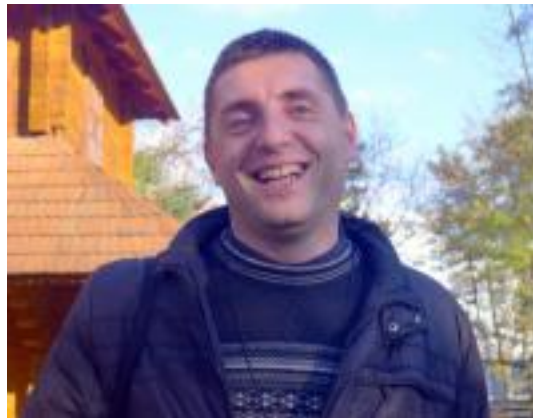


?We want to be an example of how people of different backgrounds can come together?: An Interview with Fr. Dr. Roman Fihas

?We want to be an example of how people of different backgrounds can come together?: An Interview with Fr. Dr. Roman Fihas



Fr. Dr. Roman Fihas is a Ukrainian Greek Catholic priest and coordinator of the English-language Distance Learning Master's Program in Ecumenical Studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University. In late 2018 he discussed the activities and ethos of this vibrant university while showing the East-West Church Report around its campus in the western city of Lviv. The conversation took place in English.

It is striking how many worship services there are in churches in Lviv, and the significant number of young people attending. Is this a growing trend?

It started in 1991, when Ukraine obtained independence and the Greek Catholic Church was coming out from underground. There was a religious boom?people were witnessing that they were against the totalitarian regime, and so to be religious was popular. Almost everyone came to church! Right now, this boom is diminishing a little, but we still have a lot of people attending church. Compared with central or eastern Ukraine, the number is much higher. This is because we only had 50 years of the Communist regime here, while the central and eastern parts of Ukraine had 20 years more?one more generation.

So in Lviv, for example we have around 80 Greek Catholic churches. On Sundays in the big parishes they have a liturgy?which lasts between one and two hours?every two hours, starting from the morning until about six or seven in the evening. In the suburb of Sykhiv there is one parish dedicated to the Nativity of the Mother of God where eight or 10 priests minister. It has a catechetical school where around 1,500 pupils attend classes at least once a week. This church was built up from scratch. It is a very lively parish, offering assistance to those dependent on alcohol or drugs, general counseling services, and various programs for young people. Some parishes are more active, some less. Sometimes, of course, the older generation is more represented in church than the young. But usually people have a tradition of going to church.

Did you yourself grow up in a Christian family?

My parents are Christian but they were not so religious. They baptized my brother and me, but there were no Greek Catholic churches open for them to go to. Maybe once a year they attended some liturgy, but not often.

So you came to active faith after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

Yes. We started to attend liturgies in the 1990s when Ukraine had become independent and churches began to open. I then attended a Greek Catholic lyceum here in Lviv which had a very positive atmosphere?I had many friends and studied a lot of theological topics. This study of theology was like a revelation to me. It brought me to an understanding of my faith as more than just a custom. Afterwards I felt a calling to be a priest and I decided to go to seminary here. That study lasts seven years, and I graduated in 2004.

We now have around 200 seminarians in Lviv. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church also has three seminaries in the cities of Kyiv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Ternopil. Greek Catholic monastic religious orders, such as the Basilians and Redemptorists, have their own seminaries as well.

I am a married priest?I have three children. We live in the Collegium building along with the students, here on campus. This is because we are trying to offer students a program of personal formation as well as study. They receive knowledge, but their personal formation and intercommunication are also important.

What is your teaching role here?

I work at the Institute of Ecumenical Studies, which was founded in 2004 by Fr. Iwan Dacko?who was a secretary to Patriarch and Cardinal Josyf Slipyj in Rome?together with Dr. Antoine Arjakovsky, an Orthodox professor from Paris. Ecumenism is a priority for our university. On the territory of Ukraine we have two Orthodox Churches, as well as two Catholic Churches?Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic. We have Protestants, also Jews, Muslims, and other religions. So dialogue is very important. We believe that if we want peace and to find one another, we must work towards this together.

We have a master?s program in Ecumenical Studies on campus and via distance learning, including in English. We see this as one way of spreading ecumenical awareness. We also see great potential for ecumenism in social issues.

By that, do you mean separate churches working together in different social spheres, rather than discussing ways to overcome doctrinal differences?

Yes, and in most cases this works much better than dialogue at a high level! For example, once a year we organize an ecumenical social week where we gather representatives of the different churches and business representatives from Lviv city and region. We discuss important issues that we need to influence or change. In 2018 we discussed youth?how young people find their place in the world, their challenges in following a calling to a particular profession, positive experiences that the Church has had in communicating with young people.

Is the Ukrainian Catholic University primarily intended for Greek Catholic students and theological study, or does it have a broader remit?

Everything started from theology, but we understood that we could not hide this treasure and keep it for ourselves. So the university is an open community anchored in this Christian background. We have students of IT and business analysis, journalism, history, social pedagogy, psychology, and other subjects, as well as theology.

