

CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE UKRAINIAN GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH

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A LOOK AT HISTORY

The Church of Christ in Ukraine¹ began with the Baptism of Rus' in 988. From Byzantium, Eastern Christianity also ushered in monasticism, although monastic life began to flourish only in the 11th century with Saints Anthony and Theodosius of the Caves. Monasticism then became widespread among men and women religious throughout all of Rus'. Though Ukrainian monasticism draws its origins from Greek monasticism, it developed its own character from the outset, which was more in tune with the spirituality of the Ukrainian people². In the life of the monks of the Monastery of the Caves prayer, asceticism, fasting, self-denial and silence were the most important elements. The time not taken up by liturgical prayer was devoted to physical or intellectual work, which was an important element for two reasons: it helped to combat temptations and the monks had to live off the fruit of their manual labor. However, contrary to the eastern ideal of a purely hermitic life, which led one to withdraw from the world, the monks of the Monastery of the Caves were open to the needs of the people who sought their spiritual and material assistance. Saint Theodosius of the Caves often spoke to people, dispensed spiritual advice, and fed the poor and needy. He succeeded in reconciling the ascetic dimension of Kievan monasticism with social activity, and this became the one characteristic of "Kievan" monastic tradition³. Furthermore, the monasteries of Kiev, especially the Monastery of the Caves, soon became also cultural and educational centers, for the monks translated and transcribed books (liturgical, patristic and spiritual) as well national history books. Their liturgical song and iconographic art served as models for the culture of the people.

Unfortunately, the development of monastic life in Ukraine back then did not last long. Progressively, the people's initial Christian zeal began to diminish, and with it, monastic devotion. External factors, such as the conquests by the Mongol-Tartar hordes, for instance, contributed to the reduction of organized monasticism for some centuries.

The Union of Brest (1596), with which the Ukrainian Church renewed its communion with the Apostolic See of Rome is considered as a turning point, which eventually led to the rebirth of monasticism. The metropolitan of Kiev, Yosyf Velyamyn Rytskyi, started reforming religious life, but according to Western-Latin models. A new element introduced by Basilian monasticism was centralization, which had not existed before in the East, for the superior (the archimandrite or *ihumen*) of each monastery enjoyed supreme authority. Monasteries also carried out educational and social activities: schools and seminaries opened up, and the number of monasteries increased⁴.

¹ I have used the name Ukraine rather anachronistically to refer to the people who inhabited the region around Kyiv (Kiev) in contemporary Ukraine, although the region covered by Kiev of Rus' was more extensive.

² Miroslav MARUSYN, *La regola monastica di San Teodoro Studita nell'Ucraina* (in Ukrainian), Rome 1995, 14.

³ Ihor HARASYM, "The ancient monastic tradition of Kiev, Materials from the conference on the religious life of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine" (in Ukrainian), Lviv 21-26 July 2003, 5-6.

⁴ *Trasfigurare la terra. Monaci e monache ieri, oggi e domani in Ucraina*, "Instrumentum laboris" for the

The 18th century was once again characterized by the decadence of Greek Catholic monasticism⁵ in Ukraine. A reawakening occurred in the early 20th century, with the reform of the Basilians (1882) and the ascent to the metropolitan see of Lviv of the Servant of God Andrea Sceptyzkyi (1901-1944). At that time, new congregations sprung up in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which were involved in educational, social and missionary activities (Redemptorist Fathers, Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate, Josephites Sisters), although that period was also marked by the rebirth of traditional eastern monasticism (monks and nuns of the Studite rule). Studite monasticism did not divide monks into those who prayed, fasted and practiced asceticism on the one hand and those who worked actively on the other. Metropolitan Sceptyzkyi placed serving the poor on the same level as *working for God*: prayer and the quest for God⁶.

1939 marked the beginning of the most difficult time for monasticism in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC): the persecution by the soviet regime which led to the martyrdom of hundreds of consecrated men and women.

THE LIFE OF UKRAINIAN GREEK CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS IN THE UNDERGROUND⁷

The communist regime was ruthless to religious and their monasteries, which were considered as centers of anti-Soviet activity, and thus had to be destroyed. After arresting all the bishops of the UGCC, soviet leaders began to systematically persecute men and women religious, closed their monasteries and seized their property. Church buildings were converted into barracks or hospitals for the treatment of infectious diseases, churches and chapels were deconsecrated, icons were destroyed, along with the vestments, altar cloths, holy vessels and liturgical books. Men and women religious were forced to abandon their monasteries and go to live with their relatives or on their own. In some cases, the nuns were left with no means to survive. People did not want to welcome them in their homes because they were afraid of cruel persecutions. In the best of cases, three or four nuns would share a private flat. But these homes were soon identified by the secret police (KGB), and were subjected to frequent searches.

