
VOLUNTEER PROJECT TO PRESERVE THE CULTURAL MONUMENT OF CHURCH AND MONASTERY OF SAINT CATHERINE

Luboslav Blišák*

*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2,
91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic*

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Abstract

The topic of this study is a national cultural monument – the ruins of Church and Monastery of Saint Catherine of Alexandria – and the volunteer project to save these ruins that started in 1994. Throughout the last 21 years, altogether about 1,520 volunteers participated in the project – mainly in summer – by helping to conserve the monument in order to prevent its further decay. Further the topic deals with importance and future of the project and raising public awareness. At the end of this study, our topic deals with the theme of tourism and cultural heritage.

Keywords: project Katarínka, conservation, national cultural monument, volunteering, Slovakia

1. Introduction

Katarínka is the name of a volunteer project (and civic association) aimed at saving the Church and Monastery of Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Katarínka is also an established name for this monastery used mainly by local people. The 17th century monument once belonged to the Franciscan Order and 200 years after the monastery was closed, it has decayed to ruins due to pilfering and weather conditions. The project aims at stopping its further decay and keeping this cultural monument for future generations. In addition to conservation of ruins and various types of research, the project has also another dimension. Katarínka helps to create strong friendships and spreads values based on Franciscan spirituality. It is also a place for cultural events, where the idea of the project is spread and this extraordinary cultural monument is being presented to its visitors, the general public and to experts.

The project is founded on four pillars – community, spirituality, work and Genius loci. In 2015, the project celebrated 21 years. Throughout this time, the volunteers from Slovakia have been participating in saving of this cultural monument.

*E-mail: luboslav.blisak@gmail.com

2. Church and monastery of Saint Catherine of Alexandria

The ruins are situated nearby Dechtice village; about 20 kilometres northwest from the regional centre Trnava. The archaeological research suggests that this region was inhabited already during the Eneolith era. The mound found nearby the church in Dechtice dates back to the Hallstatt era [1]. The ruins are surrounded by forests and the Small Carpathian Mountains. The spiritual character of this place is tightly bound with its history. In the first half of the 15th century, there was a stone Gothic chapel with a cemetery, where higher society members were being buried [2].

The history and foundation of the monastery are connected with events that supposedly took place at the end of 16th century. According to a legend, Saint Catherine appeared in this place to a shepherd, who caved here a small chapel into the rock. In 1617, Saint Catherine appeared again – this time to Ján Manca from Dechtice. Based on these miraculous apparitions, the lord of Dobrá Voda, count Christopher Erdödy, issued at the end of 1618 a founding charter to establish a monastery for Franciscans. Christopher Erdödy was allegedly very inclined to this Order. Later, in the mid 17th century, the Franciscan lay Chordiger Brotherhood was founded beside the monastery [3]. The church was built by the Italian architect Pietro Spazza in the early Baroque style with late Gothic features. According to Hrčka, the church and monastery were gradually built on foundations of the original Gothic chapel. The dimensions of the monastery were 55x90 meters and the church was 52x17 meters (with a 30 meter high tower) [2, p. 81]. The orientation of church was untraditional: north–south, whereas most churches were built in the direction east–west. In 1619, the monastery was inhabited by the first twelve monks.

The history of this place has not only its spiritual dimension, but also several violent events occurred here. In 1645, the complex was pillaged and set on fire by the army of George I Rakoczi during the uprising. In 1663, the monastery was attacked by Turks and later pillaged by the imperial troops, who killed the noblemen seeking here refuge. In 1683, the monastery was damaged by soldiers of Imre Thököly. A few years later, in 1697, the Lichtenstein troops were trying to forcibly recruit young men, who were here on a pilgrimage. One of the soldiers died as a result of violent civil resistance [*História kláštora sv. Kataríny*, www.katarinka.sk/sk/historia].

The church was re-consecrated at the beginning of the 18th century and the descendants of its founder – George Erdödy and Christopher II Erdödy – started to contribute to its maintenance. The complex was gradually enlarged and surrounded by other buildings: 7 chapels in front of the church, 2 chapels behind the church, ponds, inn, large gardens and farm buildings. The church interior included eight altars, as well as an organ [4]. The church was during its existence proclaimed a place of pilgrimage (‘Basilica minor’) by the Pope. In the vicinity of the church, the significant noble families were being buried: Erdödy, Lapšanský, and Apponyi [5].

In 1786, the Saint Catherine Monastery was dissolved by edict issued by the Emperor Joseph II (along with monasteries of other orders that were not active in charity or education – altogether 738 monasteries). The abandoned monastery and its valuables were at first protected by seven war invalids from Trnava. However, after several years, mainly the monastery became a target for thefts and a source of building material. The mortal remains of buried noblemen were transferred by their descendants to their family burial vaults [*História kláštora sv. Kataríny*, www.katarinka.sk/sk/historia].

