1,000 Years of Christianity

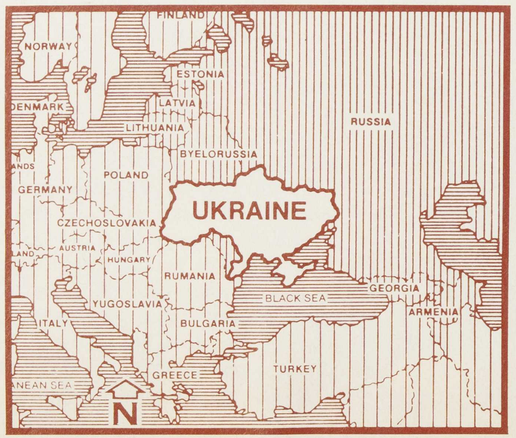
"Celebrate with us!" Ukrainian Christians invite their brethren throughout the world. "We have been your Christian brothers for 1,000 years!" Throughout 1988, Ukrainians, who worship as Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians, will be observing the millennium of the conversion of the Ukrainian people in 988, a nation then known as Kievan-Rus.

Chosen as the state religion by Prince St. Vladimir, Christianity was officially accepted by the Ukrainian people in a mass baptism in Kiev along the banks of the Dnieper River.

Brought to Kiev through the Byzantine Empire, Christianity became the cornerstone of the emerging nation and its developing culture. Its conversion marked the beginning of a period of devotion to education and the arts in Ukraine. Eager to demonstrate his devotion to his new-found faith, Vladimir built churches and provided priests for his people. He established schools, shelters, homes for the abandoned and hospices for the sick, and was later declared a saint by the Catholic Church.

Following the fall of Kievan-Rus' in the thirteenth century, the Ukrainian people would, for centuries, fight for the independence of their churches, culture, and nation. This struggle goes on today as the Ukrainian people have been forcibly absorbed into the union of Soviet republics — much like Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. And practicing Catholics in Ukraine are persecuted by the Soviet government. Their churches have either been closed or forcibly taken over by the state-regulated Russian Orthodox Church and the faithful have been forbidden to practice their Catholic faith.

"It is because of our fidelity to the Vicar of Christ on Earth that Ukrainian Catholics are persecuted today," says Bishop Basil Losten of the Ukrainian Catholic diocese of Stamford, Connecticut.



If independent, Ukrainia would be the second largest nation in Europe, home to nearly 50 million people. In the United States Ukrainians number about one-half million. Although some are Orthodox and Protestant, the vast majority are Catholic, joined to the Holy See and worshipping according to the norms of the Byzantine Rite. They are at pains to point out that this millennium is neither Russian nor Orthodox — as Soviet propaganda has begun to claim — but Ukrainian (because they are a distinct people and culture) and Christian (because there was no Orthodoxy in the one universal Christian Church in 988).

It is their hope and prayer that during this millenium their fellow Catholics and all Americans will come to know them better and will find in their tragic history valuable lessons for keeping peoples free and religion unhampered.

A CHURCH PERSECUTED

1000 years of Christianity in Ukraine includes the dramatic period of the catacomb Church in Siberia in the 1940s and 1950s, when Catholic priests, who had refused to convert to Orthodoxy, were put into penal camps but practised genuine ecumenism by providing pastoral care to Orthodox Russians as well as to Roman Catholic co-prisoners. It includes the profound piety of the country. Every second church in the Soviet Union is actually found in Ukraine. Originally Catholic, the Soviet government forced them into Russian Orthodoxy in 1946, a forced union that has never been accepted.

Joseph Cardinal Slipyi (above with Pope John Paul II) was both a victim and a hero of that Soviet suppression of the Catholic Church in Ukraine. He suffered arrest, interrogation, bribery and seventeen years of brutal imprisonment in the labor camps of Siberia. Released through the intercession of Pope John XXIII, he participated in Vatican Council II and was made a Cardinal in 1965. After working energetically for Byzantine Ukrainian Catholics throughout the free world, he died in 1984.

BYZANTINE RITE CATHOLICS

The unity in diversity of the Catholic Church is exemplified by its several canonical rites or forms of worship. Each of these rites is under the pastoral government of the Roman pontiff, but particular Rites have their own hierarchy, differ in liturgical and ecclesiastical discipline and possess their own spiritual heritage.

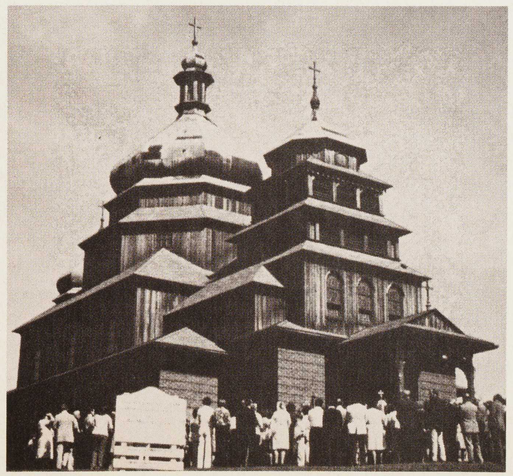
The origin of the various Rites goes back to the early Church. When the Apostles moved outward from Jerusalem, preaching the Good News, they used the language and cultural forms of the countries where they settled. Thus, various forms of worship and organization developed within the one Catholic Church — Coptic, Ethiopic, Maronite, Melkite, Byzantine, Roman and several others. Later schisms and heresies split some of these Christians from the seat of Catholicism in Rome.

In time, some of their members reconciled with Rome or to those who remained schismatic a Catholic counterpart was created. Thus, the various Rites in the Catholic Church today.

Ukrainian Catholics adhere to the Byzantine rite. They have preserved the Byzantine form of worship since the Christianization of their nation by St. Vladimir in 988.

Evolved from liturgies that were used in Palestine, Antioch and Cappadocia, the Byzantine rite spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Slavic and Balkan nations from the ancient Byzantine Empire centered in Constantinople. Through immigration the Byzantine Rite came to the United States and other parts of the world.

Immaculate Conception Church (below) in Barnsboro, Pennsylvania is in the style of Ukraine's Hutzul region.



THE VIRGIN OF KIEV

The Ukrainian icon the Virgin of Kiev is one of the most famous icons in the world. Fashioned by a Byzantine artist in about 1132 for the Ukrainian Prince Mystislav of Kiev, the icon survives today as a testament to the Christian faith of the Ukrainian people.

Mystislav, decided to build a church in the town of Vyshorod near Kiev. He commissioned an icon of the Virgin and Child from Byzantium as the showpiece of the church. The icon displays an animated face, and great tenderness of the Virgin for her child. This tenderness is extremely unusual for the strict code of icon painting of that time. The Virgin's head touches the baby in a gesture of deep affection that iconographically is described by the word "tenderness."

The Kievans immediately recognized the beauty and importance of the icon. Modern iconographers still consider the Virgin of Kiev a masterpiece whose beauty and psychological depth are often compared to DaVinci's Mona Lisa. Ukrainians usually refer to the icon as the Virgin of Vyshorod, while Russians call it the Virgin of Vladimir. The Russian name came into existence after Prince Andrew Bogolubsky removed the treasure, sometime between 1155 and 1164, to his northern city of Vladimir before he destroyed Kiev. In 1395, the icon was taken from Vladimir to Moscow and is now in the Tretyakov Gallery there. The Virgin of Kiev embodies a profoundly Slavic spirit and sets the standard for Ukrainian icon painters who have produced some of the world's most revered icons.