

University of Groningen

Religious Belonging and Multinational Encounters in “Infidel Izmir”

Hazir, Ediz

Published in:
 Church History and Religious Culture

DOI:
[10.1163/18712428-bja10035](https://doi.org/10.1163/18712428-bja10035)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
 2022

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hazir, E. (2022). Religious Belonging and Multinational Encounters in “Infidel Izmir”: Past and Present. *Church History and Religious Culture*, 102(1), 83–109. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18712428-bja10035>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the “Taverne” license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.



BRILL

CHURCH HISTORY AND
RELIGIOUS CULTURE 102 (2022) 83–109

Church History
and
Religious Culture
brill.com/chrc

Religious Belonging and Multinational Encounters in “Infidel Izmir”

Past and Present

Ediz Hazir | ORCID: 0000-0001-9773-434X

Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic;
Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen,
Groningen, The Netherlands

Ediz.hazir@fsv.cuni.cz, E.hazir@rug.nl

Abstract

In Turkey, the Roman Catholic Church faces an uncertain future as it lacks official recognition of its legal status. Thus, the survival of the small parishes signifies the survival of the Catholic Church in contemporary Turkey. This article focuses on the perseverance of the multicultural Roman Catholic community of Our Lady of Lourdes (Notre Dame de Lourdes) of Göztepe (in Izmir) after the arrival of Father Gabriel Ferone in 2008. The revival of Our Lady of Lourdes resulted from people of different backgrounds (i.e., Europeans, African students, Turks) moving to Izmir and joining this parish. The paper also explores the change in the demography of the parish during its transformation throughout the years.

Keywords

Izmir – religious minorities – multinational encounters – Roman Catholic Church

1 Introduction

Once a cosmopolitan city of Turkey with a diverse ethnic and religious composition, Izmir is now a city where Muslim–Turks constitute the majority. Izmir, historically Smyrna, was one of the Ottoman Empire’s most important ports in the 20th century. It was populated by the large community of Levantines, Armenians, Europeans, with the Greek-Rûm Orthodox forming a majority and

Muslim-Turks a minority. As a result, ancient Smyrna acquired its nickname: “Gâvur Izmir.” (in English, Infidele Izmir). The Latin Catholic community was an essential part of this multicultural mosaic since Crusaders captured the city in 1344. In time, Smyrna became the center of commerce, and the door opened towards the Occident. Its population increased with migrants from all over the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. Among all migrants, the most influential ones were Europeans who controlled trade, education, and social life. A significant percentage of such Europeans were Francophone Catholics.

“Catholic” means “universal.” However, among all Christian Churches of the Ottoman Empire and the modern Turkish Republic, the Roman Catholic Church always remained the most European one because of the diversity of its congregation and the European support and protectorate it obtained throughout the centuries. The Latin Catholic Church in Turkey has a unique status. The Catholic Church does not juridically exist in Turkey. It is only de-facto recognized as it has no legal presence, therefore, cannot own properties. The rights granted to the Catholic institutions by the Ottomans were lost after the abolition of the capitulations.¹ Therefore, several immovable properties owned by the Catholic Church were transferred to the Directorate General of Foundations. This Turkish governmental institution manages and audits religious foundations dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Since then, the Church has had two essential demands of the State needed to secure its future in Turkey: recognition of the legal status of the Catholic institutions and return of its properties confiscated by the Treasury. The Turkish State refuses to comply with these demands as it does not want to reverse discrimination against religious communities. In line with the main argument, the paper aims to answer the following questions: How did Our Lady of Lourdes’ parish manage to survive in a Muslim Country? What do a small minority of Christians represent in this political-religious context?

The first section explores the history of Christianity in Izmir until 1922. This section highlights the pervasiveness of cosmopolitanism in Izmir and shows the change in its demography. The second section examines the revival of the religious community after the arrival of Father Gabriel Ferone in 2008. Finally, the third section zooms in on the obstacles faced by the parish during its revival and transformation process.

1 Rinaldo Marmara, *Istanbul Latin Cemaati ve Kilisesi* [Istanbul’s Latin Community and its Church] (Istanbul, 2006), 181.

2 Theory and Methods

This research paper explores the persistence of a Christian (Roman Catholic) religious community in a predominantly Muslim country. The peculiarity of this religious revitalization movement is that the parishioners belong to various ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds. Despite these differences, they all contributed to the revival of a religious community in Izmir. The paper focuses on a case study (Our Lady of Lourdes from Izmir, understood as a physical church (building) and a living community of parishioners).

Religion has been the most crucial topic of discussion in Turkey and the central part of Turkish identity. The slogan of the Turkish Republic during the single-party period was: “one language, one culture, one ideal.”² This slogan played a significant role in eliminating cultural differences among non-Muslim citizens of Turkey. Republican People’s Party distinguished between citizenship (being a Turkish citizen) and nationality (Turkishness) and tied citizenship rights to nationality. Thus, there were three categories of citizenship: Muslim ethnic Turks, non-Turkish Muslims, and non-Muslims.

Therefore it is essential to understand the concept of “transnational religious identity,” which refers to personal or collective religious identities that transcend enclaves, localities, regions, nations, and states to achieve a broader unity of belief, practice, and community. The term implies the nation-state’s existence as the leading worldwide political sovereignty. Transnational religious identities are continuously reconstructed in continuing struggles over ideology and authority. Shifting coalitions of elites, counter-elites, ethnic groups, and those excluded from local authority structures compete for influence, voice, and recognition.³

The Christians in Turkey seek recognition and equal rights with the rest of the population. Resilience generally refers to withstanding stressful challenges and retaining or regaining normal functioning. Consequently, individuals display strength when they manifest positive adaptation under extenuating circumstances. The parish of Our Lady of Lourdes, despite the difficulties (political pressure, language barrier, cultural differences), is formed of individuals

2 Basak Ince, *Citizenship and Identity in Turkey: From Atatürk’s Republic to the Present Day* (London, 2012), 39.

3 D.F. Eickelman, “Transnational Religious Identities (Islam, Catholicism, and Judaism): Cultural Concerns,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser, Paul B. Baltes, 26. vols. (Amsterdam, 2001), 23: 15862-15866.

who adapt to extraordinary circumstances, achieving positive and unexpected outcomes in the face of adversity.⁴

My study has both exploratory and explanatory aims, and it employs the interdisciplinary resources of cultural history, religious studies, political science, and political theology. Apart from qualitative methodology, this paper uses in-depth interviews with the Priest Gabriel Ferone (the leading supporter of the Our Lady of Lourdes) and several parishioners (from different nationalities and backgrounds). All interviews were conducted between September 2019 and May 2020. Some were led by Skype and phone calls in Istanbul, and some took place in Göztepe, Izmir, Turkey, where the parish is located. The interview with Fr. Ferone and the African student community was in French, while the consultation with the other parishioners mainly was in Turkish and English. The data collection methods included interviews, letters exchange, discussions with those involved in the revival of the Izmir parish, field research, archival research, and attendance to the mass at Our Lady of Lourdes as the study of secondary sources.

3 The Importance of Smyrna for the Christian World: Short Historical Reminder

Smyrna was one of the finest examples of cosmopolitanism in the Ottoman land at the beginning of the 20th century. Correspondingly, the foundation of the Parish of Our Lady of Lourdes coincides with the peak of Christianity in Smyrna. However, before focusing on the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes, it is worth mentioning the historical background of cosmopolitanism and the importance of Christianity in Smyrna. Ancient Smyrna (known as Izmir since 1930) is one of the most important settlements of Christianity: it has two of the seven churches of Apocalypse, including Ephesus and Smyrna; the tombs of St. John the Apostle, St. Philip of Hierapolis, and the house of the Virgin Mary (discovered in 1891) are also within the borders of the city.

