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A great Catholic renaissance in Ukraine may be at risk

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 28, 2010 All Things Catholic

On any countdown of terrific Catholic stories over the last twenty years, the renaissance of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine would have to be near the top of the list. Numbering some five million faithful, about ten percent of the Ukrainian population, Greek Catholics follow Orthodox liturgical and spiritual traditions but have been in full union with Rome since the 16th century.

Under the Soviets, the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine was the largest illegal religious body in the world, and one of the most persecuted. The legendary Ukrainian Cardinal Josef Slipyi, who spent two decades in the gulags, once said that his church had been buried under "mountains of corpses and rivers of blood." During his 2001 visit to Ukraine, John Paul II beatified 27 Greek Catholic martyrs under the Soviets -- one of whom had been boiled alive, another crucified in prison, and a third bricked into a wall.

Given that history, the church's recovery in the short span of time since the Soviet Union imploded has been nothing short of miraculous. In 1939, the Greek Catholics boasted 2,500 priests; by 1989, the number had fallen to just 300. Today it's back up to 2,500, with 800 seminarians in the pipeline. Greek Catholics played key roles in the "Orange Revolution" of 2004/05, which for a brief, shining moment, promised to bring democracy and the rule of law to Ukraine.

In many ways, the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine has become a global model for the evangelization of culture.

Today, however, Catholicism in Ukraine may once again be at risk, as a new government has come to power which seems bent on reviving Soviet-style authoritarianism. On May 18, an official of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the successor to the KGB, visited the rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv -- the only Catholic university in the former Soviet Union, which means it's the only Catholic university in twelve time zones. The police official warned the rector, Fr. Borys Gudziak, against students participating in illegal anti-government protests. (Gudziak, by the way, is a 50-year-old Ukrainian-American born in Syracuse, New York, who holds a Harvard doctorate in Slavic and Byzantine Cultural History.)

The SBU official also insisted that Gudziak sign a letter and then give it back, presumably to be placed in police archives. Gudziak refused, charging that asking people to sign letters and turn them over to the police was a classic KGB technique for recruiting collaborators.

(Gudziak's description of the experience can be found here, which he says has no precedent in Ukraine since independence in 1991: New Government Pressures UCU [1])

As proof that the May 18 visit was not a one-off event, consider that Gudziak's cousin Teodor, a layman and mayor of a city in Western Ukraine, was recently arrested on bribery charges ? despite the fact that he actually has video of plainclothes policemen breaking into his office to plant forged documents. Consider, too, that staffers at the Ukrainian Catholic University got calls from the SBU on their cell phones this week, a none-too-subtle way of saying "We know how to find you," and that when President Viktor Yanukovich visited Western

Ukraine on Wednesday, where the bulk of Catholics are concentrated, the university conveniently lost its electrical power. Faculty and students have been using the Internet to inform the world of what's happening in the country -- and that, of course, requires electricity.

All this is especially alarming because the Ukrainian Catholic University is a fascinating place, with much to offer the broader enterprise of Catholic higher education around the world. For example, the university has launched a "Center for Spiritual Support of the Handicapped" in conjunction with the L'Arche Community, a new movement in Catholicism founded by Canadian layman Jean Vanier, which fosters friendships with people who have physical and mental disabilities. Gudziak says the theory is that contact with the handicapped ought to be an integral part of theological formation. Next month, the university will break ground on a new dormitory, where the spiritual life will be inspired by L'Arche.

Gudziak says that L'Arche is a perfect fit for a society recovering from the systematic deception and lack of trust associated with the Soviet period -- because, he said, "the handicapped do not have masks."

So far, Western reaction to the pressures facing Gudziak and his fellow Greek Catholics has circulated mostly in conservative circles, among hawks already convinced that Putin and his allies in the former Soviet sphere are sliding back into Cold War-era patterns. In principle, however, this is not an ideological question, but a matter of religious freedom and human rights, as well as solidarity with fellow Catholics at risk -- wherever that risk originates.

On Wednesday, I reached Gudziak by phone at his office in Lviv to discuss the situation facing the university and the church.

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How would you describe the general situation facing the Catholic Church in Ukraine today?

