

# EuroMaidan: a pilgrimage from fear to dignity

*An interview with Bishop Borys Gudziak*

**The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has been an important inspiration to the protests against the government of the ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. From the very beginning in November 2013, Church leaders insisted that the Government must listen to the voice of people, that violence should be avoided, an artificial division of the people be avoided and that dialogue was the way out. Bishop Borys Gudziak of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was on a pastoral visit in the Netherlands. He kindly granted an interview. At the home of his longtime friend Laurent Nouwen, he explained how he views the roller-coaster ride that Ukraine is going through since last November.**

## **Bishop Borys, the protests at the Maidan, what were they really all about?**

In a nutshell, it was a pilgrimage from fear to dignity. After the experiences of the 20th century, two World Wars, the Soviet Union, the worst kinds of persecution with 15 maybe seventeen million people killed. After a century, when the system killed systematically, people live in fear. They don't trust each other. They think one thing, say another and do a third to protect themselves. This was a natural, I would say, even a healthy reflex in those circumstances, but that does not make for a healthy society. You cannot have good businesses, politics or family life, if you can not trust.

After twenty years of independence and openness to the outside world, Ukrainians began dropping their fear. They were claiming their human, God given dignity. That is the essence of the Maidan and what is continuing to happen now.

This is not an easy pilgrimage. As psychologists know, abused people often cling to the relics of their abuse and they are in denial. It is hard to admit that you had a bad history and that it is necessary to get out of that. But I think that is being done now with a clear resolve.

## **The protest in Kyiv were dubbed 'EuroMaidan'. So, was the Europe part of the protest also a kind of catalyst?**

I think that rejection of the Association Treaty with the European Union that Yanukovich had promised and that was five years in the making provoked great protest. But that was really a pretext.

The underlying issue was dignity. People were against the general negation of their dignity, which was over the years becoming worse and worse. And becoming completely flagrant. You know, millions of people were pushed into poverty,

while a small, very small elite lived in crazy luxury.

There was, of course, also the question of freedom and rule of law. All of these issues, basically can be expressed best by the word 'dignity'.

## **Did it come as a surprise?**

Nobody could have predicted it. That it would be so sustained, and in the end, so focused, so peaceful for so long, during the winter.

Also I didn't think that the violence of the government could be so brutal and so blatant, shooting people in the centre of the country, in the central square, in broad daylight, with the television cameras running and three Ministers of the European Union sitting down in Kyiv negotiating. I think what happened is that the evil of the system became naked and nobody could any longer deny it.

And it is like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon, but it is a difficult process.

I have been saying for the last months that the country is consolidated in a special way. This vote we saw last Sunday 25 May brought clarity. Maybe it is not so much about the President-elect Mr Poroshenko, but it was the clarity that we had to choose a candidate together and go forward. We could not allow a second round of presidential voting. It would have given President Putin of Russia a chance to kill more people.

## **Sometimes the protest was interpreted as the coming of age of a new generation. What is your perception?**

Well, yes and no. The presidential vote showed that people of all generations came together. The communist party for example tended to have the support of an older generation, which had some nostalgia, let's say, for the Soviet past. But

the communist candidate only got a few percent.

And, yes, I think that the young people are particularly consolidated for a move forward. But I think, in all regions, in some less, in some more, there is a real sense that that what Mr Yanukovich and the oligarchs stand for is something the people want to leave behind.

## **A desire for change exist, but the road towards change is a very difficult and complicated one. What do you think is the role of Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church?**

It is basically the same, in that the Church isn't and shouldn't be a political agent.

What the Greek Catholic Church has done more or less effectively is to continue something that it was forced into to do, in some sense, and also chose to do so in the catacomb times. The Church was forced

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into the underground and so, paradoxically, it was free and didn't collaborate. Thus, it emerged in the late 1980s with a great moral authority and that moral authority allowed for its freedom to speak about real things.

Of course, the Greek Catholic Church is not an ideal Church, but it has, over the last twenty-five years, articulated a social doctrine that helps orient people.

