

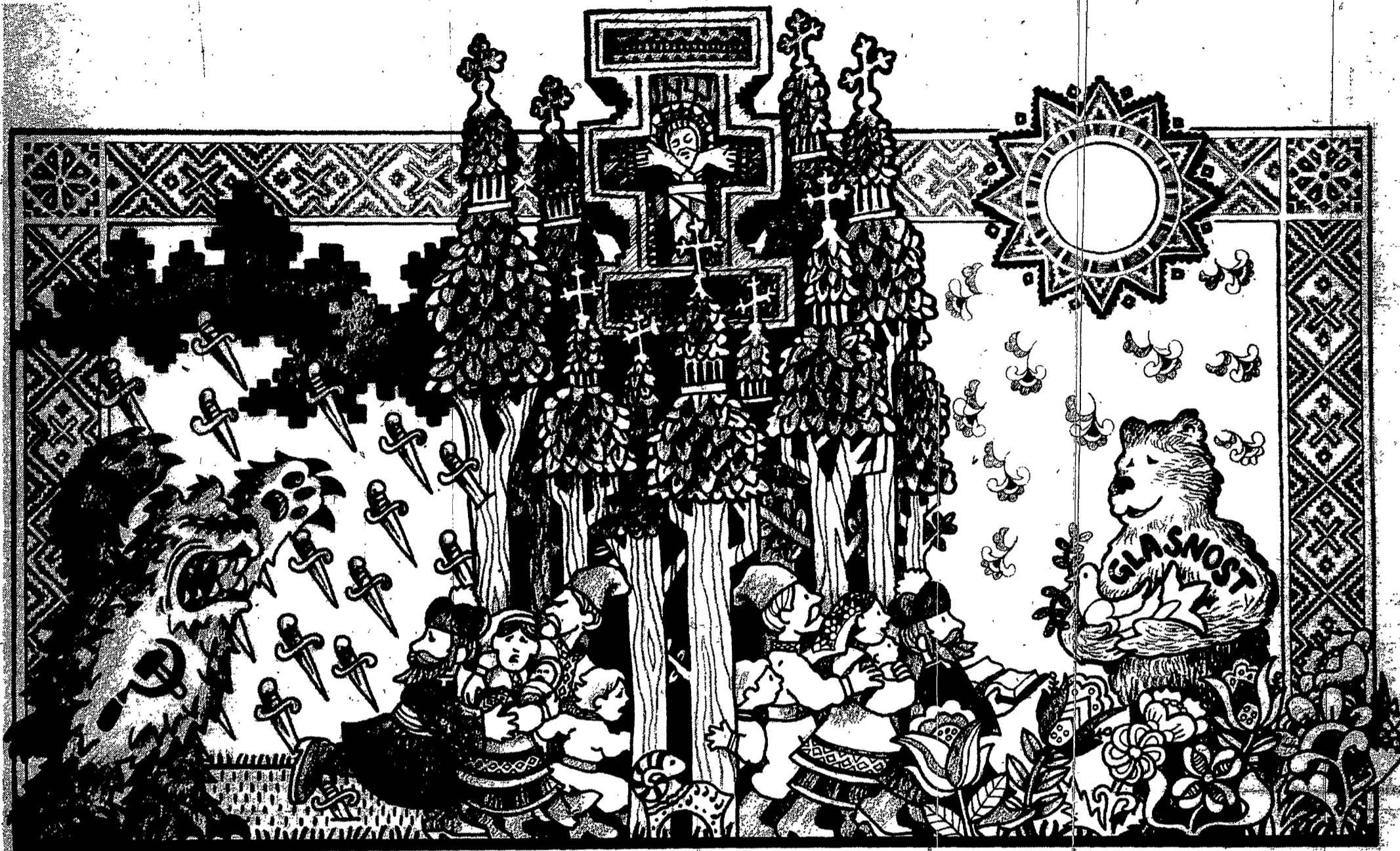


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CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester Thursday, January 18, 1990 50¢ 20 pages



John Kashner with grateful acknowledgements to Tomi d'Prato

Emerging from the forest in the Ukraine

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Bobby McFerrin's pop hit, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" played softly on the radio in Dr. John Kindrat's Rochester office Friday, Jan. 12 as Kindrat read passages from a report on the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

"I thank God that He gave me the strength to bear this cross for nearly 18 years, and I bow my head in reverence to my 10 brothers in the episcopate, the more than 1,400 priests, 800 sisters and tens of thousands of faithful, who by their imprisonment sealed their loyalty to the Pope ... with the sacrifice of their lives," Kindrat read aloud.

