



# Gathered Fragments

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## Ruthenian Byzantine Catholics in the U.S.A.

By Fr. John Louis Mina, Ph.D.

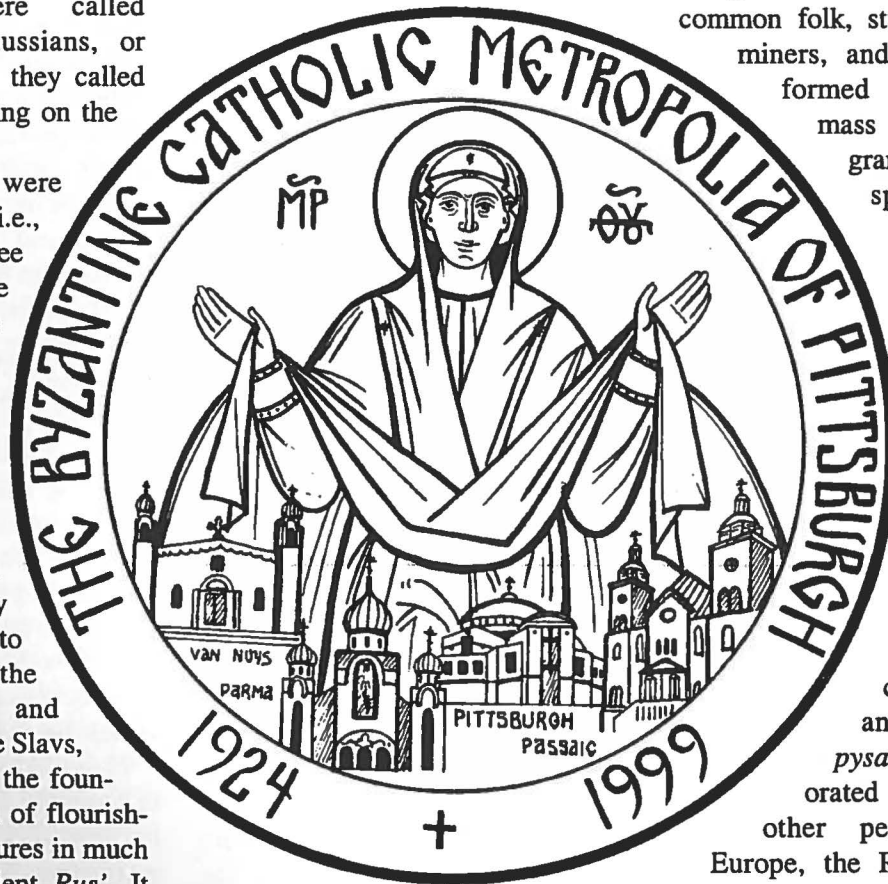
By the end of the 1880s, another people was added to the ethnic mosaic that constitutes Western Pennsylvania. They came from a remote mountainous area in the northeastern part of the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. They were called Ruthenians, Carpatho-Russians, or *Slawisch*. Their language they called *Rusin* or *Rusnak*, depending on the dialect area.

These newcomers were mostly Greek Catholics, i.e., in union with the Holy See of Rome, but of the Byzantine or Greek rite and ecclesiastical tradition. Their liturgical language, "Church Slavonic," was one of the important written languages of medieval Europe. Springing from superb ninth-century translations from Greek into Bulgarian Slavonic of the saintly brothers Cyril and Methodius, Apostles to the Slavs, Church Slavonic became the foundation and early medium of flourishing Eastern Christian cultures in much of the Blakans and ancient *Rus'*. It continues today as a cherished sacred language of liturgy and Scripture.

On a more mundane level, the Ruthenians before the Great War employed a somewhat bookish redaction of the Russian language for literary purposes. There were also experiments in creating a literature in the vernacular, based on different dialect

areas. The most successful of these attempts were in Galicia and, surprisingly, among the ethnic islands of transplanted Ruthenians in Batchka — today's Yugoslav Vojvodina. The educated element, which at that time was limited mostly to clergy, clergy families, and a few teachers, generally had

an excellent command of Polish, if they were from the Austrian-crown land of Galicia and Ladomeria north of the Carpathians. If they were from south of the Carpathian mountain range, i.e., from the Kingdom of Hungary, they usually spoke fluent Hungarian and often supported Hungarian national aspirations. The common folk, sturdy small farmers, miners, and lumberjacks, who formed the overwhelming mass of Ruthenian immigrants to the new world, spoke colorful folk dialects, replete with many wise folk sayings and proverbs. They possessed a rich tradition of songs, ballads, and dances, ancient tales and folk customs. Many excelled in various folk crafts, including wood carving, embroidery, and the making of *pysanky* (elaborately decorated Easter eggs). Like other peoples of Central Europe, the Ruthenians have an



### Fall Lecture Oct. 17 at Synod Hall

Father John Louis Mina, Ph.D., will be the Historical Society's featured speaker this fall. Author of the cover story in this issue of *Gathered Fragments*, Father Mina is archivist for the Byzantine Catholic Archdiocese of Pittsburgh. He will speak on the 75th anniversary of the archdiocese at 2:30 p.m., Sunday, Oct. 17, in Synod Hall, 125 North Craig St., Oakland.

extensive repertoire of paraliturgical songs for every liturgical season. Bordering on the folkloric and sometimes comprising many verses, these songs were developed and transmitted during the great annual pilgrimages to the sites of miraculous icons and renowned monasteries. Often set to hauntingly beautiful melodies, these hymns are still sung before and after the Divine Liturgy and during the communion of the faithful.