It also has had some charismatic leadership in the persons of Cardinal Lubomyr Husar and of Great-Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the new head of the Church. In the past and during this recent half year, they called things by their proper name. In keeping with the encouragement of Pope Francis, who said that the shepherds need to be with the flock, they insisted that the priests of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church go with the people, even when this meant to be on the square.

***But does this not somehow mean that the Church is a 'political agent'?***

I don't think it is the Church's business to be overly involved in the mechanics of change or at least in the politics of change. The Greek Catholic Church can also grow, learn and continue its own conversion. I think there is lot more that can be done socially by the Church. For example, to address the needs of the poor. Also, recent events have shown that the Greek Catholic Church is no longer just a Western Ukrainian phenomenon. It is nationwide with an important vocation in the centre of society, geographically located in Kyiv.

I think in some ways the position of the Greek Catholic Church was also a signal to other Churches, which developed an increasingly articulate position regarding the injustices in Ukraine. What then followed was a joined stance of not only the Christian Churches, but also of the Muslims and the Jews. This is, by the way, something that has been overlooked or at least not fully seen in Western Europe.

The Churches were very much present and there was an explicitly religious moment on the square, on the Maidan. There was prayer on the hour, every hour during the night, when it was cold and dangerous. That many on the Maidan said that it was the prayer of the priests that allowed them to endure and to stand in peace during many difficult moments for so many

months. The Churches really stood together, even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

***There exists a big difference between the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow and Kyiv?***

This is becoming more and more clear. I think it has been a very important moment which challenges the Churches to grow.

The unity of the people on the Maidan was prophetic and has run ahead of the unity of the Churches. It remains to be seen how the many prophetic moments of the Maidan will be preserved and structured and how much of the enthusiasm will remain. But I think the country has changed, society has changed. A whole young generation has been inspired, particularly by the martyrdom, the sacrifice of so many people. Some sacrificed their health or their finances, others their very life. This, I think, cannot be turned back.

The idea that this movement was right extremist was again shown false by the presidential vote. Only the total of the two far right parties was three percent, while in France on the same day twenty-five percent of the population voted for the far right party of Marine LePen. The fact that all the Jewish organisations and parts of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate were supporting the Maidan and opposed the Crimean invasion shows that this was by no means a Western Ukrainian fascist movement.

***Will the Church have an input in the new Ukraine?***

I think the Church will continue to speak about corruption. And in some ways the simple lifestyle of for example Cardinal Husar is an example for church leaders and political leaders as well. In the end the Church has not much power. It should witness and speak words of truth.



*Bishop Borys, Ukrainian Greek Catholic Bishop in France, the Benelux and Switzerland*

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For our Church to become a witness means that it should live by those words of truth as well. So, it is also a time of conversion of the Church. It is a continuous process and I think the kind of encouragement of Pope Francis is something that many Ukrainians are listening to.

### **Do you, do Ukrainians, does the Church feel this kind of support coming from other countries?**

For many months, the Ukrainians heard words of profound concern about the situation, but this profound concern was repeated in its state of words for a very long time. It is clear for me that the propaganda from Russia about the situation in Ukraine has had a great influence in the West. Even among Catholics.

Many conservative Catholics think that President Putin of Russia is defending traditional values, where it seems that Putin has no concern for tradition at all. His concern is power.

### **Is this something you have to discuss with fellow Bishops in the West?**

Actually, I did it today, in Haarlem. And you know, for example the Melkites and the Eastern Christians in the Middle East have this sense that Russia contributed to blocking the war and Western intervention in Syria. And they are happy, because

### **Bishop Borys Gudziak**

**B**orys Gudziak was born in Syracuse, New York (USA) in 1960. A son of Ukrainian immigrants, Gudziak graduated from Syracuse University, obtaining a degree in philosophy and in biology. In 1983 he graduated in theology from the Pontifical Urban University in Rome. At Harvard University, Borys Gudziak did his doctoral studies of Slavic and Byzantine Cultural History.

Since 1992, Gudziak lives in Lviv, Ukraine, where he founded the Institute of Church History. From 1995 until 2013 he served as Vice Rector then Rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University (previously: Lviv Theological Academy). He was ordained to the priesthood in 1998. In 2012, he became a bishop.