The most ruthless persecutions go back to the period between 1946 and 1953. Men and women religious were often exiled to Siberia, and few of them returned home due to the terrible living and working conditions. Those who were lucky enough to remain in Ukraine were "visited" almost daily by state officials who "checked their passports". To create a stronger psychological effect, these visits took place especially during the night, thus engendering fear and taking up a lot of energy. Here is an account by Sister Omelyana, Servant of Mary Immaculate

conference on the religious life of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine, 18-19.

⁵ At that time, the term "Greek Catholic" was introduced in the Austrian Empire to distinguish the Oriental Byzantine rite (hence "Greek") Catholics, from Latin Roman rite Catholics.

⁶ *Trasfigurare la terra*, cit., 22.

⁷ The information reported in this part was obtained from Anastasia ZABROTSKA, SAMI, "L'esperienza di vita degli Ordini e delle Congregazioni femminili della Chiesa greco-cattolica ucraina nella clandestinità", in *Materials of the conference...*, cit.; "Le memorie di suor Lyubov ILNYTSKA, OSBM", Archive of the General Curia of the Basilian Sisters in Rome.

(SSMI): "We are asleep. They knock on our door. 'Open up! Passport control!' There's a soldier standing by each window and door. We open the door. 'We're looking for Yosyf Slipyj's pastoral letters.' 'Go ahead, look around'. They completely stripped the sister, looked at each scar, undid her hair which was in braids"⁸. To frighten the nuns, they would line them up against the wall. These inspections sometimes lasted all night.

During that time, the sisters or priests would be summoned by the KGB for questioning. They were asked to collaborate with the KGB by reporting people and providing information. They were asked questions especially on underground priests, literature and sacred objects. To obtain the information they wanted from their victims, the investigating judges would torture them physically and psychologically, after which some would not return home.

In spite of the difficult living conditions of the underground Church, men and women religious tried to lead a monastic life. To survive they were forced to take on a state job and say their prayers even at night. Every religious community tried to keep the rhythm of its liturgical celebrations as before rather than making them shorter, also in view of the nuns' limited possibilities. The sisters prayed the matins and canonical hours early in the morning and would attend the liturgy. They went to the Latin church, because it was the only one that had been left open (just in a few cities) during the communist regime. There, men and women religious could go to confession and meet their brothers/sisters as well as their superiors.

Almost everywhere, the sisters would keep the Blessed Sacrament in their homes. When they did not attend Latin mass, or if a liturgy was not celebrated in the house by an underground priest, they would administer Holy Communion on their own. Liturgical celebrations at home mainly took place at night, with the doors and windows closed, for fear that "guests" from the security bodies might arrive. Religious priests would look after the sisters not only with the sacraments, but also with instructions and 2-3 day retreats.

In addition to pious practices, consecrated persons would also serve the poor and needy in the underground. They would first of all bear their personal witness and bring a word of comfort in the milieu in which they worked. The sisters did not neglect the catechesis of youths either, although this took place in the secrecy of private homes. Sometimes the sisters provided material aid to the priests and bishops who were persecuted or had been exiled to Siberia. In the underground, the sisters would often act as go-betweens between priests and the laity. People would go to them and ask them where they could find a priest. The sisters would look for one and told people where to go. They were the first to reach the place where the liturgy would be celebrated. They would bring the vestments and sacred objects, dress the altar, serve the celebrant during the liturgy, and prepare the bread for the Eucharist.

In spite of the incessant persecution and fierce anti-religious propaganda in soviet society, new vocations to consecrated life sprang up in the UGCC. Young people would come forward, attracted by the way of life of consecrated persons or priests, and by the conversations they had with them. "Underground" vocations generally sprang up among young men and women who had been educated in religious families. Often, the superiors would be afraid to accept new candidates for fear that they may be spies, for unfortunately such things hap-

⁸ Interview with Sister Omelyana BERESTYANSKA, SAMI, of 2 December 1993, Ivano-Franidvsk: Archive of the Institute for the History of the Church, Lviv, P-1-1-329, p. 5.

pened. Thus, to have some certainty that a given person had not been sent by the KGB, superiors would require the witness of a sister or priest who knew the person well.

