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Trapped Between Two Churches: Orthodox and Greek-Catholics in Eastern Poland

SERGE KELEHER

In 1596 the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Kiev and All Rus' entered into communion with the Roman Catholic Church, in an arrangement usually called the Union of Brest.¹ Bishop Dionysius (Zbirujski) of Kholm was among the hierarchs who sealed the act of union, and thus the diocese of Kholm² became part of what was originally termed the 'Uniate' Church, and later the Greek-Catholic Church.³ The faithful of this diocese would have spoken late-medieval Rusyn (the language which philologists today call Ukrainian) in some districts, late-medieval Belarusyn in other districts, and early-modern Polish to some extent. Religious distinctions were more important than ethnic distinctions at the time; people normally identified themselves by their church affiliation. Politically, these faithful were all inhabitants of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which had resulted from the Jagellonian Union of those two states in 1569.⁴ The territory of this diocese was to remain under Polish control until the third partition of Poland in 1795, when the city of Kholm and some of the diocesan territory passed into Austrian hands. After the Congress of Vienna (September 1814–June 1815) the city of Kholm and its diocesan territory became part of what is sometimes called the 'Congress Kingdom' of Poland. The tsar of Russia was also king of Poland under this arrangement, which lasted until the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917.

Besides the Kholm diocese in the Congress Kingdom, the partitions of Poland and the Napoleonic wars brought several other Greek-Catholic dioceses under the control of tsarist Russia. The Russian government disapproved of the Greek-Catholic Church, and made strenuous efforts to aggregate the Greek-Catholics to the Russian Orthodox Church. By 1839 the Russian government succeeded in doing this in most of Ukraine and Belarus'.⁵ The only remaining Greek-Catholic diocese in tsarist territory was the Kholm diocese.

In principle Greek-Catholics retain the Eastern Orthodox tradition in matters of spirituality, theology, liturgy and discipline, but in practice the Greek-Catholic Churches have usually been severely romanised or 'latinised' in each of these areas.⁶ The Greek-Catholics in the Kholm diocese had endured a heavy dose of this 'latinisation'. By the middle of the nineteenth century the churches did not have icons; the altar tables were fixed to the wall (which makes the processions and incensations that are necessary for the Byzantine liturgical tradition impossible); numerous Roman Catholic devotional practices and liturgical furnishings had been introduced everywhere; and the liturgical texts had been seriously altered in a romanising direction.⁷ The churches were furnished with organs, confessionals, and

monstrances; various Roman Catholic devotions such as the feast of Corpus Christi, the blessing of fire, the Holy Hour, the Rosary, and the Stations of the Cross were in common use. The Greek-Catholic priests dressed and groomed themselves like Roman Catholic clergy. By the latter part of the nineteenth century the Greek-Catholics in the Kholm diocese had lost even the memory of much of their own authentic Orthodox tradition.

Emerging nationalism added to the confusion. The Greek-Catholic clergy, attracted by the semblance of Polish cultural superiority, preached sermons in Polish. In Galicia, further to the south and under Austrian control, by the middle of the nineteenth century the Greek-Catholic clergy were preaching in Ukrainian, and became one of the most important elements in the Ukrainian national revival. Nothing comparable occurred in the Kholm diocese. Still, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, ideas were stirring everywhere. Other Greek-Catholic clergy in Galicia preferred to consider themselves Russians, and looked to Russia for leadership and example, without necessarily advocating a breach of communion with Rome.

