

Pope John Paul II in Ukraine: Appeal for Reconciliation

by Elisabeth Hellenbroich

In the wake of Pope John Paul II's June 24-27 visit to Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin commented that the Pope's recent trips to Eastern Europe have shown some "positive elements." "I would be truly happy," Putin said, "if the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy See would develop the potential of opening new horizons." The remarks came as the Pope is making renewed efforts to intensify relations between the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the East. On Sept. 22-27, the Pope will travel to Armenia, where he will celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the arrival of Christianity.

Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to Ukraine, which included stays in the cities of Kiev and Lviv, was of historic significance: It was the first journey by a Pope to Ukraine since the great schism between the Western and Eastern churches in 1054 A.D. With it, John Paul II fulfilled an invitation which Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma had issued in 1998.

In this mostly Orthodox Christian country, in which live some 6 million Catholics, from the Greek Catholic and the Latin Roman Catholic rites, the Pope's trip generated great interest, and furthered a debate over the meaning of Christianity for the social and national development of Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church under Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev, closely bound to the Moscow Patriarchate, had pronounced itself most strongly against the Papal visit. Vladimir, in contrast to the representatives of both other Orthodox branches in Ukraine, demonstratively stayed far away from ceremonies including the Pope. Russian Orthodox Patriarch Aleksii II also expressed strong disapproval of the trip. The journey would contribute neither to peace, stability, nor reciprocal relations, he declared.

Nonetheless, the Pope, whose mission springs from his deep love of his fellow man — which he turns upon *all* Christians, and all humanity — succeeded in building a bridge of understanding, and showing the way to reconciliation and ecumenical dialogue. The Pope repeatedly called upon all Christian confessions to preserve peace among themselves. They should turn to their common inheritance, and not to what separates them, he exhorted, in order to direct themselves to their true task, that of building the nation, which must rest on the principles of love and justice.

The harsh reaction toward the visit by the Russian Ortho-

dox Church and by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church branch subordinate to Moscow, stood in sharp contrast to the positive reaction of the ordinary people of Orthodox belief. The Orthodox hierarchy had no substantial arguments against the visit to put forward. With this attitude, the Moscow Patriarchate threw away a unique historical chance on the path toward dialogue and ecumenicism. The effect of the visit, whose leitmotiv was "reconciliation and forgiveness" within the common cultural roots and evangelical Christian mission, will grow over a long period, and strike its roots in the hearts of the Ukrainian population.

Strife Among the Orthodox

The Pope travelled in a land in which half the population are Orthodox believers, but belong to distinct and rival tendencies — while some 40% are unbaptized atheists.

One bone of contention between the Russian Orthodox and Catholic churches, constantly brought up from the side of the Russian Orthodox, is the Uniate Church.

When, during the 1990s, the Eastern Rite Catholic Church (today with about 5 million members in Ukraine) experienced a renaissance after decades of oppression by the Soviet regime, strife arose in many places between Orthodox and Eastern Rite Catholics over the building and direction of churches.

Further conflict concerns tensions within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In the post-Soviet period, three currents have crystallized out of it, which today are in confrontation with one another:

1. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOK) under the leadership of Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev, which is combined in canonical association with the Patriarchate of Moscow and recognized by the Orthodox communion.

2. The Ukrainian Autocephalic Orthodox Church, which had always refused to recognize the Soviet regime, and whose leadership was taken up, during the decades of communism, by the Ukrainian diaspora in North America.

3. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Patriarchate of Kiev, which separated itself from the UOK, under the leadership of the earlier Metropolitan of Kiev, and former Exarch, Filaret. Since 1995, Filaret has been designated as Patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox-Patriarchate of Kiev.

Neither of the last two churches are recognized outside

Ukraine, nor does the Vatican support bilateral relations with them.

‘That All May Be One’

In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (“That They May Be One”) of 1995, which was built upon the leitmotiv of a journey, the Pope wrote: “God wills the Church, because he wills unity, and in unity the entire depth of his ‘*agapē*’ comes to its expression.” He would come as a pilgrim and not with the design of converting those who believe differently, the Pope declared upon his arrival in Kiev. In common with all Christians, he wished to give testimony for Christ.

