

### **Orthodoxy and democracy: some remarks on the situation in Ukraine**

The organizers of this conference have given me enough freedom to discuss the situation in the Ukrainian Orthodoxy. That gives me **opportunity to present to you my own vision** of some problems in this context. From time to time I am invited to represent the situation in the religious sphere of Ukraine from the perspective of my own Church which is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

On the one hand, I know the situation from inside through practical contacts I have in the Kyiv Metropoly as a ruling center of our Church. On the other hand, I remain a lay theologian that not only teaches some disciplines in the clerical “spiritual academy” but has enough contacts with “professional Christians” of other confessions and denominations in Ukraine and abroad. This is the point from which I will try to describe the situation.

#### **From theological principle to actual crisis**

In the course of comparative theology it is usual to give a citation from the “Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs” of 1848 that was a response against the “Epistle to the Easterners” of Pope Pius IX. Opposed to the idea of the hierarchical power of the Pope this Encyclical emphasized the role of the people: “Neither Patriarchs nor Councils could then have introduced novelties amongst us, because the protector of religion is the very body of the Church, even the people themselves, who desire their religious worship to be ever unchanged and of the same kind as that of their fathers”<sup>1</sup>.

The mentioned expression “protector of religion” in attitude to “the people” i.e. the ordinary believers is more known in Russian form literally as “keeper of the faith”. In the context of the mentioned Encyclical it was opposed to the individual power of the Bishop of Rome. In the history of the Orthodox faith in Ukraine we have another aspect of the contradiction. I mean a prominent example of the Brest Union of 1596 when a major part of the hierarchy and part of the clergy and faithful accepted its adherence to the Church of Rome. In that time the majority of the lay people rejected this union and in this way the ordinary faithful opposed themselves to their own Church hierarchy.

I suppose that this principle that is in its roots a democratic one, has constituted through decades and centuries an important aspect of the orthodox identity. Nowadays this

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<sup>1</sup> §17 of the “Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs” of 1848. In English translation cited from the page of Fordham University – <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1848orthodoxencyclical.asp>.

principle emphasizes the suspicious attitude of the wide circles of the faithful to the hierarchy and its openness to the dialog with other Christian confessions. As a whole it proposes arguments for fundamentalist moods under the wide circles of the faithful.

It also has very practical and radical consequences for Church policy. For example I connect two important events of the year 2016 in the Russian Church: on the one side it was the meeting of the Patriarch of Moscow Cyril with Pope Francis in February in Havana. On the other side it was the refusal of the Russian Church to participate at the All-Orthodox council in Crete in June.

For large groups of conservative believers both events were of the same art – they meant liberal openness of the hierarchy to the foreign powers and as a result to the fallen world. In order to avoid excessive critique of this openness, the Russian Synod found enough arguments for the refusal<sup>2</sup>. Some people see this refusal as the reason for the following conflict around the granting of the autocephaly status for the Ukrainian Church three years later.

If my logic is right, we can see an important line of development: from a democratic principle of the laity as “keepers of the faith” to the radical troubles in Ukrainian Orthodoxy and as a result to the potential or real schism in the World Orthodoxy of the last years. In this situation we need to consider the principle of democracy in the Church more profoundly.

The question could be formulated in the following form: if Church democracy means involvement of a large majority of the baptized Christians into decision-making in the Church, who takes responsibility for these decisions? This pair “right and responsibility” can remind us of the title of the book of the mentioned Patriarch Cyril “Freedom and responsibility: a search for harmony”<sup>3</sup>. There is no need to analyze or quote this book but we should keep in mind the mentioned pair of contrasts.

### **Lay people and opportunities for their religious education**

Now I would like to give you some remarks on this principle of responsibility that in my opinion presupposes knowledge of the Christian faith and life according to this faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare my article in German: Die Absage der Russischen orthodoxen Kirche: ein Bruch in der Orthodoxie?, in: Orthodoxes Forum, 31. Jahrgang, 2017, Heft 1+2, S. 55-62. Initially it was a paper at the conference “Orthodox Church after the Pan-Orthodox council: resonance, reception, problems” that took place in November 2016 at the University of Munich, Germany.

<sup>3</sup> The full title is “Freedom and responsibility: a search for harmony — human rights and personal dignity”. First edition in Russian in 2008.

Here I find it appropriate to remind the situation at theological faculties in Germany where I have studied for a considerable period of my life. Among the students there were mostly two groups – the first one with the goal to become pastors in the Evangelical Church and the second one with the goal to become teachers of Religion in public schools.

Unfortunately we cannot find these two groups in the Ukrainian context. Till now public school education and religious knowledge are divided and this division finds its ground in the constitutional principle of division between “Church and state” as well as between “school and Church”<sup>4</sup>. For a period of time in most parts of Ukrainian regions the school subject “Christian ethics” was only an optional one, and in the last years it became even rarer accessible for the pupils.