Izmir was also essential for the expansion of Christianity to Europe. St. Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyon), the disciple of St. Polycarp (patron saint of Smyrna), left Smyrna to evangelize Gaul.⁵ The spread of Christianity across Europe was

4 Mark Frazer, Richman, J. Galinsky, M. Risk, "Protection, and Resilience: Toward a Conceptual Framework for Social Work," *Practice Social Work*, 23 (3) (1999), 131–143. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/23.3.131>.

5 Gaul, French Gaule, Latin Gallia, the region inhabited by the ancient Gauls, comprising modern-day France and parts of Belgium, western Germany, and northern Italy. A Celtic race,

facilitated by the ancient channels of trade which followed a road through Asia Minor, Aegean, and Mediterranean seas. The European interest in Smyrna increased with the crusades. The formation of the Latin Kingdom in Constantinople (1204–1261) led to increased Latin influence in Western Anatolia. In October 1344, the Holy League organized by Pope Clement VI and formed by the forces of the papacy—the Venetians, the Hospitallers, the Lusignan kingdom of Cyprus—launched an attack against the Turkish ruler of the Aydin emirate, Umur Pasha, aiming to conquer Smyrna which was under Turkish control since 1317. The crusade of the Holy League was successful and resulted in gaining control over Smyrna.

Smyrna remained a Latin city until the early 15th century, even though the Muslim–Turks still controlled the upper part of the city. Contrary to common knowledge, Smyrna's notorious name "Infidel City"—which is still used to refer to the city of Izmir—dates to the time of the Latins rather than the late 19th century (when the majority was Orthodox). Timur's Mongol Empire destroyed the town in the years following the battle of Ankara (1402), and the Ottomans conquered it in 1424. Smyrna remained under Ottoman control until the Greek invasion in 1919. Despite the Ottoman rule over the city, the Latin influence endured and increased in the 16th century. The major trading houses of Europe moved to the Levant, the region along the eastern Mediterranean coasts of the late Ottoman Empire that stretched from Alexandria in Egypt to Izmir/Smyrna, the Straits that connect to the Black Sea, the east Greek coasts, and their hinterland,⁶ especially after the introduction of the Capitulations. These houses formed Smyrna's first Levantine communities. The rise of the Latin Catholics is closely related to the French protectorate over Catholics, promoting missionary activities in the Ottoman lands. This right was granted to France by the Capitulations.⁷

Capitulations grant rights of ex-territoriality to Christians residing or traveling in the Ottoman Empire. They are undoubtedly rooted in the radical distinction between Mohammedanism, which acknowledges the Koran as the only source of human legislation and the only law for the government of human

the Gauls lived in an agricultural society divided into several tribes ruled by a landed class. For the definition see "Britannica" <https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe>.

6 Ozan Ozavci, *Dangerous Gifts: Imperialism, Security, and Civil Wars in the Levant, 1798–1864* (New York NY, 2021), 1.

7 Buğra Poyraz, "The Definition and the Development of the Religious Protectorate of France in the Ottoman Lands", *Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 8/1 (March 2021), 283–304. <http://doi.org/10.51702/esoguifd.812250>.

affairs, and the western systems of jurisprudence, which are animated by the equitable and philosophical principles of Roman law and Christian civilization. But their accepted foundation in international law is in the treaty made with the French in 1535, which guaranteed that French consuls and ministers might hear and determine civil and criminal causes between French men without Ottoman authorities' interference. Later, the French took under their protection persons of other nationalities not represented by consuls, and hence the generic name of "*Franks*" was given to all participants to these privileges.

The Capitulations encouraged foreigners to come to the Ottoman lands. The privileges given to France were also later granted to other European states by individual treaties with the Sublime Porte. The Capitulations allowed them to conserve their nationals' rights and ensure their properties and exclusive jurisdiction by their national courts (excluded from Ottoman jurisdiction).⁸

The word "capitulation" derives from the Latin verb "*capitulare*," which means "agreeing." In modern Italian, "*capitolazione*" means "treaty." The term has a meaning of reciprocity in its substance. However, the Ottoman Capitulations represented one-sided arrangements to grant privileges to France and later to other states, even though Ottomans were expecting particular consideration in return (in commercial and social spheres). Another meaning of the Italian verb "*capitolare*" is "to surrender." This meaning reflects the true nature of capitulations bearing in mind that the Ottoman Empire surrendered financially to Western powers in the 19th century because of the Capitulations.⁹

The first privileges granted by the Ottomans to the foreigners were mainly economic. For example, capitulations given to Genoese merchants by the Ottoman Sultan Orhan were aimed to build an alliance and stimulate foreign trade. With years the content of capitulations grew wider: the Treaty of Galata¹⁰ ensured the merchants' properties, goods, and freedom of religion.

The treaties mentioned above were the predecessors of the Capitulations of 1536. The treaty of 1536 signed between the Sublime Porte and France was the official start of capitulations. The scope of the Capitulations expanded

8 Rinaldo Marmara, *Istanbul Latin Cemaati ve Kilisesi* [Istanbul's Latin Community and its Church] (Istanbul, 2006), 179.

9 Bugra Poyraz, *Fransa'nın Osmanlı Katoliklerini Dini Olarak Himaye Etmesinin Sonu ve Papalık Makamı ile Diplomatik İlişkilerin Başlaması* [The End of the Religious Protectorate of France for Ottoman Catholics and the start of the diplomatic relations with the Holy See] (MA. Diss., Istanbul Bilgi University, 2016).

10 Philip Marshall Brown, "The Capitulations," *Foreign Affairs* 1 (1923), 77. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/1923-06-15/capitulations>.

throughout the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Finally, with the Capitulations of 1740, the privileges given to France became permanent.

France was granted permanent privileges regarding holy places, religious institutions, and clergy members from May 28, 1740. Through the 59th article of the 1740 Capitulations agreement, the Ottoman state opened all the seas to French merchants by letting them use Danube and Don rivers closed for commercial navigation for the international trade. Article 83 of “Capitulations” guaranteed France’s superiority over other European powers. Thus, France had not only outspread its protectorate over the Latin Catholic clergy, subjects, and institutions, but also became the supreme authority of all Catholic foundations, schools, hospitals, orphanages, churches, convents, etc. of all Catholic Congregations (Assyrian, Chaldean, Armenian, Maronites, Byzantine Catholics, and Bulgarian Catholics).¹¹ As a result, Europeans settled in the Empire were rarely appealing to the Ottoman authorities, except for tax payment or changing their civil status.¹² The result was the rapid development of major Ottoman ports such as Smyrna. Smyrna’s importance for the trade between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe gave it its name of *echelle du Levant*.¹³ Towards the end of the 19th century, the city was populated by multiple ethnic and religious groups. The Latins, the Greeks, and the Armenians moved to western Anatolia for work. The Jews who were present since their exile from Spain in the 15th century became part of the demography, increasing the community’s population. Smyrna became, over time, an excellent example of cohabitation and cosmopolitanism.

