

Daniel Łukasz Kita<sup>1</sup>

University of Warsaw, Poland  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7296-6746>

## Catholic mosaic of the town of Szczepieszyn: community dynamics in a historical melting pot of cultures

### Introduction

Catholicism, as the dominant religion in the Republic of Poland, has a deep-rooted presence also at the local level. Its manifestations and functions, along with the changing discourse around religious culture, are undergoing significant transformations under the influence of changing historical and social contexts. Szczepieszyn, as a town with a centuries-old, multiethnic and multicultural tradition, provides a unique field for research on the evolution of the presence of Catholic culture – both symbolically and structurally. In light of the ongoing processes of individualization of religious practices, secularization, or pluralization of worldviews, the manifestations of local Catholic identity are being reevaluated, which poses the question of the status of this community – both in symbolic and contemporary terms.

This article seeks to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of the historical presence and the Catholic transformation in Szczepieszyn, which has led the residents to the present day, with Orthodox and Judaic culture continuing for a great while. The author adopts a diachronic-sociological approach, which allows not only to grasp the variability of the Catholic experience in Szczepieszyn, but also to diagnose its current relevance in the social consciousness of the residents of the town. The thesis of the article is to ascertain the influence of the Catholic religion on the life of the residents of the town of Szczepieszyn. The research questions raised for the workshop, on the other hand, are aimed at obtaining answers to the following questions: 1) How was the presence and role of Catholics in the religious and social life of Szczepieszyn shaped?, and 2) Is the contemporary identification of residents in religious terms more of a religious or cultural-identity nature?

### Methods

The methodology used in this article is based on a research approach aimed at obtaining a multifaceted view of the issue. This article attempts an integrated treatment of the dimensions of the local level of Catholic culture in Szczepieszyn, such as: 1) a historical

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence address: e-mail: [dl.kita@student.uw.edu.pl](mailto:dl.kita@student.uw.edu.pl)

reconstruction of the presence of Catholic culture in the town, and 2) an empirical analysis of the social perception of the town's residents on the issue of Catholic culture. The empirical part of the research concerns a public perception survey conducted in the period July-October 2024, on a sample of 352 adult residents of the town of Szczecbrzeszyn.

### **Catholic human – a short description**

The Catholic community in Poland is currently the largest religious group, strongly linked to the national identity both historically and culturally. Their affiliation is based on recognition of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, whose structure in the country is organized in a diocesan-parochial system (Dziobek-Romański, 2000: 41-48). It is worth noting that in the context of Polishness, Catholics play not only a social role, but also a symbolic one, being often identified with the cultural heritage and national identity.

Referring to the historical background, Catholicism was officially conducted to the lands of the Polish kingdom with the baptism of Mieszko I in 966 (Mironowicz, 2017: 39-46). It is noteworthy that from that moment on it played a fundamental role not only in religious terms, but also in political and cultural terms, including education. In the centuries that followed, Catholicism shaped the model of collective life, social norms and symbolic power structures, resulting in the “Christian citizens” of the Republic (Deszczyńska, 2021: 42-48).

Catholics in Poland are a religious group that identifies with the teachings and structure of the Roman Catholic Church, whose official centre is the Holy See in Rome. The denomination is based on the recognition of Christian dogmas, with elementary importance attributed to the authority of Pope as the Head of the universal Church (Liszka, 2016: 59-69). It is characteristic of Catholicism to refer to the tradition of the sacraments, the hierarchical structure of the Church, as well as the cult of the saints or Mary (Baczyński, 2017: 170-175). Moreover, in sociological terms, Catholics can be seen both as a community and as a carrier of cultural values or social norms rooted in a given society (Ogorzelec, 2022: 96-108).

The contemporary category of Catholic society, however, is not homogeneous, as it includes people who both strongly identify with the teachings of the Church and those for whom the Catholic faith is merely cultural or identity-based.

### **The dawn of faith: the formation of spiritual foundations before the 14th century**

There is no documented account of the exact time Christianity came to Szczecbrzeszyn. Throughout Poland's thousand-year history, its Christianization was resisted by its inhabitants due to the centuries-old Slavic faith of the fathers, and with the introduction of a new religion the Slavic culture was destroyed, as well as a new way of life was im-

posed on Poles (Kołodziejczyk, 2022: 28-29). However, in 886-885 in Poland, thanks to the mission of Cyril and Methodius, the Slavic rite was introduced in the Great Moravian state, as evidenced by the baptism of the prince of Vistula, as well as the survival of the Slavic rite in Malopolska (Łepkowski, 1973: 777).

In 966, the Baptism of Poland took place. This was the time when Latin culture, as well as the ferment of the Gospel, began to affect the lives of the Slavs, to whom the state and the Polish nation belonged (Kałwa, Rechowicz, 1969: 13). In addition, the followers of Christ were already finding their way into Slavic areas, long before the official baptism of Poland (Łepkowski, 1973: 777). At that time, pagan beliefs persisted in the periphery, especially in the wooded areas, remaining strong until the end of the Middle Ages (Kołodziejczyk, 2014: 16).

In 1037, there was a popular uprising against the new church and the mighty, resulting in the interruption of the Christianization of Poland (Łepkowski, 1973: 778). Indeed, this shows the variability of confessional affiliation depending on the dominant religious influences, as well as the geopolitical context. In 1054, rivalry between bishops reinforcing differences in culture, language, social, political and economic conditions, led to a rupture of the Church's unity and a split of it into Roman and Byzantine. Since then, Eastern Christianity took the name of Orthodoxy and Western Christianity of Catholicism, resulting in the liturgy being held in the national language in the Orthodox Church and in Latin in the Roman Catholic Church (Przysada, 2014: 105-106).