From the cultural identity the most part of the citizens of Ukraine identify themselves not only as “believers”, but as belonging to the Orthodox Church. For example, in 2019 this “orthodox” belonging was recognized by 64,9% of the citizens with variation from 46,6% in the West till 73,9% in the Centre<sup>5</sup>. I suppose it is possible to consider that these people are mostly baptized in the Orthodox Church but the question of the level and source of their knowledge about their own faith remains open.

In our Church it is usual to baptize infants. Often pious parents bring their children to the Eucharist so that children become first and most active partakers of the Body and Blood Christi. One of the reasons for the disproportion by the Eucharist to the adults is that children under seven years have no presuppositions for this, while for the adults there are rules and restrictions.

But if we speak about religious education, the situation is worse. Officially according to the state statistics in Ukraine we have 4.086 schools established by the Church. Among them only one is a secondary school, all the others are Sunday schools where the quality of catechism differs very much. This number of schools is only 40% of the number of the priests (10.510) and 34% of the number of the registered parishes (12.069)<sup>6</sup>. The situation in another large orthodox structure – “Orthodox Church of Ukraine” is even worse: the number

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. §35 of the Constitution of Ukraine, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Other groups were “not belonging to any religious faith” (12,8%), greek-catholics (9,5%), “mere Christians” (8,0%). All the others groups were under 2%. Cf. *Derzhava I Tserkva v Ukraini-2019: pidsumky roku I perspektyvy rozvytku vidnosyn* [State and Church in Ukraine-2019: results of the year and perspectives of the relations’ development]. Kiev, 2019. P.14.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. official data for the year 2020 — <https://dcss.gov.ua/statistics-2020>.

of their official Sunday schools (1.755) represent 38% from the number of priests (4.572) and only 25% of the parishes (6.981)<sup>7</sup>.

So, in Ukraine we have problems with religious education for lay people that identify themselves with Orthodoxy. As I have already mentioned, our system of religious teaching in the schools is underdeveloped. Moreover, we also have no obligatory educational items for the pupils of 13-14 years, as it is in West-European countries, especially before their confirmation. We do not have as well an interesting experience of Romania, where theological seminaries are an alternative to gymnasiums before young people begin their education at the universities.

For several years in Kyiv there has been a so-called “Open orthodox university”, but in fact they organize different meetings, lectures etc., but have no real programs of standard university education as bachelor or master courses. In this situation I can remember two interesting examples when lay people that have had interest in religious knowledge, have had a motivated belonging to our Church and influence in Ukrainian society, had previously studied at our Kiev theological seminary.

The first one is Vadym Novinsky who is one of the richest businessmen of Ukraine. Since 2012 he is also a member of Ukrainian Parliament. But not many people know that he has studied at our seminary in correspondence course. Only after finishing his education he was ordained as a deacon and is often to see near the most influential hierarchs of our Church.

The similar situation is with Sergii Trofimov: for many people he is known as one of the close friends and colleagues of the President Volodymyr Zelenskyi, for some time he was a deputy head of the office of the President of Ukraine. But only few people know that his support of our Church in the political debates of the last years was grounded on his previous experience of education in the correspondence course of our seminary.

These two names are interesting examples but they show an important problem: there are few systematic opportunities for lay people to connect their political or business activity with special education in the sphere of theology or religious studies. Our theological system is oriented first of all on training for priesthood candidates. There are few opportunities for a combination of secular professional activity and thorough knowledge of one’s own faith.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. the same table.

## **Statistics of the faithful: number of parishes and sociological surveys**

In Ukraine we have no official membership in religious confessions. On one hand, it can be explained through liberal legislation of our state after the period of atheistic persecutions in Soviet time. But on the other side, it can be explained through the jurisdictional conflict that existed in the Ukrainian Orthodoxy from the very beginning of the independent existence of our state. For almost 30 years we had a conflict between the belonging to the Moscow Patriarchate which reflected the status-quo of the Soviet time and to other two Churches of autocephalous orientation.

Since 2019, after granting the Tomos on autocephaly this conflict exists between two jurisdictions – “Ukrainian Orthodox Church” and “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”. Usually in their concurrence there is comparison of the number of parishes, discussions on changing the belonging from the latent “Russian church” to the genuine or authentic “Ukrainian church”. These are the labels for both churches that officially have in their title both “Ukraine” and “orthodox”. For people from outside it is difficult to make a difference. Many believers visit a parish that is nearer to their home or have other priorities.