The Tanzimat reforms starting with the “Edict of Gülhane,” promised the equality of all Ottoman subjects regardless of their religion and nationality. Tanzimat was a revolution for the Empire as it intended to end the superiority of the Muslims over the other minorities and foreigners, and its implementation in Smyrna was successful.¹⁴ However, the bright shimmer of Gâvur Izmir should not make us forget the rigor of the social and cultural hierarchies in the city. Smyrna was a city formed by homogeneous religious and ethnic groups. The Levantine Community evolved, starting with the permanent capitulations of 1740. They were even described as “Europeans within the Ottoman Empire.”

11 Rinaldo Marmara, *Istanbul Latin Cemaati ve Kilisesi*. [Istanbul’s Latin Community and its Church] (Istanbul, 2006), 81.

12 Nasim Sousa, *The Capitulatory Regime of Turkey: Its History, Origin, and Nature* (Baltimore, 1933), 70–71.

13 *Les Echelles du Levant* [the ladders of the Levant] are Ottoman port cities privileged with Capitulations.

14 Charles Frazee, *Ottomans and the Sultans* (London, 1983), 157.

The cosmopolitanism in Smyrna was a social order dominated by the Europeans who possessed the economic and technical power of the West.¹⁵

It should also be acknowledged that the physical and economic presence of Western Europe and its cultural omnipotence was crucial for maintaining Smirnian cosmopolitanism. In the early 20th century, Smyrna was an outpost of the West in the Levant that the French consul described as a European city.¹⁶ The church of Our Lady of Lourdes was founded in the district of Göztepe (one of Izmir's southern suburbs) by Father Fercken (a Dutch Priest) in 1900 during the last part of the "Belle Epoque." Göztepe, at the time, was populated by Christians apart from a few wealthy Turkish families (i.e., Governor Rauf Bey's). Rums were the majority as they were in the rest of Smyrna. Armenians became part of the suburb in the 1870s by establishing their chapel. The common language of the parish was French and was spoken by all Catholic Christians. The parish was named after "Our Lady of Lourdes" due to the strong French influence.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Izmir could have been considered Asia Minor's most prominent European city, as it was culturally closer to Europe than any other Ottoman City. According to the German Ambassador, Mordtmann Smyrna had approximately 300,000 inhabitants, including 110,000 Rum Orthodox, 30,000 Jews, 15,000 Armenians, 9,000 Turks as a part of the Ottoman *Reaya*, and 55,000 foreigners including 30,000 Greeks, 10,000 Italians, 2000 French, 1200 English, and the rest from other European nationalities.¹⁷ Even though this is only an estimated number of inhabitants, the city's diversity is already visible from these figures.

The Levantine institutions remained active in Izmir during the Greek occupation. The great fire of Smyrna (September 13–22, 1922) resulted with the end of Levantine superiority over Izmir. The entire Latin quarter, including multiple Christian institutions and buildings belonging to several Christian denominations (i.e., Lazarists, Filles de la Charite, etc.), was destroyed. The French ambassador Graillet described the situation as "the loss of a small fortune."¹⁸

The cosmopolitanism of Smyrna was swept away by the war while the Turkish Nation state was rising from its ashes. After the foundation of the Republic, Turkey went under a strict Turkification period. Although this paper does not focus on the analysis of Turkish nationalism, it is significant for the argument

15 Herve Georgelin, *Smyrna'nin Sonu, Izmir'de Kozmopolitizmden Milliyetçilige*. [The End of Smyrna: From Cosmopolitanism to Nationalism] (Istanbul, 2008).

16 *Ibid.*, 287.

17 *Ibid.*, 48.

18 *Ibid.*, 281.

advanced to mention the situation of the Latin Catholic community after 1923. The recession of the Levantine community—the prominent supporter of the catholic institutions, began with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Although the Ottoman Empire had abolished the Capitulations on September 9, 1914, they were reinstated during the Greek occupation (1919–1922). Still, with the treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the capitulations were abolished once in for all. While Greeks, Armenians, and Jews were considered a minority, the Catholics stayed outside the scope. Thus, the Levantine population of the Ottoman Empire either obtained Turkish nationality and became Turk-Catholics (of Latin rite and remained in Turkey as foreigners) or left the country. Over time, Latin Catholic Turkish citizens were mixed with Catholics from other denominations (e.g., Chaldean, Armenian.)

Regarding the protection of non-Muslims, the Turkish Government undertook several essential obligations such as full assurance of complete safety of life and liberty of all inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race, or religion. “All inhabitants of Turkey shall be entitled to exercise any creed, religion, or belief, the observance of which shall not be incompatible with public order and good morals. Non-Muslim minorities will enjoy full freedom of movement and emigration.”¹⁹

Communities, considered minorities (Greeks, Armenians, Jews), formed commissions to deal with the issues regarding their communities. However, the case of the Roman Catholic Congregation was not concluded during the Lausanne Conference. Turkey’s responsibility towards France, Italy, and Great Britain on Latin Catholic Churches is based on the additional letters to the Lausanne Treaty. Turkey didn’t have a prior agreement with the Holy See as the Holy See was recognized in 1963.

In 1989 Vicar apostolic of Istanbul and president to the episcopal conference, Monseigneur Pierre Dubois, talked about the struggle of the Catholic community: Challenges faced by the Church in Turkey stems from various reasons. The minorities (Greeks, Jews, and Armenians) recognized by the Lausanne Treaty benefit from certain legal rights. For example, Their properties are managed by their elected committees. However, the Roman Catholic Church is not a legal entity in Turkey; therefore, not owning or managing its properties causes obstacles and uncertainty.²⁰

19 Keith Arthur Berriedale, ed., *Speeches and Documents on International Affairs, 1918–1937* (London, 1938), 87.

20 Rinaldo Marmara, *Istanbul Latin Cemaati ve Kilisesi* [Istanbul’s Latin Community and its Church] (Istanbul, 2006), 204.

The great fire did not harm the suburbs, but without the presence of the Christians, the community forming Our Lady of Lourdes decreased drastically. The episode from the building process of Modern Turkey, the great depression of 1929 to the end of World War 2, prevented the city's development as there was no Turkish bourgeoisie to revive the economy. Izmir started to regain its importance with the Turkish accession to NATO in 1952. The city expanded towards the suburbs, especially after the 50s. The church was able to survive with the support of Izmir's Catholic Diocese until the sixties despite the decline in the number of Christians, which gradually decreased in the community.

In consequence, the daily mass ceased to be celebrated. A Muslim family was assigned to guard the place to preserve the building despite the absence of a living community. This situation continued until the mid of the 2000s when the parish almost entirely disappeared.

4 A Foreign Priest's Works to Revive the Catholic Community: Father Gabriel Ferone, "Le Curé"

This paper concentrates on the revival of an ecclesiastical parish in Turkey, especially with the arrival of the church's "Cure" Father, Gabriel Ferone. Thus, before addressing his contribution to the church's survival and the revitalization of the religious community, it is vital to trace the micro-history of the savior genealogically. Father Gabriel Juan Federico Ferone Solis was born in Canada to a Franco-Mexican family. During his childhood in the Paris region, he did not have an advanced Christian upbringing and worked in different fields for many years (i.e., the car industry). After completing his military service, he worked at a homeless shelter at night while working with a Catholic parish's youth during the day. This experience strengthened his faith and resulted in him entering Saint Sulpice's seminary in "Issy-les-Moulineaux." He decided to join the seminary during his trip to the Philippines for World Youth Day when the Pope called to evangelize places where Christians were minorities.