The Church enjoys freedom, but it's still getting up off its knees after the devastating blows of the Soviet period. The Roman Catholic Church was decimated under the Soviets, and the Orthodox Church was also persecuted and circumscribed. The Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine was outlawed outright and driven into the catacombs. All the churches in the country lost some or all of their infrastructure, and in the case of the Greek Catholics some of that infrastructure was taken over by the Orthodox.

We still face unresolved problems from the Soviet era. For example, many church properties have never been returned. The Greek Catholic Church was legally banned, but never fully legally rehabilitated. Churches themselves, meaning our liturgical buildings, have mostly been returned, but many monastic properties, academic and educational institutions, hospitals, and publishing houses have never been restored.

Our biggest challenge is to emerge from a situation in which great numbers were killed, martyred, and an even greater number of people were maimed -- either physically, or spiritually and psychologically. They lived in a context of systemic fear, which produced a vast breakdown in trust. For example, there were many collaborators with the KGB, but no one ever really knew who was collaborating because these were always secret arrangements.

That legacy of fear and a lack of trust is bad for the whole society. It's bad for business, because who's going to invest if they can't be sure of what's going to happen to their money? It's bad for law and the legal system, it's bad for medicine, it's bad for everything. Today many Ukrainians don't trust doctors, for example, because the quality of medical care is often low and medicines aren't readily available. Many products in our society are counterfeit.

In general, there's still a great tentativeness in the society. Qualities that define Americans -- freedom, problem-solving, being proactive -- aren't really valued here. In the Soviet context, they were reflexes that could get you into trouble. The saying in the Soviet era was, 'Initiative is punished.' People held back, waited until the dust settled, before they acted. That's not so much a conscious decision as it something that's deeply in the marrow of the people.

That tentativeness affects the Church too?

It affects the life of the Church and the mission of the Church. As Christians, the core of our spiritual life is to foster a life of love among persons. The highest model, of course, is the Holy Trinity, and our relationships of love with other people are based on the fact that they're created in the image and likeness of God. Love requires vulnerability. When we love, we have to sacrifice, we take the risk of being rejected and of suffering.

Yet in Ukraine, we still have a social context in which vulnerability means great, often heroic risk. Not only is it unrealistic, but it's inhuman and un-Christian, to expect that all members of the church will be martyrs all the time. People get worn out by their history and by the systematic injustices and lawlessness of everyday life. As a result, people close up. They hide behind facades, masks, and walls. The church in Ukraine is called to break through those walls, but our people are as susceptible to the psychological pressures of the past as anyone else. After twenty years in Ukraine, I'm beginning to understand that Biblical image of the forty years of wandering in the desert. That wandering is not just physical and geographical, but also spiritual and cultural. If forty years stands for two generations, it would mean we're about halfway to normalcy ? to living in a house of God where there is no fear.

Are you still moving in the right direction?

Unfortunately, in recent months this process has not only stopped, but we've had several strong jolts in the opposite direction. Almost every week there's something new. The memory of the old system is in the sinews of the people, and right now there's a lot of curling in across the board.

Can you give an example?

Here's one that really affects young people. Corruption was fairly blatant in some sectors of society under the Soviets, when in a sense it was a way of cutting through the bureaucracy. In the early post-Soviet period, what happened is that the bureaucracy remained intact but there wasn't any more fear of Soviet repression, so corruption went wild. Education is a classic case in point: For decades, students had to pay bribes to get into a university. Around the middle part of this decade, the going rate to get into medical school was about $10,000, and bear in mind that this is in a country where the average salary is under $200 per month. As a result, many Ukrainians went abroad to earn money to pay the bribes for their children, which breeds incredible social dislocation. For example, a mom might go to Italy to earn money for the bribe for the oldest child, so the younger kids grow up without a mother. That's so common there's a term for it -- "social orphancy."

In 2008, the Minister of Education at the time, an Orthodox physicist named Ivan Vakarchuk, instituted a general entrance exam for university admissions across Ukraine, more or less like the SAT. It became the sole criterion for admissions, and it worked. The bribes stopped. It meant that a child from the most backward, rural part of Ukraine could be admitted to our equivalents of Cornell or Cal-Tech on a level playing field. The new government, however, quickly dissolved that reform, and it's not surprising that many university rectors welcomed that move. After all, they benefitted from the old system. The Ukrainian Catholic University was one of only two of some 170 universities in Ukraine that publicly opposed it.

