Adaptation Without Assimilation:
The Genius of the Greco-Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo

Paul Robert Magocsi

Abstract

The events of 1646, which eventually came to be known as the Union of Uzhhorod, led to the creation of the Greco-Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo, and those of Prešov, Oradea/Nagyvár and Hajdudorog, which were carved out of this original ecclesiastical unit. Furthermore, the faithful of the Eparchy of Kríževci and the Metropolitan Province of Pittsburgh, with its four eparchies, and the Slovak Eparchy in Canada also trace their roots to the Union of Uzhhorod. While originally these people might have identified themselves as Rusyn or as people of the "Rus' faith," over time, they accepted diverse national identities. The author focuses on this aspect as the genius of the Union of Uzhhorod, which created a Church in Carpathian Rus' which has been able to adapt to various political and socio-economic situations without losing its essence, i.e., assimilating. He examines three different

1 Originally delivered by the author as one of four keynote addresses at celebrations on April 22, 1996 in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, marking the 350th anniversary of the Union of Uzhhorod. Prof. Magocsi attended as a representative of the Byzantine Catholic Metropolis of Pittsburgh. A modified version of this paper was presented in Ottawa at the Sheptytsky Institute Colloquium, December, 1996.
approaches to the issue throughout history: those of the purists, adapters, and assimilators. He concludes that adaptation has best served the Greco-Catholic Church with roots in the Carpathian region and suggests it as an approach for the present and future.

The year 1996 marks the anniversary of an important historical event that took place 350 years ago in the city of Uzhhorod. On April 24, 1646, sixty-three Orthodox priests made a Catholic profession of faith. That solemn proclamation eventually came to be known as the Union of Uzhhorod, which established the foundation for the Uniate Church in the Carpathian region of the former kingdom of Hungary.

The manner in which the Union of Uzhhorod came about and how it was finally secured among the population in the Carpathian region – not to mention the subsequent historical development of what became the Greco-Catholic Church with its triumphs, trials, brutal liquidation after World War II, and resurrection only a few years ago – are all part of a fascinating story. It is a story, however, which time does not permit me to elaborate upon here. Moreover, there are others more qualified than I who could tell that story better. 3

Instead, what I would like to do is share with you some reflections on the historical and cultural significance of the Greco-Catholic Church for the inhabitants of the Carpathian region or, more precisely, Carpathian Rus’. These reflections, moreover, come from someone who is neither a priest nor even an adherent of

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an Eastern Christian Church, whether Greco-Catholic or Orthodox. Therefore, the following reflections are from the perspective of a religious outsider, although an outsider who has spent at least the past quarter century trying to understand the historical and cultural complexities of the East Slavic peoples living along the southern slopes and adjacent lowlands of the Carpathian Mountains.

Statistics and Geography

The original Eparchy of Mukachevo to which the Union of Uzhhorod applied was geographically much larger than it is today. When, in 1771, the eparchy was proclaimed to be an independent ecclesiastical entity, it had over 800 parishes spread throughout thirteen counties in the northeastern part of the Hungarian Kingdom, territories which today are within Ukraine, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. 3 The size of the eparchy first began to change in 1818, with the removal of 192 parishes from its western counties to create a new Eparchy of Prešov. Five years later, 123 parishes from Szatmár county in the south were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Greco-Catholic Eparchy of Oradea/Nagyvárad, and in 1853 another 94 parishes to the Eparchy of Gherla. Finally in 1912, 68 parishes from the southwestern region of the Mukachevo eparchy were transferred to the newly-created Eparchy of Hajdúdorog. Thus, by the eve of World War I, significant parts of the original Eparchy of Mukachevo were within three neighboring Greco-Catholic eparchies in territory that today is in Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary.

