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*A Slavic Pope and the Millennium of Christianity in Rus'*

**(Pope John Paul II's Speech to the Participants of the Colloquium**

**On the Millennium of the Christening of Kievan Rus')\***

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Pope John Paul II's relationship to problems of the Christian East and thus to the Kremlin and to a Communism hostile to Christianity — has long commanded the attention of politicians, journalists, and political scientists. The strong support which the Pope has given Solidarity and his deep concern for the Church and the faithful in the USSR and its satellites have been a mark of important changes in the politics of the Vatican toward Eastern Europe. There is nothing strange in this, for since coming to Rome, the former Cardinal of Krakow has an intimate knowledge of East European condition and a healthy scepticism of Vatican traditions into the eastern policies of the Capital of St. Peter (that back to the time of Possevino<sup>1</sup>, and that are still current among the Roman clergy). The Pope has put a brake on those Vatican officials who were so interested in contacts and cooperation with the Kremlin and other Communist regimes that they were often ready to overlook the interests of the faithful and of the captive nations.

This does not mean, however, that John Paul II refuses to talk with representatives of Communist regimes. Quite the contrary. This Pope has expressed a willingness to speak with everyone in his quest to promote peace, social justice, and human rights. Indeed, in his addresses the Pope consistently speaks out in defense of those human rights which are being endangered and violated by totalitarian Communist and authoritarian regimes.

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\* John Paul II speech took place on 5 May 1988 in the hall of Clemens VIII, who did a great deal to promote a union between Catholic and Orthodox Churches. His audience was composed of scholars, participants in a colloquium on “The Genesis Development of Slavic and Byzantine Christianity,” which had been jointly organized by the Polish Institute of Christian Culture and Italian Institute of Medieval History. The text of the speech was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* on 6 May 1988.

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Possevino, S.J., tried to convince Ivan the Terrible bring Russia's Orthodox Church into the Catholic fold. His dream of such a union played a part in Russia's negotiations with the Polish-Lithuanian State, at which Possevino was the official mediator.

One of John Paul II's fundamental precepts is that "One cannot speak of true freedom and even less of democracy in a situation in which citizens do not truly participate in important decisions affecting the life and future of the nation."<sup>2</sup> He expressed this thought in Paraguay in his address to the representatives of the political opposition fighting the government of General Stroessner. It brings to mind the Pope's numerous statements directed at Poland's General Jaruzelski and encapsulates John Paul II's political credo very well. In other words, the Pope wants to promote changes in the interest of peace and social justice and on the basis of the rights of citizens. He also labours to reduce world tensions and to promote unity among peoples. This spirit of universal rapprochement permeates all the papal documents issued on the occasion of the Millennium of Kievan Rus's official introduction to Christianity. In speaking about St. Volodymyr's and Rus's baptism, John Paul II reminds us that both the Eastern and Western Churches formed one religious community at that time. Therefore, the Millennium, in the eyes of the Pope, is not only a great holiday for Orthodoxy, but for Catholicism as well. It is especially a great holiday for the Catholics of the Eastern rite. And for the Ukrainian, Belorussian and Russian nations. It is a great holiday for those who to this day live by the inheritance of St. Volodymyr's great act.

The peoples of East-Central Europe have long been disenfranchised as a result of the great power politics exemplified by Yalta, the Brezhnev Doctrine and Sonnenfeld's *faux pas*. For this reason they view all contacts by western leaders with the Kremlin as not necessarily heralding any positive results. The Ukrainians, though thankful to the Pope for his interest and support, nonetheless experience a sense of disquiet observing the growing contacts between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church. For this Church has traditionally kowtowed to state authority - even to the present atheistic one. The Apostolic Letter *Euntes in Mundum* which was publicized on the occasion of the Baptism of Kievan Rus' and sent to the Patriarch of Moscow, astonished Ukrainian Catholics, especially since it was issued on the eve of the departure of a large Vatican delegation to Moscow and Kiev (headed by Cardinal Casaroli). The Papal message *Magnum Baptismi Donum*, addressed to the Ukrainian Catholic community, only partially quieted their displeasure. In this context, John Paul's address on 5 May to the participants of the colloquium in Rome takes on a particular meaning and undercuts the efforts by proponents of ecumenism at any price.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 29 May 1988, No 22 (2031).

In his appearance, John Paul II spoke very positively about the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Union of Brest (1596). He also acknowledged the difficult experiences undergone by the Ukrainian Catholic Church and its continued suffering. He recalled Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych, a martyr for the faith, whose memory lives on in the hearts of the faithful, deprived of their clergy and their churches in the USSR. The Pope's supportive words about the Ukrainian Catholic Church were not new; we have heard them before. What caused quite a stir now was his reminder of the Ukrainians' right to their own Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which in 1925 "had, as is known, many bishops and priests, many parishes and millions of believers."<sup>3</sup>

As we know from the history of Christian nations, their political independence, symbolized by the crown, was always predicated on the organizational independence of their Churches. The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church as well as the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the 20th Century supported and stood for the struggle for the independence of Ukraine. Both of these Churches were liquidated and banned by law on Soviet territory. Pope John Paul II's appeal to have them reinstated springs not only from a defense of individuals and nations, but also from a strong premonition that a true rebirth of St. Volodymyr's deed is likely to have its new beginnings on the territory of Ukraine and that this can lead to true Christian unity.

