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Growth of Ukrainian Catholic University the epitome of hope in country's troubled times

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | May. 13, 2014 Conversations with Sr. Camille

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In addition to the bitter cold of Connecticut's recent winter, you have suffered the piercing chill of the political situation in Ukraine. What does this mean to you?

The winter we endured in Connecticut this year was nothing compared to the brutal cold that our friends in Ukraine endured for three long months, standing in the sub-zero temperatures on Ukraine's Independence Square and facing off against riot police and government snipers.

Why does the Ukraine's pro-democracy movement matter to you?

I think this movement should matter to everyone in the world that cares about human rights and human dignity and what our Founding Fathers called "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." I care about this movement as the son of Ukrainian refugees who fled Ukraine during World War II. As children, my parents witnessed horrible brutality at the hands of the Nazis and the Soviets. Both families narrowly escaped being deported to slave labor camps in Siberia, and my mother witnessed a firing squad in which every 15th man in her village was executed by the SS because their community had sheltered Jews from the Holocaust.

The Ukrainian people have been striving for freedom and for a just society for more than 400 years. They've endured genocide, mass starvation, the brunt of two world wars, Stalin's purges, ethnic cleansing, and persecution on a scale that is hard for any American to fathom. I want to see the world community stand in defense of Ukraine. In recent months, we've been inspired by the hundreds of thousands of people who spoke clearly about their passionate desire for democratic change and an end to government corruption. If the United States and Europe fail to defend their right to self-determination, this would be a tragedy. Not only a tragedy, but a disgrace.

Have recent developments quashed hope for the freedom you desire for the Ukrainian people?

Certainly, the invasion of Crimea was a shocking development. Vladimir Putin seems determined to spawn a civil war in Ukraine by sending troops to cities in Eastern Ukraine. I've been to Crimea, and I feel great sympathy for its people who were forced to rejoin Russia at gunpoint. It's shameful that our media gave any legitimacy to this shotgun referendum. To believe Putin, you would have to believe that 140 percent of the electorate voted to rejoin Russia. But we should remind ourselves that there were no election observers, and it's impossible to hold a legitimate referendum in two weeks' time with no opportunity for the public to debate the issue. The cynicism of Russia's invasion -- Putin's utter contempt for anything resembling truth or freedom of

choice -- was an insult to our collective intelligence.

Have you lost hope for the freedom Ukrainians desire?

I have not. If Putin is a student of history, he'll realize that the Ukrainian people are a tough, resilient nation. Our resistance movement fought Stalin well into the 1950s. Even as late as 1956, Ukrainian freedom fighters were still sabotaging Soviet troop trains headed to put down the Hungarian uprising. Our Ukrainian Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church chose to go underground rather than merge with the Russian Orthodox Church, and they refused to betray their faith by collaborating with the Soviet secret police.

Putin may dream of reconstituting the old Soviet Union. But if he tries, he will face a very fierce and determined foe. He'll be running the risk of defeat and humiliation in the same way the Soviets were unable to subdue Finland in 1939. And for all his arrogance, Putin has to be concerned that a protracted war in Ukraine and international isolation will leave him vulnerable to economic collapse. He also has to worry that he could lose huge swaths of land to the Chinese, who also have ambitions about reclaiming lands in the Far East they believe they are entitled to.

When we remember Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, we see that God has a way of punishing empires and humbling their delusions of grandeur.

What do you think will happen?

By nature, Ukrainians tend to be very religious, peace-loving people. The world has seen how they have shown tremendous restraint in responding to Putin's provocations in Crimea and Donetsk. For over 1,000 years, they had no ambitions of conquering neighboring territories. But they will defend their own land, and they have a tremendous capacity for resistance and self-sacrifice for a higher goal.

How did you become involved with Ukraine's only Catholic university?

Well, I knew Bishop Borys Gudziak, the co-founder of the Ukrainian Catholic University, when he was still a young doctoral student at Harvard in the early 1980s. Even then, he was a man of powerful vision and moral strength. Long before there was any hint of perestroika or glasnost, he told us that someday, Ukraine would become free, that our church would come out of the catacombs, that the pope would visit Ukraine and that Cardinal Josyf Slipyj's dream of creating a Ukrainian Catholic university would be fulfilled. All those predictions came true. In 2009, I learned that there was a job opening in the Ukrainian Catholic Education Foundation. Since I had a background in nonprofit law and development, I decided to apply for that position.

