

The Catacomb Church: Ukrainian Greek Catholics in the USSR

BOHDAN R. BOCIURKIW

Dating from the Union of Brest of 1596, the Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church (presently known as the "Ukrainian Catholic Church") has evolved into a national institution of central importance in the Western Ukraine, after it was suppressed by the Russian authorities in the rest of the Ukraine (and Belorussia) in the course of the 19th century. At the time of the Second World War, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (within pre-war Poland, excluding the Apostolic Administrature of Lemkivshchyna; and within Czechoslovakia excluding Priashiv* [Prešov] diocese) embraced four dioceses and one Apostolic Visitature, with over four million faithful, who were served by eight bishops, 2,510 secular and 164 regular priests, numerous monasteries and convents with large numbers of monastics, a theological academy and four theological seminaries with a total of 229 students, and 2,772 parishes with 4119 churches and chapels.¹ With the Soviet occupation of the Western Ukraine and shortly after the death of the primate of the Church, Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytskyi, the new regime early in 1945 opened an increasingly vituperative campaign against the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, charging it with "treason," "collaboration with the enemy," "bourgeois nationalism" and a variety of other political offences, and calling upon the clergy and faithful to disown their episcopate, repudiate the Union with Rome, and "return" to the "ancestral" Russian Orthodox Church. In the process of this campaign the entire Uniate episcopate was arrested, together with a large number of the clergy who refused to accept "conversion" to Orthodoxy. To create the fiction of a grass-roots movement for "return" to the Russian Church, an "Initiative Committee" led by a renegade Greek Catholic priest, H. Kostelnyk, was formed in May 1945 and, with the help of the communist authorities, took over the administration of the Church. In March 1946, the "Initiative Committee" staged a "Sobor of the Greek Catholic Church" in Lviv, which was attended by 214 priests and 19 laymen. The Sobor "voted" to dissolve the Church's 350-year old Union with Rome and to join the Russian Orthodox Church.

* Proper names are printed in their transliterated Ukrainian form. Ed.

Though this gathering clearly lacked canonical authority, the Soviet government accordingly declared the Greek Catholic Church to be “dissolved”, suppressing the remaining Uniate monasteries, convents and parishes.³ A similar campaign was conducted in the Carpathian Ukraine, culminating in August 1949 with an “Act of Reunion” in Mukachiv.³

The Struggle for Survival

The artificial nature of the “reunion” left the Patriarchate and the regime with the problem of suppressing the continuing overt and passive resistance to Orthodoxy and of assimilating the “converts” into the Russian Church. The dimensions of these problems have been well illustrated by subsequent developments in the Western Ukraine. Thus in September 1948, the ecclesiastical leader of the “reunion” campaign, Protopresbyter Kostelnyk, was assassinated in Lviv, allegedly by the Ukrainian underground. The same fate befell his Bolshevik counterpart, writer Halan, in October 1949.⁴ For years a section of the Uniates, in particular the urban intelligentsia, boycotted the “reunited” churches and attended the few remaining Roman Catholic churches. In many parishes without priests, churches remained closed as the faithful refused to admit Orthodox clergymen. In Ivano-Frankivsk diocese alone, there were at least 175 such parishes between 1946 and 1956.⁵

With many of the clergy accepting Orthodoxy in form only and continuing to observe the traditional Greek Catholic practices, a large number of West Ukrainians apparently found participation in the “new” Church preferable to an existence without church life. Nevertheless, a significant number of Uniate laymen have continued to depend on the infrequent services of the “illegal” priests and monks – those who, having opposed “conversion”, escaped arrest by going into hiding or formally adopting secular vocations.⁶ Vicars-general, who had been secretly appointed, were left behind to head the decimated “Catacomb Church”. The number of these “illegal” priests has increased, especially since the mid-’50s with the return of those “recalcitrant” clergymen who had completed their sentences or who profited from the post-Stalin amnesties. Among the returnees were bishops Charnetskyi and Liatyshevskyi who had secretly resumed their episcopal duties and consecrated new secret bishops and priests.⁷ The resulting intensification of clandestine Uniate activities, combined with a widespread expectation that with “de-Stalinization” the regime would permit the legalization of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, caused considerable alarm by 1957 within the local Orthodox Church, the more so since in some parishes the faithful began to repudiate Orthodoxy.⁸ But these hopes failed to materialize. A declaration published by a conference of deans of the Lviv diocese in October 1957, clearly indicated that the official position towards the Uniate Church remained unchanged:

