

Christian? No. Orthodox? Apparently so.

by Larissa Bayrachny

Many in the Ukrainian community are aware of what is happening in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada (UOCC) and many are not. More specifically, there is a serious division amongst the faithful as to the future direction of our church.

There are two sides to the dilemma. There are those who support the UOCC's decision to work towards the unity of all Orthodox faithful in North America, under the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (EP). This is a virtuous ideal but leads to the other side of the dilemma: many Ukrainian Orthodox faithful are deeply disturbed by the intent of pan-Orthodoxy to blur, if not eliminate, the ethnic component of our church. This is disturbing, as this intent was not disclosed as part of the 1990 agreement with the Ecumenical Patriarch. In addition, as the Ecumenical Patriarch regards the Moscow Patriarchate (MP) as the only legitimate Orthodox church in Ukraine, any sort of affiliation with the Ecumenical Patriarch provokes deep concerns. And, to the profound astonishment of many, it appears that the UOCC supports this position as evidenced by the events surrounding His Holiness Patriarch Filaret's visit to Canada.

As the common people argue amongst themselves, our hierarchy continues to remain silent on these issues, with the exception of a published rebuttal to the hundreds of letters and emails sent to the consistory regarding the visit of His Holiness Patriarch Filaret, Kyivan Patriarchate (KP). The scandal is out in the open and the hierarchy is only hurting itself by keeping silent.

In 1990, at the Sobor of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada, delegates voted to enter the union with the EP. However, we need to address the questions that persist today – what exactly does the union with the EP mean for our church moving forward and has our hierarchy been clear and transparent all along with its members? And with its clergy, as well?

If the “elimination” of the “Ukrainian” in our church was part of the original agreement between the UOCC and the EP and if the delegates were fully aware of this and the vote was still in favour, then why are there so many parishioners completely unaware of this? Has there been anything in any of the publications released by the Consistory clarifying this for the people? Have the concept and implications of pan-Orthodoxy been shared with parishioners and with all of our clergy? Obviously not, since there are so many people that have been taken aback by this revelation and the UOCC's current position on the matter. Most, particularly in eastern Canada, are not aware that they are on the road to being members of the Orthodox Church of Canada, without the “Ukrainian” in it.

On the other hand, if the delegates were led to believe that the union would allow the faithful to continue as they were, to retain their Ukrainian culture and heritage, and full sobornopravnist', then the recent events that have taken place with the visit of His Holiness Patriarch Filaret to Canada have proven this to be false and that the terms have been broken. If the delegates were misled, then we can cry foul and we should be demanding our hierarchy take responsibility for this deceit and/or ultimately demand their removal from the positions they hold. The faithful have been denied and continue to be denied access to the actual Articles of Agreement as agreed upon between the UOCC and the EP.

One cannot truly believe that their soul will be "saved" by those that deliberately have lied to further their own personal agendas. If pan-Orthodoxy has been the intended path all along, then action is required by the people. Without the people, there is no parish. Without parishes, there is no money. Without the faithful, our hierarchy and clergy would have their place in monasteries and not amongst us. The UOCC must be accountable to its paying members and should be acting on their concerns with the EP; we should be pressuring them to do so. And if they cannot, then we should be demanding to know why. And we do deserve some explanations. Educate us, if you deem that we do not understand the complicated nature of your negotiations.

On the matter of canonical or not – these laws were made by man and there is no reason that they should not be challenged if they are contrary to our faith; the greatest commandment that Jesus Christ put forth "Love thy neighbour as thyself" overrides all canonical laws, therefore, the people should have been allowed to meet and greet His Holiness Patriarch Filaret on that principle alone. If this mandate came down as stated in the letter from the Ecumenical Patriarch, then he himself, with all due respect, is not following God's commandments and therefore, there is warranted suspicion that he, too, has a hidden agenda - one that serves his own personal plan.

Giving the UOCC hierarchy the benefit of the doubt, the pan-Orthodox plan may have only become known after the union with the EP in 1990 and has been evolving over the years. But if so, once again, why did our hierarchy not share this vision with all the members of the UOCC? Were there ongoing concerns that letting parishioners know exactly what was happening would be like opening Pandora's Box and they chose not to have to deal with it? If this is the case, the head of our hierarchy, has not only betrayed his flock, but Ukraine and his own Ukrainian ancestors and heritage. Especially so, if he was aware of the road he was taking us down, all along.

