

A Visit to Ukraine with RENATE
(Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation)
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As no doubt you are aware, the Orange Revolution four years ago took its toll on the country in terms of conflict, deaths (over 10,000) separation and displacement. Independent from Russia since 1991, this young country suffers many economic problems - migration/emigration is high. In the civil war, families were divided taking pro- Europe / pro- Russian 'sides' Russian aggression, especially the annexation of Crimea is a running sore. It's a massive landmass of 44 million, running a thousand kms east-west. Orthodox Christianity is the majority religion. Churches - Russian and Greek - are also divided. The Greek Catholic Church is closest to us as it recognises the Pope. All these churches have the Orthodox Rite, with a married clergy, except for Bishops who have to be celibate, so most of the Bishops come from Religious Orders. What I heard reminded me of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland where the roots of the conflict are the results of injustices and discrimination of two 'opposing' denominational ideologies. Interestingly, our host, Fr Roman, Redemptorist of the Greek Catholic Rite, compared his country to Ireland under the colonisation of the British! Under Communism, the country has suffered greatly for over seventy years, particularly clergy and religious. Many were killed or sent to labour camps in Siberia where temperatures plunged to minus 40. The choices were: (i) renounce religion and cease practice; (ii) join the Communist party; (iii) be killed or sent to Siberia to the labour camps (concentration camps).

How did the Greek Catholic Church survive during the Communist era? Much the same way as the 'hedge' schools and the underground church survived in the Penal Times in Ireland. Grandparents kept the 'story' of the faith alive, with prayers and religious rituals done in secret, often at great risk of being executed if caught. Priests and Sisters, disguised as laity, worked on farms or factories by day, taught catechism in secret, but always on guard against informers.

Trafficking is rife wherever there is conflict! Displaced peoples are subjected to terrible abuse in camps or in places where they flee for refuge. Ukraine has 230,000 victims of trafficking since 1991, mainly into Russia. Mass migration within the country is a big issue. Because of the war, imagine a whole town of a million, say Armagh moving to live in Tullow. Different accents (even dialects) foods, customs, clothes, religious practices. Almost like being in a foreign country and yet all Ukrainians, but a thousand miles from home and all the familiarity of home.

When displaced families are desperate for money or work; when troops of foreign soldiers are in garrison towns, young women often turn to prostitution to earn cash, or be forced by their families to earn money in that way. When young women are viewed as 'not one of us' it is so much easier to abuse them.

Having said all that, we met Sisters, priests and laity who are trying to assist in whatever way possible, with limited resources. Salesian Fathers run an orphanage for 65 boys, ages 6-18. A Congregation of Sisters set up a 'Bridge of Hope' project for young girls in the town of L'viv to have a safe place to live when away from home, a project funded by the diaspora in Canada. The Canadian and German churches assist with funds for rehabilitation projects. Yet, funds and resources are scarce to meet the needs. The Mayor of L'viv told us the Church is a huge influence in the country. It has the trust of the people that no other institution has through its work in social services care, health, education - much like the contribution of religious in Ireland over the decades.

The Catholic Church is an Eastern Rite Church with a married clergy - 400 priests for 300 parishes!

We stayed in the diocesan retreat centre. Next door was the diocesan seminary and next to that a nursing home for physically disabled and older people - all run by the diocese. Nuns are doing what we did ourselves - teaching, nursing, running orphanages, shelters. From our short experience of just a week, the Rite of Service for Mass is very traditional with emphasis on sacramental services. The photo shows us outside one of the Cathedrals (there are many!) after Mass that lasted almost 2 hours! Singing was special, wonderful chanting in 6-8 parts, lots of incense rising into the church with bell-ringing. Four priests in the sanctuary with their backs to us, occasionally turning round to bless us and swinging incense around us! The Mass took almost two hours which was a 'short' one! Taking Communion was a challenge. The host (a very small square of bread, soaked in wine) was literally flipped with a long gold spoon into open mouths! Some of us waited to see what others were doing before joining the line!

Fr Ramon drew our attention to an ad attracting tourists to Ukraine: *'Beautiful girls and cheap beer'*. Makes one wonder if this is an invitation to visit brothels or perhaps surrogacy since there has been a rise in the rise in 'egg donation.' Fuelled by Russian aggression, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has displaced nearly two million people. For all that, we were the recipients of great hosting and good food. On the surface, all seems well, but it may be a veneer hospitality that camouflages the real hardship and difficulties for ordinary Ukrainians in their struggle for a decent life.

Mary Patricia Mulhall csb



Patricia Mulhall csb (3rd Row on the left) with other members of RENATE in Ukraine