This sort of thing is happening all over. In the business sector, shakedowns are on the rise. It was fairly common

before the Orange Revolution, and now it's happening again. Business owners are getting calls from these guys who are back in power, saying, 'Remember me?' It might be the new police chief, or the guy running the tax authority, or somebody from what our people call "the forces" ? meaning the state police, the Security Service of Ukraine (former KGB) and other agencies. All the top officials in these jobs have changed in the last three months.

To be sure, during the Orange era, there was still corruption, and the police units were not cleaned up. Today, however, the new government represents the country's oligarchic clans, and the corruption is again becoming much more pervasive and overt. I know there's a lot of concern about what's happening in the business community.
I should say there's also a new climate of censorship in the press and on TV, and some prominent journalists here and abroad have spoken out about it.

In the West, we have the impression of growing nostalgia for the Soviet era, symbolized recently by the erection of statue of Stalin in Eastern Ukraine ? the first time that's happened since the fall of the Soviet Union. Do you sense more people looking back on the Soviet period fondly?

I don't know if there really is a strong sense of nostalgia, but I would say that the Ukrainian leadership is following Putin's direction in revisiting the critique of the Soviet period. Today, the semi-official line is that sure, Stalin made mistakes, but he also made the Soviet Union great. The fact that he killed millions, in fact tens of millions, isn't talked about. The fact that he helped start the Second World War with the Molotov/Ribbentrop Pact isn't talked about -- instead, he's the great "generalissimo" who defeated Hitler. The new Minister of Education in Ukraine recently said that textbooks in Russia and Ukraine ought to be brought into harmony, which essentially means teaching the Soviet version of history.

My sense is that the country right now is stunned, because these moves from the new government have come incredibly quickly and systematically.

Let's talk about your situation. Since you were visited by an agent of the SBU on May 18, have there been any further developments?

Today I was called by the presidential administration, and they proposed a meeting with the head of the SBU. They said this was all a gross misunderstanding, that nobody gave the local authorities orders to do this sort of thing. They said they want to straighten it all out. This is primarily related to the publicity this has generated, because I know my memo has circulated around the world. It was picked up by The Economist, and a number of embassies have taken an interest in it. Today, the story was front-page news in a number of Ukrainian newspapers. What happened certainly is remarkable. There is no precedent during the 19 years of Ukraine independence for what I was asked to do. Since the rectors of the other universities in the country have been silent, leaders such as Vakarchuk believe that they have given in. In 2001, during the authoritarian period under President Kuchma, the SBU wanted my vice-rector, a woman in charge of student affairs, and me to inform on our students. In recent years this kind of pressure was unthinkable.

The big picture right now is that there's growing pressure from the center on all structures in society to keep people in line.

Are you worried about a broader crackdown on the Catholic University?

It could happen. Today, a number of our middle level staff persons received calls on their cell phones from the SBU. That's not illegal, but this kind of thing gives people the creeps. How would you react if all of a sudden you got a direct call from the CIA or the FBI, with prying questions? Even in the basically law-abiding United States, that would wake you up! Yesterday students were telling me that some of them are afraid to blog and to

post commentaries because the SBU keeps track of blogs, organizes defamatory responses (as now is happening in our case), and monitors bloggers. The students are afraid of retribution -- for example, that their parents might lose their jobs.

This morning, when President Yanukovich came to Lviv for the first time to convene a meeting of all of Ukraine's governors, the electricity was disconnected at our main building. I think the fact that we are using technology to communicate with the world about our difficulties leads the authorities to fear that we are the center of some kind of revolution, and presidential security required that we be closed down. In fact, all we want to do is to teach peacefully and normally, to do research and to minister to the social needs of this troubled land.

The methods of pressuring people in this society are well known and never forgotten, and some of the perpetrators are alive and well and once again in power. There's every reason to think this is a real danger.

What's truly surprising is that there are 170 universities and almost 700 other institutions of higher education in this country, but only one rector has been approached by the SBU and has spoken up. Could what happened really be unique to me, or is it that other rectors are just folding under pressure?

What do you think?

I think it's most definitely the latter. Bear in mind that the rectors of state universities here are basically employees of the Minister of Education, their programs are accredited by the ministry, and their budget is determined by the ministry.

I don't think the visit by the police was just for me. This sort of thing was once quite routine, and it's becoming so again. The only surprise is that I refused to go along with the procedure.

You think you may face growing pressure because you refuse to play ball?

