



PHOTO BY NATALIA TSUPKA

**A Ukrainian Catholic University pro-life group leads prayers in a hospital where abortions are performed.**

# A Population Cut in Half?

**What Stalin did by force Ukrainians now do by choice. But Catholics are fighting back.**

by **Matthew Rarey**

**A**fter enduring 500 years of foreign rule that ended with almost half the population perishing during World War II and the long Communist “peace,” today’s Ukrainians are confronting their most vicious enemy to date: themselves.

Last September, President Victor Yushchenko declared the country’s demographic crisis a “critical threat to national security.” According to the United Nations Population Division, Ukraine’s birthrate of 1.2 children per woman is one of the lowest in the world. If it persists, the country’s population of 47 million will be cut in half by 2050.

As history shows, a people’s unwillingness to reproduce is a sign of terminal decline. And since nature abhors a vacuum, Ukraine eventually may be repopulated with peoples non-Ukrainian, non-European, and certainly non-Christian. Either that, or many more Ukrainian cities and villages will

resemble the ghost town near Chernobyl. As with the other dying nations of post-Christian Europe, the roots of Ukraine’s demographic crisis are not economic or political, but moral and religious. Consequently, Ukraine’s Christians are leading the fight to reconvert their country from a culture of death to a culture of life.

Ukraine’s demographic crisis and the Catholic response to it can best be viewed from the perspective of the western third of the country; first, because this is where the country’s five million Ukrainian Greek Catholics predominate. (The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is the largest of the eastern rites, representing the overwhelming majority of Catholics in Ukraine.) Second, Catholics display a characteristic unity that is lacking among the Orthodox of Ukraine, who are split into three factions and often mired in disputes with political overtones, particularly in the case of the faction allied with the Moscow patriar-

chate. Furthermore, the western third of Ukraine has a history distinct from the rest of the country. Since these differing histories impact the current demographic crisis, they must be briefly recounted.

## **NATIONAL DIVIDE**

The eastern two-thirds of Ukraine, for centuries under czarist rule and predominately Orthodox, was subsumed into the Soviet Union shortly after the Red Revolution. It suffered spiritually from the Communists’ initially brutal policy toward Christianity, which sought to destroy every outward manifestation of the faith and brainwash the young into atheism. The family was undermined in the early 1920s by the introduction of easy divorce laws and legalized abortion. (The Soviet Union was the first nation to recognize a “right” to abortion.) In the early 30s, Stalin orchestrated a famine that decimated the countryside—the conservatively estimated seven million dead

were largely replaced by Russian imports—an atrocity that remains as vivid a horror among Ukrainians as the Holocaust is among Jews.

The wounds of Communism in eastern Ukraine are more hideous and fester more openly than in the west; the various social ills afflicting the entire country are particularly severe there: a purely functional notion of sex coupled with high rates of abortion, birth control, and divorce, leading to the breakdown of the family and the downward demographic slide. In the first decades of Bolshevism, the Red scythe slashed with amateurish enthusiasm, cutting wide and deep. As Communism matured, however, it became more a business than a labor of passionately perverted love. By the time it came to the western third of Ukraine, it had begun entering the business phase.

Alternately under the rule of Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, western Ukraine escaped the birth pangs of the Soviet Union, falling under Communist rule nearly 30 years after Red October with the advance of the Red Army in 1944. The Communists subverted western Ukrainian Christian culture less violently than in the east, with one big exception: in 1946 Stalin banned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church because of its link to the West—Greek Catholics have acknowledged papal authority since the Church of Kiev's Orthodox bishops ended the schism with Rome in 1596—and its status as a focal point of Ukrainian patriotic identity. All Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishops were imprisoned in the Gulag, where all but one, Cardinal Joseph Slipyj, died in captivity. The Church functioned underground as the "Church of the Catacombs" until re-legalized in 1989.

Being banned had a positive effect, however; it spared the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church from the temptation to compromise the Church's societal role in order to stay on the good side of the Evil Empire. This allowed the Church to maintain its integrity, an indispensable buttress to its apostolic activities in present-day Ukraine.