Between the Orthodox and the Catholic churches there have been times of positive relations, but also times of sadness. Thus it is important to recognize the mistakes of the past and to seek forgiveness. “The burning wish of my heart is that the errors of the past not be repeated in the future.” Addressing himself to the Ukrainian people, he declared: “I embrace you all, beloved Ukrainians, from Donetsk to Lviv, from Kharkiv to Odessa and Simferopol. In the name Ukraine, is planted the memory of the greatness of your country, which with its history is witness to its unique calling as the gateway between East and West. In the past centuries, this nation was the dividing-line between different cultures, the meeting-point of the spiritual treasures of the East and West!”

In his address to representatives of politics, culture, economy, and science in the Presidential palace, John Paul II spoke of Ukraine as a cradle of Christian civilization. In remembering the painful times of oppression and destruction, especially in the 20th Century, the Pope emphasized the meaning of the fundamental expression contained in the Ukrainian Constitution, “responsibility before God.” It is important, he said, to fill this principle with new life, and to erect a society building upon the values of the Gospel. Turning to the politicians, the Pope quoted the words of Crown Prince Wolodymyr Monomach (born 1125), who in his book *Instruction to His Children*, wrote: “Do not allow the powerful to destroy humanity.”

The Pope pointed to the three pillars of human civilization, which are vital to preserve as the foundation of human society: the recognition of divine authority as the source of natural law and the moral principles of society; respect for the worth of the human being as the image and likeness of God (*I Genesis 1:26-27*); and the duty to view power as a tool for the service of the weakest and poorest in society.

In this speech, the Pope addressed the conscience of political leaders, admonishing that they should learn from history: “Your task is to serve the people, and to ensure peace, and at the same time justice, for all. This is in opposition to any attempt to misuse power for personal aims. Take care for the necessities of the poor, and work so that every human being has a share in the lawful growth [of society]. You are heirs of a great history. I think, above all, of the Orthodox Archbishop of Kiev, Metropolitan Peter Mohyla, who in the 17th Century founded the Academy of Kiev, which is remembered to this

day as a beacon of humanist and Christian culture.” By this, the Pope referred to the heritage of important Orthodox churchmen and great humanists, who set in motion a far-reaching work of reform of the Orthodox Church, as well as of education.

In another talk, the Pope reminded the Roman Catholic bishops of the Greek Catholic and Latin Rites, of their responsibility to act as witnesses of faith, as true “shepherds,” who should be led by the burning wish to live their lives in the imitation of Christ, to bear witness as once the great saints and martyrs of Ukraine bore witness. The Pope spoke of the church as breathing with the “two lungs of the Eastern and Western traditions.” As members of one church—although with different rites—they might take a unique opportunity to contribute to this process, of bringing about “unity” within multiplicity.

The Measure of Progress

Meeting with representatives of the General Ukrainian Council of Churches and of other religious organizations, among them also a representative of the Kievan Orthodox Church, the Pope pointed to the general tasks of all religions: These, he said, consist in creating a social and moral society from the truth of the inviolable freedom of the individual person.

And in another meeting, with youth, John Paul II pointedly demanded of them that they not run after false gods and take refuge in materialistic hedonism, but courageously swim against the “stream of the time,” to work together in building a just society. “Ukraine needs men and women who are determined to serve, and whose goal it is to support the rights and welfare of all, especially the weakest and most deprived. That is the logic of evangelism, but also the logic which allows the civil community to grow. True civilization is measured not only through scientific progress, but also, and above all, through the human, moral, and spiritual progress of humanity.”

Interview: Father Romano Scalfi

The Pope in Ukraine Sought a True Friendship

Roman Catholic Father Romano Scalfi is chairman of the Milan, Italy-based organization “Russia-Christiana,” which he founded in 1957. Its aim is to make known to the West the spiritual and cultural tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, to promote ecumenical dialogue, and to contribute to the Chris-