The analysis of historical conditions indicates that as early as the 12th or 13th century in Szczepieszyn, the first masonry temple was built on a hill on the north side as a Catholic church dedicated to the Holy Spirit, which was handed over to the Orthodox believers and converted into an Orthodox church (Przysada, 2017: 28). According to Aleksandr Przysada, the first church dedicated to Our Lady of Uspieniya did not mean that there had not already existed a parish church in 1194 along with a Vatican contact for about 100 years back (Przysada, 2014: 106). This would indicate the early rooting of Christian structures in the area. Moreover, the local ecclesiastical organization was able to function within the orbit of papal jurisdiction, which weaves Szczepieszyn into the broader process of peripheral integration of the Central and Eastern European regions with the institutional centre of the Roman Catholic Church. This is because it gave a universalist religious order of Western Christianity. The Catholic population, due to the influx of the Orthodox population and their occupation of the church, built themselves a wooden church dedicated to Our Lady of Szczepieszyn or Grodoczerwińska, as it was very well known in southeastern Poland until the 16th century, which was forgotten with the construction of the new church (Przysada, 1997: 17). Indeed, it testifies to the local population's need to preserve their religious identity and the parallel coexistence of religious traditions in the urban space. Moreover, it speaks to the importance of Szczepieszyn as a regional centre of Catholic worship and the aspirations of the community to consolidate its presence in the town's religious landscape.

### **The Golden Age of Initiation: the 14th century as an era of strengthening the Catholic presence**

After the Church of Our Lady of Szczebzeszyn (Grodocerwieńska) burned down, the town's owner, Dmitry of Goraya, built a new church dedicated to St. Nicholas in Szczebzeszyn (Przysada, 2014: 107), with John, called Rector, as its first pastor (Przysada, 1997: 18). The burning of the church did not halt the development of Catholicism in Szczebzeszyn. This testifies to the local elite's strong commitment to the perpetuation and expansion of the Latin Christianity in the region. Situated on the upper Wieprz River, Szczebzeszyn served as a town during the time it belonged to the Halicko-Vłodzimierski Duchy. The evidence of this can be found in a document recorded in King Casimir the Great's detention formula of August 23, 1352, *Actum prope Szczebressyrto oppido ruthenicali* (Szczygieł, 2004: 195).

A parish school and a Catholic library were established at the founded church resulting in a great influence of the Szczebzeszyn church on the Czerwieńskie Grody, and ultimately shaping, recovering, restoring and consolidating the Catholic national identity of the population living in the lands (Przysada, 1997: 18). The town's history proves that the Catholic religion already occupied an important part in the life of the inhabitants in the 14th century, as evidenced by the reconstruction of the temple. The establishment of a school and a library there was an important intellectual and formative centre, whose influence went beyond the town, affecting the development of the entire Czerwieńskie Grody. Due to the deprivation of pastoral care through the town's affiliation with the Chełm diocese, Dmitri and his relatives asked Archbishop Jacob Trepa, in view of the pastoral neglect of Catholics and the lack of apostolic work among the Ruthenians leaning toward Orthodoxy, to incorporate the Szczebzeskie district into the Halych archdiocese and establish a Szczebzeszyn parish. The result was that their request was granted, despite the considerable distance of the Szczebzeszyn domain from the Halych archdiocese (Przysada, 1999: 74). Indeed, this was a key step in strengthening the Catholic community as an administrative organization in the region, ensuring its stability and the support of the Church hierarchy.

In 1397 and 1398, the town's magnate marked the parish's endowment with two documents, as well as led to the establishment of the parish (Krasny, 1999: 18-50). Through these activities, including attention to the Church organization, Dmitri contributed to strengthening the Catholic structure in the region. Providing better conditions for religious and educational activities is part of giving social order in the name of the greater civic good. On January 16, 1398, at the request of Dmitri, Trepa incorporated the Szczebzeszyn district into his archdiocese (Bieńkowski, 1961: 190). In 1398, he consecrated the church in honour of St. Nicholas as a good patron for a temple located at the confluence of two cultures, which, according to Marek Walczak, were merged by Dmitri as the two worlds of the Ruthenian and Latin culture. These actions marked an im-

portant stage in the consolidation in the local Church structure, strengthening both the economic stability of the parish and the administrative part of it. It also shows a lasting integration into the Church system in the surrounding lands. It is possible that during the visits of Bishop Strepa and the Vicar General of the Order in Rus, Leonardo, the matter of a convent of Friars Minor was taken up (Krasny, 1999: 19). During their stay there, a decision was made to bring the Franciscans to the town and to fund a monastery and church for them (Stankova, 1975: 23). The Franciscans brought by Dmitri to Szczepieszyn were to help him settle and develop the town, which was devastated by invasions and wars. They occupied the wooden Holy Trinity Church and the monastery buildings (Lawera, Bata, 2001: 10). The initiative was aimed at intensifying religious life. The development of pastoral activities, as well as the strengthening of the presence of the monastic structure in the structure of the town, constituted an important evangelization element, which may be indicative of the formation strategy of the Church in the border lands.

