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AT THE CROSSROADS: THE HISTORY OF THE GREEK-CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LITHUANIA
Francesco La Rocca

This is the final article on the history of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania that represents the results of thesis research that Francesco La Rocca completed in September 2010 for the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe – MIREES, awarded by the University of Bologna in cooperation with Vytautas Magnus University at Kaunas, Corvinus University of Budapest and Saint-Petersburg State University.

PART 3: A NEW BEGINNING

Persecution

In order to analyse the Greek-Catholic community in Lithuania at the end of the 20th century, a brief overview of the destiny of the Uniate Church under the Soviet rule is necessary. In the framework of the incoming Communist society, religion was regarded as a relic from the past. The Soviet government, especially in the first decades of its life, did not spare efforts to eradicate the religious feeling among the people, even though religious freedom was officially implemented. Hundreds of priests, nuns and laymen (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestants as well as believers of other religions present in Soviet Union) were sent to gulags, imprisoned by the Soviet secret service and sentenced to death.

The Greek-Catholic Church was one of the most persecuted religious communities in the entire Communist bloc. Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia: wherever a Uniate community was present, the local government intervened to eradicate it. Communist rulers had actually a further “reason” to fight Uniates, beyond the ideological one: like at the times of the tsars, a Byzantine priest who was loyal to Rome was seen as a traitor and as a menace. Moreover in a Communist society, where there was no room for religious justifications, a Greek-Catholic was seen as an agent of a foreign power, the Vatican, and he was treated like a spy.

To a certain extent, there were analogies even between the Soviet and the Tsarist religious attitudes towards Orthodoxy. Of course, secretaries of the Communist Party did not regard themselves as protectors of Orthodoxy, as the Tsars used to do. Nonetheless, the way the Tsars manipulated the Orthodox Church to strengthen their power inside and outside Russia, so the Communist power, from a certain moment, used the Russian Orthodox Church to consolidate its hold on people.

This new attitude towards Orthodoxy was actually Stalin’s creation. During the first years of the Soviet government, Soviet leaders persecuted indifferently all the religious denominations established in Russia. The situation changed radically with World War II: the German invasion and the initial setback of the Red Army pushed Stalin to revitalise the Orthodox Church as an instrument of propaganda to foster resistance against the invader, instead of destroying it. In 1917, the Church had elected its first patriarch, Tikhon, after 196 years since the establishment of the

2 St Tikhon Bellavin of Moscow (1865-1925). He had been Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska for a long time. In 1917 he was elected Patriarch. At the beginning, Tikhon tried to resist the abuses perpetrated by the Bolshevik government against his Church, and for this reason he was put under arrest for two years. Tikhon was eventually forced to swear his allegiance to the state. He was canonised by the Russian Church on 1st November 1991 as a victim of
Holy Synod. Tikhon was forced to go along with Stalin’s plans in order to have his Church saved from destruction. Actually, with Tikhon’s submission to Soviet power, the persecutions against the Orthodox Church ceased. From that time on, the Orthodox Church was forced to be an instrument of the Soviet regime.

Unfortunately, the Greek-Catholic Church was one of the victims of this “agreement” between Soviet power and Orthodoxy. In fact, in March 1946 the Soviet government summoned a “council” of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lviv, where some affable prelates asked to join the Orthodox Church. This act was not recognised by the Greek-Catholic clergy who lived abroad, and in that same year Pope Pius XII declared that council as non-canonical and illegal, denouncing it as a severe violence perpetrated by Moscow against the Catholic Church. That council is still an open wound in the relations between the Orthodox and the Greek-Catholic Churches, since Uniates regard it as an act of violence perpetrated by Soviets with the contribution of the Orthodox hierarchies.