After four years in the diocese of Évry, he spent a year at a monastery in Southern France, where he found the purpose of his calling. He describes his decision as: "Turkey was natural for me because I already knew this country well and wanted to serve in a country which is the cradle of Christianity, especially a Muslim country where the church is almost absent."²¹ As stated during the interview, I conducted with Father Ferone. He chose the diocese of Izmir

21 Ediz Hazir, Interview with Gabriel Ferone (Izmir, February 2020).

because of the tomb of St. John and St Philip, the house of the Virgin Mary, and the fact that it is the most critical place for the Levantines in Turkey.

Father Ferone described the situation of Izmir's Catholic Church at the time of his arrival to Izmir as "The community was completely drained. There were no masses in English or Spanish. Most of the priests were not Turkophone. The Church operated as a Church in Italy, yet empty. The situation at Our Lady of Lourdes was even worse as there were only two to three people during Sunday masses. The Levantines, the foundation of the Latin community, were either assimilated or gone, while the priests didn't bother to welcome the Turks who were very interested in Christianity. Sometimes they were even treated rudely."²² Turks interested in Catholicism were former members of the Protestant Church. In contrast, others joined directly. An interviewee who is a native of Göztepe described the church building as a "wreck" until its restoration in the mid of the 2000s. Another parishioner I interviewed mentioned the absence of a permanent priest and the church being closed even after the repair. Thus, being part of Our Lady of Lourdes's community was nearly impossible.

Fr. Ferone's first "action" was to learn Turkish to celebrate the mass. When the Catholic clergy is compared to the Armenian or Greek Orthodox Church, the language barrier is more apparent. Greeks and Armenians have lived in Turkey for centuries and are better integrated into the Turkish population. Their grand majority speak, read and write Turkish. The priest's effort to learn Turkish was a turning point for the Turkish Catholics who spoke neither French nor English. The parish started to revive with NATO officers and their families from France and Spain. Therefore, French was accompanied by Spanish, Turkish, and English as the language of the Holy mass. The arrival of Europeans was followed by Francophone African students who came to Turkey with Turkish state scholarships. The number of Turks participating in the community's activities started to grow—all of the above created a multicultural parish consisting of or relating to people of many different nationalities (i.e., Spanish, French, Central African) and cultures (i.e., students from various African countries enriching the parish with their traditions and hymns in their dialects).

The masses increased from one Sunday morning to two on Sundays and two during the week.²³ Newcomers from all over Izmir doubled the number of parishioners. They relate the revival of the parish, particularly to Fr. Ferone's welcoming personality. Akan, a parishioner part of Our Lady of Lourdes

²² Ibid.

²³ For Mass Schedule See <https://ndlgoztepe.com/info-paroisses/>.

since 2013, describes Fr. Ferone as “a kind, humble and accepting towards all people.”²⁴ Another parishioner, Zeynep (part of the community of Izmir for over nine years), describes the priest as “an angel” thanks to whom “people started coming to Our Lady of Lourdes despite having a church in their neighborhood.”²⁵

While improving his Turkish, Father Ferone educated himself on Turkish society to serve his parish better. He read the Turkish newspapers daily and learned about how media describes Christian communities in Turkey. The news about the celebration of the first orthodox mass at the famous Sumela Monastery in Trabzon and the restoration of the world-famous Aght’amar (*Աղթամար*) Armenian Church by the government in Van encouraged him to continue his revivalist initiative in Izmir. The tolerance and support towards the religious minorities resulted from Turkey’s E.U. accession process as “protection of minorities is an area that needs improvement,” according to E.U. reports. Meanwhile, Our Lady of Lourdes Church kept receiving new visitors such as the youth groups from Cambrai, Lyon, Paris, former parishioners, and pilgrims passing through Turkey to visit Jerusalem. The pilgrimage through Anatolia dates back to the middle ages. After the house of the Virgin Mary’s discovery in Ephesus and the restoration of St. John the Apostle’s tomb in Selcuk and St. Paul’s house in Antioch, the road through Turkey became more popular among the pilgrims. With their constant participation, the church was crowded at each mass. “I have never had so many people at Mass, and I had to go eight times to visit Ephesus,” says Fr. Ferone during the interview I conducted with him in early 2020. This situation also benefitted the Turks, who discovered the younger and dynamic face of the Catholic Church. Turks were introduced to French, Spanish, and several African cultures participating in the life of a multiethnic community.

On every occasion, Fr. Ferone attempted to improve his knowledge of Christianity’s rich history in Asia Minor to be more beneficial to his parishioners from different backgrounds united under the same faith. In his first few years, he visited Bodrum (ancient Halicarnassus—Herodotus’ city), the temple of Artemis in Ephesus, the castle of the Knights of Rhodes, the ruins of “Cnide.” Also, he explored the remains of Byzantine churches and ancient Caria. He also visited Mount Ararat (Noah’s ark’s location), the Van region.²⁶ Fr. Ferone portrays his experience: “This area is hazardous. Many Protestants refugee from Iran and Afghanistan. It is a dangerous area; thus, the pastors (coming from

24 Ediz Hazir, Interview with Akan (Izmir, February 2020).

25 Ediz Hazir, Interview with Zeynep (Izmir, February 2020).

26 Capital of the Urartu kingdom of ancient Armenia.

South Korea) take turns and don't stay long as they avoid being identified as missionaries.'²⁷ Interpreting the political and social message of this letter of Fr. Ferone, one can understand that he was transmitting all this information to his parishioners so they could understand the value of secular Izmir.

According to the interviewees, Fr. Ferone interacts with people and is appreciated for his kindness and extrovert personality. He was even invited to the meal of Iftar by an association aimed to promote dialogue between religions. As the priest recalls, "In the room of 400 guests, we were the only Christians."²⁸ His hard work and devotion to the parish kept bearing their fruits. The first Christmas with the inclusion of the African students was marvelous as they created a wonderful choir. The majority of the African students came to Turkey for their bachelor's, master's, and doctoral studies in all study programs. "A total of 12,600 international students from 54 African countries have benefitted from the Turkey Scholarships since 2012."²⁹ The majority of the students prefer moving to Europe, the USA, or Canada rather than staying in Turkey after completing their degrees. The addition of the African students to the parish was exceptional as they were highly active. Father described this celebration as: "the first time the Turks experienced such celebration and were pleasantly surprised."³⁰ Around eleven languages were spoken during the mass, including African dialects like Lingala, Songo, and a tongue from Burkina Faso and Latin, French, Turkish, English, and Spanish. These were the first steps of the hymn album of Our Lady of Lourdes, published on November 23, 2017. The album, sung entirely in Turkish, was prepared by a Central African, Karl Kinguéléoua, with all parishioners (French, Africans, Turks).

This unprecedented cultural event promoted the importance of a strong connection among the parishioners. Since the beginning, the parishioners supported one another (i.e., providing the students with warm clothing, contributing to their meals) as they realized the necessity of keeping this parish alive. With the arrival of new military (NATO) families, "the number of French children have increased by fifty percent (currently 6),"—says Fr. Ferone. As a result, the church became more than a physical building. Besides his work at the church, Fr. Ferone was also helping the pilgrims visit the holy lands in Turkey. He accompanied them to the House of the Virgin Mary, the tomb of

27 Gabel Ferone, Letter (Izmir, July 2011).

28 Him and a foreign visitor.

29 Abdullah Eren, "Common future and gain in Turkey-Africa ties: Turkey Scholarships" *Daily Sabah* (Dec 18, 2021) <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/common-future-and-gain-in-turkey-africa-ties-turkey-scholarships>.

