

Good and Bad News Regarding the Conflict in Ukraine: A Revolution of Dignity and an Ecumenism of Engagement

Consumers of news media in today's 24-hour news cycle often display a sort of Attention Deficit Disorder. Since news programs today often serve to entertain as much as they do to inform citizens of vitally important events, this is not entirely surprising. And yet, for several months, the situation in Ukraine grabbed world headlines. Of course, the news outlets almost universally focus on the sensational, the confrontational, and the violent, regularly failing to report on positive developments beyond brief statements of these occurring. Moreover, what is most often omitted is any deeper analysis of such positive events.

That is why it is important for *Logos* to offer at least a preliminary glance beyond the headlines at what is going on in Ukraine since November 2013 and especially at what the religious implications might be. The phenomenon of the *Euro-maidan* is a complex one. The term *maidan*, of course, simply refers to a public square. Millions of people walk through them and utilize them on a daily basis. Occasionally, in the face of an unresponsive political system, a public square turns into *the* public square. When the government is controlled to an inordinate degree by corruption (it is too idealistic to imagine that after the fall of humanity one could have a political system without *any* corruption), when cronyism and extortion take the place of civil society, and a sufficiently large percentage of the press and other media fall under the control of the corrupt political system or at least are docile to that system, the people rise up. This rising is usually initiated by a small group or groups of dissenters. These are people who have the sheer audacity to imagine a different reality, whether in response to a particular

question or as a generalized expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo.

In Ukraine, between November 2013 and late February 2014, a revolution took place. It was not led by the right wing junta so graphically described by the Russian government and the Russian media, over which the forces of Putinism exert a stranglehold. Instead, what happened was a “Revolution of Dignity.” What started as the protest of a certain number of university students and supporters against a president who betrayed the expectations for closer ties with Europe turned into a national movement to resist the thugs who had seized hold of the political process in the country and to carve out for the citizenry of Ukraine a life worth living again, in which citizens would take responsibility for their country and pay the price for such civic involvement. The dreams of European integration that served as a catalyst for the initial protests were transformed as the government of Victor Yanukovych attempted to crush them with brutal force.

Accustomed to the use of brutality through centuries of foreign occupation and nearly seventy years of Bolshevik rule, the ruling authorities in Kyiv completely miscalculated the depth of the discontent in the country. Analysts will surely spend years trying to come to grips with the pro-European protests in Ukraine and why they were able to topple a thuggish regime. As long as the events in Ukraine in 2014 are ascribed mainly to pro-European sentiments among a majority of the population, these events will be poorly understood. Human beings tend to exercise their sometimes-unruly instincts toward freedom more often *against* something that is rather than *for* something that might be. When we look at Europe today, it is hardly the model civilization for which people might want to risk their lives. In practice, Europe is consumerist, confused and spiritually insipid. The incredible weakness of the political leadership has never been so apparent as during the most overt phases of Russian aggression in Ukraine, when European leaders could not decide on an effective course of action in response to the most serious violent disregard for national sovereignty on the continent since World War II. The very thought of perhaps needing to sacrifice a little profit or a little energy

through effective economic sanctions against Russia threw the Western powers into utter disarray. The empty threats of the United States against Putinist adventurism only heightened the irony of Ukrainians willing to die for what the West stands for. Perhaps what drives Ukrainian idealists is the realization that what one stands for is rarely echoed in the way one actually lives. And they chose what the West conceivably stands for: the basic notion that individual human beings actually have inherent value and hence possess dignity. No human society has been entirely successful in fully protecting such dignity. Both the right and left have been much more deft at infringing upon the rights and values of some at the cost of others through the pursuit of misguided policies. Nevertheless, in democratic societies the human person is at least paid adequate lip service. And so it appears that a significant majority of the people of Ukraine chose this democratic ideal and indeed saw the events of 2014 as a “Revolution of Dignity.”

What is particularly lacking in press coverage of this momentous development is any attention to the remarkable unity exhibited by the historically fractious populace of Ukraine, especially in the religious realm. While the main stage of the Kyiv *maidan* was often occupied by entertainers who buoyed the spirits of the protesters and the politicians who read the signs of the times and attempted to earn political capital with the swelling masses both in Kyiv and throughout the country, the astute observer would have noticed that the whole phenomenon had some clearly religious overtones. To be sure, there were icons and crosses held in the crowd as well as decorating the main stage. This, in itself, is not yet the indication of something powerfully alive in the spiritual realm, as superstition is still very widespread in Ukraine as a result of cultural development that was stunted by oppression from miscellaneous foreign occupations of various durations over several centuries. Crosses, icons, and the like can be signs of an interior faith, but they can also be used simply like talismans, especially in dangerous situations, with no deep interiority manifesting itself.

Much more telling was the constant presence of the clergy and representatives of so many different religious traditions.

