

## ***Head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church brings multifaceted experience to project of evangelization.***

The Cold War seems like ancient history now. The Soviet Union broke up more than 25 years ago, and world leaders who were the players then have been dead for several years: Gorbachev, Reagan, Thatcher, John Paul II ...

So it's a surprise when 48-year-old Sviatoslav Shevchuk, major archbishop of the worldwide Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church says, "For half of my life I lived in the Soviet Union." For him and for many citizens of former Soviet nations, this history is still very much alive.

When Shevchuk was born in the small city of Stryi, south of Lviv in Western Ukraine, his nation was referred to as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church had been suppressed since 1946, subsumed under the Russian Orthodox Church. The Ukrainian Church's leader was living in exile, and the faithful worshiped in secret.

Shevchuk spent four years in medical school, but was drafted into the Soviet army.

"I spent two years in the military, having experience of a very special way of being of the Soviet people," he said in an hourlong interview during the [Knights of Columbus](#) convention in Baltimore Wednesday. "Because today, nobody knows, or doesn't remember well, that the Soviet Union was a very aggressive country with a messianic vision. A new style of life—the communist idea—was supposed to conquer the whole world. So that messianic idea of the leaders of the Soviet Union was converted in many military actions, actions of the secret services, even instrumentalization of religion, especially the Russian Orthodox Church."

Perhaps even more dangerous was the system's manipulation of the human being.

"The goal of Soviet propaganda was to form the Soviet human person—*homo Sovieticus*. It was especially programmed to destroy the identity of particular nations which were in the territory of the Soviet Union and create a unified Soviet nation," Shevchuk said.

Looking back on those days, the Ukrainian prelate considers his response to the tenor of the times to be "a story of resistance to those ideologies and those social technologies."

"I was lucky enough to be born in a Christian family," he said. "In the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was the biggest group of social opposition against the atheistic regime. Even the bloodshed and persecution of Stalin were unable to destroy that Church. We were lucky enough that a Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church never collaborated with the Soviet regime and was free of that kind of manipulation."

Influenced by the example of prayer he saw in his parents and grandparents and the risks his family took, participating in the underground Church, he understood that being

a Christian was “a way to maintain our identity,” he said. It was to have “a special inner spirit, not to be a part of that massified, faceless, collective society.”

In the underground Church, priests visited homes under cover of night to administer sacraments. Even when Shevchuk’s great-grandfather died, the funeral had to be conducted in secret.

”The underground priest would come at night, celebrating Divine Liturgy, praying over the body of the deceased person and go away,” he recalled. “That was my image of the underground priest—men coming at night. But I saw how it was appreciated, [what the priest] meant to the people. It was how I approached him and those people who were in contact with that network of the underground Church. This is how I was involved in the underground Church because I was a singer, always reading the psalms during those celebrations.”

Shevchuk was invited to join a group of young men who were preparing to be priests.

Serving in the military at the same time, he realized he had something to share with fellow soldiers.

“Many young soldiers were just disappointed and almost lived the depression in the Soviet army because of the humiliation and disregard of human dignity in the Soviet army,” he said. There were tensions in military units among soldiers from the various nations that made up the vast USSR. “And I understood that in order to remain yourself, in order to be able to overcome this situation of humiliation, you have to be a Christian,” Shevchuk said. “And I started to just share my own religious beliefs with others.”

As Shevchuk related it, some soldiers—Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian—asked him, “Where do you get that spirit that keeps a joy in you? Why do you not despair?”

”And I told them, ‘Because I pray.’

“Really? You can pray, but what does it mean, pray?

“Talk to God.’

”And does he really exist?’

“And I answered, ‘Yes, because *I* exist. He’s the source of my life.’”

When one particular soldier expressed his desire to become a Christian, Shevchuk recalled, “I was really apologizing with myself that in that moment I was not a priest, in order to serve him and administer the sacraments to him.”

But he finished his military service in 1991, providentially perhaps, the year the Soviet Union collapsed.

“When I came home from the military service, our Church came forth from the underground existence,” he recalled. “And the head of our Church, Cardinal [Myroslav Ivan] Lubachivsky, returned from Rome to his episcopal see in the city of Lviv. Legal seminaries were reopened in Ukraine. So I immediately entered into that group.”

He was sent to study in Argentina, of all places. A large Ukrainian emigrant community existed there, with immigration beginning before the First World War but also fueled by those escaping Soviet communism. Shevchuk arrived at a historic moment.

“We arrived in Buenos Aires in September [1991], and in December Ukraine proclaimed its independence,” he recalled. He and other Ukrainian seminarians joined a celebratory march in Buenos Aires, carrying a large Ukrainian flag. “I remember an old woman crying and walking beside me. I asked her, ‘Madam, what happened to you? May I help you?’ And she showed me the Argentinian document, where the place of origin or nationality was written ‘Soviet Union.’ And she said ‘But I’m Ukrainian. Imagine, now I can change my document. And it will be written in my document that I am Ukrainian. And I will die as Ukrainian.’”

Shevchuk completed his studies in Lviv, and in 1994 was ordained a priest. The Church was in the midst of a huge revival, with some 350 seminarians preparing for priesthood. Because Shevchuk had learned Spanish, the major archbishop, Cardinal Lubachivsky, felt that he would be able to learn Italian more easily, so he sent the young priest to Rome to study for a doctorate in moral theology. The young priest returned to teach in the seminary in Lviv and at the Ukrainian Catholic University. It was a time of great change, when Ukrainian society was struggling to discard the Soviet mentality. Christian moral and anthropological teaching had a lot to offer in the way of guidance, and Shevchuk was well immersed in it.

