

Orthodoxy in Ukraine

According to legends, the Apostle St. Andrew traveled the up Dnipro River in his mission to the Scythians (a people who occupied vast areas of what is now modern Ukraine). On the hills of what is today the city of Kyiv, St. Andrew foretold that on those hills would someday arise a formidable city with a great many churches. While the evidence is insufficient to prove this legend, the 1621 Holy Synod of the Kyiv Metropolia passed a resolution canonizing this story as being fact. Therefore, for many Ukrainians, this is a matter of faith regardless of any definitive historic proof.

While there is evidence that at least small pockets of Christians lived in the Ukrainian homelands throughout the first millennium, Grand Princess Olha (St. Olha), who ruled as regent during her son's minority, was the first Kyivan ruler known with certainty to be a Christian. Chroniclers speak of both her beauty and wisdom. However, while she brought in political reforms, she did not attempt religious changes for her people.

Arguably the most significant event in the history of Ukraine was the "Baptism of Rus". In approximately 988, Olha's grandson, Grand Prince Volodymyr the Great (St. Volodymyr) converted to Christianity, married the Byzantine emperors' sister for dynastic reasons, and also demanded of his entire realm that all people convert to Christianity. Chroniclers state that Volodymyr directed Greek priests to take vast numbers of Kyivans into the river and baptise them.

When Volodymyr the Great died, his son Sviatopolk the Accursed killed his younger brothers, Boris and Hleb, for dynastic reasons and these two young men are recognised as the first Eastern Slavs that were glorified as saints. They are still greatly venerated by Eastern Slavs to this day. Another brother eventually in turn killed Sviatopolk. He is known as Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise. He became the greatest ruler of Kyiv and further strengthened the institution of the Church throughout the realm. Yaroslav was responsible for building St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, which to this day is the arguably greatest landmark in all of Ukraine. When Yaroslav died in 1054, Kievan Rus had reached its zenith. However, fratricide again broke out among his sons and political stability was seldom long lived in Kievan Rus after Yaroslav's rule.

In addition to political problems, Kyivan Rus fell into economic diminishment for various reasons. The final blow to Kievan Rus was the invasion of Mongols in the thirteenth century. The Metropolitans of Kiev abandoned it and eventually moved the see to Moscow. By the fourteenth century the Lithuanians were pushing out the Mongols on one side while the Muscovites fought them on the other side. The Lithuanians re-instituted the Metropolitan See of Kiev and then there were metropolitans in both Moscow and Kiev. As Moscow rose in power, it eliminated the last vestiges of the Mongol yoke by the fifteenth century.

What had once been Kievan Rus was now mostly ruled by the Russians in the east and by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the west and there was also a devastated land in the south-central area in which bands of Cossacks lived. After the Union of Lublin in 1569, all the Ukrainian homelands conquered by Lithuania went under the crown of Poland. Thus, most of what is today Western Ukraine came to be in the political control of Roman Catholic Poland.

By the end of the sixteen-century the Ukrainian nobility had mostly become ethnically Polanized and religiously Latinized, while Jesuits eagerly sought to convert the Orthodox people. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church became poorer and under continual threat. With few nobles willing to protect them the Orthodox people began to form brotherhoods at a grassroots level. Many people flocked to the south-central area to join the Cossacks as a way of freeing themselves from dominating overlords.

Eventually, several Ukrainian bishops made a bid to gain equal status for their church by entering into union with Rome. The Union of Brest (1596) was an agreement in between Ukrainian bishops, the Pope, and the Polish Crown, in which the Ukrainian Church would switch allegiance from Constantinople to Rome in return for guarantees that the Eastern Rite would be protected by Rome and the Ukrainian bishops would have equal status with Roman Catholic bishops in Poland.

When the Soviets came to power, religion in general came under great persecution. When eastern Poland was annexed by the Soviets, the Greek Catholic Church came under particular persecution as the Soviets attempted to snuff it out completely. This period, which ended with the fall of the iron curtain and the Soviet Union, was to be a bitter time for Christians with an unprecedented number of martyrs.

The animosity between Catholic and Orthodox Ukrainians flared up intermittently over the centuries and it reared its head again in Canada, particularly during the interwar period of the twentieth century. This animosity cooled during the post-war period and today, for the most part, Ukrainian parishes have more important things to worry about than the differences between being Ukrainian Catholic or Ukrainian Orthodox. Indeed, the two churches now get along very well notwithstanding their continuing differences.