

The Ukraine

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I accompanied His Eminence, Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, from Rome to this country of Eastern Europe. The governor of state of the Vatican city is to preside at two marian celebrations of particular historical importance for which they are expecting a great inflow of pilgrims. The two shrines are emblematic places in the religious history of the country, but first we shall offer a general consideration of the Ukraine. It is always helpful to know something of its past and present.

A country between the Carpathian mountains and the Black Sea

As a first reflection I prefer the above geographical description of the Ukraine to all other historical titles, that are more elusive, like the Soviet republic, for example. Territorially the Ukraine is, after Russia, the second largest country in Europe. It has a population of 53 million. The word Ukraine means border country. It is on the edge of the steppes to the north of the Black Sea and forms the frontier between the nomadic civilizations, the slavic christian world and the turkish-tatar world. Ukraine does not have natural boundaries, with the exception of the Carpathian mountains in the west. These mountains form a 280 kms (175 miles) long chain with an average width of 100 kms (60 miles), extending from the north east to the south, before entering into Romania. Instead of accepting the Ukraine with her own identity, it was often considered as a frontier country for other people.

Before the Ukraine's independence it lived under the dominion of different foreign powers: the great duchy of Lithuania, the Kingdom of Poland, the Russian empire, the empire of the Habsburgs of Austria. In the 20th century, Poland and Russia divided up the country among themselves. The catholics in the west and the orthodox in the east have shaped the culture of this country.

In the year 988 the prince, Saint Vladimir (962-1015) introduced christianity into the empire in Kiev, from where it extended to Russia. Pope John Paul II celebrated the millenium of the baptism of its patronal saint from July 8-10, 1988. He took the opportunity in a commemorative discourse, to evaluate the significance of that event that guided the successive history of the Ukraine. The emblematic symbol of the three teeth, dating back to the time of Saint Vladimir, has been restored to the present national coat of arms. The young state tore itself away from the Soviet Union in 1991 when the Berlin wall collapsed. In its declaration of independence its thousand year old roots were mentioned: the Kiev empire from the 10th to 13th century, the principality of Galicia-Volinia in the 13th to 14th centuries, the hegemony of the cossacks from Dnieper, in the 17th century, the peoples'republic from 1918-1920. I don't know if Russia had assimilated the historical inheritance of the Kiev Kingdom. Thus the titles for the Ukraine have passed down, from the Small Russia and Rutenia.

The first appearance of the word Ukraine appears in the 12th-13th centuries, to designate the borders of the Kiev Kingdom. The original name of 'Rus' was latinized into Rutenia. We associate the Ukraine with the cossacks. Cossack means 'free warrior'. They were warriors who fought against the turks-tartars, who from the 15th century were mercenaries for different chiefs from the steppes region. In 1648 they organized a revolution that marked the end of polish influence in eastern Europe.

Among other nuggets from history, is the title of this country as the 'granary of Europe.' It was precisely for this reason that the politics of the Soviet caused two horrendous famines, the first (1921) led to the death of more than one million inhabitants and the second (1932-34) ended with the death of six million.

Closer to our own day, there is still the ghost of Chernobyl. During the night of April 25-26, 1986 a nuclear accident happened. While conducting an experiment to find out how much time

the turbines would still function after sealing the vapour entrance, the nuclear reactor completely lost control. Two explosions destroyed the cement roof. In a few seconds a radioactive cloud emerged. For 12 days they attempted to repair the damage. Using helicopters they poured 10,000 tons of sand, clay, mud and lead to try to extinguish the fire. However, the nuclear catastrophe had by now done untold damage, the affects of which are still felt today. How many people died, how many defective births, malformed fetuses and cancers were caused by that tragic night in Chernobyl? The area is still contaminated.

The best known writer is Nicolaj Vasil'evic Gogol (1809-1852). Even though he wrote his novels in russian in the tzarist period, his popular expressions and dialogues are typically ukrainian.

What about the religious history of the country? We have alluded to Saint Vladimir. The orthodox church can count on 35 million faithful. It is divided into three factions: two autonomous and the other subject to the patriarch in Moscow. The Catholic church pertains to the faithful of the roman rite or latin and greek. The latter, also called 'uniates' or 'rutenos', come from the union of some schismatic bishops from Rome together with their congregations in 1595, ratified by the Brest synod. In the 18th and 19th centuries the Uniate Catholic church found a lot of support among the 'intelligentsia' or nationalist intellectuals. After the second world war religious persecution by the Soviets grew worse, there were many martyrs. The mythical archbishop, Joseph Slypyj spent many years in prison, until 1963. With the beginning of the Vatican's 'ostpolitik', he was released and came to live in exile in Rome. This hero of the faith died in Rome in 1984, and in 1993 his body was translated to his country. It was there in L'viv that we venerated it in St. George's cathedral.

