Attempted Ukrainian Catholic Ecclesicide: A Brief History, a Historical Exhibition and its Book (Book Review of To the Light of the Resurrection through the Thorns of Catacombs: The Underground Activity and Reemergence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church)

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Recommended Citation
Loya, Joseph A. O.S.A (2014) "Attempted Ukrainian Catholic Ecclesicide: A Brief History, a Historical Exhibition and its Book (Book Review of To the Light of the Resurrection through the 'Thorns of Catacombs: The Underground Activity and Reemergence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church')," Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe: Vol. 34: Iss. 5, Article 5.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol34/iss5/5

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“Attempted Ukrainian Catholic Ecclesicide:
A Brief History, A Historical Exhibition and its Book”


Reviewer: Joseph A. Loya, O.S.A., Villanova University

To His Holiness John Paul II, Roman Pontiff

From the Bishops, Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Ukrainian Catholic Church

We, bishops, priests, monks and nuns, and the faithful of the Catholic Church in Ukraine, who have signed this document, declare that in the light of perestroika in the USSR, and upon more favorable conditions caused by it, and in preparation for the millennium of Christianity in Ukraine, we consider it unreasonable to remain underground. Thus we make this request of Your Holiness to advocate the lawful legalization of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the USSR by all possible means.

Through Your Holiness, we wish to address the Soviet Government and declare the emergence of the Ukrainian Catholic Church from the underground in the USSR.

August 4, 1987

In accord with, and with the blessing of, other Catholic bishops, we hereby sign this declaration.

Bishops: Pavlo Vasylyk, Ivan Semedy

Monks: Teodor Yatsychyn, Studite; Zaplatynsk’ky, Redemptorist.

Nuns: Diohena Kulynych, SSMI; Stefania Horodyts’ka, Anastasiya Plyachok, Ivanna Tserbyr, OSB.

Monks and Nuns of the Third Order of Basilians: Maria Polichan, Ewa Targolych, Vasyl’ Bohovyk, Nataliya Shchur, Lidiya Pekal’s’ka (Redemptorist), Stefania Duda and 174 faithful.

From To the Light of Resurrection through the Thorns of Catacombs: The Underground Activity and Reemergence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, L’viv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2014, p. 89.

Particular historical subjects command supreme assiduity and care by the sheer gravity of their content, power to edify in the present, and efficacious service as floodlights upon human injustices that should never again be perpetrated anywhere, at any time. The victimization of members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, who for forty-five years of the 20th century constituted the most numerous illegal religious body in the world, is one such subject. To the Light of Resurrection through the Thorns of Catacombs: The Underground Activity and Reemergence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, a
A Brief History of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was established at the Union of Brest (Berestia) in 1596, a mere seven years after the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate that assumed jurisdiction over the Orthodox in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. (Note: the term “Greek” in the title of the Catholic ecclesial body is a historical marker for a 9th century Byzantine evangelization effort to the Eastern Slavs, and thus it is not an ethnic designation.) Specifically, a significant number of Orthodox Bishops in Ukraine and Belarus (then part of the Commonwealth) accepted the Bishop of Rome’s claim to primacy in jurisdiction. In return, the Commonwealth promised the Eastern Slav clergy equality with Roman Catholic clergy in terms of such perquisites as tax exemption and access to seats in governmental bodies. For its part, the Church of Rome guaranteed that the uniting faithful could retain their traditional Byzantine-Slavonic rituals, choice of liturgical calendar, Church-Slavonic liturgical language, administrative autonomy, married clergy, ordering of the administration of Sacraments, and traditional Eastern Christian canonical directives and disciplines. In reaction, the Moscow Patriarchate considered the Union of Brest both as a tool to leverage Polish ecclesiastical hegemony in traditionally Orthodox areas and an affront to the ideal of Moscow as the “Third Rome.” Nothing that would permanently alienate “Little Rus’” (Ukraine) and “White Rus’” (Belarus) from “Great Rus’” (Muscovy) could be countenanced by the newly minted Moscow Patriarchate.

