

# **The Borderland of Faith - Ukraine?**

**Neville Kyrke-Smith**

## **Introduction**

I speak from the perspective of an international Catholic charity which has been helping in Eastern and Central Europe for nearly 60 years. Please forgive me for the fact that the main focus of this talk is on the activities of the Greek Catholic Church and the Latin-Rite (Roman Catholic) Church: this is not to denigrate the work or situation facing different ecclesial communities. I hope it gives some insight into something of a religious revival in Ukraine, where 50 per cent of Christians attended church last Easter, and to the challenges facing Christians in Ukraine.

First something about Aid to the Church in Need. The objectives of the charity are to:

- advance the Christian religion by supporting and promoting the Church, especially in countries where Christians are suffering persecution or discrimination;
- further the other charitable work of the Church by providing practical assistance and pastoral care for persons in need, especially those who are living in, or are refugees from, such countries. (Memorandum and Articles of Association 3 Aid to the Church in Need UK)

This summer I returned to Ukraine for my fourth trip. Standing at the Divine Liturgy in a beautiful wooden church near Stryisky Park in Lviv, I prayed with Fr Bohdan Prakh and Fr Borys Gudziak, two of the energetic and visionary priests of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Fr Bohdan Prakh had been the Rector of the major Greek Catholic seminary in Lviv and Fr Borys Gudziak is the Rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University. Both of these priests have done so much to build up the Christian faith in the post-Soviet era.

Any figures from Ukraine come with a 'health warning': they cannot be accurate. However, some estimates say that the population is about 45-7 million, of whom 1.2 – 1.5 million are Latin-Rite Catholics, 3.5 – 5 million are Greek Catholics, 30 million are Orthodox (with perhaps 20 million Moscow Patriarchate plus 10 million Kievan and Autocephalous) and there are 3-5 million Protestants. There are also millions of atheists.

## **Recent History**

Lina Kistenko, a poetess, said: 'History is standing by the road looking at the people driving by'. I feel this might be a description of Ukraine in the way that people have suffered during wars. Over half the population was killed or perished during the first half of the twentieth century, including 25 per cent of the female population. During the Ukrainian enforced famine or Holodomor from 1930 to 1933 perhaps up to 11 million died. And from enforced famines to wars with Poland, Russia and Germany, the Ukrainians have suffered incredibly.

The Greek Catholic Church which was formed in 1596 at the Union of Brest was declared illegal at the pseudo-Synod of Lviv in 1946. The Soviet authorities persecuted the Greek Catholic Church and banned it. Thousands of priests and religious and all bishops were arrested and many thousands of Ukrainian faithful suffered deportation and died.

I first came to Lviv with Cardinal Lubachivsky on a flight from Rome in Holy Week 1991. After the elderly Cardinal had kissed the tarmac at the tiny airport, we were greeted with flags and branches of pussy willow thrown down like palms before the old bus we rode in. This was a long Palm Sunday – signalling the resurrection of a Church that had been banned and persecuted by the Soviet authorities. In St George's Square crowds thronged around the old Cathedral and the Cardinal appeared on the balcony of the Bishop's residence to cheers and calls to the Nuncio for him to be proclaimed Patriarch.

Perhaps we in the United Kingdom will never understand such a celebration of freedom and faith, but when last June I visited Bykivnia outside Kiev and walked in the Darnytsia Forest I began to understand something more of the sufferings on what is today Ukrainian soil. The trees are tied with embroidered Ukrainian cloths: these celebratory scarves, which are worn or adorn icons for special feasts, symbolise those buried here; perhaps between 100,000 and 200,000 are buried, mostly where they were shot from 1937 to 1941. For here Ukrainian intellectuals and prisoners were exterminated by order of the Soviet authorities and buried in mass graves. It is very moving and difficult to imagine, or even pray here...

The new President (Yanukovych) has yet to visit, but President Yuschenko used to come here often and people from all over Ukraine come now to remember and pray on the second Sunday of May. However, many people seem to deny history...if does not fit their cultural interpretation. Just as at Katyn, the Russians originally blamed the Nazis.

## **Revival of Faith**

### *Bishops*

Two Episcopal figures witness the resurrection of the Christian faith in parts of Ukraine.

