

A Russian Orthodox 'nyet' to Uniates

by Kathleen Klenetsky

Amidst hints that Moscow may be prepared to legalize the outlawed Ukrainian Catholic Church, a leading spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has delivered a scathing attack against the Uniate churches in the East bloc, virtually demanding that the Vatican agree to their continued suppression as a condition for the continuation of the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue.

Metropolitan Filaret, head of the External Relations Department of the Russian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate, and one of the Soviet Union's leading purveyors of the lie that it wants nothing but peace with the West, told a U.S.-based Catholic newspaper that the Byzantine rite church must never be recognized as legitimate.

In an interview published in the Sept. 24 *National Catholic Register*, Filaret, who serves as metropolitan of Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, voiced adamant opposition to any loosening of the brutal repression which Josef Stalin unleashed against the Ukrainian Catholic Church in 1946. Stalin declared the church illegal, and demanded that its members join the ROC. Since that time, it has been forced to function underground.

"The Uniate tradition," Filaret claimed, "was created under abnormal conditions—not as the product of a dialogue with God, but as an act *against* this dialogue. For this reason, it will never, never be a constructive factor. . . . Uniatism will never be a bridge between East and West. It will always be the precipice which separates us."

The most significant aspect of Filaret's remarks was his attempt to draw a fundamental distinction between the Roman Catholic Church, and the Uniate churches. The latter, while using a liturgy different from that used by the Roman Church, nevertheless recognize the Pope as their spiritual leader, and are doctrinally in accord with Rome.

Filaret declared that while there is room for the Roman Catholic Church to exist in the Soviet Union, this is absolutely not true for the Uniates. "We are *not* against the Catholic Church," and "we accept [the Pope] by our own judgment and free will," Filaret asserted. "But Uniatism, however you may choose to interpret it, represents an act of proselytism by the Western Church in the East. This is what angers the Russian Church."

Filaret made little attempt to disguise the reasons for

his antipathy toward the Uniates': their pivotal role in the nationalist movements which are demanding independence from Soviet rule. "In the Baltic countries and the Ukraine, and in Belorussia, too, the Catholic Church is closely connected with national culture," he said. "Sometimes this assumes a nationalist character. Churches should resist this. . . . Nationalist tendencies still exist in the Ukraine. And in practice, many Uniates are not against Moscow as a center of the Orthodox Church but against Moscow as a political center."

Soviet maneuvers

Filaret's candid interview comes just as the pace of Vatican-Soviet diplomacy has markedly quickened. It was recently announced that Mikhail Gorbachov will meet with the Pope in Rome this November. According to several sources, the subject of the legalization of the Byzantine rite will definitely be on the agenda, and, according to one individual familiar with preparations for the meeting, "will certainly be one of the Pontiff's top two priorities."

The Ukrainian Catholic Church's leader in exile, Cardinal Lubachivsky, disclosed Sept. 21 that the Vatican had set discussion of the banned church as a condition for the meeting.

A week later, the KGB's Fyodor Burlatsky, chairman of the Supreme Soviet's subcommittee on humanitarian matters, announced that the Supreme Soviet will consider legalizing the Ukrainian Church next year.

The issue of the Ukrainian church is also expected to dominate the next meeting between the Vatican's Council for Promoting Christian Unity and Russian Orthodox Church representatives, which is scheduled to take place sometime in October.

Filaret's seeming dissension from the official Soviet state declaration of war on the Byzantine churches may be part of a Soviet "soft cop/hard cop" operation, which seeks to extract as many concessions from the Vatican as possible, in exchange for some easy promises from Moscow to lessen the persecution of the Byzantine churches. It has been suggested by some observers that Gorbachov may be willing to at least grant the appearance of legalizing the Uniates, in order to defuse the mounting pressures for political and economic independence in the Ukraine and other parts of the empire.

Filaret concluded his interview by suggesting that the Pope, if he does succeed in arranging his long-wished-for trip to the centers of the Uniate churches in the East, should come to Moscow as well. "We would like John Paul II to come when the time is ripe," said Filaret. "And we cannot see how he can visit Lithuania, Belorussia, and the Ukraine without going to Moscow, the Orthodox capital." By convincing the Pope to visit Moscow, the Russian Orthodox Church is hoping to bolster its side in its ongoing contest with the Patriarchate of Constantinople for the position of true representative of Orthodoxy in the East.