. . . Rumours, spread by the Uniate fanatics and other opponents of Orthodoxy, that Union will be restored in the Western *oblasts* are inventions of our enemies calculated to deceive both the non-reunited clergy and the believers.⁹

The communist authorities, too, dispelled any doubts about their policy towards the suppressed Uniates by arresting a number of priests and unleashing a new wave of slanderous anti-Uniate propaganda which has not subsided since.

The Catacomb Church

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church represents by far the largest banned religious group in the Soviet Union. Thirty years after its forcible "dissolution," this Church still commands the loyalty of the majority of believers in the *oblasts* of Lviv, Ternopil, and Ivano-Frankivsk, and has a sizeable following in the Trans-Carpathian *oblast*. As a result of deportations and migration from the Western Ukraine, there is a growing diaspora in the Eastern, traditionally Orthodox, areas of the Ukrainian SSR, as well as in Western Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia.¹⁰ Supported by the strong Ukrainian Catholic communities in the West, the Uniates have survived, despite repeated repressive measures, both within the formally "Orthodox" Church (so-called "secret" Uniates) and as an "illegal" Church with a succession of its own bishops and a network of secular and monastic clergy who combine their worldly occupations with clandestine religious rites performed in private homes, at cemeteries, and even in the officially "closed" churches.

Three categories of Uniates can be discerned. The first group embraces those who remain Catholics at heart but, in order to openly practice their religion, formally belong to the Orthodox Church. They consider themselves a "branch of the Catholic Church, forcefully separated from the Vatican and subjected to the regime".¹¹ The overwhelming majority of the forcibly "reunited" clergy in Galicia and Transcarpathia fall into this "crypto-Uniate" category, as well as most of the overt believers. They sympathize with the "catacomb" Uniate Church, maintain links with the "illegal" clergy and often help them in difficulties. In 1973, for example, three such Orthodox priests were tried with three laymen for their part in secretly reproducing during 1969-73 over 2,000 Uniate prayerbooks and a number of psalm and service books, using state printing facilities in Lviv.¹² Should the Greek Catholic Church be legalized again they would rejoin it, but under the present circumstances they find it more practicable to work within the framework of the official Church so as to keep up the faith among the people and to counter the powerful anti-religious pressures.¹³ But as the former Uniate clergy are dying out, some of the parishes are now being taken over by the new

generation of clergy, already trained in the Orthodox seminaries, who may not necessarily identify themselves with the Uniate traditions and loyalties. With the shortage of new clergy, however, more and more churches are being left without a priest and are in danger of closing.¹⁴ One recent account from the Western Ukraine describes the plight of believers in such localities:

In my village there is no priest, but people come to church every Sunday and, together with the psalmsinger (*diak*) they sing Matins and the Mass . . . while a chalice and lighted candles are placed on the altar.¹⁵

The second group consists of the "recalcitrant" clergy and believers who reject the Russian Orthodox Church either as "schismatic" and "Muscovite" or as "corrupted" by its subservience to the atheistic regime. Some Uniate laymen, particularly from among the intelligentsia, attend the few Roman Catholic churches still open in the Western Ukraine.¹⁶ But the majority of them depend on the "Catacomb Church" for occasional religious services and rites, for the sacraments and religious instruction.