One such priest was Fr Markel Popiel. An ardent advocate of the strict Byzantine liturgical tradition, he eventually left Galicia and secured a teaching position at the Greek-Catholic theological seminary in Kholm, where he became rector in the 1860s. His liturgical and ethnic preferences attracted the favourable attention of the tsarist government. In 1871 the bishop of Kholm, Mgr Mikhail Kuzemsky, abandoned his diocese and fled to L'viv, in Austrian-controlled Galicia, without asking permission of the pope. The bishop never returned (he died in 1879). The tsarist government appointed Fr Popiel administrator of the diocese in the absence of the bishop. Fr Popiel embarked on a programme of 'delatinisation', requiring the reordering of churches to conform to the requirements of the Byzantine liturgy. It is difficult to determine whether from the beginning he intended to lead the diocese out of communion with Rome and into the Russian-Orthodox Church, or whether this step was eventually forced upon him. He was not himself a bishop, and therefore could not ordain priests. For the ordination of new priests, he arranged for Archbishop Iosif Sokolovsky, a Bulgarian Orthodox-Catholic⁸ hierarch kept in confinement at the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev, to come to Kholm. In any event, Fr Popiel's liturgical reforms met with strong resistance from the Greek-Catholic clergy and parishioners. Fr Popiel was adamant; he required that these reforms should be put into effect from 1 January 1874.

Seventy to one hundred Greek-Catholic clergy followed Bishop Mikhail Kuzemsky's example and fled to Galicia.⁹ They were not entirely welcome there; latinisation of Greek-Catholic liturgical practices was not nearly as rampant in Galicia and there was some fear that these priests would attempt to introduce such latinisations. Moreover, since these priests considered themselves Polish, the increasingly strong Ukrainian identification of many of the Greek-Catholic clergy in Galicia also caused them to regard the new arrivals with suspicion.

This move left a large number of parishes without priests. To replace the missing clergy Fr Popiel invited priests from Galicia who shared his views to come and serve in the Kholm diocese, and seems to have had no trouble finding priests willing to do so. However, when the faithful realised that these newly-arrived clergy were not willing to conduct services according to the very latinised style which had been in force in the Kholm diocese, they resisted, refusing to allow the newly-assigned priest to enter the church building. This occurred in several places. In other places, priests who had not fled to Galicia nevertheless refused to obey Fr Popiel's instructions. To deal with this resistance Fr Popiel, as administrator of the Kholm diocese, summoned

the police. The tsarist government was willing to assist him, arresting priests who did not obey his instructions, and forcibly installing the newly-arrived priests from Galicia in the parishes to which Fr Popiel had assigned them. In at least two parishes this led to grave violence. In Pratulin on 24 January 1874 the police killed Vintsenti Levonyuk and 12 more Greek-Catholics defending the village church against the newly-assigned priest, whom they did not want.

It is difficult to know whether the villagers of Pratulin realised that the priest whose arrival they were resisting, with such drastic consequences, was a Greek-Catholic priest in good standing. Polish Roman Catholic propaganda, both at the time and since then, has tried to give the impression that these priests were Russian Orthodox. On 13 May 1874 Pope Pius IX issued the apostolic letter *Omnem sollicitudinem* condemning Fr Popiel's liturgical reforms and terming him the 'pretended administrator'. Ten months later, on 5 March 1875, Fr Popiel, his clergy, and his parishes entered the Russian Orthodox Church. The only remaining Greek-Catholic parish of the Kholm diocese was in Kraków, in Austrian territory.

Some of the remaining Greek-Catholic faithful sought spiritual assistance from the Roman Catholic clergy, but the tsarist government strictly forbade these clergy to give any sacraments or religious services to the Greek-Catholics, and the Polish Roman Catholic priests obeyed this prohibition. A few Roman Catholic Jesuits from Austrian territory slipped into the Kholm region from time to time and were able to hold clandestine Roman Catholic services.¹⁰ There was ample evidence of serious disaffection on the part of many people who were officially considered 'Russian Orthodox'.

In 1905 Tsar Nicholas II granted religious freedom in the Russian Empire in the wake of the revolution earlier that year. Approximately 233,000 people in the Kholm region took advantage of this to withdraw from the Russian Orthodox Church and become Catholics. However, they all became *Roman* Catholics, not Greek-Catholics. Why did this happen?

