

11-1989

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Recommended Citation

Lefevere, Patricia (1989) "Ecumenical Movement: Best Place for the Orthodox/Uniate Talks," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 6 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol9/iss6/5>

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ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT BEST PLACE FOR ORTHODOX/UNIATE TALKS

by Patricia Lefevere

Patricia Lefevere (Roman Catholic) is an ecumenical journalist and teaches English and short story writing at Bergen Community College. She lives in Tenafly, New Jersey. She has lived in Europe, Asia, and Australia and reported regularly on the World Council of Churches during the last decade. In July 1989 she went to the U.S.S.R. to cover the World Council of Churches Central Committee meeting in Moscow.

The possibility exists to heal the decades-long wounds between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Uniate church (Eastern-rite Ukrainian Catholic Church), a leading Russian Orthodox theologian and ecumenist stated in Moscow July 21, 1989. In an hour long, exclusive interview during the World Council of Churches (WCC) Central Committee meeting, Archbishop Kiril Gundyayev of Smolensk said that contacts between the two churches could begin and that an ecumenical body such as the WCC was a good place to begin them.

Kiril, 43, has been an ecumenical leader in the WCC for two decades and a member of its executive committee since 1975. He also participates in on-going Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue between Geneva and Rome and has been a member of the WCC's Faith and Order Commission since 1985.

In outlining basic conditions towards dialogue between the two churches, Kiril stressed that Ukrainian Catholics must first understand that the Russian Orthodox Church was not responsible for their repression and did not welcome the Stalinistic tactics used to suppress their church. "History knows many example of bloodshed on both sides," he said.

"In trying to access this suffering, some Ukrainians say they suffered more, we less. But both suffered. . . . By 1939 the same methods used to suppress Catholics had been used on us," Kiril said, pointing to the deaths of nearly "all the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy in concentration camps and the near total destruction of our clergy."

Restoration of relations between the two churches depends upon a sincere quest for dialogue and a sincere attitude on the part of both and can only happen within a larger Roman Catholic-Orthodox context. He said, "The possibility of establishing love and mutual understanding of Ukrainian Catholics requires that the problem of the Uniates be dealt with

exclusively in the realm of the ecumenical movement."

One reason why the problem is so seemingly intractable, is due to its complexity. According to Kiril, "It is not just a problem of human rights and religious freedom, as many Ukrainians claim, but it is a national, political, ecclesiastical and ecumenical complex . . .".

"Perestroika declares that the principle of freedom of conscience and the realization of that right is open to all"-- Uniates included, the archbishop said. It is "important that they [the Uniates] be legalized," he added, but to see their demand purely "on the level of human rights is a very primitive understanding of the problem," in his view.

Moreover, he predicted that the restoration of the rights of the Uniates -- if undertaken outside the ecumenical sphere -- would only bring further division between the two churches and would soon lead to "warfare." He said he based his fears on two relatively recent events.

The first he said happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968 when Orthodox Christians were physically injured -- and "blood flowed" -- when they tried to save their churches from Uniate proselyting and control. "The Orthodox lost the war in Eastern Slovakia and we lost the possibility of an Orthodox church in Czechoslovakia," according to Kiril.

A second incident concerned Kiril himself when during a visit to Chicago for an ecumenical meeting in 1975, local Ukrainian Catholics pushed their way into the lobby of his hotel and sought to attack him. "Were it not for the Chicago police, I might not be here today," he added. Protestant clergy who were present in Chicago in 1975 confirmed Kiril's account of the welcome.

The theologian criticized Ukrainian Catholics in North America, especially those in the Toronto eparchy, for being antagonistic toward the Russian Orthodox Church rather than becoming an instrument for the harmonization of Catholics and Orthodox in the Soviet Union. He called on them to "change their attitude, uproot their feelings of hostility and become actively involved in the ecumenical movement."

Based on the observations of Russian Orthodox clergy in the Ukraine and on Baptismal statistics, Kiril estimated that the Orthodox counted about 80 percent of all Christians in the Ukraine region and he thought 55-60 percent of those living in the countryside were Orthodox. In parts of the far Western Ukraine he said the figure for Orthodox believers was 100 percent. The archbishop said he was "hesitant" to comment on figures reporting that 100,000-150,000 Ukrainian Catholics had gathered for prayer vigils and masses in parts of Western Ukraine recently.

Before Vatican II the Uniate churches could be explained from a Roman Catholic perspective, he said, as Rome did not recognize the Orthodox because of schism, but "Vatican II gave this up and recognized that, although historically divided, the Catholic and Orthodox church are one." The Council also opened many opportunities for sacramental unity between the two.

"I'm deeply convinced that the Ukrainian Catholics enjoy sacramental communion with the Orthodox in Western Ukraine," he suggested. As a manifestation of that spiritual union, the Russian Orthodox there could do a lot to move forward towards the ideal of Christian unity.

"It's all important that full and complete reconciliation is assured, that brotherly relations are assured in their essence," Kiril said. "It's important that all Uniate clergy become involved with the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church; then this group could play a leading role in ecumenical development. I'm in favor of such meetings and personal contacts. . . . We need encounters; we need informal and formal meetings; we need to talk with each other as Christians."

On the question of whether a visit by Pope John Paul II to the Soviet Union might encourage such a reconciliation, Kiril said that he did not believe the time was right for such a trip, and if undertaken, it might result in a further division of the two churches.

"The end result of such a visit must be our unity--our communion--rather than more division. That's why I believe such a visit should occur at a moment in history when the majority of the problems between the two churches are positively solved," Kiril said, although he would not put a date on this event.

Monsignor Eleuterio Fortino, one of two delegated Vatican observers at the Moscow meeting, said the pope is ready in principle to visit, but the reality of such a visit does not now exist despite the fact that ten Roman Catholic cardinals attended the Russian Orthodox Church's Millennium celebrations last year. "The pope has spoken," Fortino said in an Italian style of English, "I visit pastorally the Catholics, brotherly the other Christians and friendly all the Soviet people."