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The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Its Communion with the Bishop of Rome: Nurturing Its Ecumenical Engagement

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Abstract: The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) is an Eastern Catholic Church that lives according to the Ukrainian–Byzantine Christian theological, liturgical, canonical and spiritual tradition and is in full and visible communion with the successor of Peter. Unity with the Roman Apostolic See has become one of the most important foundations of the UGCC’s identity, enriching its church life and strengthening its ecumenical ministry. As a sui iuris Church in the “family” of Catholic communion, the UGCC actively develops its ecumenical commitments with the Orthodox Churches and Protestant ecclesial communities. In this article, we will briefly examine how the UGCC developed its communion with the Bishop of Rome and how communion with the Apostolic See was a blessing for this Church, but at the same time sometimes became a threat to its existence in times of persecution by totalitarian regimes. We will also present the current religious context in which the UGCC operates, analyze some of its most important ecumenical initiatives and examine its participation in the development of interfaith dialogue in Ukraine. We will consider the challenges that the Russian invasion has brought to the UGCC and other religions in Ukraine, and how the UGCC, by developing communion with Rome, manages to witness the Gospel of life in the difficult circumstances of war and death.

Keywords: interconfessional relations in Ukraine; Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church; communion with the Bishop of Rome; ecumenism



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1. Historical Aspects of Ecclesiological Maturity

Officially, the UGCC draw its origins from St. Volodymyr’s Baptismal Font in 988; when the Kyivan Metropolia was founded by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, it was historically developed in the Byzantine tradition. Generously drawing from the theological, liturgical, canonical and spiritual sources of the Eastern tradition, organically united with the legacy of Sts. Cyril and Methodius and fostering its own indigenous culture, the Kyivan Church abided in communion with the Christian Church of the West and the Pope (Koleso 2022, p. 5). It was able to grow into a self-governed Eastern Slavic Church, enjoying considerable autonomy, which allowed it to develop a truly independent life within the Byzantine heritage (Suttner 1993).

From the very beginning, the Kyivan Church was open to both the Christian East and the Christian West and supported the restoration of the unity of the Churches, which was lost as a result of the excommunications of 1054 and the later divergence between the Churches of Old and New Rome.¹ Despite the fact that the Kyivan Metropolia was under the jurisdiction of the Church of Constantinople, from time to time metropolitans and Rus’ princes contacted the Church of Rome, recognizing its primacy and trying to establish relations with it, despite the Latin–Greek alienation (Gudziak 1998).² An example of this is the participation of its representatives in the councils of Lyons I (1245), Constance

(1417), and particularly through the participation of Isidore, Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Rus', in the Council of Florence (1439). The Kyivan Church rarely entered directly into a dispute between Rome and Constantinople, from time to time trying to initiate or actively support efforts aimed at restoring Christian unity, subsequently adhering to the union traditions that had been relevant to it for a long time (Колесо 2022, n. 1, p. 7). In the latter half of the fifteenth century, the metropolitans of Kyiv appeared not to recognize strict confessional divisions, even though both Rome and Constantinople viewed the ecclesiastical rapprochement achieved at the Union of Florence as having lapsed. Through the beginning of the sixteenth century, without ever breaking ties with Constantinople, Kyivan metropolitans sought to maintain or reestablish relations with the papacy (Gudziak 1998, n. 4, p. 248).

In the context of the internal crisis, with the weakening of the Patriarchal Centre of Constantinople and the challenges of the Protestant Reformation and post-Tridentine Catholicism, the hierarchy of the Kyivan Church, seeking, in the spirit of the Council of Florence, to fulfil Christ's commandment "that all may be one" (John 17:11), decided to restore Eucharistic communion with the Bishop of Rome, while ensuring the preservation of its Eastern ritual traditions, as well as its own church and ethno-cultural identity.³ Unfortunately, as a result of this, the Kyivan Church was divided into the United and Orthodox Churches, and subsequent attempts to unite both parts of the Kyivan Church into a single patriarchate in the seventeenth century failed for a number of subjective and objective reasons.⁴ The wounds of division in the body of the Kyivan Church remain unhealed to this day (Колесо 2022, n. 1, p. 9).

Summing up the consequences of the Union of Brest, 1596, the UGCC in its Ecumenical Position from 2021 recognizes that, on the one hand, thanks to the Union, it managed to preserve and even strengthen unity between eparchies, raise its educational standards and adopt some of the best examples of European Christian culture. On the other hand, and partly of its own free will, the UGCC suffered tremendously from Latinization and soteriological exclusivism, which led to serious distortions in the understanding of its identity and vocation as an Eastern Church (Колесо 2022, n. 1, p. 11).

2. Identity of the UGCC as a Church in Communion

Christianity in the time of St. Volodymyr was accepted and adopted by the Kyivan Rus, according to Pope John Paul II, "when the whole Church of Christ lived in complete ecclesial unity. It was Christianity, Orthodox in faith and at the same time Catholic in love, because it was in full communion with the Apostolic See and with the whole Church" (Благовісник Блаженнішого Мирослава-Івана Кардинала Любачівського 1986–1987). The identity of the UGCC is traditionally characterized by two aspects. On the one hand, having a historical connection with its Mother Church, the Church of Constantinople, and being one of the legitimate heirs of the historic Kyivan Metropolia, the UGCC belongs to the Christian East, preserving and developing Eastern spirituality, theology, canonical order and liturgy. On the other hand, it is in full communion with the Roman Church and all sui iuris Catholic Churches (Колесо 2022, n. 1, p. 34). Therefore, the desire for Christian unity, which the UGCC boldly embraces, helps to develop its identity as a local (помічна, *pomisna*) church and to introduce new ideas and proposals to the global ecumenical dialogue.