It has frequently been stated that this occurred because the tsarist government would not permit any reappearance of the Greek-Catholic Church. However, that is not entirely proved, nor particularly convincing. Greek-Catholic parishes were organised in St Petersburg and Moscow as a result of the decree of freedom of religion; they had difficulties but managed to continue. From 5,000 to 10,000 Georgians became Greek-Catholics at the same time,¹¹ and in Galicia the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Basilians were expecting to go and serve in the Russian Empire.¹² In 1932 the Oriental Congregation¹³ made no mention of any tsarist prohibition, but instead blamed the transformation of these people from Greek to Roman on the lack of Greek-Catholic clergy.¹⁴ Had there been a genuine prohibition by the tsarist government in 1905 or 1906, the Oriental Congregation would have surely mentioned it in 1932. The argument of 'lack of clergy' is not convincing, however. In the 30 years from 1875 to 1905 at least a few of the original Greek-Catholic clergy would have survived, and more could have been obtained from Galicia (as was just mentioned, the Basilians were prepared to send priests). It is likely that at least a few priests serving in the Russian Orthodox Church would have wished to become Greek-Catholic, as has happened in analogous situations elsewhere.¹⁵ As to the tsarist government, it would have been in the best interests of St Petersburg to *encourage* a revival of the Greek-Catholic Church, and thus maintain the sense of a distinct identity of the faithful in this territory.

One is inclined to suspect that the real obstacle to a Greek-Catholic revival of the Kholm diocese came from the Polish Roman Catholic bishops in the area. They

acquired a significant number of faithful, who became polonised in the process, so they had a vested interest in keeping the Greek-Catholic Church out. This suspicion is strengthened by the record of events when Poland retained its independence after the fall of tsarist Russia. In 1919 and 1920 Fr Josaphat Jean, a Canadian Greek-Catholic Basilian priest, was in Warsaw, and often received petitions from people in the Kholm region who were nominally Russian Orthodox and desired to return to their ancestral Greek-Catholic Church. Cardinal Kakowski (the archbishop of Warsaw and Roman Catholic primate of Poland) would not hear of it; these people must become Roman Catholics or not become Catholics at all.¹⁶

The Polish Roman Catholic Church and the interwar Polish government formed a remarkable partnership: in 1928 the Polish government claimed all the Orthodox ecclesiastical properties in Eastern Poland, on the ground that these properties had belonged to the Greek-Catholic Church until 1839 (in some districts) and 1875 (in the Kholm diocese). The Polish authorities then embarked on a campaign to convert Eastern Orthodox villages to Roman Catholicism, literally at gunpoint!¹⁷ Polish Roman Catholic clergy accepted these 'converts' and sang the Latin *Te Deum* in the churches which had been seized from the Orthodox.¹⁸ The Greek-Catholic Metropolitan Andrei (Sheptyts'ky) wrote a strenuous letter of protest;¹⁹ The Polish government prevented the publication of the metropolitan's letter.

Another stage in the story began in 1924 when Pope Pius XI issued the instruction *Zelum amplitudinis* to the Polish Roman Catholic Bishop Henryk Przeździecki of Siedlce, authorising the bishop to serve the Greek-Catholics in the territory of his diocese. In four dioceses of Eastern Poland (Wilno (Vilnius), Pinsk, Siedlce, Łuck and Lublin) a total of 40 parishes were organised to serve former Greek-Catholics who had been nominally Eastern Orthodox and now became Catholics again. However, they were 'Greek-Catholics with a difference'. They were allowed no connection with the Greek-Catholic Church headed by Metropolitan Andrei, they were not permitted to revive the Kholm diocese, they were completely subject to the Polish Roman Catholic bishops and deans, and in some cases these were not actually parishes, but 'chapels' of existing Roman Catholic parishes. Ironically, they were *forbidden* to follow the 'Greek-Catholic' liturgical practices for which some of their predecessors had suffered martyrdom in 1874; instead they were required to hold services according to the ritual of the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁰ It is often claimed that the parishioners themselves demanded this state of affairs. That claim is incredible. Most of these parishes were in small agricultural villages. As has just been mentioned, the Polish authorities stopped at nothing to enforce their own religious priorities; the villagers were in no position to 'demand' anything from anyone. Moreover, the Roman Catholic bishops suddenly produced clergy to serve these parishes, largely from religious orders: Jesuits, Capuchins and later Marian Fathers, and other Roman Catholic orders of priests. There was no obvious reason for these orders suddenly to take such an interest in this small number of obscure chapels in Eastern Poland. Léon Tretjakewitsch²¹ suggests that the Jesuit Bishop Michel d'Herbigny was behind this strange phenomenon, and had used his influence with Pope Pius XI²² to create this peculiar arrangement in Poland in order to provide a training-ground for clergy who would later be sent into Russia. Tretjakewitsch's argument is convincing; the scheme is consistent with d'Herbigny's ideas and programme.

