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The Ukrainian Greek Catholics in an Ambiguous Position*

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No Conflict between Greek Catholics and Orthodox in Western Ukraine

The continuing conflict between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) in western Ukraine is routinely cited by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksi II as the main obstacle to a papal visit to Russia. On 9 June 2000 the patriarch complained on the Russian national television channel RTR that Pope John Paul was failing to censure the Greek Catholic 'occupation' of the region. In the L'viv, Ternopil' and Ivano-Frankivs'k dioceses of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC–MP), he maintained, parishioners were being 'hounded' from their churches and clergy beaten. Almost all the Catholic, Orthodox and government representatives we interviewed in Ukraine in September 2000, however, were in agreement that no such conflict existed. According to the secretary of the Greek Catholic Synod Bishop Yulian Gbur, 'the conflict between us and the Moscow Patriarchate exists only in the imagination'. Roman Catholic priest Fr Andrzej Legowicz similarly described the conflict as 'artificial'.

No Obstacles to Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue

Representatives of the UOC–MP do not believe that tensions are of sufficient proportions to impede Catholic–Orthodox dialogue. Archbishop Mitrofan (Yurchuk) of the UOC–MP, whom we interviewed in Kiev, stated merely that there were 'still problems in some places'. The L'viv diocese of the UOC–MP closely monitors cases of conflict and maintains a number of files on their progress, which were shown to us by diocesan secretary Oksana Zhaborinskaya. As an example of conflict she cited the ongoing dispute over a UOC–MP church in the village of Urizh in Drohobych *raion*, L'viv *oblast'*. When Greek Catholics seized the building in 1995, she maintained, parish priest Fr Nikolai Petrushchak was violently expelled from his house, and a court order to return the church to the UOC–MP had still not been executed. When asked for the number of disputes between Greek Catholic and UOC–MP parishes in L'viv diocese to date, however, she calculated the total to be a mere five. We pointed

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out to her that five disputes represented a tiny proportion of the hundreds of formerly Greek Catholic churches in L'viv *oblast'* turned over to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1946. She conceded that the serious disputes had been confined to the period of 1991–93 and were now over: 'Once the fire is out there is no need to shout "Fire!"'. When we spoke to Fr Stepan Balan and novice monk Bogdan at the Ternopil' diocesan offices of the UOC–MP about ongoing conflict with the Greek Catholics, they responded: 'There is nothing to say. There was a problem and it is in the past.'

This view of the situation was confirmed by government officials. The head of the L'viv *oblast'* Department for Religious Affairs, Stepan Borutsky, told us that 'there is no conflict in our *oblast'* between Greek Catholics and the Moscow Patriarchate'. There were 'misunderstandings' over property at parish level in just two locations in the *oblast'*, he maintained, whereas in the early 1990s the figure had been 800. Similarly the chairman of the State Committee for Religious Affairs Viktor Bondarenko replied: 'what was called conflict does not now exist in practice'. He maintained that the continued statements by Patriarch Aleksi represented 'an out-of-date point of view' tenable only until the mid-1990s at most.

Why is the Moscow Patriarchate so anxious to claim that the conflict still exists? Most of those we interviewed were unsure, but those who did offer a view cited the reasons put forward by Patriarch Aleksi himself. According to Bishop Gbur, 'It is the Moscow Patriarchate's excuse not to engage in ecumenical dialogue with the Vatican'. Patriarch Filaret (Denisenko) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kiev Patriarchate (UOC–KP) similarly claimed in an interview with us in Kiev that the Moscow Patriarchate needed 'some kind of reason' not to allow a papal visit to Russia, while in L'viv Fr Legowicz commented: 'If the patriarch does not want the pope to come to Russia then this situation will never change.'

