

## Language, Identity and Inculturation in the Ukrainian Catholic Church<sup>1</sup>

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My presentation will not be a formal academic lecture, but rather a reflection on language, identity and inculturation as these are intertwined in the Ukrainian Catholic Church and in my own life story. Let me begin, however, by defining the terms.

*Language:* People usually grow up in a mono-lingual culture. In my case, as well as for many emigrant communities, I grew up in a bi-lingual milieu: Ukrainian and English. This changes the way one perceives the world. It is a blessing, since it provides tools for communication in more than one way. But it also presents difficulties and challenges in terms of self-identity: Who am I? Am I a Ukrainian-American, an American of Ukrainian descent or a Ukrainian, who enjoys the benefits of American citizenship and culture?

*Identity:* Our identity is received from our parents; it may even be handed down from generation to generation. However, it needs to be discovered, acknowledged, and developed. Identity is closely linked to tradition, for it is through tradition that identity is fostered. Tradition includes not just language, but also customs, beliefs – indeed, entire worldviews. In the Church we speak of Tradition (with a capital T), which defines the living patrimony of Christian faith and practice, handed down to us from the apostles, through generations guided by the Holy Spirit. Sacred Scripture is an integral part of the Tradition of the Church, for Scripture cannot be separated from

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the uninterrupted Tradition of its interpretation within the community of faith. While the Tradition of the Church is singular, traditions can be many.

*Inculturation:* As all human ideas, words and deeds are expressed through culture, this has profound implications for our faith. The God of Israel revealed Himself through a concrete culture – the Semitic culture of the Hebrews. Our Lord chose to become incarnate in that same culture. But Christianity quickly came into contact with the Greek, Roman, and broader Semitic worlds, both leaving its mark and being coloured by those worlds with which it came into contact. No culture is incapable of receiving the gospel. But having received the gospel, no culture remains quite the same. Inculturation in the ecclesial sense is finding a way to express gospel truths through every culture, language, and people, adapting those elements which are not contrary to the Christian faith. The very fact that every culture has this capability is a profound statement about the nature of creation and God’s presence in all of human history.

I grew up in a Ukrainian Catholic family. My parents came from Europe after World War II. They had to abandon their homeland in Western Ukraine, which was in the process of forced integration into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. My generation of baby-boomers born in the United States was brought up in a bicultural milieu (as were Ukrainian children in other countries). We spoke Ukrainian before we learned English. At home English was discouraged, and sometimes even punished. There were children who would go to confession saying, “Father, I have sinned. I spoke English.” Since their parents had told them that it was wrong to forget one’s ancestral language, they presumed it was also a sin. This sounds amusing today, but we must understand the trauma our parents endured. They had lost everything – family, friends, home, jobs, a way of life. And there was not a single émigré family that did not have at least several relatives who had been shot, exiled, or imprisoned. Ukraine, whose population before World War II was in the vicinity of 40 million, lost almost 10 million during the war. Imagine, a quarter of the population! And so Ukrainians, who had struggled for centuries to gain

independence, were now under communist rule – and not only that of a foreign power – Russia – but of militant atheists as well! We can thus better understand our parents' determination to preserve their heritage: the faith, the language, the traditions, the culture – especially as these were being systematically destroyed in the Soviet Union. So our parents could become, as it were, almost fanatical about such issues in their effort to preserve what was under threat, both in their homeland, as well as abroad. In any case, they were very touchy about their identity. There were fathers, for example, who disavowed their daughters for marrying non-Ukrainians! Some even frowned upon their children for studying the Russian language at school. And because our parents had lost these Ukrainian realities precisely at a time when Ukrainian national consciousness had been growing, this need for self-preservation was sometimes felt by them more acutely than by other émigré communities from the European continent. I remember Patriarch Joseph Slipyj constantly exhorting the faithful, “Be yourselves!”

The two most important factors which aided in keeping our people together were language and the Eastern/Greek/Byzantine Catholic Church. Had we been of the Roman Rite, our ancestral roots might have been lost much sooner. While the Roman Catholic Church does allow at times for so-called ethnic parishes, jurisdictionally and in other ways the Latin Church is far more monolithic. As Catholics we could have easily attended a local Latin parish (some, in fact, did!). But being Eastern Catholics, we would frequently drive from different parts of the city to the one or more Ukrainian churches established in a given place.