The sufferings of the Greek-Catholics were well known to their Lithuanian brethren. Some interesting information on the persecution of Greek-Catholic communities are reported by the most important source for the history of the Church under Soviet rule, the Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church (Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika). The Chronicle was a collection of various articles coming from priests and laymen in Lithuania, where they report the abuses perpetrated by the Soviets against the Church and the Catholic believers. Its deviser was a curate from the district of Lazdijai, Sigitas Tamkevičius, who was also a clandestine Jesuit. The Chronicle, which was published underground from 1972 to 1989, was able to let the Lithuanian communities abroad know the real condition of the Church in Soviet Lithuania. Father Tamkevičius was eventually arrested in 1983, accused of fostering anti-Soviet propaganda through his publications. His arrest did not stop the publication of the Chronicle, which continued until 1989. Tamkevičius, who had been released the previous year, was later appointed Archbishop of Kaunas and President of the Lithuanian Bishop’s Conference. The Chronicle, through its translations into English, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian, soon became accessible to a wider audience, and so informed about the tragedy taking place in Lithuania. Admittedly, the Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika was a device for civil resistance, before becoming a unique source for the scholars of Eastern European issues.

The Chronicle deals with the Greek-Catholic Church quite often. Its authors reported the council of Lviv as example of the persecution that the Catholic Church was experiencing not only in Lithuania, but in the entire Soviet Union. Beyond that, the Chronicle also reported that some Uniate priests and laymen were living in Lithuania at that time. In fact, according to this source, several Greek-Catholics from Ukraine were sheltered in Lithuania after the suppression of their Church. Issue Nr. 17 lists the names of some priests of clear Ukrainian origins (Rev. A. Chomski, the Bolshevik persecution.

2 Pius XII, Orientalis Omnes, Vatican City, 1946.
3 Sigitas Tamkevičius SJ (1938), Archbishop of Kaunas. He was ordained as a priest in 1965, and secretly joined the Society of Jesus in 1968. Due to his public activities in favour of the Church, Tamkevičius experienced imprisonment several times. He was the life and soul of the Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church (Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika), an underground publication where Catholic Lithuanians denounced the conditions of the Church (and of entire Lithuania) under the Soviet Regime. He was eventually sent into exile to Siberia, but managed to return when the Soviet Union collapsed. In 1996 Tamkevičius was appointed Archbishop of Kaunas.
5 Various Authors, Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika, nr 12, p. 216.
Rev. A. Ivanchik, Rev. A. Laucevich and Rev. A. Liachovich): the Italian editor claims that these priests were Greek-Catholic, who had made their way to Lithuania to escape the persecutions against the Uniate Church in their homeland.8

The most tragic witness to the persecution of Catholic Ukrainians in Lithuania in the Soviet times (always given by the Chronicle) is the story of the young Vitalij Ocikevich. Ocikevich was a Ukrainian candidate at the Vilnius seminary, one of the few Catholic seminaries still working in the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities were pushing him to work as their informer from within the seminary, but the young Ukrainian refused. His body was found in his residence in Vilnius on 14th May 1975, clearly showing the signs of the beating up perpetrated by those Soviet security agents who killed Vitalij.9

Resurrection
The sufferings of the Greek-Catholics in Soviet Union came to an end only in the 1980s. During the Gorbachev era the persecutions against religious communities gradually came to an end. This new situation pushed Greek-Catholics, who were surviving underground, to undertake the first steps towards an official recognition. A clear signal of the new situation came from a meeting between Pope John Paul II and Gorbachev in 1989: on that occasion, the Polish Pope openly asked for full acknowledgment of the rights of the Greek-Catholics in the Soviet Union.10 The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church reported that, in 1988, a group of Uniates from Ukraine and Belarus wrote a letter to Gorbachev himself, claiming the rights of their Church.11 The collapse of the Soviet Union and the abolishment of the Soviet law on cults finally allowed Greek-Catholics to re-emerge from underground.

