

Rebuilding the Bridge Between East and West

Ukrainian Catholic University, shut down in the 1940s by the Soviets, reopened in 2002 and today plays a crucial role in re-evangelizing the country. But it needs the help of Catholics worldwide.

by Matthew Rarey

From Stalin's persecution of "enemies of the state" after the defeat of Nazi Germany until Gorbachev's last-minute reforms on behalf of a dying Soviet Union in the late 1980s, the Catholic Church's largest Eastern Rite suffered for the faith behind the Iron Curtain—suffering that was largely hidden from the eyes of the faithful worldwide.

Under orders from the Kremlin, the clergy of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) were executed or exiled to Siberia, and the UGCC was forcibly merged with the Russian Orthodox Church at the sham "Council of Lviv" in 1946. Conveniently, Stalin ensured that none of the UGCC bishops, who had either been killed or deported, were present to agree to the new order. But Rome's faithful Ukrainians persevered as an underground Church through the decades of oppression, and emerged jubilantly once the dead hand of communism was lifted from Ukraine in the early 1990s.

Today, they want their fellow Catholics across the world to celebrate this good news. In November, leading Ukrainian Catholic laymen and clergy visited several American and Canadian cities to promote their flagship apostolate: the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU), which was re-founded in 2002



PHOTO BY ANDREW WOVK

Myroslav Marynovych, a Gulag survivor who serves as the senior vice rector of UCU.

after the Soviets shut it down in the 1940s. UCU serves as the only Catholic institution of higher learning in the territory of the former Soviet Union.

This writer attended their first stop in New York City on November 4. The program began with an invocation by Bishop Dionisiy Liakhovych, the representative of Patriarch Lubomyr of Kiev, chief prelate of the UCGG. He then led the audience of some 250 Catholics, mostly Ukrainian-Americans, in a Slavonic hymn, the beautifully somber echoes of which filled the hall until silence gave way to the din of forks and knives over a lunch of hearty Ukrainian cuisine.

The main event was a video presentation about the UCU (featuring remarks by Cardinal Francis George of Chicago), followed by comments from school officials about the challenges in a post-communist society.

The Rev. Dr. Ihor Boyko, dean of the Philosophy and Theology College at UCU, spoke about Ukraine's bioethical temptations.

"Today Ukraine is moving closer to a time when medical progress and biotechnology can be contrary to and at odds with the morals and cultures of our society," said the 32-year-old priest, noting that "the problem lies in instituting laws that address bioethics" where no such laws exist. "It is not possible to predict what the end results may be with this continued un-tethered manipulation of life's secrets. Much will depend on the scientists themselves, their moral positions and their consciences."

The primary concern of the UCU, formally dedicated to "the glory of God, the common good, and the dignity of the human person," is the moral and spiritual life of Ukraine, Father Boyko reminded the audience.

Besides awarding lay scholars degrees in the humanities and training future priests and nuns (last August, six young women took the veil as Redemptorists), UCU's Institute of Religion and Society addresses public-policy issues. Re-

versing the grim Soviet legacy of abortion is an especially dire task, said Father Boyko. (The Soviet Union was the first nation to legalize abortion, back in the 1920s.)

"The fundamental right guaranteed to every citizen by the constitution of Ukraine is the right to life, which the government [by allowing abortions through the twelfth week of pregnancy] grossly violates," said Father Boyko, who called to the audience's attention the deleterious effects of abortion on population growth. The 1989 census reported 51 million citizens in Ukraine; the most recent, 48.5 million.

"According to Ukraine's ministry of health, there were almost 350,000 abortions in 2001," said Father Boyko. "But unofficial sources report numbers as high as 2 million."

The keynote speaker was Myroslav Marynovych, the senior vice rector of UCU and director of the Institute of Religion and Society. He is prominent in Ukrainian academic and political circles and is a key figure in the ecumenical dialogues between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. His personal story is well known. In retaliation for his work as a founding member of Ukraine's Helsinki Group, which monitored Soviet human rights abuses, he spent 10 years in the Gulag (1977-1987). Upon his release, he founded the Ukrainian Association of Amnesty International and was instrumental in the re-founding of the Lviv Theological Academy, the precursor to the Ukrainian Catholic University.