30 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2012).

John, and the cave of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (which is also a place of pilgrimage in Islam).³¹

The flourishing of Our Lady of Lourdes attracted other communities. Fr. Ferone welcomed a Lutheran congregation under a Finnish pastor to celebrate their mass. The pastor, who wanted to perform the service in a traditional church, had already contacted other catholic parishes, but Fr. Ferone was the only one who accepted his request. "I have agreed to welcome them, especially since they are Lutherans, more Catholic than many Catholics," said the priest with bitterness. "I wouldn't be in favor of sharing the same place for worship in France, but in Turkey, the Christians must show unity."³² The church's first choir was formed mainly by African students in 2013. The choir was a success during the Christmas celebrations. The interest of Muslim Turks in the Christmas mass was also an exception. "As always, the neighbors and the curious outnumbered the faithful," says Fr. Ferone. The success of the Christmas mass continued during the Holy Week. The participation of Spanish families in the Stations of the Cross with the arrival of Spanish and Turkish guitarists improved the quality of liturgies during the Easter period. An additional Mass was also added for the anglophone NATO soldiers. The missal chants were sung in French, Turkish, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. "Thanks to the internet, even Armenian and Russian readings were added to the sermons as my parish is very cosmopolitan!"³³

The tradition of the Sunday gatherings after the mass continued in the presbytery. The challenge was to find time to prepare the meal as the community grew. A Levantine, a friend of the Church and benefactor of African students, was occasionally helping to fund these meals. The volunteers did the cleaning of the church and the presbytery. Fr. Ferone was occupied by painting and doing other small reparations: "After Easter, I started doing a lot of work (i.e., repainting the building, ripping off dead trees and grass entangling the church). The garden became lovely with the purchase of numerous flowers and the creation of a small "Japanese garden" made of stones ..."³⁴ However, essential reparations were required due to large cracks in the ceiling. The diocese decided to use metal fortifications to prevent the roof from collapsing as Izmir is on an earthquake line. Other highlights of 2013 were creating the parish's first web-

31 In Christian tradition, the Seven Sleepers is the story of people who hid inside a cave outside Ephesus around 250 CE to escape religious persecution and reappeared after 300 years. See Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Seven-Sleepers-of-Ephesus>.

32 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2012).

33 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2013).

34 Ibid.

site, a new sound system, and above all, the purchase of the statue of Thérèse de Lisieux. All these were possible through the careful use of donations. Our Lady of Lourdes started hosting European pilgrims crossing Turkey on their way to Jerusalem. They were interacting with the parishioners. Thus this cultural exchange resulted in many Turkish parishioners going to Europe to explore the Christian culture under Fr. Ferone's guidance.

The two significant events for Izmir's Christians in 2013 were the opening of St. John's Cathedral after the Restoration which also serves as an Anglophones parish- and the opening of the First Greek Orthodox Church after 1922, which was regarded as a ray of hope for the return of the Orthodox Christianity in Izmir. In the meantime, Izmir kept growing as a city. The completion of the new metro (200 m from the parish) facilitated access to the church, especially for the African students forced to relocate far from the center after the Turkish government's decision to geographically separate the dorms where both male and female students resided together. The change in infrastructure caused by the natural gas pipes installed in the neighborhood weakened the church's foundation causing a severe threat after multiple cracks on the church's walls. Thus, the diocese funded installing a metal box inside the church to prevent the roof from collapsing. The church functioned under these circumstances until the amount required for the reparations was gathered. The archbishop, who witnessed the remarkable improvement of the multicultural parish within a few years, managed to find donors thanks to his contacts in Italy. An association of architects that works for the Vatican agreed to donate nearly 100.000 Euros (despite the expenses being 200,000). "We are now waiting for the approval of the Committee on Conservation of Cultural Assets in Turkey,"³⁵ says Fr. Ferone. Nevertheless, the situation of the building did not bother the parishioners as they were the church.

The reparations of the church began at the end of 2014. The State of the church and the bell tower was highly problematic, with significant cracks throughout the walls. Fortunately, the drainage system and concrete injections stabilized the building. "These modifications were completed without the official approval (as it still hasn't arrived) but had to be done due to safety reasons. The Turkish authorities complicated the task, and the fact that the Catholic Church isn't legally recognized made everything harder. The architect foresaw the total duration as one year, but the funding is only half-guaranteed since the aid promised by the Italian architect's association hasn't arrived. The money from the Italian Episcopal Conference only allowed the work to begin without

35 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2014).

knowing whether it would be complete. I don't worry much about it because the providence is there, but truthfully we continue our service under a threatening roof."³⁶ His genuine concern was the safety of two African students he allowed to live in the presbytery as the cracks were frightening.

Despite all the difficulties of 2015 (political and local), the community kept ameliorating. The number of children participating in catechism increased to almost thirty. Sunday mass was always full, while a Saturday mass was added. The choir functioned perfectly with the parishioners' English, French, Spanish, Latin, and African languages. "There is something for everyone, and it's wonderful,"—says the priest. These parishioners from various parts of the world united under their faith while putting their distinctions on the side were exemplary. Shortly after Easter, eight Turks were baptized at Our Lady of Lourdes. "Gradually, a Turkish Church is being born from almost nothing. There is an atmosphere of hope in the church of Izmir, which is in full renewal."³⁷ As a result of his hard work, Fr. Ferone was appointed as "Episcopal Vicar"³⁸ among thirteen priests. He received additional administrative responsibilities while replacing other priests in Izmir in case of need. He also continued to monitor the reparations at the church. The Vatican decided to cover the roofing expenses, which cost 53000 euros.

Despite the successful reparation of the church, many parishioners (primarily Spanish) still left due to the political situation in Turkey. However, Turkish catechumens (a convert to Christianity receiving training in doctrine and discipline before baptism) increased. The chores at the parish were very tiresome for the priest. Therefore, he asked his Bishop in Paris to support him in hiring someone to do the cleaning, cooking, etc., as this would allow him to concentrate on his work.

Fr. Ferone's ongoing dedication to the church promoted the flourishing of the parish through 2018. The priest performed three adult baptisms (around twenty overalls in Izmir). The addition of new Turkish catechumens, five confirmations from the Francophone community, five weddings, group studies, and the weekly *Tridentine Mass* for a group of young Turks (not baptized yet) enriched the parish. The conversion to Christianity is not popular among Turks as the Christians (throughout the centuries) were presented as the enemy. The other denominations (i.e., the Orthodox Church) are cautious and discreet about this drive among the Turks. Conversion to Christianity as a Muslim–Turk

36 Ibid.

37 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2016).

38 A priest acting as deputy to a bishop to assist him in the administration of his diocese.

is an unusual step out of social normalcy in Turkey. However, since the mid-2000s, approximately 200 Turks have been baptized in Izmir.

Moreover, a small group of mothers from different nationalities started organizing “prayer days.” Our Lady of Lourdes’ first-ever album sung by parishioners entirely in Turkish was published in November 2017. Since the Catholic liturgical repertoire in the Turkish language is quite poor, this work will probably be a little extra stone for more inculturation and help Turkish Christians pray in their language through inspired songs that carry beauty. The adaptation of Christian liturgy to a non-Christian cultural background is conflicting. Therefore, having access to the Gospel, hymns, catechism in the mother tongue increases the chances of understanding the teaching. Turkey referred to as “the Holy Land of the Church,” was where the Christian community, particularly Antioch and Ephesus, became conscious of her identity and consolidated her growth.