In Ukraine, which obtained its independence from Moscow on 24th August 1991, the Greek-Catholic Church had been officially acknowledged in 1989. In 1991, the head of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in exile Major Archbishop Myroslav Lubachivskyi,12 moral heir of the ancient Catholic Metropolitans of Kiev,13 returned to his country. Several priests who were living in exile managed to come back to their home country, where they contributed to the rebirth of the Church. The current head of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church is Cardinal Lubomyr Husar,14

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8 Pietro I. Monti (ed.), Cronaca della Chiesa Cattolica in Lituania, La Casa di Matriona, 1979, Milano, p. 300; Various Authors, Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika, nr 17, p. 81.
9 Various Authors, Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika, nr 17, p. 93.
11 Various Authors, Lietuvos Katalikų Bažnyčios Kronika, nr 78, p. 149-153.
12 Myroslav Ivan Cardinal Lubachivskyi (1914-2000), Major Archbishop of Lviv. Born in Ukraine, he studied in Lviv. He went abroad to study, but was unable to come back in Ukraine due to the Soviet occupation. He went to live in the USA, where he was appointed as Bishop of Philadelphia (Ukrainian eparchy). In 1984, Lubachivskyi became Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. He managed to come back to Ukraine in 1991. Until his death, he led his Church in the delicate post-Soviet years in Ukraine.
13 The re-establishment of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania, if on the one hand it has been a natural consequence of the religious freedom finally implemented in Eastern Europe, on the other hand, it unwillingly contributed to make the religious situation of Ukraine quite tricky. In fact, to speak about the Church of the Byzantine tradition, at the present time in Ukraine includes the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kievan Patriarchate (uncanonical) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (uncanonical).
14 Lubomyr Cardinal Husar (1933), Major Archbishop of Kiev-Halych. Current head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. He spent most of his life in exile, first in Austria, then in the United States and eventually in Italy. While in Italy he joined the monks of the Ukrainian Studite Order living in Grottaferrata (Rome district), an Order which aims to experience the Oriental monastic life in the light of the purest Byzantine tradition. In 1993 he came back to Ukraine together with the other Studite monks. At the death of Lubachivskyi, Husar was elected Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church.
who succeeded Lubachivskyi as Major Archbishop of Kiev and Halych on 25 January 2001. Husar, who has spent most of his life in exile, is a firm upholder of his Church, albeit always open to dialogue with other Christian confessions (i.e. the Orthodox Church) and religions. In 2005, he transferred the seat of the Head of the Greek-Catholic Church from Lviv to Kiev. Now he is patiently putting on pressure to obtain for his Church the status of Patriarchal Church, at the moment with little success.

The end of Soviet power allowed also Lithuania to became independent again, after more than forty years of Soviet occupation. On 11th March 1990, the Republic of Lithuania proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union, with Vytautas Landsbergis\footnote{Vytautas Landsbergis (1932), former President of the Republic of Lithuania, currently Member of the European Parliament. Landsbergis was one of the promoters of the Sajūdis movement, which at the end of the 80s gathered the Lithuanian democratic opposition. With independence, Landsbergis became first Head of State (1990-1992). He has been involved in Lithuanian politics until 2004. In that year Landsbergis started his career as Member of the European Parliament. Due to his commitment in establishing democracy in his country, Landsbergis has received several awards in many countries of the world.} as President. The new constitution, which was passed in October 1992, implemented the right of religious freedom after decades of state atheism. It paved the way for the rebirth of a Greek-Catholic community in Lithuania.

Where did these new Uniates come from? They were not the Russians converted by the Orientalis Missio in the 30s and 40s: these new Greek-Catholics were all Ukrainian. Moreover, they were Ukrainians of recent immigration to Lithuania, having arrived in the Baltic during the Soviet era. Ironically, one can claim that the Soviet Union itself, due to its internal mobility policy, paved the way for the rebirth of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania. When Lithuania became independent, there were 44,800 Ukrainians living behind its borders,\footnote{Severinas Vaitiekus, Ukrainiečiai Lietuvoje, Valstybinis Nacionalinis tyrimų centras, Vilnius, 1996, p. 60.} many of them of Uniate faith.