For the UGCC, communion with the Church of Rome has served as a great historical support, enriched its ecclesiological experience and filled it with the spiritual gifts that have led its faithful to great sacrifices and heroic feats of faith in times of persecution.⁵ The UGCC continues to enrich its ecclesial thinking through ongoing dialogue and communion with the Roman Catholic Church and with other local churches and communities, which,

together with the UGCC, are an integral part of the Universal Church in communion with the Bishop of Rome (Колесо 2022, n. 1, p. 55).

The identity of the UGCC in different periods was threatened, on the one hand, by the process of Latinization: in a certain period of its existence, the Church could not always fully draw from its natural roots in the Eastern tradition.⁶ Popes sometimes had to defend the Eastern Rite and affirmed its equality within the Catholic Church. They issued encyclicals and other documents supporting the preservation of Byzantine and other Eastern traditions in liturgy, discipline and spiritual life, for example “*Orientalium Dignitas*” (1894)—Pope Leo XIII defended the rights of the Eastern Catholic Churches and called for the preservation of their traditions; “*Rerum Orientalium*” (1928)—Pope Pius XI encouraged the development of the Eastern Catholic Churches and the study of Eastern theology; and “*Oriente Lumen*” (1995)—Pope John Paul II emphasized the importance of Eastern spirituality and traditions in the life of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, based on the soteriological exclusivism inherent in the Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council, sometimes the UGCC was perceived as a tool that could be used to “convert Russia”. Also, on the other hand, the UGCC was perceived by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as an obstacle to the establishment of dialogue, and thus the issue of Uniatism as an unacceptable method on the path to the Christian unity was raised in 1993 during the official meeting of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church at the Balamand Monastery in Lebanon. While rejecting Uniatism as a model for unity, the Declaration acknowledged the existence and legitimacy of the Eastern Catholic Churches, affirming their right to exist and minister to their faithful.⁷

Identity, which is expressed in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, has repeatedly caused serious challenges and even threats to the very existence of the UGCC. First, at the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this took place through the gradual incorporation of its individual parts into the Russian Orthodox Church through violent “reunification” initiatives. This is especially true of the twentieth century, which also became a time of martyrdom for this Church. In Soviet times, the UGCC was the largest underground religious community in the world (Bociurkiw 1996).⁸ It was also one of the most active structures of resistance to the Soviet system, defending human dignity and the right to religious freedom in the face of totalitarianism (DeVille and Galadza 2023).

3. The Ukrainian Religious Context and Ecumenical Initiatives of the UGCC

Religious life in Ukraine began to flourish after the collapse of the USSR and Ukraine’s independence in 1991. Ecumenical life since that time has been full of various challenges and achievements. Ukrainian Christianity (in contrast to Russia, where the ROC had a dominant position in the state) was characterized by the absence of one monopolistic denomination that could dictate terms to other denominations or have special privileges from the State. Such diversity created a certain tension and competition between denominations, but, at the same time, it created the basis for *dialogicity* and openness in Ukrainian Christianity.

In Ukraine, during the early 1990s, several Orthodox Churches were formed at once, namely the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), but they did not have communion with each other. The Catholic Church was represented by Eastern Catholics, i.e., the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and the Mukachevo Greek Catholic Eparchy (MGCE), and Roman Catholics, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine (RCCU), as well as Protestant communities, usually of the Baptist or Evangelical persuasion. According to the non-governmental think tank

and research institution Razumkov Center, Ukrainian society demonstrates a fairly high level of religiosity (about 70%): “after 2014, there has been a downward trend in the number of those who identify themselves as Orthodox (their share decreased from 70% in 2014 to 55% in 2024). Meanwhile, the share of Greek Catholics has somewhat increased from 8% to 12%. 10% called themselves «just Christians», and 18% said they did not identify themselves with any religious faith. . . Other denominations and religions (Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, etc.) have notably fewer followers” (Yakymenko et al. 2024, p. 5).

This diversity became a source of interdenominational conflict and tension during the first three to five years of independence.⁹ However, after a phase of distrust and sometimes hostility caused by conflicts over the distribution of churches and church property, interchurch relations moved into a period of peaceful coexistence. Initiatives of reconciliation, some origins of dialogue and cooperation emerged, interfaith prayers started to be held, and various scholarly theological meetings were organized between representatives of Ukrainian churches. The churches of Ukraine have put forward joint legislative and educational proposals within the framework of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, which was established in 1996. This institution represents 95% of religious communities present in the country. Meetings between leaders of Ukrainian churches have become commonplace (Аналітична записка 2020, p. 16).

4. Challenges to Ecumenism in Ukraine

However, ecumenism in the Ukrainian state remained a hostage to some factors, namely that Orthodox Christians in Ukraine have been cut off from global ecumenical processes. The UOC, as part of the ROC, has never been a separate member of ecumenical bodies, dialogues or meetings, as it has always been part of the ROC. Within the ROC itself, the attitude toward the ecumenical movement has often been and remains ambivalent: outwardly, the ROC is a full member of the World Council of Churches, its hierarchy participates in international ecumenical meetings (in fact, Patriarch Kirill began his career as the official representative of the ROC in the WCC in 1971–1974) and joint statements are issued with other denominations, but in its internal environment the attitude towards ecumenism is quite different: most clergy, and believers in general, are brought up in the spirit of isolationism and prejudice against all who are non-Orthodox. The UOC’s relations with other Ukrainian Orthodox denominations are burdened with negativity: the UOC-KP and UAOC have been accused of schism, and their sacraments—including Baptism—were not recognized—and in many cases are not recognized to this day. The rather neutral attitude of the UOC to Russia’s military movements against Ukraine in 2014 only increased the rejection of this religious community by a large part of Ukrainian society (Аналітична записка 2020, n. 21, p. 17); the number of those who associate themselves with the UOC has dropped significantly from 13% in 2021 to 5.5% in 2024 (Yakymenko et al. 2024, p. 6).