Do you travel there to oversee its growth?

Yes, I've had the privilege of watching it grow. This university started from what Jesus would call a mustard seed. They began with a ramshackle kindergarten building, refurbished it and created the Lviv Theological Academy. This was an institution that had been abolished by the Soviets in 1946. Then, with generous support from many donors Bishop Borys inspired in the United States and Canada, they were able to build a beautiful new seminary and an academic building on the outskirts of the city of Lviv.

Later, in June 2001, Pope John Paul II visited Ukraine. He blessed the cornerstone for our new campus. This is located at the entrance of historic Stryisky Park, on a site where the old Communist Party tried to build a giant monstrosity that they hoped would become their cultural center. Instead, that building was demolished in something you might call an act of architectural exorcism. Bishop Borys and his team of dreamers started building our new Stryisky Park campus. When I first saw that site in 2010, it was just a level field of gravel. Today, there stands a state-of-the-art residential college and a beautiful academic building that houses faculty

offices, lecture halls and seminar rooms, all designed by the architectural firm Kallmann McKinnell & Wood. These are buildings with beautiful atriums and open classrooms. They were designed to reflect a vision of light, transparency, openness and dignity -- the very elements of the human experience that the Soviets tried to destroy.

What kind of education does it provide?

More important than the buildings are the academic programs, the outstanding faculty and students, and the unique community spirit that UCU has developed. In addition to our departments of theology and philosophy, UCU also has programs in history, psychology, modern and ancient languages, and a new master's program in journalism. We're also very proud of the acclaimed Lviv Business School, which has been written up in *The Financial Times* and *The Economist* for its fine executive MBA programs.

Does it promote ecumenical events?

UCU has a deep commitment to the social Gospel and ecumenical action. We're all painfully aware of Eastern Europe's history of genocide, bigotry, religious persecution and martyrdom. For American readers, the best insight into this may be the book *Bloodlands* by Yale historian Timothy Snyder. Against this backdrop, UCU has always tried to provide moral witness and to be a force for interfaith and ethnic reconciliation.

Although we are a proudly Catholic institution, we have also reached out to our brothers and sisters in the Orthodox churches (both Ukrainian and Russian) and in the Polish Catholic, Armenian and Jewish communities. We've also honored Mustafa Jemilev, the head of the nonviolent movement of the Crimean Tatars, an Islamic community, which is now under severe threat from Putin's occupation forces. We invite lecturers and students from various faith communities to share their experiences in maintaining their cultural and religious heritage, and we look for ways to seek forgiveness, common ground, and a way forward. In 2011, we launched a new program in Christian-Jewish studies to examine the various ways in which our religious traditions intersect and inform our response to national and moral crises.

We have tried to build public awareness of the many ways in which Ukrainian Catholics defied the Nazis and the Soviets and defended the rights of their fellow citizens. So UCU published a booklet about the 28 Ukrainian martyrs and saints that St. John Paul II beatified in 2001. These represent just a tiny sliver -- the tip of the iceberg of the thousands of Ukrainians who refused to cooperate with the evils of Nazi and Soviet rule. Among these was Metropolitan Archbishop Andrei Sheptytsky, who led a Catholic sanctuary movement to save Jewish children and adults from the Holocaust. We've worked to organize lectures by some of these survivors, and last fall, we attended an awards luncheon in New York, where the Anti-Defamation League honored Sheptytsky for his heroism.

Have you always lived in the United States?

I was born and raised in Hartford, Conn. I have lived in the U.S. for my entire life except for a brief time between 2005 and 2006, when my wife and I lived in Kiev, Ukraine, with our three young daughters. At that time, I served as the executive director of the Children of Chornobyl Relief and Development Fund. Over the course of 20 years, this group delivered over $60 million worth of medical technology and humanitarian supplies to Ukrainian hospitals that were treating children stricken with birth defects, thyroid cancer, leukemia and a slew of other illnesses associated with the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl.

Living in Ukraine was an amazing experience for our family. We lived in a small "khrushchovka" apartment in Kiev, and we became very familiar with the Maidan, where the Orange Revolution unfolded, and where so many people lost their lives defending their freedom during the most recent uprising.