At least some of the Kholm diocese was once again Greek-Catholic, then, albeit in this unusual form. In 1931 the Jesuits opened a Pontifical Oriental Seminary at Dubno, to train future clergy for this group of parishes and others which were

expected to follow. In the same year the Greek-Catholic Redemptorist Mikola (Charnets'ky) was ordained bishop, as 'visitor' for these parishes. He had no jurisdiction, and all decisions about these parishes were still in the hands of the Polish Roman Catholic bishops, but Bishop Mikola could at least conduct hierarchical worship services, ordain clergy and so forth. By 1937 this 'Byzantine-Slavonic' or 'Neo-Uniate' ecclesiastical arrangement in Poland had 40 parishes²³ and 71 priests; 89 sisters of four different Polish Roman Catholic religious orders were working with them. The Orthodox Church in Poland strongly objected to these developments, and alleged that some at least of these parishes had been created by forced conversions.²⁴ This is more believable in those territories which had been aggregated to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1839, but even there evidence indicates that the Greek-Catholic embers never died completely.²⁵ In the Kholm diocese there were large numbers of people who had been baptised as Greek-Catholics, and could remember very well that this was their own religion.

In 1939 the Second World War broke out, and Poland disappeared again, divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. During the first Soviet occupation the communists did not disturb the Greek-Catholic parishes (although they closed the monasteries and confiscated all the revenues). When the Germans came in 1941 they did not disturb the Greek-Catholics either, although they would not permit them to expand. However, when the war ended in 1945, Poland had new boundaries. Much territory which had belonged to Poland during the interwar period was ceded to the Soviet Union. This territory included 26 of the 'Neo-Uniate' parishes. Stalin had no use for the Greek-Catholic Church: the parishes were either closed immediately or compelled to become Russian Orthodox. But what of the 14 parishes which remained in postwar Poland? They were all in the Polish Roman Catholic dioceses of Siedlce and Lublin. Bishop Stefan Wszyński²⁶ of Lublin and Bishop Czesław Sokołowski of Siedlce, followed in 1946 by Bishop Ignacy Świrski of Siedlce, put intense pressure on the parishes to adopt the Latin liturgy and ritual and become Roman Catholic. The majority of parishes and clergy succumbed to these pressures. Less than 20 years later, of course, the same parishes found themselves with yet another drastic change in worship patterns: the new Roman Catholic liturgy which followed the Second Vatican Council. Three of the parishes refused to become Roman Catholic, and reverted to the Orthodox Church.

