

Letter From Ukraine

by Matthew A. Rarey

Dispelling the Darkness of Secularism



Bolshevism evolved into religion, some kind of materialistic pagan religion, which worships Lenin and his like as demigods, while considering lies, deceit, violence, the oppression of the poor, the demoralizing of children, humiliation of women, destruction of the family . . . and the reduction of all the nation to extreme poverty as the principles of its rule—although all these principles are false.

—Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, leader of the Ukrainian Greek Catholics (Lviv, 1936)

After being tossed about by the Charibdis of communism, the nations of Eastern Europe are sailing toward the Scylla of secularism. And this monster, according to Pope Benedict XVI, is even more destructive.

Communism, like any ideology, is fanatically embraced only by a slim, myopic minority; secularism—in its materialistic, hedonistic manifestation—appeals to man’s carnal nature, thus threatening to turn the majority from a divinely oriented life. While communism inspired the destruction of churches, many ordinary people continued to pray and worship discreetly, their faith strengthened through persecution. With communism nearly two decades in the grave, secularism tempts ordinary people to worship Mammon and Me during the week, sleep in on Sunday, and maybe honor God by taping a holy card to the dashboard. It is a slippery slope from Pravda to Prada, but the same man-centered, God-negating principle applies to both. Ukraine is a case in point.

“It’s tragic that the Berlin Wall fell at precisely the time when the West no longer had the same moral integrity it had, say, even thirty years before,” Fr. Peter Galadza said over coffee and pastries in the rector’s office of the Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU).

“So when the Wall came down, the worst of the West came pouring in: all the cultural detritus pumped out of New York and L.A. that foreigners associate with America. And many people here, especially the young, assuming that the West was superior, lapped up the very worst elements of secularized Western culture—loud commercialism, vulgar music, hypersexualization—all the garbage that we conservatives had been decrying since the 60’s. It’s a pity.”

Father Galadza, a Pennsylvanian of Ukrainian descent, is director of UCU’s Institute of Liturgical Studies. (Located in the city of Lviv, near the Polish border, UCU is the sole Catholic university in the former Soviet Union.) A man of jolly girth and the father of five—married men being allowed ordination in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which runs UCU—he surveyed Ukraine’s post-communist landscape on a sunny afternoon in mid-March.

The focus of our discussion was western Ukraine and how the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church—the majority of whose 5.5 million members reside in the west—is confronting the secular scourge, particularly as it impacts marriage.

The east, for centuries under czarist rule and predominantly Orthodox, was annexed to the Soviet Union shortly after the Red Revolution. The communists’ initial policy toward Christianity was to destroy every outward manifestation of the Faith and brainwash the young into atheism. And it suffered demographically from the culture of abortion introduced in the mid-1920’s (the Soviet Union was the first to legalize the practice) and Stalin’s orchestrated famine of the

early 30’s, in which approximately seven million Ukrainians died, to be replaced largely by imported Russians. Today, eastern Ukraine bears the worst scars of the communist “principles.” Besides a stratospheric abortion rate and consequent demographic collapse, this part of Ukraine is where human traffickers prey heavily upon impoverished young women, luring them to the West with promises of legitimate jobs, only to force them into prostitution, servicing johns from London to Los Angeles.

The western part, however, had been (and remains) predominantly Greek Catholic and Western-oriented. 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 its Christian culture less violently than in the east, with one exception: In 1946 Stalin banned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the largest Eastern Rite of the Catholic Church, both for serving as a link to the West—she has been in communion with Rome since the 16th century—and as a focal point of Ukrainian patriotic identity. Her bishops were executed or sent to Siberia, where all but one, Joseph Cardinal Slipyj, died in captivity. And she functioned underground as the “Church of the Catacombs” until being relegalized in 1989.

Being banned had a positive long-term consequence, however: It spared the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church from the temptation to compromise her societal role in order to stay on the good side of the Evil Empire. This allowed her to maintain her integrity, an indispensable buttress to her apostolic activities in present-day Ukraine. The officially sanctioned Orthodox Church was not spared this temptation. In order to stay above ground, she had to confine her activities to the four walls of the church building on

Sundays and holy days. Thus, the Orthodox churches of the former Soviet Union are less effectively engaged in the reevangelization of society than their Catholic brethren. (Evangelicals, meanwhile, feature American-style preachers on television.)