The 1980 article had been written by Cardinal Josyf Slipyj, who spent several years in Soviet prison camps from Moldavia to Siberia for professing his Catholic faith. The cardinal's detailing of Soviet atrocities against the church made McFerrin's upbeat hit sound out of place as Kindrat carefully intoned the report's words.

But "Don't Worry, Be Happy" offers an ironic twist in the context of what is currently happening in the Ukraine. For it seems the patience and forbearance of Ukrainian Catholics through years of persecution is finally being rewarded by a blossoming of religious freedom for their heretofore "illegal" church.

Mikhail Gorbachev's dramatic drive to expand freedom in the Soviet Union during the last decade has emboldened millions of religious believers to profess their faith fearlessly for the first time since World War II, when Joseph Stalin briefly loosened religious restrictions to boost the morale of the besieged Soviet peoples.

Following the war, Stalin again clamped down on religion as he had done before international conflict broke out, and the Ukrainian Catholic Church suffered the persecutions more acutely than did other Christian denominations. Ukrainian priests were killed or imprisoned, and their churches were closed or taken over by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church gave allegiance to Moscow in 1927 in exchange for limited freedoms. Since then, its functions have been largely controlled by the communists — a control that alienated many of its clergy and believers.

Outlawed by Stalin in 1946, the Ukrainian Catholic Church has spent the subsequent years underground, conducting services and catechism in the forests and behind the closed doors of Catholic homes in the Ukraine. Forcefully merged with the Russian Orthodox Church the same year it was outlawed, the Ukrainian Catholic Church literally came out of the woods in 1987 as parishes and hierarchs began openly disavowing any ties with the Russian church and proclaiming their loyalty to Pope John Paul II.

Hunger strikes, street demonstrations and petitions for religious freedom were the hallmarks of the non-violent movement, which by early 1989 was being acknowledged by Soviet authorities, who continually offered minor concessions to the protesters in hopes that they would back down from their ultimate demand — legalization of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Ukrainians were also doing exactly what Stalin feared — inspiring the Ukraine as a whole to agitate for more freedom and independence. Stalin needed to crush Ukrainian Catholics because they represented a potential nationalist move-

ment, remarked Dasha Procyk, a Ukrainian Catholic in Buffalo who chairs the Women's Association for the Defense of the Four Freedoms in Ukraine, a U.S.-based, human-rights group.

"The Ukrainian Catholic Church has an important role," Procyk said. "Not only is it the backbone of faith, but it is the keeper of national consciousness."

Most Ukrainian Catholics live in western Ukraine, which was part of Poland before World War II, she said. Although Stalin forcefully annexed the region, its inhabitants hold memories of religious freedom under the Poles before the war.

The Ukrainians, although loyal to Rome, have a separate rite and have been conducting services in their own language for centuries, Procyk noted. Hence, Ukrainian Catholics have looked to their church as both a spiritual and national home.

Roman Tratch, professor of psychology at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, echoed Procyk's observations on the church. The estimated 5-7 million Ukrainian Catholics are a minority among the Ukraine's 50 million inhabitants, but the Catholics are well-organized and have given hope to local Americans for Human Rights in Ukraine chapter.

Tratch noted that the majority of Ukrainians belong to the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which was almost liquidated in the early 1930s. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church was taken over by the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century, he said, but arose again as the Autocephalous when the Ukraine was briefly independent after World War I.

The professor pointed out that the freedom the Catholics in the western Ukraine enjoyed under Polish rule — and earlier yet, under the Austro-Hungarian Empire

— enabled them to become much stronger than the Orthodox Ukrainians, who are only now beginning to reassert themselves following the Catholics' model.

Catholics everywhere were overjoyed Dec. 1 when Mikhail Gorbachev visited Pope John Paul II at the Vatican. That same day, the Ukrainian Council for Religious Affairs proclaimed a decree calling on Catholics to register congregations with local councils, a de facto legalization move that has spawned the registration of more than 600 Catholic parishes, according to the *Ukrainian Weekly*, a paper based in Jersey City, N.J.

Gorbachev has also asserted that the Soviet Union will move to pass a law this year permitting "freedom of conscience." Indeed, when he met with the Holy Father, Gorbachev uttered words that would have choked in the throats of his militantly atheistic predecessors.

"People of many confessions, including Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and others, live in the Soviet Union. All of them have a right to satisfy their spiritual needs," the Soviet leader told the pope.

But is Gorbachev sincerely devoted to freedom? And will he survive?

Seventy-two years of communist rule have led many Ukrainians to question the intentions of any communist leader. One such skeptic is Josyp Terelya, a journalist and Catholic activist who was deported from Ukraine in 1987 and now lives in Toronto, Canada. Terelya expressed his doubts — through an interpreter — in a recent telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Terelya, who spent almost half his life imprisoned for his beliefs, believes that Gorbachev's days are numbered. From

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