At the same time that its geographical extent decreased, the influence of the Eparchy of Mukachevo radiated far beyond its European homeland, as a result of the immigration of Greco-Catholics who carried their faith abroad. Already in the mid-

3 Among the published general histories of the Church, the most useful are Athanasius B. Hecaţ, Răspuns temeiilor istoriei Bucovinei (Iasi, 1967) – revised English version: Athanasius B. Pecar, The History of the Church in Carpathian Rus’ (New York, 1992); and the older work by Antal Hodínka, A munkációs görögkatolikus püspökök története (Budapest, 1910). For details on the movement for Church Union, see Michael Læko, Unio Uzhhorodensis Ruthenorum Carpathorum cum Ecclesia Catholica (Rome, 1955), published in English translation as The Union of Uzhhorod (Cleveland and Rome, 1966).

eighteenth century, Rusyns began to settle in the Bačka and Srem regions of what was then southern Hungary (today’s Vojvodina in Serbia and eastern Croatia), while during the four decades between 1880 and 1914 nearly 180,000 Greco-Catholics from Carpathian Rus’ settled in North America. From these communities the Vatican eventually organized the Eparchy of Križevci in Croatia (1777); four eparchies (1924–1981) and a Metropolitan Province of Pittsburgh in the United States (1969); as well as an eparchy for Slovaks of the Byzantine Rite in Canada (1980). It is for this reason that the 350th celebration of the Union of Uzhhorod has brought together hierarchical and lay representatives of the original Eparchy of Mukachevo based in Ukraine as well as its ecclesiastical descendants who today live in seven other countries: Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Yugoslavia, the United States, and Canada.

Adaptation to New Identities and Circumstances

When the Union of Uzhhorod came into being, the vast majority of priests and faithful (other than the Romanians in Szatmár and southern Máramaros counties) were ethnically of Rusyn language and culture. It is for this reason that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Uniate, or Greco-Catholic, Church in Carpathian Rus’ represented a body of believers who called themselves Rusnaks or Rusyns, that is, people of the “Rus’ faith” (rus’ ka vira). Only in the nineteenth century did the ethnolinguistic composition of the Eparchy of Mukachevo change. This was in large part due to the process of national assimilation. Thousands of Greco-Catholics living especially in the lowland areas of what is today southeastern Slovakia and northeastern Hungary, while maintaining their “Rus’ faith,” adopted a Slovak or a Magyar national identity. 4 This was a gradual process that lasted for nearly

half a century between the 1840s and 1890s. 5 Consequently, by the early twentieth century, the Greco-Catholic territories of the northeastern Hungarian Kingdom (the eparchies of Mukachevo, Prešov, and Hajdúdorog) had been transformed into a multicultural community primarily of Rusyns, Slovaks, and Magyars.

I mention the geographic and ethnographic composition of the original Eparchy of Mukachevo because it provides a key to the understanding of what, I believe, is the genius of the Greco-Catholic Church in Carpathian Rus’. That genius lies in the Church’s ability to survive, and that survival has depended on its willingness to adapt to ever changing political, socioeconomic, and religious circumstances. For the most part, the Church as a body has been able to adapt without giving up its essence. This is what I mean by the turn of phrase used in the title of this essay: adaptation without assimilation.

Why, one might ask, should a Church have to adapt in the first place? There is, of course, a simple answer. Life by its very nature is in a constant state of flux, requiring individuals and social structures (including Churches) to adapt to ever-changing circumstances in order to survive. The question of adaptation becomes even more crucial for social entities such as ethnonational groups that do not have their own states, or for that matter Churches which do not enjoy the full or even partial protection of the state in which they function.

4 The question of whether the Greco-Catholics of present-day eastern Slovakia were originally of Rusyn or of Slovak nationality is very controversial. At the outset of the twentieth century, the renowned Czech scholar, Lubor Niederle, Slovanský svět (Prague, 1909), 93, concluded that “all of eastern Slovakia is, in

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5 Between 1841 and 1890, 176 Rusyn villages in eastern Slovakia were Slovakized and 37 were Magyarized, while only one Slovak village was rusynized: Jaromír Koček, “Ethniky vývoj československého Potiš,” Národnostní obzor, III (Prague, 1933), 270.
It is well known that historically Rusyns have been a stateless people and that their Greco-Catholic Church south of the Carpathians has had to function under political regimes that for the past three and one-half centuries were formally either Roman Catholic (Hungarian Kingdom, Slovakia), Protestant (Transylvania), or atheistic (Soviet Ukraine, Communist Czechoslovakia). In such circumstances, the Rusyn people and their Greco-Catholic Church were at best tolerated, and to achieve that toleration they had to adapt to the prevailing sociopolitical situation. The very notion of adaptation implies there is a norm from which one may feel obliged to move away in order to adapt to another norm that is acceptable to the political and social environment in which one lives. In the case of Uniate/Greco-Catholics, their original norm was characterized by a distinctive liturgical Rite (a variant of the Byzantine); the use of Church Slavonic as a liturgical language; and adherence to the ancient Julian, instead of Gregorian calendar. The norm was also reflected in certain customs such as optional celibacy, the separation of the altar from the congregation by an iconostasis, and congregational singing without instrumental accompaniment characterized by the heavy influence of folk music in what is known as Carpathian plainchant (protopopie). These and some other elements were together what defined the “Rus’ faith,” whose adherents became the carriers of the Rusnak/Rusyn ethos and future nationality.