Bishop Vasyl Seminiuk is now Bishop of Ternopil. He asked me to pass a message on:

*I would like to thank your benefactors at Aid to the Church in Need very much. I am so glad that there are such Christians who are prepared to help those who have emerged from years of persecution. I assure them of my prayers.*

Bishop Vasyl was ordained secretly and was tortured by the KGB, but now leads a strong and developing diocese which reaches into the more Soviet and spiritually arid lands of central Ukraine, across the Zbruch River. There are now sixteen new Greek Catholic churches in Ternopil with six more planned. Four liturgies are held on Sundays in all the churches and the services are full. There is an English-language liturgy at the Cathedral, as foreign students study in Ternopil. There are also chaplaincies for the 20,000 doing teacher training and at the financial university: the student missionary work is vital and Aid to the Church in Need has helped with chapels. There is strong youth work involving Renewal, a community of Catholic students. Up to 10,000 students go to Zarvanytsia at end of June on pilgrimage.

Bishop Joseph Milyan is Auxiliary Bishop of Kiev, aged 54. He has been a bishop for one year. He told me: 'Storks arrived from Rome to deliver the news about my becoming a bishop just over a year ago!' Bishop Joseph had been a parish priest in Lviv and came to oversee the building of the Cathedral in Kiev. The Greek Catholics now have 21 parish groups registered in Kiev with five chapels. There are 62 parishes registered in the whole diocese, with 60 priests/deacons. Bishop Joseph was ordained at 4am on 30 December 1984 in Brukovychi. Bishop Joseph left his house at 2am under cover of darkness – and his family knew nothing of his ordination as priest for 3 years.

Bishop Joseph Milyan told me:

*The main challenge now is indifference. Additionally people are not willing to take responsibility. We seem to have lost most of our dreams – God is the only dream left and we need to develop a parallel Christian society. We want to raise a new person – linking into ecology, for example, and speaking of truth, cooperation, and calling for a fair wage or payment of wages... We must help with an evangelisation of society.*

*Sisters*

The faith and witness of the religious orders is also remarkable. The Sister Servants of Mary Immaculate have 25 communities in Ukraine (with one in Kazakhstan) and 132 sisters, two novices and two postulants. Sr Nadia SSMI in Zhovkva told me:

*Thank you for the huge help of Aid to the Church with which we could increase our work and extend our communities. Without your help we could not serve the Church. We now have stability and some new vocations.*

One religious sister paints icons, some of which are distributed through Aid to the Church in Need. Sister Hlykeria (a Studite Sister) said

*I heard (a broadcast) in 1989 and wrote and asked for a Child's Bible from Aid to the Church in Need. It was the first time I felt that someone had heard a request of mine and taken me seriously. Your response moved me so much – and I am now a Sister here. The most important*

*thing is that we help each other in faith, even though we do not know each other. The underlying presence of Christ unites all of us. In their gesture of goodwill your dear supporters are spreading the glory of God. Please hold on to your faith – and even in your difficulties please know that we remember and pray for you.*

At a Song of the Heart festival at the seminary where I stayed, hundreds of children celebrated their faith in a catechetical song competition – a 'Ukraine's Got Talent'.

### *Monks*

At the beautiful and tranquil Univ Studite Monastery, the retiring Ihumen/Hieropriest, Fr Venedikt Aleksiychuk (who has since been appointed a bishop in Lviv) told me at this Lavra (monastery):

*Univ Monastery is, in God's providence, to promote mutual understanding and dialogue – it is becoming a place of unity ('unia'). There are now 32 brothers in Univ of whom nine are priests and seven in the novitiate (first- and second-year). Throughout Ukraine there are 85 Studites – 50 have final vows... The spirituality of the East is more monastic. There are not different models. The West has a different emphasis. The monastic life in the East is the radical life – a witness through being and living with God. By being radical and traditional as a monastery, the vocation of the monk is to live in unity with Christ and our very existence is a witness to unity. We have been seen as Orthodox monks within the Catholic Church. A lot of religious women come here to visit and stay with other male religious... Thank you for your help with our Monastery and especially the important new retreat centre, which is full ...all summer! Like those who welcomed pilgrims on their journey – the participation of your benefactors is like that of those who welcomed guests – and enabled them on their way. You are part of our life and participants here. We always pray for your benefactors and one brother holds their intentions in his heart every day.*

