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Ralph Della Cava

Queens College, City University of New York

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ASSESSING POPE JOHN PAUL II'S VISIT TO UKRAINE

by Ralph Della Cava

*Dr. Ralph Della Cava is Senior Research Associate, Institute of Latin American Studies, Columbia University, and Professor of History Emeritus, Queens College, City University of New York. A specialist in modern Brazilian history, he is the author of **Miracle at Joazeiro** (1970) among other books and articles dealing with religion and society in Brazil as well as in Central Europe and the former USSR. The following article in interview form appeared in **The Ukrainian Weekly** (12 August 2001)*

1. Would you please offer a general assessment of the Pope John Paul II's visit to Ukraine?

From the standpoint of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), the papal visit put to rest any lingering fears that the Vatican might still seek to achieve an historic rapprochement with Russian Orthodoxy at the expense of its Eastern rite churches in Ukraine and elsewhere. That fear surfaced in 1993 after Orthodox and Catholic representatives met at Balamand (Lebanon) and declared that Uniatism was “a method of union of the past” and an obstacle to the “full communion” of Catholic and Orthodox Christians in the future. The recent visit was clearly a disclaimer.

More immediately, it legitimated the UGCC's assertion of being a genuinely national – not simply regional - church. The civic and religious ceremonies in Kyiv, the nation's capital, were not simply a gesture to the customary protocol between states (although they were that, too). Rather, they underscored the vital role the UGCC had played in bringing Western Europe - via the Vatican – to reaffirm support for Ukraine's independence. Moreover, the liturgy celebrated for the new UGCC churches to be built in Kyiv, where Uniate presence had been less visible in the past, signals the UGCC's intention to continue to be heard on questions of national and societal concern.

2. How do you think Pope John Paul II's visit will affect the religious situation in Ukraine, particularly the relationship between the four Ukrainian Churches – Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (UOAC), and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church–Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP)?

That remains to be seen. Obviously, the “unification” of Orthodoxy in Ukraine lies much more in the “courts of appeal” of Constantinople and Moscow than in Rome’s. Ten days before the pope’s visit representatives of the UOC-KP and UOAC had met in Istanbul under the aegis of the Ecumenical Patriarch. Throughout July, they were joined by high ranking delegates of the Moscow Patriarchate who originally boycotted Constantinople’s initiative.

But obstacles clutter the path to unity. For the moment the four-way discussions – to which the UGCC is not a party – will purportedly examine how best to clear them. The biggest hurdle is said to be the anathema pronounced on Patriarch Filaret (UOC-KP) by the Moscow Patriarchate. To be sure, Moscow refuses to lift it. But the real issue may lie in “timing:” while the ROC has declared feasible a “canonically acceptable” Kyivan Patriarchate – i.e., a *single*, nationwide Ukrainian Orthodox Church -- it also insists that that reality is still some twenty or thirty years away. Sectors of the Ukrainian government are said to favor a more immediate timetable, while the Russian Federation has still to weigh in on it.

In this struggle between churches and states with a long and intimate association with one another, at times friendly, at times conflictive, the papacy’s role is marginal. In Kyiv, the pope did not exactly endorse the joint UOC-KP/UOAC quest for unification. In contrast, the UGCC has shown sympathy for it in an overt effort to champion a “national” Orthodox Church that is legally and ecclesiastically independent of the Moscow Patriarchate.

3. Pope John Paul II’s visit to various countries, e.g., Poland and throughout Latin America, often had far-reaching effects beyond the religious sphere. Could the pope’s visit have a similar positive impact on Ukrainian civic and political development?

If by “far-reaching” consequences we mean deep-seated and lasting, then we would do well to re-evaluate the pastoral consequences of such visits beyond the immediate euphoria and popular enthusiasm they generate. For example, those to Poland have failed to halt the steadily declining status of the Catholic Church within post-communist society. In Brazil, they have yet to decelerate three decades of extraordinary growth in the numbers of Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches and of their communicants, mostly comprised of converts from Catholicism.

In Ukraine, the paramount pastoral issue – according to the Greek Catholic Archbishop Major of Lviv, Cardinal Lubomyr Husar – turns on the recent recrudescence of historically tense relations between his rite and the ethnically Polish, Latin rite church. “It is the necessity to resolve this conflict between the two rites of the Catholic Church,” he asserted on June 17th in an interview granted the Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, “that is the purpose of [the pope’s] visit to Ukraine. It is not the Orthodox but the Catholics of Ukraine that John Paul II has to reconcile. ... All other goals are secondary.” To date, I have yet to find in the press, religious or secular, additional details about this conflict and how it is being played out.

4. How will the visit and the beatification of martyrs for the church serve the further growth of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, strengthen its identity in western Ukraine and its possible expansion beyond western Ukraine?

Throughout former Communist states, Orthodox and Catholic authorities have rushed to elevate their martyrs and holy persons to sainthood. It is a necessary process, fit and proper, so that heroes can be honored and the past not forgotten.

But, for both camps this has been an uneven, sometimes embarrassing, and often conflict-ridden undertaking. The controversy generated by the proposed beatification of Pope Pius XII continues to rage. So too does that over the ROC’s recent “second-class” canonization of Tsar Nicholas II as a “bearer of suffering” rather than a martyr for the faith. Even the decision of the pope to pray at Babi Yar rekindles unsettling questions about those who sanctify and those who are sanctified.