How do your efforts on behalf of the people of Ukraine impact your family life?

Well, I do spend a lot of time on the road, and my wife and daughters are very patient and understanding. Having lived in Ukraine and knowing the kind of poverty and hardships our friends have endured there, my family has been incredibly supportive.

Please describe your wife and children.

I'm very lucky to have a wonderful wife with a great sense of humor. Irene was born and raised outside of Detroit. She comes from a family of very gifted musicians that play the Ukrainian national instrument, the bandura (ban-DOO-rah), which is this spectacular 50-string folk harp that is symbolic of the soul of Ukraine. My brother-in-law, Julian Kytasty, has played in Carnegie Hall and has become a real ambassador for this instrument, performing in Poland, Israel, Russia, the Kyrgyz Republic and many other exotic places.

My wife is also no slouch when it comes to music. Every summer, she runs a weeklong music workshop for about 30 kids who want to learn how to play the bandura. And my daughters, Alina, Teryn and Maya, are all learning how to play. My oldest daughter, Alina, is a freshman at Clark University, and she is very interested in international affairs, Latin American culture, ethnomusicology and dance. My daughter Teryn, still in high school, is an aspiring opera singer, and my 10-year-old, Maya, is studying cello and piano.

Is your wife politically active?

Well, Irene does not consider herself a political activist, but what she does with her music is very politically loaded. Many of the songs performed on the bandura are full of political protest. They're a cry from the heart against the injustices that have been heaped on the Ukrainian people for over 400 years. In the 1930s, Stalin targeted the bandura players and executed hundreds of them for writing poems and ballads that promoted the spirit of Ukrainian freedom or condemned the czars and the Bolsheviks for their oppression. This was all part of Stalin's Great Purge, the campaign of cultural genocide by which Stalin, Khrushchev and now Putin have tried to wipe out Ukrainian cultural identity. So everything Irene does to promote the distinct beauty of Ukrainian culture and the bandura in particular is a profoundly political act.

Please say something about your birth family, childhood and education.

My parents, Orest and Oksana Kuzma, were always very active in St. Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Hartford as choir members and community activists. My sister, Marika, is an accomplished choral conductor and music professor at the University of California. My grandfather Michael founded the Ukrainian Credit Union in Hartford as a way to build economic self-sufficiency in our community. Both sides of the family were very committed to preserving Ukrainian culture. But they were also very sensitive to human rights issues affecting other people. When I was an infant, we lived in an African-American neighborhood. I grew up during the era of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, and I always had a special interest in the nonviolent strategies of Mahatma Gandhi and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Freedom Rides, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Did any experience particularly inspire you?

When I attended college at Yale, I had the privilege of meeting some great peace activists, like the Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr., Dorothy Day and Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan. After graduation, I worked for a while in South Carolina, where I had a chance to work with the Carolina Brown Lung Association, Ralph Nader's Public Interest Research Groups, and other groups that fought for social justice and environmental quality.

So over the past few months, as I've watched the Ukrainian people singing "We Shall Overcome" and utilizing Gandhian and civil-rights-type tactics in their struggle, I've been deeply moved by their courage.

What kind of law do you practice?

Well, I haven't really practiced law very much in the past 10 years since I've been in the nonprofit sector. When I finished at the Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, I served as a staff attorney for the Legal Aid Society of Hartford County, where I represented tenants combating homelessness and eviction proceedings. Later, I worked on the habeas corpus circuit in the Connecticut state prisons, serving inmates who were still trying to challenge their convictions. One of my clients, James Tillman, was eventually able to prove his innocence through DNA testing, but by then, he had already served 18 years for a rape he did not commit.

What led you to choose this profession?

When I was still in college, I worked one summer at the Catholic Worker house in lower Manhattan. I could see how poverty, substance abuse and mental illness could drive ordinary, decent people to the point of utter despair. I wanted to do what I could to help them overcome poverty and to find the spiritual strength to make a better life for themselves.

In light of your many involvements, what gives you the most satisfaction?

Right now, the greatest satisfaction comes from seeing the Ukrainian Catholic University inspiring a whole new generation of Ukrainians to fight for freedom and to be fearless in that fight. I'm thrilled to see how this community of scholars and activists has helped to promote ethical values, interfaith dialogue and reconciliation, and a strategic vision for transforming Ukrainian society and overcoming the brutal legacy of Soviet rule.