The amalgamation of all Orthodox churches, without ethnicity regarded as a priority, will slowly erode and eliminate the Ukrainian aspect of our parishes. Those wanting to retain their Ukrainian

heritage and the Ukrainian Orthodox church in both Canada and the USA are having a very difficult time accepting this reality. As a result, some have chosen collectively to remain Ukrainian Orthodox by turning to the Kyivan Patriarchate because the Ecumenical Patriarch's vision of a unified Orthodox faith does not embrace the ethnic lines of division.

The EP's vision is moving steadily forward in North America and it will only be a matter of time before it directly affects each and every one of us. For those in the Eastern Eparchy, it already has – the title of Bishop of Toronto, which has been in place for over 50 years, has been revoked because there is already a Bishop of Toronto, albeit Greek. As well, parishioners are being told whom they can and cannot welcome into their churches as evidenced by His Holiness Patriarch Filaret's visit to Canada.

Most of us have grown up in churches that are both Orthodox and Ukrainian. Our religion and ethnicity are one. Our communities revolve around this fact. If it did not matter, one could join the closest Orthodox church in the vicinity. If the Ukrainian part of it is no longer important for some, then it is completely understandable that the amalgamation is a wonderful thing. However, for many, both religion and ethnicity are inseparable. Many are at a loss as to why our Metropolitan did not have the courage to stand up to the Ecumenical Patriarch, particularly for what he knows defines us as a people. The issue here is what we don't know - the reluctance on the part of our hierarchy to be honest with us, and their failure to accept the consequences of their actions and/or inactions.

If you consider yourself Ukrainian and Orthodox, it is a given that you believe the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Ukraine needs to be free of the Moscow Patriarchate (MP). Currently, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Ukraine that stands independently of Moscow is under the Kyivan Patriarchate and we should be supporting the KP, not just with words but also by actions. This does not necessarily mean by joining the KP but by preserving our church in the Diaspora, by rallying to see the Moscow Patriarchate leave Ukraine, to see the return of all Ukrainian property back to the Ukrainian people and to see a truly independent church, free of foreign intervention in order to support a truly independent Ukraine. And, ultimately pressuring the EP to recognize the KP in Ukraine on their terms, not on Moscow's. Now that Ukraine is free, there is no reason for the MP to continue its reign in Ukraine, except one of monetary greed. As good Christians, they should return what they have taken from Ukraine, what is rightfully belonging to the Ukrainian people – the churches, the monasteries, the power...

Our hierarchy must listen to the words being spoken. It is their responsibility as role models to make peace amongst the people – not allow them to continue arguing. They should be striving to help

those parishes that are failing financially to find solutions – not closing them down without compromise, as recently has been happening. Their obligation should be finding a way to keep the people in our churches – whether it is amalgamating our Ukrainian parishes, sharing priests and/or rotating priests... but shutting down parishes in which parishioners have bounced back with the will to continue? To not find amicable solutions? That the only way is to sell the property?

The people in New Westminster, BC, who are suing the UOCC for the return of the deed to their church, looked for a solution – they had only two choices, it was either join the Kyivan Patriarchate as a member church or shut its doors and have the Consistory assume title and sell their property. They chose to join the KP rather than be without a church. Ask yourself the question – what would you do if you were told you had to close down your church and that the Consistory would sell the land and keep the proceeds? Would you fight to save it? Without personally knowing anyone in this parish, one can still sympathize with them. It is very disillusioning in that a compromise was not found. One would think that if a group of people came back wanting to save their church that our hierarchy would have worked with them to find a solution. From the rhetoric seen in recent chains of emails amongst the faithful, it does not sound like that was the case. Therefore, it should not be held against them in that they wanted to save their parish – they did not flip to the KP on a whim. We now are waiting to see what will happen with St. Anne's in Scarborough, Ontario. Once again, it has been reported that the UOCC is not willing to entertain viable solutions that would keep the parish viable and active.

If the current concerns of his followers were truly important to His Eminence, then he would listen and value their opinions rather than waving them off. The Sobors have lost credibility in the eyes of many as the outcomes have been often compromised. So where does that leave the people?

The parishes will need to decide what the future holds for them. Moreover, they should be let go freely if that is what they choose. However, that would only happen if this were not about money. It is not about doing what is right by the people and staying true to the commandments. Sadly, these words are all moot because everything points to the fact that this is about politics, power and money.

Christian? No.

Orthodox? Apparently so.

Submitted on behalf of *The Brotherhood for the Revitalization of Ukrainian Orthodoxy in Canada*, a group of private individuals concerned about the future of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada - "Preserving, Protecting and Revitalizing our Faith and Ukrainian heritage for our generation and those to follow." Find out more at www.BRUOC.ca

October 2012