They say history repeats itself. The Ukrainian emigration to North and South America began in the late nineteenth century. By the time our parents had arrived in the 1940s and 1950s, there were at least two generations of Ukrainians before them, a significant percentage of which by that time had retained little or completely lost their Ukrainian language. Their native language was English – and Ukrainian was the language of their ancestors. This was especially so as the pre-World War II Ukrainian emigration had not been a political emigration in

the same way. Thus, they considered themselves Americans (or Canadians, or Brazilians, etc.) of Ukrainian descent, whereas our parents were Ukrainians who through a twist of fate had found themselves on American soil.

Here in the United Kingdom, however, we are two generations behind that of the Americas. A large wave of émigrés, mostly male, came to this country after WWII. Because of the small number of Ukrainian women, many married English, Welsh, Scottish, German, or Italian women. Some wives learned Ukrainian, others did not, but a great majority have taken on the heritage of their husbands and have educated their offspring as Ukrainians. Pictures of parishes and organisations from the 60s and 70s reveal large masses of these émigré communities. This generation, however, lived through a severe crisis in the 70s and 80s caused by opposition to the patriarchal question raised by Joseph Cardinal Slipyj. Furthermore, the natural processes of assimilation, secularisation, job seeking, and marriage have compounded these problems, resulting in the absence of young people in today's churches and community organisations. The only exception is the London cathedral parish which has seen a rebirth thanks only to a new wave – the fourth – of émigrés from Ukraine in the 1990s and 2000s.

The children of my generation were growing up in a land they called their own. So there was bound to be tension, the parents being adamant about their family preserving everything Ukrainian. Some children grew up loving their parents' culture, adopting it as their own, even if in a different context. There were others, however, who resented being burdened with all this Ukrainian baggage, and so they rebelled, even drifted away. Nature took its course, too: although there were marriages of Ukrainians with other Ukrainians, there were also so-called mixed marriages. In that case, if the mother was Ukrainian, she would frequently pass on the culture, even the language, to her children. But if only the father was Ukrainian, this was much more difficult.

How does all this reflect on the Ukrainian Church? Most new emigrants preserve their language because they often do not know the language of their adopted country, and they find comfort and understanding among their own people. Their

children, however, attend local schools and quickly come to speak the language of the land much more fluently than their parents. Thus the language of parents or grandparents quickly becomes a foreign language, which children acquire and master with increasing difficulty.

If parents are strict in passing on their heritage to their children, churches can be even more conservative. They preserve not only rites and customs, but also the ancestral language long after populations at large have stopped speaking it. Case in point: Latin in the Roman Church, Church Slavonic in the Byzantine Slavic Churches. It is only after the Second Vatican Council that Ukrainian was introduced into the Ukrainian-Byzantine Catholic liturgy. Initially, Ukrainian (and English) was allowed for only five parts: the epistle, gospel, creed, the Our Father and the prayer before communion. In 1968, an official translation of the liturgy into Ukrainian appeared. It was only twenty years later, in 1988, and as a result of demands for equality, that the liturgy was finally officially translated into English. Thus, the offspring of the original émigrés could finally hear the liturgical services sung in the language they spoke. (In the UK we are, as it were, at a half-way house: happy to listen to prayers and petitions in English, but still like to maintain traditional Ukrainian responses: “Hospody, pomyluy” rather than “Lord, have mercy.”)

This brings us to a first conclusion. People often place more emphasis on tradition, culture, and language, than on the mandate to evangelise! This is not done out of malice; I think it derives more from a lack of deeper reflection on the faith and the Church’s missionary vocation. Just as in everyday life people usually do not like to leave their comfort zones, but keep to their routine even after it is ineffective, so also Christians do not like to have their waters stirred. Exercising and sharing the faith can be hard work.

What should be done? Evangelisation is always a process of growth in awareness: awareness of God’s presence in our lives, of His initiative in communicating with us, of our need to respond to His invitation. The faithful, and in the first place the clergy, need to reflect on what it means to be a Christian. Christianity is not an exercise in self-improvement, nor is it an

effort to save one's soul. Christianity is accepting God's invitation to share life with Him and, through Him, with His people – all His people, all His children, “the good, the bad, and the ugly”; thus, not just with members of one's own ethnicity.