Moreover, the New Testament is formed of writings that originated and addressed to its Christians. Furthermore, the land of Turkey was also crucial for the first evangelization of the Slavs through Saints Cyril and Methodius. The only way for inculturation was with the proper transition of the knowledge by using the correct language. According to John Paul II, “A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.”³⁹

“Since the church naturally speaks all the languages, everyone who participates in the mass can understand each other and praise the only Lord,” says Fr. Ferone describing his joy. October 2018 was prime time for Fr. Ferone as he went to Prague for the annual meeting of worldwide Francophone communities to present his parish, which he described as “a great success!”⁴⁰ His presentation on the church with videos and pictures served as an example of the successful rebirth of the community despite all the hindrances the Catholic church faced in a non-Christian environment, which gave hope to the churches in countries where the Christians experience difficulties, even receive threats. However, the restrictions on freedom of speech and threat to secularity caused the decrease of foreign parishioners and Catholic Africans (as the government mostly approved the scholarship for Muslim Africans). Gladly the Turks’ growth was stable. “I have about ten new Turkish catechumens this year. Last Sunday,

39 “Address of his Holiness John Paul II to the plenary assembly of the pontifical council for culture” (Consistory Hall March 18, 1994). https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1994/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_18031994_address-to-pc-culture.html.

40 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, November 2018).

the mass in Turkish was full. I had never seen it like this,”—says the priest.⁴¹ Fr. Ferone also strengthened his ties to France. The archbishop of Lyon visited Izmir for the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and informed Fr. Ferone about the future visit of forty people from the seminary of St Irenaeus of Lyon as he will guide them. Despite the decrease in parishioners, the average participation was still thirty to forty people during celebrations in 2019. The Europeans usually come to Izmir with a three-year contract. Therefore, every three years, there is a change in their number. However, the number of pilgrims joining the community increased after the de-valorization of the Turkish Lira. After months of administrative complications, Fr. Ferone finally received his work permit, facilitating his international travels. He also managed to receive donations from the Saint Irenaeus Foundation, allowing him to change the washer, fix toilets, buy a new computer to replace the stolen one, change the furniture and reorganize the garden with the help of an African student.

The highlight of 2019 was the permission from the authorities in Ankara to celebrate the Saturday Mass in Çeşme, where the Levantines spend their summers. In previous years the mass was celebrated in a Levantine's home. However, the attitude towards Christians changed after specific events (i.e., After the release of U.S. pastor Andrew Brunson, certain foreigners blamed for the coup attempt). Thus, a new place had to be found for the mass. Fr. Ferone took the responsibility and applied to the town hall for permission to use the ancient Greek Cathedral located in the center of Çeşme. Local authorities granted permission on August 15, 2019, the day of the feast of the Annunciation. It was like a gift from the Virgin Mary. The first mass in Çeşme was celebrated with 60 Levantines (a significant number for Turkey). “I went with the archbishop to thank the authorities of Çeşme (the municipality and the prefect) for their kindness to lay the groundwork for our next request for next year. It doesn't sound like much, but it's an unexpected victory!”—says Fr. Ferone. A Turkish restaurateur allowed Fr. Ferone to celebrate a mass at the old Greek chapel located inside the walls of his establishment in Bodrum all year round without demanding anything in return.

The efforts of Fr. Ferone in reviving Our Lady of Lourdes were successful. At his arrival, the priest who did not have any expectations has managed to turn a “lost cause” into an exemplary parish. His kindness and helpfulness combined with his extrovert personality built a multicultural parish formed of Europeans, Africans, Turks, pilgrims, and Levantines. Parishes in Europe

⁴¹ Ibid.

admired this success, were awarded by the Catholic Church and were taken as an example by local parishes in Turkey. However, his mission has been facing multiple difficulties, and without acknowledging them, it would be impossible to appreciate his persistence and consistency in keeping Our Lady of Lourdes alive.

5 The Obstacles Faced by the Community of Parishioners in Izmir

Izmir is known as “The pearl of the Aegean, and it is one of the most multi-cultural places in Turkey. Another “nickname” for Izmir is “the Stronghold of the Republic” because, despite the backsliding in democracy and the Islamization of the country, Izmir preserved its secular core. This State of affairs allows its citizens to freely express their religious and political beliefs. However, in the last two decades, the backsliding in democracy greatly affected Izmir. Thus, the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes was also influenced by political, social, and economic alternations.

One of the significant events concerning Turkey’s Christians was Luigi Padovese’s murder. Padovese was the Vicar Apostolic of Anatolia and President of the Turkish Bishops’ Conference in İskenderun (former Alexandretta) in June 2010. His driver brutally beheaded monseigneur Padovese. The officials announced the bishop’s murder as a solo act of the mentally unstable driver. “The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said that the Vatican understood that the killing did not have a “political” motivation, but that the assailant was a man of Kurdish origin who had worked as a driver for the bishop and of late had shown signs of “unbalance” and “depression.”⁴² The convict’s lawyer also defended his client by saying that “he had a mental health condition” despite him saying that he killed Padovese for being the dajjal (antichrist)”⁴³ It should be noted that attacks towards clergy members happened before: e.g., in Samsun, the Catholic priest Pierre Brunissen was stabbed; Catholic priest, Father Andrea Santoro was murdered in Trabzon in 2006. Assassin detained as a suspect in Brunissen’s stabbing and Santoro’s murder were diagnosed with schizophrenia, making them suspects in crimes committed by a legally incompetent person who has a mental disease. In short, attacks

42 Rachel Donadio, “Catholic Bishop Stabbed in Turkey” *The New York Times* (June 3, 2010). <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/04/world/europe/04bishop.html>.

43 DHA, “Piskopos cinayeti zanlısı tutuklandı” *Hürriyet* (June 4, 2010). <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/piskopos-cinayeti-zanlisi-tutuklandi-14930010>.

against Christians have been seen as isolated incidents, especially after people with mental illnesses appeared as suspects.⁴⁴

In the meantime, the murder of the bishop raised hard questions related to the position of Christianity in Turkey. Turkey has been a secular country with no official religion since the constitutional amendment in 1928 and was later strengthened by Atatürk's Reforms and the appliance of laicism in 1937. Therefore it is capable of protecting religious minorities and fostering dialogue with the West, but the recent events show the opposite. As a result, Father Ferone expressed his anxiety by positing, "Since then, Catholic communities have become even more closed in on themselves. I am more cautious and open the church less."⁴⁵ The issue related to the security of the Christians is about personal attacks, backsliding in democracy, oppression over the freedom of expression, and human rights. Thus, Fr. Ferone doesn't conceal the "reality" of his profession's difficulty.

Another issue that worried the priest was specific political taboos, such as the Armenian Massacres of 1915, which are very difficult to address in Turkey. Such topics and "unwanted" memories about the past increase nationalist feelings despite the complete lack of knowledge of what happened. Misinformation and ignorance can be easily seen when the subject is the part of history Turkey wishes to forget. In this vein, in 2012, France attempted to criminalize the denial of the Armenian genocide. The French Senate has approved a controversial bill that makes it a criminal offense to deny that Ottoman Turks committed genocide against Armenians during the First World War.⁴⁶ However, a new French law making it a crime to publicly deny the Ottoman Empire's genocide of Armenians a century ago was ruled unconstitutional Tuesday by France's Constitutional Council.⁴⁷ French citizens who lived and worked in Turkey had a probability of facing problems with Turkish authorities following the conflict with France regarding the controversy over the penalization of the denial of the Armenian genocide.⁴⁸ Thus, Fr. Ferone was obliged to return to France to obtain a formal work visa he didn't need until then. "A week before

44 "Cinayet ört bas mı ediliyor ?/ O Rahip ne demisti?" *OdaTv* (June, 4 2010). https://odatv4.com/guncel/o-rahip-ne-soylemisti-*0406101200-10579.

