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Pope Francis Meets with Ukrainian Church Leaders over Two Days

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An unprecedented event took place in Rome on July 5-6. Desiring to demonstrate support for the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church at a time of war, shifts in interconfessional relations, fluctuating hopes amid heightened tensions, humanitarian and social crises, Pope Francis invited the head, metropolitans, and members of the Permanent Synod of the UGCC to a personal meeting at the Vatican.



The Pope himself, the cardinal secretary and leading officials of the Vatican Secretariat of State, and prefects of four curial departments, together with their assistants, dedicated two full days of fraternal conversation and reflection to the challenges and mission of our Church – in Ukraine and in its global presence.

To recognize the uniqueness of this format it might help to imagine the American president – a political leader of 300 million, as compared to the Pope, who leads a billion Catholics – invited Ukrainians to meet for two days with the leaders of the U.S. government: an apt comparison, since the relative percentage of Ukrainians in America more or less corresponds to the proportion that Ukrainian Greek-Catholics constitute in the Catholic Church.

For the Vatican dignitaries and for us eleven bishops, who represent the global Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in North and Latin America, Oceania, and Europe, including Ukraine, these were 12 hours of concentrated mutual listening.

To take time to listen and to learn to know one another in tranquility are true luxuries in the modern world. Today everyone is rushed, demands everything here and now, wants immediate results and gratification, and is impatient for quick and simple black and white decisions. We have somehow lost the understanding that life is complex and that, in order to fathom the human person, place, and situation, it is necessary to devote a significant amount of time, sometimes weeks or months. We have forgotten how to listen.

In this bustle how many people have succumbed to the populism of politicians! How many children have grown up feeling unheeded, ignored! How many women have felt their voices unheard whether in family or society! How many men are afraid to be truly open about their fears and concerns! In various countries, even the most developed democracies, we witness profound divisions, alienation, and deep even if well-concealed wounds.

The Catholic Church is a global community of a billion. In historical secular terms, this is the most enduring organization on earth, with two millennia of uninterrupted if stormy history. It has spread to every country. Its principles are incarnated in every culture, and even more – it has been a creative force within these various cultures. No other institution has done so much for the development of education, relief of humanitarian and social needs, promotion of world peace, and care of human souls, as has the Catholic Church.

For two days, as we frankly communicated to the Pope and Vatican officials our difficulties and challenges, our local and global achievements, we also had the opportunity to reexamine ourselves. A SWOT analysis of the UGCC was presented; the successes and failures of the pastoral work of the Church were discussed. The Holy See wanted to understand how it can help the UGCC not only develop but “flourish” as was emphasized in the final communiqué.

I thought about the fact that three Galician bishoprics from a provincial corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1900 were able to transform into a Church that now boasts 34 eparchies (dioceses) and exarchates (mission dioceses) all over the world.

I thought about the role the Holy See has played to make this development possible.

During the time when the Soviet regime seemingly eradicated the very existence of our Church and tried to destroy the unique individuality of Ukraine’s nationhood, culture, and language, the Holy See lifted up the name of the UGCC, Ukraine, and Ukrainians on the international arena, and provided structural support and legitimacy to Ukrainian ecclesiastical and community life.

The Vatican itself in 1950 bought property in Sarcelles near Paris for the Taras Shevchenko Scientific Society, to enable researchers there to edit and publish the monumental “Encyclopedia of Ukrainian Studies.”

At a different time and in a different way, the Vatican financially supported the Ukrainian Free University in Munich.

It was Roman Catholics who provided financial backing for Patriarch Josyf Slipyj and the material basis of his dream, the Ukrainian Catholic University, established initially in Rome.

The Roman Catholic Church has played an active role in practically all pastoral, charitable, and educational projects of the Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine. Over the last hundred years more than 1,000 Ukrainian priests received a full higher education and often earned doctorates in institutions run by the Holy See.

Support for the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church on the part of Rome has a long tradition, and now a new format has appeared -- deep listening. Its leader is Pope Francis.

It is unbelievably difficult today to carry the responsibility for unity and general leadership of the Catholic Church, in particular because of the instantaneous nature of modern communications, and our nervous impatience that demands immediate responses and reactions to every question. Speed and brevity are the desired currency.

The Pope offers a different style, a different set of relations.

Benefitting from several opportunities for personal contact with him this year, I can attest that the Pope knows how to listen, and with attention and sincerity. Attention and sincerity, and closeness to those in need, and awareness of our specific pain shines in his eyes, regardless of the fact that the pontiff must hold in his heart the cares of the whole world. His directness, simplicity, and goodness impress. This Pope wants the human being to be close to God. He does not tolerate pomposity, formalism, and clericalism.

Pope Francis is not a politician, though his status in the world community demands certain actions which involve the political arena. He is, above all, a pastor who deeply cares about people’s fates. He and his assistants demonstrated this yet again over these two days.

It would be good if other world leaders dedicated as much time and attention to Ukraine, the Ukrainian war, human suffering and aspirations.