### **Messengers of peace: the Franciscans and spiritual renewal of the 14th and 15th centuries**

Inn 1400, the Franciscans began their activities in the Holy Trinity Church, which, along with the monastery, was founded by Dmitri in 1393 (Przysada, 1998: 7). This foundation was an expression of respect, as well as elite support, for monastic life, and was important for strengthening the Catholic presence in the town. This contributed to the expansion of the Catholic model in Szczepieszyn. According to Przysada, thanks to the activities of the Franciscan Order and the Roman Catholic Church, Szczepieszyn, considered a Ruthenian town for centuries in association with the Ruthenian Orthodox Church, acquired a Polish character (Przysada, 1998: 7). This was manifested in the strengthening and spread of the Polish language in liturgy and education, as well as in the integration of the town with the broader religious-national processes taking place in the lands of the Kingdom of Poland. This was also conditioned by Queen Jadwiga Andegawenska's supporting the Franciscan Order, which conducted missionary activities in Ruthenia, as well as getting to know the Franciscans during her trip to the Hungarian court with Dmitri (Przysada, 2017: 39). Showing the magnate her support confirms the town's inclusion in the monarchy's broader strategy aimed at propagating the Catholic culture in the eastern lands. In addition, the monarchy's involvement was political in nature, as it strengthened Christianity in the border lands, integrating the community into the local Latin cultural circle.

Moreover, under the rule of Bishop Jan Biskupiec, the Szczepieszyn parish became part of the Chełm diocese in the second quarter of the 14th century, remaining its status practically until the end of the 18th century (Przysada, 1999: 75). The result of the reorganization was elementary for the further institutional development of the parish.

What is more, the change contributed to a better integration of the society, along with increased activity among pastoralists in the borderlands.

It is also worth mentioning that it is elementary that at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, the new owner of the town, Aleksander Tarnowski, brought Jews to Szczebrzeszyn due to the economic benefits (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, 2011: 9). It follows that the town, having a Catholic (including Franciscans), Orthodox and Jewish population, was still open religiously.

### **Reformation episode: Catholics facing the Calvinization of the local community**

According to Walczak, the parish was of immense importance to the surrounding lands, encompassing 27 settlements in 1564 (Krasny, 1999: 19). The parish priest of Szczebrzeszyn was Herbut Walenty, who was famous in his time fighting the Reformation as a deputy of the Kingdom of Poland to the Council of Trent in 1545-1563 (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, 2011: 30). Indeed, this testifies to the developed territorial structure, as well as the wide reach of the pastoral ministry. What is more, the rectory's involvement in the struggle against the Reformation ideas confirmed its commitment to defending the Catholic ideals, as well as strengthening its loyalty to the broader Counter-Reformation current in the Polish lands.

In the 16th century, the town was a centre of the Reformation as well as the Calvinist movement, due to the policies of Andrzej Górka, which is why Feliks Krucierg and Feliks Stankar came to the town (Przysada, 1997: 20). In 1570, Górka, the new owner of the town, took over the Church of St. Nicholas for the Calvinist collection, which in turn collapsed probably after the death of his son Stanisław in 1593 (Krasny, 1999: 80). The result of this change was also the establishment of a Calvinist school in the church. The institution shaped new generations in the spirit of Calvinist values, as well as being a vehicle for an educational-ideological system, providing a kind of alternative to the existing Catholic culture. Indeed, this reflects a periodic change in the religious orientation of the local elite and the influence of the Reformation currents on religious life in the town. According to Wojciech Giebuta, at this time the Franciscans left their monastery for several decades (Giebuta, 1998: 71-72). This constituted a significant disruption in the functioning of pastoral and religious life in the lands of Szczebrzeszyn. Moreover, their absence reflects the religious tensions of the Reformation era, as well as the difficulties faced by the Roman Catholics.

Szczebrzeszyn became a symbol of religious freedom, which attracted diverse circles and strengthened its position as an important Reformation centre on the eastern borderlands of the Commonwealth. However, after more than 20 years in 1593, Ordinate Jan Zamoyski restored the church occupied by the Górka brothers to the Catholics, endowing it anew and attaching it to the funds of the infulata of the Zamoyski Col-

legiate Church (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, 2011: 93). This marked an important moment in the recatholization of the town. The incorporation of the temple into the collegiate church provided a permanent economic foothold, but also solidified it with a center of religious life. As an opponent of the Reformation, Zamoyski expelled dissenters from Szczepieszyn (Przysada, 1998: 8). He, thus, eliminated the influence of one of the most radical Reformation movements. He also obtained confirmation from King Sigismund III Vasa on the establishment of the parish and the endowment of the church. This sealed the towns return to the Roman Catholic Church.

### **Counter-Reformation: the new monastic era in the thought of the Franciscan revival presence**

In the 17th century, or more precisely in 1610, the construction of the Franciscan Church in Szczepieszyn began (Krasny, 1999: 54). This is a peculiar endeavor that should be interpreted as an important stage in the consolidation of the Catholic borderland presence in the region. In addition, the St. Nicholas Church began to be rebuilt from its foundations by 1620, by Fr. Nicholas Kiślicki (Krasny, 1999: 50-51), who was the first known dean and parish priest of Szczepieszyn (Czubar, 2007: 11). This process is part of the broader context of the Church's post-Tridentine policy, according to which it strengthened the eastern borderlands of the Commonwealth in an effort to consolidate its influence.

The Franciscan monks, having returned to Szczepieszyn, began construction of a monastery and church – a wooden building dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary with three altars inside (Giebuta, 1998: 72). It is noteworthy that the construction of the church materialized the Counter-Reformation ideas, as well as was a response to earlier historical turmoil caused by the disruption of the religious structure through the Reformation. The Franciscans, after being brought to the Szczepieszyn area, taught the nearby peasants new ways to cultivate the land with new crops, farming or animal husbandry. The monastery could serve as a centre for the transmission of practical knowledge, which was part of the Roman Catholic Church's role as a promoter of social order.

