

An Unofficial UOC-OCU Dialogue as a Grassroots Initiative for Reconciliation of the Orthodoxy in Ukraine

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Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, the religious issue in Ukraine has become much more acute. Since then and to the December 2023, about 900 parishes transferred from the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC) to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), according to the official data of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience. But more than 8,000 parishes remain in the UOC despite the Russian aggression. For many citizens, it is unclear what else needs to happen for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to unite with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, or at least not falsely to leave the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In the spring of 2022, 15 dioceses of the UOC declared that they would no longer commemorate Patriarch Kirill of Moscow during church services. At the same time, especially after the Ukrainian Defense Forces succeeded in pushing Russian troops back from Kyiv, the number of parishes transferring from the UOC to the OCU increased significantly. These transitions were actively facilitated by local authorities in the free territories of Ukraine. After about 500 parishes announced a change of jurisdictional subordination, the UOC held a council in Feofaniya, where it announced an alleged break with the Moscow Patriarchate. After this council, the wave of parish transitions subsided for a while.

According to the official announcement, “The Council adopted appropriate additions and amendments to the Statute on the administration of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, testifying to the complete self-sufficiency and independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.”¹ Sometime after the May 27 meeting in Feofania, a new version of the Statute of the UOC appeared on the web (but still not on an official

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¹ Resolution of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022 (in Ukrainian), <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/27/postanova-soboru-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-vid-27-travnja-2022-roku/>, accessed October 25, 2023.

resource of the UOC).² The Council really eliminated all mention of dependence of the UOC on the ROC, except for one. In paragraph I.1 of the Statute, a reference to the Charter of the Patriarch of Moscow Alexiy II dated October 27, 1990 appeared. After the Council in Feofaniya, the ROC annexed the Crimean dioceses of the UOC, thereby showing that it does not really accept the so-called “broad autonomy” of UOC. So far, we can only state that the UOC has obtained an unclear canonical status.

Several days before the meeting in Feofaniya, the Council of the OCU had addressed the hierarchs, clergy, and laity of the UOC with a statement concerning the possibility of a dialogue³, inviting the UOC to start an official dialogue without any preconditions. The hierarchs of the UOC were called to withdraw their decision to break communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and to follow the Tomos on autocephaly granted by Ecumenical Patriarch. At least, they were called to condemn Patriarch Kirill of Moscow for promoting the ideology of “Russian World” and supporting the war in Ukraine.

In response to this invitation, the Council of UOC in Feofaniya formulated conditions for the possibility of dialogue. OCU was called to the following:

1. stop forcible capture of churches and forced transfers of parishes;
2. “realize” that the canonical status of the OCU is “actually non-autocephalous” and provides for fewer freedoms and opportunities than exist in the UOC;
3. “resolve the issue of the canonicity of the OCU hierarchy”, that is, “to restore the apostolic succession” of bishops.

Looking ahead, it is important to note that some of the UOC priests who participated in this Council in Feofaniya, during the first informal meeting on dialogue, noted that the points from the Council’s resolution which refer to the prerequisites for dialogue on the part of the UOC, in particular, claims regarding the canonical status of the clergy of the

² Statute on the Administration of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (as amended) (in Ukrainian), https://glavcom.ua/pub/pdf/49/4938/27_123.pdf, accessed October 25, 2023.

³ Address of the Bishops’ Council of the UOC (OCU) to the hierarchs, clergy and faithful in the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine (May 24, 2022) (in Ukrainian), <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/document-post/zvernennya-arhiyerejskogo-soboru-upts-ptsu-do-iyerarhiv-duhovenstva-ta-virnyh-v-yurysdyktsiyi-moskovskogo-patriarhatu-v-ukrayini-24-travnja-2022-r/>, accessed October 25, 2023.

OCU, as well as the canonical status of the church, were not discussed at the Council, but were included in the list of Council resolutions by the UOC leadership itself. After the Council in Feofaniya, the Synod of the OCU stated that it expresses joy at the fundamental agreement on the need for a dialogue, but added that such a dialogue should begin with no preconditions or ultimatums.⁴ Until now, an official dialogue has not started.

But a grassroots initiative of clergy arose instead. After the start of the active phase of the war, over 400 priests of the UOC signed an open appeal for an international church tribunal over Patriarch Kirill's actions.⁵ The appeal was initiated by priest Andriy Pinchuk from the Dnipropetrovsk diocese of the UOC. The appeal was sent to the Primate of the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. The main thing Patriarch Kirill is accused of is supporting the spread of the "Russian world" doctrine, which became the ideological basis for the invasion of Ukraine.