To be sure, some made speeches, supporting the rightful demands of the people. What was more powerful than well-chosen words was their serene unity and the witness of their constant prayer. Christians (representatives of all three major Orthodox jurisdictions, as well as Greco-Catholics, Roman Catholics, and various Protestant groups), Jewish rabbis, and Muslim imams stood on the stage and prayed, either together or in succession, day after day and, more importantly, night after night. Some prayed in Ukrainian, while others did so in Russian. To be fair, there was significant coverage of the inspiring photos of monks or priests standing between protestors and riot police, but some of the reports seemed to have a difficult time understanding the situation as more than a colorful stunt on the part of exotic-looking clerics. Believers in the West might have found the images inspiring. News editors probably saw in them award-winning photographs. There was, however, something unquestionably spiritual and God-centered going on as the protests unfolded. Patriarch Sviatoslav of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church put it aptly when he presented the spiritual nature of what was transpiring:

For many it was a nation-building experience. For many more, it was also a religious experience. Representatives of the Roman Catholic, Greco-Catholic, various Orthodox Churches, Baptists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and other Christians, Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams surrounded the maidan with prayer. Our people have been praying, praying, praying, in their homes, their parishes, in their workplaces, and at their computer screens, engaged in social media. They have prayed personally and communally. An “ecumenism of engagement” arose on the maidan. As we prayed together in various languages and in various faith traditions, we felt the presence of God. This is not just the naïve persuasion that “God is on our side, therefore we will prevail.” No, this experience of God’s presence was much more **nuanced**. Many felt in those critical last days before the snipers started massacring the protesters that this night, this hour might be the last hour

of our lives. And yet we felt, we saw with some of the clearest vision of our lives, that God indeed was with us. It so happened that what became the favorite prayer of the maidan was the passage from Isaiah: “God is with us, understand all you nations and submit, for God is with us!”¹

This is the kind of statement that one will almost never see in the secular press. But without it any analysis of what was happening in Ukraine and what is continuing to happen would be woefully incomplete and perhaps even distortive. Since 1996 there exists in Ukraine a body called The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. It includes representatives (at the national level) of some 95% of religious bodies operating in Ukraine. Interestingly, there is no such body in most Western democracies, and certainly not in Canada or the United States. Here Christians, Jews and Muslims have the opportunity to discuss issues of mutual concern. It is through this organization that these various religious groups have presented a united front regarding the Yanukovich government’s violent attempts to repress protestors in Kyiv. In fact, in their statement of February 19, 2014, the council beseeched both the protestors and the government to refrain from violence.² On February 22, the council issued a statement condemning any talk of separatism or division of the country as dangerous given the delicate situation. This same organization met with the government on February 26, 2014, soon after the election of an interim president following the flight of Yanukovich to Russia, issuing a statement condemning corruption and supporting the legitimacy of the new governing authorities. It included the following:

We condemn the provocations seeking to promote confrontation and hostility between people in different regions of Ukraine and between different ethnic and

¹http://news.ugcc.ua/en/articles/speech_of_his_beatitude_sviatoslav_at_the_institute_metropolitan_andrey_sheptytskyi_canada_toronto_may_2_2014_70326.html.

² <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements?start=10>.

religious minorities and we encourage the government to refrain from any steps that could be interpreted as seeking to divide Ukrainians on religious, linguistic, national, regional or other grounds. Under such difficult conditions, we must do our utmost to maintain a united Ukrainian state and we must take all possible steps to prevent any attempts to divide our country.³

When Russia's Council of the Federation authorized Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine on March 1, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations swiftly responded in the negative. In this statement the Council emphasizes the following.

The people of Ukraine have friendly, brotherly feelings toward the Russian people. The citizens of Ukraine do not desire any inflaming of enmity. We want to continue to build fraternal relations with Russia, as a sovereign, independent country.⁴

Also significant is the March 24th statement of this council regarding the normalization of the socio-political situation in Ukraine⁵. What most coverage of these statements by the Western press, even when it is religious press, fails to appreciate is the immense importance of the fact that it is precisely the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) that has been holding the rotating chair of this organization throughout this volatile period. In fact, this is positively astounding, given the fact that the Moscow Patriarchate itself has been, in recent years, propounding the idea of "the Russian world" (Russkii Mir) which Orthodox theologian Paul Gariyuk has described as "a quasi-ecclesiastical unification of the

³ <http://euromaidanpress.com/2014/03/07/statement-of-the-all-ukrainian-council-of-churches-and-religious-organizations-following-a-meeting-with-acting-president-oleksandr-turchinov>.

⁴ <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/380-council-of-churches-statement-on-decision-of-russian-military-invasion>.

⁵ <http://vrciro.org.ua/ua/statements/382-council-of-churches-address-on-socio-political-situation-in-ukraine>.