The ceremony of taking the veil would happen during the liturgy, but in secret and always in whispers. Sometimes not even the closest relatives were informed. The sister would usually borrow the habit for the ceremony, after which she would take it off and hide it again. Although the ceremony was a short and mysterious moment, far removed from the world's eyes, it became an enlightening time in the consecration of the young sisters and changed their life, their attitude towards themselves and towards others. "I felt really well". Sister Volodymyra tells us, "I felt like I was in another world, as if I were floating. I experienced this change in my life so naturally and at the same time with great enthusiasm, along with the weight of responsibility"⁹.

The formation of young consecrated persons was spontaneous, to a certain extent. Each Congregation or Order had its master of novices, but frequent meetings with them were forbidden because they were watched by the KGB. The elder sisters with whom the younger ones lived thus became "novice mistresses" themselves. "My mistress was Sister Emelia, with whom I lived. The older sisters who welcomed us [in the monastery] did not give us many instructions or lectures, but with their example they taught us the way we should be, how we should live and work for the glory of God"¹⁰.

Undoubtedly, the time of persecutions greatly challenged the UGCC and its consecrated members' faithfulness to Christ. Some of them went as far as ruthless martyrdom. Despite this, it was a school for the education of strong personalities in critical situations, though it did leave many negative marks, which are visible in the daily life of consecrated persons in the UGCC.

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN THE UGCC

In the early 90s, after the UGCC was legalized, the Orders and Congregations that had lived in the underground for so many years, started to come out in the open. The main concern for most of them was the restitution of their monasteries and land. They began to accept new vocations, and the novitiates were gradually renewed. In the years of freedom, the number of vocations increased greatly. There were cases in which as many as 30-40 persons received their habit at the same time!

However, the consequences of their underground existence manifested themselves quite readily. First of all, there was a penury of adequately formed individuals who could serve as superiors and novice masters. Secondly, the superiors had to solve more urgent material problems, from food to the reconstruction of their buildings, thus the formation of young members was not a priority. Thirdly, the communities were hardly able to adapt to the new climate of freedom in society. They were often reluctant to let go of old-style practices in which elderly members had been educated. As they were not familiar with the reforms introduced

⁹ Interview with Sister Volodymyra Stefania DMYTRYSHYN, Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family, 19 December 1997, in Morshyn: *Ibid.* P-1-1-747, p. 20.

¹⁰ The memories of Sister Olha Yaroslava TREMBACH, SAMI, 18 May 2001, in Lviv. Provincial archive of the Suore Ancelle di Maria Immacolata.

by the Second Vatican Council, they looked upon new and modern practices with suspicion. Others would engage in frenetic catechetical activities, to the detriment of the life of prayer and solitude, which are essential to nourish the apostolate.

In addition to these internal difficulties, Ukrainian men and women religious had to cope with the social problems of their milieu. Communist ideology has left its negative imprint on religious, social and cultural life. The external changes sweeping through society were no guarantee of internal changes in people's way of thinking. Communism created a profound rift in the human soul: to survive, one had to think in one way, speak in another and act in yet another way. Soviet ideology stifled creativity, destroyed ideals, turned the person into a being that does not think, decide or feel any responsibility for anything, it taught the individual not to trust anyone, to be suspicious of everyone and to always be afraid. The men and women who formed young vocations grew up in this destructive milieu and educated young candidates according to pre-Council methods. The young people of today who come knocking on the door of a religious community need different attitudes and new educational methods. Moreover, in post-communist societies there is generally a strong mistrust of authority. The level of morality and culture has gone down drastically. The echo of this reality may be heard in religious houses, as new vocations come from such a social and cultural setting.

These problems pose new challenges and tasks for the consecrated men and women of the UGCC. The Lord does not cease to call these broken and hurt souls to consecrated life. Men and women religious are thus looking for new ways to face such problems, to support young people and back them up in their choice of vocation. One of the methods used today is spiritual retreats for young people, led by consecrated persons, joint prayers and interviews with people of different social classes and age groups. However, the main challenge today is not to lose prayer and the vital contact with God, and not to lose oneself in the world. The best guide to avoid this is the ancient monastic tradition of the Rus', which is greatly appreciated and sought after by consecrated persons. In spite of the diversity of charisms of religious Orders and Congregations, which did not exist in the ancient Eastern tradition, those who practice consecrated life in contemporary Ukraine are united in their search for solutions to today's challenges.

The religious houses of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church strive to be centers of spiritual and ecclesial life, prayer and pilgrimage, iconographic art and liturgical song. By serving God "in Spirit and truth" the consecrated person helps men and women with his/her witness of a life of prayer and sacrifice, in silence and inner peace. Prayer is the strength of men and women religious; it then takes concrete shape in the hand stretched out to one's neighbor.

This is what constitutes our faith in the present and our hope in the future.