

Rome's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Ukrainian Ecumenism: A Plea for Clarity

The present issue of our journal includes the French translation of a public statement issued by the Ukrainian Scholarly Theological Society (USTS) at the conclusion of a special congress in Lviv, Ukraine in January 2007. The statement, “Eucharistic Communion: The Challenge Posed by Tradition and the Present Moment to the Traditional Churches of Ukraine,” was endorsed by the almost 200 Greco-Catholic participants.

The term “Traditional” in the title actually refers to the Churches that derive from the adoption of Christianity in AD 988 by Saint Vladimir (Volodymyr). These Churches of the Byzantine tradition comprise, on the one hand, three Orthodox jurisdictions (Moscow Patriarchate, Kyivan Patriarchate, and Autocephalous), and, on the other, the Greco-Catholic Church of Ukraine. Not only are the aforementioned Orthodox Churches not in full visible communion with the Greco-Catholic (and vice-versa), they are also divided among themselves.

Anyone who visits Ukraine knows how frustrated people of good will are by the divisions among Eastern Christians. Ironically, some of them recall the period when persecution compelled them to downplay their differences. Of course, the issues are complex but certainly one can only laud the widespread desire among Eastern Catholics and Orthodox in Ukraine to restore ecclesial unity.

The USTS's statement was an attempt to show leadership. It was also a demonstration of the Ukrainian theologians' desire to validate the *sensus fidelium* and the Spirit's inspiration thereof. But the statement was hardly radical. Quite the

contrary! The only potentially contentious issue is the proposal that on appropriate occasions – and possibly on an annual basis at the beginning of Lent – Orthodox and Greco-Catholics seek ways to concelebrate the Eucharist after appropriate reflection, forgiveness, and common recitation of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Anyone familiar with “theological statements” in the West knows that such suggestions are inoffensive, especially as the USTS has framed them within a pervasive respect for the principle *sentire cum ecclesia*.

Nonetheless, it has come to our attention that the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith apparently intervened to ban the publication of the statement in the Ukrainian Scholarly Theological Society’s organ, *Bohoslovia*.

This development is disappointing – and surprising – for at least three reasons: 1) the statement contains nothing of a theological nature that could be deemed even remotely scandalous or heretical; 2) presumably individuals in Ukraine played a part in informing the CDF of the statement while other individuals there subsequently enforced the ban; and 3) Greco-Catholics have been sent a contradictory message: “commit to ecumenism” but avoid concrete initiatives *in Ukraine itself*.

The last point is crucial. Those familiar with the rhetoric of the last twenty years surrounding “Uniatism” know how often the Vatican has – appropriately – stressed the need for Ukrainian Greco-Catholics to show ecumenical good will. (And note, incidentally that the USTS is not promoting a “nationalist ecumenism” or a “patriotic Church.” The statement is explicit about including Ukraine’s *Moscow Patriarchate* communities in the reconciliation – and the USTS’s formulations are thoroughly theological.) To us, however, it seems that for certain Vatican authorities, concrete local understanding is apparently not vital to Ukrainian Catholic/Russian Orthodox rapprochement. Instead, it would seem that the Vatican urges Ukrainian Greco-Catholics to commit to ecumenism in order to suppress initiatives that might displease Moscow. This kind of “ecumenism” means, for example: not insisting on the right to serve Greco-Catholics in Russia, not commemorating Cardinal Husar as patriarch, and not establishing Greco-Catholic

ordinariates in Eastern Ukraine even after wasting endless hours proving there is a manifest need for such structures.

All of this is redolent of a tendency to see Ukraine as simply a stepping stone to Russia. Of course, Ukrainians should have no delusions. They are *not* “big fish.” But precisely because the country and its Christians are among the “lesser” of the brethren, ecclesial authorities should show solicitude worthy of a crucified Lord rather than calculations reminiscent of *Realpolitik*. And while we admit that such political maneuverings tend to be the purview of other Vatican dicasteries more than the CDF, the net effect remains “action taken on behalf of the Holy See.”

Pope John Paul II wrote in *Oriente Lumen* (par. 20) that he “intends to place himself at the service of a Church united in charity. Peter’s task is to search constantly for ways that will help preserve unity. Therefore he must not create obstacles but must open up paths.” When he penned these words, he admitted that “attempts in the past had their limits, deriving from the mentality of the times and the very understanding of the truths about the Church.” Referring to the Catholic Eastern Churches in paragraph 21 he recognized that

these Churches carry a tragic wound, for they are still kept from full communion with the Eastern Orthodox Churches despite sharing in the heritage of their fathers. A constant, shared conversion is indispensable for them to advance resolutely and energetically towards mutual understanding. And conversion is also required of the Latin Church, that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of Eastern Christians ... that she may show concretely, far more than in the past, how much she esteems and admires the Christian East and how essential she considers its contribution to the full realization of the Church’s universality.

Have we returned to the kind of atmosphere that dominated Ukraine for centuries after the Union of Brest (1596) when Roman Catholics in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and subsequently the Habsburg Empire regularly