He assumed he would live out the rest of his life as a priest-professor, but in 2009, he was elected to be bishop for the Ukrainians in Argentina. He was just 38 years old.

“When I arrived in Argentina, the president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops was Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, known by everybody today as Pope Francis,” he recalled. “He was the one who introduced me to my brother bishops. I remember that first meeting and those very solemn looking bishops who were turning their heads toward me and asking, ‘Well, who’s that altar boy? Did he receive his first Communion?’”

Turning serious, Shevchuk said “Cardinal Bergoglio himself was to me a good father, because I had no idea what does it mean to be an Eastern Catholic bishop in Latin American culture, in the social situation of Argentina. ... I remember some talks with Cardinal Bergoglio, and he taught me that being a bishop in today’s world, especially in Argentina, doesn’t mean anymore to be far away and a prince of the Church, but to be a humble servant and friend of the poor. So I had to rethink all liturgical questions, all pastoral issues in order to be effective pastorally, a bishop for the Ukrainians in Argentina, who were disseminated throughout a big country, a huge county, six times bigger than Ukraine. And in that country I had only 16 priests.”

But once again, just as he was settling into his new role, in 2011, Cardinal Lyubomyr Husar stepped down as major archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

”For some strange reason, my fellow bishops elected me, the youngest among them, as their primate,” Shevchuk said. “It was, again, a big change. The Lord told me to leave behind all your habits, all your personal projects, your way of incarnation into Latin American culture, come back home and lead the Church in the country which was

entering into a very, very unstable moment of its existence. ... I never imagined that I would be the head of the Church which is supposed to lead not only the Church but even the Ukrainian people in a time of war. We never imagined that blood, persecution, tears, suffering, would knock again on our door.”

In 2013, he saw his old friend from Buenos Aires, Cardinal Bergoglio, elected Pope. Later that year and into the next, his Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was swept up into a movement that would once again reassert the identity of the Ukrainian people. What came to be known as the “Revolution of Dignity” led to the pro-Russian Ukrainian president fleeing Kyiv to Russia and the election of a new president and parliament. But events also led to a deadly police crackdown in the streets of the capital, the Russian annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, and an pro-Russian independence movement in Eastern Ukraine, which is widely regarded as a Moscow-backed military action.

Shevchuk cannot help but see how Catholic social teaching, which he had taught in the seminary, has been central in the events since Ukrainian independence, especially in the last few years. That social teaching is based on four principles: human dignity, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity.

“If we preach about the love of God, but we don’t defend the dignity of the human person as the first cornerstone of the social teaching of the Church, nobody would understand why God loves me. ‘Who am I that he should love me?’” he said. “And after the Soviet system of annihilation of human dignity, the affirmation and defense of human dignity was the first task of the Church in its work of evangelization: to be human, to defend the dignity of each citizen, regardless of his religious, ethnic, or political background.”

No coincidence, perhaps, that the protests that started in November 2013 on Kyiv’s Maidan Square came to be called the Revolution of *Dignity*.

That movement was, he said an expression of solidarity, another principle of Catholic social teaching. “People were united in the defense of Ukraine as a state, its integrity, as a common good” (yet another principle). “Suddenly, that solidarity enabled Ukrainian society to give an adequate response to a huge humanitarian catastrophe, which is going on right now in Ukraine. Just in a few months, we started to have millions of internally displaced persons, when the Russian aggression started, when Russian army entered Ukrainian territory. People were supposed to leave behind them all their belongings and go out.”

Solidarity is expressed, he noted, in many villages of Central and Western Ukraine, when displaced persons cannot afford to buy food. Spontaneously, a system started where such people would write down the groceries they took on a list in the market, and locals who had the means would pay for them later.

“Nobody was asking, ‘Who are you? Which language do you speak? To which Church do you go? Only because you are in need, I will help you.’”

The fourth principle of Catholic social teaching, subsidiarity, is being exercised in the current conflict with Russia, he said.

“So, we will not wait until somebody comes and defends my country. It is my duty,” he said. “So people felt finally responsible for their state, for their country, for the future of their children. And that was exactly the opposite of what was happening in the Soviet Union. Because government was responsible for everything.”

To illustrate his point, he reached back to his days as a Soviet soldier.

“An officer called a poor soldier in front of the standing line of the military unit and started to yell at him,” Shevchuk remembered. “And he tried to justify himself and he started to reply, ‘Well, but I thought that ...’ and he stopped him: ‘You have no right to think. You have only to faithfully and on time execute the orders.’ And people were afraid in the post-Soviet Ukraine to undertake private initiatives. ... But we have to educate people to be free.”

As he continues to shepherd a worldwide flock, with parishes in Ukraine, the United States and Canada, Latin America, and other countries, he strives to help people understand that although it is known as the Ukrainian Catholic Church, it is not only for Ukrainians. As a Catholic Church with a history going back to Constantinople, it is a universal Church, one that has a special appeal to those attracted to Byzantine liturgy and spirituality.

“I’m convinced,” he said, “especially after the period of the severe persecution in the Soviet Union, as a Church of Martyrs, we have much to share with the world today.”