Lacking recognition from other Orthodox Churches, the UOC-KP and UAOC were unable to participate in international ecumenical dialogue. The granting of the Tomos of Autocephaly and the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in 2019 brought hope for healing the divisions within Ukrainian Orthodoxy.¹⁰ However, this expectation remained unfulfilled due to long-standing internal conflicts, deep-seated prejudices and strong external pressures, and thus most UOC parishes did not join the OCU.¹¹

Most of the Protestant communities of Ukraine belong to the “second wave” of Protestantism. These are Baptists, Pentecostals and Adventists, who are characterized by low ecumenical activity, a sort of isolation, in contrast to the “first wave” of Protestants—Lutherans and Reformed. The atmosphere of persecution during the Soviet Union pushed

them to confessional isolationism, and only in the 2000s did they begin to form inter-Protestant representative structures and reach the all-Ukrainian level. Although most Protestant communities still remain largely self-centred, the development of theological education, initiation of relations with other denominations and participation in joint projects have enabled the gradual penetration of ecumenical consciousness into their environment ([Аналітична записка 2020](#), n. 21, p. 18).

5. Ecumenical Initiatives of the UGCC

The UGCC, in comparison with other denominations in Ukraine, has certain ecumenical achievements and advantages. However, in its midst, the attitude to ecumenism is heterogeneous, sometimes with certain reservations. The negative experience of church property conflicts during the period of coming out of the underground has not yet been forgotten: among the older generation of priests, the memory of the Vatican's *Ostpolitik*, when in the 1960s the Vatican did not mention the persecution of Ukrainian Catholics in the USSR in order to maintain a dialogue with the ROC, is still alive.¹²

Nevertheless, the UGCC has played the leading role among other Ukrainian denominations, being engaged in different ecumenical initiatives. This pioneering role in ecumenical processes has its own objective causes. Back in the days of the Soviet Union, when Ukrainian denominations tried to survive under the brutal conditions of atheistic Soviet propaganda and persecution, a part of the UGCC in exile was comforted by freedom and could freely benefit from the achievements of the modern ecumenical movement. Thus, after the 1990s, Ukrainian Greek Catholics were able to continue their activities in new circumstances in Ukraine as well. With the rapid development of religious life, as well as the establishment of seminaries and other church educational institutions, Ukrainian Eastern Catholics could participate in international ecumenical congresses and meetings; many graduates of seminaries studied abroad, and many teachers from outside Ukraine taught in Ukrainian seminaries. All this made it possible to make serious ecumenical progress, even at a time when the Orthodox brothers were not yet ready for this ([Fihas 2021](#)).

We can only briefly summarize some of the ecumenical initiatives of the UGCC as of the late 1980s. The main documents of the heads of this Church bear significant ecumenical importance. In the period of persecution and catacomb existence, the UGCC in 1987 confirmed its openness to reconciliation through the voice of His Beatitude Myroslav-Ivan (Lubachivsky), in particular with the Russian Orthodox Church ([Колесо 2022](#), n. 1, p. 18), when he extended his hand of forgiveness, reconciliation and love to the Russian nation and the Moscow Patriarchate. Nevertheless, this gesture remained unanswered ([Ковчег 2 ЛЬВІВ 2000](#); [Shevchuk 2011](#)). Later, in 1994, at a time of severe inter-confessional confrontations, Cardinal Myroslav-Ivan published the Pastoral Letter *On the Unity of the Holy Churches* with an appeal for unity among Christians in Ukraine. His successor, His Beatitude Lubomyr (Husar), continued ecumenical work, which was summarized in his Pastoral Letter *One People of God in the Land on the Hills of Kyiv* in 2004. His Beatitude Lubomyr raised important issues for inter-confessional dialogue with Orthodox brothers, in particular the issue of the common Kyivan tradition, the need of forgiveness and reconciliation and a call to move from erasing exclusivism to contemporary complementarity, from the Churches' position of subordination to public service, from the "ecumenism of ultimatums" to partnership dialogue and from confessional rivalry to the primacy of love. All these could be the main principles on which the future vision of the Kyivan Church could be built. The Letter of His Beatitude Sviatoslav (Shevchuk) on the occasion of the centenary of the renewal of unity of the Ukrainian Nation and State, *Our Saint Sophia*, from 2019, talks about the "Sophianic" foundation of the civilization of Kyivan Christianity.¹³

In 1994, the UGCC created the Lviv Theological Academy, which later became the Ukrainian Catholic University, a leading educational and research institution in Ukraine and known throughout the world. The University successfully develops and operates theological programmes, including the Institute of Ecumenical Studies, which since 2004 deals with, inter alia, issues of Christian unity. UCU has become a place for constant meetings of representatives of various denominations, and also for their creative reflection on today's challenges. The fact that this Institute's president Fr. Iwan Dacko became a member of the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, as well as this Commission's Coordinating Committee, has considerably increased the authority of this institution.

