

# Defender of religious rights leaves diocese

By Richard A. Kiley  
Managing Editor

ELMIRA HEIGHTS — If it were possible, the copying machine at St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church would have breathed a sigh of relief when Father George Lukachyk left for his new pastorate in Connecticut earlier this month.

The self-described "voice of conscience" for Ukrainian Catholics in America, Father Lukachyk estimated that since his arrival at St. Nicholas in 1987, the parish copier has handled hundreds of articles and billions of words documenting the plight of the religiously oppressed in the Ukraine.

"I believe that God sent me to Elmira Heights ... but I feel my work was done here," said Father Lukachyk, 64, who became pastor of St. Michael Ukrainian Catholic Church in Terryville, Conn., on July 1. "I've done more as an individual for Ukrainian Catholics than all the priests in the Western world."

Although he learned last March about his impending transfer, Father Lukachyk — affectionately known as "Father George" to his parishioners at St. Nicholas and the mission church of Christ the King in Bath — was officially notified of the move through a letter from his bishop in Stamford, Conn., last month.

"I am grateful to you, Father George, for your sincere and conscientious efforts in St. Nicholas parish," wrote Bishop Basil H. Losten, bishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Diocese of Stamford, which has jurisdiction over Ukrainian Byzantine Rite Catholics throughout New York state and New England.

"It is my fond hope that, in your future undertaking, you will exhibit even greater zeal and service for the greater glory of God and the good of our Church through the salvation of souls," Bishop Losten added.

Replacing Father Lukachyk as pastor of St. Nicholas is Father Stephen Fabregas, a native of Sayre, Pa. Coincidentally, Father Fabregas comes to Elmira Heights from the Colchester, Conn., parish Father Lukachyk left five years ago.

Since his arrival at St. Nicholas three years ago, Father Lukachyk, a Syracuse



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer  
Father George Lukachyk, former pastor of St. Nicholas Ukrainian parish, and Kristin Page admire a monument to the Blessed Virgin of Hrushiv.

Stauben crystal cross to a Moscow patriarch on the occasion of the Christian millennium in the Soviet Union in 1988. "He was presenting a symbol to the wrong person at the wrong time," the priest said.

During his service in the Southern Tier, Father Lukachyk has formed a close friendship with Josyp Terelya — the international lay leader of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. Terelya claims that in 1987 he and thousands of other witnesses saw an apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Ukrainian village of Hrushiv. He claims that he has seen the Virgin Mary six times and that she has spoken to him on four occasions.

Father Lukachyk and Terelya, who has spent nearly half his life imprisoned for his beliefs, seriously question whether Mikhail Gorbachev is sincerely devoted to freedom throughout Russia.

"We both know that God has chosen Ukrainian people to convert Russia to Christianity," Father Lukachyk said. "Gorbachev is pulling the wool over the eyes of Western people by talking about openness. There is still much oppression over there."

The Soviet government outlawed the Byzantine-rite Ukrainian Catholic Church in 1946, forcing Catholics who wished to continue worshipping openly to join the official, state-sanctioned Russian Orthodox Church. The Ukrainian Catholic Church literally emerged from 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.

Although the Ukrainian Catholic Church still lacks legal status, authorities in the Soviet Union have not prevented the church from functioning publicly and have even registered a handful of its parishes.

Father Lukachyk said he is encouraged by the meeting that took place last week among the pope and 10 bishops from the Soviet Ukraine. It was the first time the bishops, who were ordained to the priesthood and consecrated clandestinely, had ever met with a pope.

Despite recent developments that show hope for Ukrainian Catholics, Father Lukachyk said U.S. churches and cities must heed the message of such religious activists as Terelya and keep pressuring Gorbachev to improve religious conditions in the Soviet Union.

Through their sister-city relationship, residents of Elmira Heights will keep the Ukrainian people in their daily prayers, send Bibles to them, and promote further awareness of oppression in the Soviet Union.

Although he is unsure of what lies ahead for him in his new pastorate, Father Lukachyk said he is thankful for the experience he gained while serving in the Southern Tier.

"I've been like this all my life ... I take a cause and go with it," he said. "I'm leaving myself open to anything at my new church. I'll accept whatever God's will is for me."

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