L'viv – Leopoli

This is the first stage of our journey. In order to avoid a cacophony of terms we tried to understand the different names of the city. This historical city of West Ukraine is called L'viv in ukrainian, L'vov in russian and Lwów in polish. The austro-hungarian empire coined the name Lemberg. In church literature and latin the name Leopoli is used. Behind the names are events. Still in 1919 it remained annexed to Poland, until in 1939 when it was invaded by Russia as part of the Stalin-Hitler agreement. Today L'viv is the main city in western Ukraine, with a million inhabitants. Kiev is the political capital. However, the bridge between central and western europe passes again through L'viv. For this reason it is strategically and culturally important.

In the first partition of Poland (1772) L'viv was converted into the capital of Galizia and Volinia, which at the end of the Hapsburg empire was called Lodomerien. After Vienna, Budapest and Prague, L'viv or Lemberg was the fourth city of the empire, even though the furthest from Vienna. I shall transcribe this general description of the place by Alexander Granach: "This area of western Galizia offers 'reserves of oil, yellow tobacco, the best sorghum, ancient forests, rivers and lakes, above all, beautiful and healthy people: ukrainians, poles and jews... The three peoples are alike, inspite of their differences in practices and customs..."

Here our polish province made an historical foundation in 1613, with a church in a primitive baroque style. With later suppressions and restorations in several places, the last priory that goes back to 1932 was confiscated by the soviet communists in 1946. A year earlier the convent of our carmelite nuns had been transferred to Przemyśl, Poland.

Upon our arrival at the airport of this city we were met by an impressive delegation, consisting of the nuncio of the Ukraine, the latin archbishop and his auxiliary. Everything was presided over by the main archbishop of the greek-catholic church, cardinal Husar Lubomyr. He is almost blind, but a venerable incarnation, and a man with a lot of passion, and much interior light. He welcomed us with great warmth and kindness.

Together we visited the greek-catholic seminary and the fledgling but promising catholic university. In many cities in eastern europe you will see fine icons, both old and modern, but the L'viv icon museum is exceptional. Our visit was important for a possible future exhibition in the vatican museums.

We were hosts of the greek-catholic metropolitan, Mgr. Ihor Vazniak, always with the same attentive concern of his boss, cardinal Husar. We celebrated mass in the latin cathedral, and with the latin archbishop, Mgr. Mieczysław Mokrzycki we walked around the centre of the city.

I was curious to see the old carmelite church of the polish province, but I did not have time to go inside, today it is a church of the greek-catholic rite.

We made our way to the marian celebration that night in Ternopil, but before reaching this place we were welcomed by a delegation from the diocese, consisting of their bishop, Mgr. Vasy Semeniuk, a group of children and young people. As a sign of welcome, they offered cardinal Lajolo bread and salt. We listened to speeches and songs. Guided by a police escort we continued on our journey, always in the good company of the nuncio of the Ukraine.

In Zarvanytsia a surprise awaited us. It was a huge marian shrine with different kinds of buildings on a terrace. A crowd of more than 40,000 people attended the torch-light procession. Both cardinals took part. The greek catholic bishops wear a tiara instead of a mitre. How many were there? A seminarian whispered to me the secret that they did this so as to distinguish themselves from other ecclesial dignitaries also vested in formal dress: on the pectoral cross only the bishops wear the effigy of the 'panaghia' (of the blessed Virgin). Who could forget the scene with all those thousands of people acclaiming the Blessed Virgin during a night vigil, and everything done without any hurry?

Berdychiv

For my mediterranean ears the name of this city seems strange, slavic, far away, unknown. However, Berdychiv counts among its many citizens an exceptional spokesperson. The young professor, Joseph Ratzinger in his 'Introduction to Christianity' (1967), asked in the first chapter if it is still possible in today's world to believe. Quoting Martin Buber, the present Pope offered as proof the reflection of the 'man from Berdychiv,' Zaddik, in his search for faith and in dialogue with the rabbi, Levi Jizchark.

