious but also secular subjects. In the monastery, he founded a printing house, which in the following decades published a number of books on Georgian history.



Fig. 1. The Georgian Catholic monastery in Istanbul built in 1861
(photo National Centre of Manuscripts)

The buildings of the Congregation are still preserved in Feriköy though they have undergone significant renovations. There are a few photographs showing the monastery as it looked in the late nineteenth century. One of the earliest photographs dates from between 1894 and 1900 as it shows a large four-storied building in the monastery, which was built in 1894. Its upper floor was used as a hotel.¹² It is adjoined by another four-storied building, lower and narrower than the first one, with a wooden belfry attached to its wall. Two two-storied houses stand next to this building. The church is located to the east of the last one, presumably divided from it by a passage that is not visible in the photograph. It is a low single-nave structure with a tiled roof. All the buildings of the monastery, including the church, look very humble. The simple geometry of their architecture and plain whitewashed facades speak of the limited resources of the Congregation. To the east, the church abuts onto a narrow unpaved street lined by a stone enclosure of the monastery, which joins the plain east wall of the church on both sides. There are two doors in the wall. The one located in front of the hotel building still exists today with its

¹² Sh. Putkaradze, *Stambolis kartuli savane* (Tbilisi, 2012), p. 18.

authentic metal gate; the second door was on the left of the church and would seemingly have been used to enter the courtyard but was walled up later.

The monastery was reconstructed in 1901 (Fig. 2). It was a period of the increased building activity of the Catholics in Istanbul. Although many Catholic churches of the city go back to the late Byzantine era or early Ottoman rule, most of them were rebuilt or renovated in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Neo-Gothic style became the dominant architectural form of these churches. This style is also evident in the reconstructed Georgian church at Feriköy; however its external appearance is much more modest than that of the Catholic churches built by Europeans in Istanbul. The name of its architect is unknown.

The church was enlarged to the west with its nave partly occupying the area of the demolished two-storied houses. It became twice as high and much longer than the old one, but did not exceed it in width. One can assume that the existing longitudinal walls were used during the reconstruction and thereby the church retained its original single-nave structure. It has a wooden false barrel vault and a tiled gable roof.



Fig. 2. The church of Our Lady of Lourdes
(photo National Centre of Manuscripts)

The east façade of the church (Fig. 3), which faces the street, as did the old one, is frugally decorated with horizontal lines grooved in the plaster. Four buttresses attached to the façade have a decorative rather than a structural purpose since there is no actual need for reinforcing the eastern wall. The buttresses are topped with light open turrets consisting of tiny lancet arches resting on four dwarf columns. Their capitals are adorned with foliage made of simplified acanthus leaves. In the middle of the east façade, there is an inscription in French displaying the dates of the foundation and reconstruction of the church: N. D. DE LOURDES ÉGLISE GÉORGIENNE F. 1861 R. 1901.

The plain longitudinal walls of the church are reinforced with buttresses. There are two lancet windows in the east portion of the north wall and one in the east portion of the south wall. The west façade looks onto to the courtyard. A bell tower attached to the west wall also serves as the main entrance to the church (Fig. 4). It has two floors but looks like a four-storied edifice because the upper floor room is very high and has three levels of windows.



Fig. 3. The east Façade of the church

The luminous and airy interior of the church has not been significantly altered since the reconstruction of 1901 (Fig. 5). Five pair of pilasters, with gilded composite capitals, articulates the longitudinal walls, which are topped by a moulded cornice. To the west there is a curvilinear upper gallery furnished with a wooden banister (Fig. 6). It can be ascended by stairs located in a separate building attached to the church from the south. This building also contains a confessional and a sacristy. In the centre of the floor there is the gravestone of the founder of the Georgian Congregation, Petre Kharischirashvili.¹³

To the east, the church has a sanctuary terminating with a straight wall instead of an apse (Fig. 7). It is separated from the nave by a low marble railing comprised of S-shaped curves inscribed in circles, a motif widely used in Neo-Gothic architecture. On both sides of the sanctuary, there are painted wooden sculptures standing in niches: Saint Christopher carrying the Christ Child on the left (Fig. 8) and Jesus Christ on the right.