The officially-sanctioned Orthodox Church, however, was not spared this temptation. In order to stay above ground, it had to play the role allotted it under Communism: i.e., the Church's activities were to remain enclosed within the four walls of the church building. Several generations of Orthodox clergy grew accustomed to operating this way,

producing an ingrained mentality that relegated them to accommodating church-going on Sundays and holy days. The result is that the Orthodox Churches of the former Soviet Union are less effectively engaged in the re-evangelization of society than their Catholic brethren (to say nothing of the evangelicals, who even feature American-style preachers on television).

### THE CULTURE OF DEATH

Ukraine provides many examples of the culture of death, but the scourge of abortion is the most significant. "In 2002 we produced a study estimating that 33 million abortions have been performed in Ukraine since 1955," said Dr. Yuriy Pidlisny. "That averages to six per

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woman. Many more have been performed since 2002, of course." According to United Nations statistics, Ukraine surpasses Russia's average of five abortions per woman.

Pidlisny is director of the Institute of Marriage and the Family at the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU), located in the western city of Lviv near the Polish border. A bespectacled scholar in his mid-40s, he explains that the casual acceptance of abortion, which is often used as a means of birth control, is the consequence of several generations of Communist propaganda and atheistic science.

"During Soviet times, people were taught that God is an illusion and, consequently, man was proclaimed the ruler of his own life," he told this writer, who had several discussions with him in March. "The acceptance of the theory of evolution—that man is but a byproduct of evolutionary chance—led to the teaching that a human being undergoes a recapitulation of the evolutionary process in the womb. Conclusion: that

'something' in the womb is not a human being, so there's no moral problem with a woman terminating a pregnancy if, for example, she values her career more than motherhood."

Almost 20 years after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union, Ukrainian abortion laws remain locked in the Communist past. According to Article 281, "only a physical person has a right to life," a "physical person" being one who "exists only after birth."

This legal understanding accommodates what Pidlisny calls the "hedonistic mentality" rampant in present-day Ukraine; one recalls Pope Benedict XVI's warning that secularism (in its Western materialist manifestation) poses a greater threat to Ukraine than the Communism of yore. Both Marx and Mammon are false gods, but Mammon is the older and more alluring—and especially dangerous to societies in which Marxism assaulted and undermined Christianity over multiple generations, leaving many people devoid of or weak in faith.

### THE CULTURE OF LIFE

Thus, pro-lifers in Ukraine are confronting a mentality rooted in a distorted understanding of human life and man's relationship to God. In response, the Institute of Marriage and the Family is promoting the Catholic Christian understanding of life throughout Ukraine.

Founded by Pidlisny in 1998, the institute's first task was to publish Catholic documents in Ukrainian, from papal encyclicals to Pope John Paul II's writings on the theology of the body. Today the 14 professors affiliated with the institute teach extracurricular courses at UCU on such topics as "Familial Ethics from the Christian Point of View" (which addresses philosophical, medical, psychological, and theological issues); "Human Sexuality: Myth and Reality"; and natural family planning. (Additionally, UCU students affiliated with the institute teach a mini-course on human sexuality at Lviv-area high schools.) These courses, which are open to the public, are serving as a model for diocesan programs elsewhere in Ukraine.

"I truly believe we're fulfilling a vital social role," said Pidlisny. "Our priority now is to spread our courses beyond Lviv with distance-learning programs, meanwhile developing our classes into a comprehensive master's degree pro-

gram in the Church's teachings on marriage and family. This is pioneering work, and there is so much to be done in Ukraine."

UCU's pro-life group shares office space with the Institute of Marriage and the Family. Its president is Natalia Tsiupka, a third-year student majoring in philosophy and theology. She and the 25 core members of the group participate in an array of outreach programs in the community. Each month they host a public seminar; topics have ranged from the beginnings of human life (e.g., proving that "the pre-born are indeed very much human") to the immorality of contraception. Students from Lviv's state universities also attend the seminars, which are promoted by those schools' own pro-life groups.

"So many of them know nothing about the moral teachings on abortion, contraception, marriage," she said. "I believe they walk away better informed."

Additionally, UCU's pro-lifers organize prayer groups that pray inside hospitals—Christian doctors and nurses often join them, said Tsiupka—and provide literature to women seeking abortions. (All state hospitals in Ukraine provide abortions.) The students also band together local church and youth groups for public prayer in the city center to attract the attention of those passing by.

