

# “Being a Church” During Times of Crisis

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During the revolution on Maidan Square, the Ukrainian Churches and religious communities supported the protesters in unprecedented unity. The author reflects on the contribution of the churches to this interdenominational “revolution of dignity”. He calls for a theological reflection on the events from the perspective of the social teaching of the church. He voices criticism of the position of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate and the Roman Catholic Church.

The theme of our conference, “Religion in times of crisis,” indirectly contains a question whose answer appears to be obvious to the church: “Being a church in times of crisis” means remaining true to oneself as a church. Even if the challenges for the church may change in times of crisis (e.g. due to material losses), it should above all embody the mystery of Christ and, as a social institution, should not agonize about its decline in income, political influence, or the structural condition of its chapels.

This time of the Holy Spirit which, as the prayer *Heavenly King* states, “frees us from sins,” is a trial. When people are caught in a battle between good and evil, it is no time for fancy slogans, and it is even less appropriate to deliver lofty speeches in front of people who are risking their lives. This is what the experiences of our clergymen in the field or Maidan Square teach us. There are fateful moments when all social mantles fall and man stands in front of God in all his naked humility. This was also the experience of political prisoners in the Soviet gulags. In moments of unjust persecution and undeserved suffering, the human spirit grows with an inner tension, and the river of suffering turns into the Jordan River, which washes away our sins. These are the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount promised to those who “are persecuted for the sake of justice.”

Those who have experienced such moments know what the church is and can essentially be provided it lives the word of the Gospel relentlessly and without fear: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28). The Maidan paid this service to the people. The most symbolic moment was the night when the St. Michael Monastery, which belongs to the *Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate* (UOC-KP), opened its gates to hunted and persecuted Maidan protesters. The faded icons suddenly shined anew in the splendid consciousness of the Ukrainians, and one saw the church as a protector, a safe haven, and a *sanctuary*. The journalist Kateryna Schtschotkina aptly wrote in an article on the “night of the open door”: *It was revealing to observe how, during those days, the Ukrainian church in general became what it previously was in theoretical and rhetorical terms: namely a part of public life*<sup>1</sup> One had the impression that a tremendous jolt had passed through society, which had shaken off yet another deceptive chain from the communist era. In the words of the same journalist: *At critical moments many things are turned upside down, but many things also keep themselves upright.* And this obviously applies to the church, which – even if just for a moment – has found its true and legitimate place.

## THE INTERDENOMINATIONAL “REVOLUTION OF DIGNITY”

In times of crisis, particularly in conflicts between society and an anti-social government, the issue of whose side the church is on becomes more important. A moment comes when uninvolved third-parties or mere observers become co-perpetrators in collaboration with the government. However, if one

1 <http://gazeta.dt.ua/internal/nich-vidkritih-dverey-.html>

wishes to convey justice with credibility, one must side with the sufferers. All confessions in Ukraine passed this test, but not necessarily all church jurisdictions.

Ukraine can be proud of the fact that the overwhelming majority of its churches and religious communities have declared a willingness to commit themselves to the core of their social teachings – to defend the God-given dignity of man against attacks by the government. Since the 1990s, church jurisdictions and confessions have asserted claims and have pursued a strategy of confrontation based on the principle of “my victory will be your loss.” Yet, they have now spontaneously come to the realization that they share common values, and have begun to develop a “win-win” strategy amongst themselves. Instead of a “sealing-off” tactic, driven by a fear of others and potential conflict, they shown a solidarity based on the legacy of the Grand Prince of Kiev Volodymyr Monomakh (1053–1125): “Place yourselves in front of the powerful whenever they want to demoralize people!” This can only happen if the common denominator is human dignity. Instead of a fierce rivalry, a certain form of competition to take courageous positions has emerged among the churches, which has in turn brought about an unexpected common stance.

After the head of the *Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church* (UGCC) received a threatening letter from Yanukovych’s Ministry of Cultural Affairs (see RGOW 2/2014, p. 7), he did not run frantically to the Ministry to ask for forgiveness. Instead the head of the UGCC read the letter publicly and underscored the church’s right to assist its community--particularly in times of crisis. It was no coincidence that representatives of the UGCC referred to the popular words of Pope Francis, which stated that shepherds are supposed to smell like

their sheep (see RGOW 5-6/2014, pp. 39-41). In the presence of an increasingly hostile President, Viktor Yanukovych, Patriarch Filaret (Denisenko) from the UOC-KP has also condemned his errors towards the people in public speeches. What remains in our memory are the images of the arrested Protestant pastors being transported away from Maidan and the Muslim clerics carrying out pastoral conversations with their believers. Statements made by Jewish representatives regarding the purportedly anti-Semitic character of the Maidan were another notable phenomenon (see RGOW 4/2014, p. 11).

