

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 10, 2011 at 11:00am

End of an era in Ukraine

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NCR Today

ANALYSIS

Today marks the end of an era for the Eastern Catholic churches in union with Rome, as the best-known Eastern Catholic leader in the West is stepping off the stage.

The Vatican announced this morning that Cardinal Lubomyr Husar, who turns 78 later this month, has resigned as the leader of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine. The church will shortly organize a synod of its bishops to elect a successor.

Technically, the Vatican recognized Husar as the "Major Archbishop of Kyiv-Haly," but the world's six to ten million Greek Catholics, both in Ukraine and in immigrant communities elsewhere, have regarded him for the last decade as their "Patriarch."

Born in Ukraine in 1933, Husar fled with his parents to the United States in 1944, during the chaos of the Second World War and the rise of a Soviet regime that would drive the Greek Catholic Church underground and imprison most of its leadership.

He studied at Catholic University and Fordham, and was ordained into the Ukrainian Catholic eparchy of the United States. (Husar also became an American citizen, which made him a sort of honorary American cardinal after John Paul II gave him the red hat in February 2001.)

In 1973 Husar joined a Studite Monastery in Italy and became its superior. He was secretly consecrated a bishop in April 1977 in Castelgandolfo by Cardinal Josyf Slipy, his predecessor as head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, but the act was not recognized by Paul VI's Vatican, anxious not to upset the Russian Orthodox Church or the Soviets. Husar's episcopacy would remain a secret for the next nineteen

years, until it was formally recognized by John Paul II and the Greek Catholic synod in 1996.

In 2001, Husar was elected archbishop. Though the office is for life, Husar made it clear beginning in 2009 that he intended to step down, in part because of declining health.

Over the years Husar has been easily the most articulate and theologically engaged of the Eastern Catholic prelates. He performed brilliantly during John Paul's June 23-27, 2001, trip to Ukraine, cementing his reputation as pastorally gifted and politically sophisticated. He's also a warm, smiling, slightly chubby prelate, who came off as sort of an Eastern Catholic version of Pope John XXIII. For a brief period, there was a mini-flurry of speculation that Husar could be a candidate to become pope himself.

One measure of Husar's impact is that a vice-rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University recently penned a lengthy essay about the transition, the gist of which was to convince Ukrainian Catholics not to freak out.

“He radiates such authentic love and a sense of deep peace, coupled with humility and wisdom and warm and witty humor and he shares all of this with everyone. It is difficult to name anyone in Ukrainian society today who is regarded as a greater moral authority than Lubomyr Husar,” writes Oleh Turiy.

Facing the loss of such a leader, Turiy urges Ukrainian Greek Catholics not to succumb to “a state of panic.”

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In fact, Turiy argues, all the changes in leadership in the Greek Catholic Church during the 20th century occurred amid crisis and turmoil, yet they all produced new leaders of unexpected quality.

In a press conference today in Kiev, Husar said that in his retirement he hopes to do some pastoral work with youth and with various professional groups, among other things helping to ensure that “nothing from our church's past is lost.”

This is a moment of special anxiety for the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine. After a rebirth in the 1990s, the church played a key role in Ukraine's “Orange Revolution.” Today, however, a pro-Russian regime is once again running the show in Kiev, and the church has been experiencing some not-so-subtle intimidation from the state security service.

The eyes of the Catholic world, therefore, ought to be on Ukraine in coming weeks, both to celebrate the legacy of the one of the most remarkable Catholic personalities of our time, and to signal solidarity with the church he led.

[John L. Allen, Jr. is *NCR*'s senior correspondent.]

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