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UKRAINE CENTER OF CHRISTIAN WWORLD. THE NEED FOR CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION

The Center of Ecumenical, Missiological and Environmental Studies “Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou” (CEMES), faithful to its vocation and vision, has oriented all its scholarly projects towards the Orthodox unity, which is so vulnerable in our present-day Orthodox Church. The Orthodox unity had suffered a serious blow by the last-minute decision of the Russian Church, together with Antioch, Georgia, Bulgaria, not to participate in the long-awaited and for nearly a century been prepared Pan-Orthodox Council, and later deteriorated with the decision of the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) to break Eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate (EP), and later with those Churches that recognized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).

CEMES first set up an anglophone inter-Orthodox, inter-jurisdictional Master Program in “Orthodox Ecumenical Theology” (MOET) at the International Hellenic University (IHU). And after the emergence of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict it assigned to the MOET teaching staff (from all Orthodox jurisdictions) the task to examine the Ukrainian crisis from a scholarly academic, theological, historical and canonical, perspective, and particularly the issue of autocephaly in a single and united Orthodox Church in Ukraine.¹

Now, 2 years after the official granting of Autocephaly to a united Church in Ukraine CEMES and MOET decided to focus in addition on the practical aspects of restoring the almost broken unity of the Orthodox community in Ukraine. More precisely, on how the broken unity in Ukraine can be practically restored. H.A.H the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has in numerous occasions affirmed this, and H.H. the Patriarch of Moscow Cyril quite recently in an interview to a Russian TV opened a small window by suggesting private prayer between himself and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, as the least he can do, in view of the unilateral breaking of the Eucharistic communion by the Holy Synod of the MP.

The Orthodox academic theological community, as the prophetic conscience of the Church, cannot but follow their example. And I have personally informed both sides about a Ukrainian Orthodox Reconciliation Project (UORP), to be undertaken by mostly academic theologians from almost all jurisdictions. And as a first step to consider pragmatic proposal, based on the actual situation that exists at this specific time. Taking into consideration that the Ukrainian public, and its government are open to a closer relationship and even cooperation with their neighboring countries, the main feature for this rapprochement should be the idea of soft power, suggested by one of CEMES’ partners in the project.

What is at this stage needed is a cultural cooperation, exchange of ideas and engaging the younger generation for the mutual enrichment in humanitarian sphere. My

participation in the inter-faith training course “Union and Diversity. Ad Dialogum Religiosum” (Kyiv, 1-8 September, 2021) was actually prompted by similar ideas, among whose it was Nataly Pavlick’s that course’s organizer.

In the meantime, the overall ecumenical – and why not also inter-faith – reconciliation cannot be left out or ignored. After all, the present Ukrainian crisis has revealed, and brought to the surface, the ecumenical stance and expressed spirit of Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). This historical structure within the Catholic Church has, rightly or wrongly,² negatively affected till recently the progress of the bilateral dialogue between the main traditional branches of Christianity (Eastern Orthodox and Catholic) after the collapse of the Soviet rule in almost the entire Central and Eastern Europe. One should not forget that the Greek Catholic Churches were historically developed mainly in the geographical area of the present Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Today, most of us consider these Churches no longer as an obstacle, but as bridges towards Orthodox-Catholic unity.³

Why Ukraine and its religious landscape is important and matter so much? Why is Ukraine considered nowadays the center of attention and concern? Is it the autocephaly, or its geopolitical status? Maybe one of them or both. But there is something more serious that has just been discovered, due to the above-mentioned factors. Ukraine, or the geographical area of the present independent state, was in the past the arena of encounter and clash of the two main theological and spiritual streams of Christianity, Eastern and Western. And today is the place where this past bleeding wound can either be prolonged to the detriment of the Orthodox image and her witness to the world or through a healing process and reconciliation can lead Christianity at large to a new era, with ecumenical encounter, and why not restoration of Church unity, “for the life of the World”

We should also not forget that the break of the Eucharistic communion by the Patriarchate of Moscow with the Ecumenical Patriarchate – a temporary I hope and wish – is not an isolated case within Orthodoxy. Previously, the absence of ROC from the Holy and the Great Council of 2016, and their veto to the completion of the pre-conciliar document on autocephaly, was widely explained at an ideological and geopolitical level as an attempt to prevent the loss of Ukraine, something that would weaken the novel theory of the Russian leadership (political and ecclesiastical) about *Russkii Mir*,⁴ and at a theological level because of their refusal to accept the primatial role of the Ecumenical Patriarch. I leave aside the old theory of a “Third Rome”.

