

# Studying Ukrainian Greco-Catholics at World Youth Day: A Small Sample of Committed Young Adults from Western Canada

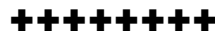
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## Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 34)

The Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church (UGCC) faces a series of challenges in retaining the committed allegiance of younger members. With the weakening and disassociation of religious and cultural patterns the UGCC in Canada has seen a significant decline in membership. In this context a study of Ukrainian Greco-Catholic (UGC) young adults who went to World Youth Day 2008 provides an insight into the life, belief and practices of a special sub-group of the UGC population, namely those who are highly committed to the Church. This study examines the WYD pilgrims and argues that many of the factors that contribute to high levels of religious commitment are evident amongst pilgrims. The paper proposes that this pattern of religious affiliation may have significance for the pastoral outreach of the UGCC in Canada.



### *Introduction*

James Beckford has described post-industrial societies as sharing many common cultural assumptions: a relatively high standard of living and relatively low infant mortality; a Christian heritage; advanced economic and political structures; and entrenchment in an increasingly globalized mass culture.<sup>1</sup> In these societies religious expression is becoming increasingly marginalized and shunted into the private sphere where it lacks salience.<sup>2</sup> This marginalization is part of a more drawn-out process where religious communities diminish as they are no longer able to satisfy the demands and aspirations of young people. This decline is most notable in religious communities that have relied on religious socialization, both within the community and by the wider culture, as a primary mechanism of retaining strong levels of religious commitment.<sup>3</sup> This can be contrasted with religious communities which adopt a more directed and purposeful approach to catechesis within their community.<sup>4</sup> In these groups, which would include what Thomas Reeves calls strict religious communities, the decline in membership is less dramatic and in some instance communities with this disposition are growing.

Consider, for example, the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church (UGCC) in Canada. Concerns about the efficacy of its

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<sup>1</sup> See James Beckford, *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Unwin-Hyman, 1989), esp. 7–29.

<sup>2</sup> “Salience” is best understood as the impact that religious beliefs have on daily life. See Yves Lambert, “New Christianity, Indifference and Diffused Spiritualities,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000*, eds. Hugh McLeod, Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63–77; Mark Chaves, “Secularization and Religious Revival: Evidence from U.S. Church Attendance Rates,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (1989): 464–477.

<sup>3</sup> Marie Cornwall, “The Social Bases of Religion: A Study of Factors Influencing Religious Belief and Commitment,” *Review of Religious Research* 29 (1987): 44–56; Jordi C. Sabe, “The Crisis in Religious Socialization: An Analytical Proposal,” *Social Compass* 54 (2007): 97–111.

<sup>4</sup> James Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983); Steven Bruce, *Firm in Faith: The Survival and Revival of Conservative Protestantism* (Aldershot, UK: Gower, 1984).

outreach to youth and younger adults seem to be well-founded.<sup>5</sup> Robert Anderson, quoting figures from the 2001 *Annuario Pontificio*, noted that Ukrainian Greco-Catholics (UGC) in Canada from 1990 to 2007 had declined 58% from a figure of 201,957 to 85,608.<sup>6</sup> A large part of this decline can be traced to the Church's inability to attract younger generations to affiliate beyond nominal levels.

I have elsewhere identified at least two significant factors that challenge the capacity of Eastern Christian youth and young adults to develop strong religious commitment.<sup>7</sup> First, there is the phyletistic tendency of Eastern Churches to identify themselves primarily with ethnic or national groups.<sup>8</sup> This in turn can predispose younger members to stress social identity over religious affiliation.<sup>9</sup> In secular cultures preserving an ethnic identity is not straightforward but this is an easier task than maintaining an underlying religious affiliation based on what Stark and Finke have called an "exchange with the gods."<sup>10</sup> Many traditional religious groups have great difficulty in promoting the transcendent dimension within their communities.<sup>11</sup> The link between the transcendent and religious

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church: Does Organized Religion Matter Anymore?* (New York, Simon & Shuster, 1998), esp. 166–90.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Anderson, "The UGCC in Canada," *Progress: Ukrainian Catholic News*, 10 January 2010: 4.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rymarz, "Between Heaven and Earth: Challenges Facing Orthodox Christian Youth in Western Societies" in *International Handbook of the Religious, Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of Education*, eds. Marian deSouza, Gloria Durkha, Kathleen Engebretson, Andrew McGrath and Robert Jackson (Amsterdam: Springers, 2006), 513–525.

<sup>8</sup> John Erickson, *Orthodox Christians in America: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Ariela Keysar, Barry Kosmin, Jeffrey Scheckner, *The Next Generation: Jewish Children and Adolescents* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000); Yvonne Haddad, Jane, Smith and John Esposito, eds., *Religion and Immigration: Christian, Jewish and Muslim Experiences in the United States* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Roger Stark and Rodney Fink, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Bouma, *Religion: Meaning, Transcendence and Community in Australia* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992), 63–91; Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 103–06.