After the partitions of Poland near the end of the eighteenth century, Catherine II endeavored to eliminate as best she could Byzantine Rite Catholicism in right-bank Ukraine. Nicholas I accomplished Catherine’s intention both in the right bank and in Belarus in 1839 with the state-engineered “Polatsk Sobor (Council).” Even further afield, Alexander II liquidated what Eastern Catholic eparchies (dioceses) he could during his reign in the latter half of the 19th century. In post-Revolution times state authorities acted to manipulate what it could not or chose not to destroy. In December 1939 the district of Kremianets was transferred from Volhynia to Galicia so that the local Pochaiv monastery, a concentrated powerhouse of conservative Orthodoxy, could be utilized to gain purchase in an intended Galician jurisdictional offensive on behalf of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Russian Orthodox Church that had been persecuted into subjugation by the beginning of the World War II emerged as a pliable tool of the state by the end of the war. The Greek Catholic Church in western Galicia, strongly rooted as it was in the local population’s allegiance to the Church of Rome, was a tougher nut to crack.

On the eve of the war, the Greek Catholic Church was still a vital and popular institution, with nearly 3,000 priests and 3.6 million faithful in Ukrainian territories and in inter-war Poland. Another
360,000 believers in Eastern Czechoslovakia and Zacarpathian Rus practiced their faith in their homelands. With the Red Army’s reoccupation of Western Ukraine in June 1944 came the forced seizure of churches and their properties. Soviet propaganda portrayed support for the Catholic Church in Ukraine and any semblance of Ukrainian nationalism as evidence of pro-Nazi proclivity. Pope Pius XII’s appeals for respect for religious freedom in Soviet-dominated parts of Europe were rejected by central and local Communist authorities in Ukraine and elsewhere. The UGCC was forced underground in 1946; it would reemerge amidst the collapsing Soviet Union in 1989.

The key instrument in the suppression of Eastern Catholicism was the infamous, totally uncanonical 1946 “Sobor” of L’viv presided over by Protopriest Gabriel Kostelnik. Born in 1886, Fr. Gabriel was Carpatho-Russian by origin. He had studied in Zagreb, then at the Theological Academy in L’viv and Freiburg University, where he had obtained a doctorate in philosophy. He enjoyed the reputation of being an accomplished academic theologian, Church historian, poet and philosopher. Ordained a priest in 1913 in L’viv, he served at the Cathedral of the Transfiguration there and worked as Professor at the L’viv Theological Academy. As he led the pro-easternizing (i.e., anti-latinizing) wing of his Byzantine Rite Catholic Church, Soviet authorities acted on the assumption that Kostelnik could be co-opted into its effort to destroy the Eastern Catholic Church in its home territories. Irenic Eastern Catholic readings of Kostelnik’s motivations impute to him the premonition, shared anonymously in private talks with his fellow priests, that the Soviets would commit to the complete suppression of their Church in any event. Under such circumstances Kostelnik concluded that the clergy should lead their flocks into Orthodoxy in order to forestall the influx of “Muscovite” priests into Galicia. Such proactivity on the part of the clergy, so his thinking supposedly went, could be advantageous in obtaining consecrations of local former Greek Catholics to the episcopacy, the reduction of non-Galician liturgical changes to a minimum, and perhaps permission to establish a theological seminary in L’viv. Kostelnik’s chosen “reunion” plan involved the calling of a special Sobor to accomplish the transfer of ecclesial allegiance; this instead of the utilization of a series of regional conferences that was the course being favored by the Moscow Patriarchate. Within a year of the 1946 “Sobor” that proclaimed renewed allegiance to Orthodoxy, 997 priests, or 78% of the total in Galicia, had joined Fr. Gabriel into membership in the Moscow Patriarchate. By 1959, of 3,431 Catholic parishes registered in 1946, 3,222 had become Orthodox. By 1961, of 1,643 former Catholic priests, 1,243 had become Orthodox, while 347 continued to adhere to their Catholic identity. During this period the visible structure of the UGCC was totally dismantled by arrests and the internal exile of hierarchs, pastors, monastics and religious educators.

