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IN DOUBLE JEOPARDY: FOR UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, A WAR ON TWO FRONTS

By Geraldine Fagan

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For centuries, Orthodox Christians beyond the borders of the present-day Russian Federation have maintained ties with the Patriarch of Moscow. Patriarch Kirill numbers up to 12,000 parishes in Ukraine as a third of his worldwide flock, a key component of his claim to lead the world's largest Orthodox Church.¹ President Putin has repeatedly referred to this spiritual bond when justifying military intervention in Ukraine. In the lead-up to his army's February 24, 2022, invasion, he characterized Russia and Ukraine as "essentially the same historical and spiritual space," while lambasting the Kyivan regime for "reprisals against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [UOC] of the Moscow Patriarchate."² This was echoed by Patriarch Kirill on the day of the attack. Citing "the God-given commonality" between Russians and Ukrainians, he declined to condemn the invasion—termed "ongoing events"—and called for avoidance of only civilian casualties.³ His statement came in sharp contrast to that of Patriarch Aleksy II, his predecessor, on the day Russia invaded neighboring Georgia in 2008:

I call upon the warring parties to cease fire and return to the path of dialogue...
I also make my ardent appeal to those who have gone blind with hatred: Stop!
Do not let more blood be shed, do not let today's conflict be expanded many times over!

Five hours ahead of Kirill's statement on 24 February—as Russian forces and many observers were anticipating the swift extermination of Ukraine's leadership and a Russian victory parade in Kyiv⁵—the head of the UOC publicly affirmed his commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty. "We turn to the President of Russia and ask that you stop this fratricidal war immediately," Metropolitan Onufry declared. "Such a war has justification before neither God nor man."⁶ Senior to Onufry, Patriarch

¹ This article is reproduced with permission of the *East-West Church Report*.

Kirill bore ultimate pastoral responsibility for millions of UOC members, both civilian and military. On the fourth day of the war, the UOC's Synod therefore also asked Kirill to call upon Russia's political leadership to stop military action immediately.⁷

Patriarch Kirill's response, however, was to cement an exclusive alliance with the Kremlin and its invading forces. In mid-March, before the altar of Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral, he presented an icon to the head of Russia's National Guard—which had just suffered heavy losses in Ukraine—in the hope that this would “inspire new recruits taking their oath.” National Guard head Viktor Zolotov apologized that completion of the Kremlin's “special military operation” in Ukraine was taking longer than anticipated, before adding that the icon would “protect the Russian military and hasten our victory.”⁸

In Ukraine, meanwhile, scores of the Moscow Patriarchate's own churches were being damaged or destroyed in Russia's onslaught.⁹ These included the 19th-century Church of St. George in the village of Zavorychi, 25 miles northeast of Kyiv, reduced to charred embers after Russian forces fired at its dome. “That's the Russian World for you!” a neighbor quipped as he filmed the church in flames, making sarcastic use of the invaders' term for the exceptional civilization they claimed to be advancing.¹⁰

Buildings were not the only UOC casualties. During Russian shelling of the northeastern city of Kharkiv, a cleric, choir director, and relatives on their way home from Sunday worship were killed when a missile struck their car. During the northern assault of Chernihiv Region in March, the priest-monk in charge of Holy Trinity Church in the village of Grabovka died from shrapnel wounds. Closer to Kyiv, a parish priest was injured by a mine when attempting to evacuate Irpin in late March. He died five days later.¹¹ The UOC's website has documented these and similar casualties, including in the largely Russian-speaking southeastern region of Donbas.¹²

Yet the Moscow Patriarchate's main communication platforms—the websites of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Department for External Church Relations—have been all but silent about these incidents. They commiserated the deaths only of chaplains to the Russian armed forces, such as Protopriest Mikhail Vasilyev, whose funeral was led by Patriarch Kirill in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior on 9 November.¹³ This was while prominently reporting Patriarch Kirill's condolences

concerning other violent loss of life during the same period, such as to President Xi of China following the crash of Flight 5735.¹⁴

To date, there has also been no specific word from the Moscow church leadership on the atrocities that came to light in Bucha, Irpin, and elsewhere following the withdrawal of Russian forces from northern Ukraine in late March. In Kyiv, Metropolitan Onufry expressed horror and sorrow at the violence as soon as the news from Bucha emerged. The day after Ukrainian forces liberated the town, Patriarch Kirill led a service at Moscow's Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces and prayed "that the power of our armed forces might be multiplied."¹⁵

Kirill's post-invasion stance provoked a seismic reaction throughout the UOC. It is typified by a mid-March video in which a representative of the largely Russian-speaking Odesa Diocese directs an emotional plea to his Patriarch:

Millions of people were looking to you; ears were straining to hear your words, something in our defense.... All our Orthodox Christians say one thing—that the Patriarch should have stood at the border, rent his vestments, fallen to his knees, and said, "Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin], Volodymyr Oleksandrovych [Zelensky], shoot me, do whatever you want to me... but I will not permit or bless you to kill my flock."