### *Future Priests: Seminarians*

There are over one thousand Catholic seminarians and novices in Ukraine, of both Greek Catholic and Latin rites. Visiting seminaries is inspiring. I had first visited the site of the new Ukrainian Greek Catholic Holy Spirit Seminary in Lviv back in 2001, when the then Rector, Fr Bohdan Prakh, had told me that this was where he wanted to build a new seminary to replace the old summer communist youth camp at Rudno which they had been using, where all the seminarians seemed to fall ill as a result of the cold and poor facilities. It was a privilege to stay in this seminary built with the help of ACN benefactors, where now 200 young men study for the priesthood. Fr Orest Demko, the Vice-Rector of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Holy Spirit Seminary in Lviv, preached:

*We have to be Christ's hands in this world... and you at ACN have been the hands of Christ for us... There is no eparchy or organisation in Ukraine that would not be sustained by your organisation, Aid to the Church in Need, in the last 20 years. I am sure all of them would like to have a possibility to personally thank you for that help. This desire of God is that we are His hand, His mediators to do the good...Prayer is the task we all receive. On the one hand, we see the people who are ready to help even the people they do not know and might never receive thanks from them – but they do the good for higher glory of God and just to sustain their neighbour - to shine with our own life and with all our deeds, to be able to witness Heavenly Father, and to bring the Gospel of Christ to the world. That is the task which everybody has to take by the end of the celebration of today. That would be the fulfillment of the commandment 'be my hands in this world'...*

At the Latin-Rite seminary near Lviv, the Roman Catholic Rector and Biblical Professor, Fr Oleg Salamon, explained that they prayed for all benefactors and that we helped them to be a resource for the Church throughout Ukraine. Once Fr Oleg explained how the premises were used, it was clear what he meant by a resource. As well as 28 seminarians, with eight candidates, there are five Pallotine novices, they host a theological Institute where 24 lay students come along and on three days twice a month faithful come from the archdiocese (which covers four regions). Additionally every month 50 sisters (Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic) come once a month for a week for 'formation for formators'. Four times a year for three days the Institute of Family meets and there are also six groups of continuous formation of priests meeting twice a year. The seminary is also a centre for pastoral training for groups and the 145 priests of the Archdiocese come on retreat and to meet. Twice a year there are meetings of altar boys: 350 came recently, as well as 50 leaders of altar boys. There are also meetings and some holidays for sick – with carers – for a week at a time. Some families come and there are also youth meetings. There are 50-60 religious orders helping in the Archdiocese who also visit.

### **Tensions and Opportunities**

Archbishop Mieczyslaw Mokrzycki, the Latin-Rite Archbishop in Lviv, spoke of the tensions over reclaiming buildings. As Ukraine was torn apart so often in the twentieth century - and only settled to its agreed present territory properly in the 1990s – buildings seem to be the living unhealed surface scars. Ukraine is on a spiritual and geopolitical fault line, between East and West, with territorial claims associated with nationalism or historical claims of oversight. The Russian Orthodox (Moscow Patriarchate) want buildings in Lviv. The Latin Rite also want buildings for their communities. The Greek Catholics still want some of their buildings back. For the local faithful – with the painful recent history – there are often disputes which seem to be under the control of political or government factions rather than bishops. The Archbishop summed up the Roman Catholic challenge: 'The spirit of history haunts us, but we are *not* a Polish Church in Ukraine. We have Masses in Russian, Hungarian, English, Ukrainian, Latin, Romanian, Slovakian and Polish.'

Yet, when speaking to Cardinal Lubomyr Husar,<sup>1</sup> he reaffirmed this summer that the Greek Catholic Church could still be a bridge between East and West. The Union of Brest in 1596 envisaged the Kievan Church as a 'bridge'; in that year Pope Innocent VIII said 'I hope through you the East will be connected'. Cardinal Husar told me in 2000:

*We can be a bridge, but a bridge is not simply a way of getting somewhere, it is a two-way affair. We are trying to conceptualise this, to connect the two lungs. Our fate often seems to be trodden on...like a bridge...but... Archbishop Fisher, when he went to Rome, when asked what he spoke of with Pope John XXIII, said 'what do you expect two old people to talk about? Prayer!' Prayer is the most important ecumenical element. We must have a dialogue of spirituality, we must both talk and live prayer. There is trouble in excessive nationalism. Christian patriotism, as Metropolitan Sheptytskyi said, is better.*