If we now turn to how the norms of Greco-Catholicism and, secondarily, to how various national identities have evolved over the last 350 years, I believe we can speak of a three-fold spectrum of attitudes or modes of action. The individuals who at one time or another have embodied such attitudes might be called: (1) purists; (2) adaptors; and (3) assimilators.

**Purists**

The purists are those who identify fully with a given norm—usually acquired as students or seminarians—and who are convinced that any change in the norm they learned, however minor, must be avoided at all costs. Already in the seventeenth century, when the Union was first being implemented gradually throughout the Carpathian region, some priests like Mykhailo Andrella fiercely opposed any association with the Catholic world because, as he believed, it would violate the purity of the eastern oriented Orthodox Rus’ faith. In the nineteenth century, other purists arose, such as the secular political activist Adol'f Dobrians’kyi (1817–1901), who, as head of the Preparatory Committee for the Autonomy of the Greco-Catholics of Hungary, strove during the 1860s and 1870s to defend the status of the Greco-Catholic Church in the face of ever-increasing magyarization and latinization. The purist tradition was continued in the United States during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries by the priest Alexis Toth (1853–1909) and Bishop Orestes Chornock (1883–1977, consecrated 1938), who felt the Greco-Catholic norm had to be defended against the encroachments of Roman-Russian Catholicism.

**Assimilators**

At the other end of our three-fold spectrum are the assimilators. These are individuals prepared to make whatever change is neces-
Adaptors

In between the purists at one end of the spectrum and the assimilators on the other are the adaptors. These are people who are able to assess the social and political realities in which they live and, after doing so, try to accommodate to those realities without necessarily surrendering the essentials of their own religious and national identities. Among the earliest adaptors was Vasylii Tarasovych, bishop of Mukachevo from 1634 until his death in 1651. Although Tarasovych was a supporter of the Union, he realized that the particular circumstances of the 1630s and 1640s required him to remain Orthodox while he consolidated the political position of the eparchy in the face of a Transylvanian Protestant secular ruler who fiercely opposed any accommodation with his Catholic Habsburg enemy. By acting in such a way, the “Orthodox” Tarasovych laid the groundwork for his successor, Partenii Petrovych, who in 1651 became the first Uniate bishop of Mukachevo. Other adaptors included Bishop Mykhail Manuil Ol’shavsky (1697–1767, consecrated 1743), who in the eighteenth century swore an oath of loyalty to the bishop of Eger while at the same time continuing to work to assure that the Eparchy of Mukachevo would become juridically independent, an eventuality that occurred in 1771 during the reign of his successor Ivan Bradach (1732–1772, consecrated 1768).

Closer to our own times, examples of adaptation can be found in figures like Bishop Basil Takach (1879–1948, consecrated 1924), who after 1929 agreed to enforce the papal decree of celibacy for Greco-Catholic priests in the United States, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of other aspects of the Eastern Rite. Other bishops, like Pavel Goidych (1888–1960, consecrated 1927) of Prešov and Teodor Romzha (1911–1947, consecrated 1944) of Mukachevo, tried to accommodate to the new

13 Ibid., 54–61.
post-World-War-II political order. Their efforts might have been successful had not the Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia been intent on destroying the Greco-Catholic Church within their respective borders.¹⁵

**Functional Characteristics of the Three Groups**

One could provide many other examples of purists, adaptors, and assimilators, and one might also debate whether those that I have mentioned should be placed in a category other than the ones I have suggested. Before closing, however, I would like to comment on the functional characteristics of what I have been calling the purists, the adaptors, and the assimilators.