Professor Marynovych addressed the resurgence of the Church in Ukraine and the spiritual hazards it faces. "To change people's mentality means to change their spiritual attitudes," he said. "That is why I am so close to the Church. That's why I work at the university."

Noting what a small institution can accomplish when faced with a monumental task, he reminded the audience to remember what "that small group of dissidents in [Soviet Premier Leonid] Breshnev's time" set in motion "when most people thought it was stupid to stand openly against the almighty 'Empire of Evil.'"

"As always, it is personal witness that is the most convincing treatment for an illness in the human spirit," Professor Marynovych said. "The UCU witnesses the importance of theology,

Excerpts from an interview between Matthew Rarey and Myroslav Marynovych.

As in the case of Alexandr Solzenhitsyn, did your incarceration in the Gulag bring you closer to Christ and inspire you to work on behalf of the Church?

Marynovych: Initially, my work for the Ukrainian Helsinki Group was not directly connected to my faith. I was rather indifferent toward religion, while still preserving a certain respect for the Church (my grandfather was a priest). Later it became clear to me, however, that I didn't connect the idea of human rights with the French Revolution. In a labor camp, I came to fully appreciate that this idea traces back to the Christian principle, rooted in the commandment to love your neighbor. The inner link with this principle is more powerful [than any purely secular understanding].

The total conversion to Christianity in my case was caused by what you might call a personal revelation. After leaving the Gulag, I had to analyze the nature of evil and its hidden dangers while witnessing to the urgency of kindness in human life.

Relations between the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church continue to be strained. Indeed, you have written that the "Moscow Patriarchate presents the revival of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church...solely as the result of Catholic proselytism and state intervention." And the Moscow Patriarchate still refuses to acknowledge the invalidity of the 1946 Lviv "Council." Are there reasons for hope today?

Marynovych: Well, there is always reason for hope. The position of the Russian Orthodox Church is strongly dependent on the political vision developed by the Russian state. So far, the Moscow Patriarchate is being used by the Kremlin as a channel for the idea of the "unity of all the Eastern Slavonic nations." That's the substitute for the idea of a new "union" under Russian leadership. As long as this idea seems to be realistic for the ruling elite of the Russian Federation, Moscow will be unfavorable to accept the changes of 1989-1991 [with the re-emergence of the UCGG in the collapse of the Soviet Union] as accomplished and incontrovertible. We need more time, and I am sure future developments will assure the Russian Orthodox Church that it lies in her best interests to develop modern relations with all the Ukrainian churches [both the UCGG and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church].

How has religious freedom fared in Ukraine's transition from forced membership in the Soviet Union to independence?

Marynovych: Having opened up to the West, Ukraine has gone from brutal, atheistic prohibitions against religion to the threat of the marginalizing of religion. So, in the life of believers, secular democracy has become both a blessing and a challenge.

On one hand, a regime of unprecedented religious freedom was established in Ukraine. A peculiar parity of forces was set in our country between various confessions and denominations that is an important precondition for overcoming the authoritarian stereotypes of the past and a kind of guarantee of religious freedom. In particular, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church came out from the underground and is quite freely developing. We founded the first Catholic university in the post-Soviet order. It has been recognized by the Vatican and successfully overcomes atheistic stereotypes of state bureaucracy as it renews the official study of theology in Ukraine.

In terms of religious freedom, Ukraine has made serious steps towards Europe and our country no longer is mentioned in reports from organizations monitoring violations of religious freedom.

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What role does the Ukrainian Catholic University serve in the life of your country?

Marynovych: I can cite at least three aspects of the UCU's mission that are of crucial importance to Ukraine. The first is bringing back theology as an academic discipline in Ukrainian higher education and, through that, strengthening the positive impact of the Church on society as a whole. The second is supporting the ethical basis of our social and even political life. We try to achieve this by rejecting corruption, promoting honesty in public life, and taking an ethical approach to academics that stresses serving the needs of the marginalized in society. Third, our mission is to promote the unity of the Church and we present our Catholicity in a clearly ecumenical manner.