In our Orthodox theology the refusal to accept a Church with a visible head (a *Πρότοσ*, not in jurisdictional but in terms of a humble diaconia) actually destroys the basis of the Church's unity. This imperative necessity of having a *primus* at a universal level, mostly in view of its existence in all other levels (metropolitan, episcopal and parish), inevitably deprives the coherence in our Church’s witness. Any novel perception of Church unity, based primarily on power, (arithmetic superiority), which is currently promoted, or even as it is viewed by the Patriarchate of Moscow on the basis of Moscow being the capital of a currently dominant empire, as previously was the case of the Ecumenical Patriarchate at the city of New Rome, the capital of the Roman empire, can hardly have any ecclesiological, or canonical, justification. It may not be a coincidence that these views were not initially shared by Ukrainian Orthodoxy, even by the pro-Russian UOC-MP.⁵

The new situation in Ukraine with the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox in that country⁶ unexpectedly brought also a wider *ecumenical revival*.⁷ And ironically enough with the contribution of the UGCC in religious reconciliation in Ukraine and their openly expressed views in favor of a Ukrainian autocephaly. The Ukrainian Greek

Catholic community, for nearly half a millennium a problem in the Ukrainian/Russian history, has suddenly emerged as one of the main players in fostering ecumenical relations, the way even the famous Balamand Declaration⁸ for promoting the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue has failed in the past.⁹

In addition to their signing the 2014 “Memorandum of single and unified Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church,” following the announcement of the EP’s determination to grant autocephaly, in a survey under the title “What the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Can Teach Each Other,” the Ukrainian Greek Catholics did not hesitate to answer: “Broad participation in church government,” something so important in the “venerable Orthodox tradition.” And after the Ecumenical Patriarchate invited ordinary clergy and laity in addition to bishops to the December 15 unification council, they declared: “Without neglecting the conciliar tradition of the Catholic Church, the Greek-Catholic Ukrainian Church can also learn from the strong Orthodox traditions of synodality and lay participation. This applies not only to the conduct of major councils, but to the election of bishops and priests,”¹⁰ and I would add to the entire ecclesiastical life, the liturgical one included, from parish to the universal expression of it. His Beatitude Mgr. Sviatoslav (Shevchuk), underlined, that “in Ukraine there is an interesting perspective for ecumenical dialogue in the context of new possibilities.”¹¹ And in an interview¹² he went as far as expressing a bold optimistic view, that “the restoration of Eucharistic communion between Rome and Constantinople is not utopian thinking, as some people call it. This is the goal of the ecumenical movement. This is the fulfillment of the commandment of Christ, ‘that all may be one’.”¹³

As to a canonical step a practical proposal, though not the only one, may be an interim solution of a double jurisdiction in Ukraine, i.e. the creating of a new ecclesiastical structure, or even council, with mutual agreement by both the UOC-MP and the new Autocephalous OCU. Although a double jurisdiction may not be fully canonical, and even in the Orthodox diaspora is in the process of being overcome, it seems the only feasible solution that will diminish hatred among the grass-roots, developed during the past 20 years, exacerbated in the last two years. Only such or similar solutions can in a very short time reconcile all Ukrainian Orthodox making them embrace one another, and not fighting between them, as an example not only to the rest of the Orthodox, but to the whole world, of what Christian love really means.