We shall not omit a single detail. The present diocese of Zytomir, 160 kms [100 miles] west of Kiev, enters into our carmelite history, as it links up with the missionary seminaries that the carmelites had in Rome, Malta, Louvain, and in Meulun (France). The palatine of Kiev, Janusch Thyszkiewicz was imprisoned by the tartars. In desperation he abjured the orthodox schism and made a vow: if he obtained his freedom, he would build a priory, its members must work for the conversion of the schismatics until their unity with Rome. His intention was confirmed when he saw a vision of a woman dressed as a carmelite. When he later entered our church in Lublin he realized he had seen no less than Saint Teresa of Jesus.

In 1628 he managed to get a license from the Order. It took a long time to build the church, but in 1642 it was consecrated in the presence of the founder-benefactor. From the beginning the carmelite community focussed on the conversion of the cossacks and the orthodox, as the chronicles specify, 'with great patience.' They endured the incursions of the cossacks led by Bohdan Chmel'nyč'kyj between 1648-1653, and the turks in 1699, which brought death and many difficulties.

The primitive seminary was restored in 1717. Later an important library was added, plus an historical printing press that printed ukrainian, rutenian, polish and russian literature, plus also a hospital and a pilgrimage centre. I asked myself if the Order had ever had a project of such vast dimensions. The priory was constructed as a fortress, having its own equipment ('fortalitium B.V. Mariae') to defend itself against the invading cossacks. They still lost their walls. These were then restored in a way that shows off clearly the physiognomy of a priory-fortress. In one of the frequent and destructive revolutions in the area everything was suppressed in 1867. In 1918, when Poland, obtained its independence that had been lost in the 18th century, the carmelites returned to Berdychiv. However, in 1926 during the communist regime, they were obliged to abandon the place.

The beautiful baroque church was converted from the beginning into a sanctuary with a miraculous painting of the Blessed Virgin, a copy of the 'Salus populi romani' in the basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. In a vertical position it measures 120 cm by 75. (50 x 30 ins), and represents the Virgin with the infant Jesus on her left arm, the carmelite scapular in her right hand., This marian image by an unknown artist was donated by the founder, and canonically crowned in 1756. For the fame of the shrine and the attraction of pilgrims it has been compared to the shrines in Czestochow in Poland, Ostra Brama in Vilnius (Lithuania), Loreto in Italy and Monteserrat in Spain.

During the bolshevik devolution the church was converted into a museum of atheism. The only religious object that was preserved was the miraculous painting of the blessed Virgin, for its historical value. The lower part or crypt functioned as a cinema for young communists.

However, the memory and nostalgia for this place never died in carmel in Poland. During the first waves of 'perestrojka' the polish carmelites returned as missionaries to this place that is so full of historical significance. After 64 years of interruption Fr. Philip Sáinz de Baranda, then General of the Order, from the Burgos province, was able to celebrate mass on July 16, 1990 in the square, in front of the shrine's ruined facade. The restoration has been slow and expensive. However, as a result of the restoration, devotion to the Blessed Virgin of Carmel from Berdychiv, has reawakend throughout the country, renewing the tradition of the national shrine as a place of pilgrimage from within the Ukraine and Russia, with processions of young people ... On March 10, 1997 the Holy See reauthorized the canonical coronation of the image, now protected from profanations and exposed to veneration by a growing number of people.

On the Sunday closest to the solemnity of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel a great marian gathering came together in this Ukrainian city. Over a period of several days and by stages young pilgrims made their way to the shrine, sleeping in churches and schools along the way. They arrived in their thousands in Berdychiv, in time for vespers, with an accumulated enthusiasm and fervour from their vigils along the way. The young people's mass, with more than 5,000 participating, was a promising prelude to the feast. This was a sign of their fervent faith, which was confirmed by the commitments they made ... It was the great get-together, the annual meeting of young ukrainian christians. The effect was one of renewal that spread far and wide. That night the exhausted pilgrims slept in their sleeping bags. They had to be ready for the following day.

We arrived in the city, having first been at the marian celebrations in Zarvanytsia, a distance away of some 300 kms (190 miles). We arrived in time for the solemn celebration at midday. I remember that on this day the temperature reached 39 degrees. It was even more reason to admire the faith of these pilgrims, exposed as they were to the pitiless sun for hours. The bishop of Zytomir and a carmelite representation welcomed us. The reason for Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo's visit was (he explained it on different occasions and before different authorities) the carmelite celebration in Berdychiv. It is a shrine in a latin rite environment: poor but most admirable. The very expensive reconstruction is proceeding slowly. Also here various bishops concelebrated, all in the latin-rite. Among them was our brother, Mgr. Anders Arbolierius, ocd, Archbishop of Stockholm, Sweden.