A precious witness of the return of the Uniates in Lithuania comes from the man who led this process, Father Petro Pavlo Jachimec OSBM. I had the opportunity to meet and interview him on 18th October 2009. His life well represents the conditions of many Greek-Catholic priests and believers in the Soviet Union: born in a village of Lviv district in 1961, Father Jachimec joined the Basilian Order in 1981, when Basilians were still banned.\footnote{As revealed by Father Jachimec himself during an interview.}

As we have seen previously, there were already some Greek-Catholics living in Lithuania. Most of them were Ukrainians escaping from religious persecution in their home country. The arrival of immigrants of Ukraine raised the number of Uniates or crypto-Uniates in the country, who were living their faith underground. At the beginning of the 90s, when the political situation was changed, these Greek-Catholic believers asked the Basilian order for a priest: Jachimec was sent to them in June 1991.\footnote{Ibidem.} He reopened the Church of the Holy Trinity and the Basilian monastery in Vilnius, becoming both the parish priest of the Greek-Catholic community and the hegumen (abbot) of the monastery. On that occasion, the Orthodox Church in Vilnius mounted some protests against the arrival of the Uniates, but it was just a short-lived episode.\footnote{Ibidem.}

It is worth noting that in those same years the Greek-Catholic Church also emerged in the two other Baltic countries, i.e. Latvia and Estonia. They flourished among the communities of

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15 Vytautas Landsbergis (1932), former President of the Republic of Lithuania, currently Member of the European Parliament. Landsbergis was one of the promoters of the Sajūdis movement, which at the end of the 80s gathered the Lithuanian democratic opposition. With independence, Landsbergis became first Head of State (1990-1992). He has been involved in Lithuanian politics until 2004. In that year Landsbergis started his career as Member of the European Parliament. Due to his commitment in establishing democracy in his country, Landsbergis has received several awards in many countries of the world.


17 As revealed by Father Jachimec himself during an interview.

18 Ibidem.

19 Ibidem. Episodes like this represent a step back on the way towards mutual understanding between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches. It must be remembered, that several episodes of cooperation among priests and believers of both confessions took place during the years of the anti-religious persecution perpetrated by the Soviet authorities. Unfortunately, hard feelings between Greek-Catholics and Orthodox believers resurfaced with the end of the Soviet Union.
recently immigrated Ukrainians, thus following the same path of their brethren in Lithuania. From 1992 to 2002 Lithuanian Basilians took care also of Ukrainians in Latvia and Estonia. Then, Ukrainians in Estonia got their own parish priest, whereas in Latvia a local Orthodox priest converted to Catholicism and started to serve the local Greek-Catholics. Since then, Vilnius Basilians have been working only in Lithuania.\textsuperscript{20}

The legal status of the new Church was soon settled: on 14\textsuperscript{th} February 1992, the Lithuanian government granted the Basilian Order the status of a legal person and recognised the Basilian representation in Vilnius as religious centre.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{The Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania Today: An Overview}

Nineteen years have passed since the re-establishment of the Uniate Church in Lithuania. During this time, Basilians managed to consolidate the community, which now can count on regular services and on a quite organised parish life. We can now give an overview of the situation of the Church today.

The main centre of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania is the Church of the Holy Trinity in Vilnius, at 7B Aušros Vartų Gatvė. The parish priest and three other Basilian monks reside in the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, situated in the same building of the church: at the moment, it is the only Basilian monastery in the Baltic.

The Holy Liturgy is celebrated every Sunday in the Church of the Holy Trinity, while once a month an Adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament is organised.\textsuperscript{22} Since there are many Greek-Catholic Ukrainians who are not residing in Vilnius, occasionally Basilian Fathers celebrate also in other localities such as Klaipeda, Jonava (Kaunas district) and Skaidiškės (Vilnius district). The community issues a weekly magazine \textit{Parapijos Žodis} (The Word of the Parish) which informs on the current activities of the Church.

As far as the believers are concerned, the 2001 Lithuanian Population and Housing Census reports that there were 364 people claiming to be Greek-Catholic in Lithuania.\textsuperscript{23} Father Jachimec asserts that now they are almost a thousand, albeit only half of them go regularly to church, most of them residing in Vilnius.\textsuperscript{24} They are mainly immigrants arrived in Lithuania at the time of Soviet Union, the others being their children or grandchildren who are born in Lithuania plus more recent immigrants or students from Ukraine.