The central part of the sanctuary is accentuated by a lancet arch. It symbolically represents the firmament with golden stars scattered on a blue background. The icon of the Virgin Hodegetria occupies the centre of the sanctuary arch. The rest of it is filled with ornate wooden panels of a dark brown colour. The icon has an inscription in Polish saying: “*Pod Twoją obronę uciekamy się*”, a beginning of the oldest hymn dedicated to the Mother of God *Sub tuum*

¹³ The inscription of the gravestone is made both in Georgian and Latin. The latter states: “OSSA PETRI CARISCIARANTI PATRIA GEORGIA DOMO AKALCIK SERVORUM ANCILLARUMQUE VIRGINIS AB IMMACULATO CONCEPTU INSTITUTORIS AC MODERATORIS GENERALIS PRIMI PISSIMA VITA CESSIT VII ID OCT MDCCCXC VIXIT ANNOS LXXII MENSES V OIES XXVI R. I. P.

praesidium (“Beneath Thy Protection”). The icon and its decoration are seen in the photograph taken soon after the reconstruction of the church in 1901; however, it is not known exactly when and how the icon appeared in the church.



Fig. 4. The west façade of the church



Fig. 5. The church. interior looking east (photo National Centre of Manuscripts)

Lower portions of the pilasters supporting the arch have the shape of Gothic canopies, while their upper portions serve as pedestals for wooden sculptures. On the left side, there is a statue of Saint Andrew with his X-shaped cross and on the right side of Saint Nino the Illuminatrix of Georgia. The sculptures stand very close to the sanctuary wall and are perceived together with the mural painted on the upper part of the wall. The initial painting executed soon after the reconstruction of the church, can be seen in the early twentieth-century photograph. It features two groups of saints depicted on each side of the sanctuary arch and in the middle the all-seeing eye of God surrounded by angels. Around 1910, this painting was replaced by the present one. The scene of the Apparition in Lourdes has been represented in the centre showing the Virgin against the background of the cave and Saint Bernadette Soubirous kneeling in front of her. The cycle of miraculous healings related to the cult of Our Lady of Lourdes has replaced the rest of the painting.

The purpose for re-painting the sanctuary is clear. It aimed at a better representation of the patron saint of the church. What make these murals exceptionally interesting are the images of the two churches shown on each side of the sanctuary arch, next to the sculptures of Saint Andrew and Saint Nino. On the right, there is the depiction of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, the first church of Georgia, and on the left of a Neo-Gothic church with two towers

attached to its west wall. The latter bears a close resemblance to the Catholic Church in Batumi built between 1898 and 1903 and it must have been painted according to it. Thus, on the one hand the oldest and the most important Georgian church and on the other hand the largest and the most typical Catholic church of the country are represented in the sanctuary.



Fig. 6. The church. Interior looking west



Fig. 7. The church. Interior looking east

These images make the sanctuary murals much more than just a religious painting. It is a cultural representation of the aspiration of Georgian Catholics to be included into the national narrative that had been formed by the end of the nineteenth century. The painting was intended to demonstrate the harmony between the two halves of the Georgian Catholic identity, ethnic and confessional, symbolized respectively by the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral and the church in Batumi.

The whole spirit of this representation conformed to the ideas and goals of the Georgian Catholic intellectuals. In the early twentieth century, Michel Tamarashvili published his works, in which the story of Catholics is integrally interwoven into the general history of the Georgian church. He saw Catholics as a part of the nation rather than as a separate confessional community. This frame of mind was common among the elite of Georgian Catholics both in their home country and abroad. The desire of Catholics to stress their “Georgianness” can be seen even among the ordinary parishioners of remote villages. The inscription on the south wall of the church in Ude near Akhaltsikhe, built between 1901 and 1909 states: “there are 2120 Catholics in Ude, builders of this church, and 520 Muslims, both groups being Georgians by race.” The mention of Muslim Georgians in the inscription should be considered as a message of awakening to Muslim compatriots whose national self-consciousness was not as pronounced as that of the Catholics.