Coming to the United States, the Ruthenians brought with them a simple, firm faith and an intense attachment to their spiritual traditions. In the view of the American Roman Catholic hierarchy of that time, who were struggling in the face of immense bigotry to weld the diverse immigrant groups into one monolithic ecclesial body, the arrival of these Eastern-rite Catholics could not have been more inopportune. From the very beginning, two grave problems arose: first, the problem of jurisdiction — the Greek Catholic priests claimed jurisdiction from their bishops in Europe; and second, the celibacy issue. In a letter from October 1, 1890, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith established that only celibate Greek Catholic clergy could serve in North America and that they would be subject to the authority of the local Roman-rite ordinary. However well-intentioned, this ruling proved disastrous. The first condition could not be implemented for many years simply because of the dearth of celibate Ruthenian priests. The second condition was no less impracticable, due to the uninformed and mostly hostile attitude of the American Roman Catholic hierarchy and clergy of that time toward the Eastern-rite Catholics. Severe conflicts ensued: Eastern Catholic priests were sometimes banned and their churches placed under interdict, but instead of disappearing, the Ruthenian communities continued to multiply, often functioning in defiance of the Church authorities. This led to an erosion of respect

for ecclesial authority and the strengthening of control over these de facto independent parishes by lay curators.

In 1890, Father Alexis Toth, a widower from the Eparchy of Presov, presented himself before the archbishop of Minneapolis with a request for faculties but was summarily refused. The Ruthenian parish in that city remained without liturgical services. As a former professor of Church law and history, Father Toth sought a way out of this canonical impasse. Shortly afterward, he established contact with the missionary Russian Orthodox bishop, resident at that time in San Francisco, and on March 25, 1891, Father Toth and his flock were received into the Russian Orthodox Church. By the time of his death in 1909, Archpriest Alexis Toth had brought more than 20,000 Ruthenians into the Russian church.

In order to improve the unsatisfactory situation in the parishes and stem defections, in 1902 the Holy See sent Canon Andrew Hodobay from Hungary as apostolic visitor to the Greek Catholics in the United States. Withdrawn in 1905, he was replaced in 1907 by Bishop Soter Ortynsky, a Basilian monk from Galicia. In 1913 Bishop Ortynsky finally received ordinary authority, but he died in 1916. By the end of the Great War an unfortunate cleavage between the Ruthenians from Hungary and those from Galicia had become so aggravated that the two communities were divided into two apostolic administrations. The two communities have remained separate ever since, and the Galician community under the name of the Ukrainian Catholic Church has grown into the Ukrainian Catholic Metropolitan Province of Philadelphia, including the suffragan eparchies of Stamford, Chicago of St. Nicholas, and Parma of St. Josaphat.

The Ruthenian Byzantine Catholic Church of Pittsburgh is celebrating this year its diamond jubilee. Created in 1924 for Carpatho-Russians, Slovak, Hungarian, and Croatian

Greek Catholics from the lands of pre-War Hungary, this Church now encompasses persons of many different ethnic backgrounds. It comprises the Byzantine Catholic Metropolitan Province of Pittsburgh with its suffragan eparchies of Passaic, Parma, and Van Nuys. This Church boasts an impressive new cathedral and cathedral complex in the Pittsburgh suburb of Munhall, a seminary on the North Side of Pittsburgh, a Basilian motherhouse and major pilgrimage site at Uniontown, other monasteries, convents, schools, and numerous beautifully appointed parish churches. Byzantine Catholics are important participants in state, national, and international synods and also active in the cause of ecumenism.

Milestones in the history of the Ruthenian Catholic Church of Pittsburgh include the arrival of Bishop Basil Takach in 1924. Although according to the letter of appointment, the episcopal residence was to be in New York, the concentration of Ruthenian Catholics in Western Pennsylvania and the location here of the central offices of the two Ruthenian fraternal organizations, the Greek Catholic Union and the United Societies, made Pittsburgh the more logical site. Thus the large church of St. John the Baptist in Homestead, now the projected location of a Ruthenian cultural center, became the first cathedral. An elegant episcopal residence was constructed by the GCU across the street from the cathedral.

Notwithstanding these auspicious beginnings, Bishop Takach's path in the new world was to be one of virtual martyrdom for the sake of his flock. Precipitated by certain decrees of the Vatican, the two unresolved problems of authority over church property and clerical celibacy came to a head in 1929, and their conjuncture was to ignite the independence movement that took away approximately 40,000 faithful. In 1938, the independent candidate, the widowed Father Orestes Chornyak, was consecrated bishop in

Constantinople by Ecumenical Patriarch Benjamin I, who at the same time erected the Orthodox Carpatho-Russian Diocese of Johnstown. By that time, however, thanks to the firm but patient policy of Bishop Takach, the Ruthenian Catholic Church had weathered the storm.