On July 5, 2022, on the anniversary of the repose in peace of Metropolitan Volodymyr Sabodan (the former leader of the UOC), the first meeting of priests from different jurisdictions took place in St. Sophia of Kyiv, with the assistance of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience. The initiative for the meeting came from the signatories of the letter about the church tribunal against Patriarch Kirill. 21 representatives of both UOC and OCU (including the author of this article) gathered together for a conversation about church unity and agreed to abide by Chatham House rules. The Minister of Culture of Ukraine Mr. Oleksandr Tkachenko opened the meeting. Dr. Olena Bogdan, Head of the State Service of Ukraine, moderated the discussion, which lasted for more than three hours. "The ice has broken. For the first time since the creation of the OCU, a meeting of priests of

⁴ Statement of the Holy Synod of the UOC (OCU) on the latest news in the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine (UOC) (in Ukrainian), May 31, 2022, <https://www.pomisna.info/uk/vsi-novyny/zayava-svyashhennogo-synodu-upts-ptsu-za-pidsumkamy-ostannih-podij-v-yurysdyktsiyi-moskovskogo-patriarhatu-v-ukrayini-upts/>, accessed October 25, 2023.

⁵ UOC (MP) priests collect nearly half a thousand signatures for Kirill's church tribunal (in Ukrainian), April 18, 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-kyrylo-tserkovnyi-trybunal/31808350.html>, accessed October 25, 2023.

the two churches was held to exchange views on the present and the future,” said Dr. Olena Bohdan after the meeting.⁶

It was suggested we speak primarily about what we have in common. It is clear that we have much more in common than what separates us.

- We share the common faith, as well as theological, liturgical, and canonical traditions.
- We have a common history, but in some ways, we differ in the assessment of certain events from history. We need to work on a common vision of history.
- We are united in understanding the destructive position of the Moscow Patriarchate, which has supported the war against Ukraine.
- We have many common problems. All of us are graduates of the Russian Orthodox Church. We all feel the lack of education of the clergy and the episcopate. Our churches are characterized by “Byzantinism” in terms of over-emphasis on ritual, various baubles, and attributes of power and authority.
- We need to study and revive the Kyivan tradition – both in liturgy, and in church art and architecture, and in the canonical tradition of electing the clergy and the episcopate.

It was also articulated that we should give up “hostile language” in relation to each other.

It was also suggested to abandon the shameful and anti-canonical practice of re-baptism of believers who move from the OCU to the UOC. The participating fathers from the UOC agreed that they personally recognize the sacraments in the OCU. The next step could be an open declaration that the faithful laity can freely visit the churches and participate in the services of both jurisdictions. There are no obstacles to this from the OCU side. We are open to communication, cooperation and shared prayer.

At the end of the meeting, the participants discussed the text and published a “Declaration of Understanding.”⁷ The participants noted that they have found unity of views in terms of interfaith relations in the following aspects:

⁶ Vitaliy Chervonenko, “The OCU and UOC have started a dialogue on reconciliation. Should we expect unification?” (in Ukrainian), July 6, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-62067911>, accessed October 25, 2023.

⁷ Declaration of understanding (in Ukrainian), July 6, 2022, <https://www.ethos.org.ua/deklaracziya-porozuminnia-upcz-ta-pczu/>, accessed October 25, 2023.

- condemning the war unleashed by Putin's Russia against the sovereign people of Ukraine;
- condemning the destructive position of the Moscow Patriarchate, which, ignoring the commandments of God, has become a "servant" of the Putin regime and blesses Russian aggressors for bloodshed;
- understanding the need for unity to protect Ukraine;
- understanding the need for unity of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, which faces external and internal challenges of our time;
- understanding the need to abandon aggression, stereotypes, bias and the language of ultimatums and hostility in communicating with each other and in the public space;
- understanding the need to abandon the non-canonical practice of crossing;
- the need for educational work on the ground in order to overcome and prevent inter-church and inter-confessional conflicts in the future;
- the need to move away from narrow corporate interests in the inter-Orthodox dialogue;
- understanding the existence of different models of coexistence of Orthodox jurisdictions, etc.⁸

The participants also emphasized the expediency and necessity of a constructive dialogue between the two branches of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, and declared their hope that such a dialogue, initiated by the clergy of the UOC and OCU, will be the beginning of a process of unity, which will be joined by church communities and clergy. "Overcoming divisions, serving the people of Ukraine and building our common home are our common goals. I believe that this meeting is the beginning of a new, wise, strong path for our churches for the sake of a free and peaceful future for Ukraine," wrote Mr. Tkachenko, the Minister of Culture of Ukraine, after the meeting.⁹

It is worth noting that the reaction to the first meeting of representatives of the UOC and OCU clergy in the church environment of different

⁸ OCU and UOC MP sign Declaration of Understanding, July 7, 2022, https://risu.ua/en/ocu-and-uoc-mp-sign-declaration-of-understanding_n130717, accessed October 25, 2023.