In the course of this winter there has been an extraordinary convergence between the slogans of Maidan and religious social teachings, which has been appropriately termed the “*Revolution of Dignity*.” Nothing like this had existed since the independence of Ukraine, and it had appeared as though people were no longer listening to the church. Suddenly, it became apparent that the seeds that had been sowed were bearing fruit. And this is precisely how it should be: the church sows and God reaps.

#### THE CHURCHES FACE CRITICISM

Now I will change the tone of this essay from apologetic to critical. It cannot be denied that the churches were unsupportive of Maidan from the beginning and had lagged behind its goals for a while. This has to do with the historical tradition of these churches’ cautious restraint, which by no means does credit to their pastoral mandate. Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun’s sober analysis (UOC-MP) from December 11th, 2013 should therefore not go unmentioned:

*“With regard to the orientation of its values, Maidan grew [...] beyond the Ukrainian churches [...], without exception to all churches. [...] Only in the*

*final phase of Maidan did the Ukrainian churches reach the moral standard and sense of responsibility which had defined Maidan the entire time. Starting from general appeals for non-violence, people engaged in solidarity, through words and actions, with the values promoted in Maidan Square; they had become aware of their spiritual proximity to Christian principles. Maidan has demonstrated numerous examples of altruism, willingness to sacrifice, willingness to support one another, etc. It has deliberately acted as the weak one, despite its strength in terms of numbers, and has almost already taken on an eschatological meaning for the renewal of the dignity, which God gave to human nature.”<sup>2</sup>*

I accept the critique of the Archimandrite with regard to all churches. But I interpret the remark that “some churches were more involved, and others less involved” as a hidden reference to the UOC-MP, which desired to maintain a neutral position at all costs and has increasingly come under the crossfire of national critique. In my opinion one can accuse this church in particular of having “crept into a metaphysical hole,” being “blind towards a lawless government,” and having spread obviously hollow slogans that have put it in a position of danger, such as, “everybody only wants the best—nobody wants evil.”

The UOC-MP is now exposed to tensions coming from contradictory trends, and the crisis that it is currently experiencing will certainly change it. Fortunately, there are voices in Ukraine that call the neglect of this church by its name. One may refer here to a remark made by theologian Yuri Chornomorets, who insisted that the bishops could not justify themselves by saying that, “they did not know what they were doing.” Among all the observations which Chornomorets tellingly renders

<sup>2</sup> [http://risu.org.ua/ua/index/monitoring/society\\_digest/54600](http://risu.org.ua/ua/index/monitoring/society_digest/54600).

in his recently published articles (see in this issue, pp. 18-19), there is one, in my estimation, very essential observation, which I previously came across in my youth while reading Nikolai Leskov’s unique justification of a particular, doctrinaire feature of Russian Orthodoxy: “Consider at the very least, cherished Lord, the holy humility of Orthodoxy and understand that the spirit of Christ is particularly inherent in those who accept everything which is wanted by God”.<sup>3</sup> The American church historian Yaroslav Pelikan would say, “How tempting is this justification by tradition?”

And the Russian philologist Sergei Averinzev once remarked, “We are striving for the absolute good while living in devilry...”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, who would be so foolhardy as to claim that it would be agreeable to God to support Yanukovych’s presidency? And did not HE, God himself, intervene when it seemed as if all decision-makers had already come to terms with Yanukovych? Who nowadays would dare make the claim that Putin’s presidency is appealing to God, if HE, God, has taken away his common sense as if to punish him?

The church makes a great mistake when it calls for forbearance while ignoring these additional points from Matthew 25:43, without which its purpose is twisted around: “I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” How can the servants of the church not only tolerate the lie, but also become its conveyors and repeat the slander of the Moscow Patriarch directed at the “United Churches and Schismatics?” It has become apparent that the defamation of the United Churches by the Russian Orthodox

<sup>3</sup> Leskov, Nikolaj: To the end of the world, available at: [http://www.rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol\\_05/021.htm](http://www.rvb.ru/leskov/01text/vol_05/021.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Prokop, J.: Zrozumieć Rosję. Kraków 1990, p. 104.

Church is already an act of pure desperation – and evidence that it no longer has any arguments to make. It is the very last card that it is able to play: the word “united” is intended to have the same propagandistic function as the word “fascist.” One cannot reason with them – one can only hate them and, in doing so, abandon all moral inhibitions.