In April, the students organized a public prayer meeting in honor of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic celebration of the Feast of the Annunciation. The day began in the Cathedral of St. George, where the archbishop of the Lviv archeparchy (archdiocese), Ihor Vozniak, blessed an assembly of over 500 people from myriad sympathetic groups, such as the Association of Catholic Doctors and Mothers in Prayer. Then they divided into eight smaller groups, which held prayers in the various city hospitals.

Their most effective outreach, however, may be their work with adolescents. For the past five years, UCU's pro-life group has given lectures at Lviv-area public schools. "We go to classes and speak to students in their early teens about things like the value of virginity, the meaning of true love, and how contraception and abortion are not love," said Tsiupka. "Hopefully we are helping young people to [eventually] choose wisely."

Tsiupka's group and the Institute of Marriage and the Family are on the

same page as the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Helping people realize the sacramental nature of marriage and the divine duty of rearing children—in contrast to the secular notion of marriage as a "partnership" predicated on feelings, almost commercial in nature, and easily dissolvable—is a vital ministry in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church's re-evangelization of society.

According to the Church's Commission on the Family, 59 parish centers in Ukraine offer standardized programs to prepare couples for marriage. These programs take 45 hours to complete. The information office of the Archeparchy of Lviv describes these as "well-developed programs that often serve not only the parish where they are housed, but also neighboring parishes." (If no center is conveniently located, the duty of marriage preparation falls to the local parish priest. The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches requires all "pastors of souls ... to see to it that the Christian faithful are prepared for the matrimonial state.") The pre-marriage program is mandatory, although the loosely organized "Movement of Young Marriages," a popular follow-up program featuring classes and talks aimed at guiding newlyweds through their first five years of marriage, is not.

In place for almost 10 years, the Church's pre-marriage program is having a tangible impact. Last year, the regional authorities of the *oblast* of Lviv (Ukraine is divided into *oblasts*, analogous to states or provinces) publicly attributed Lviv's precipitously declining divorce rate over the past five years (from 53 percent to 30 percent) to the Church's program. (This trend of declining divorce rates holds true for much of western, heavily Catholic Ukraine; eastern *oblasts*, however, have posted significantly higher divorce rates. The divorce rate in Dnipropetrovska is 75 percent and 78 percent in Donetska, according to 2006 figures.) In turn, the local government in Lviv has responded to the Church's pre-marriage initiatives by creating counseling programs attached to the civil marriage registration centers.

### **PAYING COUPLES TO PROCREATE**

The Catholic Church in Ukraine is attempting to reverse the demographic crisis by restoring the divine appreciation of temporal life. Viewed from this perspective, procreation is valued as a co-sharing in God's creation: a gift to

be embraced as a path to happiness, not a detour from secular notions of material success. Whether the Church and her subsidiary institutions succeed depends upon the willingness of people to listen to the Good News and experience a change of heart and mind. In short, what Ukraine needs is a full re-conversion.

Because the root of Ukraine's demographic crisis is moral and religious, it is not surprising that the government's attempts to boost birth rates through monetary incentives have met with uneven success. (As of today, \$2,000 USD is offered for the birth of a first child, with progressively more for successive children. Ukraine's per capita income is less than \$2,000 per annum.) According to Pidlisny, only in sections of western Ukraine and the vicinity of the capital, Kiev, have birthrates begun trending upward. But it is too early to judge whether they will have long-term significance.

Throwing money at the problem is not the answer, however, according to an American who has studied birthrates worldwide.

"Government incentive programs, though they have helped somewhat, have failed to raise birthrates to replacement rate in any of the western or eastern European countries in which they have been tried," says Joseph D'Agostino, a freelance journalist and former vice president for communications at the Population Research Institute. (His forthcoming book, *Triumph of Patriarchy*, addresses the West's demographic decline.) "It's a sad day when governments are forced to pay women to have children, and even sadder to realize that hasn't worked."

Unless Ukrainians sacrifice for the future rather than focusing selfishly on momentary pleasures and concerns, they will have half-completed a task that was once on Stalin's wish list: making all of the Ukrainians disappear from Ukraine. But perhaps the half left behind will be the faithful remnant of Christians who, loving God, in turn love themselves enough to be fruitful and multiply. Time will tell. ■

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