

# Strangers in a Strange Church?

## New Faces of Ukrainian Catholicism in Canada

**Christopher Guly**

Introduction by Fr. Peter Galadza  
of the Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies,  
University of St. Michael's College  
in the University of Toronto



NOVALIS

# Introduction

A title like *Strangers in a Strange Church?* probably requires some explaining. To begin with, note the question mark. It's rhetorical. The nine people described here are not foreigners in the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church (UGCC),<sup>1</sup> nor is their Church strange. Of course, some people of Ukrainian background have considered or continue to consider these non-Ukrainians "outsiders." And certainly many North Americans view the UGCC – like most Eastern Churches – as exotic. However, that's what makes these stories so compelling. They document struggle and success.

The book narrates the lives of seven individuals and one couple who have joined the UGCC in Canada, more specifically Ottawa, in the last 25 years. None of them is of Ukrainian background, but they are among the best "Ukrainian" Catholics I've ever met. They're all young and they are all passionate about living a Christian lifestyle. The combination of youth and commitment to Jesus Christ – according to an Eastern tradition that many Ukrainian Canadians themselves have jettisoned – is beguiling.

In addition to being entirely of non-Ukrainian background, all of the people whose stories are told here have two other things in common: their faith formation took place in or via other faith communities, and in diverse ways they have all given back to their new community – not to mention the world at large. As regards

---

1 "Ukrainian Greco-Catholic" is technically the more accurate name of the Church. The elimination of "Greco-" became common in English because греко-католик (*hreko-katolyk*) was almost always mistakenly rendered as "Greek Catholic," which added confusion to perplexity. But "Greco-Catholic" has a far stronger pedigree than "Ukrainian Catholic." In Ukraine, until the early 1990s, the former was the Church's sole name. In fact, today in Ukraine, "Ukrainian Catholic" (without "Greco-") refers to the Church of the Roman, not Eastern, rite. However, in the present publication we follow the convention that took hold in Western countries after World War II. Prior to that period, the term "Ruthenian Greek-Catholic Church" was usually employed throughout the West. With the painful loss of Ukrainian statehood twice in one generation and the evolution of national consciousness, the Vatican acceded to the Ukrainian diaspora's popular demand for the change in nomenclature.

the first: these nine individuals were raised Evangelical, Roman-rite Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal and Salvation Army. The Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church is thus the beneficiary of an evangelization and faith formation that took place elsewhere. But this book is not about proselytism. (More on that below.)

As for giving back to the UGCC: within their adopted communities, these newcomers have taken on vital roles. They supervise the local youth group; they volunteer with the UGCC monthly soup-kitchen initiative; they serve on the parish council; they have revitalized their church's catechetical program. Some have even become energetic members of the local Ukrainian Council of the Knights of Columbus! One of them, Lisa Gilbert, also dares to dream. She is the only one of the nine who presently lives outside Canada. Having moved to Kansas, where she attends an Antiochene Orthodox church for vespers and a Roman Catholic church for Mass, she wistfully asserts: "There was once a Ukrainian Catholic mission [in Wichita]. Perhaps I'm [here] to try to get the mission parish started up again!"

Regarding work in the world at large, the group includes a former civil servant who has championed the cause of religious freedom from Indonesia to Crimea (Andrew Bennett); a physician who risked her life to serve in Ebola-stricken West Africa (the above-mentioned Lisa Gilbert); and soccer parents (Rebecca and Harold Visser) who have bravely defied a football league establishment to help immigrant children avoid the street. Even with seven children of their own, the couple has enabled Muslim and Christian youths from Somalia, Syria and Latin America to obtain affordable membership in local soccer clubs.

Paradoxically, it is these non-Ukrainians who bolster Ukrainian secular life as well. The former Baptist of Goan-Indian background (Brian Butcher) becomes the cantor at prayer services for Ukraine on Parliament Hill. His children, along with those of other "converts," form a phalanx of volunteers at Ottawa's Ukrainian festival, and it is they who – owing to their musical talent – are called upon to sing the Ukrainian national anthem at Ottawa City Hall on