The Real Conflict: Orthodox versus Orthodox

Representatives of the UOC–MP with whom we spoke in western Ukraine viewed the current threat to their parishes as coming from other Ukrainian Orthodox jurisdictions. 'The conflict now is with the UOC–KP and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC),' remarked Fr Stepan Balan at the diocesan offices of the UOC-MP in Ternopil'. The foremost local dispute as far as Fr Stepan and novice Bogdan were concerned was not with the Greek Catholics but with the UAOC. The Church of the Nativity, the only functioning church in Ternopil' city under Soviet rule, passed from UOC–MP to UAOC control in the early 1990s when priest-in-charge Fr Valeri Kudryakov (now Metropolitan Mefodi of the UAOC) transferred jurisdiction. During the subsequent six-year battle for control of the adjacent priest's house, said Bogdan, there were continual physical attacks. When parishioners remaining loyal to the UOC–MP managed to secure the building, he said, 'you couldn't hear the service because of demonstrators beating on the windows', whereas once the UAOC gained the upper hand, 'police officers with machine guns prevented our people from attending vespers'.

The secretary of the L'viv diocese of the UOC–MP, Oksana Zhaborinskaya, told us that ten of the diocese's approximately 60 parishes were currently 'wavering' between the UOC–MP and the other Orthodox jurisdictions. Bishop Makarii (Maletych) of the L'viv diocese of the UAOC told us that every single one of the UAOC's 330 parishes in L'viv *oblast'* had belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) before 1990. If a substantial number of the ROC's pre-1990 churches did

indeed transfer not to the Greek Catholic Church but to another Orthodox jurisdiction, the Moscow Patriarchate's charges of 'occupation' in western Ukraine could equally well be levelled at the UOC–KP and the UAOC as at the Greek Catholics. Ascertaining precisely how many have in fact done so proves difficult, however. The head of the L'viv *oblast'* Department for Religious Affairs Stepan Borutsky provided us with the figure of 1464 for the total number of buildings registered with the ROC in L'viv *oblast'* in 1991, but he was unable even to estimate how many of these now belonged to the Greek Catholics, since current statistics included the considerable number of churches constructed in the period since then. Travelling by road through L'viv and Ternopil' *oblasti*, we did indeed observe evidence of extensive construction: all the 25 Greek Catholic churches we counted over a distance of 160 miles appeared to be very new.

Asked approximately how many of the pre-1990 Russian Orthodox churches had reverted to the Greek Catholic Church and how many had either remained under the auspices of the ROC or gone over to one of the other Orthodox jurisdictions, our interviewees nevertheless gave remarkably similar estimates. Greek Catholic Bishop Yulian Gbur, Greek Catholic Abbot Venedikt (Aleksichuk) and Patriarch Filaret of the UOC-KP all suggested 60 and 40 per cent respectively. A Greek Catholic village priest in Ternopil' *oblast'*, Fr Ihor Fedorishin, thought that the balance was 50/50, as did Fr Stepan Balan of the Ternopil' diocese of the UOC–MP. Taking into account the particularly extensive construction on the part of the Greek Catholics, these estimates would seem to be borne out by statistics from the Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies (*Ukrains'kyi tsentr ekonomichnykh i polityshnykh doslidzhen*) (UCEPS)). According to UCEPS, the total numbers of religious organisations registered with the UGCC, the UOC–MP, the UOC–KP and the UAOC in L'viv *oblast'* as of 1 January 2000 were 1433, 58, 388 and 345 respectively. The analogous figures for Ivano-Frankivs'k *oblast'* were 651, 21, 285 and 125. For Ternopil' they were 739, 108, 192 and 280 – closer to the 50/50 estimates of our interviewees in that region.