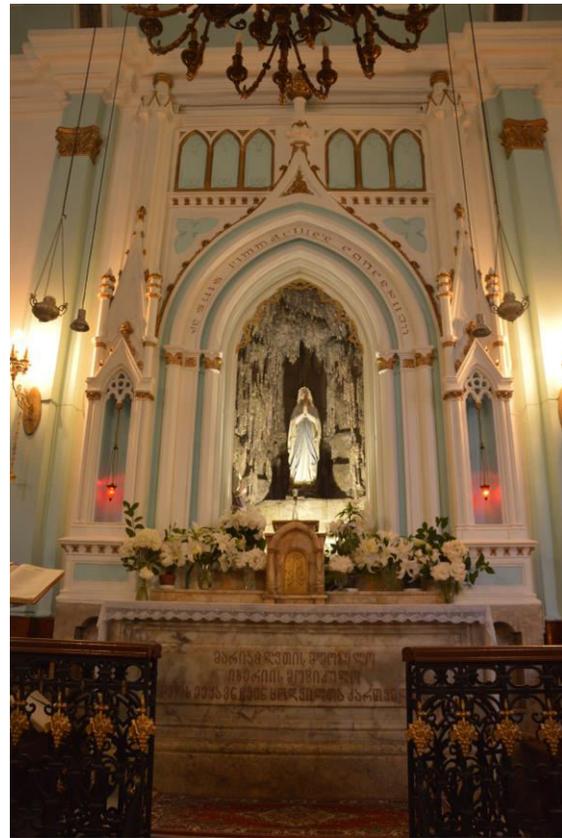


Fig. 8. Saint Christopher carrying the Christ Child Fig. 9. The statue of Our Lady of Lourdes

The sculptures of Saint Andrew and Saint Nino also have important roles in the sanctuary decoration. Church tradition considers Saint Andrew as the first preacher of the Christian faith in Georgia,¹⁴ while Saint Nino converted the Kingdom of Iberia (east Georgia) to Christianity around 330.¹⁵ Her sculpture stands next to the depiction of the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, which was founded by her. The presence of the two saints serves to emphasize the indissoluble ties of the Georgian Catholicism to the ancient church tradition of Georgia and to Georgian history in general. It is peculiar to Georgian Catholicism around 1900 to give special respect to the illuminatrix of Georgia. Anselm Mghebrishvili, the priest of the Catholic church in Batumi, ordered the statue of Saint Nino in Milan.¹⁶ It still stands in the right niche on the west façade of

¹⁴ Modern historiography considers the story of Saint Andrew's preaching in Georgia as mythical; however, it has been attempted to reinterpret the story in a broader historical context. See: V. Licheli, "St Andrew in Samtskhe - Archaeological Proof?" in: T. Mgaloblishvili (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus, Iberica Caucasia*, vol.1 (Richmond 1998), pp. 25-37.

¹⁵ See the hagiographical life of Saint Nino in: *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, selected and translated from the original texts by D. M. Lang (London -Oxford, 1976), pp. 19-32. The relation of the history of Saint Nino to the Georgian self-consciousness is discussed in: M. Tarchnisvili, "Die Legende der heiligen Nino und die Geschichte des georgischen Nationalbewusstseins," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 40, 1940, pp. 40-75. See also: D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 BC – AD 562* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 246-252; D. Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁶ Anselm Mghebrishvili sent the icon of Saint Nino to Michel Tamarashvili and asked him to make statue following its iconography (Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 2655).

the church. In 1910, Rafael Isralishvili, the author of a book on the history of Georgia published in French, wrote in his letter to Michel Tamarashvili:

You wrote about the icon of Saint Nino saying that it is not well known in Europe. Whose fault is that? ... As regards this subject, we know how great is the offence of the old generation, but others [i.e. the new generation] are also to blame for leaving our great saint forgotten - not only in Europe, but also in Georgian churches where walls are covered with images of unfamiliar and foreign saints while our patron saint cannot be found anywhere... The image [of Saint Nino] included in my book, which looks like a Greek icon, must be different. The saint has to be either in traditional Georgian dress or in a French one, which does not differ from ours [i.e. from that of Georgian Catholics].¹⁷

The end of the extract is particular by significant as it vividly reflects the character of the identity of Georgian Catholics. They consider the saint as “theirs” if she is depicted either in traditional Georgian dress or in “French” clothing, i.e. the clothing typical for Catholic saints. Therefore, the saint has to look either like a Georgian, or like a Catholic in general to satisfy either the national or the religious feelings of the believers. “Greek” (Orthodox, Byzantine) iconography is unacceptable from both points of view. Saint Nino depicted according to this iconography is alien to Georgian Catholics.

The main concept of the sanctuary decoration is echoed in other parts of the interior of the church. In the south wall, there is a niche with the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes represented, as usual, in a rocky cave (Fig. 9). An inscription on the lancet arch of the cave repeats the words said by the Virgin to Saint Bernadette: “*Je suis l’Immaculée Conception*”. On the marble base of the statue there is a Georgian inscription that says: “Mary the Mother of God, the Apostle of Iberia, protect us sinful Georgians.” Here one can see an attempt to put a completely Catholic cult of Our Lady of Lourdes into the Georgian context, linking it with the church tradition that considers Georgia as an appanage of the Mother of God, the country under her particular protection and patronage, which was assigned to her by lot.¹⁸

The further history of the Georgian Congregation of the Immaculate Conception is a chronicle of hardship that was aggravated by continual conflicts between its friars. Mutual accusations, petty complaints, and denunciations became a part of the everyday life of the monastery. Controversies became particularly intense after the death of the founder of the Congregation, Petre Kharischirashvili, in 1892. He himself was accused of establishing the wrong priorities. Conservative friars thought he paid too much attention to the education of monks to the detriment of their being true servants of God. They thought that education should not be superior to the fear of God, which is considered to be the foundation of wisdom in Catholic teaching. In the letter sent on 20th May 1901 to Michel Tamarashvili, the second superior of the Congregation, Stephan Giorgadze, blamed Kharischirashvili for worrying only about increasing the number of students and giving them a good education instead of urging them to perform a monk’s primary

¹⁷ Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 1854.

¹⁸ An apocryphal story, which is an essential part of the Georgian church tradition, tells us that, after the Ascension of Christ, the Apostles cast lots to see who among them would travel to which country to preach the Gospel. The Mother of God said that she, too, wished to cast lots alongside the Apostles. Her lot fell on Iberia (east Georgia), but an angel appeared to her and bade her stay in Jerusalem, vowing that her lot would be accomplished in due time. She never did come to Georgia in the flesh, but her mercy nevertheless abides in Georgia. According to the tradition, the Mother of God is mystically connected with Georgia through the Icon of Our Lady of Iveron, which was found in the eleventh century by the monks of Iveron, the Georgian monastery at Athos, and has been kept there ever since that time.

duty by praying to God. Giorgadze asked Tamarashvili “to pray on the tomb of Saint Peter and invoke him to help in the spiritual recovery of the unfortunate monastery”.¹⁹

Living conditions were another reason that caused the discontent of friars. They are described as exceptionally hard in the letters of Gregory Atitov, one of the most captious monks of the Congregation. In several letters sent to Tamarashvili in 1897, he painted the situation of the monastery in the worst possible light. He criticized the superior of the monastery, Giorgidze, for his construction activity in the monastery and for his alleged plans to purchase a plot of land.²⁰ He wrote about insufficient rations and the poor quality of food complaining that the superior and his assistant ate very well while other monks wished just to have something worth eating.²¹ Atitov tells the story of Father Antony, who had serious health problems and spent a whole month at the hospital in Istanbul, where he was never visited by the superior. After returning to the monastery Father Antony’s health become worse and he asked for a doctor, but nobody paid any attention to him. According to Atitov, neither was the education system at the Congregation good. He is very critical when writing about the teachers of the school, accusing them of absenteeism and incompetence.²²