Middle-aged and elderly people are the most active parishioners: this characteristic affects the Church’s life and the style of activities. In fact, some claim that there is a lack of initiative coming from the community, due to the advanced age of most of its active members.\textsuperscript{25} This is actually a striking difference between the Lithuanian community and the Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine, where youth are quite organised and active. One of the Vilnius parishioners explains this phenomenon with the wish of the young Ukrainians to get more integrated into the Lithuanian society: belonging to such a particular and, in a way, “alien” Church could be seen as an estranging

\textsuperscript{20} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{21} Vaitiekus, \textit{Ukrainiečiai Lietuvoje}, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{22} T. Pavlo Jachimec OSBM, \textit{Šv. Trejybės parapija šiandieną in «Šiaulių universitetas: Šiaulių universiteto savaitraštis»}, 09-11-2004, p. 4. Interestingly enough, the Adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament is a loan from the Latin Church, originally not present in the Byzantine rite.
\textsuperscript{24} My interview.
\textsuperscript{25} As claimed by some parishioners during an interview.
factor.\textsuperscript{26} It is actually a good explanation. This phenomenon is also emphasised by the scarce relevance that the Greek-Catholic Church has in Lithuanian society, being a religious community much less known than other Lithuanian religious minorities, such as the Old Believers or the Karaites.\textsuperscript{27} One may also explain the estrangement of the young Lithuanian-Ukrainians in light of the tendency to religious indifference which is so widespread among many European youth (and Lithuania is no exception). Both reasons are probably true.

Another interesting characteristic of the Uniate community in Lithuania is the deep national awareness of its members. The “Ukranianess” is a distinctive feature of this Church: the Holy Liturgy is held in Ukrainian and all the parishioners are quite proud of their national background.\textsuperscript{28} The bond with the Ukrainian identity of this community is so pronounced, that even some Orthodox Ukrainians join their Uniate brethren in the celebration of the Mass, instead of going to one of the many Russian Orthodox Churches of Vilnius.\textsuperscript{29}

It must be underlined that this stress on the Ukrainian identity of the Church does not mean that the community is striving to self-ghettoising from the external world. On the contrary, all the believers and the Basilian Fathers I met were extremely keen to be known and to share their ideas with people external to their community. Admittedly, the use of the Ukrainian language in praying and preaching, widely unknown in Lithuania and hard to understand even to speakers of Russian (like many Lithuanians still are) does not help Vilnius Uniates to communicate their religious and human richness. It must be also said that most Lithuanians do not seem to be interested in this part of the religious panorama of their country: Father Jachimec meaningfully claimed, talking about the relations with Lithuanians, that they “look at our community with some tolerance”.\textsuperscript{30}

In conclusion, one can say that the Greek-Catholic Ukrainian Church in Lithuania is still a living Church, despite some structural problems such as the absence of a vibrant youth community and a certain inertia of the parishioners. On the other hand, they can count on some

\textsuperscript{26} Ibidem.

\textsuperscript{27} Karaites (Lit: \textit{karaimai}, Heb: \textit{kara’im}) are an extremely interesting Lithuanian ethnic and religious minority. They settled in Lithuania at the time of Grand Duke Vytautas. Their religion, called Karaism, represents a non-orthodox branch of Judaism: Karaites accept only the Torah as source of their faith, rejecting rabbinical doctrine and authority, hence their name (from the Hebrew word \textit{kara} “scripture”). The founder of Karaism was Anan ben David, who lived in Babylonia in the 9th century. Karaites spread all around the Middle East and even in Crimea, where they adopted the local Tatar idioms. After the disbanding of the Golden Horde in 1395 following Tamerlane’s victory over the Tatars, some of these Crimean Karaites made their way to Lithuania. Lithuanian Karaites, whose major settlement is currently in Trakai (Vilnius district), still retain their religion and the Turkic language of their ancestors. Karaite communities can be also found in Ukraine, Turkey, Egypt, United States and Israel.

\textsuperscript{28} Information taken from an interview with a parishioner. Actually, the interviewed person meaningfully claimed that one of the reasons which had pushed him to join the community of the Holy Trinity Church was his status of “conscious Ukrainian”.