This, of course, can only be achieved if the model of the 1928 agreement between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Autocephalous Church of Greece, which allowed a century ago the so-called New Lands in Greece, spiritually belonging to EP and commemorating in the liturgy Patriarch Bartholomew first (together with Church of Greece Holy Synod) to be temporarily administered by the Autocephalous Church of Greece. In other words, if both the UOC-MP and the OCU leave aside for a short time their civil ecclesiastical war and agree in joining forces in Church administration (or in their witness to the Ukrainian society). During this interim period, a Church administration can possibly be established, with a Permanent Holy Synod (or council) consisting of 6 hierarchs from UOC-MP and 6 from the OCU, and a Synod of all the Orthodox hierarchs, exactly on the model that perfectly operates in the Church of Greece for nearly a century. All these, hopefully by extending their synodality to the “royal priesthood” (both ordained and lay people) and at all levels of ecclesiastical life, until a full-scale reconciliation and maturity is achieved, and eventually a truly united Orthodox Church in Ukraine emerges.

As a second suggestion, MOET, as well as CEMES (in collaboration with the famous Tufts University in USA) is setting up a second inter-disciplinary program on “Geopolitics and Religion” (G&R), that will invite scholars to give open internationally public lectures, as MOET has already started with all members of its academic committee (H.E. Metropolitans John of Pergamon, EP, Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Russia, Nifon of Targoviste, Romania, Makarios of Kenya, Alexandria, Kallistos of Diokleia, EP, Vassilios of Constantia, Cyprus, and myself), as well as all the nearly 20 members of the teaching staff.¹⁴

CEMES has already invited interested Orthodox academic theologians, despite any natural pessimism they may feel,¹⁵ to make similar recommendations for brotherly/sisterly discussion. The growing disrespect of the society at large for our Orthodox Church after the experience of the pandemic¹⁶ is the right “*kairos*” for the faithful Orthodox academics to act.

The UORP now consists of Academics from: Ukraine (from all traditions) and all the autocephalous Churches: of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, and Czech and Slovak Lands, as well as OCA, together with some other selected Christian scholars concerned about Christian reconciliation in Ukraine.

¹ academia.edu/41211517

² Uniatism, as the most reliable Greek Catholic scholar, and expert in Byzantine liturgy, the late Robert Taft, pointed out, “far from restoring the broken communion between East and West... led to new divisions” (“Anamnesis, Not Amnesia: The ‘Healing Memories’ and the Problem of ‘Uniatism’,” December 1, 2000 Lecture at the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, at www.american.catholicpress.org/Father_Taft_Anamnesis_Not_Amnesia.html).

³ See my “Orthodox-Catholic and Greek Catholic Relations after the Ukrainian Crisis,” in V. Latinovic-A. Wooden *Stolen Churches or Bridges to Orthodoxy? Volume 2: Ecumenical and Practical Perspectives on the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Dialogue II*, Palgrave 2021, 253-267.

⁴ Some analysts believe that in the back of their mind is the hegemony over all of Orthodoxy, being the continuation of, or something similar to, the earlier theory of a “Third Rome.”

⁵ In addition to their earlier appeal for autocephaly, with the signature even of their current primate, Metr. Onuphry, there was also in November 2014 a “Memorandum of single and unified Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church,” signed by a number of Bishops of all the church denominations (including UOC MP and UGCC). At that period there were negotiations, supported by all of Ukraine’s Presidents, even the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich, requesting a United Orthodox Church. Almost immediately, of course, UOC MP and the Greek Catholic Bishops withdrew their signatures. As for the situation today, there can be only one explanation for the persistence of the Russian Church: Because they have lived their rivalry and controversy with the Catholic Church because of Uniatism, they continue even in the era of universal reconciliation to consider themselves the guardians of the authentic (Orthodox) Christian faith, and Greek Orthodoxy under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, not only fallen into...Uniatism, but also too tolerant and quite open to the ecumenical dialogue. It is no coincidence that the *Russkii Mir* narrative has as its constituent element the confrontation with the “corrupted” West, to which Greek Orthodoxy also indirectly belongs. Being an advocate of the unity of the Orthodox Church, as of course of the entire Church of Christ, although I completely disagree with these views, both for missiological and for theological reasons, I believe that a genuine and sincere dialogue with the Russian views is necessary more than ever. And to this end this UORP has initiated a series of practical measures to heal the existing enmity between autocephalists and Russophiles of Ukraine.

⁶ This is rejected not only by the Moscow Patriarchate, but also by the community in Ukraine affiliated to it (UOC-MP), a community that demographically is heavily declining after the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea.

