The UOCC as the Light of Truth for Contemporary Orthodoxy

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada which now celebrates her centennial, was formed in Canada thanks to the initiative of pious believers gathered together in 1918 in this beautiful city of Saskatoon. This Church stands today as a beacon of light for all Orthodox Christians in the world. While throughout history many Orthodox and Heterodox Churches have encountered great challenges in living the ideals of the early Church, the UOCC with her foundation of Sobornopravnist/Conciliarity and, having followed the example of the Church of Christ in the Book of Acts, has preserved and advanced the true Orthodox understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ active in God’s created world.

Some, or much, of what I will mention today can be found in other churches, especially in the UOC-USA, but I will discuss mostly the Church of Ukrainian Orthodox people living in Canada.

There have been many local and historical influences on our Church in 1918 and throughout her history that have made us who we are today.

Briefly I will mention just a few of the external ways through which our Lord and Saviour has formed this Church in Canada.

1) The heritage of the Church in Ukraine. The Brotherhoods, Sobornopravnist.

2) The avoidance of the Tsarist aggressiveness and dominance, and of the western Christian hang-ups.

3) The Canadian mentality of mutual cooperation and respect for others.

Historians have remarked that Canada as an independent state is unique by being founded by the cooperation of French Roman Catholics and English speaking Scottish Presbyterians. Nowhere else in the world has this happened. Others mention the Métis of Western Canada who have made the land so welcoming to others and the general idea that in a harsh climate neighbours must help each other to survive. All of this produces a mentality which helped the UOCC develop into a Church that has been able to fit into Canada and welcome people from all of Canada and make each of the four waves of Ukrainian immigration a part of the Church.

Even the official name of our Church has been a result of the Canadian attitude of compromise and a way of making everyone feel at home in the UOCC. I remember an elderly priest once telling me that it was an example of the genius of Fr. Sawchuk and others at the beginning of
our Church in Canada. It is significant that the Church was registered as the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada and Українська (Греко) Православна Церква в Канаді in Ukrainian. The words of Canada comforted those who spoke more English and Canadians outside the Church that the Church was a Canadian Church which just happens to be Ukrainian Orthodox in faith. The words in Ukrainian meaning in Canada underlined to people primarily from Ukraine that the Church is Ukrainian Orthodox and just happens to be in Canada, maybe only temporarily, until Ukraine is free. This was a great Canadian compromise to make everyone feel at home.

Also, we see a British attitude of order and good government in our Church by the hard work put into securing a Parliamentary Charter for the Church. On the whole we adopted the English Canadian tendency for strength but meekness, politeness and humility. We defer to “experts” outside of our Church, we often are self-critical and invite speakers mostly from other churches, or from the US, as if everything is seen as better somewhere else.

I think we have at times overdone this humility. I think that we should look at what makes the UOCC unique.

What do we have to offer the Orthodox world?

I believe that the UOCC is a Church based on Biblical and Canonical norms and that we should act as the light for all Orthodox on how to live and missionize this world: “The Light of Truth for Contemporary Orthodoxy.”

We should not be so humble as to believe that just because things are done differently somewhere else that they must be wrong in our Church!

The UOCC is part of the Kyivan tradition in the Orthodox Church, so let us not forget we are part of one of the largest Orthodox traditions. So, in a way, what happens in the UOCC is the normal way to live Orthodoxy in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, our Canadian humility has led us too often to believe that if we see a different liturgical or pastoral practice in Greece, the Orthodox Church in America or Pennsylvania that it is we who are making a mistake.

Now let us consider what is unique and positive about the UOCC and what we have to offer the world.

There are many unique aspects of the UOCC- I will start with 2 fundamental New Testament passages which are being lived in our Church.

Priests are to treat others with respect as one family in Christ. We are all called together to be one people, the holy nation of God - Народ Божий.

I Timothy 5:1,2

“Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity” and
I Peter 2:9,10

“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God.”

The Royal Priesthood of all believers underlines the ultimate responsibility for the Church, the people of God, rests in the Holy Nation – clergy and laity together.

So, when in Ukrainian history many bishops were corrupt and/or decided to join the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Brotherhoods came into being to rescue the Church.

Likewise, here in Canada when a true Ukrainian Orthodox Church needed to be formed, the laity met in this beautiful city of Saskatoon a century ago having called the confidential meeting (довірочні збори) to begin the establishment of our Church.

The power and grace of God resides in the Baptized People – laity and clergy. “Усі ті що у Христа хрестилися у Христа зодягнулися”

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Galatians 3:27.

Even in Scripture the question of Ordination of Deacons was not just a question for the apostles to decide. In Acts 6: 3 the 12 apostles told the faithful who wanted more equity in the social work of the community, “You find good men and we will lay hands on (ordain) them”.

“Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.” Acts 6:3, 5; 6.

This is exactly the practice of the UOCC where on the Consistory Board, the Bishops and the Priests and the laity all have a say in who is approved for ordination. This Biblical Orthodox Practice avoids or prevents rule by the loudest in bullying and cronyism, clericalism or corruption in general (all of which can be seen elsewhere in the religious world).

St Paul tells St. Timothy as a new leader, Bishop, how he is to respectfully treat everyone in the Church – he does not say they are, for example, just peasants of no value.

All who have put on Christ in Baptism are worthy of respect and have a say in the Church.

One major reason our Church has been strong is the role of the laity, especially the lay-women.

Where would we be without Союзу Українок / UWAC?
Not just the fundraising – but the foundational teaching of youth, self-enlightenment, and the loving missionary outreach to those inside and outside the parish community.

Somehow the non-orthodox idea has crept into heterodox and even some Orthodox churches that God only loves and supports clergy or only expects men to manage things. Clearly, we in the UOCC know and rejoice that that is not what God expects.

CYC/TYC/ Союз Українок/ CYMК are not adjunct organizations to be tolerated but are fundamental to the Church and, when supported by the clergy, are the way that our Church will grow in the fulfilment of God’s will.

Lay-people who attack or belittle clergy are a problem but clergy who attack or belittle Союз Українок or other laity are suffering from clericalism and need to repent.

In 2008 the Sobor, here in Saskatoon, spent a lot of time discussing the meaning of Соборноправність / Conciliarity which is special in our Church and revealed to us in Holy Sculpture. I won’t discuss all the implications other than to say that one basic meaning of соборність or соборноправність is that “We are all in this together” God – the Holy Spirit can work through each and every one of us.

We see that the normal practice in the UOCC is Biblically-based and very Orthodox because in Canada we, of the UOCC, have been able to accept all the good God-centered Orthodox practices and filter out the chaff that has crept into the Church in other places. For example:

- the administrative style, learned from Genghis Khan, of tyrannical rule by tsars or tsar-wannabes, strong men.

- the necessary adaptions to survive the Turkish oppression where the clergy administered all religious and also most secular Orthodox affairs.

- or the erst-while Church practice of considering higher clergy as aristocrats and the laity as peasants

These practices were neither Biblical nor Orthodox and so we here never accepted such things – not in 1918 not in 2018.

Our beloved Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada is small in the world of Orthodoxy or even amongst the other churches of Canada but she has much to show and teach others as she has, by God’s Providence, preserved much that has been lost in other groups or churches. The world needs more Canada and the Orthodox world needs the Biblically-based example of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada.

God has called together the Bishops, the priests and the non-ordained members of the people of God to work together in harmony, guided by the teachings of Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring light to those in darkness and thus to become the light of truth for contemporary Orthodoxy.