45 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2010).

46 "French Senate passes Armenian genocide law" *BBC* (January 23, 2012). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16677986>.

47 The CNN Wire Staff, "French court overturns Armenian genocide denial law" *CNN* (February 12, 2012). <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/28/world/europe/france-armenia-genocide/index.html>.

48 "La France adopte la loi sur le génocide arménien" *France Culture* (January 24, 2012). <https://www.franceculture.fr/politique/la-france-adopte-la-loi-sur-le-genocide-armenien>.

the Feast of the Palms, I was summoned to the Ministry of the Interior Affairs' Izmir office, where I was given a week to leave Turkey. The intervention of the Vice Consul of France allowed me to extend this period until the first Monday after Easter,"⁴⁹ says Fr. Ferone describing the situation. Moreover, after completing all the formalities, he returned to Izmir, which took about two years.

The period away from my parish was like an exile in my home country.⁵⁰

The backsliding in democracy and minority rights continued. Saint Sophie of Trabzon and the church where the council of Nicaea⁵¹ took place were transformed into Mosques despite being used as museums. The rumors about the conversion of Saint Sophie to a Mosque finally became a reality in 2021. All these events harmed Izmir's Catholic Church. Fr. Ferone narrates: "the situation of the Catholic Church in Izmir is as difficult as ever. No priest is now in Karşıyaka (Cordélio) since the hardworking Dominican priest left the parish. The archbishop will retire in September, so there will be a lot of movement within the Church in Izmir. My Bishop in France approved the extension of my contract, but I do not know how much longer it will be, probably 2 or 3 more years ..."⁵²

The Islamization of the country became more tangible in public life. The convicts of the "Zirve Publishing house massacre" were released after five years of imprisonment. This decision gravely concerned the Christians in Turkey.⁵³ The Baptist pastor of Buca was monitored night and day by the police.⁵⁴ Verbal attacks have also occurred in three Catholic churches "... recently, including mine for the first time, but I was not present, they assaulted a young Christian parishioner."⁵⁵ The fear of the Christians continued to grow deeper with the threats made by Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists (i.e., Charlie Hebdo shooting) addressed French nationals. "The police, at our request, comes during the Sunday morning mass. I made a similar request for the evening mass, but only a few patrols were permitted," says Fr. Ferone. "Bizarre and potentially dangerous youth groups have also been circling the church for some time. The Christians

49 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2012).

50 Ibid.

51 The first Christian ecumenical council AD 325.

52 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2014).

53 "Cemaat'ten ikinci hamle" *Oda Tv* (March 8, 2014). <https://odatv4.com/guncel/zirve-katille-ri-de-tahliye-edildi-0803141200-55083>.

54 A district in Izmir.

55 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2014).

in my parish were afraid and urged me to call the police. We are now more careful, and the church is mostly closed,” adds the priest.

On top of the struggles above, 2015 was probably one of the most problematic years for Turkey. Unexpected terror attacks committed by ISIS and Kurdish separatists in Istanbul and Ankara, the war in the eastern part of Turkey against PKK, and the conflicts at the Syrian border were among the perturbations. In 2016 the fear increased after the terror attack killing twelve German tourists in Sultanahmet. Additionally, the political conflict with Russia created after Turkey shot down the Russian jet on November 24, 2015, and the assassination of the Russian ambassador in 2016 seriously affected tourism. Since then, the Turkish–Russian relationship was on a knife’s edge. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, who visited Moscow in 2018, defined “Russia as a strategic partner,” shocking NATO allies. However, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov described Turkey as “a strategic partner of Moscow.” The Russo-Turkish conflict in Syria and Libia continued with the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and escalated with Turkey’s support to Ukraine. Thus, Russia stopped all charter flights to Turkey on April 13, 2021.

The consequences of the coup attempt in the aftermath of the parliament’s bombing, capture attempt of the president, and shooting civilians in Istanbul and Ankara aggravated the situation further. The coup attempt organized by the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) / Parallel State Organization (PDY) on July 15, 2016, resulted in the death of 251 citizens, and 2196 citizens were wounded.

Fr. Ferone indicates a growing concern within the parish: “Everyone is horrified and wondering where the country is going. What if the situation gets worse? The U.S. military in Izmir’s NATO base has already evacuated their families. Moreover, the increasingly egregious attacks on freedom of expression following the coup are also problematic. The climate of insecurity caused all churches in Turkey to limit their practices. Churches are also closely monitored by the police. Some Christians avoided the uncertainty of going to church on Sundays, and some of the faithful evaporated into the wild waiting for better days.”⁵⁶

The refugee crisis resulting from the Syrian conflict started to affect Turkey in 2015. According to the officials, Syrians in Izmir reached around 150,000 in 2018 (approximately 3.5%). This number does not include the unregistered refugees using Izmir as a gateway to Europe. In Izmir, the Catholic Church experienced difficult times with the accusations of converting Muslim refugees to ease their

⁵⁶ Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2016).

passage to Europe. This false accusation forced the church to no longer accommodate refugees as a precaution. Misinformation increased the risk of the church being exposed to the possibility of harm from the Muslim radicals. “Fortunately, the police are aware of the situation and secures Churches during Mass while daily monitoring the archdiocese and the cathedral.”

The political tension with France kept bringing other complications. Even though Fr. Ferone had his Turkish residence permit, he still faced difficulties returning from France. “When I returned from France at the end of December, on Christmas Eve, I almost couldn’t return home. The airline refused to take me onboard without a return ticket or a valid work visa. I had to pay a fine to get out of the country, and when I got back, I was wondering if I was going to pass the customs.”⁵⁷ The complication was nothing but the diplomatic tension between France and Turkey; as of right before, the French government refused the entry of twenty imams to France. On Tuesday, February 18, Emmanuel Macron announced the gradual end of “detached imams,” regularly criticized.⁵⁸ He expressed his concern over the “Islam Consulaire,” which is the dependence of the Imams to their countries of origin, especially Turkey, amid an authoritarian and Islamist drift.⁵⁹ Macron argued that these imams were neither francophone nor familiar with the French culture and social context. As a retaliation, The French clergy faced problems receiving a work visa for Turkey. Fr. Ferone could re-enter Turkey thanks to his residence permit.

In addition to the above-described issues, the church has constantly faced such problems as theft and pillage. Theft is a common issue faced by religious institutions. Unfortunately, it became ordinary for Our Lady of Lourdes; each time the priest went abroad, something was missing upon his return in the premises of the church: “On my return from Europe, I had had the most unpleasant surprise of seeing several robberies in my church, which had repeated multiple times before, despite the precautions as if the thieves were aware of my absence.”⁶⁰

57 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2019).

58 Connexion Journalist, “Macron announces measures against ‘Islamic separatism’” *The Connexion* (February, 2020). <https://www.connexionfrance.com/French-news/Macron-announces-new-measures-to-fight-against-Islamic-separatism-including-education-and-new-rules-on-Imams>.