Right, especially because we've been one of maybe two or three places that have spoken out, in a country with hundreds of institutions of higher education. There's certainly precedent for targeting universities. In Belarus, for example, the independent European Humanities University founded in 1992 was closed down in 2004, and in 2005 moved to Lithuania because it got in trouble with the government. In St. Petersburg, the European University was harassed and closed down for a while in 2008. They have plenty of ways of getting at you ? fire codes, tax law, security codes, and so on.

Personally, I've been threatened before. In 2001, during a TV broadcast, it was suggested that when the rectors of universities whose students participate in unsanctioned protests are American citizens, those rectors should be deported.

You think the crackdown is about the reassertion of old Soviet controls, and not specifically anti-Catholicism?

That's part of the mix too. The new Minister for Education in Ukraine has said that Western Ukrainians are not real Ukrainians, culturally, confessionally, and linguistically. That's not just an isolated gaffe, but a consistent theme in his articles and books. He's known as an anti-Catholic agitator. He may be extreme, but he's not alone. Our president, for example, broke with protocol -- he actually violated the law -- when he didn't have an ecumenical service for his inauguration. Instead, the prayers were said exclusively by Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow. The president so far hasn't met with any religious leaders except from the Moscow Patriarchate. Essentially, we've got a state church developing, and the Greek Catholics are the ones most heavily criticized by that state church.

How can American Catholics help?

First of all, we want to ask for prayers. The resurrection of the Church in Ukraine was a miracle and a grace, and solidarity in prayer creates a conduit for that grace.

Second, American Catholics can write and speak out -- write your congressman, your senator, the Ukrainian embassy in Washington and the President of Ukraine himself. We expect provocations and a defamation campaign, so ask these officials to protect our security and our freedom.

Third, we could really use some financial help. We live hand to mouth ... we get no government support, and the church in Ukraine is very poor. The pressure we're facing today takes up our time and energy, and distracts us from fund-raising. About 85 percent of our expenses have to be met through fundraising, because tuition payments from students only cover about 15 percent of our cost. Because we're so young, we have no endowment or alumni.

The Ukrainian Catholic Educational Foundation [2], which is based in Chicago, is a great source of support for us.

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A final thought occasioned by the Gudziak interview, and the situation facing Catholicism in Ukraine.

One reason that these developments have not galvanized much Catholic interest in the West is that the rise to power of the Yanukovich government in February more or less coincided with the explosion of the sexual abuse crisis in Germany, which quickly brought Pope Benedict XVI into the center of the storm. Tight focus on the scandals has made it difficult to tell any other Catholic story, and other stories gain traction only to the extent that they have something to say about the crisis.

In the case of Ukraine, finding a connection is actually not as much of a stretch as it might seem. In fact, the growing pressure facing Greek Catholics has implications for a key point about the Vatican's response to the sexual abuse crisis: The question of cooperation with the police and other civil authorities.

In the United States and Western Europe, the failure of bishops over the decades to report crimes by priests to the police, or to turn over personnel files and other records voluntarily to civil probes, is one of the most appalling dimensions of the crisis. It has cemented impressions that the church for too long regarded itself as "above the law." Many observers in the West, both inside and outside the church, have insisted that the Vatican should impose a universal policy of reporting sexual abuse charges to the police, and full cooperation with all civil investigations. (A recent "layman's guide" to handling sexual abuse allegations from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith moved in that direction, stipulating that "civil law concerning reporting of crimes to the appropriate authorities should always be followed.")

Such a policy amounts to a no-brainer in parts of the world where the rule of law holds, and where the police enjoy basic public trust. But consider what it might mean in a place like Ukraine -- where the police and security forces are often seen as corrupt and subject to political manipulation, and where Catholics in particular regard them as agents of a hostile regime trying to hobble the church. (Gudziak, for example, says he believes himself to be under regular surveillance by the SBU.)

In that context, a binding requirement under canon law of cooperation with the police could seem self-destructive.

What this suggests is that Vatican ambivalence over the years about mandating cooperation with the police might have some basis other than sheer denial about the sexual abuse crisis, or the usual Roman desire to keep the church's dirty laundry under wraps. In part, it may also be a reflection of the complexities of crafting policy for a global church, in which solutions that seem obvious in some parts of the world can generate real headaches in others.

That's obviously no excuse for the church's failures, but it may at least go some distance towards an explanation.

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