It must also be asked, what *civic* purpose will the newly proclaimed saints serve? Might they be invoked to perpetuate national and denominational differences, thereby sharpening division and deepening animosities? Or should they instead be praised, as the Holy Father likely intended, to promote a truly ecumenical “communion of saints” shaped by the common and shared circumstances of recent persecutions? Such a determination is for the living to make.

5. It is assumed that Pope John Paul II would like to visit other countries that were once part of the Soviet Union, i.e., Kazakstan, Armenia, Belarus, and ultimately, Russia. How do you view the possibilities of these visits? Has the visit to Ukraine facilitated such subsequent visits or has

it created difficulties?

The pope's upcoming September visits to Kazakhstan and Armenia had been confirmed well before he ever set foot in Ukraine. They are part of a larger Vatican objective: to reinforce the Church's presence throughout the former communist bloc wheresoever Catholics reside.

No visit to Belarus is yet scheduled. But, Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek, the Latin rite Archbishop of Minsk-Mohilev and President of the Belarus Conference of Bishops, recently implied it was inevitable. Nor did he believe that His Holiness, Alexy II, the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, and Belarus President Alexander Lukashenka could stop it - despite their joint June declaration from Brest which urged the "unity of the Slav peoples" against the "forces [that] want to break that unity apart."

Noting that Latin Catholics comprise twenty percent of Belarus's ten million inhabitants, the Cardinal gratefully acknowledged the appreciation of President Lukashenka – even though "he sides with Orthodoxy" - for the role the Catholic Church has played "in the rebirth of the national Belarus spirit."

In doing so, Swiatek may have taken a page from the UGCC's four-point strategy. One, reaffirm the Church's support of the nation and its leadership (no matter how controversial the latter may be). Two, hold up its own faithful as a model citizenry (however much a minority it is). Three, through a papal visit and Vatican ties, foster the "West's" support for independence. Fourth, in the face of prejudice and discrimination (to which Belarus Catholics had recently been subjected) advocate a politics of ecumenism, religious toleration and the defense of civil liberties. But, whether the pro-Orthodox – and pro-Russian – President Lukashenka will "buy" into it is moot.

6. You have been studying the relationship between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church for several years. What is your assessment of the reaction of the ROC to the Pope's visit?

The position of the ROC has been univocal and unequivocal. During the papal visit this June, His Holiness, Alexy II, reiterated it with candor. As long as "the Greek-Catholic war continues against Orthodox believers in Ukraine and until the Vatican stops its expansion into

Russia, Belarus and Ukraine," there can be no meeting of pope and patriarch. But, "as soon as these obstacles are removed," he affirmed – just as he has repeatedly over the past decade - “We are ready for such a meeting.”

On this count, Alexy II enjoys the support of Russian President Vladimir Putin who recently told Pope John II in Rome that while he himself would welcome a visit to Russia, he defers to the patriarch and the ROC. So too does an influential sector of the Russian public who, like one Moscow Orthodox journalist, increasingly views “the route of the papal visits [as] a ring around Russia.”

Of course, Russia’s state-church relations are not fixed in stone. To the contrary, tensions between the two exist, especially over ties to Western Europe. While the ROC has often assailed them, the state – its reservations about NATO and the International Monetary Fund, notwithstanding - judiciously courts them: for capital, for the sale of its resources, for keeping America at bay, for continued prestige as a world power.

But, no imminent reversal of Putin’s stand seems likely and so the proposal of the pope’s Apostolic Administrator in Moscow for a “‘Ukrainian’ way out” is patently premature. In an acerbic press exchange this June with the patriarch, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz retorted: "The Holy Father's visit to Ukraine is the answer to ... whether he can come to Russia without being invited by the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia."

7. You have also followed the triad relationship of Rome-Constantinople-Moscow. What has been the Patriarch of Constantinople's reaction to Pope John Paul's visit to Ukraine?

The issues merit a fuller discussion than space allows. Suffice to say, relations between the Papacy and the Ecumenical Patriarch, once cordial and close, have for a variety of reasons, entered into a “cooling off” period. But those of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul), His Holiness Bartholomew I, with the ROC and its confreres in the UOC-MP (like those presently of the pope’s) have been all too long locked in “deep freeze.”

At issue has been the single-mindedness of Constantinople, the “Mother Church” and “primus inter pares” of world Orthodoxy, to exercise its historic competence and grant full ecclesiastical autonomy, called *autocephaly*, to the so-called “anti-Moscow Patriarchate” factions of Estonian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Talks with regard to Ukraine resumed in full

swing in July just after the ROC ended its temporary boycott. But the four-way wrestling match ahead should prove no less contentious than in the past, especially as Ukrainians vigorously press to resolve matters - now!

What lies behind Bartholomew I's eagerness (his religious and ecclesiastical interests aside)? Call it the inescapable need to re-adjust to the hard realities of the post-Cold War era. For one, the reestablishment of Constantinople's "primacy" among Orthodox churches throughout the former communist bloc where its ministry had been long prohibited could not be more urgent. For another, it must raise new sources of revenue as some of its wealthiest congregations in America and Greece either clamor for autocephaly or curtail its jurisdiction. For still another, its once virtual monopoly to speak for world Orthodoxy in international fora of states and religions is, in effect, being challenged on many fronts by the most populous and powerful Orthodox church on earth, the Russian.

Thus, the struggle for the "re-founding" in Ukraine of the ancient (and pre-Moscovite) Orthodox "Church of Kyivan Rus'" is now momentarily joined to the future direction of world Orthodoxy. Neither the Vatican nor the UGCC can do terribly much to effect the outcome. But, for all the parties, states, and churches, it is clear that the stakes could not be higher, the prizes greater.