One parish, however – that of Saint Niketas the Martyr, in Kostomłoty, about eight kilometres south of Terespol (and very close to the border of Belarus') managed to avoid these two alternatives; this is now the only such parish that continues to function, and its church is the only one in Poland where the Greek-Catholic liturgy remained in use without interruption during the communist period. That fact, incidentally, undermines the Polish Roman Catholic claim that it was 'the communists' who would not permit Greek-Catholic worship in Poland. Had the Polish communist government cared to close the church in Kostomłoty it could have done so with little or no difficulty. Outside Poland almost no one knew that the parish still existed.²⁷

The survival of the parish in Kostomłoty is due to the tenacity of the faithful, and to the courage of two priests: Fr Aleksander Prylucki,²⁸ ordained in 1934 and appointed pastor of Kostomłoty in 1940, and Fr Roman Piętka, the present pastor. When the Polish bishops began putting pressure on Fr Aleksander to make the parish Roman Catholic after the Second World War he fobbed them off with excuses, claiming to be in very poor health and pleading that once he was dead a younger, vigorous priest could make this change with no difficulty. Fr Aleksander survived well into the 1970s. In the 1960s Roman Piętka was a young Marian seminarian,

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interested in the Eastern Churches. After tracing several rumours, he discovered that the church in Kostomłoty was still functioning and visited it; Fr Aleksander realised that God had sent him a successor. Roman Pietka was ordained to the priesthood, and through the good offices of the then major superior of the Marian Fathers, Bishop Ceslaus (Sipovich),²⁹ was appointed coadjutor to Fr Aleksander and then pastor in Kostomłoty.³⁰ Under Fr Roman's pastoral leadership, the parish is thriving.

Not only the villagers of Kostomłoty attend the parish; Greek-Catholics from all over that part of Poland have become parishioners, and some people come from even greater distances. In Warsaw people are inviting Fr Roman to organise services in the capital for them. In Belarus' the remaining Greek-Catholics knew that Saint Niketas was still functioning; the church became a beacon of hope to them. They sent innumerable requests for prayers and candles to the church and when they were able to visit Poland they came at once to Kostomłoty to receive the sacraments and pray in what they considered their own parish.

It is difficult to draw a 'conclusion' from this convoluted history. The surviving parish in Kostomłoty is symbolic of several hundred parishes and many thousands of people who found themselves ground between opposing churches and opposing nationalities.³¹ The history of the past four centuries brings little credit to the governing authorities of church and state. Visiting Saint Niketas' Church in Kostomłoty, however, one cannot help but admire the village priests and the simple faithful, who no doubt compromised when they had to, but kept their church open and their faith alive.

Notes and References

- ¹ For the text of the relevant article of the Union of Brest, see Serge Keleher, *Passion and Resurrection: the Greek-Catholic Church in Soviet Ukraine* (Stauropogion, L'viv, Ukraine), 1993, pp. 189–97.
- ² Or 'Chełm' in Polish.
- ³ Sometimes the 'Orthodox-Catholic' Church.
- ⁴ Paul Robert Magosci, *Historical Atlas of East Central Europe* (University of Washington Press, 1993), offers several useful maps of the territories in question at different periods. The secular arrangement of the states in Eastern Europe at the time of the Union of Brest appears on map 14, p. 47.
- ⁵ Wasył Lenyck, *The Eastern Catholic Church and Czar Nicholas I* (Ukrainian Catholic University Press, Rome and New York, 1966).
- ⁶ Cyril Korolevsky, *L'Uniatisme* (Prieuré d'Amay, Belgium, 1927), provides a historical analysis of this lamentable phenomenon. An English translation of Korolevsky's seminal essay appears as an appendix to Cyril Korolevsky, *Metropolitan Andrew (1865–1944)* (Stauropogion, L'viv, 1993), pp. 543–98.
- ⁷ L. Huculak, *The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom in the Kievan Metropolitan Province During the Period of Union with Rome (1596–1839)* (Analecta OSBM Series II Sectio I, vol. 47, Rome, 1990) gives useful information on these matters with regard to the eucharistic celebration. For some further information see Cyril Korolevsky, *Metropolitan Andrew ...*, chapter X, 'Liturgical Reform', pp. 407–36.
- ⁸ For ethno-political reasons the Bulgarian Orthodox-Catholics, who are in full communion with Rome, do not care to be called either 'Greek' or 'Byzantine' Catholics.
- ⁹ *Bohaterstwo Unitów Podlaskich (1875–1905)* (Wydawnictwo Salezjańskie, Warsaw, 1993). This book is largely Polish Roman Catholic propaganda, but contains some information.
- ¹⁰ There were no Greek-Catholic Jesuits until 1925; until 1923 the Jesuit Constitutions forbade such a possibility.
- ¹¹ Ronald G. Roberson CSP, *The Eastern Christian Churches* (Pontifical Gregorian

