

## ORTHODOX - CATHOLIC RELATIONS IN THE USSR

by Patricia Lefevere

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Catholic and Orthodox believers "must" work together if they are "to testify about Christ in the secular world," said Archbishop Kirill (Goundiaev) of Smolensk in the Soviet Union. But the problem is that they are "unable" to do so--at least in the western Ukraine where bitter and long-standing political, ecclesiastical and ecumenical rivalries have pitted one group of believers against the other in a "nationalistic struggle," he said.

The hostilities could not have come at a worse time, said Kirill, who directs the external affairs department of the Russian Orthodox Church. "Our divisions are scandalous; they are turning people away from the church at a moment when great expectation was foreseen for Christianity" in the Soviet Union.

Kirill made his comments in an interview at the seventh world assembly of the World Council of Churches which took place in Canberra, Australia, February 7-20, 1991. A member of the WCC's Central Committee since 1968, and its executive committee since 1975, he is also a member of its Faith and Order Commission and its Joint Commission for the Dialogue between Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.

He has had frequent contact with the Vatican, has previously represented the Moscow Patriarchate at WCC headquarters in Geneva and is bishop of the Russian Orthodox parishes in Finland.

In an interview two years ago with this reporter in Moscow, the archbishop predicted that restoration of the legal rights of Ukrainian Catholics--if undertaken outside the ecumenical sphere would only further divide the two groups and would soon lead to "warfare." While warfare has been avoided, there have been "ugly" scenes between members of the two churches in many parts of the western Ukraine during recent months. These have included hunger strikes by both sides, arrests, and protest marches resulting from the handing over of churches--most recently used by the Orthodox --to Ukrainian Catholics.

The local authorities, who had watched Catholics worshipping outside the Orthodox churches over many weeks, have handed over hundreds of these churches to the Uniates during the past 12 months he reported.

This has caused enormous problems for the Orthodox, Kirill said. "It effectively elbowed us out of our own churches." Now the danger exists, he said, that the Orthodox will be

deprived of their churches or else given churches that are "unsatisfactory" due to size or location.

He cited Ivanofrankovsk where the Orthodox no longer have any churches and Lvov where the former Latin Rite Church of St. Nicholas, has been awarded to the Orthodox, but "it's too small to satisfy our needs," Kirill said.

The Archbishop does not blame the Vatican for instigating the recent tensions, which have seen Catholics vigorously defending their newly won turf. In fact he has been working closely with Vatican officials for more than a year on a set of recommendations designed to normalize relations between the two sides. The plan had won approval of both church authorities and had called for the establishment of a commission of one to two representatives each from Rome, the Moscow Patriarchate (headquarters of the Russian Orthodox Church) and from the two local churches in the western Ukraine.

However, the accord has "been left in thin air" and talks "severed" by the Uniates' refusal to continue discussions," Kirill said. Both he and Vatican representatives blame the stalemate on the fact that the local authorities turned over the churches in quick successions and large number to the Catholics.

"We were talking about six or seven churches and suddenly there were nearly 1,000" changing hands, Archbishop Edward Cassidy said in an interview here. Cassidy, a key architect of the normalization plan has visited the Ukraine a number of times during the past two years. The former archbishop of Sydney replaced Cardinal Johannes Willebrands as president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in January 1990 and was named a Cardinal this year (1991).

The church hand-overs--which Kirill blames on the fact that the majority of officials in the western Ukraine are "nationalistic" and long favored separatism from Moscow and Ukrainian independence--have made the Orthodox face conflict "with brethren with whom we have no conflict," he said.

"I believe in the good will of the Vatican. I have no facts to the contrary, but I think the Vatican has no possibility to control the problem" in the region, he said.

(Much will depend on the visit of Cardinal Myroslav Ivan Lubachivsky to the Ukraine later this month, Kirill said. The visit, which the Vatican has described as "pastoral," will be the first by the head of Ukrainian Catholic Church, who has been living in exile in Rome.

Kirill hopes that Lubachivsky "will transfer the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II to Ukrainian Catholics" and that he may effect better relations between the two churches. But he admits that the Cardinal may remain.