Who most influenced your belief system?

I think it was a combination of my parents' upbringing and paying attention to some of Jesus' more provocative teachings in the Gospel. Later, I was influenced by the writings of Gandhi and Tolstoy and various Ukrainian dissidents that helped me to understand how faith needs to be applied to current political and human struggles.

How and with whom do you pray?

I pray with my family and also with my friends in church and at the Ukrainian Catholic Education Foundation. Lately, we've been praying especially fervently, asking God and the Blessed Virgin to deliver Ukraine from further wrath or affliction or war.

Do you have a favorite Bible passage or story?

There are two I like best. First, there is Jesus' rebuke: If we only had the faith of a mustard seed, we could move mountains. This seems like an absurdity at first. But then I think of the insane miracles we have all borne witness to in our own lifetimes: the removal of the Berlin Wall (every bit as thrilling as the crumbling walls of Jericho!), the end of apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the South, the emergence of Ukraine's churches from the underground and their spectacular renaissance, and so many nonviolent revolutions that have torn down the walls of tyranny. We've also seen how so many emerging economies that once languished in poverty are beginning to change their fate through better government and more humane policies: Brazil, Chile, India, Tunisia, Turkey, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Baltic countries.

Then there is Jesus' encounter with the rich young man. It reminds me how wealth can have a crippling effect on our values. And yet, wealth also gives us the opportunity to invest in great causes. We can do so much good in

the world through creative charity, bold thinking, socially responsible business development and sound stewardship.

What have been your most satisfying achievements?

So far, I've been most pleased with the creation of three endowed professorships in Jewish-Christian Studies at UCU and the growth of a beautiful campus that reflects the dignity and vision of this wonderful group of people. Prior to that, I was very pleased with some of the hospital partnerships we created with the Children of Chornobyl Fund in cities like Lutsk and Poltava and Dnipropetrovsk, where we could see the impact new technology and training had on saving the lives of newborns and kids with cancer.

Any disappointments?

Sure! I'm always disappointed with my own inability to convince more people to be more generous in their support of groundbreaking and transformative institutions like UCU.

What is your image of God?

Oh! That's a tough one. My late father used to look up into the starlit sky and remind me how tiny and insignificant we are and how glorious and unfathomable the universe must be. The most I ever felt God's presence was on a summer internship in Alaska during a bus ride through the St. Elias Mountains. The scenery was so spectacular that I literally found it hard to catch my breath. Later, I tried to write a choral piece about this, a setting of verses from Psalms 42 and 84: "How beautiful is Thy dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts!" In those sheer valleys and towering mountainsides, it felt like I caught a tiny sliver of the power of God's eternal creativity, the slow turning of the planet and the profound evolution of life as he chooses to spawn it. I also see God as a powerful improviser, unleashing color and sound and glory all over the universe.

I also think we hear God's voice in the greatest works of music, like the grand finale of Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite" or Mozart's "Jupiter Symphony" or the incredibly tender opening of Brahms' "Requiem," when the choir whispers, "Selig sind ... " "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted!"

When I hear those masterworks, I think I understand how the great martyrs, including millions of Ukrainian political prisoners, could actually find joy and solace, even in the face of crushing despair.

What in our church encourages or discourages you?

I'm very encouraged by the teachings of Pope Francis: His emphasis on humility and combating poverty and injustice will have a very positive impact.

What discourages me is the growth of intolerance between faiths, humanity's inability to find strength in peace as opposed to the kind of mindless machismo, the cult of violence that we see sweeping this country and so many other places in the world. But I'm inspired by the "Revolution of Dignity" we saw unfold in Ukraine this winter. I would like to see the world's religious leaders insist on greater freedom in Russia and recognize the terrible persecution and genocide suffered by Ukrainians. We should encourage the Russian Orthodox Church to speak out against the injustices and poverty plaguing Russian society, not to serve as an apologist for Putin's imperialism. Ukrainian Catholics and other religious communities deserve the right to worship freely. Like the brave students at UCU, we need to be bolder in defying tyranny and speaking truth to power.

Thank you, Alex, for using your own impressive gifts in behalf of so many others.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people

whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [1] from Now You Know Media.]

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