The underground Uniate Church is said to embrace at least 300 to 350 priests,¹⁷ headed by three or more secret bishops;¹⁸ they recognize the authority of the Church's primate, Archbishop Major Josyf Slipyi, who after nearly 18 years' imprisonment was released by the regime and allowed to leave for Rome. One of the "catacomb" bishops - Vasyl Velychkovskiy - was arrested in 1969 together with two other Uniate priests; all three were sentenced to three years' imprisonment each.¹⁹ In Lviv alone, according to Levitin-Krasnov's recent account, there were about 80 Uniate priests in 1974.²⁰ Almost invariably these clergymen hold full-time secular jobs or have now retired from such jobs; many have behind them a decade or more of imprisonment or exile for their refusal to "convert" to Orthodoxy. In most cases their identities seem to be known to the Soviet police, who frequently subject them to searches, interrogations, and fines, but stop short of arresting them unless they extend their activities beyond a narrow circle of friends in private homes.²¹ The diminishing ranks of the aging "recalcitrant" clergy are being replenished by an unknown number of younger priests already trained and ordained in the underground Church.²² They are likely to be more activist and militant than the older clergy. Outside the Western Ukraine there may be as many as 30 Ukrainian Catholic priests in Lithuania, some of them serving their Ukrainian flock from afar.

The third, smallest but most radical category of the Uniates centres on a "neo-Uniate" movement popularly known as *Pokutnyky* ("Penitents") dating from the 1950s, which apparently has broken away from the "Catacomb Church".²³ This group which has been subjected to ruthless

repression by the administration and the police, combines eschatology with radical nationalist views and urges a total repudiation of the Soviet regime. According to recent Soviet attacks on the *Pokutnyky*, their movement:

spreads among the population a slogan of the God-choseness of the Ukrainian people, prohibits the believers from participating in elections, in social-political life, calls upon them to reject service in the Soviet Army, work in Soviet enterprises, education of children in schools, and medical assistance.²⁴

On the one hand, the "neo-Uniates" proclaim themselves a purely religious movement, a "truly apostolic faith," [and] on the other hand they speculate on the national sentiments by declaring that "the Lord elevates" now the Ukraine which allegedly has "for long centuries been under oppression, in abject slavery and captivity". Thus, they are trying to inflame hatred towards other peoples, and first of all towards the Russian people, which allegedly has brought atheism to the Ukraine.²⁵

Since 1968 the Uniate activities in the Western Ukraine have intensified markedly, possibly in connection with the legalization of the Uniate Church in neighbouring Czechoslovakia²⁶ and in line with the general upsurge of dissent in the Ukraine. There have been more and more cases of priests and believers who have challenged the validity of the Church's prohibition, taken possession of churches closed or abandoned by the Orthodox Church, and, in particular, have sent petitions and delegations to Moscow and Kiev demanding the legalization of the Uniate Church.²⁷ In 1974 one such delegation, accompanied by a Ukrainian priest from Lithuania, Volodymyr Prokopiv, travelled from the Lviv *oblast* to Moscow in order to submit a similar petition signed by 12,000 believers.²⁸ The Soviet authorities responded to such petitions by sharpening the repressive measures against the activist Uniate clergy, monastics and laymen and by intensifying their propaganda campaign against this "bourgeois nationalist Church" which "was forever rejected by the Ukrainian people". Soviet publications have been voicing alarm about the upsurge of Uniate activities, which have involved "illegal agitation for the revival of the Uniate Church" and distribution of "pamphlets, calendars and prayerbooks of anti-Soviet and anti-communist content".²⁹ Speaking at a special conference on Catholicism in the USSR that was held in Lithuania in December 1969, a professional *antireligioznik* from the Ukrainian SSR charged that:

. . . nurturing hopes for the restoration of the Uniate Church, its apologists are working on the clergy who reunited with Orthodoxy, trying to persuade them to repudiate the "Muscovites" and to openly

or secretly carry a Uniate, pro-Vatican line. In some regions of the Ukraine, illegal schools were organized to train new Uniate priests. In a series of localities, the Uniates have wilfully opened the previously closed churches and have conducted religious services [without a licence] . . .⁸⁰

The Defence of the Uniate Cause and the Vatican

The cause of the persecuted Uniates was taken up by the Ukrainian dissent movement. Its mouthpiece, the *Ukrainian Herald*, has since 1970 carried accounts of the harassment, searches, arrests and trials of the Uniates and has editorially condemned the "wanton liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church by the henchmen of Beria" as "illegal and anti-constitutional".⁸¹ A leading Ukrainian dissenter and historian, Valentyn Moroz, devoted part of his "Chronicle of Resistance" to the nation-building role of the Uniate Church in Galicia and equated the regime's anti-Uniate struggle with attacks upon "the spiritual structure of the nation".⁸²

During recent years, the dissident Lithuanian Catholic clergy have also offered support to the demands for the lifting of the illegal ban on the Uniate Church.⁸³ In September 1974, an eloquent appeal to Sakharov's Human Rights Committee in Moscow came from a leading Russian Orthodox dissenter, Anatoli Levitin-Krasnov. The latter called upon the Committee to raise its voice in defence of the Uniates and other persecuted religious groups. "The Union [Uniate Catholicism] in the Western Ukraine," wrote Levitin-Krasnov, "is a massive popular movement. Its persecution means not only religious oppression, but also the restriction of the national rights of West Ukrainians."⁸⁴

It is significant that, since the dawning of Vatican-Soviet détente, the Holy See has desisted from any direct public condemnation of Soviet persecution of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. The Curia spokesmen have been arguing in private that – in view of Moscow's intransigence on the "Uniate question" – such a condemnation would not improve the position of the "Catacomb Church" but would only harm the Vatican's other initiatives *vis-à-vis* the USSR and its client States. By 1971, Rome appeared to be carrying its ecumenical *rapprochement* with the Moscow Patriarchate to the point of outwardly accepting as a *fait accompli* the official dissolution of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, when the Vatican's representative at the national *Sobor* of the Russian Orthodox Church, Cardinal J. Willebrands, failed to react to a *Sobor* resolution (read in his presence) ratifying the so-called "re-union" of the Uniates with the Moscow Patriarchate.⁸⁵ Relations between the Roman Curia and the Ukrainian Catholic Primate, Cardinal Josyf Slipyi, have been progressively deteriorating during past years, as the Pope turned down the Uniate bishops' request for the creation of a Ukrainian Catholic

Patriarchate which would unite under its jurisdiction all Uniate dioceses both within the Ukraine and abroad. During 1976, the Vatican remained silent while its Ukrainian flock in the West marked the 30th anniversary of the tragedy that befell their co-religionists in the Soviet Ukraine. This attitude of the Holy See, the seeming fraternization of its representatives with the Uniates' persecutors, and its negative response to those demanding greater autonomy for the Ukrainian Church, have embittered and divided Ukrainian Catholics in the West, as well as inside the USSR, while offering to the Soviet authorities a new propaganda weapon in their continuing attempts to demoralize and destroy the "Catacomb Church".

¹ *Annuario Pontificio*, 1943-45.

² On the liquidation of the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church in the Western Ukraine, see this writer's "The Uniate Church in the Soviet Ukraine: A Case Study in Soviet Church Policy," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. VII, 1965, pp. 83-113.

³ See V. Markus, *Nyshchennia Hreko-Katolytskoi Tserkvy v Mukachivskii Eparkhii v 1945-50 rr.* (Destruction of the Greek Catholic Church in the Mukachiv Diocese in 1945-50) (Paris: Offprint from *Zapysky N.T.Sh.*, Vol. CLXIX, 1962).