Some valuable object were saved by transfer to another locations (the Calvary sculpture was transported by Erdödys to Dechtice, the statues of four Franciscan saints from the church tower corners were moved in 1905 to the Pálffy family vault in Smolenice). Other historical artefacts are now stored in the Western Slovakia Museum in Trnava. The oak tables and solid wooden door from the monastery canteen are in the Franciscan monastery in Trnava. The restored side altar of Holy Trinity is to be found in a church in Piešťany. Some of the paintings from Saint Catherine Church were found abroad, e.g. the painting of Joannes Apponyi is in Eisenstadt, Austria [4, p. 24]. 200 years after its closure, the church and monastery became a ruin due to pillages and weather conditions. The man and nature changed its surroundings as well as the interior beyond recognition.

During the Second World War, German soldiers used the church tower as an observation point. The church wall bears traces of shelling, but there was no bigger battle near the locality. In the mid-20th century, professor Šimončíč pointed to the significance and history of this place. For many years, he was investigating the history of the site, together with historians H. Radvány and J. Štibrányi. In 1994, Katarínka was ‘re-discovered’ by a young student Peter Herceg, who founded a volunteer project and together with many volunteers helped to conserve the monument and partially regain the original significance of this historical place of pilgrimage.

3. Volunteer project to save the cultural monument

The project of saving the Church and Monastery of Saint Catherine of Alexandria is one of several civic associations in Slovakia, where people work as volunteers, without being paid. The formally unemployed people do not participate in the project, as their work would be paid in a form of a state benefit in unemployment. Since 1994 when the project started, the monument has been preserved by teenagers, students, and people employed in various sectors. They come here mostly during the summer season, i.e. during the school/university holidays and vacations. *“Throughout these years, a lot work has been done in Katarínka – both visible and also invisible at first sight. The work often takes place on scaffoldings, in height and on wall tops.”* [6]

As a practical example, we are presenting the amount of work in financial terms (i.e. the amount of financial savings). “*In 2010, the amount of volunteer work was 3,136 days, which is 20,125 hours. If we value one worked hour by 3€, the total price of work in 2010 was 60,375€. In 2014, it was cca. 68,000€.*” [6]

The project Katarínka is run by two civic associations – the civic association Katarínka and Association of Youth Christian Communities – Regional Centre Katarínka. In the 21 years of its existence, about 1,520 volunteers – from the age of 17 – participated in the project. Many of them regularly come back to give their helping hand again. Some are helping over the years with organizing of activities as leaders or as work supervisors, passing their experience to other volunteers. Some come here even with their children. The church and monastery is now a part of nature reserve (it belongs to the Small Carpathians Protected Landscape Area). It was declared a national cultural monument in 1963.

The project aims mainly at conserving the ruins, securing their structural stability, and stabilizing the masonry “*without unjustified addition of material and without roofing of the church*” [5]. Thus, the project objective is not to renew the complex to its original state, but to prevent its further decay, maintain its current shape for further generations and mainly to preserve the ‘Genius loci’ of this place surrounded by nature. Various experts have participated in the project, e.g.: archaeologists (Jozef Urminský, Michal Slivka, Ivana Kvetánová), historic site experts (Jaroslava Žuffová), structural analysts (Ivan Holub, Vladimír Kohút), anthropologists (Silvia Bodoriková), and others.

The project Katarínka has been collaborating with prominent Slovak institutions: The Regional Monuments Board in Trnava, The Museum of National History and Science in Hlohovec, Department of Applied and Environmental Geophysics at Comenius University in Bratislava, Department of Anthropology at Comenius University in Bratislava, Department of Archaeology at Comenius University in Bratislava, Department of Classical Archaeology at Trnava University, as well as the Franciscan Monastery in Bratislava. Several types of research activities have been carried out in connection to the church, monastery, and its surroundings: the monumental, archaeological, anthropological, geophysical (with surveyors and geophysicists from Germany and Turkey), and dendrochronological research [6, p. 26] (the latter is determining the age of trees for historical documentation purposes). Research results have brought remarkable discoveries. The geophysical research localized in the vicinity of the church previously undiscovered chapels, as well as 50-meter long wall foundations of a former building. The archaeological research helped to discover crypts, a Baroque altar, statues of Saint Catherine and Saint Tecla, a torso of an angel, and many other objects.