"If he stimulates the line of the Ukrainian hierarchy, which is rather radical and sometimes extremist, he will dramatically aggravate" tensions between the Orthodox and

Catholics, Kirill said. "The extremists in power could use the visit as an opportunity to attack the Orthodox.")

However, Cassidy said he did not believe this would happen, but allowed that the visit "could have positive results or could make relations more difficult." Lubachivsky "is well aware of the Holy Father's desire to bring about real reconciliation in this area." The important thing is that both churches show "sensitivity" toward each other during and after the visit, the archbishop said.

Cassidy also thought that the Synod of Ukrainian bishops, held February 3-10 in Rome, and papal confirmation in January of 10 formerly clandestine bishops of the Ukraine, who have just been named to local sees, would help to "normalize" the status of Catholics in the area.

Asked whether Ukrainian bishops would give back to the Orthodox any of the churches recently returned to them for the sake of reconciliation, Cassidy said: "Our bishops could not do this psychologically or realistically." He stressed that the transfers had taken place via the local authorities and not through church channels.

"It was not our desire that they (the Orthodox) be left with no churches." But he added that Ukrainian Catholics "could never be happy" while St. George's Cathedral in Lviv was in the hands of the Orthodox.

Cassidy, 66, said that the forebears of today's Ukrainian Catholics had built and maintained most of these churches prior to the Stalinist era and to their handover to the Orthodox. He thought that "justice" had been a motivating principle in their return by the local authorities.

Cassidy disagreed with Orthodox claims that the Catholics had seized churches "violently. . . They have simply taken back what was theirs," he said. "They did not do it with iron bars."

The archbishop said that a number of the take-overs happened without incident, but admitted that Catholics had "defended" their newly gained houses of worship if anyone tried to oust them.

While Cassidy promised that the Vatican would continue to work for the peaceful resolution of the hostilities, he said that it was easy to understand how Catholics who were persecuted and forced to live underground or else attended another church in order to have the sacraments, could emerge 45 years later lacking "an ecumenical spirit."

"Not all Catholics are saintly people," he said sporting a beige jacket and a wry Irish grin. "But our church didn't have the chance to form them. They were mainly formed by the Orthodox . . . who felt they'd practically eliminated the Catholics."

Cassidy said that the Orthodox had "massively underestimated the strength of the underground church and of the Oriental rite within their own churches" in western Ukraine. Still he felt "profound sorrow" for Orthodox priests who now find themselves without a parish.

"They see aggression on the part of Catholics in their ecumenical talk," Cassidy said; "they think the Pope has only to speak and everybody does it." Regrettably, "the preparation of our Ukrainian people in their faith has lacked the experience of ecumenism," he said.

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Despite the apparent impasse between Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox believers, leaders in both churches believe that there are ways in which the two churches can cooperate ecumenically in the Soviet Union.

In separate interviews here in February 1991, Archbishop Kirill of Smolensk, director of the external affairs department of the Russian Orthodox church, and Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity, both indicated that the model of a "Christian Lifestyle" could serve Soviet citizens who are groping for a way out of their economic morass. Both prelates were attending the World Council of Churches' Assembly here.

The notion of proposing an "alternative lifestyle, a poverty of self, classical asceticism or traditional monasticism may seem a dangerous idea" when Soviet store shelves are empty and there is not much to eat, Kirill said. But the ideal for which Soviet people are now fighting is to gain the lifestyle of the average American, he said.

"The USSR is in a very serious economic state," he said, noting that the loudest voices are clamoring for an uncontrolled free market. "No one speaks of regulating the free market for ecological reasons," he said.

Yet the church must convince people that "the capitalistic style favored by Reagan and now is so popular in the USSR" requires a level of consumption, which is not possible ecologically, he said.

Kirill lauded the World Council of Churches for its support of the churches in the East and for its conciliar process that links Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). "The Soviet economy must be just and ecologically sound. We can't build up our economy at the expense of degrading the environment."

Kirill believes that the church's main weapons against consumerism are the preaching of the Word, the use of its power in Parliament and the mass media and the attempt to convince through a non-materialistic lifestyle and example. "Our churches must become life-sustaining communities at all levels, especially at the grassroots, he said.