The development of research on the common Kyivan tradition is embodied in the publishing project *Kyivan Christianity*, which was launched in 2013 in cooperation with the Humanities, Philosophy and Theology Faculties of the Ukrainian Catholic University. It aims to research the theological, canonical and socio-cultural sources of transmission of the Kyivan Metropolia in the broader comparative context of the universal Christian traditions of Byzantium, the Latin West and Eastern Orthodox communities. During ten years of work, Ukrainian scholars collected material for more than 30 volumes, which covered the period from the Middle Ages to the early modern era.

The UGCC, with the help of its international partners, developed the largest social aid organization in the country, Caritas Ukraine, which operates throughout the non-occupied territory of the state. The coordinated work of Caritas has become a huge help for the war-torn Ukrainian society, and thousands of people receive professional help and comfort every day. Social engagement extends beyond the denominational boundaries of religious communities, inspiring each denomination to serve the needy even more.

The UGCC is the only Church in Ukraine that has developed its *Ecumenical Position*, and regularly updates it every five years.¹⁴ Cardinal Kurt Koch in 2019 said that such a document is a sign of the ecumenical maturity of the Church and a testimony that it cannot be considered as an obstacle. Even more, it is a catalyst for ecumenism (Acistampa 2019). At the same time, asserting through its superiors that the issue of the Christian unity is one of the priorities of their Church, representatives of the UGCC constantly participate in ecumenical events, academic conferences, meetings and joint prayers.¹⁵

However, intra-Orthodox confrontation, antagonism and a tendency to gain a kind of exclusivity, especially in relations with the state on the one hand, and political and ideological influence from outside Ukraine on religious consciousness (for example, the *Russkiy Mir* ideology; see below) on the other, became serious obstacles that did not allow the launch of the process of mutual recognition of Baptism between Ukrainian Churches or for a serious theological dialogue to be started.

6. War as a Threat for Religious Life

6.1. Physical Threats and Destructions

The full-scale military invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which violated international law and agreements, has become the largest military conflict since World War II. Now lasting more than three years, the war has claimed the lives of thousands of soldiers and civilians, and has caused countless injuries and maimings. It has led to the destruction of entire Ukrainian cities, civilian infrastructure, and hundreds of schools and hospitals. Since 2022, vast territories have been mined, the soil polluted due to ongoing military operations, and numerous crimes against the environment—including acts of ecocide—have been committed.

This war has brought a grave physical threat to the Ukrainian people. Due to the high number of brutal and senseless killings of civilians by Russian forces, many experts

describe the war as having a genocidal character (Snyder n.d.). Russian political leaders have openly denied Ukrainians the right to be a distinct nation, to have their own national state, government, political and historical position, and their cultural and religious life is under attack.

The war has triggered both internal and external migration, forcing people to flee from frontline areas. The profound humanitarian impact of the conflict is reflected in the fact that approximately 10 million Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes, making it one of the largest displacement crises in recent history. Continuous military actions have severely impacted Ukraine's religious landscape, with the destruction of sacred sites presenting a challenge for faith communities across the country. According to the "Religion in Fire: Documenting Russia's War Crimes Against Religious Communities in Ukraine" project, as of 2 February 2025, at least 643 religious sites had been damaged or destroyed. These include churches, mosques, synagogues, chapels, prayer houses, Kingdom Halls, cemeteries, memorials, and religious educational institutions.¹⁶

6.2. Religious Persecutions and Threats to Religious Diversity

The war has severely undermined religious freedom, leaving a trail of devastation. On the occupied territories of Ukraine, systematic violations of religious rights have been carried out by the new Russian authorities. Clergy have been pressured to collaborate with the occupying regime, and in cases of refusal, they have faced violent retribution, including physical elimination.¹⁷ Many churches and prayer houses have been closed, while threats, persecution, and imprisonment of religious leaders are ongoing, the killing of some clergy and preachers has also become a reality. From the onset of the aggression in Donbas in 2014, Protestant leaders were among the first victims. Since then, 67 ministers from various Ukrainian Churches and religious organizations have been killed by the occupying forces.¹⁸ The once rich confessional diversity of Ukraine has been systematically eroded in these territories, reduced to a monopoly of Russian Orthodoxy under the Moscow Patriarchate, with all other forms of religious expression strictly reduced or banned.

In particular, the UGCC and its affiliated faith-based organizations have faced severe repression. The Russian authorities have officially banned UGCC activities in areas such as Zaporizhzhia region, extending this prohibition to humanitarian organizations like Caritas and the Knights of Columbus. These bans have resulted in the expulsion of all Greek and Roman Catholic clergy from occupied territories, effectively eliminating Catholic presence and disrupting both religious life and community support systems.¹⁹ Notably, two Greek-Catholic priests, Ivan Levytsky and Bohdan Heleta CSsR, were released from Russian captivity in 2024 after more than a year and a half of unjust imprisonment. Additionally, the occupation authorities have confiscated church properties, including buildings and land, further impeding religious activities and halting the provision of vital social and humanitarian services previously delivered by these religious organizations.²⁰

Therefore, religious persecution by Russian authorities—marked by the pressure, imprisonment and killing of religious leaders, the monopolization of religious life, and the exclusive privileging of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)—has emerged as the foremost threat to religious freedom and religious diversity in Ukraine's occupied territories.

