Exhibit "To the Light of Resurrection through the Thorns of Catacombs"

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EXHIBIT “TO THE LIGHT OF RESURRECTION THROUGH THE THORNS OF CATACOMBS”

By Iryna Ivankovych

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_Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you._ Matthew 5:10-12 (NKJV)

Those of us who live in the United States may think that the idea of persecution of Christians is not very relevant today. We are not experiencing any physical persecution here.
But if we can look beyond the borders of the United States of America, we will see that things are different. It is a fact that more Christians around the world have been martyred for their faith in the past century alone than in the combined previous nineteen centuries of the church's history. In many countries today it is a crime to be a Christian. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2.2 billion people lived in 79 countries under significant restrictions on their religious freedom in 1980, with some three million Ukrainian Greek Catholics being deprived of this right for almost half a century. Yet, with dignity and unbreakable spirit, the largest Eastern Catholic Church, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) walked a long way to the Light of Resurrection through the Thorns of Catacombs, which is and still will be examined and analyzed by historians, sociologists, and other scholars around the world.

It was this necessity of recording the history of the Church in the Underground that prompted an alumnus of Harvard University, Dr. Boris Gudziak, to establish the Institute of Church History back in 1992. It became the center of work beginning with the revival of the L’viv Theological Academy in 1994, which was subsequently restructured into the Ukrainian Catholic University in 2002. The mission of the Institute is to study the historical legacy of the Ukrainian Churches in the broader context of Universal Christianity; to critically reinterpret various aspects of the Ukrainian religious life in the past on the basis of thorough adaptation of sources and use of methodological approaches of the contemporary scholarship. The Institute focuses on the research of the situation of the Church under the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. It investigates the historical grounds and particularities of the contemporary interreligious relations, as well as interrelations between the State and the Church. The Institute promotes the development of church history as an academic subject; it also cultivates intellectual interest for religion and spiritual life, one of the central aspects of the human experience.

From its beginning, the main goal of the Institute was to carry on the research project titled “Profiles of Fortitude: An Oral History of the Clandestine Life of the UGCC, 1946-1989,” a captivating intellectual topic. How was it possible that common, ordinary, defenseless people could withstand and resist the unlimited forces of the Soviet superpower? The documents and testimonies about the Church of the Catacombs, which are partially
housed in the Institute of Church History, will become a source of specialized research for historians, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and others scholars. The main method of the Institute’s operation was the “live” or “oral” history: collecting and analyzing the memoirs of witnesses about forcible liquidation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church by the atheistic Soviet regime and about its life in the Catacombs.

The project “Profiles of Fortitude,” was crowned with an exhibit titled “To the Light of Resurrection through the Thorns of Catacombs” which commemorated the 20th anniversary of the legalization of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in 2009. As stated at the beginning, millions of Ukrainians became victims of not only wars and military conflicts in the 20th century, but also of the totalitarian systems that promoted hatred among various groups of peoples. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) became the victim of deliberate religious persecution by the Soviet regime that attempted to impose atheism. The so-called ‘L’viv Sobor’ of 1946, organized by the Soviet authorities and its repressive services, completed the reprisal of the insubordinate Church. The ‘Sobor’ acknowledged liquidation of the UGCC and its ‘reunification’ with the Russian Orthodox Church. Officially dissolved and banned by the Stalinist regime, the UGCC began a new chapter in its history, the life in the Catacombs. From 1945-46 till 1989, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was the largest illegal Church in the world and the largest community in the Soviet Union, which despite persecutions and interdictions, preserved its identity and offered resistance to the totalitarian Soviet system. The Church of the Catacombs embraced all social strata. It had its bishops, priests and monastic orders. Among its faithful were adults and children, villagers and intellectuals, artists and workers, musicians and sportsmen. Despite unprecedented totalitarian control and forcible suppression, this community found many ways and means of existence in next-to-impossible conditions. Not only did it miraculously survive, but demonstrated a phenomenal spiritual renaissance. Moreover, the Martyr Church bravely asserted God-granted human dignity, carrying truth and life to the people. It is impossible to imagine the independence of Ukraine, its spiritual and moral foundation without the underground paschal testimony of its martyrs and confessors of faith. The struggle of the Greek Catholics for civil rights was not only a way of resisting the totalitarian regime, but
also an integral part of the democratization process and Ukrainian national revival in late 1980s.

