



PART 2

VOICES AND
THEMES
FROM CONTEXT

THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE AND LOCAL PRACTICE: UKRAINE

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Unfortunately, today in Ukraine we are going through the phase that can hardly be called “healing the wounded memory”. Rather, this is the stage of *creating new wounds* – especially in relationships between two Orthodox jurisdictions – the *Ukrainian Orthodox Church* (UOC) and *Orthodox Church of Ukraine* (OCU). Since a long time they have existed in confrontation with each other. At the same time the current phase of the war with Russia is characterized by a revision by the Churches members of their own identity – this can become an impulse for positive changes and future reconciliation between the Churches in Ukraine.

If we talk about *Orthodox-Catholic relations*, then in recent years we can observe a revival of discussions about the relationship between *primacy and synodality*. Traditionally, synodality was historically thought to be more characteristic of Eastern Churches, whereas primacy seemed to characterize the Western Church. However, in recent decades we can see that both ecclesiastical traditions accept the opposite trends that can bring them closer to each other.

In particular, the Catholic Church seeks opportunities to strengthen synodality in its existence. This is especially clearly evidenced by the so-called “Synod on Synodality”, which was held in Rome in October 2023. In the Orthodox Church on the world level, there is rather a tendency to strengthen the primacy. This is especially obvious in the competition between the church centers of *Constantinople and Moscow*. Their contradictions were espe-

cially pronounced in the disputes around the "Ukrainian church issue". This dispute reflects the difficulties in the unity of the Orthodoxy at the global level – here the difficulties in holding the Creta Council in 2016 are indicative. Instead of revealing the unity of World Orthodoxy, it rather showed problems for this unity. It is usually supposed that one of the factors in the divergence of the positions of Constantinople and Moscow was the Ukrainian issue. The World Orthodoxy at the aforementioned council was unable to accept the document about procedure of granting the autocephaly. Therefore, the provision of autocephaly to the church in Ukraine in 2018–2019 led to an aggravation of the conflict, up to the rupture of Eucharistic communion from the side of Moscow Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church itself. The issue of inter-church relations is important for resolving the church crisis in Ukraine. However, in my opinion, nowadays the most pressing issue for Ukrainian Orthodoxy is that of church-state relations. This issue became relevant back in 2014 – after the Orange Revolution and Russia's seizure of the territories of Crimea and Donbass. For the Ukrainian state, this issue concentrates on its role in the church conflicts. Traditionally, after Ukraine gained its state independence in 1991, it is supposed that in Ukraine for several decades there was a fairly liberal legislation in the field of religion. It did not give an unambiguous priority for one of ecclesial jurisdictions and gave the chance to all to develop one's Church structure as much as they could. In particular, this attitude was supported by the principle of dividing Church from the state that was enshrined in Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine.

Since 2014, the attitude of the Ukrainian state towards the issue of conflicts between Orthodox churches has been gradually changing.

During his presidency (2014–2019), Petro Poroshenko sought to actively promote reconciliation of the Orthodox churches. However, by the end of his term, this was done hastily and instead of union led to an aggravation of the conflict. The planned "Unification Council", held in December 2018, instead of uniting all Orthodox jurisdictions, led to the rising of the internal Ukrainian conflict to the level of World Orthodoxy.

It would seem that under the new President Zelensky, the church conflict subsided, but Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine again sharply put the church theme to the public attention. Since December 2022, the Ukrainian state has been pursuing a rather tough policy towards the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (led by Metropolitan Onufry and in canonical unity with the Moscow Patriarchate). At first, these were sanctions against individual hierarchs and some cases of criminal prosecution against the UOC clergy for collaborative actions in favor of the aggressor state. However, from October 2023, after the adoption of the law 8371 in first reading, we face the reality of the possible legislative ban of the UOC.

For the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, all this sharply raises the issue of the church unity. First of all, this concerns the internal unity of the structure of the UOC itself in Ukraine. Over the past five years, there have been two waves of changes of belonging for church parishes from the UOC to the OCU: after the Tomos on autocephaly was granted in 2019 and after the outbreak of a large-scale war in 2022. These changes of belonging have spawned many conflicts on the local level.

Both the Ukrainian state and the wide public of Ukraine clearly demand from the UOC significant changes in its relations with Russia and the Russian Church. In my opinion, such changes

are multiple at the level of consciousness of church people and at the level of hundreds of parishes that actively supported the struggle of the Ukrainian state to preserve its own statehood and territorial integrity.

However, today the problem of the canonical unity of the UOC with the Moscow Patriarchate remains acute. As already mentioned, nowadays at the level of the world Orthodoxy there is no agreed procedure for obtaining a new autocephaly. We should add here the problem of a split that was hastily resolved in 2018–19, but till now has not received a common reception. This problem fits into the general context of the conservative perception on the part of the leadership of the UOC: the required “separation from Moscow” is perceived here as a fall into the schism, and this was the main horror story for this Church for several decades.

Thus, nowadays the UOC faces a choice of what kind of unity it should give preference to: either canonical unity with the Moscow Patriarchate in spite of the ongoing war; or restoration of unity with the World Orthodoxy, led by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. However, the problem is that for the UOC there is no possibility of reconciliation with Constantinople without merging with the structures of the OCU and it is not ready for this way.

My proposal in this comprehensive situation is to abandon the idea to build in near future one Orthodox Church structure in Ukraine. There are a number of signs that the standoff between the two Orthodox jurisdictions in Ukraine is only partially directly connected to the current war. They are much deeper than the issue of the presence of pro-Russian activity, dangerous in conditions of the war.

Despite many efforts against the UOC, it remains relatively united and does not want to join the state-backed OCU. At the same time, it has withdrawn from administrative ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and is experiencing processes of comprehension what is important and invariable in its identity, and what can and even should be abandoned.

That is why I believe that for the benefit of Ukrainian society and the state it would be reasonable to return to the multiplicity expressed by the idea of synodality instead of a strict hierarchy and primacy. Better if Ukraine has two Orthodox Church structures that will eventually establish peaceful forms of coexistence. This is a better perspective than a violent church unification that will leave wounds for a longer time than the current war between the states of Russia and Ukraine.