⁹ Olexandr Tkachenko's personal Facebook page, July 6, 2022, <https://facebook.com/oleksandr.tkachenko.ua>, short link: <http://bit.ly/43KiAAJ>, accessed October 25, 2023.

jurisdictions was markedly different. Of course, both jurisdictions have supporters of dialogue. But in the official circles of the UOC, the news of the informal meeting of the clergy caused a mostly critical reaction. UOC officials said that the clergy did not have the blessing of the hierarchy to participate in the meeting, and for many in the UOC this was the main argument against it. "If they (the priests) did not coordinate their actions with the ruling bishops, it is surprising. Such a situation should not have happened in a healthy church environment," said Metropolitan Klyment of Nizhyn, spokesman for the UOC.¹⁰

One of the members of the initiative group of the UOC clergy, Archpriest Ioan Tronko, who was unable to attend the first meeting, spoke about it as follows:

The main task of the informal meeting is a search. This is not the beginning of a union or some kind of "ecumenical movement", as one Ukrainian bishop put it. It is the beginning of a conversation. (...) Just as sincere repentance requires, first of all, a desire to change, so reconciliation requires that the conversation at least begin.¹¹

The first practical consequence of the first informal meeting was that two weeks later, one of its participants, Archpriest Anatolii Slynko, joined the Orthodox Church of Ukraine together with the Holy Resurrection parish in the village of Zazymia, Kyiv region.¹²

The second meeting of representatives of the clergy and laity of the UOC and the OCU was held online on January 20, 2023. It was attended by priests Serhiy Prokopchuk (UOC), Andriy Pinchuk (UOC), Volodymyr Vakin (OCU), Bohdan Ogulchansky (OCU), Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, Dr. Andriy Smyrnov, Prof. Konstantin Sigov and others. Fr. Cyril Hovorun called it a "big mistake" to identify the Church exclusively with the bishops. He emphasized that ordinary believers can accelerate the unification of the Churches, for example, by supporting the idea of Archbishop Sylvester Stoichev, rector of the Kyiv Theological Academy and Seminary of the UOC, to bring the solution of the Ukrainian church issue to the pan-Orthodox level, and thus enter into a dialogue with the

¹⁰ Chervonenko, "The OCU and UOC have started a dialogue".

¹¹ Archpriest Ioan Tronko and Iuliia Kominko, "UOC and OCU: Dialogue or the Beginning of a Conversation?" (in Ukrainian), July 26, 2022, <https://www.dialogtut.org/upcz-ta-pczu-dialog-chy-pochatok-rozmovy/>, accessed October 25, 2023.

¹² Parish in Zazymia joined the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (in Ukrainian), July 18, 2022, <http://zazymie.info/index.php/news/85-zazymska-parafia-priednalasia-do-pravoslavnoi-tserkvy-ukrainy.html>, accessed October 25, 2023.

Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria and other Churches. Rector of the Volyn Orthodox Theological Academy of the OCU, Archpriest Volodymyr Vakin, noted that Ukrainians still remain dependent on the paradigm imposed by the ROC, according to which universal Orthodoxy is seen as a confederation of independent local churches. Instead, the rest of the Orthodox world retains the traditional historical understanding of the Church as a conciliar organization whose joint activities are coordinated by the Ecumenical Patriarch.¹³

Soon after, on February 16, 2003, the third meeting was held offline at St Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. It was marked by two official representatives from the UOC side: Archimandrite Mytrofan Bozhko, academic secretary of Kyiv Theological Academy, and Dr. Serhiy Bortnyk from the Department of the External Relations of the UOC. The new Head of the State Service of Ukraine for Ethnic Affairs and Freedom of Conscience, Mr. Viktor Yelensky, participated.

It is important that at the beginning of the meeting there was a joint prayer for Ukraine, for the unity of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, for Ukrainian soldiers, defenders, for prisoners, for the wounded, for exiles, for volunteers, etc. The prayer service was led by Fr. George Kovalenko (OCU), all the others were without *epitrachelia* (it means there was no liturgical concelebration), but all prayed together. As part of the meeting, a round-table discussion was held on “Church, Society, State: Dialogue for Unity and Victory.” Mr. Viktor Yelensky, Archpriests Volodymyr Vakin (OCU) and Ihor Kovrovsky (UOC) spoke at the event. Mr. Victor Yelensky emphasized that the consolidation of society is a necessary precondition for the Ukrainian Victory and the unity of Ukrainian Orthodoxy is an important component of this consolidation. Of course, such consolidation is hardly possible without the UOC breaking with the Russian Church, which has become a tool to justify the Russian invasion, he added. He also emphasized that the state leadership is very interested in the unity of the Orthodox, where there are “neither winners nor losers, neither triumphant nor those who are carried on a shield.”¹⁴

¹³ Serhii Shteinikov, “Movement for the Dialogue of Churches: Clergy and laity of the UOC and OCU hold second meeting” (in Ukrainian), January 23, 2023, https://risu.ua/ruh-za-dialog-cerkov-duhovenstvo-i-miryani-upc-ta-pcu-proveli-drugu-zustrich_n136096, accessed October 25, 2023.