Why does Patriarch Aleksi not make public complaints about incidents such as that in Ternopil' city, so reminiscent of the alleged 'occupation' by Greek Catholics? In Fr Stepan Balan's view, open discussion of the problem might make it more difficult to unite the various Orthodox jurisdictions, 'but silence is a form of lie'. Bishop Yulian Gbur was clearly reluctant to answer the same question, which we posed several times before he replied 'no comment'. When we put the same question to Bishop Makarii of the UAOC's L'viv diocese, he responded that the Moscow Patriarchate 'did not wish to wash its dirty linen in public', but did not enlighten us further. Other interviewees provided a possible explanation: Stepan Borutsky told us that there had been just five Orthodox churches in L'viv *oblast'* before the Second World War; Patriarch Filaret remarked that Galicia used to be '100 per cent Greek Catholic'. UAOC Archbishop Ihor Isichenko of Kharkiv and Poltava maintained that the Moscow Patriarchate had now accepted that Greek Catholics were not its own ('*chuzhiye*'), but that this was not the case regarding those who had gone over to one of the other Orthodox jurisdictions.

If Patriarch Aleksi were to complain publicly about the activities of the UOC–KP and the UAOC in western Ukraine, then, he would highlight their comparative strength in the region, and by implication their ability to attract up to 40 per cent of traditionally Greek Catholic believers which the Moscow Patriarchate was unable to retain after 1990. The UOC–KP's Bishop of L'viv Andrii (Horak) boasted as much to us: 'We have preserved Orthodox parishes.'

The Vatican: Friend or Foe of the Greek Catholics?

The Vatican does not leap to the Greek Catholics' defence in response to Patriarch Aleksi's accusations of their 'occupation' of western Ukraine. It could legitimately claim that the conflict between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Greek Catholics no longer exists, or point out that the Catholic Church is not the sole 'villain' since the UOC–KP and the UAOC are also encroaching upon what the Moscow Patriarchate regards as its canonical territory. It could even argue that, since Greek Catholicism is the most established Christian tradition in Galicia, the region does not form part of the Moscow Patriarchate's canonical territory at all. Could the Vatican therefore have its own stake in prolonging the artificial conflict between the Greek Catholics and the Moscow Patriarchate?

When we asked UOC–KP Bishop of L'viv Andrii (Horak) why he thought that the Vatican did not counter Patriarch Aleksi's accusations, he replied: 'The Vatican never complained in 1946 either. Maybe because it is the promoter of the accusations.' Patriarch Filaret of the UOC–KP explained to us that 'The Vatican's current policy is to leave the Greek Catholics alone. They are a barrier to dialogue with the Moscow Patriarchate and therefore the Vatican is not supporting Uniatism.' Maintaining links with Moscow, he thought, was also the motivation behind not highlighting the activities of the UOC–KP in Galicia: 'That would mean recognising that the UOC–KP is the largest Orthodox jurisdiction in western Ukraine and upsetting the Moscow Patriarchate.'

Greek Catholic Bishop Yulian Gbur confirmed the Vatican's reluctance to involve other Orthodox jurisdictions in the dispute over western Ukraine: 'Rome allows us to talk only to the Moscow Patriarchate, because the others are not canonical – although they are closer to us.' L'viv Roman Catholic priest Fr Andrzej Legowicz confirmed this. He explained to us that the Vatican would have to come to an official agreement with the Moscow Patriarchate that the conflict with the Greek Catholics was over before it could make a public statement to that effect.

Several of our interviewees felt that the Greek Catholics had been abandoned by Rome. The head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church's Department for External Church Relations Ihor Ozhievs'kyi cited to us the absence of direct financial support for his church from the Vatican. The funding which had permitted the extensive church construction we had observed in L'viv and Ternopil' *oblasti* had come, he said, from two German-based Catholic charities, 'Aid to the Church in Need' and 'Renovabis', as well as from the US Catholic Bishops' Conference – but not from Rome. The Vatican, he maintained, was terrified 'that we will destroy the system which has developed within the Catholic Church', since in effect the Greek Catholic Church was a 'local church', and the Catholic Church 'does not recognise local churches'.

In Patriarch Filaret's view, the Greek Catholics already sensed that 'Rome does not need them any more'. Greek Catholic village priest Fr Ihor Fedorishin told us that in his view the Roman Catholic Church was a quite separate structure. The Greek Catholic union with the Vatican, he maintained, was purely symbolic, 'just as the Moscow Patriarchate is symbolically subordinate to Constantinople'. Of our interviewees, only Patriarch Filaret and Bishop Andrii (Horak) seriously thought that the Greek Catholics might leave the Catholic Church as a result of the Vatican's stance. However, vicepremier of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Nikola Zhulins'kyi volunteered to us the information that the Greek Catholics were currently 'looking to possible integration into one local Ukrainian Orthodox Church'.