But one of our most pressing concerns is how to preserve the authenticity of our mission within a society traumatized by such a long period of communist persecution and degradation. We do not receive financial support from the state, which gives us a certain measure of autonomy. At the same time, it puts pressure on the UCU administration to raise funds that are vital for the stability of the university's development.

Does Western secularism pose a danger to a Christian Ukraine?

Marynovych: It appears that Eastern Europe—which is returning to the bosom of European civilization—and Western Europe—which now questions the Christian foundations of that civilization—are passing each other by.

What do you mean?

Marynovych: Unfortunately, the democratic West is actually making the same mistakes [regarding religious freedom] against which it once warned the communist East. Allow me to mention two examples.

Before the Enlightenment, Europe suffered from prohibiting unbelievers from holding responsible positions in society. Then the Enlightenment equalized the social rights of believers and unbelievers and removed chains from the human spirit. Today, however, the European Parliament did not even allow Rocco Buttiglione [former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's minister of European Union policies] to serve as a European Commissioner out of fear that his Roman Catholic faith would exercise a negative influence on the people! This shocked Ukrainian believers.

Second, this fall the European Parliament passed a law banning the Christian version of the origins of the world from being taught in EU schools.

For me personally, these examples are doubly painful because I was a proponent of Western democracy all my life and pointed to the countries of Western Europe as examples for Ukrainians. Today, I cannot help seeing that Western Europe is sliding into traps from which Eastern Europe has just begun to extricate itself.

the ability to reject corruption, and the need to promote the unity of the Church."

One of the attendees at the event, a Roman Catholic priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn, Father Michael Perry, was recognized for his work on behalf of the UCU. He has hosted seminarians from the UCU at his parish in order for them to improve their English and promote their apostolate to the Catholics of America. In return, this past summer a seminarian from Father Perry's diocese, Rodnev Lapommeray, an American of Haitian descent, spent six

weeks with the students in Ukraine studying their language, liturgy, and culture.

According to Lapommeray, a soft-spoken man in his mid-20s, he went to Ukraine because he was "interested in the Eastern liturgy." (The "Greek" in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church refers not to the ethnicity of its 10 million members worldwide, but their liturgy.) And he returned with a broadened perspective on the universal nature of the Catholic Church.

"In Ukraine [the students and faculty of UCU] are doing such a remark-

able job on behalf of the re-evangelization" of their country, he said. However, he noted that new enemies have arisen in the wake of communism's collapse, such as "Western materialism" and the concomitant assault on "the dignity of the human body" through the celebration of sexual excess with the deliberate denial of procreation.

In 2007, UCU educated 1,250 students, plus 300 summer school participants, and subsidized 300 faculty and staff on a budget of \$1.89 million.

Father Perry, a bluff Brooklynite of Ukrainian heritage, interjected: "Never has a university meant so much to the Catholics of a country, and we Americans ought to know so much more about the work these Ukrainians are doing to promote Catholicism."

He praised the Chicago-based Ukrainian Catholic Education Foundation (UCEF) for its role in promoting the UCU to Americans, who have provided half of the donations to the UCU since its inception. "The Ukrainian Catholic Education Foundation is helping the UCU do the Lord's work on a shoestring budget," Father Perry said. In 2007 the UCU educated 1,250 students, plus 300 summer school participants, and subsidized 300 faculty and staff on a budget of \$1.89 million.

The UCEF sponsored these ambassadors from Ukraine on their mission to North America. The UCEF's president, John Kurey, addressed attendees at the luncheon in New York as well as those at subsequent visits to Yonkers, Chicago, Toronto, Montreal, Edmonton, and Warren, Mich.

"The Ukrainian [Greek] Catholic Church is the epicenter of ecumenism in the world today," said Kurey, a Roman Catholic. And he hastened to add that donations to the UCU, through the UCEF (www.ucef.org), promote the university in the most efficient manner possible. For the past two years, CharityNavigator.org gave the UCEF four out of four stars because 84 percent of the non-profit organization's proceeds go directly to the charity it serves, Ukrainian Catholic University. ■

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