⁴ On their respective role in the "re-union" campaign, see this writer's "The Uniate Church in the Soviet Ukraine," *loc. cit.*

⁵ *Pravoslavnyi visnyk*, No. 7, 1957, p. 215.

⁶ Some Uniate priests found haven within the Lithuanian Catholic Church and have continued to serve their Western Ukrainian flock from afar. For hostile accounts of the "illegal" Uniate activities, see *Pravoslavnyi visnyk*, No. 4, 1957, p. 70; No. 8-9, 1957, p. 255; No. 12, 1957, pp. 368-69; No. 1, 1958, pp. 24-27; No. 5, 1958, pp. 133-35; No. 11-12, 1958, pp. 349-50; No. 6, 1959, p. 189.

⁷ See *Molod Ukrainy*, 11 September, 1964.

⁸ *Zhovten*, No. 2, 1957, pp. 120-26; *Kommunist Ukrainy*, No. 7, 1959, pp. 77-82; *Pravoslavnyi visnyk*, No. 3, 1957, p. 70; No. 7, 1957, p. 255; No. 8-9, 1958, p. 284; and No. 5, 1958, pp. 133-35.

⁹ *Pravoslavnyi visnyk*, No. 12, 1957, p. 371.

¹⁰ In his declaration submitted on 5 September, 1974, to the Moscow Human Rights Committee, Anatoli Levitin-Krasnov estimated that some 300,000 Uniates were arrested or deported in connection with the suppression of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church after the war ("V oboroni Ukrainskoi Katolytskoi Tserkvy," *Suchasnist* [Munich], No. 1, January 1975, p. 108). See also *Ukrainskyi visnyk*, No. 7-8, 1974, Paris-Baltimore, 1975, pp. 143-45; and V. Markus, "Religion and Nationality: The Uniates of the Ukraine," in B. R. Bociurkiw and J. W. Strong (eds.), *Religion and Atheism in the USSR and Eastern Europe*, London, 1975, pp. 101-122.

¹¹ Cited in a report on the Uniate Church in the Ukraine by Lvivskiy in *Ukrainski Visti*, Edmonton, 5 September, 1974. Cf. V. Markus, "The Suppressed Church: Ukrainian Catholics in the Soviet Union," in R. T. De George and J. L. Scanlan (eds.), *Marxism and Religion in Eastern Europe*, Dordrecht, 1976, pp. 122-127.

¹² Borys Antonenko and Roman Fedoriv in *Zhovten* (Lviv), No. 4, April 1974, pp. 90-96.

¹³ See Lvivskiy, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ukrainskyi Visnyk*, No. 7-8, 1974, pp. 140-45. E.g., the Ivano-Frankivsk diocese, which in 1956 had 630 parishes, in early 1974 had slightly more than 100 priests left (Antonenko and Fedoriv, *loc. cit.*, p. 95).

¹⁵ A private letter from the Ukraine (Autumn 1974).

¹⁶ At least five Roman Catholic churches are known to be still operating in Galicia. V. Markus ("The Suppressed Church," *loc. cit.*) as well as Lvivskiy (*loc. cit.*) distinguish between "hard-liners" and "moderates" among the Uniates in the present

Western Ukraine. The "hard-liners" treat even the "crypto-Uniates" who formally converted to Orthodoxy, as "traitors" and consider Orthodoxy a "schismatic," "false" faith. They are most likely to be found in the few remaining Roman Catholic churches.

¹⁷ According to unofficial Vatican sources, whose estimates are far too conservative according to Uniate spokesmen in the West.

¹⁸ Levitin-Krasnov, *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ For a Soviet version of Velychkovsky's trial, see M. Bielinskyi, "Tuda: iz zalu suda" (Judas: From the Courtroom), *Vilna Ukraina*, Lviv, 14 December, 1969.