¹⁴ “As anyone says: I love God, but hates his brother, he is a liar” (in Ukrainian), February 16, 2023, <https://dess.gov.ua/yak-khto-skazhe-ya-boha-liubliu-ta-nenavydyt-brata-svoho-toy-nepravdomovets/>, accessed October 25, 2023.

Fr. Ihor Kovrovsky named the challenges facing the churches in overcoming the division, in particular, different visions of the ways of unity. Fr. Volodymyr Vakin noted that the ultimate goal of the dialogue should be not just understanding, but eventually the integration of jurisdictions into one church structure: “If we are talking about unity in Orthodoxy, it is not coexistence with other denominations. I want to look at the Orthodox of Ukraine as brothers in Christ, not as a cultural expression of our coexistence. Because the structure of our church requires this. And it is for this unity that we should be concerned.” As evidence of joint efforts, representatives of the initiative groups of the OCU and the UOC prepared an appeal to the bishops, clergy and faithful of the churches. They emphasized in particular:

We are aware that among a significant part of the clergy and laity of the two Ukrainian Orthodox jurisdictions there is a deep alienation, distrust and the formation of an “enemy image”, which leads to mutual dehumanization. That is why we insist on the need to reset our relations, we feel a mature need to renew our relations, to get rid of old claims and prejudices. It is also important to change the information policy and the rhetoric of mutual devaluation of representatives of both Churches (UOC and OCU) to create the preconditions for dialogue. The Ukrainian bishops should rise above corporate interests and start a dialogue for the sake of unity.¹⁵

The main result of all these meetings was the opportunity for the clergy of the opposing church jurisdictions to meet each other and to openly discuss the painful issues.

The meetings revealed that the majority of UOC representatives do not see any perspective of unification into one administrative structure. Instead, such unification is the desired goal for the OCU. Before such unification occurs, various compromise options are possible. Perhaps some priests from the UOC are afraid that joining the OCU is like joining the Kyiv Patriarchate. But this is a false fear. Yes, at the Unification Council of 2018, the Kyiv Patriarchate became the basis for the OCU in terms of numbers, but the UAOC in its entirety and part of the UOC (today more than 1,500 parishes) joined the OCU. The desire of priests

¹⁵ Address of the participants of the interchurch dialogue in St. Sophia of Kyiv to the bishops, clergy and faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (in Ukrainian), February 20, 2023, <https://dcss.gov.ua/zvernennia-uchasnykiv-dialohu-upc-ta-pcu-v-sofi-kyivskiy-16-02-2023/>, accessed October 25, 2023.

from the UOC to preserve their “structure” is completely confusing. For some reason, the UAOC and UOC-KP have found the strength to overcome the temptation of their own structure, while the UOC cannot.

Why do most UOC priests not hurry to move to the OCU? There are various reasons for this. Not only do some frank supporters of the “Russian world” remain in the UOC, but also a large number of Ukrainian patriots. One of the main reasons is the stereotype that has been formed for decades, that all Ukrainian church structures outside the UOC-MP are “graceless schisms”. This misconception has been absorbed, becoming part of their worldview, and sometimes even part of their identity. It is so difficult to recognize this mistake and to confess this publicly. Sometimes these are personal reasons - an unwillingness to conflict with part of the family, parents or spouse. Sometimes it is a fear of losing the support of sponsors. For some, the image of the OCU as a result of accepting parishes whose transitions were forced by local authorities or for other reasons is not very attractive.

One of the UOC priests, who is a supporter of the unification, privately shared another reason why he and his fellow priests prefer to remain in the UOC for now. They publicly or privately criticize their bishops and hope that their voices will be heard by others. For the leadership of the UOC, it might be better to “push” all supporters of autocephaly to the OCU. But in the case of a transition to the OCU, their testimonies and appeals will no longer be accepted by others who remain in the UOC. And they still hope to change this structure from within and make it more pro-Ukrainian and attractive to society. But there are certainly no theological arguments in favor of the division between the UOC and the OCU being cemented for centuries. The UOC and the OCU are not different denominations, but different jurisdictions, and it would be a big mistake (proposed during one of the meetings) to treat this dialogue on the same principles on which interfaith dialogues are built. After all, we seek not only the recognition of the sacraments, communion, joint service, joint educational, social, or cultural projects, etc., but also unity in the one local church.