Actions promoting the reinstatement of the legal status of the Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Churches in the Soviet Union are a part of the great vision that is being drawn by John Paul II. It is not difficult to observe that this vision, as it relates to Ukraine, has a great deal in common with the vision of the late Metropolitan Andrii Sheptytskyi (Szeptycki, Szeptyckij). The banal phrases issued by the Communist leadership about religious freedom and the concomitant clamour about *perebudova* (*perestroika*) and *hlasnist'* (*glasnost*) do not keep pace with the concrete suggestions for change that have been put forward by the Pope. The Pope expects actions and declares that the millennial celebrations should become "an occasion for the common happiness of all the sons and daughters of St. Volodymyr and St. Olha in complete freedom of religion, freedom of conscience and freedom of worship. This religious freedom is the full-fledged right of the peoples of ancient Kievan Rus' — Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Russians — baptized in the Dnipro's redeeming waters where the Church, in its faith in Christ, remained one and inseparable."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 May 1988.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

In conclusion, it is worth calling two matters to mind. As we know, the period of *hlasnist'* and *perebudova* does not mean a departure from the Soviet imperial policy nor from Russification. The captive nations' demands for independence are as frightening to the Soviet leaders today as they were to Nicholas II at the time of his constitutional reforms. Cooperation among these nations could bring about the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Therefore, no effort is spared to promote and sustain hostility among the nations of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc. It is very telling that Ukrainians were permitted to vent anti-Polish sentiments at such crucial moments as in September 1956 or during the time of Solidarity. In Poland, at the same time, publications aimed at eliminating inimical ignorance and inveterate hatred<sup>5</sup> are discouraged, while slanderous books such as those by Edward Prus slandering Metropolitan Andrii Sheptyts`kyi or attacking the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) are published in large editions. Moreover, both in the Soviet Union and in Poland, a great deal of effort is spent in discrediting any publications or information which attest to attempts made by the emigration or by people in Warsaw or Kiev to promote Polish-Ukrainian cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Given these facts, the attempts by John-Paul II to eliminate hatred and introduce cooperation between these nations take on a special meaning. It is worth remembering that it was Archbishop Karol Wojtyla himself, together with Archbishop Boleslaw Kominek, who were the authors of the famous epistle issued in December 1965, "We Forgive and Ask For Forgiveness", which was addressed, in the name of the Polish episcopate, to the Bishops of Germany.

It is not surprising, then, that the currently observed rapprochement between the hierarchy and the faithful of the Polish and Ukrainian Catholic Churches,<sup>7</sup> as well as the improvement in the situation of the Ukrainian clergy in Poland<sup>8</sup> is taking place the patronage of this Pope. John-Paul II's bring friendship and cooperation between Poles and Ukrainians, as well as his appeals for more religious freedom for all the peoples in the USSR goes against traditional Russian and Soviet policy. The Pope's address of 5 May 1988 makes it clear that Gorbachev's well-publicized gestures toward Russian Orthodox Church will be seen simply as empty phrases if

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<sup>5</sup> An entire issue of the Catholic monthly *Znak* devoted to Ukrainian themes was banned. The censorship was so severe that even an open letter to *Tygodnik Powszechny* about Metropolitan Andrii Sheptytskyi was not published (see M. Pryshlak, "Szeptyckij a porozumienie polsko-ukrainskie" in *Zeszyt w jezyku polskim*, No 1-2, Munich, 1985, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> The Polish-language issue of *Sucasnist'* (No 1-2, 1985, V. L. Kaczmarczyk, ed.), called forth a two-hour denunciation by General Kiszczak, Minister of Police in Poland, which was published in *Trybuna Ludu* (14 June 1986) and *Polityka*.

<sup>7</sup> Two meetings have taken place between Jozef Cardinal Glemp, the Primate of Poland, and Myroslaw Cardinal Lubachivskyi, Metropolitan of Lviv, on 8 and 17 October 1987. For the English translation of the remarks of both prelates, see *Studium Papers* Vol. 12, No 2, April 1988. On Cardinal Glemp's initiative, a big celebration of the Christianization of Kievan Rus' will take place in Jasna Gora in front of the image of Mary Mother of God of Czestochowa. The clergy of the Ukrainian Catholic Church will participate. This event, as well as participation of both the Polish clergy and the Polish might be a significant step promoting Polish-Ukrainian cooperation.

<sup>8</sup> Andrzej A Zieba, "Ukrainians and the Catholic Poland After World War II", *Studium Papers* Vol. 12, April 1988, pp. 37-41.

the Kremlin does not reinstate the two great Churches of Ukraine that were destroyed and banned by the Soviet regime.

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