Does the university belong to the state system or is it private?

Our university is a private university, although all our programs?from theology to IT?are accredited by the state. But we do not receive any finance from the state. All our funding comes from private donors around the world.

Does that mean that students either have to pay from their own funds or take on loans? Are the fees the same for every subject?

We would like the legal situation to change so that state educational funding goes not to institutions but to individual students, and so to wherever each student decides to study. In the meantime, students have to pay, but around one third of our students have scholarships?we have schemes that support students. Even those who do pay for their studies themselves pay only around 20 or 30 percent of what the university has to spend?we cannot make the fees very high, because otherwise people would be unable to come. However, the rate for IT is around three times higher than subjects such as history and theology, because those students will easily find a well-paying job after they graduate.

What is life like for students at the university?

We have around 2,000 students here. There is currently room for around 300 to live on campus in the Collegium building, alongside mentors such as myself. In this building there is also a chapel, and the Emmaus Center for people with special needs. There are places such as workshops for their own activities, but we are also able to meet with them over tea and help them with anything required due to their special needs. This is the spirituality of Jean Vanier, the French founder of L?Arche, who dedicated his life to living with such people and who recognized their special gifts. For example, they teach us transparency?what they want to say, they say without any masks. This is something very positive?we have only just started to learn how to interact with such people in Ukraine.

We also have a small convent; there are three nuns who live in the Collegium building. The students liaise with them in organizing different events.

You also have a splendid new library here in the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Center, opened in 2017.

Yes, it must be a big surprise to come here and to see all these buildings! This is probably the first library to be built in Ukraine in the past 25 years. It was built in order to attract young people to come and meet with books! It also hosts famous speakers and different cultural events. Anyone can join the library for 50 hryvnia [around \$2] a year. The cafeteria and children?s room are also open to all.

How would you describe the ethos of the university?

Our founder and president, Borys Gudziak [as of June 2019 overseeing all Ukrainian Greek Catholics in the USA as Archbishop of Philadelphia] says that we build our identity on three Ss. In Ukrainian, they are *svidchyty*, *sluzhyty*, and *spilkuvatysya*.

Svidchty is 'witnessing,' above all the witness of our New Martyrs, who with their lives witnessed that it is possible to know truth and to stand for truth. It is also important for us to be witnesses to the truth in this 21st century.

Sluzhyty is 'serving.' As Jesus came to serve us, so we will serve Him. If we want to see changes, we also have to be aware that we will have to put in a lot of service.

Spilkuvatysya means communication. In the USSR people did not trust one another, because your neighbor could go to the KGB and say bad things about you, and you could be imprisoned. Communication was ruined. But at this university we invite many different people to this campus to build up communication and trust between people. We want to be an example of how people of different backgrounds can come together to create a unique university.

So the university is not only for practicing Christians?

Yes. But being in a community which prays gives people the time and space to get a taste of the Christian faith. Sometimes working here seems like sowing grain. You do not know what the fruit will be in one, five or 10 years time. There are some who do not practice, and there are some cases when people come here without any religious background and who become Christians. It just depends.

What was your experience of Ukraine's recent past?the pro-democracy Maidan demonstrations of 2013-14 in Kyiv?

What we experienced during those three months of Maidan was something very rare. There was sweetness, but also fear. We had no idea how it would all turn out. Many of the people at Maidan said they could not come back home, because the regime would know where to find them and they would be finished. So everyone knew that they had to press on. But the spirit of Maidan was not against somebody: it was for freedom, for change, and against corruption. There was also constant service. It was a cold winter, and people constantly asked those coming to Maidan if they needed something to eat and then brought food, or told them where they could find something to keep warm if they were cold. It was like the early Church, when everyone helped each other.

I understand one of the UCU staff was among those killed in the demonstrations.

Bohdan Solchanyk. He was a history lecturer at the Ivan Franko National University in Lviv, but he also taught here. He was killed in the final days of Maidan, aged just 28. It was a tragedy.

Do you think the determination for change is still strong?

During Maidan it seemed as if we were taking part in a sprint over a short distance, because we were running very fast. We thought we had reached the finish line, but then we realized that we needed to keep going forward. There was disappointment for about a year after Maidan, because we did not see immediate change. But then we understood that we were actually running a marathon. All those steps may look very easy, but time is needed.

We also understood that it is very important to follow this path and not to stop?to be faithful to the end. There is the problem of populism now?not only a Ukrainian problem!?and it is easy to blame somebody as guilty, or to say that you just have to change this or that and then we will have paradise! [Laughs] In Ukraine we are also in a bad economic situation because we lost seven percent of our territory, and the continuing war demands a lot of resources. But we have made progress in areas such as education and medicine; we have begun to live as an independent

state.

Bohdan Solchanyk and others who died are an example telling us not to step back; we have to move forward. We have good examples and we have?not saints, but people who help us to continue our progress. We still have a lot of work to do. We just started to change our country.

The interview is republished with permission of the East-West Church Report
<https://www.eastwestreport.org/subscribe>

No