In one sense, it is easy to sympathize with and to respect the purists. At first glance, they seem to stand on what we popularly call the moral high ground, refusing to compromise their principles in defense of an "immutable norm." Such attitudes are at times self-defeating, however, or may lead to situations which eventually deny the very traditions the purists fought to defend. Let us mention one instance of such purism gone astray. *

For over a decade beginning in 1891, Father Alexis Toth, now the Orthodox St. Alexis of Wilkes Barre, strove to convince Greco-Catholics in the United States that the only way to preserve their Rite, traditions, and identity was to convert to Orthodoxy. In the end, those Greco-Catholics who did, as was said at the time, "return to the faith of their fathers," entered a world of Russian Orthodoxy in which their unique Carpatho-Rusyn religious traditions — including the Carpathian plainchant that St. Alexis himself loved so well — were overwhelmed by Great Russian religious practices. Effectively, this has meant that today the vast majority of the descendants of those people in the United States who under Toth's influence converted to Orthodoxy have little idea of the distinctive


Carpatho-Rusyn dimension of their religious heritage and no idea of their national heritage.¹⁶

Looking at the other two categories in our three-fold spectrum, we might say that the adaptor is a realist, while the assimilator is an opportunist. Such an equation views the adaptor positively and the assimilator negatively. While, indeed, there may be differing opinions about how to characterize the two categories, one thing does seem certain: there is most often a very fine line between the adaptor and the assimilator. The adaptor inevitably has to face the question: how far can I adapt to the current sociopolitical and spiritual climate before my actions endanger the very religious or national identity that I and my Church represent? For instance, if the Eparchy of Mukachevo were to come under the jurisdiction of the Archeparchy of L'viv, would this threaten the distinctiveness of the Carpathian religious tradition? To what extent should the Slovak language be used at the expense of Church Slavonic and Rusyn in the Eparchy of Prešov? How far can the Byzantine Catholic Church in the United States distance itself from its eastern European roots, and still expect to hold on to its present members while at the same time attracting new ones whose commitment is solely to Eastern Catholicism without a cultural heritage grounded in a specific European homeland?

These questions or dilemmas are not easy to resolve, and I do not presume to have any answers. But each of you who are members of the Greco-Catholic Eparchy of Mukachevo and its daughter eparchies worldwide — and this includes the laity as well as clergy — are continually forced to confront that fine line between adaptation and assimilation. What better time is there than now, on the 350th anniversary of the Union of Uzhhorod and on the eve of

¹⁶ In conjunction with St. Alexis' canonization by the Orthodox Church in America in 1994, several articles appeared describing his love of the Carpathian tradition which was subsequently undermined by the Russian-oriented hierarchy of the Church in the United States. See especially Sergei Glagolev, "The Memorial Day Pilgrimage and Canonization of Father Alexis Toth in the Bicentennial Year: Our Part in Salvation History," *Alive in Christ* 10 (South Canaan, PA, 1994): 8–9, and several shorter pieces in praise of the Carpatho-Rusyn nature of the sainted priest, pp. 35–39.
the second millennium of the coming of Christ, to reflect on these matters.

The Ideal Embodiment of Rusyn Culture

I believe the genius of the Greco-Catholic Church in Carpathian Rus’ lies precisely in the fact that for the past three and one-half centuries it has been able to adapt yet not assimilate to the political and cultural realities of the secular world in which it finds itself. With this in mind, I would argue that of all the variants of Christianity that have played and that still play a role in Carpathian Rus’ – including Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism in its various forms – it is the Greco-Catholic Church which has proven to be the ideal embodiment of the Rusyn and other national cultures of the Carpathian region.

And why is this so? Because by nature Rusyns have always tried to avoid extremist solutions and ideologies, and to accommodate to the needs of their neighbours and the environment in which they live. Accommodation, of course, does not mean relinquishing one’s religious, cultural, or national identity. I believe that the faithful of the Greco-Catholic Church, whether in the mother Mukachevo Eparchy or daughter eparchies nearby and abroad, realize that as individuals and as a corporate religious body they must retain their own identity and their own sense of worth in order to survive and to attract others who may wish to find Christian salvation through the path offered by Byzantine Greco-Catholicism. Adaptation without assimilation is the lesson of the past. This is the genius of the Greco-Catholic Church which will assure its survival in the future.