The Russian invasion has already taken the lives of 13,000 people according to UN estimates, injured and maimed some 30,000 (9,000 civilians). There are already some 400,000 combat veterans many traumatized, more than 1,000 have committed suicide. That is just on the Ukrainian side. No statistics are available on Russian casualties —because officially Russian soldiers “are not involved.” The war has directly affected 5.2 million Ukrainian citizens, 3.5 million of whom require humanitarian assistance. Some 2.5 million have become internally displaced persons or refugees. The Russian invasion transformed Donbas — a compact,

urbanized and industrialized region — into a conflict zone rife with criminality and with ruined industry and infrastructure—houses, hospitals, schools, water, electricity and gas supply systems.

It was possible to explain to the leaders of the Holy See how the war exacerbated the historical wounds caused by decades of genocidal totalitarianism. In the twentieth century between 12 and 15 million people were killed on Ukrainian territory. The system killed systematically, and fear became deeply lodged in the collective DNA. This fear of the other leads to pervasive interpersonal distrust rendering family, social, economic, and political life all the more difficult.

Wide-spread post-Soviet poverty and social injustice, substandard medical care and social services, high levels of abortion, alcoholism, AIDS, divorce, family violence, infant mortality, and low average life expectancy have been aggravated by five years of hybrid war combining military methods with economic undermining, infiltration of the political system, and various types of cyber-attacks. The Russian invasion has occasioned a veritable humanitarian crisis. Now, enduring the sixth year of foreign invasion Ukraine is the poorest country in Europe. A million emigrants and refugees are leaving the country annually, often without documentation. The Holy Father wanted to hear the truth about what is taking place.

This is not a dry geopolitical calculation on the Pope's part, but attention that flows out of true evangelical love: for the despair of the refugee, for the loneliness of the young person, for the traumas of those who because of war have lost their relatives, for the sufferings of families broken by alcoholism, for wounds to the soul caused by divorce, separation, and enmity.

In order to grasp Pope Francis better, it is worthwhile knowing how to read signs, gestures, and symbols.

The Pope has emphasized a number of times that he begins and ends his day with Ukraine, in prayer before the icon which His Beatitude Sviatoslav gave him. He recalled this at the meeting in Rome:

“You know that every morning and every evening my gaze turns to the icon of the Mother of God which His Beatitude gave me when he left Buenos Aires to assume the ministry of Major Archbishop which the Church entrusted to him. Before this icon I begin and end my day, trusting in the graces of the Mother of God, who is the Mother of us all and your Church. One can say that I begin and end my day ‘Ukrainian style,’ beholding the Mother of God.” To the attentive eye and heart, these words of the Pope demonstrate how personal the question of Ukraine is for him.

For two days, other Vatican leaders also had the opportunity to come to better know, and more deeply appreciate Ukraine, Ukrainians, and our Church. We strove to be good communicators.

Was everything that should be said — said, was everything heard? Obviously, not. However, there is encouraging hope that a new format for discussion has emerged. There was a sincere dialogue or, rather, a polyphony – without dialectic and fakery – in which respect, hospitality, and the desire to comprehend one another reigned. We prayed together and listened.

The Catholic Church is an institution both divine and human. It works with the soul and the heart, not with steel or stone. Its weapons are soft: above all – prayer, words, and sometimes silence. To understand the strength of prayer, words, and silence is not easy, especially when rockets are exploding and passions raging.

Over the two days with Pope Francis and his co-workers, we felt a mutual communion, from heart to heart. I am convinced that the Pope suffers over the fate of all people in this mysterious, dramatic, deeply wounded but beloved by God corner of the world. He strives, intensively and directly, to grasp the needs of Ukrainians from the Carpathians to Donbas, from Chornobyl to Crimea, the desires of all the faithful following the Kyivan tradition in various countries and on various continents.

God is close, especially where there is pain. His witnesses are always close when things are difficult for us. They do not waste time on arguments. They do not waste effort to convince the mighty of the world of this, but directly and sincerely they listen, standing near us in solidarity.

We could see this in the Pope's eyes, his attitude and directness, when he quietly drank espresso, allowing His Beatitude Sviatoslav and all of us to speak in the name of globally dispersed Ukrainians – from Argentina to Australia, from Los Angeles to Montreal, from Dublin to Warsaw, from the Sian to the Don.

That was also the attitude of his co-workers.

That of Cardinal Parolin – the Secretary of State and second in charge at the Vatican. Quiet, smiling, friendly. He is not afraid to admit that he may not know something. A tested diplomat who wants to build bridges. He personally visited Ukraine after the start of the war in order to see up close what was happening.

That of Cardinal Sandri – responsible for the Vatican's relations with the Eastern Catholic Churches, who always expressed deep respect for the UGCC. Last summer he was in the gray zone in Donbas, he prayed with us in Zarvanytsia, and a few weeks ago he met with our faithful in North America.

We saw this attitude as well in all those cardinals, archbishops, and bishops present at the meetings.

It is impossible to say and hear everything in two days. It was a first step toward a deeper acquaintance and understanding. Clearly it was not full, but the Lord fills everything and will be with us all. This process is ascending – it is symbolic and does not stop at the curia or with the Pope, because they do not have the fullness of grace, which is only with the living God.

Nevertheless, their witness deeply affected us. The simplicity of sharing conversation and coffee. The Pope encouraged us to be pastors who do not look at our watches but who give time. He gave us a lot of his. Indeed, time will tell how these discussions will bear concrete fruit.

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