- University, Rome, 1986), p. 37.
- ¹² See the letter from Archbishop Adalbert Langevin to Cardinal Gotti, 25 October 1905, published in Korolevsky, *Metropolitan Andrew ...*, pp. 496–98.
- ¹³ The Vatican department responsible for matters concerning Eastern Catholics.
- ¹⁴ *Statistica* (Oriental Congregation, Rome, 1932), p. 190.
- ¹⁵ Between 1989 and 1991 approximately 500 nominally Orthodox priests became Greek-Catholic in Ukraine and Romania; in both countries the Greek-Catholic Church had been suppressed for more than 40 years.
- ¹⁶ See Korolevsky, *Metropolitan Andrew ...*, p. 297.
- ¹⁷ An account of such a forced conversion of the village of Hrynycki, in the Kremianets district, appears in Korolevsky, *Metropolitan Andrew ...*, pp. 246–47.
- ¹⁸ For example, the former Greek-Catholic Cathedral in Kholm is now a Roman Catholic Church.
- ¹⁹ Text in Korolevsky, *Metropolitan Andrew ...*, pp. 504–7.
- ²⁰ This requirement was not always observed in practice, although clearly efforts were made.
- ²¹ Léon Tretjakewitsch, *Bishop Michel d'Herbigny SJ and Russia: a Pre-Ecumenical Approach to Christian Unity* (Das Östliche Christentum, Augustinus-Verlag, Würzburg, 1990), Neue Folge, vol. 39.
- ²² During the 1920s d'Herbigny was virtually all-powerful in Rome on such matters.
- ²³ A map and list can be found in *Kościół katolicki w Polsce 1918–1990: rocznik statystyczny* (Warsaw, 1991), pp. 72–73.
- ²⁴ For an Orthodox account of the situation in the parish of Zhabche, in the Muck diocese, cf. Vitali Sahaidakiv's'ky, *Pravdy ne vtopyty* (Prut, Toronto, 1977). The book is in Ukrainian, but the chapter on the 'Neo-Unia' also appears in English as an appendix. Sahaidakiv's'ky (quite independently of Tretjakewitsch) also attributes the initiative for the 'Neo-Uniate' movement to Michel d'Herbigny.
- ²⁵ Since 1989 there has been a strong movement in Belarus' for the revival of the Greek-Catholic Church.
- ²⁶ Later Cardinal-Primate of Poland.
- ²⁷ Korolevsky, who took good care to keep abreast of contemporary developments in the Christian East, wrote his biography of Metropolitan Andrei in 1956, and states that all these parishes were destroyed, so he was evidently unaware that Kostomłoty had survived. I made repeated inquiries in the late 1950s and was always told that nothing remained.
- ²⁸ He was himself a parishioner of one of these 'new Greek-Catholic' parishes near Biała Podlaska, and did his theological studies at the Pontifical Oriental Seminary in Dubno.
- ²⁹ He was himself a Greek-Catholic, and served Belarusian Greek-Catholics in the emigration.
- ³⁰ Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński made strenuous efforts to block this appointment.
- ³¹ As to the question of ethnic identity: when the present writer visited the parish at Kostomłoty in August 1994, Fr Roman invited him to preach – in Russian! Since the villagers all speak Ukrainian, this seemed odd. Fr Roman explained that any 'official' use of Ukrainian could appear to raise a territorial or ethnic question, but Russian would simply indicate that the homilist was a distinguished visitor. The villagers do not care to specify their own ethnic identity; if asked they will say 'we're the locals'.