Instead, however, "they see only that your prayers and your blessing are directed somewhere completely different."¹⁶

This sense of spiritual dislocation intensified with another discovery among UOC faithful: that many brethren in Russia refused to believe accounts of their suffering. Cases included the priest of the Church of the Myrrh-Bearing Women in downtown Kharkiv—shattered by Russian shelling—and his own brother, also a priest, living in Russia.¹⁷ In early March the abbot of Kyiv's Trinity St. Jonah Monastery, Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov), implored his many social media friends and followers from Russia:

Yes, we are at war. Russia attacked Ukraine. Civilians are dying, children are being killed, our churches are burning. We were not waiting for any "liberators" and we did not request them. The people are one and united against this terrible aggression. I don't know what else to say... that's the truth.¹⁸

By early May, more than a third of the UOC's 53 dioceses announced that they had stopped commemorating Patriarch Kirill during worship services, thus omitting a phrase honoring him as Church leader: "our great lord and father."¹⁹ Most

of these dioceses lay in the particularly devout portion of Ukraine to the west of Kyiv. As Archbishop Iona later explained:

I often hear the phrase, “I don’t want to pray for Patriarch Kirill.” There is a significant difference between “to pray for” and “to commemorate.” We are obliged to pray for him—especially those who have suffered from Russian aggression—in accordance with the Gospel command (“...pray for those who persecute you,” Matt.5:44). But to commemorate as “lord and father” during services is a different matter. No one can bring themselves to call someone “father” who has blessed the mass murder of his flock.²⁰

Respect for Patriarch Kirill within the UOC had been hemorrhaging even prior to the invasion.²¹ When a late 2021 national poll asked Orthodox declaring allegiance to the UOC whether they trusted various church leaders, an overwhelming 81 percent responded that they trusted Metropolitan Onufry, but only 55 percent vouched the same of Patriarch Kirill. (Even Metropolitan Epifany—leader of the rival Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU]—scored 45 percent, while Pope Francis polled 48 percent).²²

With the invasion support for Patriarch Kirill evaporated. On May 27 the UOC formally disavowed the Moscow Patriarchate. Despite the logistical challenges of wartime, a full Council of bishops, monastics, and laypeople representing all dioceses convened at St. Panteleimon’s Monastery near Kyiv—including representatives of 12 dioceses situated in parts of Ukraine not under Kyiv government control, who joined via online video link.²³ Led by Metropolitan Onufry, almost all delegates supported proposals to make the UOC fully independent of Moscow.²⁴

Before May 27 the UOC already enjoyed a high degree of administrative independence, having been awarded the right to self-governance by Patriarch Aleksy II in 1990.²⁵ While the term “autocephaly”—Orthodox ecclesial independence—was not used, this empowered the UOC to amend its own governing statutes. On May 27 the Council did so to remove all remaining subordinating ties to Moscow, key being:

- commemoration during services of the Russian Patriarch as church leader by Metropolitan Onufry (this had not been compulsory for more junior clerics).
- participation in the Synod and Councils of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).
- approval from Moscow for any future new leader elected by and for the UOC.

These changes were subsequently registered by the Ukrainian government.²⁶

The ROC's Synod responded by insisting that its approval was required for such changes. However, it indirectly acknowledged the validity of the Council by accepting one decision that went in its favor: permission for UOC dioceses to act independently if they were unable to liaise satisfactorily with Kyiv due to military action. Several dioceses under Russian occupation consequently refused to abide by the decisions of May 27. All dioceses in Crimea—along with Roven'ki Diocese in Ukraine's southeastern Donbass region—were formally transferred from the UOC to the ROC.²⁷