Christians loose every time when there is a war on. But they have no idea of what Putin is doing at home or in Ukraine.

If there has been basically a war, maybe it was not a full scale war military. The real full scale war was the information war and Putin was winning for a very long time.

I think it is very important for the Europeans to put on spectacles and look critically, because the danger is very real. Today, what happens in Ukraine affects every European. And any sense that we can avoid the issues of *Putinism* is an illusion, because it is either participate and pay now or pay later. As it was with Hitler in the late 30s.

### **Isn't this rather disappointing?**

There is disappointment in Ukraine over the susceptibility, the naiveté of Europeans. Putin said that the Maidan is a right-wing fascist thing, that Russians and Russian language are being persecuted and that Crimea always was Russian. None of them are true.

The Crimea was only Russian for 170 years. The Tatars of Crimea endured no less than three genocidal attacks from Russia. It was said the 97 percent of the population voted for annexation, but a fact is that only 34 percent voted. It was a completely falsified election, held at gunpoint. But Europe uses this referendum as a factor in their calculations.

### **Maybe it is good to be politically realistic rather than too idealistic?**

In the end, maintaining principles is realistic. If you compromise on your principles today, you will pay later. And it is better to face the problem as it exists.

Europe did not want to face the problem of Hitler and over 50 million people perished. The warning bells about Putin were being rung already 10 years ago. And those who spoke about a new Cold War, for example the journalist Edward Lukas of the *Economist*, were dismissed as being alarmist. But everything that Lukas predicted has happened and even worse.

And what is emerging as well is the profound moral corruption in the West, where Gerhard Schröder is on the pay role of Putin. Where for example Germany trains the special forces of Russia and continued to do so, as they were attacking Crimea. Today the French are selling two war ships.

Switzerland and England are facilitating the robbery of entire post-Soviet societies. Financial institutions are benefiting from this business.

The lack of a principled clear stance in Europe also leads to the kind of vote on Sunday. What does Europe actually stand for? Maybe there exist very negative xenophobic sentiments, but when a society, an institution, a union like Europe articulates clear and inspiring principles those negatives have less of a chance in developing and fostering.

Therefore, Ukraine not only challenged Russia and not only Putin who is afraid that civil society, democracy and the rule of law might spread to Russia. Ukraine also challenges Europe. It is the very first time in contemporary European history that Europeans, with a European flag have died for European values – values which are taken for granted in the European Union by many. A paradoxical alliance of right-wing movements and the neo-fascism of Putin is now speaking out against fascism.

Many unhealthy processes have been revealed. They were not created today, but became apparent during the Ukrainian crisis.

### **What have been significant moments for the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church?**

I think that the Greek Catholic Church has successfully maintained a balance of solidarity without partisanship, being close to the suffering and those who are calling for justice.

I think, many Ukrainians and Greek Catholics as well have been summoned to a deeper place in their spiritual life. Just as Europe is being challenged, Ukrainians have been challenged and cannot avoid the profound questions. Corruption not only goes from the top, it goes from the bottom. Millions of people are involved in the corrupt kind of structure of society.

Seeing members of their community giving their lives for justice in society is now a very important experience for all Ukrainians, including Greek Catholics. In Western Ukraine most people go to Church, at least sometimes, on Eastern and big feast almost all, but corruption in Western Ukraine is present, maybe even prevalent. And so, also Greek Catholics

have to ask 'what is our role in this corruption?'

So, I think there has been a clarity of principle, but also a challenge for continued conversion.

### **What did the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church do specifically?**

Well, along with other Churches the Greek Catholic Church enunciated four main principles. First, that the President and the Government need to listen to the people. Two, that violence is inadmissible. Three, that talk, rhetoric and action to divide the people is inadmissible. Four, that dialogue is the only way out.

These four principles were like a mantra for months. And I think this is the most important thing the Churches said. And trying, unfortunately, often without success, to bring these things into reality.

### **Did you try to do so yourself?**

On 13 December 2013, I accompanied our Major-Archbishop Sviatoslav to a private meeting with President Yanukovich. It lasted 25 minutes and for 22 minutes Mr Yanukovich spoke, explaining theoretical economic reasons why Ukraine cannot join the European Union. In other words, he did not want to have a conversation.