\textsuperscript{29} It is actually not so uncommon that believers of the same nationality and ritual traditions, but belonging to different confessions (i.e. Catholic and Orthodox), apply to the “competitor” Church to receive the Sacraments, without giving up their original confessional belonging. It happens mostly when these believers come to stay in a place not served by churches of their own confession or not praying in their native language. I have personally met some Orthodox Albanians who go to the Greek-Catholic Church of St Athanasius in Rome, since it is the only place in the Eternal City where the Holy Liturgy is sometimes celebrated in Albanian by priests of the Byzantine rite from the Italo-Albanian minority. The Church of St Athanasius is the church of the Pontifical Greek College (\textit{Pontificius Collegius Graecus}), founded on 13th January 1577 by Pope Gregory XIII, the first institution of the Catholic Church dedicated to the education of priests of Byzantine tradition. It was originally conceived mainly for the spiritual necessities of the Italo-Albanians, at that time a newly-born community, who were lacking a seminary for prospective priests of their own nationality and rite. Today, in the Church of St Athanasius the Holy Liturgy is celebrated in Greek and, on some particular occasions, in Albanian.

\textsuperscript{30} My interview.
well-prepared and respected priests as well as on their national pride and the richness of the Byzantine tradition, a tradition that they managed to preserve through the dark years of the Soviet domination. These Greek-Catholics will use these strong points to face both their internal shortcomings and a new, sneaky menace coming from the outside. A menace which does not come from Moscow or from other hostile political and religious powers, but paradoxically from that religious freedom that they were waiting for so long: religious indifference, the lack of interest in the Church and in religion that many young Ukrainians in Lithuania are experiencing.

With all these uncertainties, it is hard to forecast the future of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania. Asked on this point, Father Jachimec answered with probably the most reasonable among the possible answers: “Only God knows!”.

Conclusions and Last Questions
The description of the current Uniate community concludes the narration of this history of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania. It is hard to draw a balance of this complex religious and social phenomenon, and of course we cannot judge the personal religious choices of the people taken into account so far. Nonetheless, there are a few questions, the answer of which can contribute to help us to assess the relevance of the Greek-Catholic presence in Lithuania. First: may one really talk about an actual Uniate Church in Lithuania, given the several changes in structure, organisation, ritual and ethnic background (first Ruthenian, than Russian and eventually Ukrainian with an occasional Lithuanian graft)? And secondly, may one say that the Greek-Catholic Church is a constitutive element of Lithuanian identity?

Greek-Catholics in Lithuania: an Actual Church?
At first glance, Greek-Catholics do not seem to have represented a single and coherent Church over the course of the centuries. It is possible to distinguish at least three different Uniate communities which have existed in Lithuanian history: the Ruthenian community, the most relevant and numerous one, which emerged with the Union of Brest and, as far as Lithuania is concerned, which was destroyed by Russians in 1839. The second community is the short-lived Russian Catholic one, the fruit of the Catholic mission among Orthodox believers over the interwar years and eventually dispersed by the Soviet invasion. The third and last Greek-Catholic community is the contemporary one, a small Church made up by Ukrainians living in Vilnius and in some other Lithuanian localities.

The Ruthenian and the present-day Ukrainian communities are actually much more bound to each other than to the Russian one: the Ukrainians are actually spiritual descendents of the old Ruthenian Church, tracing back the origin of their faith to the Union of Brest. Very nationally aware, they make much of the role of the Ukrainian language during Holy Liturgy. On the other hand, Russian Catholics had little to do with the Ruthenian heritage. On the contrary, the stress on the preservation of the purity of Russian ritual and spirituality contributed to keep them apart from their Ruthenian/Ukrainian counterparts.

Different people, different epochs and, to a certain extent, different ritual traditions: is it therefore possible to talk about a real Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania? It is, in my opinion, since Ruthenians, Russians and Ukrainians are bound by two fundamental elements: communion with Rome and Byzantine spirituality.

The communion with Rome has provided them with a bond with the successor of Peter,

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31 Ibidem.
32 Obviously, here and afterwards we are dealing only with Catholic Ruthenians, Russians and Ukrainians.
allowing them to be part of the Catholic Church. It could sound like the most banal among the possible answers: they are part of the Church since they are Catholic. This is but a fundamental passage, if one wants to understand Greek-Catholic ecclesiology: according to the Catholic faith, the Church of Rome unites the particular Churches, despite their cultural and ethnic background, in the unity of the Catholic Church. This means, that the choice to be in communion with Rome really makes these Ruthenians, Russians and Ukrainians part of the same Church.