As underground priests were greatly hampered in their ministry, priest-less liturgical services and religious activities were adopted to respond to the pious sense of religious obligation. Home churches in which the Eucharistic elements were preserved and distributed became the rule. Monastic life in the
underground developed its own survival mechanisms and strategies. Monks and nuns sought employment in the secular labor force on all professional and practical skill levels. Civil attire, of course, substituted for monastic habits and headwear. Religious community life was practiced by small groups of two or three monastics that were hosted in lay households. Baptisms were administered, marriages blessed, and confessions were heard in carefully guarded, opportune circumstances. Knowledgeable clergymen provided informal, clandestine seminary instruction to willing aspirants for ordination.

Andrew Wilson, in his *Ukrainian Nationalism in the 1990s* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), credited the UGCC for its quickness in reestablishing itself in the liberalizing political climate of the 1980s. The self-styled Initiative Committee for the Defense of the Rights and Believers of the Church, in operation in western Ukraine since 1982, organized a series of mass demonstrations in support of the Church in 1988-1989, culminating in a mass rally of 150,000 in L’viv in September 1989. These grassroots movements, in conjunction with other beneficial high-level initiatives such as Mikhail Gorbachev’s historic Vatican meeting with Pope John Paul II the following December, resulted in the re-legalization, if not re-establishment, of the UGCC. (See Sabrina P. Ramet’s *Nihil Obstat: Religion, Politics, and Social Change in East-Central Europe and Russia*, Duke University Press, 1998, p. 253.) The Soviet authorities continued to obstruct every attempt by the Church to reclaim property lost to the Russian Orthodox Church during the deep and dark years of persecution. For Wilson, pro-Ukrainian momentum leading to victory in Galician local elections in March 1990 was the catalyst for the further stoking the Church’s revival. Within a few short years, Ukrainian Catholics could claim over 2,800 active parishes.

The state never acknowledged the unlawfulness and invalidity of the attempt to liquidate the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. It is not known—and therefore judgment must be reserved—regarding the degree to which the Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate was complicit in this evil project, even as the Patriarchate itself suffered at the hands of the state. (In a variety of public forums and publications the Patriarchate has been variously portrayed as a totally reluctant instrument of the state, an eager opportunist, and something in between.) The American-born UGCC monk Serge Keleher (1942-2011) sounded a correct note in enjoining all to support a patient effort to help the Russian Orthodox Church find the strength to accept and recognize in mutual joy the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and pray that these two Churches that share such a bitter history may finally discover one another in love.

**The Exhibition and its Book.**

The Institute of Church History of the Ukrainian Catholic University (L’viv) commemorated the 25th anniversary of the official legalization of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church with an exhibition covering the years 1939 to 1991. The Institute is a nonprofit research institution founded in L’viv in 1992 by Harvard University graduate Borys Gudziak, Ph.D., as a realization of the project, “Profiles of
Fortitude: An Oral History of the Clandestine Life of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.” The Institute subsequently contributed to the revival of the L’viv Theological Academy (1994). In 2002 the Academy was restructured into the Ukrainian Catholic University, the first Catholic university to open in the territory of the former Soviet Union and also the first university opened by one of the Eastern Catholic Churches, of which ICH is now a subdivision. The Institute’s scientific activities are based on the methodology of “oral history” and include the systematic collection of personal lived testimonies about the underground religious life of clergy, hierarchy and laity, plus scholarly interpretations of these testimonies. Research of the historical inheritance of the Ukrainian Churches is ordered to the broader context of Global Christianity and critical re-thinking of various aspects of Ukrainian religious life in the past. In the beginning of 2013, the ICH archive included 2,200 audio interviews, 100 video interviews, more than 5,000 documents, over 5,000 photographs and approximately 800 authenticated museum artifacts.

The “Light of Resurrection” exhibition includes materials from the Institute, including memoirs of eyewitnesses and active participants of the underground collected during 1992-2009, documents from state archives, and pictures from private collections. Exhibits tell the stories of Greek Catholic clergy, monasticism, and the laity – each group having had its unique human fate. The exhibition is structured to treat three important stages of the history of the UGCC of the 20th century: violent liquidation, underground life, and finally, legalization in 1989. The exhibition’s book and the subject of this review was first debuted in America during an international study conference on the subject sponsored by LaSalle University, Philadelphia, PA, in early May 2014.

