

The Russian Catholic Church of  
the Byzantine Rite:  
An Assessment of Events from August  
2004 to February 2005

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***Introduction***

Relations between Rome and Moscow have been tense for the last quarter-century, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of the Eastern Catholic Churches in both Russia and Ukraine. Issues related to the nature and very existence of these Churches are touched on increasingly often in church polemics and exert an important influence on ecumenical dialogue. Issues related to the existence of the Catholic Churches of the Byzantine Rite occupy a large place in the interaction between the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church.

It is clear that a comprehensive and serious study of the Eastern Catholic Churches in all aspects, including their internal life, their union with the rest of the Catholic Church, and their role and place in ecumenical dialogue, is crucial for a deeper understanding of church life and the ecclesiastical problems of modernity. Yet there are relatively few serious research works in this domain. As far as Russian publications are concerned, only a few works have been published: Catholic scholars, as a rule, pass over this topic in silence, and that in a country where ecumenical dialogue increasingly raises questions related to Eastern Catholics. This state of affairs cannot be considered either normal or fruitful. This author would like

to hope that this lengthy and detailed essay will make its contribution, although modest, to a change in this state of affairs.

In 2004 the author published several articles related to the theme of Russian Catholics of the Byzantine Rite.<sup>1</sup> Following this, a whole series of events took place in 2004 and early 2005, whose significance for the Russian Byzantine Catholic Church (hereafter RBCC) cannot be overestimated: the appointment of Bishop Josef Vert as the representative of the Russian Conference of Catholic Bishops (hereafter RCCB) for Catholics of the Eastern Rite; the council of Russian Catholic Clergy, held in the settlement of Sargatskoe in the Omsk region, which affirmed the existence of the Exarchate for Russian Catholics of the Byzantine Rite, founded in the early twentieth century; the reaction to this event and the different opinions that followed; and the appointment of an ordinary for Catholics of the Byzantine Rite in Russia by the Holy See. All these events, regardless of our attitude to them, indicate that the Russian Catholic Church of the Byzantine Rite, after decades of disruption to church life, has entered a new period in its history, and as such, deserve very close attention and assessment.

This paper will sequentially describe the events that occurred in the period mentioned, and closely related problems of church life, while giving them, where possible, a fair canonical assessment in historical context and in the light of the Magisterium. Of course, the canonical assessment given is of a private nature; it may be criticized and be imperfect at some points. In this connection the author would be grateful for justified criticism and well-argued comments from other interested researchers.

Despite the fact that the theme of this work is rather narrow and the tasks set are strictly limited, their practical significance cannot be overestimated. Insufficient meaning given to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, “Интервью: Русские католики восточного обряда – миф или реальность?” [“Interview: The Russian Catholic Eastern Rite – Myth or Reality?”], September 10, 2004, accessed January 30, 2019, <http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=26619>; and “В России Мы Не Гости” [“We are not guests in Russia”], March 10, 2004, accessed January 30, 2019, <http://portal-credo.ru/site/?act=fresh&id=184>.

historical-canonical problems may lead to an aggravation of existing difficulties instead of their resolution, something that, pitifully, could be sometimes observed in the course of the events under examination. The author hopes that serious attention to the questions related to these sensitive and often complicated problems will be able to help in further development of the situation, preventing possible mistakes and difficulties.

When speaking of the Catholic Church, one often thinks of the Latin Church, yet such a conclusion suggests not only a lack of knowledge, but a certain defect in the perception of the Church, conflating the universal Church of Christ and her unchangeable truth with only one concrete cultural manifestation, the Latin or West-Roman. But, precisely as Catholic, the Church by definition includes both East and West. Thus, in spite of these problems the Eastern Catholic Churches have always remained a living witness to the necessity and possibility of the complete and visible unification of Eastern and Western Christians in the universal Church, headed by the bishop of Rome.

Does the modern Church have a place for Russian Byzantine Catholics? Does it make sense today to speak about the existence of the RBCC, since it is often considered an obstacle to the complicated dialogue with Russia's dominant Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate? Is it perhaps permissible to sacrifice for the sake of this dialogue a few hundred active faithful and several priests of the RBCC in Russia? We believe that what has been said above is enough to answer these questions firmly and negatively. The presence and apostolic work of this Church should be perceived not only as not hindering genuine ecumenical dialogue, but even as a witness to the possibility of its total success and a distinctive guarantee of its authenticity.

There are, however, some who do not think this – some, indeed, who see the RBCC precisely as a hindrance to East-West unity. Sad to say, such people can be found *within the Catholic Church herself*, often including high-ranking hierarchs in Rome and elsewhere. Some of these men have been engaged in sins of both omission and commission, by hindering the full freedom and flowering of the RBCC. These