6.3. The Weaponization of Religion

The tragedy of this military aggression lies in the fact that the elimination of Ukraine as a sovereign state was a premeditated plan, gradually implemented by the Putin regime and these actions were clearly supported by the largest Christian Church in Russia.²¹ The ROC has become a key ideological partner of the Kremlin,²² notably contributing to the elaboration of the broad concept of "Holy Rus"²³ and, in particular, to the development of

the teaching/ideology of the so-called *Russkiy Mir* (“русский мир”, “the Russian World”), the last one was fully articulated and solemnly presented at the XXV World Russian People’s Council, chaired by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow on 27 March 2024.²⁴ The concept of the “Russian World” was crafted by Patriarch Kirill and his close collaborators as a replacement for the waning communist ideology of the late 1980s. Its goal was to become a state-building doctrine for modern Russia, grounded in religious and cultural supremacy. The idea of the brotherhood of three nations—Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians—was cloaked in imperialist and expansionist rhetoric, serving as a theoretical justification for war and the suppression of Ukrainian sovereignty and identity.

While anti-Christian in nature, the ideology of *Russkiy Mir* fosters xenophobia and violence under the guise of a messianic mission (Shumylo 2024). This framework proclaims a special role for the Russian state, people, and the “Russian World”, describing Russia as the “*katechon*”—the force restraining evil—tasked with preserving a “special civilization” in contrast to the “West that has fallen into Satanism” (Hovorun 2023, p. 544). Such rhetoric cloaks aggressive geopolitical ambitions in religious language, promoting the idea of a divine mission for Russia and legitimizing violence as a sacred duty.

This ideological shift signals a departure from traditional Christian doctrine, replacing the theology of peace and life with a theology of war and death. The ROC has glorified violence, offered spiritual justification for war crimes through the promise of forgiveness, and supported political goals such as the occupation of Ukraine and the defeat of Western civilization. Believers are subjected to apocalyptic narratives and nuclear blackmail is framed as a legitimate means to achieve an imagined victory. The Kremlin’s state power has been sacralized through political myths, turning the Church into a tool of imperial propaganda rather than a witness to Christ’s message of peace and justice (Shumylo 2024).

Ultimately, religious rhetoric has been fused with political ambition, creating a dangerous ideological construct that sanctifies violence, justifies conquest, and glorifies war as a sacred mission. This weaponization of religion threatens not only Ukraine but also the integrity of Christian witness and the foundations of global peace.

6.4. *What Can Churches Do?*

Since the beginning of the full-scale war in 2022, Ukrainian Churches have delivered a clear and unified assessment of the events, unequivocally condemning the Russian military invasion of an independent state. Through numerous joint statements issued within the framework of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCIRO), Ukraine’s diverse confessions have denounced the unprovoked violence, called for the establishment of a just peace, and urged the protection of the oppressed.²⁵ Ukrainian Christians, with their prayers, military and hospital chaplain services, and charitable activities in society, stood on the defense of their country, actively engaged in a variety of work, in order to be close to those who suffer and to help those in need. Churches and church-related organizations played a significant role in humanitarian work and with their pastoral work continue to heal the wounds of the war. And in these struggles Ukrainian Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants are working together.

The war did not begin with bullets—it began with ideas, with religious narratives that had been preached for decades. These narratives laid the ideological groundwork for further aggression. Therefore, the deconstruction of the ideologies of “Holy Rus” and the “Russian World” is essential to understanding how the Christian message was distorted and instrumentalized. Only through critically analyzing and dismantling these constructions could be laid the foundations for lasting peace, built upon human dignity, religious freedom, justice, and truth. This process would also allow Churches to reassess

and correct their own narratives, ensuring they do not unintentionally reinforce imperialist ideologies, but instead faithfully advocate for truth, justice, and the Gospel of life.

An example of efforts to deconstruct the teaching of the “Russian World” was a roundtable discussion held on 25 April 2024, at the Kyiv Orthodox Theological Academy, titled “Theological Aspects of the Doctrine/Ideology of the ‘Russian World’”. The event brought together scholars from various Ukrainian Christian traditions who critically examined the origins of this ideology, its significance and destructive impact in justifying war. Participants also called on the global community to engage in further study of the issue and to draw clear conclusions regarding the dangers of such ideologies.²⁶

On 13 March 2022, more than 300 Orthodox theologians worldwide condemned the “Russian World” ideology as non-Orthodox, issuing the “Declaration of the Orthodox Theologians on the ‘Russian World’ Teaching”.²⁷ They asserted that this teaching contradicts the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Holy Tradition of Orthodox Christianity. In light of this, there is a pressing ecumenical initiative—to hold ROC leaders accountable for spreading an ideology of war and to protect international ecumenical platforms from Russian propaganda and manipulation.²⁸

The ecumenical task of both Ukrainian Churches and the global Christian community is to stand together in defending religious freedom, supporting those persecuted for their faith, and proclaiming the Gospel of life. The solidarity of the international community, grounded in a clear understanding of the true causes of the war—rather than in appeasing the aggressor or pursuing premature and simplistic pacification—can strengthen its commitment to truth and justice. This solidarity is essential for laying a durable foundation for genuine peace, where religion serves as a force for reconciliation, justice, and love, rather than a tool of violence and division.

6.5. UGCC Initiatives to Promote Just Peace and Defend the Oppressed

As an Eastern Catholic Church in full communion with the Apostolic See, the UGCC adheres to the core Catholic principles of religious freedom and respect for human dignity, as articulated in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Additionally, the Catholic Church’s teachings on just war and peace have been integrated into the UGCC’s theological reflection and pastoral mission. However, in the face of the tragedy of war and through deep reflection on its causes and consequences, the UGCC has adopted a critical stance toward certain statements made by Pope Francis regarding the ongoing military conflict. This critique stems from the Church’s direct experience of aggression and its commitment to truth, justice, and the defense of those who suffer.