In 1620-1638, a brick church was erected, and a monastery was built next to it founded by Tomasz and Katarzyna Zamoyski (Górak, 1990: 80). The monastery complex was the second brick building in the town after the castle (Giebuta, 1998: 72). This is the main testimony to the growing role of the Church institutions in the symbolic and urban structure of Szczepieszyn. The old church was demolished due to its poor condition (Kurzej, 2009: 63). This was part of a broader process of transition from ephemeral structures to permanent forms of religious architecture. This was not only an expression of denominational stability, but also emphasized the role of the clergy. Moreover, these actions reflect a practice characteristic of the Counter-Reformation era.

However, in 1626, the aforementioned monastery was very poor, it could only feed 6 monks, so soon the building was deserted as the monks moved to Góreck. Indeed,

this shows the difficult situation of the order, reflecting its organizational and financial problems. The move to another city can be seen as an attempt to save the existence of the order, as well as to continue its mission under different conditions.

### **Sacrum of silence: a 17<sup>th</sup>-century cemetery chapel as a guardian of the dead**

In the 17th century, or more precisely in 1630 as mentioned earlier, the Saint Leonard's Chapel was built (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, Grabacik 2010: 12). The development of religious infrastructure over the decades testifies to the gradual strengthening of the Catholic community in the town. The arrangement of the buildings also suggests a deliberate spatial strategy, related to the topography of Szczecbrzeszyn. This trend fits into the broader context of the post-Tridentine renewal of the Church in Poland, as well as its involvement in the urbanization of the regional landscape. Additional confirmation of the chapel's existence at the time is provided by a visitation protocol from 1647. This may prove that the facility was not just a product of oral tradition, but an actual sight.

The Church sources mention the year 1648, when Father Jakub Skwarski, dean of the Zamość chapter, mentions a 17th-century painting of St. Leonard in the chapel, that might have been there since its foundation. Indeed, it gives it the rank of an institutionally recognized place of worship. The church is located in the municipal cemetery in the southwestern part of Szczecbrzeszyn and appears to be a neo-Gothic building from the 20th century but is distinguished by its rich history and centuries-old tradition (Bartko-Malinowska, 2017: 5-6). Its location on a cemetery hill indicates its close connection with the cult of the dead, as well as its function as a community memorial.

### **Religiosity in times of trial: the Catholic Church in the face of Tartar invasions and the Arian frontier**

The St. Nicholas Church was ravaged by Tatars and Swedes, as well as experiencing at least two fires (Krasny, 1999: 51). Between 1644 and 1648, during the Tartar invasion, the church dedicated was burned down, and in turn rebuilt in 1668 by parish priest Jan Unikowski. This demonstrates local resilience, as well as determination to rebuild the tabernacle, which is part of the continuity of religious life and the rebuilding of places of worship in difficult military-political moments.

Moreover, the Arians were expelled from Szczecbrzeszyn in 1650, commemorating the fact with a brick chapel (Przysada, 1997: 18-42). This underscores the importance of the Catholic culture in the town, and the commemoration of the event itself is part of the religious change in the region. Moreover, the chapel, thus, became a symbol of the victory of one of the religious traditions, but it was also intended to perpetuate this moment in the historiography of the residents of Szczecbrzeszyn. It was a period of the Mar-

ian culture, due to the defence of the Jasna Góra monastery in 1655 against the Swedish invasion, which took a religious form (Kałwa, Rechowicz, 1969: 340-341).

The church was consecrated anew by Mikołaj Szczerski, bishop and suffragan of Chełm (Przysada, 1999: 75). This event reaffirms the restoration of its earlier sacred function and liturgical continuity despite the destruction. This act is part of the material symbolism, as well as the spiritual rebirth of the local Catholic community. The number of weddings that took place at the time of Khmelnytsky's invasion dropped by 50% (Wojnarski, 2005: 42). This indicates the profound impact of the fires and invasions on Szczepieszyn. It may also indicate a weakening of the faithful's trust in the places of worship, but the church reconstruction syndrome does not support this thesis.

In 1655, during the Swedish Deluge, where many Franciscan convents in the Lithuanian-Ruthenian province suffered, the monastery was completely burned down and the church was robbed of all its furnishings, and then rebuilt with Father Jan Czesławski in charge (Przysada, 1997: 73). Indeed, this represented a serious blow to the liturgical environment in the town, where the material symbol and the local community were put to the test. It also led to a loss of resources and a disruption in the continuity of religious activity in Szczepieszyn.

### **The Daughters of Charity and the Bonifraters as symbols of the Catholic renewal, strengthened by the elimination of Arianism**

In 1656, Mary, the Mother of God, was solemnly proclaimed the Queen of Poland, which was conditioned by the construction of more sacred shrines (Kuchowicz, 1975: 105). More than half a century later, in 1709, an asylum was organized at the new St. Catherine's Church in Szczepieszyn, and in the second half of the 17th century, in accordance with their vocation, the Brothers of St. John of God opened a hospital at the monastery. They provided treatment, based on scientific knowledge, until 1784 when they were replaced by the order of the Daughters of Charity (Przysada, 2014: 58). Such treatments may have been conditioned by the sense of mission by the Brothers of St. John of God, but also by the process of social, including spiritual, convalescence after the difficult events of the war. A few years later, in 1783, barracks were placed in the monastery (Górak, 1990: 80). Indeed, this reflects the processes of reorganization of monastic structures within the framework of the Church policy, which indicates the conation of the socio-religious functions of the place.

At the beginning of the 18th century, in connection with the Northern War in the Chełm Land, Polish, Saxon, Swedish and Russian troops once again destroyed the monastery. This event is part of the broader context of political and military instability of the era. It is worth noting that the incident weakened the functioning of local structures, nevertheless not for long. The monastery was rebuilt in the Baroque style at the end of the 18th century, with nine monks officiating, living off the lease of the village of Her-

zy and income from the town rents (Giebuta, 1998: 74). The reconstruction was a confirmation of the community's determination, as well as the permanence of the monastery as an essential element of the *Szczebrzeszyn* identity.