²⁰ Levitin-Krasnov, *loc. cit.*

²¹ Lvivskyi, *loc. cit.* For a report on the Uniate Church's activities in the Ukraine, see Giovanni Ruggeri, "I cattolici in Russia tornano a pregare nelle catacombe: La drammatica testimonianza di un vescovo minatore costretto a lasciare l'Ucraina," *Gente*, Milano, Vol. XVII, No. 3-4, 26 January, 1973, pp. 40-43, based on an extensive interview with the late Bishop Velychkovskyi.

²² See *Ukrainski Visti*, Edmonton, 20 February, 1975, on the new anti-Uniate repressions in Lviv in connection with the uncovering by the KGB of an underground prayer house and convent. Among the victims were three candidates for priesthood in the Catacomb Church.

²³ For Soviet accounts of the sect's genesis and activities, see Ie. Pryshchepa in *Liudyna i svit*, No. 11, 1968, pp. 36-39; Iu. M. Grigoriev (Hryhoriev) in *Akademia nauk Litovskoi SSR, Otdel filosofii, prava i sotsiologii pri Institute Istorii, Katolitsizm v SSSR i sovremennost* (Catholicism in the USSR and the Present), Vilnius, 1971, pp. 168-75; and, in particular, Iu. M. Hryhoriev, *Buzuviry* (Fanatics), Lviv, 1974.

²⁴ M. A. Morozov and E. I. Lisavtsev, *Aktualnye zadachi ateisticheskogo vospitania* (The Timely Tasks of Atheistic Upbringing) Moscow, 1970, p. 17. Cf. V. Bychatin and O. Suhak, "Uniiia - iak vona ie" (Union - How It Is), *Robitnycha hazeta*, Kiev, 13 March, 1973.

²⁵ V. L. Bodnar, "Osobennosti razvitiia ateizma v protsesse kulturnoi revoliutsii v natsionalnoi respublike (na materialakh zapadnykh oblastei USSR)," in *Akademia obshchestvennykh nauk pri TsK KPSS - Institut nauchnogo ateizma, Ateizm i sotsialisticheskaya kultura* (Atheism and Socialist Culture) Moscow, 1971, pp. 51-52.

²⁶ In the same year, according to Soviet sources, the exiled Primate of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, Cardinal Josyf Slipyi, addressed to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR a demand for the lifting of the illegal ban on the Uniate Church in the Ukraine (Morozov and Lisavtsev, *op. cit.*, p. 18). The clandestine *Ukrainskyi Visnyk* (No. 1, 1970, p. 59) reported a rumour circulated among the Uniates that the Orthodox Metropolitan of Kiev, Filaret (Denysenko), personally appealed in 1969 to Shelest (then first secretary of the Communist Party of the Ukraine) for the regime's assistance in suppressing "Uniate competition" in Galicia.

²⁷ See, e.g., a 1972 petition from 180 Ukrainian Catholics of Stryi, Galicia, reproduced in *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1974, pp. 31-32.

²⁸ *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, No. 9, 1974.

²⁹ Bychatin and Suhak, *loc. cit.*

³⁰ Morozov and Lisavtsev, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³¹ *Ukrainskyi Visnyk*, No. 3, Paris-Baltimore, 1973, p. 108. The latest (No. 7-8, 1974) issue of *Ukrainskyi Visnyk* also devoted several pages to the Soviet persecution of Ukrainian Catholics and other believers.

³² See *Boomerang. The Works of Valentyn Moroz*, ed. by Y. Bihun, Baltimore, Smoloskyp Publishers, 1974, pp. 91-124.

³³ For relevant petitions and other documents, see, in particular, the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*, No. 1, 1972, p. 53; No. 4, 1972, p. 16; and No. 12, 1974, p. 11.

³⁴ Levitin-Krasnov, *loc. cit.*

³⁵ The only criticism of the Local Sobor's action came in the course of an interview "On Relations Between the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church" offered by Cardinal Willebrands to *L'Avvenire* (published on 4 July, 1971),