Some statements and expressions by Pope Francis regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war have caused confusion and concern in Ukrainian society. Although the Pope has acknowledged that Ukraine bears the greatest suffering in the conflict, he has not explicitly named the aggressor responsible for launching the war, thereby blurring the line of responsibility between the aggressor and the victim. This diplomatic approach by the Vatican has been perceived by many as a lack of moral clarity, particularly in light of the violence and suffering endured by the Ukrainian people. A sociological survey, conducted in May 2023, shows that about 34% of Ukrainian society has a negative assessment of the Pope’s position regarding the war, while 23.8% are outraged that Pope Francis compares Russians and Ukrainians, considering them equally “victims of the war”. Pope Francis gained only 3.1% of support among Ukrainians in the rating of trust among church leaders, while his desire to end the war at any cost is supported by only 9.1% of the population.²⁹

Ukrainian Greek Catholics face many challenges when the Roman Apostolic See considers the affairs of the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian Churches together with the affairs and opinion of the Russian state and Church. But doing so, *it puts the files of Ukraine*

and Russia into one and the same folder. This policy has been expressed in different ways at different times. For example, the Vatican's Ostpolitik of the 1960s and 1970s tended to silence religious persecution in the Soviet Union, especially the persecution of the UGCC, for the sake of dialogue with the ROC. Further examples include the failure to grant the UGCC patriarchal status due to the intransigent position of the ROC on this issue (Plokhy 2003, p. 851); the recent consecration of Russia together with Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, although the Fatima message request concerned only Russia; the incident with the presence of representatives of Ukraine and Russia at the stations of the Way of the Cross in Rome three years in a row; and Pope Francis' repeatedly expressed desire to visit Ukraine, but only after a visit to Russia, to name just a few. The Vatican should address Ukrainian matters—both those of the State and as well as those of the Church—more clearly as an independent unit, a subject, and not exclusively in the relation to Russia or its stance toward Ukrainians. This post-colonial approach to Ukraine and its Churches should be reconsidered and ultimately abandoned.

Having endured persecution during Soviet times, the UGCC bears witness to the importance of defending religious freedom, both in Ukraine and in the occupied territories, where it is facing persecution now. Religious oppression and the restriction of the activities of religious organizations are unacceptable and must be stopped by the international community. Together with other Ukrainian Churches and religious organizations UGCC actively advocate for the protection of human dignity and the fundamental right to freedom of religion and belief across various international platforms.³⁰

During a recent visit to Washington, His Beatitude Sviatoslav (Shevchuk), Head of the UGCC, met with Paula White-Cain, head of the Faith Office, at the White House. In the course of their conversation, he spoke about the restrictions on religious organizations in the Russian-occupied territories, the destruction of churches, and the persecution of priests and pastors. He noted, "Thanks to the mediation of the Holy See, we secured the release of our Fathers Ivan Levytsky and Bohdan Heleta. However, Protestant pastors have no one to advocate for them at the highest level. That is why I spoke up for them before the head of the office, urging their release".³¹ Such mutual solidarity and joint care for persecuted Christian communities make advocacy for religious freedom more effective and contribute to the strengthening of interchurch relations.

In view of the above challenges, the UGCC considers its important task in serving the Ukrainian society, to nurture its resilience in the struggle for freedom, together with other Churches to support the oppressed and to be their voice among the powerful of this world. In its official statement, "Rescue the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor" (Jer. 22:3): The Message of the of the Synod of Bishops of the UGCC in Ukraine on War and Just Peace in the Context of New Ideologies, the UGCC Synod calls for a clear and distinct proclamation of the Gospel Truth:

If modern humanity—the humanity of the "post-truth era"—does not recognize objective truth, it will gradually turn into a "post-justice world". If it does not develop and establish social justice based on the main principles of human dignity, the sanctity and inviolability of human life, common good, and solidarity, it will end up as societies where the concept of law is replaced by the concept of interests of certain individuals or criminal groups, the right of the strong prevails over the rule of law, the law is not the same for everyone, and the foundations of international law and the inviolability of state sovereignty fall victim to the geopolitical and economic interests of the world powers of today.³²

The active defense by the UGCC of those persecuted for religious reasons, both in Ukraine and globally, along with its shared witness with other Churches to the fundamental principles necessary for building a just peace—such as justice, respect for international

law, and care for human dignity—is a way to prevent the misuse of religion by totalitarian regimes. This commitment aims to enable religion to become a true instrument of peace and reconciliation, bringing hope to those enduring hardship and suffering.

7. Concluding Remarks

The identity of the UGCC has developed dynamically over the centuries. Originating from the Kyivan Metropolia and rooted in the Eastern theological, canonical, spiritual, and liturgical heritage, this Church lives in full communion with the Church of the West. Since historically the Kyivan Church had been open to relations with the world centers of Christianity, the UGCC seeks further promotion of this openness. It brings into the spiritual treasury of unity its unique experience of communion with the Christian West and openness to Christian Europe.³³ The UGCC carries out its mission worldwide,³⁴ developing its patriarchal structures in accordance with the call of the Second Vatican Council's Decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (n. 11) and actively participating in the ecumenical movement. The experience of communion with the Pope of Rome is a fundamental part of the UGCC's identity, enriching its ecclesial life as a Catholic Church. At the same time, embodied in one of the Eastern Christian traditions, the UGCC shares its Byzantine heritage both with its Eastern Catholic Sister Churches in other countries and with the Orthodox Churches (Babynskyi 2022), enabling it to act locally.