In 1812, the Franciscan convent was dissolved, a hospital was set up in the monastery and a hospital chapel in the church, entrusting the care of the hospital and the monastery to the Daughters of Charity (Przysada, 1999: 50). This is because it reflects the changing functions of the Church institutions in the modern era, especially in the context of social needs and the Church structures. This action is part of the process of the gradual reduction of the Church's autonomy, as well as the redistribution of its resources, which had a significant impact on the spiritual and social structures of local communities. However, at this time, founded by Father Michael Siekryński, the first stone and shingle-covered chapel dedicated to Saint Leonard was built. According to Jan Górak, a new chapel was erected in 1812 to replace the old one, shortly after the burial cemetery was established (Górak, 1990: 80). This was an expression of the permanence of local tradition and the community's desire to preserve local sacred sites.

In the first half of the 19th century, Stanisław Zamojski, taking the doctors' warnings about cemetery fumes seriously, decided to move the cemetery to another location (Przysada, 2014: 134). According to Przysada, the burial cemetery in *Szczebrzeszyn* was established in the 18th century around the St. Leonard's Chapel, due to the relocation of the cemetery from around the Church (Przysada, 1999: 55). This combined liturgical functions with burial rites along with the symbolic significance of the site, which wrote off the Christian tradition of the urban community. Roman Catholics as well as Greek Catholics were buried in the new cemeteries, and after 1877, people of the Orthodox faith were also buried there (Przysada, 1999: 55). This emphasizes the multi-religious nature of the site. Through this, the cemetery played a sacred role, reflecting the religious diversity of the community, becoming a symbol of tolerance and coexistence of religious traditions in the region.



Picture1. The Monastery of the Daughters of Charity together with the Hospital in the 20th century.  
Source: personal archives of *Szczebrzeszyn* residents.

### **The ability to survive: the January Uprising as part of the impact on Catholic life**

In 1863, after the January Uprising, the tsarist authorities eliminated the radiating source of patriotism that was the Roman Catholic Church, resulting in the introduction of compulsory keeping of the civil books of the Polish population in Russian (Przysada, 1999: 76). This reveals a broader element of Russification policy. Such actions not only interfered with the private life of the community, but also symbolically undermined the continuity of local cultural traditions. Nevertheless, in 1860, the Roman Catholic population was 2,162 (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, Grabacik, 2010: 108). Therefore, after the January Uprising, the tsarist authorities vigorously proceeded to russify the Poles in that they were responsible for destroying the culture of the Catholic religion (Przysada, 1999: 27). This was aimed at transforming the religious and cultural space in a way that promoted the assimilation and subjugation of society.

After the abolition of the bishopric of Chełm in 1875, the Orthodox Diocese of Lublin was created with a new organizational structure, resulting in the liquidation of the decanate of the Uniate Church of Szczepieszyn in 1877 and its incorporation into the decanate of Zamość. The Uspieniya Church and Monastery Complex were converted into the Orthodox churches (Przysada, 2014: 107), under the name of the Dormition of the Mother of God (Lawera, Bata, 2001: 18). The result was the abolition of the deanery of the Uniate Church in Szczepieszyn and the conversion of the Dormition temple into an Orthodox church, but in 1890 the Catholic population had a church dedicated to St. Nicholas at their disposal (Przysada, 1999: 77). This was an expression of the deliberate policy of the authorities to weaken the structures of the Catholic Church in the town and strengthen the dominance of the Orthodox faith.

In 1878, Szczepieszyn entered a sad period in its history, especially for Catholics (Przysada, 2017: 48). In 1883, the church was converted into an Orthodox church dedicated to the Dormition of the Mother of God, removing the Daughters of Charity and bringing in the Orthodox nuns in their place (in Polish called *krzyżanki*) (Górak, 1990: 80). These events underscore the process of forced reorganization of religious structures. Such efforts led not only to administrative changes, but also to the weakening of the Church's influence by imposing a certain denominational order.

The Catholic parish in the town in 1890 consisted of more than 2,000 people with one church (Przysada, 1999: 27). This represented a small decrease in the number of believers by about 200 people. However, during the period of increased Russification of Szczepieszyn, there was a destruction of manifestations of Polishness, in particular Catholicism, persecuting its adherents (Przysada, 1999: 77). The repression of the clergy, as well as the transformation of religious institutions, including the elimination of Polishness, were tools of a policy of degeneration aimed at breaking the spiritual and cultural continuity of the community. However, the town's Church continued to help the poor.

By the end of the 19th century, there was a shelter for the elderly at the church as well as a tradition of caring for the poor. There was also a confraternity of the Sisters and Brothers of the Holy Guardian Angels, and successively there were religious organizations with the developing Catholic Action (Zamojsko-Lubaczek Diocese). Indeed, this confirms the strong rooting of clerical life. These structures not only supported local spirituality. They performed an integrative function, strengthening social ties and identity in the face of changing political and social conditions.

### **Revolution of religious freedom: changes in the Catholic community after the tsar's decision**

On April 13, 1905, the tsar declared religious freedom, so the Catholic families rushed to the Roman Catholic parishes and returned to their traditional rituals, which they had not been allowed to perform since 1875 (Maławska, 1999: 80). This represented a significant step toward the restoration of religious freedom. The transition of people to their original rites reflects the realization of individuality and identity. According to Zygmunt Klukowski, in 1860 there were only 44 Greek-Orthodox believers – only after the announcement of the Tolerance Manifesto in 1905, within two months, in May and June, did 4,195 people convert from the Orthodox to the Catholic faith (Knyt, 2017: 94-95). The liberation from long-term pressures resulted in the need for the local Catholic traditions. This phenomenon was also political in nature, as it was even an opposition to the dominance of other religious traditions, representing the strengthening of the Catholic community.