So there is bound to be tension – between preserving one's heritage and being open to persons outside the tradition. But tension is an integral part of human life and a means of growth; tension is a catalyst for change if seen more as an opportunity than as a threat.

Consider the example of our Jewish brothers and sisters. They are everywhere, as are Christians. And in every country they are part of the culture in which they live – and have lived – for generations. You have American Jews, Polish Jews, Armenian Jews; but wherever they are, they are Jews. They may have lost the language (except those who purposely learn Hebrew), but they have not lost their Jewish identity and sense of membership in the people of the covenant.

Ukrainian Catholics have particular challenges if they are to follow their example. Here in Great Britain, for example, the Ukrainian Catholic Church needs to be a welcoming home for those who have most recently emigrated here. It must remain a spiritual home for those who have grown up in this country and are proud to be British. And, if it is to be true to the gospel, it must not just remain “open” to non-Ukrainians, so that they might feel welcome among our faithful, but reach out to them, offering them the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the nature of Christ's Church, as the saintly Ukrainian Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky reminded his people on several occasions. I would like Ukrainian to be retained in the liturgy, but recognize that English needs to be adopted where there is pastoral need. I would like to preserve all our traditions as I learned them from childhood, but I would also like to see them adapted to new situations, so that people outside my tradition would be enriched by them and come to love them as I do. Achieving this is not easy.

We can thus come to a second conclusion. We need first and foremost to experience “joy in the gospel” according to the felicitous phrase of Pope Francis. And this joy should compel

us to share this treasure not only with our kin folk, but also with anyone willing to listen. Our aim should not be to make good Ukrainians out of them, but to offer them friendship with our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. And we can do this by offering the unique perspective of Eastern Christianity in its Byzantine form.

I believe we have much to offer as a counter-witness to our secularised society: a strong sense of divine mystery, an alternative vision of the world based on the iconic presence of God in all of creation, asceticism which does not seek a reward from the Lord but wishes to be an expression of gratitude for His “mercy which is eternal.” This is the message our Church is called to proclaim, using whatever language medium is necessary, whether Ukrainian or English.

Currently our Ukrainian Catholic Church is implementing a worldwide ten-year plan for spiritual renewal. It is called “The Vibrant Parish – the Place to Encounter the Living Christ.” Its goal is to help our faithful to grow in unity in Jesus. There are six key elements to this programme:

1. *The Word of God and Catechesis.* We are called to acquire a deeper understanding of the faith, especially through reading and meditating upon Sacred Scripture.
2. *The Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) and Prayer.* We are called to lead a life of community (liturgical) and personal prayer, centred especially around the Eucharist, which is the centre and source of Christian life.
3. *Serving One's Neighbour.* We are called to works of charity, mercy and justice, both as a community and in our personal lives.
4. *Leadership-Stewardship.* The entire body of faithful is called to active stewardship in parish councils and pastoral programmes, under the care of their bishops and priests, who lead not as rulers or administrators, but as servants.
5. *Communion-Unity.* Our parishes are called to foster a sense of communion and unity on a number of levels: local, regional, and universal. We must also seek ways to restore communion where it has been woun-

ded or broken (ecumenism), especially with the Orthodox.

6. *Missionary Spirit*. Each parish community is called to witness to the presence of the Living Christ in our lives and to preach the good news to all humankind, reaching out beyond the borders of our local communities and into the world.

In order to bring to fruition this programme, our own people need to overcome a certain difficulty. Because of the historical circumstances in which they have lived, they are suspicious of anything that is not *nashe*, “our own.” This mentality needs to be broken – or rather, healed – so that they would not look upon others as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to become true neighbours to all of them.

It thus comes down to a sharing of gifts. We were not given charismata or talents in order to become famous or to enrich ourselves. We were given them in order to build the Body of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God the Father. Language and traditions will hinder this effort if seen as ends in themselves, but will immensely help if we understand them as tools and instruments to be used in Christ’s transformation of the world and human society in the effort to Christianize our contemporary culture.