In 1946 the ailing Bishop Takach (d. 1948) received a coadjutor with the right of succession in the person of Bishop Daniel Ivancho. During his short administration (1948-1954), Bishop Daniel erected the seminary and, aided by the influx of highly qualified refugee priests from Central Europe, he placed the seminary on firm foundations. Under his successor, Bishop Nicholas Elko (1954-1967), a diocesan newspaper, the *Byzantine Catholic World*, was launched, the English language was introduced into the Divine Liturgy. Also the Ruthenian Exarchate followed its people, opening in 1956 its first parish on the West Coast.

In 1963 the missionary exarchate was replaced by two eparchies:

Pittsburgh and Passaic. Bishop Stephen Kocisko became the first bishop of Passaic. He succeeded Bishop Elko in Pittsburgh when the latter was recalled to Rome in 1967. In 1969 the Parma Eparchy was erected for the Western states, with Bishop Emil Mihalik (1969-1984) as the first bishop. That same year, the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Munhall (since 1977, Pittsburgh of the Byzantines) was established, and Archbishop Stephen Kocisko (1969-1991) became its first metropolitan. In 1982 Bishop Thomas Dolinay was appointed to head the new Eparchy of Van Nuys, California. In 1990 he became archbishop-coadjutor with right of succession to Archbishop Kocisko, whom he succeeded in 1991, governing the archdiocese until his sudden death in 1993. Bishop Michael Dudick ruled the Passaic Eparchy from 1968 to 1996. He expanded Ruthenian parishes in the southern states, particularly Florida. He also erected a beautiful eparchial center with a rich museum and library in

West Patterson, New Jersey. In 1995 Archbishop Judson Procyk, D.D., who had built the new cathedral complex in Munhall, became the third metropolitan archbishop of Pittsburgh. The following year, Archbishop Procyk led the Ruthenian hierarchs of North America and Europe in a celebration of the 350th anniversary of the union of the Ruthenian Church with the Holy See, held at St. Peter's Basilica in the presence of the Holy Father. The event was marked by the issuance by Pope John Paul II of a Apostolic Letter on the Union of Uzhorod. The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Ruthenian Catholic Church of Pittsburgh, which will be attended by hierarchs and faithful from two continents, is a time to renew ties and, appreciating past difficulties and accomplishments, look forward with confidence to future challenges.

*Father Mina is archivist of the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Pittsburgh.*

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## “Byzantine Catholic Expression” at Heinz History Center

In commemoration of its 75th anniversary, the Byzantine Catholic Metropolitan Archdiocese of Pittsburgh announces “The Byzantine Catholic Expression,” an exhibit that opens Oct. 2 and continues through Jan. 16, 2000 at the Heinz Regional History Center.

The exhibit brings together a selected collection of liturgical, architectural, and iconographic items to help develop an understanding of the Byzantine Catholic mode of spiritual expression.

The liturgical dimension is supported by the Holy Table, and altar that belonged to the first eparch of Pittsburgh, Bishop Basil Takach. The Holy Table is completely furnished. Nearby a Holy Shroud, which depicts the iconographic image of Christ's body and which is used during Good Friday vespers, is displayed. This section also features the complete religious vestments of a Byzantine bishop, priest, and deacon, as well as the garments worn by

a monk, a nun, and an altar server. An archbishop's chair is also included.

The various designs of Byzantine architecture are shown through both church models and photographs. The models include four significant Byzantine churches in present-day Slovakia and Ukraine, as well as a model of the St. Nicholas Chapel built in 1992 in Beaver. The six photographs include a representation of several styles of American Byzantine churches. The most poignant of these photographs is that of Ss. Peter and Paul Church in Lopez, which was totally destroyed by fire on Sept. 3, 1999.

The exhibit includes an array of twelve historical photos that weave the story of significant American Byzantine Catholic events during the past 75 years.

The role of icons in Byzantine Catholic spirituality is emphasized in several ways. Twelve icons represent an array of saints and feast days as well as various iconographic styles. An adjacent

pane describes the work of iconographer Sister Stephanie Bavol, a member of the Uniontown province of the Byzantine Sisters of St. Basil the Great. A nearby panel features a six-part icon progression, detailing the crucial steps in the writing of an icon. A special section of the exhibit is reserved for a historic reference to icon screens. Reconstructed and on display is a major section of the icon screen from the old Ascension of Our Lord Byzantine Catholic Church in Clairton. The exhibit also includes photographic highlights of three icon screens located in the Pittsburgh area: those of the Byzantine Catholic Seminary of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, St. John Chrysostom Church in Greenfield, and the cathedral in Munhall.

“The Byzantine Catholic Expression” was developed by a committee chaired by Michael Barbush Jr. of Pittsburgh and was coordinated by Dave Ragan of Youngstown.