In July, 1905, shortly after the visitation of Lublin Bishop, Franciszek Jaczewski, Ordinate Maurycy Zamojski began rebuilding the St. Leonard's Chapel from the ruins, putting it into use in the fall of 1910 (Bartko-Malinowska, 2017: 7-9). The initiative emphasizes the Church authority as a factor inspiring action to restore the town's symbolism. This was demonstrated when, a few years later in 1916, the dean of Szczepieszyn received permission to take possession of the church, during which there were also plans for the return of the Franciscans to Szczepieszyn, resulting in a visit by the provincials (Gieb-uta, 1998: 74). These events symbolized the progressive normalization of religious life, including the restoration of the state of splendor in terms of the Catholic model of life in the town. Emerging plans for the return of the monks testified to the process of reconstruction, as well as the vitality of the community memory associated with the area.

In the 20th century and more precisely in 1917, the St. Catherine's Church was reconstituted in the town, leaving the hospital in the church expanded in 1843 (Górak, 1990: 80). Previously, the same church was named after Holy Trinity (Pieczykolan, 2022: 34). This was a testament to the flexibility of the local community. Such actions allowed local religious heritage to be saved, showing continuity of vitality, regardless of previous periods of profanation and transformation.

**Faith and war:****Catholic communities during the First and the Second World War.  
Spiritual convalescence in the face of community**

In 1917, after the Austrians occupied the town, it was returned to Catholics (Przysada, 2017: 49). Indeed, this resulted in a change in the denominational affiliation of local institutions that now favoured the Catholic Church. Moreover, in 1918, the St. Catherine's Church was attached to the St. Nicholas Parish as a branch church (Giebuta, 1998: 74). This type of action demonstrates an effort to consolidate the Catholic life under the auspices of the dominant denomination, as well as an attempt to adapt the sacred infrastructure to the new socio-political order. Through this, all those forced into becoming Orthodox returned to the bosom of the Church, being given the opportunity to return to the roots of their fathers (Przysada, 2017: 49). This shows a reversal of the earlier conversion process, an expression of political pressure.



Picture 2. The St. Nicholas Church, 1920s.

Source: Pieczykolan, 2022: 31.

In 1933, the Szczepieszyn deanery was merged with the Zamość deanery (Smoter-Grzeszkiewicz, Grabacik, 2010: 95). Indeed, this testifies to the reorganization of the Church structures aimed at streamlining management, as well as adapting territorial divisions to changing socio-political realities. Thus, as early as the 1930s, Roman Catholics numbered 3,394, non-denominational 26, Greek Catholics 4, and Evangelicals 2 (Kita, 2000: 8). By contrast, in 1936, Poles of Roman Catholic denomination in that year numbered 4,933, which translated into 60.5% of the town's population (Przysada, 1999: 29). The increase in the percentage of believers indicates significant changes in the religious structure of Szczepieszyn. This process may have been the result of religious conversions, but also of the Church's administrative actions.

It is worth adding that the number of the Orthodox believers tended to decrease. In the 1930s, there were already 48 people (Kita, 2000: 8). Interestingly, in 1936, during the propaganda campaign, the Orthodox peasants were persuaded to adopt Catholicism, which was done under explicit pressure (Glauza, 2004: 44-45). The result was that in 1936 the Orthodox population stood at 26, which translated into 0.3% of the whole population. Such a significant change in the religious structure confirms the thesis of a profound transformation of the region. The high marginalization of the Orthodox community reflects not only demographic changes, but also a transformation in the religious landscape of *Szczebrzeszyn*.

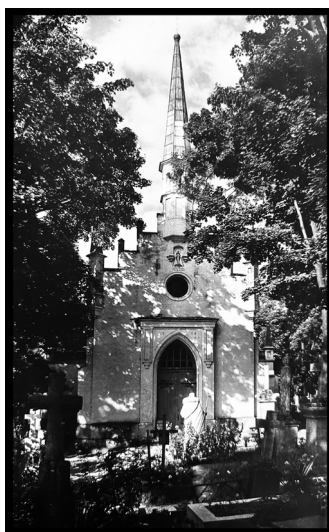
The elementary significance of this period also began in 1942, when the urban population of the Mosaic faith was deported to the Belzec death camp (Trzeciński, 1990: 22). This is the result of brutal occupation policies, extermination policies and discriminatory policies against the vital urban community. Moreover, in the same year, the St. Catherine's Church was taken away from the *Szczebrzeszyn* residents, and given to the Orthodox believers, despite their small numbers (Przysada, 1999: 33-34). The transition of the church testifies to administrative efforts to accommodate the religious minority structures in *Szczebrzeszyn*. However, according to Klukowski, the population was certain that history was repeating itself from 1888, believing that the Orthodox would leave the church sooner than before under Timofey Tracz. Such declarations were conditioned by a deep sense of uncertainty and instability that accompanied the community as a result of political and social changes.