59 Mélinée Le Priol, “À Mulhouse, Emmanuel Macron affiche sa fermeté contre le “séparatisme islamiste”” *La Croix* (February 18, 2020). <https://www.la-croix.com/France/A-Mulhouse-Emmanuel-Macron-affiche-fermete-contre-separatisme-islamiste-2020-02-18-1201079114>.

60 Ferone, Letter (Izmir, 2018).

New cameras were installed as a means of theft prevention, and the locks were changed. Unfortunately, this did not rectify the situation. The last theft substantially damaged the Church: The Holy Sacrament, the oil of the sick, a cap, the relics of St. Vincent de Paul, a small statue of Our Lady of Lourdes were stolen. The Lutheran community, which uses the church for service, suffered as their safe was emptied. "Similar to the previous years, the church was robbed again during my trip to France. My computer (for the second time) and a valuable icon of the Annunciation were stolen."⁶¹ The thieves were identified from the security cameras, but the only relief was that they weren't from the parishioners. Nevertheless, these hindrances did not prevent the parish from being active and alive.

The theft was the least of the problems for the Roman Catholic communities in Turkey compared to the political polarization and attacks on human rights. Many Christians, especially of foreign origin, left the country. The number of priests decreased. According to Fr. Ferone: "My parish has lost many of its faithful, and this is particularly noticeable this year, but we should be patient as after death comes resurrection. We are expecting newcomers, but it might not compensate the departures." The number of communities forming the parish has significantly declined, especially after the coup occurred in 2015. The foreign military officers stopped bringing their families to Izmir; African students, the driving force of the parish, lost their scholarships and returned to their country. Thus, the choir weakened, and "a Senegalese lady currently provides the liturgy of the Mass, but she knows only Gregorian and the French repertoire, so I am obliged to sing the Turkish part, which is not practical when you have to incense at the same time."⁶² While still being present, Christian Turks chose to go abroad for work or studies if possible. As a result, the priest represents the only element of stability at Our Lady of Lourdes.

At the same time, the difficulties in maintaining the growth of the community were not caused only by the outside circumstances but also by internal ones. Turkish Catholics were expressing concern with regards to the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Turks they particularly stressed the skepticism of the clergy towards the newcomers. The church's passivity was an obstacle lying in front of the community's growth. Catholic Church was often compared with the Protestant Church (comparison was not in favor of the Catholic Church). The protestant church in Turkey is very active. Interviewees mentioned the recruitment efforts of the protestants by inviting the Turks into their

61 Ferone, Letter, (Izmir, 2019).

62 Ibid.

churches or distributing bibles in the streets. The Turks expect the same from the Catholic Church, but firstly, the protestant churches are independent and face fewer problems with the authorities. Secondly, considering the Catholic Church's struggles in Turkey (i.e., confiscation of properties), it is understandable why she cautiously remains in their buildings. Inculturation is also challenging due to extreme peer pressure within traditional Turkish families.

The political atmosphere in Turkey is closely related to the treatment of Christians. Mgr. Padovese expressed his distress to the National Catholic Reporter in October 2006 about the anti-Christian climate in Turkey. "Politicians and some media groups created a systematic anti-Christianity," said Padovese. He also mentioned preparing a newsletter collecting derogatory expressions against Christians in the media. The Hrant Dink Foundation is also conducting the "Monitoring Hate Speech in the Media" project since 2009. The general purpose of their task is to contribute to the fight against racism and discrimination in Turkey. Their study aims to strengthen respect for human rights and differences in the media, draw attention to discriminatory language and hate speech against people or groups targeted for specific identity characteristics, and raise awareness of this issue, considering the importance of civilian control media.⁶³

On the other hand, the church faces problems within itself; as Fr. Ferone points out, "The church's main problem in Izmir is the absence of local diocesan clergy and Turkish priests. Most priests move a lot and mainly focus on their religious community, while diocesan priests remain in their parish. Also, the necessity of local priests who can express themselves in Turkish while understanding the Turkish culture and local mentality is obvious." The Catholic Church was and is still a foreign institution. However, overcoming the difficulties starts within the church and the clergy. A hardworking and welcoming church can face all struggles despite the incalculable politics in Turkey.

6 Conclusion

In Turkey, the Roman Catholic Church continues to have an uncertain future as it lacks official recognition of the legal status since the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Non-Muslim minorities were protected under the relevant articles of the

63 "Medyada Nefret Soyleminin Izlenmesi" *ASULİS Dil, Diyalog, Demokrasi Laboratuvarı, Hrant Dink Vakfı* (Istanbul, 2009). <https://hrantdink.org/tr/asulis/faaliyetler/projeler/medyada-nefret-soylemi/256-medyada-nefret-soyleminin-izlenmesi>.

treaty of Lausanne. The League of the Nations (articles were not to be modified without the majority's decision) guaranteed their protection. Communities, considered minorities (Greeks, Armenians, Jews), assumed they would maintain their privileges. However, before the Civil Code entered into force in 1926, the Turkish government forced the minorities to form commissions to deal with minority issues. The pressure of the Turkish State on these commissions resulted in minorities giving up their rights based on Lausanne. The Jewish community (September 10, 1925), followed by the Armenian community, and on November 27, 1925, the Greek Orthodox (Rum) community abandoned their rights stemming from Article 42 of the Treaty of Lausanne. Thus, the last remnants of the Ottoman Empire regarding the non-Muslim minorities were removed, and minorities who could not claim any special concessions were legally Turkified.⁶⁴ Therefore the Treaty of Lausanne was not a guarantee for Turkey's non-Muslim communities.

The survival of small parishes is crucial for the church's survival in the cradle of Christianity. From the Roman Empire to the Byzantine Empire, Ottoman Empire, and Modern Turkey, Christianity has not experienced such obstacles. It faces extinction unless the communities start showing a significant change.

Therefore, the robust revival of Our Lady of Lourdes' multicultural Roman Catholic community (Notre Dame de Lourdes) after the arrival of the church's "Curé" Father Gabriel Ferone is significant. The revival of Our Lady of Lourdes results from people from different backgrounds (i.e., Europeans, African students, Turks from different beliefs) moving to Izmir and uniting under the same parish. Our Lady of Lourdes—having French as its primary language—is the living example of what Izmir used to be before the Turkish war of Independence (in 1922): a mosaic of civilizations and cultures which gave Izmir its nickname Gâvur (Infidele) Izmir.

The revival, the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, is understood differently by all these people who form the community of Our Lady of Lourdes. It is regarded as serving God in a country where Christians are a minority by Fr. Ferone, while it is a shelter for the African students who came to Turkey for a better life and education. It is a connection to their countries for European Catholics as Turkey is a Muslim country by the majority. It is a place of freedom for the Christian Turks to follow their spiritual journey without being judged. Moreover, it is a place of worship for all of them. The only way to prevent unfor-

64 Rinaldo Marmara, *Istanbul Latin Cemaati ve Kilisesi*. [Istanbul's Latin Community and its Church] (Istanbul, 2006), 183.

tunate events is to continue the dialogue between religious communities and educate the population, as ignorance is always the basis of these acts.

Finally, the unity of this diverse community does not just strengthen the Catholic Church and secure its future but gives hope to other Christian communities. People from different cultural backgrounds gather under the roof of Our Lady of Lourdes sets an example for all religious minority groups who suffer from segregation. It shows that the key to perseverance is success in cohabitation while putting our differences aside. Father Gabriel Ferone gave a new lease of life to an abandoned parish. His success, acknowledged by local and foreign authorities and religious communities, results from his hard work and love for all.