The second element which allows us to talk about an actual Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania is the Byzantine rite. The deep awareness of their Byzantine tradition always allowed Greek-Catholics to keep their own ecclesiastical identity, even though in the course of time they (especially the Ruthenians) accepted some loans from the Latin rite. This cultural and religious identity was threatened several times over the centuries, both by external (Russian and Polish opposition, as we have seen) and by internal factors (the opposition of many Latin prelates to the Byzantine rite and the Latinising tendencies of some Greek-Catholics). Nonetheless, they managed to survive and finally to have their traditions fully acknowledged by Rome. It is actually the awareness not only of having a different rite, but crucially, of being a part of the great Byzantine Church in its Slavic embodiment. They are in communion with Rome, of course, but are nevertheless distinctly Byzantine.

In light of these observations, I would claim that it is possible to talk about a real Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania instead of mere, scattered Uniate realities: a Church which has been undergoing quite significant changes, but nonetheless it has retained its continuity due to the fidelity to Rome and to the Byzantine tradition.

The Greek-Catholic Church: A Constitutive Element of Lithuanian Identity?

At the beginning of this study, I claimed that it was my idea to study the history of the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania as a constitutive element of Lithuanian identity. It remains to be seen if it is true or not.

Greek-Catholics are actually not well known in Lithuania. From my personal experience, I can say that the vast majority of Lithuanians are absolutely unaware of this part of their national heritage. Sometimes I even came across Lithuanian priests who did not know about the presence of a Greek-Catholic community in their own country. The average Lithuanian traces back his national identity rather to the Medieval Grand Dukes, to the widely spread Roman Catholicism, to the Lithuanian folk culture and to the antiquity of the language, often reporting the widespread and absolutely false story of the Sanskrit origin of the Lithuanian language. If one would therefore wonder if Greek-Catholics are perceived as part of the Lithuanian culture, the answer must be negative.

Lithuanian history itself claims something different. Lithuania used to be the centre of a vast state, where different people of different ethnicity and religion used to live together quite peacefully. Here is how an outraged Apostolic Visitor described the religious panorama of Vilnius in 1609: “There are several heretics belonging to all kinds of sects: Arians, Anabaptists, Lutherans, Zwinglians and other extremely harmful sectarians. [...] There are even many Muslims, Tatars, who have their houses and properties, all of them being very hostile to the Church of God...”. This

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cohabitation of cultures and faiths, so lamentable to the eyes of the Visitor, has actually many points in common with the reality which we are now living. The Greek-Catholic community was born and developed in such an environment, being influenced by its neighbours but also influencing their religious, social, political and cultural reality, as I hope to have demonstrated in the previous chapters.

If the relevance that Uniates used to have in Lithuania in the past is undeniable, one could wonder if their role today is just as meaningful.

The Greek-Catholic presence is actually quite visible even today: those who want to enter the centre of Vilnius by the Gate of Dawn, one of the symbols of Lithuania, have to cross a road meaningfully called Bazilijono Gatvė (Basilians’ street). Once entered, the first church that they will find on their left is the Church of the Holy Trinity, which serves the Greek-Catholic community in Vilnius. If these hypothetical tourists would like to travel around Lithuania, they could even run into a village named after some Byzantine monks, Bazilionai.

Of course, the importance of the Greek-Catholic community in Lithuania today does not come from its size, which is quite small. It does not influence the everyday life of Lithuanians in any way. In my opinion, the Greek-Catholic Church in Lithuania retains its importance because it represents a living testimony of the “other” Lithuania, that Byzantine East which has been present in Lithuanian history since its very beginning. This Byzantine and Slavic East has periodically served as a cultural alternative to the Western and Latin civilisation: a lot of Lithuanian history actually comes from this swinging between East and West. On that basis, one could even claim that the presence of a Greek-Catholic Church is something absolutely natural in Lithuania: a constitutive element of its identity.