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The greatest threat to western Ukraine's distinctive religious art and architecture may come from the faithful themselves.

LVIV, Ukraine | One morning last October, staff of the medieval Pechersk Lavra monastery in Kyiv found the 150-year-old entrance arch lying in ruins.

Two competing versions of the event emerged. Staff of the state historical preserve felt sure that the Orthodox monks who share the complex – an outstanding monument of Ukrainian history and Christianity – deliberately destroyed the arch because it prevented them from undertaking construction work. It was not the first time the museum had accused the monks of destroying parts of the Pechersk Lavra complex. The monks said the tottering arch simply collapsed.

Ukrainian politicians tread very carefully on any question concerning the Orthodox church, especially the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, the largest religious organization in the country. According to numerous national surveys, people trust the country's churches more than any other institution.

In the western part of Ukraine, where communist rule came only after World War II and Orthodoxy takes a less influential role, the history of church-state relations is very different. Paradoxically, it is this region, with its distinctive heritage of religious art and architecture, where churches and icons are now at risk of destruction or thoughtless modernization – not from aggressive atheism but from religious zeal.

FROM CHURCH TO MUSEUM AND BACK

"The media and intellectuals supported us and even intellectuals from religious circles stayed neutral," says Volodymyr Hayuk, deputy director of the Lviv Museum of the History of Religion, recalling the culmination of his decade-long dispute with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church with which the museum shares the former Dominican church and monastery complex. The affair peaked when some Greek Catholic leaders insisted the museum remove the church organ and denounced the

organ concerts held under the museum's aegis as unacceptable in the Byzantine Christian tradition.

The 17th-century organ was spared after local media began to report the dispute, but the museum emerged bruised from the spat.

"They ejected our library from the sacristy, and now books are in the basement packed in garbage bags," Hayuk says. The museum runs the monastery part of the complex, and Hayuk hopes to return the former monastery library to its original purpose.

Hayuk has no bone to pick with Greek Catholics as a faith. His main opponents have been one charismatic priest and a few members of his congregation: "They blamed me for being an atheist, a communist, a mason. But I'm sure the problem of our co-existence can be solved," he says.

Hayuk was the museum's director from Soviet times, when it was called the Museum of Religion and Atheism, until 2004, returning as deputy director after two years away from the museum. Under communism and for a time after independence the museum was responsible for 19 church-museums in the Lviv *oblast*, or region.

"People from villages often asked us to turn their church into a museum," he says, recalling the Soviet era. "That was the way to save a church: if it became a museum, the state had to preserve it. No matter it was a museum of atheism or a village museum, we were forbidden to remove anything. ... We returned about 2,500 items to parishes – icons, ornaments, censers."

Unlike the officially-sanctioned Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox church, the Greek Catholic faith was banned in 1946, following the Soviet incorporation into Ukraine of the Greek Catholic heartland in prewar Poland and Czechoslovakia. Many priests were exiled to Siberia. Others continued to serve and teach future priests underground. The Greek Catholics, who acknowledge the spiritual leadership of the Vatican but follow many Orthodox practices including a non-celibate priesthood, were also victimized at times under Czarist rule.

With memories of Soviet and Czarist persecution still vivid, Greek Catholics in independent Ukraine came out of hiding full of hopes for the future.

"When the churches had been transferred back to the religious communities in the early '90s, there was a kind of euphoria: we thought somebody would at least care for them," recalls Liliya Onyschenko, the head of Lviv's architectural heritage department. At that time the state did not hold the new owners to protect the cultural heritage of the properties. Now, parishes must sign heritage protection agreements, "but they drag it out for ages," she says.

MONEY THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

There are more than 50 old churches, cloisters and synagogues in Lviv, but responsibility for monitoring the city's entire architectural heritage rests in the hands of a single employee in Onyschenko's office. Despite the architectural wealth of the region, Kyiv subsidizes other *oblasts'* cultural budgets much more generously. Today, after surviving the years of desolation and atheistic vandalism, many preservationists fear the western Ukrainian architectural heritage faces the threat of

"self-help."

Inappropriate repairs to old churches did not become a major problem until recent years when parishes' income began rising and they began investing in church renovations.

"Poverty is the heritage protector's good friend," Onyschenko says bitterly. Money appeared before proper heritage protection's restraint, marked in some cases by under-floor heating systems that can damage artworks, plastic windows, unsupervised renovations, and kitschy new paintings in place of Baroque originals.

Andriy Saluk, who runs a foundation called Lviv Historical and Architectural Heritage Preservation, ascribes most of the damage to old religious buildings to good intentions, mentioning how "dedicated church ladies" can damage the gilding of old statues when they attack years of built-up grime with ordinary household cleaners.