As a part of the common activities (conserving of walls, anchoring and stabilization of wall tops and of load-bearing points), dividing walls, windows, and window arches have been saved from further collapse. The load-bearing walls have been structurally secured, including the tower corner that was prone to collapsing. At present, experimental cases are under way in Katarínka – bio

rehabilitation of wall tops (grassing them over and thus stabilizing also pillar tops), or experiment with so-called metakaolin (substance for stabilization of the grouted walls close to the ground, where the mortar crumbles due to winter frosts and moisture) and other eco-friendly building components.

The interventions of modern technology are minimal (e.g. the already mentioned experiments and stabilization of load-bearing walls using the anchor bars. In 2015, concrete was first used – in 2016 the metal structure of the new tower stairs will be fixed to it). Usually, various types of work include the old techniques of bricking and grouting – similar to processes used for construction of the church and monastery in the 17th century. A handmade carved historical winch for lifting material with weight up to 200–300 kg was used to fix the new oak beams into the tower. All the beams and oak boards have been shaped by hand. The local rocks and old burnt bricks from other older buildings are used for grouting and addition of building material. Thanks to these eco-friendly and traditional work procedures, the monument maintains its historical shape and value.

It should be noted that all work activities around the church and monastery, as well as all interventions, are being consulted with The Monuments Board of the Slovak Republic and with other experts. All the security requirements at work set by law are being monitored and followed. Work security is a priority, because the volunteers are young people without similar previous experience.

4. The importance, related activities, and future of the project

The project has both spiritual and socializing dimensions. It helps young people to broaden their knowledge, develop work habits, and learn about the interesting history of the place. For many years, the project has been very popular among the youth and working people, who like to return here and motivate others to participate by spending two extraordinary weeks in this place.

As one of the project pillars, community significantly helps to form the atmosphere and has strong socializing aspect. Strong friendships are established during work and common activities. One interesting thing about the project is its focus. Each camp is situated back in time into the 17th century and volunteers do not use any modern technology, such as mobile phones, laptops, or watches. In this way, they can fully enjoy the peace, silence of nature, and Genius loci of this historic site. The project is for volunteers from the age of 17 and is open also to volunteers without religious belief or to non-Catholics.

Another pillar is the spirituality. Since the start of the project Katarínka, traditional pilgrimages on White Sunday (first Sunday after Easter) were restored. The pilgrimages to Katarínka used to have big significance. In the 18th century, the holy masses were celebrated by the bishop of Trnava and attended by approximately 5,000 pilgrims [*Blíži sa tradičná Bielonedelná púť na Katarínku*, <http://www.abu.sk/archiv/oznamy/blizi-sa-tradicna-bielonedelna-put-na-katarinku%20>]. In April 2015, the 16th White Sunday pilgrimage took place,

attended directly by 160 people, with around 400 people present at the Holy Mass [Na Katarínku prišlo dnes takmer 400 ľudí, <http://trnava.sme.sk/c/7747039/na-katarinku-prišlo-dnes-takmer-400-ludi.html>]. “Slovak Republic undoubtedly belongs to the Christian countries of Europe in terms of statistical significance pursuing religious structure in the post-revolutionary censuses (1991: 60.43% Roman Catholics, 3.39% Greek Catholics; 2001: 68.9% Roman Catholics, 4.1% Greek Catholics).” [7]

Throughout the year, several events are organized by volunteers for the visitors. At the end of May 2015, the Night of Churches was held at Katarínka, attended by 200 people. July 5 – the National Holiday of Saints Cyril and Methodius – is traditionally a Doors Open Day. In 2015 – in spite of tropical heat – about 600 visitors attended this event (1,000 people came in 2014 and 900 visitors in 2013). The event Night of Castles and Ruins was in 2014 attended by around 300 people and in 2015 already by 650 visitors. The volunteers usually prepare varied program for both adults and children. The events are enriched by chamber concerts or theatre performances. The themed evenings (Night of Churches) include tourist guiding among the walls with the light from kerosene lamps and torches, with a qualified interpretation about this historical place. Especially during summer months (July – beginning of September), the visitors have a chance to learn more about this place of pilgrimage from the trained volunteers. Katarínka thus becomes a place of rest in nature, as well as a cultural and spiritual place.

In 2016, the last works at new tower stairs will be carried out, followed by the final approval. This will open the observation point on top of the church tower, which has been worked on actively over the last three years. The tower will be accessible thanks to newly built stairs with balusters. The visitors will be able to enjoy the view from the tower, which has been by now accessible only to volunteers due to security reasons. The future works are planned mainly for the monastery, because it is in worse condition than the church.