The exhibition “To the Light of Resurrection through the Thorns of Catacombs” displayed at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on May 3, 2014, consisted of twenty thematic banners and is based on the documents compiled from 1998 to 2008 by the Institute, as well as the memoirs of eyewitnesses and active participants of the underground. One can also view documents from State archives, as well as numerous pictures from private collections of survivors. The exhibit tells the numerous life stories of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic clergy, monastic orders and laity; each one a unique tale of human endurance. All of them bear witness to a profound Christian faith and steadfast fidelity to God, His Church and His people. Chronologically, the exhibit covers the period between 1939 and 1991, and it reflects three important phases of the UGCC history in the 20th century: forcible liquidation, the underground era, and legalization in 1989. Starting with the interwar period, the exhibit guides through the beginnings of a policy of repression and the process of the liquidation of the UGCC. We learn about hierarchical structure of the Church in the Catacombs led by Cardinal Josyf Slipyj, Bishop Vasyl Velchykovsky, and Bishop Volodymyr Sternyuk. When studying the geography of imprisonment, one can’t help but marvel at the clandestine pastoral work in GULAG prisons and exile, as well as in the catacombs in Ukraine. Underground life of religious congregations and laity of the underground Church and formation of its clergy are expressed by numerous photographs and documents. The exhibit concludes with the first rays of freedom, combat for the civil rights of the Ukrainian Catholics, and rebirth of the Church.

To facilitate each visitor’s journey through the exhibit, a comprehensive book has been put together that contains historical data, copies of secret documents, memoirs, excerpts from interviews, and numerous pictures witnessing to the road that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has come through the thorns of Catacombs. Published initially in Ukrainian, the book was subsequently translated into German in 2013, and freshly printed in April 2014, it is available today for the English-speaking audience. It is a product of mutual cooperation between the St. Sophia Religious Association of Ukrainian Catholics in the USA and the Institute of Church History. The Director of the Institute, Dr. Svitlana Hurkina, with whom
we worked hand-in-hand while preparing the English version of the book, contributed an article contained in this issue, while the book is also reviewed by Prof. Joseph Loya of Villanova University.

Since 2009, the exhibit has been displayed in many cities and towns of Western Ukraine, as well as in Kyiv and such eastern outposts as Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Dnipropetrovsk. Copies of this exhibit are permanently displayed at St. Clement’s Institute of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Rome, Italy, and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Cathedral in Peremyshl’, Poland. With the efforts of St. Sophia Religious Association, the exhibit is now present in the United States and will constitute an integral part of the Josyf Slipyj Research Center in Philadelphia.

As stated by Bishop Boris Gudziak, the exhibit “is the fruit of countless heroic deeds by thousands of our fathers and mothers in faith and freedom. Veterans of the underground, who generously shared their paschal experience, worked side-by-side for seventeen years with approximately one hundred researchers, interviewers, photographers, decipherers, students and other enthusiasts of the subject to create the database of this exhibition.”

As proven by the exhibit, 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 indestructability of the national spirit. The Church has revived and is now continuing its activity in the independent Ukraine. On June 27, 2001, His Holiness John Paul II beatified many UGGC bishops and priests during a Pontifical Divine Liturgy in L’viv, and in doing so recognized the spiritual triumph of the Church which, amidst the hardship of a totalitarian regime, preserved its faith in Jesus Christ, its fidelity to Church unity and its hope in the inevitable Resurrection.

This exposition is one of the first attempts to outline the multifaceted phenomenon of Christian indestructibility, creativity, and fidelity to principles. The creators of this exhibit grew up well after the underground era, yet amazingly continue to nurture the legacy of the past in a professional and trenchant manner. In the exhibit, even an expert is able to find some new relevant information; and the average visitor will discover an authentic, precise and fascinating image of the unique ecclesial and human experience.