All Ukraine, however, presents the same basic cultural milieu in which a postcommunist society confronts the seductive godlessness of secularism. The communist system doggedly uprooted Christianity (if it did not always destroy the actual churches); attacked the moral basis of the culture; and propagated a purely functional notion of sexuality that encouraged abortion and birth control, which, together with easy divorce, undermined marriage. The perversion of sexuality, considered in the context of the Soviet ethos of hypermasculinity, has made young women the saddest victims — unsure of their sexuality and lacking a sense of self-worth to boot.

Walk down any main street in Kyiv (the capital and the largest city in eastern Ukraine) or Lviv (the largest city in the west), and you will see many young women sporting fashions that are not only decades out of style but whorish: the miniest of miniskirts, black-leather go-go boots with stiletto heels, tight jeans, fishnet stockings. More often than not, they also are skinny bordering on emaciated. According to Father Galadza, these appearances are the result of a combination of factors.

“First, they think, ‘Hey, look, now that we’re a free country, isn’t this what freedom is all about?’ So they copy the worst models of Western femininity, which aren’t models for femininity at all. They’re a perversion of femininity.” Furthermore, Father Galadza continued, “Many of their own mothers encourage this dress and this attitude. ‘Dress to be alluring and don’t eat too much or you won’t be attractive enough to find a man.’”

The distorted attitude of young women toward their sexuality is especially tragic in a society with high unemployment, as it encourages a quotidian form of prostitution: the prevalence of “kept” women, whether attached to a wealthier man for a



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short while or taken as a long-term mistress. “They may not think they’re prostitutes,” Father Galadza concluded, “but they are.”

Indeed, the form of secularism rampant in Ukraine is not “the aggressive, anti-Church ideology associated with left-wing European parties responsible for denying the Christian foundation of European culture,” says Prof. Myroslav Marynovych, director of UCU’s Institute of Religion and Society. “This kind of secularism was publicly blamed in the Ukrainian press for not allowing [the openly Catholic] Rocco Buttiglione to become EU justice commissioner.”

The culprit is that nonideological form of “soft” secularism — hedonistic and materialistic — that preoccupies

one with the here and now to the detriment of realizing a transcendent purpose to life. This threatens the most elemental institutions in a society already morally undermined by communism: marriage and, by extension, the family. Helping people realize the sacramental nature of marriage and the divine duty of rearing children — in contrast to the secular notion of a “partnership,” predicated on feelings, almost commercial in nature, and easily dissolvable — is a vital ministry in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church’s reevangelization 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 take 45 hours to complete. The



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Fr. Peter Galadza, director of the Ukrainian Catholic University's Institute of Liturgical Studies.

information office of the archeparchy (archdiocese) of Lviv describes them 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 falls to the 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, but not 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.

“Though my wife and I already were acquainted with the Christian understanding of marriage as a Sacrament,

we encountered topics that simply aren't taught at school,” said Hryhoriy Seleschuk, a researcher at UCU's Institute of Religion and Society in his late 20's. “Bioethics and natural family planning, for example, are topics virtually unheard of in Ukraine. The more secular couples attending the classes seemed especially interested.”

In place for almost ten years, the official 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) publicly attributed to the program Lviv's precipitously declining divorce rate over the past five years—from 53 to 30 percent. (This trend holds true for much of western, heavily Catholic Ukraine, whereas eastern oblasts, according to

2006 figures, have posted significantly higher divorce rates. The divorce-to-marriage ratio in Dnipropetrovska and Donetska is over 3:4.) Mr. Seleschuk noted that the local government in Lviv has responded to the Church's pre-marriage initiatives by “creating its own network of marriage counseling programs attached to the civil marriage registration centers.”

Also noteworthy is UCU's Institute of Marriage and the Family, which disseminates Catholic literature throughout Ukraine. Founded in 1998, its first task was to publish Catholic documents in the native language, 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 courses at UCU on such topics as “Familial Ethics from the Christian Point of View” (a 180-hour-long course addressing philosophical, medical, psychological, and theological issues); “Human Sexuality: Myth and Reality”; and a primer on natural family planning. Classes are open to the public as well, and they are serving as a template for diocesan programs. Additionally, UCU students affiliated with the institute teach courses on human sexuality from the Christian perspective at Lviv-area high schools. The authorities do not mind, and there is no Ukrainian counterpart to the ACLU to raise a ruckus.

“I truly believe we're serving a vital social role,” says Prof. Yuriy Pidlisny, founder and director of the institute. “Our priority now is to spread our courses beyond Lviv with distance-learning programs, meanwhile developing our classes into a comprehensive master's degree program in the Church's teachings on marriage and family. There is just so much work we Christians must do in post-Soviet Ukraine. But we must begin somewhere.”

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