At the beginning of the mass the papal nuncio to the Ukraine read out a special message from the Pope, signed by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of state. 'His Holiness unites himself spiritually to all those gathered together each year in this centre of marian spirituality... How many generations of believers have come together in prayer before the ancient and beautiful icon of Our Lady of Berdychiv! ... The Holy Father wants to encourage the catholic community in the Ukraine to hold fast to the school of Mary in order to grow in its spiritual enthusiasm and in its witness to the Gospels. He exhorts, above all, the young people, to convert themselves into evangelizers of their fellow citizens ...'

For his part, Cardinal Lajolo began his homily, 'I cannot hide my emotions.' He continued afterwards, 'This is a place that is full of history. Not only of human events. It is a place sealed with the will of God, of His love. God wants to be recognized and loved by the ukrainian people and by all peoples. For many years last century this building had become a museum of atheism ...' To the obvious delight of the public the Cardinal proclaimed the Blessed Virgin of Mt. Carmel of Berdychiv as 'salus populi ucraini', just like the painting, from which it was inspired, of the Virgin 'salus populi romani' in the basilica of Saint Mary Major.

Kiev

Our next stop was the capital. The Nuncio offered me hospitality in his place. The impression one gets of the ukrainian capital is of gaudiness, with the many golden domes reflecting the sun. Kiev stands proud before Moscow, with its orthodox church and also before the tzarist city of Saint Petersburg. In this place of the 'Ru's', next to the river Dnieper, the

saintly prince Vladimir Sviatoslavitch was baptised in 988, thus beginning the christianization of the slavic people in this area, even though later the administrative centre, for historical reasons, would pass to Moscow. Leaving aside the many marvels of the city and considerations of its history, I would just like to record its geographical dimensions: 42 kms (26 miles) from north to south and 35 kms (22 miles) from east to west. Its surface area covers 829 square kms (515 sq., miles), for 3 million inhabitants.

His Eminence consecrated the carmel on July 20, the feast of St. Elijah. He presided at the celebration with various carmelites in the convent of our nuns, keeping up a lengthy dialogue with the community. We came together for lunch in the carmelite priory. The Cardinal was informed about the parish life, with small pockets of the faithful spread out over a vast area. Our brothers accompanied us when, in the afternoon, we visited the historical centre.

The following day, before taking our return flight to Rome, and thanks to the Nuncio, we were able to visit the Santa Sofia cathedral. There we descended to the monastery formed out of caves, which is part of UNESCO's world heritage. The welcome by the orthodox monks was exquisite. We were received formerly by the archbishop, who directed various questions to Cardinal Lajolo. In conclusion the archbishop offered up a prayer for union and for fraternity.

Conclusion

After our visit to Malawi in 2007, I convinced Cardinal Lajolo to make this visit to the Ukraine. He was convinced that he should take an interest in an overview of eastern Europe, with its diversified contexts. Here is where the Orthodox faith lives, as well as ecumenism, inter-ritual faith of the greek-catholic and latin churches. He was able to confirm, experience and live all of this in its most natural environment. Apart from the many personal contacts that his Eminence made, the constant information of the Nuncio, Mgr. Ivan Jurkovic was an original source. The Cardinal had not wanted to leave disappointed. What he heard, saw and experienced superceded all his expectations. He saw and he praised the people's faith, who have many past martyrs, but also many living witnesses today. He noted the open wound of the division between the churches, and the difficult challenge of ecumenism.

The visit stimulated our carmelite presence in the Ukraine. It was an important endorsement for the ancient shrine of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel of Berdychiv. The entire carmelite Order owes the Cardinal a debt of gratitude for this trip, and for his message. Everywhere he went and on various occasions, Cardinal Lajolo confirmed that he had come to the Ukraine on the invitation of the carmelites, accompanied by a carmelite friar, for carmelite reasons.

For my part, my second time in this country, the visit helped me to fix better in mind the memories and impressions of my first visit. The unpublished chapter was the contact with the greek-catholic church. I appreciated it very much, because it reminded me of the apostolate among the 'rutenos' or 'uniates' of the carmelite missionaries on their way to Persia in 1605, after their first contact with the slavic world in Prague and Cracow. In particular, I was greatly impressed by the life and formation of some greek-catholic seminarians in Ternopil.

The Ukraine is a country whose ancient people have suffered for their christian faith. The ukrainian people have not forgotten the past. They can teach the present generation and everyone from their past experiences, as well as their present.