5. Raising of public awareness

Raising of public awareness of projects and activities of non-profit organizations has an important place in the process of their management. The non-profit organizations and civic associations are not able to achieve their objectives without communication strategy management. The civic association Katarínka communicated with several target groups:

- **contributors** (individuals, companies, foundations, ministries, self-governing regions);
- **tourists and visitors** (enthusiasts and supporters of the project, pilgrims);
- **volunteers and activists** (who directly participate in the project);
- **experts and general public.**

All the mentioned groups are important for the project. Without contributions from individuals and donations and grants, the project would not further develop due to lack of finance. The project aims at presenting the cultural

monument and gained knowledge to general public in form of sharing the volunteers' experience. The conservation mainly takes place in order to keep this cultural monument for future generations. Without communication towards the new potential volunteers, the project would stop existing due to lack of workforce. The experts are worth mentioning, too – they include historians, historic site experts, but also students from various fields. They are interested in the place especially from the professional point of view. Katarínka has been subject to many already mentioned research activities, some of which include experts from abroad.

Since its beginnings, the project has been using the common communication means and gradually new ways of communication started to be used (in chronological order):

- oral passing of information about the project (word of mouth);
- printed articles (newspapers, magazines);
- first posters, notice boards, wall posters;
- postcards, badges, business cards;
- information boards (on site and in leisure centres);
- organizing of events (White Sunday Pilgrimage, Doors Open Day, Night of Churches, chamber concerts and tourist guiding);
- participation in festivals (e.g. promotional stand at the Festival Lumen);
- spoken announcements (in municipal radio, during the Mass);
- personalized marketing (a database of former project participants is used to regularly contact them with latest updates about the project);
- groups based on work specialization;
- TV and radio (programs, news reports, teletext);
- print news (news agencies and web portals);
- project webpage;
- blogs;
- social networks (Facebook fan page);
- other social networks (YouTube, Pinterest);
- presence on a fair (Coneco Incheba);
- conferences, expert discussions;
- theses (Bachelor, Diploma – initiated by enthusiastic volunteers);
- specialized publications, papers, etc.

The managed communication strategy gradually increases the project awareness, resulting in the increasing number of visitors each year. The interest in summer camps is increasing as well and the camp capacity is mostly filled. The project communication management includes raising of awareness among experts and general public. It has been established in order to achieve the synergic communication effect, which improves the final impact and feedback. *“Decision on selection of the marketing mix leads to create integrated system of methods, tools and relative preferences. Their parallel usage may reach the most effective results in due time.”* [8]

6. Tourism and cultural heritage

“Tourism belongs to the most dynamically developing economic sectors. Some experts tend to call it the sector of peace.” [9] There is a certain symbolism when learning about cultural heritage the easy way is connected with silence and peace – this is also the case of visiting the churches, places of pilgrimage, or calvarias. *“Slovakia is one of the countries with the highest number of such structures in Europe – as many as 109 calvaries are recorded.”* [10] For interest, due to the large number of churches, is Trnava city called Little Roma.

The vast majority of visitors to a sacral object – like Katarínka – can be categorized as religious tourists. Religious tourism is older than tourism itself, because we encounter pilgrimage already in the age of pre-historic religions [11]. Čábyová connects this sector not only to religion and spiritual experience (in a form of pilgrimage or mass), but also with getting to know the sacral monument and its surroundings. Sacral places help to understand the interpretation of history and the knowledge creates connection between local population and its own cultural heritage [12].

As it was already mentioned, the conservation is mainly carried out in order to preserve the cultural monument and to share the experience from this place with other people. In this case, the connection between volunteer project and tourism can be observed. In general, the cultural heritage would lose its deeper meaning if the visitors and local population showed no interest in it. Volunteers from Katarínka remain therefore motivated to continue with their activities: conservation of the monument, building the tower stairs, and organizing public events.

“Cultural monuments with potential for tourism are located across the entire area of Trnava region. Cultural heritage includes castles, ruins, and more than 300 churches.” [13] A sightseeing tour connecting these sites would bring higher interest for individual monuments and more tourists would visit them. For this reason, The Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Saints Cyril and Methodius, together with The Faculty of Regional Development at Mendel University in Brno prepared a project called The Cyrillo-Methodian Tour for Development of Activities and Cultural Tourism (‘Cyrilometodská cesta pre rozvoj aktivít a kultúrneho turizmu’). Thanks to cooperation between the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic, the project of Cyrillo-Methodian Tour has a real chance to increase the potential of cultural tourism and religious tourism for both countries.

7. Conclusions

The paper deals with a national cultural monument – the ruins of the Church of Saint Catherine’s Monastery of Alexandria and a volunteer project that has been for 21 years successful at maintaining the current state of the ruins and preventing their further decay. Information about the interesting history of the place has been provided, as well as about the project significance and its

future. The focus has been also on influence of awareness, because without the development of cultural and religious tourism, the general public and experts would lack interest in the place and further existence of the project would be endangered, which would mean the gradual decay of cultural heritage.

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