For people abroad it is useful to have some numbers. Traditionally in recent years we speak about 12 thousand parishes of the “Ukrainian Orthodox Church” and till 7 thousand parishes in the “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”. If you are interested, you can find analysis of the statistics of the parishes and priests on the website of our foundation “Academic initiative”<sup>8</sup>. At the same time one speaks about a thousand changes of belonging when some parishes changed their belonging from “Ukrainian Orthodox Church” to “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”. There is statistic of these changes that show two waves of them – after the granting of the Tomos in 2019 and now, after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

These struggle for parishes concerns mostly the church hierarchy. In the situation of the lay people it is more suitable to speak about proportions in belonging from sociological data. If we compare the statistics of the orthodox “belonging” in last 20 years, we will see some changes from 66% in 2000 through 70,6% in 2013 till 62,3% in 2020<sup>9</sup>. For our case it is enough to note that the number of the Orthodox Christian in Ukraine is about 2/3. It gives an opportunity to say about deep historical and cultural roots of the Orthodoxy in our land.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. my analysis “Is the “Orthodox Church of Ukraine” mainly a church of Galicia? Witness of the state statistics”, [https://www.academic-initiative.org.ua/en/2021/06/27/ocu\\_mainly\\_a\\_church\\_of\\_galitia/](https://www.academic-initiative.org.ua/en/2021/06/27/ocu_mainly_a_church_of_galitia/).

<sup>9</sup> Here I am using the statistics of the Razumkov-centre – *Osoblyvosti relihiynoho I tserkovno-relihiynoho samovyznachennya hromadyan Ukrainy: tendentsiyi 2000-2020*. Kiev, 2020, P. 13.

But on the other side, in answering about their belonging to a concrete orthodox jurisdiction the largest group of the respondents recognizes that they are “mere orthodox”. In 2020 this group was 43,3% of all orthodox, much more than supporters of any of three concrete jurisdictions (“Orthodox Church of Ukraine”, “Ukrainian Orthodox Church” and the old “Kiev patriarchate”)<sup>10</sup>. This refusal to identify oneself with a concrete jurisdiction has different consequences but for our analysis means refusal to share responsibility for the parish and Church life. This people are rather consumers of religious services than responsible members of the Church.

Of course nowadays, after the beginning of the war these numbers are changing rapidly. According to some surveys, belonging to “Moscow patriarchate in Ukraine” is supposed to be fewer than 10%. But the number of support of the OCU as a “genuine Ukrainian church” contradicts the real situation in the parishes. Because there are usually two groups of believers: the first one are rather constant visitors of the Church services and the second one the occasional visitors for largest feasts of the year.

People that support strengthening of the OCU, belong mostly to the occasional visitors. They are rather ideologically motivated supporters of the ideal “Ukrainian Church”. A large difference between support of the OCU and real participation in the parish life remains an important problem for this Church.

### Some concluding remarks

As a result of my considerations we can see some important problems.

- First of all the total number of the orthodox believers in Ukraine. According to the surveys this number is at the level of 65-70%. In this perspective Ukraine remains culturally an orthodox country. But statistics in the sphere of theological or religious education testifies important problems: **poor development of religious education** for pupils and less opportunities for adults. As a result, lay people in Ukraine propose no real intellectual alternative to the hierarchical power.
- The idea of lay people as “keepers of the faith” brought the UOC to deepening of **fundamentalist moods** and opposition to secularized style of believing. This tendency can be called fideism. I suppose that difference in identity of UOC and OCU is not only as pro-Russian and anti-Russian but also fundamentalist and liberal ones as well. The number of monks and monasteries testifies for this difference: in the UOC there are

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.* P. 16.

about 20 times so many monks and nuns as in OCU. The monasteries are usually very conservative centers that prevent a wide dialogue of the church hierarchy with the general public of Ukraine.

- On the other side there is a tendency in the UOC that **most of its believers remain faithful** to their priests and hierarchs. In the situation of political and military confrontation nuclear members of the parishes are opposed to the large majority of the believers. In some aspects these believers repeat or reflect conservative monastic convictions that are inherent to the contemporary Primate of this Church Metropolitan Onufriy.
- On the other side, the new leadership of the OCU tries to be modern and **to stay in dialog with the wide circles** of the Ukrainian society. Nevertheless the skeptics suppose, it is more a constructed image for mass media than real fact that influences religious situation in Ukraine.
- In any way **contradiction between two Orthodox jurisdictions** in Ukraine defines the religious landscape in the country. I would say, both ways of development can be called “democratic” ones. The UOC finds its support under its nuclear believers that can be called responsible members of the Church. The OCU seeks for support under the general public. I wish they could find a common way for establishing Christian principles in the Ukrainian society.
- I wish for Orthodox Christians in Ukraine responsible membership in the Church. It would mean strengthening of democratic principles in the Church. This responsible membership in the intellectual sphere would mean witnessing about our faith according to the words of Apostle Peter: “Always be ready to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have” (1. Peter 3:15).