Other church and government representatives with whom we spoke thought that the Vatican was trying to curb the Greek Catholic Church with a conscious policy of latinisation, although this was frequently confused with polonisation. The UAOC's Bishop Makarii (Maletych) of L'viv claimed that Rome was indeed exerting a latinising influence on the Greek Catholics, or 'nurturing them in Jesuit fashion'. Ozhievs'kyi noted that the latinising influence was supported by the westward-looking Basilian order, which – perhaps as a result – was significantly stronger and richer in the region than the staunchly eastern-rite Studites.

Whatever its policy towards them might be, the Vatican's failure to lend public support to the Greek Catholics in Galicia is being rewarded by complete silence over Roman Catholic activity in central Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian Centre for Economic and Political Studies, the Roman Catholic Church had 324 registered religious communities in Zhytomir, Vinnytsa and Khmel'nyts'kyi *oblasti* as of 1 January 2000 (the Greek Catholic figure for the same area is just 29). Viktor Bondarenko told us that the Roman Catholics were the fastest growing of the traditional churches in Ukraine. Surprisingly, Patriarch Filaret assured Keston that the Roman Catholic Church was ministering to 'its own people' in these regions. He did not complain about this activity precisely because it was being conducted among Poles, he said, although earlier in our interview with him he mentioned that in Ukraine Roman Catholics were 'trying to attract Orthodox'. Although the language of Roman Catholics in L'viv is frequently Polish, Fr Legowicz told us that as far west as the city of Ternopil' – where we noted that a large Roman Catholic church was being constructed – masses are celebrated in Ukrainian and not Polish. Archbishop Mitrofan (Yurchuk) of the UOC–MP told us that the Roman Catholic Church was very active in Ukraine and brought in numerous missionaries from Poland. When he agreed that most Poles in Ukraine were by now completely russified (or ukrainified), we asked him why the UOC–MP did not complain about Roman Catholic activity in the country's central regions. 'We have no problems with Roman Catholics', he replied.

Abbot Venedikt (Aleksichuk), who heads the Greek Catholic Studite Monastery of the Holy Dormition near L'viv, told us that his church was 'under pressure from both sides' – both Catholic and Orthodox. In his view, however, the Greek Catholics' role in stirring up Catholic-Orthodox relations was ultimately necessary for the reconciliation of the broken Christian Church. 'When a person is sick a surgeon is not afraid of his screams', he explained to us. 'He knows that he needs to cut the patient open, not stroke him and say everything is all right.'

Polish/Roman Catholics versus Ukrainian/Greek Catholics in Galicia

There are 'serious contradictions' between the Greek and Roman Catholic Churches in Ukraine, Viktor Bondarenko told us. When we visited western Ukraine we did indeed encounter evidence of substantial friction between the two branches of the Catholic Church at local level.

Oksana Zhaborinskaya told us how Archbishop Avhustyn (Markevich) of L'viv had written to the papal nuncio in Kiev, Archbishop Antonio Franco, on 19 July 1995 to complain about the behaviour of Greek Catholics in Urizh. When he had tried to investigate the conflict in the village, the archbishop wrote, Greek Catholic parishioners had attempted to push him down some steps, ripped his surplice and used foul language. In his reply of 7 August 1995, apparently without independent confirmation of the incident, Franco apologised to the archbishop for the acts of

violence perpetrated against him by the Greek Catholics – and lamented that similar incidents also occurred between Greek and Roman Catholic parishes in western Ukraine.

