

Schismophrenia: A Reflection on Ukrainian Autocephaly

by [Fr. Bohdan Hladio](#)



“No earthly joy exists unmingled with sorrow” —St. John of Damascus

We are all no doubt aware of the controversy surrounding the recent proclamation of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. As a Ukrainian Orthodox priest, I cannot help but see how St. John’s words are an apt description of the situation of the Orthodox Church in general and myself personally.

I recently traveled to Ukraine, visited friends in previously “non-canonical” churches and monasteries, and was able to serve the Liturgy with them. This brought much joy to us all. For most Orthodox Ukrainians the recognition of the Church in Ukraine as worthy of autocephaly is the correction of an historical injustice, the righting of an ecclesial wrong.

Yet I have friends within various Orthodox churches here in North America who see this proclamation of autocephaly as a source of sorrow. And I have trouble understanding why.

When talk first began about the possibility of recognizing the Orthodox Church in Ukraine as autocephalous, contrary voices were raised saying that to do so would be to “legalize the schism.” In one sense you almost want to ask, “What are you supposed to do with a schism?”

Can we be happy when millions of Orthodox Christians are out of communion with world Orthodoxy? If schism is bad for the Church, it obviously needs to be healed. But how?

“They must repent!” The position taken by the Moscow Patriarchate Church in Ukraine was that all those belonging to “non-canonical” groups had to repent and return to the “canonical” Church, following which contentious issues like liturgical language, church polity, etc. could be addressed. This approach was clearly unfruitful, and over the past twenty-nine years the few attempts made by the Moscow Patriarchate to seek reconciliation were half-hearted at best.

It must be emphasized that the schism which until recently existed in Ukraine was not dogmatic in nature. The faith, liturgy, discipline and practice were exactly the same in the “schismatic” as in the “canonical” Churches. The schism was based, rather, upon politics and culture. Neither the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church nor the Kyivan Patriarchate Church wished to be out of communion with world Orthodoxy, but felt that in good conscience they could not submit to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Such schisms are nothing new. Two recent examples are that of ROCOR (the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia) and the “Free Serbian” diocese in North America.

In 2007 ROCOR and the Moscow Patriarchate established Eucharistic Communion. Those familiar with the history of these two Churches know how vehemently antagonistic their relationship had been since the 1920’s. Though I am not aware of any official pronouncements by ROCOR declaring that the Moscow Patriarchate was without grace, many members of ROCOR – allegedly even its primate, Metropolitan Philaret of blessed memory – certainly believed the MP (as well as the OCA) was “[graceless.](#)” Yet when it came time for reconciliation there were no re-consecrations, re-ordinations, or re-baptisms. Just the signing of documents and concelebration.

Another useful example is that of the of “Serbian-American” schism. In 1963, the hierarch of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese in the USA, Bishop Dionisije, was deposed by the Bishop’s Sabor in Belgrade. He ignored this censure (which he claimed was of political provenance) and organized the “Serbian Orthodox Church in the USA and Canada.” The schism lasted almost 30 years. The Serbian Patriarchate claimed that this schismatic body was without grace, and [their mysteries were not valid](#), an exact parallel to the situation in Ukraine from 1989 to 2018. Yet when it came time for reconciliation the schism was again healed by concelebration—no re-consecrations, re-ordinations, etc. I recently learned that in 1992, when the schism was healed, Patriarch Pavle served a requiem at Bishop Dionisije’s grave.

Consequently, calls for *akribeia* (rigor) in healing the schism in Ukraine, and the castigation of Patriarch Bartholomew and the Patriarchate of Constantinople for healing the schism by *oekonomia* (leniency) seem manifestly unjust. When Serbs and Russians (and those who accept their legitimacy) who were reconciled by leniency, without public manifestations of repentance, re-consecration, etc., demand rigor towards the Orthodox Ukrainians who were in the exact same situation, their words are, to put it mildly, disingenuous and uncharitable.

The same can be said of calls for a conciliar resolution to this problem. Patriarch Bartholomew went to great lengths to facilitate the participation of all the local Churches in the Holy and Great Council in 2016. One of the issues which was originally to have been addressed was the process for recognizing and proclaiming autocephaly. When leaders of Churches who refused to participate in the Holy and Great Council on Crete now call for a council to be convened to discuss the matter of Ukrainian autocephaly one can only wonder at their motives.

Regarding Ukraine, there is one fundamental question which needs to be answered: Given the canonical, administrative, and political realities of how the Orthodox Church is organized and functions in the world today, what good reason can there be for denying autocephaly to the Church in Ukraine? No matter whose “canonical territory” Ukraine might have been, given the current administrative and organizational realities within the Orthodox Church, it seems patently absurd that the Church in Ukraine should not be autocephalous when the Churches in such countries as Poland or the Czech lands and Slovakia are.

The proclamation of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine has exposed very real fissures within the structure of the Orthodox Church: the question of canonical territory; the reality of multiple jurisdictions in one state or territorial unit; the lack of a clear, universally accepted process and procedure for the recognition and proclamation of autocephaly; how primacy is understood and practiced; the refusal of certain local Churches to attend conciliar gatherings; etc.

Let us not add fat to the fire by promoting a double standard—by demanding of the formerly out-of-communication Orthodox Ukrainians the public repentance which was not required of our Serbian and Russian brothers and sisters in Christ.

Fr. Bohdan Hladio is a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, currently serving in Oshawa, Ontario. Besides his pastoral work he has served on many diocesan boards and committees, and has authored one book as well as numerous articles. He is currently completing a Master's degree at the Orthodox School of Theology, Trinity College, in Toronto.