Eastern Orthodox Slavs on the so-called ‘spiritual space’ (whatever that means) of the same triad of Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia.”⁶ In various statements, Patriarch Kirill has taken care to avoid condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine. His August 15, 2014 letter to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew lays blame on the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyivan Patriarchate):

We cannot ignore the fact that the conflict in the Ukraine has unambiguous religious overtones. The Uniats and schismatics are trying to overpower the canonical Orthodox Church, which continues to minister with patience and courage to its suffering faithful in a harsh environment.

Both the Kyivan Patriarchate and the UGCC have rejected these claims as baseless. Patriarch Filaret of the Kyivan Patriarch made public a powerful, well-argued and ecumenically minded August 24 letter to Patriarch Bartholomew in which he defends not only his own Church, but also the Greco-Catholics. Patriarch Filaret rejects the notion of any sort of religious war in Eastern Ukraine and categorically states:

All of these facts testify that the infringements of the rights of the faithful is on the part of the terrorists who advertise the fact that they are acting in behalf of Russian Orthodoxy and are defending the so-called “Russian world.”... In reality this is a war by Russia against Ukraine, which has the character of seizure of territory.⁷

He condemns the hypocritical position of Patriarch Kirill “who in his public statements says that his Church does not intrude into the conflict but only prays, while in his letters to the

⁶ <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/04/the-president-and-the-patriarch>.

⁷ <http://www.cerkva.info/uk/patrosplannia/5375-lyst-patr-bartholomew.html>.

Primates of Churches sets out ideas that are entirely consonant with Russian state propaganda.^{8c}

Perhaps the most outrageous attempt to somehow turn the conflict in Ukraine into a religious war came from Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, the chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations. This prelate has repeatedly complained about the very existence of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church.

It is worth reproducing his words at length, simply because of their sheer audacity. Otherwise, accounts of his temerity might seem exaggerated.

During the third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Catholic Bishops on Pastoral Challenges to The Family in the Context of Evangelization, Metr. Hilarion, like other “fraternal delegates” from churches outside of the Catholic communion, was invited to deliver an address of greeting. In it he made some valuable statements regarding the challenges facing Christian family life. After stating that the Orthodox Church has retained the ancient practice of married clergy, common also to Eastern Catholics, he suddenly launched into a tirade of ecclesiastical politics that completely overshadowed his earlier contribution. This remarkable section of his intervention is reproduced below.

The Orthodox Church has accumulated a rich experience of pastoral care for the family. She has always preserved the institution of married clergy. As a rule, the families of priests are large and their children are brought up in the spirit of Christian devotion and faithfulness to church teaching. A priest with his own experience of family relations and parenting can better understand family problems and give his spiritual children the necessary pastoral aid. I believe it would be useful to notice this experience, which is also present in the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite.

⁸ Ibid.

Speaking about the Churches of the Eastern Rite, I would like to digress from the forum's topics and to touch upon an issue that has become today a stumbling block in the relations between the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches. It is the problem of Uniatism, which has become once again more acute as a result of the recent events in Ukraine. Regrettably, the conflict in that country, which has already taken the lives of thousands, from the very beginning has acquired a religious dimension.

A significant role in its conception and development has been played by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. From the very first days of the conflict, the Greek Catholics identified with one of the sides of the confrontation. Contrary to the respect for canonical norms prevailing in relations between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, the Greek Catholics have entered into active cooperation with the Orthodox schismatic groups.

The Joint Commission for Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue, as far back as 1993 in Balamand, recognized that Uniatism is not the way to unity. We are grateful to our Catholic brothers for their open recognition of the mistakenness of Uniatism. And we have to state regrettably again that Uniatism does not bring the Orthodox and the Catholics any closer to each other; on the contrary, it divides us.

On behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church, I would like to address the representatives of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church present in this hall with an appeal to renounce any statements on political topics and any visible forms of support of the schism as well as calls to create "one Local Church of Ukraine." For standing behind this call is a simple truth, the wish to tear away the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine from their

Mother Church, the Moscow Patriarchate, with which Ukraine has been bound by age-old blood ties.

The principal mission of the Church is to serve the cause of people's salvation. The mandate given to us by God does not presuppose interference in political and civil conflicts. In a world in which there are so many divisions, in which the very foundations of the survival of human civilization, including the institution of the family, are under threat, Christians are called to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Mt. 5:13–14), bringing all to the love of each other and to unity in Christ.

We can do much together, also for the protection of the Christians who have become today victims of persecution. In Iraq and Syria and in a number of other countries in the Middle East and Africa, Christians are subjected to genocide. We should do all that depends on us to stop the killing of Christians, to stop their mass exodus from the places where they have lived for centuries, to draw the attention of the whole world community to their calamitous state.