Declining to name specific regions, Viktor Bondarenko complained to us that his national committee did not have control over local committees for religious affairs, 'which is totally wrong because we now see blocs forming, uniting local authorities with the dominant church in the area'. It appears that Roman Catholics get a raw deal from the local authorities in Galicia, where Greek Catholicism predominates. On 23 September an elderly parishioner in the Roman Catholic cathedral in central L'viv told us, with obvious resentment, that all but two of the city's 36 pre-Second World War Roman Catholic churches had been 'given to autocephalists, Greek Catholics and Baptists. The authorities did not return them to us even though we wanted them.' The Greek Catholic Church currently holds more than 40 churches in the city.

According to Zhaborinskaya, the large neo-Gothic former Roman Catholic church of SS Olga and Elizabeth near L'viv railway station has been given to the Greek Catholics, while a former Roman Catholic church two doors up from the UOC–MP church in L'viv has been taken over by a community of Seventh-Day Adventists. Fr Andrzej Legowicz confirmed to us that a Roman Catholic community was given permission to celebrate mass in SS Olga and Elizabeth in the mid-1990s, but that this decision was subsequently overturned by the local authorities, who then handed the church to the Greek Catholics. Although Fr Legowicz claimed not to know about the Adventist church, he added that the Roman Catholics had failed to recover their former seminary building in L'viv – now a Greek Catholic church – and that the present Roman Catholic seminary was approximately 20 miles outside the city. Elsewhere in L'viv *oblast'*, he said, the Roman Catholic community in the village of Riashne had been refused permission to build for the past five years, while in the village of Komarne the Greek Catholics had taken all three church buildings and the Roman Catholics were now obliged to celebrate mass in the village cemetery. In his view the L'viv authorities were 'trying to control the number of Roman Catholic churches'.

Asked about the fate of SS Olga and Elizabeth on 26 September, Stepan Borutsky claimed not to know about any decision being overturned. The Adventists 'bought ... were given' the former Roman Catholic church near the UOC–MP church, he maintained, because the Roman Catholics did not ask for it. In L'viv, he claimed, 'we do not have any Roman Catholics'. Abbot Venedikt (Aleksichuk) suggested to us that two churches in central L'viv were enough for the city's Roman Catholics since 'there are no Poles here any more'. We also encountered a cool attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church at the 'Anisiya' church credit union, where general manager Volodymyr Sydorovs'kyi explained that the union 'works with all traditional confessions of the region' – but not Roman Catholics: 'only churches of the eastern rite'.

In fact, the large number of former Roman Catholic church buildings in the city testifies to a tradition established during recent centuries of Polish rule, curtailed when Soviet troops occupied the region during the Second World War and those of Polish nationality were deported westwards in Operation Wisła. Sixty years on, however, resentment of former Polish domination coupled with fear of a resurgence of polonisation fuels both hostility towards Roman Catholicism – which many Ukrainians fuse with Polish identity – and nationalist feeling within the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church as it seeks to preserve its own identity.

According to Fr Legowicz, Roman and Greek Catholics used to attend each others'

churches before the Second World War, but now Greek Catholic priests sometimes forbid their parishioners to attend Roman Catholic churches: 'The Greek Catholics are viewed as a Ukrainian church, the Roman Catholics as Polish.' This clear demarcation of nationality was reflected in the words of one woman leaving the Roman Catholic cathedral in L'viv: she apologetically remarked to us that she liked the church very much and attended it 'even though' she was Ukrainian.

At the close of a Greek Catholic service in the village of Beneva (Ternopil' *oblast'*), the choir and congregation tearfully sang a Ukrainian nationalist hymn: 'O Lord, listen to our plea, take misfortune from our land, a people's strength is in unity, O Lord, grant us unity.' The village priest Fr Ihor Fedorishin later told us that he believed the latinisation of Greek Catholics to be the aim of Poland rather than of the Vatican, 'because then it will be easier for Poland to take this territory'. During the sixteenth century, he told us, the patriarch of Constantinople had visited Ukraine and castigated the people for having paganised Christianity with so many national elements. 'But these are so strong with us', he explained to Keston, 'that neither Rome nor Moscow can destroy us.'