The identity of the UGCC as an Eastern Catholic Church in communion with the Roman Apostolic See has been repeatedly threatened—most notably during Soviet persecution, and now once again as its structures are being persecuted and banned in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. Yet, despite these trials, the UGCC has remained a vibrant community that has challenged entrenched confessional stereotypes and traditional “confessional spheres of influence” (Avvakumov 2021, 2022). Although Eastern Catholics in Ukrainian society make up only 10% of all believers, they can fulfill their task when they are an active and creative minority that can produce new ideas and models of unity, to form trustworthy leaders, in particular in the field of peacebuilding and reconciliation, and creatively approach the issue of dialogue.

The UGCC tries to build its patriarchal structure³⁵ as an Eastern Catholic Church, as a local Church in a specific time and place, developing its communion with the families of the Catholic Churches, and actively implementing its ecumenical commitment. The patriarchate, as the natural form of existence and activity of *sui iuris* Churches, expresses and ensures the fullness of the means necessary for the Church's service in all areas. According to Bishop Borys Gudziak, the patriarchate is not a privilege or a pedestal; rather, it signifies ecclesial maturity, linked to moral authority and responsibility, as well as an essential instrument for unified, solidaristic service in communion (Gudziak 2024).

Today, the attention of the world community is focused on the Ukrainian context, on the tough experience of facing war, pain, and suffering, and at the same time tireless resilience, struggle for freedom and dignity. This experience, being local, already has a global impact and forces world leaders—both religious and political—to rethink the foundations of a new and more just world order, to create new approaches in fostering peace, and to look for such methods of communication and dialogue, which will be based on the principles of truth and human dignity.

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Notes

- 1 “Crisis and Reform” is a fundamental study that examines the historical developments leading to the Union of Brest, when the majority of Ruthenian eparchies recognized the primacy of the Pope while preserving their Slavonic–Byzantine rite. Gudziak focuses on the pivotal role of the Kyivan metropolia in its struggle against both the Moscow metropolia and the growing influence of Polish Roman Catholicism and Protestantism on Ruthenian spiritual life. He also highlights how these tensions, along with the impact of Patriarch Jeremiah of Constantinople’s visit to Muscovy (1588–1589), ultimately prompted the Ruthenian hierarchy to seek union with Rome.
- 2 More studies on the motives for the conclusion of the Union of Brest and the intentions of the Rus’ bishops (Moncak 1987; Gudziak 1998, n. 4; Hryniewicz 1995; Suttner 1990).
- 3 The proposals of the Orthodox Kyivan Metropolitan Petro Mohyla to conclude a new union with Rome without breaking with Constantinople can be found in Hryniewicz (1995).
- 4 About the preservation and development of the identity of the UGCC as a daughter of the Kyivan Metropolia, as an Eastern Church in union with the Church of Rome (Chirovsky 1994).
- 5 More about the problem of Latinization as a consequence of Uniatism can be found here (Korolevskij 1927; Galadza 1994; Pott 2010).
- 6 More about the question of Uniatism can be found here (Skira et al. 2022; Latinovic and Wooden 2021a, 2021b).
- 7 Bohdan Rostyslav Bociurkiw’s book is a fundamental study of the Stalinist suppression of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. It is being published on the 50th anniversary of the so-called L’viv Sobor of 1946, at which the Church was abolished. Dr. Bociurkiw judiciously places together the information he collected to describe the planning, realization and immediate consequences of the Soviet liquidation of the Greek Catholic Church. He carefully analyzes Soviet policy towards the Church from the first occupation of Galicia by the Red Army in 1939 through to the Church’s “reunion” with the Russian Orthodox Church and the repression of the leading Greek Catholic clergy after World War II. In the process, he identifies the main executors of the Kremlin’s directives and separates fact from fiction and deliberate Soviet disinformation.
- 8 The genesis, difficulties and challenges of interconfessional conflicts in the early 1990s in Ukraine can be read about here (Elensky 1999; Marynovych 1999, 2003).
- 9 More studies on the granting of the Tomos of Autocephaly (Drabynko n.d.; Аналітична записка 2020, n. 21, p. 24; National Institute for Strategic Studies 2019).
- 10 According to the State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience, since 2018, two religious communities of the UOC have changed their subordination in canonical and organizational matters to the religious centres (administrations) of the OCU in 2018; 319 communities in 2019; 30 in 2020; 25 in 2021; 496 in 2022; 471 in 2023; and 232 in 2024: <https://interfax.com.ua/news/general/1036509.html> (accessed on 25 January 2025).
- 11 More studies on the Vatican Ostpolitik (Floridi 1986; Stehle 1981).
- 12 The most significant official UGCC texts on the ecumenical issue can be found here (Інститут екуменічних студій УКУ 2022).
- 13 Comparison and analysis of the two texts of the Ecumenical Position of the UGCC of 2016 and 2022 can be found in Schon (2023), Andriyovsky (2021) and Drabynko (2021).
- 14 The main ecumenical achievements and the role of the UGCC leaders can be found here (ІЕС УКУ 2021; Даско 2001).
- 15 Many papers that put the ongoing military conflict in the context of the religious past and present in both Ukraine and Russia, thus contributing to a theologically informed understanding of the current situation and its global effect, can be found here (Avvakumov and Turi 2024). The volume includes the papers presented at the “Church Diplomacy and the Religious Dimension of the Russian-Ukrainian War” conference held in Lviv, Ukraine, on 29–30 June 2023.
- 16 The “Religion in Fire” project was launched in March 2022 by the Academic Religious Studies Workshop NGO, with support from government institutions and civil society organizations. Its goal is to record and document cases of religious site destruction caused by Russian military aggression, as well as to analyze changes within Ukraine’s religious communities following the full-scale invasion.
- 17 An extensive commentary on religious persecution in the occupied territories can be found here: Brytsyn and Vasin (2025).
- 18 “Comment of the MFA of Ukraine regarding the situation with religious freedom in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine” (10 January 2025): <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/komentar-mzs-ukrayini-shchodo-situaciyi-z-religijnoyu-svobodoyu-na-timchasovo-okupovanih-teritoriyah-ukrayini> (accessed on: 13 January 2025).