The aforementioned Most Reverend Borys Gudziak, currently Bishop of the UGCC Eparchy of Paris, authored the book’s Foreword. He prays that the “Light of Resurrection” exhibit will serve to inspire profound spiritual thinking and a re-examination of personal values and attitudes. He poses the always-relevant question: Can one rise to meet the challenge of living faith in one’s time and place as did the ancient martyrs of long ago in far removed places? The exhibition and its book augment English-language studies on the subject pioneered under such titles as Soviet Persecution of Religion in Ukraine (Commission on Human Rights of the World Congress of Free Ukrainians, 1976), The Ukrainian Catholic Church, 1945-1975 (St. Sophia Association, edited by Miroslav Labunka and Leonid Rudnytsky, 1976), Passion and Resurrection: the Greek-Catholic Church in Soviet Ukraine 1939-1989 (Serge Keleher, Eastern Christian Publications, 1993), the masterful The Greek Catholic Church and the Soviet State (Bohdan Rostyslav Bociurkiw, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1996) and Finding a Hidden Church (Christopher Zugger, Eastern Churches Publications, 2009). As with many of these efforts, the content of the text and commentaries in To the Light, with its array of black and white photos, does not convey any middle-register grayness in moral judgment and conclusions about the way
the UGCC was treated by Soviet authorities. More temperately, nothing in the text expresses animus regarding the *Ostpolitik* of the popes of Rome—the strategy that disadvantaged Ukrainian Catholics in favor of achieving Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical reconciliation. (For insight into just how virulent academic-level Ukrainian commentary on the *Ostpolitik* strategy can get, see George Weigel’s *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II--The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy*, Image Books, 2011, page 181.) Extant in some academic quarters is the perspective that state attacks on the UGCC were but a small part of the more encompassing Soviet assault on the Vatican and on Catholicism in general on the territory of the USSR, not a campaign aimed specifically against UGCC. Such broad circumspection is not much in evidence in *To the Light*.

This book conveys the sense of a measured, guided walking tour through a series of display rooms. The layout can be described as a captioned picture album (captions are in brown italic typeface) interlaced with a double-columned narrative text (in both italic and non-italic typefaces). This amalgam of styles requires concentration in tracking the story line. For example, the narrative paragraph on the bottom of column two of p. 19 has its continuation in the middle of column two on page 21. (A significantly smaller font size for photo captions would have been welcomed.) This said, it should be realized that this publication is not meant to be a breezy page-turner; any more than one should quick-shuffle through the actual exhibition. “Stop-learn-reflect” is the watchword for both the physical exhibition place and its print medium extension.

Readers stand to be impressed, as this reviewer was, by the extent to which the undergrounders refused to suffer in silence. In 1972, eighty believers from Stryi (L’viv region) issued a complaint to the Supreme Council of the USSR demanding the opening of their church and protesting the persecution of the faithful. In the following year, Fr. Volodymyr Prokopiv delivered to Moscow a petition requesting legalization of the UGCC that was signed by 1200 faithful of the Church. Especially appreciated is a photo of Studite priest Herman Budzins’ky (1905-1995) and a close up picture of one of the many letters he sent out to protest the illegitimacy of the 1946 L’viv Sobor and the liquidation of his Church. An English translation of an excerpt of the pictured letter on p. 53 conveys steely resolution:

*To the Editor of the Free Ukraine Newspaper, L’viv.*
*To Most Reverend Nikolay (Yuryk), [Orthodox] Metropolitan of L’viv.*

*... Comrade Myhal’ insists that when Ukrainians were forcibly converted to the Russian faith, they returned to the roots of their ancestors. But this was not so .... It is not true that the Sobor of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of 1946 liquidated the Union of Brest’, because the UGCC did not convocate its Sobor that year. Sobor is convened by the Metropolitan and the bishops. It is unheard of for a priest to convocate such a gathering as it is in contradiction with the Cannon [sic] Law and ancient traditions of the Church. Therefore, the so-called “L’viv Sobor of 1946” cannot*
be referred to as a Sobor. It was merely a gathering of priests who could only decide matters pertaining to themselves, and not the fate of the entire Church.

