

## Eastern Christianity and Contemporary Art: What William Kurelek Can Teach the Church He Left Behind

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*The following reflection was delivered at the Sheptytsky Institute on July 4, 2019 during a presentation of the new edition of William Kurelek's Passion of Christ, edited by Dr. Khrystyna Beregovska, a noted art historian based in Lviv, Ukraine.*



### ***Introduction***

Dr. Beregovska's new edition of Kurelek's *Passion of Christ* has already been launched at two other venues here in Toronto.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, I decided that it would be appropriate to conduct the first half of this evening's events in a way that foregrounds the specific nature of our venue, the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute, which is devoted to the study of Eastern Christian theology in all its breadth.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I am finally giving voice to thoughts that have been percolating in my mind since at least 1981, the year I wrote a piece for the Ukrainian newspaper *Svoboda*, extolling the theological genius

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<sup>1</sup> William Kurelek, *Спасаючи Христосом/The Passion of Christ*, ed. Khrystyna Beregovska (Lviv, Ukraine: Apriori, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The second half of the formal launch consisted of a lecture by Dr. Beregovska.

of Kurelek's *A Northern Nativity*.<sup>3</sup> More recently, I did a series of clips for the weekly Ukrainian TV program KONTAKT summarizing some of the ideas from that article written almost 40 years ago.

The aforementioned newspaper piece was written with the painful knowledge that William Kurelek, baptized into an Eastern Church, could not ultimately find needed spiritual sustenance in his native Orthodoxy. The spiritual tradition that he turned to during his mental breakdown was Roman Catholicism.<sup>4</sup> Note, however, that when I say "painful knowledge," I am not begrudging the Holy Spirit's wisdom in converting Kurelek through that Western tradition – and I use the word "conversion" here in the sense of a radical change in life orientation, not in the sense of changing denominational allegiance. Such a begrudging would indeed be petty, a symptom of the kind of identity politics that has plagued the Eastern Churches, and Catholic proselytism, for far too long. It would also be typical of the kind of institutional wrangling that has nothing to do with the gospel.

What I mean, then, by "painful knowledge" is that an Eastern Christian tradition of great depth was unable to serve Kurelek when he needed it. The reasons for that are manifold, grounded in everything from demographics to sociology to theology. And it is the kind of issue that consumes those of us committed to revitalizing the various Eastern Christian traditions in Western environments. But allow me to re-iterate my earlier point: one can only rejoice and applaud those Roman Catholics – faithful to their tradition – who were present in the mid-1950s and afterwards to guide Kurelek to a healing experience of Christ's light.

In any case, what I would like to do this evening is indicate – in our post-institutional age – how William Kurelek was

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<sup>3</sup> In this series of paintings with accompanying descriptions, Kurelek depicts the Christ Child and Holy Family in a variety of Canadian contexts, emphasizing the presence of Christ among the poor and marginalized. William Kurelek, *A Northern Nativity: Christmas Dreams of a Prairie Boy* (Toronto: Tundra Books, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> For the most recent overview of Kurelek's life and work, which also provides a fulsome bibliography of works by and about Kurelek, see Michael D. O'Brien, *William Kurelek: Painter and Prophet* (Ottawa: Justin Press, 2013).

and remains an outstanding gift to Eastern Christianity, a form of Christianity that he nonetheless left behind. In an era that provides exciting opportunities for cultural cross-fertilization, Kurelek is a prodigious resource for synthesizing the best in Eastern Christianity with the best in Western Christianity. This is no mean task, especially when one considers how Eastern Churches sometimes meld *the worst* of the two traditions.

My talk will proceed in three stages. I will begin by discussing how Kurelek's rustic realism is a necessary supplement to Byzantine iconography's eschatological realism. I will then reflect on how the canonical sacred art of Eastern Christianity receives an important complement in the "non-canonical" art of Kurelek. Finally, I will conclude with several disparate remarks regarding other important elements of Kurelek's work. I hope, of course, that no one will construe my presentation as a suggestion that Kurelek's genius derives from its utility. I firmly believe in *ars artis* – art for art's sake. But to the extent that – to quote Platonic "doctrine" – beauty is the form of the good, whenever that beauty truly serves the good, such service deserves to be exulted and expounded upon.

### ***Rustic Realism and Eschatological Realism***

I suspect most of my audience today does not need an explanation of what I mean by rustic realism. I do not know enough about art history to be able to say whether Kurelek's style can be appropriately defined in that way. But that is how I view it. Anyone familiar with Kurelek's work must admit that it exudes a sincerity that is simple and yet evocative of the deepest dimensions of unadorned human experience.

But what, on the other hand, is *eschatological* realism, and why is Kurelek's art a necessary supplement to it? Eschatological realism is the term used to define the style characteristic of classical Byzantine iconography. This form of "theology in colour" (as Byzantine iconography is aptly described) attempts a nuanced and balanced melding of realism and abstraction. The relative realism in iconography is an attempt to give credence to the true humanity and historicity of the persons or events being depicted; the abstraction, on the other hand,