It was only in the last minutes that we could challenge him, encouraging him to stop the violence. Unfortunately, he did not listen. Two months later the February massacres occurred.

### **Let us talk now about the ecumenical dimensions of the crisis.**

Well, it is becoming clear that this idea of a meeting between the Pope and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch in itself can be counterproductive. It does not really stand for a principled stance.

The question is what does the Moscow Patriarchate say and do about such violent aggression of members of its own Church. So far it has been very little. I think that the silence of the Moscow Patriarchate will be a paradox for many. It is a paradox for many Russian Orthodox believers, who are critical thinkers.

Of course, the hope is, of all of us, that there will be new possibilities for Christian reconciliation and collaboration, but the most recent developments have shown that there must be a basic understanding,

The Ten Commandments and the basic Christian principles need to be shared.

### **You doubt this is the case?**

Too many members of the Moscow Patriarchate at very high levels have supported or at least remained silent about an egregious incidence of violence. It was promoted by Russia in this new ideology of Russian greatness and in which the Russian Orthodox Church with its kind of model of the Russian world is participating. It is a constituent, leading element in this nostalgic neo-imperialism. And that is something problematic. First of all, for the Church itself and its credibility with its faithful. Inside of Ukraine it has turned many believers against the Patriarchate.

Many people do not realise that half of the Moscow Patriarchate is in Ukraine. So, if all Orthodox believers in Ukraine come together as an autocephalous church, this Ukrainian Orthodox Church will be the biggest in the world and Moscow will be number two. If people want to be number one, of course, they worry about losing their acclaim to grandness.

### **This is not how it should be, I suppose.**

No. Jesus took us on a road going down. Stripping himself, going to the poor, becoming poor himself, giving everything away, he even gave his own life. Therefore, a Christian spirituality and ecclesiology, a Church identity build on aggrandisement is in the end fundamentally in opposition to the proposal of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Are you somehow saying that the Russian Orthodox Church is a mouthpiece of the Kremlin?**

Especially European Church history has shown that when Church associates itself with power and money, it loses its spiritual integrity.

Today, we all hope for the spiritual integrity of the Russian Orthodox Church, so that it can best serve a suffering population. The social conditions in most of Russia are very poor. Life expectancy of males is about 62 years of age. The abortion rate is very high.

Some people in the West think that Putin is supporting traditional values, but he should address some of these life issues at home. Maybe four percent of the population of Moscow enters a church on Easter

day and the general practice in Russia is very low. Even according to the words of Russian Orthodox leaders, it is often superstitious rather than an authentically evangelised religious experience.

I personally acknowledge the great suffering that the Russian Orthodox endured under the Soviets. There were tens of thousands martyrs. Acknowledging this past, we also express the hope that Russia may flower spiritually.

But today, when the Church supports a system which kills journalists. Which has completely 'marginalised' the freedom of speech. Which makes public dissent very dangerous. Which allows for an Olympic Games in Sochi to have a construction budget greater than all of the Olympic Winter Games in history, at a time, when much of the population is suffering.

When there is no spiritual, ecclesial discussion about these subjects, there is a great concern for the welfare of the Gospel in a very big country.

### **My final question. Does your Ukrainian Experience hold any significance for us?**

One thing to look at is that the life of the Church twenty-five, thirty years ago was seen as hopeless. In 1939 the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church had 3,000 priests and in 1989 it was reduced to 300 priests with an average age of seventy. Today, twenty-five years later, it is 3,000 again, average age forty, with 800 seminarians for five million faithful.

In 1900, the quintessentially ethnic Greek Catholic Church had three dioceses, Lviv, Permyshl, Ivano-Frankivsk. There were just three bishops and no auxiliary bishops. Today the Church has fifty bishops on many continents and in many countries. It is a global Church, not only an ethnic phenomenon.

I think for the Church in Europe, the witness, martyrdom and revival of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church should be a powerful sign of hope that the Lord is working in history, that projections about the Church's demise are premature and that given the radical following or imitation of Christ, the Gospel is an assured reality.

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