When comparing the letters of the malcontent friars with other sources, one can assume that their criticism was exaggerated and sometimes obviously partial. For instance, Alfonse Khitarishvili, the superior of the monastery from 1898 to 1904, had a very good reputation in Georgia. He was characterized by contemporaries as “a precious and diversely gifted” man.²³ Before leaving for Istanbul, he had served in the Catholic church in Tbilisi and was famous for his sermons. The parish felt very emotional when hearing he was making a move. However, Khitarishvili is described in an extremely negative fashion in the letters of the friars of Feriköy. In 1902, Friar Ivane Merabishvili wrote to Tamarashvili that the superior not only ignored his responsibilities, but also made living conditions insufferable for the members of the Congregation thus compelling them to leave the monastery.²⁴ Gregory Atitov asked Tamarashvili not to let Alfonse Khitarishvili be re-elected in the position of superior.²⁵

In the following years the situation of the Congregation became even worse. The vicar apostolic of Constantinople was so bothered with the denunciations the Georgian friars made against one another that he threatened to close the monastery.²⁶

Naturally, this unhealthy atmosphere would have a negative impact on the life of the Congregation. However, personal aversion of its member to each other did not affect their devotion to their common goals. A feeling of a common mission united even the most mutually inimical friars. It is noteworthy that the activity of the Congregation was well known and appreciated in Georgia.²⁷

Since its foundation, the Congregation was increasing in number mostly through the arrival of young Catholics from Georgia. After the occupation of Georgia by Bolshevik Russia in 1921 and its further incorporation into the Soviet Union, the borders of the country were closed and it

¹⁹ Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 1294.

²⁰ Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 346.

²¹ Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 347.

²² Ibid.

²³ Z. Chichinadze, *Kartvel katoliket moghvatseni da meskhet-javakhetis tsnobebi* (Tiflis, 1904), pp. 39-42.

²⁴ Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 2337.

²⁵ Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 352.

²⁶ Archive of M. Tamarashvili, case no 981.

²⁷ In 1897, the Georgian newspaper “Iveria” sent its reporter to Istanbul to visit the monastery at Feriköy and attend the exams in the Congregation school (*Iveria*, 1897, no 185, p. 4).

became almost impossible for young people to join religious institutions abroad. Due to the impossibility to have contacts with Georgia, the Congregation steadily declined. According to some accounts, in the 1930s, there were a few hundred Catholics whose liturgical language was Georgian and who were ministered to by priests of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception.²⁸ The last superior of the Congregation, Petre Tatalashvili, died in 1961, and the last Georgian friar in 1979.

One of the most renowned members of the Congregation was the church historian Michael Tarchnishvili (1897-1958), who after 1930 lived mostly in Rome. He had long dreamed of a Georgian College in Rome where the national and cultural identity of his homeland would be nurtured and displayed to the Catholic world. Being in search of donors for his undertaking he was approached by the RSHA, the Nazi intelligence service that wanted to use the proposed college as a shelter for its agents spying on high-ranking clergy in the Vatican. When Tarchnishvili understood the situation, he refused and the project failed.²⁹

The Congregation of the Immaculate Conception in Istanbul is a milestone in the history of Georgian Catholics. It had a significant role in the construction and maintenance of the Georgian Catholic identity. Despite difficulties, the founders and members of the Congregation managed to establish themselves as a distinct Catholic community with their traditional rite and native liturgical language. With their ideas and activities, the friars of the Congregation rebuffed those who thought their Georgianness was compromised by their Catholicity. Actually, they formed a branch of the Georgian nationalism contributing to the consolidation of the nation and to its struggle for independence.

²⁸ D. Atwater, *The Catholic Eastern churches* (Milwaukee, 1935), p. 131.

²⁹ D. Alvarez and R. A. Graham, *Nothing Sacred: Nazi Espionage Against the Vatican, 1939-1945* (London, 1997), pp. 92-113.