The heritage of Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytskyi and Cardinal Josef Slipyi is vital for an understanding of the Greek Catholic position. Cardinal Lubomyr Husar refers to this in the interesting publication, *Conversations with Lubomyr Cardinal Husar*, when speaking to Professor Antoine Arjakovsky (an Orthodox Professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University). On reviving the unifying spirit of the Kievan tradition the Cardinal quotes Metropolitan Sheptytskyi: 'the future unified church would be neither Catholic nor Orthodox, in the traditional sense of the words'. Cardinal Husar also related that when Metropolitan Sheptytskyi was asked in the 1920s about his views on the ecumenical situation 'But aren't you contradicting yourself?', without the least embarrassment he replied: 'But I am an Eastern person!' To him, like the Holy Fathers of the Desert, logical thinking was not an absolute value as long as you could express certain thoughts. When asked about the relationship with Rome the Cardinal commented

*We are cum Petro... I absolutely do not deny the primacy of Peter and his specific office to support his brothers, to keep them united. I am with Peter serving God. I follow Peter serving God.*

The ecumenism of the Gulags, the intermingling of the blood of the martyrs, is a vivid and important image to encourage unity in suffering and witness, still to be drawn out more fully.

## Hope

There are signs of greater ecumenical drive between Catholics and Orthodox under Pope Benedict XVI and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill. Archbishop Antonio Mennini, the Apostolic Nuncio to the Russian Federation (now Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain), told me in Moscow in late 2009 'we

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<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Lubomyr Husar retired on 10 February 2011 and Most Reverend Sviatoslav Shevchuk was elected Major Archbishop and Head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on 23 March.

must find more courage to turn the pages of history'. He too referred to the sufferings of martyrs together in the camps:

*We have to encourage the Catholic community to show solidarity to the Orthodox. The initiative of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI is so important. Do not accuse or reproach, but become a friend! Only the way of charity can become the way of truth. Become friends of the Orthodox so they can learn our Catholic spirituality and religious culture. We have to understand the Russian and Orthodox culture.*

Archpriest Fr Igor Vyzhanov, a priest from External Affairs Department of the Russian Orthodox Church, told me in 2009

*I really appreciate the help from your Christian foundation. I know the spirit and dedication of your work and I enjoy working most with the Catholics – I am pessimistic about some other ecumenical work, but we have a common heritage.*

Archpriest Igor had been present before and after the recent meeting between Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev and Pope Benedict XVI. And concerning the Greek Catholics in Ukraine he said,

*We must foster a solution with the Greek Catholics in Ukraine – and we both call for the need for dialogue... We need your prayers and charity for our common mission. We have challenges in common - both Catholics and Orthodox.*

At least it seems that both the Orthodox and Catholics – both Latin Rite and Greek Catholics – agree that a way forward has to be found. As the late Fr Alexander Men used to like to quote in a prayer: 'We pray that the ecumenical divide does not go up to heaven.' Or as one Greek Catholic layman, Bohdan Dminsky, told me:

*Ecumenical tensions are a problem of the hierarchy of the Churches. For most villagers these tensions are no longer a problem: disputes over buildings have - for the most part - been settled at a local level.*

Just recently, in September, there has been an extraordinary 'Ecumenical Voyage on the Volga' when a boat laden with the relics of eight saints from the first millennium of the Church started a historic ecumenical journey along the Volga River. Blessed by both the Orthodox and Catholics, this perhaps symbolises a journey that may never seem to have an end on earth. The ship carrying the relics is called 'Fr Werenfried' after Aid to the Church in Need's founder, who spearheaded the initiative to convert boats into chapels to allow services to be celebrated in places that have no church. The relics are a gift from the Catholic Church to the Russian Orthodox Church from the era of the still undivided Church - the saints are John the Baptist, Anne, Bartholomew the Apostle, the martyrs Stephen and Lawrence, George, John Chrysostom and Cyril, the missionary to the Slav people. People are boarding the boat for the Liturgy and to pray. An Orthodox priest is on board at all times, to

celebrate the Divine Liturgy in the boat's chapel, dedicated to St Vladimir, who baptised Russia.

Long shadows of sufferings haunt the peoples of all former Soviet countries. Healing, reconciliation and understanding will probably take forever – but the power of prayer and charity and the hope of the Gospel inspire us so that once again the Church can 'breathe with both lungs'.

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