There is an additional church which should consider whether it has passed the test of Maidan—the *Roman Catholic Church of Ukraine*. Presently, the Catholic world is commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, which has radically renewed and strengthened Catholic social teaching. During Maidan, I missed the pastoral services of this Ukrainian church. Active spiritual guidance and the presence of Roman Catholic clergy during interdenominational prayers at Maidan are insufficient to realize the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. Precisely here is an appeal to the church community to raise its voice against a criminal government: *Otherwise all those political forms in various countries which oppress civic and religious freedom will be rejected, which increase the number of victims of political passions and crimes, and abuse the exertion of state power for the self-interest of a certain party or even the rulers themselves, to the detriment of the common good.* (GS 73). The head of this church should reflect on whether its silence regarding the relationship between the state and society in times of general national challenges is not clear proof that it is still acting like the church of a religious and national minority, which is neither ready, nor willing to bear greater moral responsibility for conditions in the country. It is questionable whether this position is reconcilable with the status that this church is striving for in Ukraine.

#### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

If I share the view of Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun that the churches have been somewhat helpless regarding the Maidan protests, I also must accept the question of how critical I have been towards my own Greek-Catholic church. In my opinion, it has lacked theoretical reflection concerning Maidan, and this shortcoming does not correspond with the theological potential of this church. God makes himself apparent in different events of life, beginning with the firmaments of heaven—“Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night” (Genesis 1:14)—and ending with the smallest blade of grass, whose wonderful structure reflects that of the universe in a certain way. Does this not also signify that HE speaks to us through the spectacle of the Maidan?

Russia’s current aggression towards Ukraine also requires further theological reflection. This can be felt in an emotional passage by Kateryna Schtschotkina: *“Moscow’s campaign against Kiev is an absurd horror for a Russian person. It is akin to a Greek tragedy, at the conclusion of which an inexorable Fate appears, and everything falls apart. What the Kremlin is presently doing with regard to its relations with Ukraine in the frame of Russian doctrine (to include Russian orthodoxy)—whether it be an attempt at patricide, or whether, as Krotov writes, it is the attempted rape of one’s own mother—it is something so repulsive that the world will not survive it and will, as a result, collapse.”*<sup>5</sup>

There certainly is a more fitting biblical motive for reflecting on Moscow’s occupation of Crimea, which draws on the now unpopular

5 [http://risu.org.ua/ru/index/expert\\_thought/authors\\_columns/kshchotkina\\_column/57575?fb\\_action\\_ids=10204143334198569&fb\\_action\\_types=og\\_recommends](http://risu.org.ua/ru/index/expert_thought/authors_columns/kshchotkina_column/57575?fb_action_ids=10204143334198569&fb_action_types=og_recommends).

metaphor of “brotherhood.” Let us remember the spiritual wish which was elevated by the Kievan church in the early 11th century to the highest level of importance: the magnanimity Boris and Gleb showed to their murderous brother, Sviatopolk. One thousand years have passed and, ever since, the church has upheld non-violence as the greatest good in the consciousness of people. Society may justify an abstinence from violence towards Russians on the Crimean Peninsula by the lack of proper command structures, the poor state of the army, or because of the country not letting itself be provoked as Georgia was a few years earlier. Yet the soldiers indicate yet another motive—namely, a deliberate and effective taboo. The church should recognize this as an essential sign. Over the course of the centuries, Ukrainians have lost their grand ancient Kievan principles and have become the poor relatives of their greater Russian rulers. They have recently shown, however, that they have something else in their memory, which is influenced by the heritage of the ancient Kievan spirituality, namely Boris and Gleb’s willingness to sacrifice.

On the other hand, the Moscow Patriarch appeals propagandistically to the spiritual heritage of Kievan Rus’ and simultaneously supports the cursed Sviatopolk in its current Putinesque form. He thereby clearly deprives himself of the heritage of Boris and Gleb, and his concept of the so-called “Russian World” (see RGOW 2/2012, pp. 22-24) becomes an ecclesiastically ersatz imperial idea. I do not criticize those self-sacrificing Ukrainians who took up arms. The cursed Sviatopolk scoffed at them and gloated over its Blitzkrieg on the Crimean Peninsula. Europeans did not understand the passivity of the Ukrainians. They wanted to support Ukraine if only it would protect itself.

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Being a church, of course, means practicing that which it preaches. However, the magisterium of the church also shares in the prophetic role of Christ with its gift of foreseeing the future. This means the ability to see the first glimmer of light when the surroundings are still full of darkness. The church is able to bear witness to the coming Kingdom of God as part of the fate of each human life, and thus foresees what awaits it after her death. However, beware of false prophecies of the end of the world. The church has almost lost its ability to feel the breath of the very near future. This has been especially noticeable in these times of crisis.

At the beginning of this essay I formulated the thesis that “being a church in times of crisis” primarily means being true to oneself, and thus being the church. I can summarize why. Yuri Chornomorets reminded us of the words of Maximus the Confessor: *“The church dedicates itself to the same activities as God himself.”* This is particularly noticeable in times of crisis because this is when epochs and paradigms change; when the omega of the old becomes the alpha of the new. And this, as we know, is the time of the Lord (Rev 22: 13). This is why the Church must do everything in its power to ensure that this time of the Lord also becomes the time of the Church.

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