Yet Moscow has not introduced any further sanction. Following the May Council the UOC thus finds itself in somewhat of a gray zone, operating as if autocephalous in all respects but without the corresponding recognition from some 15 local Orthodox Churches. (The rival OCU has been recognized as autocephalous by only four of these since its formation in January 2019: Constantinople, Alexandria, Cyprus, and Greece.) This is while many Orthodox leaders have expressed support for Metropolitan Onufry and followed his rhetoric in condemning Russia's invasion.²⁸ In Warsaw in late August, Polish Orthodox priest Fr. Doroteusz Sawicki explained to the *East-West Church Report* that “throughout history, autocephaly was never granted easily.” While the Polish Orthodox Church believes Ukraine has reached the stage where it should have an independent Church, he noted that “they first have to gather together by themselves—without allowing politics to interfere—and fully unite Orthodoxy in Ukraine... otherwise, there will again be disputes about who has autocephaly and who doesn't.”²⁹

In practice, politics have played a crucial role in such recognition historically. For instance, the Georgian Orthodox Church's own departure from the Moscow Patriarchate in 1917—along with a self-proclamation of autocephaly—was accepted by the Russian Orthodox Church only in 1943. This took place under Soviet pressure, accompanied by an apology to Stalin from the then Patriarch of Moscow for the ROC's “great power chauvinism” having hindered earlier recognition. Georgia's Orthodox Church has been universally recognized as autocephalous since 1990.³⁰

Politics are also paramount in today's Ukraine, as rejection of the May 27 Council's decisions by diocesan administrations in Russian-occupied areas—as well as individual clerics outside them—is casting suspicion over the whole UOC. This is especially the case when such a stance coincides with overt support for the Russian state. Examples include the metropolitan of Luhansk Diocese and an abbot from

Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia Region—areas both under Russian military occupation—who were among Orthodox clergy attending the Kremlin’s September 30 ceremony triumphantly marking Russian annexation of their regions along with those of Donetsk and Kherson.³¹ In the portion of Kharkiv Region under Russian occupation in July, the metropolitan of Izyum Diocese also endorsed the newly installed head of administration, before fleeing to Russia when Ukrainian forces recaptured the area.³² All of these clerics had previously rejected the decisions of the 27 May Council.³³

The UOC’s Synod dismissed the heads of Izyum Diocese as well as Romny Diocese in Sumy Region—who had also left for Russia—in late November.³⁴ Yet several senior clerics who have similarly argued to retain the UOC’s subordination to Moscow remain influential: Metropolitan Antony Pakanich, UOC Chancellor and Synod member; Metropolitan Pavel (Lebed’), Synod member and abbot of the Kyiv Caves Monastery; Metropolitan Luka (Kovalenko) of Zaporizhzhia and Melitopol; and Vadym Novynsky, billionaire patron of and deacon in the UOC.³⁵

Insisting that “we will never allow anyone to build an empire inside the Ukrainian soul,” President Zelensky announced a number of measures aimed at the UOC on 1 December:

- The introduction of legislation making it “impossible for religious organizations affiliated with centers of influence in the Russian Federation” to operate in Ukraine.
- The examination by Ukraine’s State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience of the UOC’s legal statutes “for the presence of a church-canonical connection with the Moscow Patriarchate,” with corresponding legal measures if required.
- The verification of legal compliance by religious organizations located in the complex of the landmark Kyiv Caves Monastery, a government-administered cultural heritage site.
- The intensification of counter measures against subversive activities by Russian special services in Ukraine’s religious sphere.³⁶

The UOC’s severance of organizational links with the Moscow Patriarchate on May 27 should put it in a strong legal position to refute any claims of affiliation with “centers of influence” Russia. Yet media mischaracterization of the May 27 development means that Zelensky’s announcement has been widely assumed to mean

an outright ban on the UOC: in some coverage, the UOC is erroneously identified as the UOC MP and “still answering to” or “tied to” Moscow.³⁷ As it serves both their interests, this argument is encouraged by both the ROC and the OCU.