- 19 “‘Not a single Catholic priest’ left in Russian-occupied Ukraine, reveals major archbishop” in National Catholic Reporter, 10 July 2024, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/not-single-catholic-priest-left-russian-occupied-ukraine-reveals-major-archbishop> (accessed on: 25 January 2025).
- 20 “Russian occupation authorities ban UGCC activities in the occupied part of Zaporizhzhia region” in UGCC website, 7 December 2023, <https://ugcc.ua/en/data/russian-occupation-authorities-ban-ugcc-activities-in-the-occupied-part-of-zaporizhzhia-region-793/> (accessed on 2 February 2025).
- 21 Many papers that put the ongoing military conflict in the context of the religious past and present in both Ukraine and Russia, thus contributing to a theologically informed understanding of the current situation and its global effect could be found here: [Avvakumov and Turi \(2024\)](#). The volume includes the papers presented at the “Church Diplomacy and the Religious Dimension of the Russian-Ukrainian War” conference held in Lviv, Ukraine on 29–30 June 2023.
- 22 [Hovorun \(2023\)](#) and other articles of this author on the issue.
- 23 Anatolii Babynskiy analyzes the historical development of the idea of “Holy Rus”, which formed the basis of the ideology of the “Russian world”. After the collapse of the USSR, the mythology of “Holy Rus” was proposed by the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church as a substitute for the bankrupt Marxist-Leninist philosophy. This idea had a deep history and emphasized Russia’s special mission in the world and was supposed to become the ideological foundation for the reintegration of the post-Soviet space, where the Russian Orthodox Church retained a dominant role. The author examines how the idea of “Holy Rus” was formed and its characteristics in previous periods of Russian history, as well as its part in shaping the ideology of the “Russkiy mir” and justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine ([Babynskiy 2024](#)).
- 24 “Order of the XXV World Russian People’s Council ‘The Present and Future of the Russian World’” «Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора “Настоящее и будущее Русского мира”» in Patriarchia.Ru, 27 March 2024, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html> (accessed on 2 February 2025).
- 25 <https://vrciro.org.ua/en/documents/> (accessed on 3 February 2025).
- 26 Resolution of the Round Table “Theological Aspects of the Doctrine/Ideology of the ‘Russian World’”, 1 May 2024, <https://kpba.edu.ua/en/academy/resolution-of-the-round-table-theological-aspects-of-the-doctrine-ideology-of-the-russian-world-2/> (accessed on 2 February 2025).
- 27 “Declaration of the Orthodox Theologians on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii mir) Teaching”, 13 March 2022, <https://ucu.edu.ua/news/a-declaration-of-orthodox-theologians-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/> (accessed on 11 December 2024).
- 28 Cyril Hovorun has criticized the World Council of Churches’ policies since 2014 for allowing itself to be instrumentalized by Russian propaganda through the ROC: [Hovorun \(2022\)](#).
- 29 Razumkov Center’s statistics in ZN.UA, Online: <https://zn.ua/ukr/war/prahnennja-papi-rimskoho-terminovo-privniti-vijnuzabud-jaku-tsinu-pidtrimuje-9-ukrajintsiv-opituvannja.html> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
- 30 “His Beatitude Sviatoslav presented the religious dimension of the war against Ukraine and the ideology of the ‘Russian world’ at the Hudson Institute” Ukr. «Блаженніший Святослав представив релігійний вимір війни проти України і ідеологію «русского мира» в Інституті Гудзона» in UGCC website, 21 February 2025, <https://ugcc.ua/data/blazhennishyy-svyatoslav-predstaviv-religiynny-vymir-viyny-proty-ukrayny-i-ideologiyu-ruskogo-mira-v-instytuti-gudzona-6426/> (accessed on 22 February 2025).
- 31 “Head of UGCC Meets with Head of Trump Administration’s Faith Office on Persecution of Christians in Occupied Territories”, 22 February 2025, <https://ugcc.ua/en/data/head-of-ugcc-meets-with-head-of-trump-administrations-faith-office-on-persecution-of-christians-in-occupied-territories-1457/> (accessed on 23 February 2025).
- 32 *The Message of the of the Synod of Bishops of the UGCC* (see n. 39), 64.
- 33 *The Ecumenical Position of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church* (see n. 1), 35.
- 34 <https://ugcc.ua/church/structure/> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
- 35 Read more about the significance of the patriarchate for the UGCC and history of the Ukrainian Patriarchal Movement here: [Husar \(2005\)](#), [Shevchuk \(2018\)](#), [Ploky \(2003, pp. 849–67\)](#), [Sorokowski \(2013\)](#).

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