In 1943, the Nazis occupied the St. Nicholas Church, which remained closed until 1944, that is, until the end of the German occupation of *Szczebrzeszyn*. Such measures being systematically carried out sought to eliminate the manifestations of Polishness, as well as to exclude any kind of independence, mainly in the religious dimension, which was a kind of refuge for the locals. The meeting place of the faithful at that time was the cemetery Church of St. Leonard, where baptisms and weddings were held due to the church's distance from the town center (Bartko-Malinowska, 2017: 9-11). The relocation of services was an act of resistance to occupation policy and an attempt to preserve religious continuity in *Szczebrzeszyn*. In addition, holding mass in the cemetery building signifies a symbolic gesture toward the dead, which demonstrates an attempt to restore the spiritual cohesion of the community.

In 1944, shortly after *Szczebrzeszyn* was liberated from the Nazi occupation, the St. Catherine's Church was restored to its former purpose as a Catholic temple, referred to by residents as the Monastery (Przysada, 1999: 51). Returning it was a symbol of restoring historical balance, but also an expression of rebuilding the identity of the local community.

### **In the shadow of the wars: Catholic religious life in the period of postwar reconstruction**

After the Second World War, the town had a population of 5,100, 40% of whom were non-Catholic immigrants (Czubara, 2007: 9). Such a percentage indicates the maintenance of religious continuity in the town, while the state attempting to marginalize the Church structures. In 1954, the Ursulines arrived in the parish, and the Josephite nuns worked at the local hospital from 1945-1974. This an important step towards the postwar reconstruction of the Catholic identity in *Szczepieszyn*. The nuns, known for their activities in the care or educational fields, played a key role in restoring spiritual and social stability during the communist period. Their presence may also have been an expression of the continuation of religious structures in the town, which were actively involved in building an urban identity. However, the sisters left *Szczepieszyn* in the 20th century.



Picture 3. The St. Leonard's Chapel – 1966.  
Source: Kozakiewicz, 1968: 6.

In 1997, the Franciscans were invited to the town to reconstitute the *Szczepieszyn* convent, but nevertheless the plan was abandoned due to the lack of serving fathers who could settle in the new convent (Giebuta, 1998: 75). Such difficulties in attracting clergy were characteristic of the post-war period in Poland. Nonetheless, the attempt to restore the church and convents to full functionality testified to the desire to preserve the Catholic spiritual community and urban identity based on the religious structures.

In 2007, the parish of St. Catherine of Alexandria in *Szczepieszyn* (Zamojsko-Lubaczów Diocese) was separated from the Church. Such action was intended to allow the faithful access to the new social and demographic conditions present in the *Szcze-*

brzeszyn region. The separation of the parish may also have marked an attempt to rebuild local identity.

Significantly, as of 2023, there were 4220 Catholics out of a population of 4815 (St. Nicholas Parish). The high percentage of Catholics indicates the dominant role of the Church in the lives of the residents. The observation shows that the Catholic unity prevails in the town despite the existence of two parishes. The parishes, despite the lack of a Jewish population and despite a few Orthodox Christians, dominate the town of Szczebrzeszyn. Church attendance by the urban population is part of the creation of town life on the basis of the religious culture that has accompanied the residents of Szczebrzeszyn over the centuries.

### **Catholic life in the society of the 21st century: the public perception of the inhabitants of Szczebrzeszyn on the issue of the Catholic culture**

Szczebrzeszyn, as a town of three religious cultures, is among the places that are part of the creation of cultural discourse on the historical map of Poland. The subject of this study was to prove its internal perception by means of conducting the first complex survey of the residents' social perception in the town's history.

The criteria for selecting participants included population affiliation and willingness to participate in the study. A stratified random sampling method was used to select the respondents, allowing for representativeness in terms of age, gender, faith education and political option supported. After applying the sampling calculator with subjects – 4156 residents of the town of Szczebrzeszyn for 2023 (2200 women – 53%, and 1956 men – 47%), a 95% confidence level and a 5% maximum error – the sample was 352 people. The survey did not include very young people under the age of 16. The sample was divided into age categories, including:

- group aged 16-20 (11 women and 10 men);
- group aged 21-40 (52 women and 57 men);
- group aged 41-60 (54 women and 53 men);
- group aged 61-80 (57 women and 42 men);
- group aged 81-100 (12 women and 4 men).

The interviews were conducted in the form of a survey questionnaire. The selection of respondents was carried out in a quota manner, taking into account demographic data variables, which ensured the representativeness of the sample with regard to the structure of the urban population, which consists of such variables as gender, age, education and place of residence.

Turning to detailed information regarding the analysis of public perception, it is worth noting that only 16 people surveyed (4.5%) are atheists. Moreover, only 1 person (0.2%) is Orthodox, and as many as 335 people (95%) are Roman Catholics. Of elemen-

tary importance is the fact that as many as 301 people (85.5%) believe that Roman Catholics play an important role in the town of Szczepieszyn. Only 14 people (3.9%) hold a different opinion, believing that they do not play an important role at all, and 37 people (10.51%) for whom the answer was difficult to choose. It is noteworthy that in terms of age range, these answers are distributed in the context of the “no” answer the most in the 21-40 and 41-60 age ranges. Interestingly, most of these answers were marked by the Roman Catholic population, as only 4 people were non-believers.

Touching on the question of religious knowledge, the survey showed that as many as 313 people (88.92%) knew the dates and locations of the town's most important Catholic holidays. Only 16 people (4.54%) did not know this, as well as 23 people (6.53%) found it difficult to answer the question. The largest percentage of those who did not know the answer fell into the 21-40 group, accounting for only 2.27% of those surveyed. Interestingly, the majority of those who did not know the answer are Roman Catholic – accounting for only 3.4% of the respondents.