The photo gallery/flow chart two-page spread of the Church’s various hierarchs who served from 1945, when the Greek Catholicism was still legal, to 1989, is instructive. The exhibit incorporated materials from an earlier exposition entitled "The Church in the Underground" which opened in the summer of 2001. (As of this writing, the exposition’s website is still accessible at http://www.ichistory.org/churchex/church19.html). The “Light of Resurrection” exhibition expanded the listing of hierarchs from the prior exposition to include in its flow chart bishops of the neighboring Slovak Eparchy of Pryashiv, Pavlo Goydiec (1888-1960, died while imprisoned), and Vasyl Hopko (1904-1976, fourteen of those years having been spent in prison, and four years under police surveillance). Also of interest is the presentation of the “Geography of Imprisonment,” a section on “Formation of the Underground Clergy,” and a special chapter on Patriarch Josyf Slipyj.

Special to this reviewer is a 1963 photo of Bishop Vasyl’ Velychkovs’ky standing at what is apparently his personal writing desk (p. 73). At the moment of depiction government authorities are searching his apartment. Thrusting into the picture from the photo’s left edge is a hand and pointing finger belonging to an unseen government agent. It is a strikingly mordant twist on the “Hand of the Unseen and Almighty God (Dextera Dei)” motif in sacred iconography: the finger in the government file photo points accusingly, the Divine finger in an icon identifies the one upon whom the Favor of the Lord rests.

In only one instance did the editors or production staff of this introductory-level publication trip themselves up in trying to be a bit too helpful. A “Translator’s note” on the bottom of p. 81 states, “wine and unleavened bread are essential matter for Consecration [of the Eucharist] during the Liturgy.” The note pertains to specific items that the oft-imprisoned and exiled Slipyj continued to order from the Sisters of St. Vincent. These were required to celebrate the Divine Liturgy: texts of prayers, ingredients for chrism (anointing oil, usually mixed with balsam or balsam and spices), raisins and white rusks for Eucharist. The translator must have availed himself or herself to a Roman Catholic resource by defining the Eucharistic matter as “unleavened” bread. In fact, the Byzantine Rite used by UGCC stipulates leavened Eucharistic bread. Indeed, the photo on p. 81 labeled “Investigation materials pertaining to the second criminal case against Slipyj” plainly shows squares of leavened bread on a round metal liturgical paten.

Specialists’ studies in this area—as exemplified by Bocuirkiw’s book—generally exercise the methodological discipline of vigilance against the sentimentality, exaggerations, and superficialities of émigré “martyrology.” This work under review does at times employ somewhat pietistic formulas (e.g.,
Studite nun Josyfa Viter is stated to have “miraculously managed to escape from the ‘Brygidka’ prison in L’viv,” p.33), but such a sense is appropriate to the founding principle of the exhibit.

The next point will be registered after this quick reference to a particularly pernicious temptation to which Churches of the Byzantine Tradition have proven to be especially susceptible. “Phyletism” is the blurring, if not outright fusion, of faith and ethnic identity, or of church and nation. As John Anthony McGuckin cautions, the notion of “nation” is a modern concept superficially overlaid on the bedrock of apostolic faith. (See his book, The Orthodox Church: an Introduction to its History, Doctrine and Spiritual Culture, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 26.) A laudable patriotism and pride in ecclesial identity certainly can both be maintained separately without shading one into the other. On p. 99 the text of To the Light reads as follows: “The lengthy existence of the underground Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church became a manifestation of the spiritual and moral maturity of the Ukrainian people; it was a sign of the indestructibility of the national spirit.” [Reviewer’s emphasis.] This reviewer would prefer that the tenacity of the underground UGCC be singularly accorded to the indestructibility of its Catholic faith.

The underground Church in Ukraine was populated by believers who were neither voiceless nor faceless. Each pair of eyes of the faithful in the book’s photos profoundly homilize on constancy and perseverance—or “long suffering,” to employ the classic catechetical term for such virtue—for readers who themselves have eyes to see. This work is an absolute treasure for visual learners. The year 2016 will mark the 70th anniversary of the Soviet suppression of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in western Ukraine and the 370th anniversary of the Mukachiv eparchy in the Zacarpathian region. It is hoped that commemoration preparations entail more such studies, exhibitions, and books on the subject of the catacomb experience of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.