I wish you all, dear brothers, God's blessing and success in your efforts!⁹

Needless to say, during a synod on family life, this harangue was received with amazement and distaste. Pope Francis, present during this intervention, was clearly disappointed. Various heads of Catholic episcopal conferences rushed immediately after the day's session to assure Patriarch Sviatoslav of their solidarity with the UGCC and with Ukraine. Cardinal Dolan of New York was so incensed that he quickly approached Patriarch Sviatoslav for an interview on the subject for Dolan's radio program. A week later, having returned to Ukraine, Patriarch Sviatoslav stated in a press conference that

⁹ <https://mospat.ru/en/2014/10/16/news109624>.

it is obvious that “someone is striving to transfer the existing conflict onto religious ground, having inflamed inter-religious conflict.”¹⁰ He added that Metropolitan Hilarion’s intervention has done harm to the Orthodox Church and that ecumenical relations among the various confessions in Ukraine have actually never been better, noting that this is especially true of practical ecumenism of common engagement in issues of everyday life.

Thus, after several years of propagating the idea of some sort of “Russian world” by the Moscow Patriarchate, with a concomitant effort by Putin to establish a “Eurasian Union,” which is a similar idea in more purely political and economic terms, Russia’s incursion into Ukraine has caused unprecedented unity among the people of Ukraine, whether Ukrainian-speaking or russophone, no matter what their religious or ethnic background. Would that ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue could make such progress in peacetime!

This unity in Ukraine, the unity of a civil society in the making, is built on an *ecumenism of engagement*. While the Moscow Patriarchate professes its supposed neutrality in the face of a Russian invasion into Ukraine, the churches and religious bodies of the beleaguered nation engage the situation, calling for peace, but insisting that it be built on justice, carefully monitoring the moral rebuilding of the country and the necessary struggle against corruption. Various Churches have reminded the citizenry that their vote is a sacred trust and that to buy votes or to sell one’s vote in the present situation is a grave sin, deserving, perhaps, even of excommunication. The country is an economic shambles, and its sovereignty and territorial integrity are in doubt, but the people seem intent on realigning things according to a deeply felt moral compass. They no longer trust politicians to solve problems for them, but recognize that they themselves have a direct responsibility for the future of their own country, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multicultural and religiously pluralistic state. And the various Churches, including the leadership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, are working together to foster, inspire, and guide this

¹⁰ <http://ugcc.tv/ua/media/71836.html>.

civil society through the ecumenism of engagement. That is the good news.

The bad news is that the Russian government and the upper echelons of its favored church do not seem to have grasped the good news coming out of Ukraine. Perhaps the greatest information war since Goebbels has claimed them as its victims. It could just be that they actually believe the incredible stories that they put forward. There is an old Ukrainian saying about this sort of thing: "When the Lord wants to punish someone, he takes away their reason." Unfortunately, when one party acts in a completely unreasonable manner, suffering occurs. In this case, that suffering is on an enormous scale, as Putin wages his hybrid war and continues his efforts to destabilize the country that could have been his closest, most advanced, and most powerful ally, if only he were able to treat it as a neighbor rather than a tributary from which to exact his due.

The consoling factor in all of this is that Ukrainian believers of all stripes have learned from this strife to intensify their prayer and to live in solidarity with one another. Just about every religious group in Ukraine has suffered in some important way in the conflict. The non-Moscow aligned Orthodox Churches and the Greco-Catholic Church have lost houses of worship and other institutions in Crimea and in the Russian-held Eastern provinces. The Baptists and other Protestants in the East have suffered at the hands of rebel forces who, incredibly, consider them "agents of the CIA." Muslims in Crimea are feeling the heavy hand of Russian rule. Their leaders cannot travel safely between Crimea and the rest of Ukraine. Even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has suffered losses: several parishes have left the jurisdiction for the Kyivan Patriarchate and untold thousands of parishioners may individually switch allegiance due to their perception that to be tied to the Moscow Patriarchate in any way is disastrous for them (even among Russian speakers). Christians, Jews, and Muslims have seen their young soldiers die at the front and thousands of civilians have been caught in the crossfire as well. There is certainly enough pain to go around.

No one has been left unaffected. If anything will be able to heal the scars of this war-torn nation that has known so much suffering throughout its history, it is this new-found solidarity of believers, their rediscovery of the moral requirements of citizenship, and their ability to pray and work together to bind up the wounds of the people and to give them hope. It is my prayer that this be a lesson those believers in Ukraine will never forget. Out of the ashes of this terrible aggression, may God's light shine brightly as a beacon to other peoples. The protestors on the Kyiv maidan claimed that Ukraine needs to be part of Europe. As I observe some very noble and energetic developments in Ukraine and the simultaneous listlessness and loss of roots and resolve in Europe, I think it can be argued that today Europe needs Ukraine even more than Ukraine needs Europe.

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