The places of culture of the Catholic religion are also relevant. Only 7 respondents did not know where the places of worship were located, which translated to 1.98% of the sample. Here, too, as before, the largest percentage of this response was among those in the 21-40 age group, accounting for 1.13% of the respondents. All of these responses were from Roman Catholics. It is interesting to note that as many as 342 respondents (97.15%) said they were familiar with the places of worship, with 3 people marking the answer “hard to say.” Those in this group were 2/3 of the 21-40 age group and 2/3 were Roman Catholic.

Referring to personal experience with the Catholic cultural traditions, it is necessary to outline the profile of respondents. 7.3% of respondents have no contact with the Roman Catholic traditions, but about 1.42% (10 respondents mostly from the 21-40 age group) of those would like to get acquainted. Interestingly, the respondents in the group that has no contact or would like to get acquainted with the traditions were 12 people of Catholic faith, which is 3.4% of all respondents. As many as 169 respondents (48.01%) participate occasionally in the Catholic practices, while 158 (44.88%) participate systematically.

The answers to the question of the importance of cultural heritage in the dimension of the Catholic culture were already less divergent. For 228 respondents (64.67%), it was very important. Some of them said it was an integral part of the local identity. Only 15 people (4.26%) said it was rather unimportant to them, and for 101 people (28.69%) the issue was important but without greater significance. Similarly, this group was mostly made up of people from the 21-40 (7 people) and 41-60 age groups. It is worth noting that those for whom it was rather unimportant were mostly Roman Catholics (10 people). An interesting group consisted of 8 people for whom the discussed issue was not important at all, which translated into about 2.27% of all respondents. Those respond-

ents when it comes to the religion were distributed 50/50. It should be added that here, as before, the largest group was made up of people aged 21-40.

The maintenance and transmission of cultural traditions of the Catholic culture in Szczecbrzeszyn was also a controversial topic. 43 respondents (12.21%) said they had no opinion on the subject, and 18 (5.11%) said it was difficult to say. Interestingly, as many as 14 people declared as Roman Catholic (3.97%) marked the answer “it is difficult to say”, and 38 people of those who had no opinion on the subject were Roman Catholic with a majority of the respondents from the 41-60 and 61-80 age groups. However, as many as 216 people (61.36%) considered that social and cultural changes pose a challenge to preserving local traditions. On the other hand, 75 people (21.30%) believed that traditions are being adequately transmitted and nurtured.

The impact of the Catholic culture on the social life of residents in Szczecbrzeszyn varied. Only 9 people (2.55%) said that traditions are neglected, which was noted by people mostly in the 21-40 age group. Similarly, 33 people (9.37%), for whom the impact is low and traditions are strongly marginalized, felt the same. 13 people in this group were also from the 21-40 age group. It should be added that as many as 28 Roman Catholics were in this group. However, as many as 196 people (55.68%) said that the influence was high and the traditions were strongly rooted in the life of the community. Similarly, 114 people (32.38%) the influence is moderate and traditions while present in the life of the town do not dominate the sacred space.

Greater involvement of the local community in preserving and promoting the Catholic culture in the town was similar to the question about maintaining and passing on cultural traditions. As many as 65 (18.46%) respondents said they had no opinion on the subject, and 46 people (13.06%) said it was not the responsibility of the local community. Interestingly, as many as 59 people who had no opinion on the subject were Roman Catholics, as were 35 who thought it was not the community's responsibility. However, as many as 212 people (60.22%) said that the local community should support the Catholic culture, with 29 people (8.23%) saying that a benefit-cost analysis of such a project is needed. It is interesting to note that the last group of respondents was 100% Roman Catholic, which also translated into the age falling most often for those in the 21-40 group.

## Conclusions

With the above historical overview in mind, as well as the results of the public perception survey, several points should be emphasized. The historical overview showed that the Catholic culture in Szczecbrzeszyn had a strongly rooted religious identity, which through “generational knowledge” has survived to the present day, as indicated by the research. The public perception toward the Catholic culture showed the persistence of its symbolic presence as the dominant code of local identity. In addition, for the most

part, the respondents demonstrated the strong embedding of Catholic values in the community space, given the fundamental normative and historical continuity. At the same time, it was possible to observe the process of internalization of religious practices as elements of daily *habitusum* regardless of the degree of declared faith. The Catholic culture has a legitimizing function in the town for the social and symbolic power structures, producing a local framework of collective morality, as indicated by the importance of the Church as a socio-cultural and religious institution. This orders and sustains the arrangement of meanings not only in the town space, but also in the individualization of cultural processes. Ultimately, the analysis revealed ambivalence, as on the one hand there is the stability of the Catholic faith, while on the other there are potential challenges in the context of the region's culturally diverse heritage.

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes the dynamics of the Catholic community in the centuries-old and multicultural town of Szczepieszyn, located in the southwestern part of the Lublin Basin. The Catholic religion is presented as an integrating element of the local identity in the historical and contemporary context. Elementary attention was given to the role of the Roman Catholic Church in shaping the town's cultural identity and its impact on relations between different religious groups. In addition, an outline was included of the historical process in which Catholics consolidated their position, from the 14th century, through the period of partitions, to the socio-political transformations of the 20th and 21st centuries. The study was based on an analysis of literature on the subject, documents and a public perception survey on the residents of Szczepieszyn. The conclusions demonstrate the key role of Catholicism in maintaining the local continuity of tradition and adapting to social change. Moreover, the work highlights the role of Catholicism as a pillar for building a multidimensional identity for the town's residents in understanding social challenges. The paper also highlights the multifaceted nature of the Church's influence both on the socio-cultural, spiritual level and in the importance of interfaith dialogues in the process of social integration and preservation of the town's cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Szczepieszyn, Catholics, community, identity, role, Discourse

Article submitted: 06.05.2025; article accepted: 26.05.2025.