Within days of Zelensky’s announcement, Ukraine’s SBU state security service announced financial sanctions against ten significant UOC clerics: Abbot Pavel of the Kyiv Caves Monastery, Deacon Novynsky, and bishops who had switched allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church and/or fled to Russia.³⁸ (Notably, these include Metropolitan Platon of Feodosia in Crimea, identified by dissident KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin as agent *Karpov*, who followed KGB directions to replace “politically immature” priests in Yekaterinburg [then Sverdlovsk] Diocese in 1982.)³⁹

Several dozen UOC clerics have been subject to criminal proceedings for supporting Russia’s invasion, including a priest in Severodonetsk (Donetsk Region) sentenced to 12 years in prison for providing the Russian army with co-ordinates of Ukrainian military positions.⁴⁰ As scholar of the UOC Nikolai Mitrokhin points out, however, their number is a miniscule percentage of the UOC’s thousands of clerics, while other walks of Ukrainian institutional life—including regional government, the military, and the security services themselves—display a proportionally greater number of collaborators. The UOC is also not the only religious organization to have fallen under suspicion: In December the SBU announced charges against a priest of the Roman Catholic Church’s Kyiv-Zhytomyr Diocese for publicly justifying Russian aggression.⁴¹

Since late November the SBU has conducted raids on an array of monasteries and other UOC sites across Ukraine, including the Kyiv Caves Monastery and Kharkiv’s Intercession Monastery.⁴² Parallel UOC fears that the Kyiv Caves Monastery might be seized and transferred to the OCU intensified with the announcement that the OCU had registered a monastic community with the same name. In December Viktor Yelensky—a former parliamentarian who lobbied for the creation of the OCU—was appointed new director of the State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience.⁴³ Interviewed in Kyiv in late 2018, Yelensky told the *East-West Church Report* that transferal of the lower portion of the Kyiv Caves complex occupied by the UOC’s monastic community to the OCU was not an issue, but that he anticipated “pressure from society” for it to take place. (The UOC’s access to two churches in the upper portion of the complex—largely a museum—is more tenuous.) [Author’s 21 February 2023 note: the two churches in the

upper portion of the monastic complex were indeed transferred to the OCU in January 2023.] Yelensky also stressed that only individual religious congregations—not whole Churches— hold legal personality status according to Ukrainian law, so that an outright ban on the UOC would prove impossible.⁴⁴

So far, the Ukrainian government’s measures against the UOC thus appear to be aimed at specific elements sympathizing with the Russian regime. A non-surgical approach risks alienating UOC faithful, and so stoking conflict within Ukrainian society. Many UOC in independent Ukraine are involved in humanitarian initiatives to support both Ukrainian civilians and the armed forces, such as Dnipro parish priest Fr. Andriy Pinchuk’s charitable foundation *Pomagaem* [Ukrainian: “We help”] and campaigns by Kyiv’s Trinity St. Jonah Monastery to donate blood as well as generators and similar equipment to Ukrainian frontline troops.⁴⁵

Reflecting in late December on the UOC priest recently jailed for 12 years for assisting the Russian military, Abbot Iona of the monastery lamented:

Lord, have mercy on us and forgive us! Our church, in which this person and others like him served, exchanging the service of Christ for the service of Herod. That includes those who recently voted for the theft of Ukrainian territories—a violation of the commandment “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” While there are only a few of them, all UOC faithful in all regions suffer because of them.⁴⁶

Among those commiserating Abbot Iona was a fellow Orthodox Christian in Russia. “Even among the 12 apostles,” he commented, “there was one Judas Iscariot.”

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⁴¹ Nikolai Mitrokhin, public social media post, 2 December 2022; “SBU podvidomyla pro pidozru rymo-katolyts’komu sviashchennyku, iakyi zaperechuvav zlochyny rashystiv u Buchi,” SBU, 22 December 2022, <https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-povidomyla-pro-pidozru-rymokatolytskomu-sviashchennyku-yakyi-zaperechuvav-zlochyny-rashystiv-u-buchi>.

⁴² Mark Santora and Ivan Nechepurenko, “Ukraine Raids Holy Site Amid Suspicion of Orthodox Church Tied to Moscow,” *New York Times*, 22 November 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/11/22/world/europe/ukraine-russia-monastery-caves.html; “U tserkvakh UPTs MP Kharkova 10 hrudnia pochalysia perevirky SBU,” *RISU*, 10 December 2022, https://risu.ua/u-cerkvah-upc-mp-harkova-10-grudnya-pochalysya-perevirki-sbu_n134722.

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⁴⁴ Author’s interview with Viktor Yelensky, Kyiv, 8 October 2018.

⁴⁵ “ITOGI Sviashchennogo Sinoda Ukrainskoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi ot 20 dekabria 2022 goda,” UOC, 20 December 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/12/20/itogi-svyashhennogo-sinoda-ukrainskoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi-ot-20-dekabrya-2022-goda/?lang=ru>.

⁴⁶ Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov), public social media post, 21 December 2022.