Over the eight-year life of his foundation, Saluk has been a watchdog keeping an eye on renovation jobs. Asked to name at least one fully successful restoration of an old Lviv church, his very long pause is sufficient evidence of his skepticism. Onyschenko manages to name at least four projects that followed all the rules of historic preservation.

Borys Vosnicki, the director of the state Lviv Art Gallery, has decades of experience in conservation of churches and secular buildings in and around the city. In 1960 he headed the conversion of a disused Bernadine church into a museum of Baroque sculpture. Although Communist Party ideological functionaries never allowed the exhibition to open, the church, with its valuable interior, had been saved. It was later turned over to the Greek Catholic Church.

Nonetheless, in the '70s some of Lviv's Soviet-era leaders remained loyal to sacral art and saw to it that the former Poor Clares church was turned into an exhibition space rather than an assembly hall for an automotive trade school. After independence the space became the home of an exhibition devoted to one of Ukraine's most gifted and mysterious artists, the Baroque sculptor Johann Georg Pinsel. Ironically it was during 2007, announced as the "Year of Master Pinsel," that some in the Greek Catholic Church proposed that the former Roman Catholic church be turned over to them.

The Rev. Orest Fredyna, the *protosynkel* (vicar general) of the Lviv Greek Catholic archdiocese, confirms that the Greek Catholic community is interested in the Poor Clares church.

"We should remember the reason churches were built," he says. "And if the church has the possibility to get its temples back, it's very important to return sacred places to God. ... If we have the temple, and God gives us an open-hearted priest, this church will not be empty."

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE OF GOD

The Lviv Art Gallery runs the Pinsel exhibition, but Vosnicki is not worried about the Greek Catholics taking control of the church. What does concern him is the fate of Ukraine's old wooden village churches.

"Our *kosciols* [Roman Catholic churches] are very like European ones. But the Ukrainian wooden church of the 15th to 19th centuries is something that amazes the whole world!" Vosnicki exclaims.

"In the 20th century more than 15,000 wooden churches and about half a million icons were destroyed in eastern Ukraine," he says, while under Soviet rule after 1945 only one wooden church burned down in newly-annexed western Ukraine. But since independence in 1991, "we've lost 130 churches" in the west.

Reportedly, as many as 164 churches have been damaged or destroyed by fire just since 2000. Numbers vary because not all churches are listed state heritage buildings or because some sources refer only to the Lviv *oblast*, others to the three regions of western Ukraine together or to all of Ukraine.

Vosnicki lists the possible reasons why people burn or demolish old wooden churches. One is that as people in the countryside become wealthier, they yearn for bigger churches than the wooden ones built two or three centuries ago. He also believes that most of the fires are not accidental.

But the Rev. Sebastian Dmytrukh, head of the Sacral Commission of the Greek Catholic archdiocese of Lviv, insists that the church never urges priests and the faithful to burn old churches and icons. "If some objects are not usable in church any more, these must be passed to a church museum," he says.

He believes the problem lies in priests' lack of appreciation for the cultural value of church buildings and artifacts. He cites the words of the revered Greek Catholic thinker and art patron, Archbishop Andrew Sheptytsky: a priest should be educated to understand art and should pass on his knowledge to the congregation. Nowadays, many priests just don't understand what treasures they have in their care, he says.

Known for his enthusiasm and love of old Ukrainian icons, Dmytrukh has rescued and restored many unusual objects, and he has been trying to establish a museum of icons for several years. A monk, he sees such a museum as a secular institution. He understands his mission as enlightening of priests, but also has to save sacral art directly: "In one village I managed to save 50 16th- and 17th-century icons and carvings. The people were just about to burn them."

In this growing divide between churches and secular preservationists, all sides concur that decentralized control over churches contributes significantly to the problem. When the state turns over a religious property, it is returned to the parish. Thus, the fate of many old churches rests in the hands of their congregations – and so does the livelihood of their priests, because the parishioners pay the priest's living expenses through their voluntary donations. Priests in Ukraine receive no salary from the central church.

"The 'priest-and-parish-problem' is specifically Ukrainian, *protosynkel* Fredyna says.

"Our values altered significantly during Soviet times; just a few people understood that their donations were for God, not the priest," he says, adding that in many Catholic countries, priests have centralized maintenance.

Dmytrukh complains that under current legislation no one is really responsible for maintaining religious buildings. "Our laws forbid taking artworks made before 1946

out of the country. But there is no law to effectively prevent the destruction of a 17th-century church!"