⁷ Obviously, this paper exclusively focuses on the present situation, after the decision of the EP to grant autocephaly to the Church of Ukraine. For the origins of Uniatism the reader can consult the most reliable treatment on the issue, written by a Russian historian and theologian (of Ukrainian origin, born

in Odessa), G. Florovsky. He started his chapter on “Uniatism” in the second part of his *Ways of Russian Theology*, with the following accurate assessment: “The Unia was less an act of religious choice than cultural and political self-determination. Neither reasons of faith nor of doctrine were fundamental to the secession of the bishops. The early Uniates were quite sincere in contending that ‘they did not change the faith.’ They felt they were only transferring jurisdictions and seem really to have believed that the ‘Latin faith’ and the ‘Greek faith’ were identical.” (http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/way_russian_theology_florovsky.htm#).

⁸ The thorny issue of Uniatism for Orthodox-Catholic relations was clearly demonstrated as such by the rejection of a perfectly drafted document by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches during its 7th plenary session, held in 1993 at the Balamand School of Theology in Lebanon. This document, entitled “*Uniatism, method of union of the past, and the present search for full communion*,” was written in the hope to smoothen the tensions that had arisen between Eastern (and Oriental) Orthodox Churches and their Catholic counterparts in different countries, but most evidently in Ukraine after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The document thoroughly discussed ecclesiological principles and suggested practical rules for both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, in an attempt to improve their relations by reciprocally avoiding interfering in each other's affairs and not using history in a polemical manner. According to Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the Catholic co-chairman of the Commission at that period, the report contained three principles: that individuals have the freedom to follow their conscience, that Eastern Catholic Churches have the right to exist, and that Uniatism is not the current method of full communion. The two further points of the declarations were that the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches are “sister churches” and that rebaptism should be avoided.

⁹ The Eastern Orthodox rejected the Balamand Declaration, because it did not call for the abolition of the Uniate Churches while most of the Greek or Eastern Catholics rejected it, “because it seemed to imply, they should never have existed.” Of course, the Orthodox were always demanding within the framework of the official theological dialogue and beyond that the Eastern Catholic Churches, considered as the Trojan Horse to proselytism, should either return to the Orthodox Church or be fully absorbed by the Catholic Church without following the Eastern rite. That demand was regularly put forward in recent years by the ROC, insisting that the “problem of Uniatism” should be solved before any substantial progress can be made in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. And that was the reason of the temporary break of the official bilateral dialogue for nearly a decade, only to start again with another disagreement by the Russians, this time on the “Ravenna Document.” This time it was a disagreement on the importance of primacy, basically for having a different understanding of the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarch, always avoiding calling him this way using instead the title Patriarch of Constantinople, had consequences also for the progress of the Catholic-Orthodox theological dialogue. A notable exception on this issue was the reaction of the Ukrainian Eastern Catholic Church, the head of which, His Beatitude Myroslav Ivan Lubachivsky, welcomed the Balamand Declaration. In a letter to Cardinal Edward Cassidy, he said: “I commit myself, my brother bishops, clergy and faithful to applying the practical rules of the Balamand Document to the best of our ability”.

¹⁰https://Ris.org.ua/en/index/expert_thought/authors_columns/asorokowski_column/74140/

¹¹http://news.ugcc.ua/en/photo/the_leaders_of_the_ugcc_and_the_ocu_spoke_in_favor_of_deepening_the_cooperation_between_the_churches_85095.html.

¹²<https://glavcom.ua/country/society/blazhennishiy-svyatoslav-jednannya-katolikiv-i-pravoslavnih-ne-je-utopijeyu-559594.html>. This brought the immediate reaction by the friendly to the Moscow Patriarchate western Orthodox site <http://orthochristian.com/118536.html>.

¹³ Also, from his interview in glavcom.ua, in the above note.

¹⁴ Cf. the publication of all lectures also in an e-book form as CEMES 36.

¹⁵ One can only read the background of this Russian-Ukrainian enmity in Tetyana Derkach, *Russian Church in Hybrid War against Ukraine*, Kyiv 2019, to realize how serious the situation is.

¹⁶ Cf. P. Vassiliadis (ed.), *The Church in a Period of Pandemic*, CEMES 25: Thessaloniki 2020.