

Eastern Rite Lay Confraternities in Ukraine and Byelorussia¹

Easter rite lay confraternities (*bratstva*) are specific only to Ukrainian and Byelorussian church communities. Some historians consider these confraternities to be direct descendants of the medieval fraternal associations (*bratchiny*) which, presumably, were in turn descendant of early Christian brotherhoods or early medieval guilds. In their organizational structure, however, the early modern Orthodox confraternities had much more in common with Western religious confraternities of laymen than with the archaic *bratchiny*.

Confraternities attached to Orthodox, and later also to Greek Catholic parishes developed primarily as a framework for the religious, social, and cultural activities of Ukrainian and Byelorussian burghers—although in some cases noblemen and peasants are also known to have participated. The first reliable documents on legally approved Orthodox confraternities date from the mid-sixteenth century. Such documents include the 1538 charter of the Furriers' Brotherhood in Vilnius, the 1542 statute of the Annunciation Confraternity and that of the St Nicholas confraternity (1544), both in Lviv. Confraternal activity at that time was limited mostly to philanthropy and the upkeep of church property.

Active involvement of confraternities in political and cultural movements began only with the reorganization of the brotherhood of parishioners of the Dormition church in Lviv. In January 1586 the Dormition Confraternity adopted a statute that included articles assuming its control over the clergy and the establishment of a school and a printing shop. The founding members of the confraternity belonged to the milieu of Orthodox artisans and merchants residing in the Ukrainian quarter in the

centre of Lviv. In 1593 the patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople granted the rights of Patriarchal Stauropegion (i.e., direct subordination to the Patriarch, and exemption from the authority of the local bishop) to the Dormition church. In the wake of this grant the Dormition Confraternity itself assumed the title of a Stauropegion Confraternity. The Dormition Confraternity quickly became the most influential religious association of laymen in Ukraine and a model for similar organizations in some regions of Ukraine and Byelorussia.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries confraternities were active in virtually every town and in many villages of western Ukraine, as well as in numerous cities and villages of the eastern provinces of the country. The Byelorussian Orthodox Confraternity of Vilnius (Vilnia, Wilno) was particularly active in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Its work had a crucial impact on confraternities in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Epiphany Confraternity of Kiev was founded as late as 1615 and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Confraternity of Lutsk in 1617. Perhaps the most impressive fact in the history of the confraternity movement was the enrollment of the hetman Petro Konashevych Sahaidachnyi "and the entire Zaporozhian Host" into the Kiev Confraternity.

In Ukraine and Byelorussia there were essentially two types of confraternities. The "rank-and-file" parish confraternities took care of the local churches and were instrumental in socializing the common people in towns and villages. They also worked to enhance the spiritual enlightenment of members through sermons and common prayers. Alongside confraternities of this type there existed in some cities burgher confraternities that performed all the functions of ordinary confraternities but, at the same time, opposed the supremacy of the hierarchy and devoted much attention to cultural and political activity, sometimes even trying to establish an organizational framework for the political representation of the Ukrainian and Byelorussian communities.

The major city confraternities founded or reorganized in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries belonged primarily to this second group. They competed for influence with

the hierarchy and actively defended the political and cultural rights of Ukrainians and Byelorussians. Their role was especially important in the national and cultural revival of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

In Ukraine and Byelorussia the Roman Catholic community constituted a small but influential minority. Its interests were fostered by the Polish-Lithuanian state and its social elites. Among Ukrainian and Byelorussian noblemen the tendency towards integration with the ruling Polish nobility led them to a gradual loss of their religious and national identity. In such conditions, Orthodox burghers, and later Cossacks, assumed the role of defenders of national political rights and cultural traditions. In many cities and towns, confraternities conducted political activities in defence of the civil rights of Orthodox burghers. They not only sent petitions and protests to the authorities, but also distributed pamphlets and proclamations appealing to Orthodox people for unity in defence of their civil and religious rights. By forbidding their members from bringing their conflicts into the official courts of the Polish-Lithuanian state or the Catholic-dominated city magistracies, confraternities tended to become self-governing bodies of the Orthodox communities. In effect, this constituted an attempt to establish alternative administrative structures for the Ukrainian majority. These alternative administrative structures could draw charisma only from native religious institutions.

In such a situation it was extremely important to maintain Orthodox churches in such a way as to allow them to compete with Roman Catholic churches. The magnificence of church architecture and the splendour of church services contributed to the self-esteem of local people, an important factor in preserving cultural identity. Consequently, confraternities built new churches and repaired old ones. They also commissioned icons and mural paintings.²

The educational activities sponsored by the confraternities were equally important. The school of the Lviv Stauropegion Confraternity incorporated principles of humanist pedagogical thought.

After the acceptance of church union by most bishops of the Kiev Orthodox Metropolitanate, all major confraternities remained in the anti-Uniate camp and played an important role in it. This can be explained by the fact that the Union of Brest was promoted by the bishops and the Polish authorities. The conditions of the union were generally perceived as advantageous to them.

Undoubtedly, confraternities introduced a spirit of competition into the life of the Ruthenian, Orthodox, and Eastern Catholic churches. This contributed to an improvement in the general level of religious and cultural life. As a result, in spite of their anti-Uniate orientation, the activities of the early Orthodox confraternities have been evaluated positively not only by Orthodox historians, but also by most Catholic scholars.

In the first half of the eighteenth century the Eastern rite Catholic bishops began to organize confraternities subordinated to the clergy. Although they lost their reformational fervour, both Orthodox and Uniate confraternities retained their position as a conduit for the socialization of parishioners. Such confraternities survived in several regions of Ukraine, mostly in villages and small towns, until the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries, serving primarily as a framework for the preservation of traditional rites and customs.

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Notes

¹ For a more extensive study, see Iaroslav Isaievych, *Bratstva ta ikh rol'v rozvytku ukrains'koi kultury XVI-XVIII st* (Dyiv, 1966)

² The Dormition church in Lviv built by its confraternity is highly valued as an excellent example of using Renaissance models in Orthodox sacral architecture.