

Ukrainian-Americans celebrate first Orthodox Christmas since split of church from Russia

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Svetlana Shkolnikova

CLIFTON — The Ukrainian Orthodox Holy Ascension Church has been holding a divine liturgy for Orthodox Christmas for nearly 100 years.

This year's service, held on Monday in accordance with the Julian calendar, was different. In Clifton and around the world, the Ukrainian diaspora celebrated its first Christmas in independence.

On Sunday, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church severed ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and became autonomous after more than three centuries under Russian jurisdiction.

"We have been waiting for this for hundreds of years," said Oleksii Holchuk, pastor of the Clifton church. "It was a huge step in our independence, and I'm really happy to live in this historical time."

Holchuk spoke of the split during his homily, telling dozens of parishioners that they have finally been given back both a nation and a church. Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

"Now we make one big step for peace in our country," Holchuk said in an interview. "The Russian church had been used for political ways, for destroying Ukrainian independence, so this step is a really important step for our country and all Ukrainians."

The Ukrainian church had been loyal to the Moscow patriarchate since 1686, when it abandoned allegiance to the historical seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople, now Istanbul, under pressure from Russia.

An effort to break that hold began in earnest after the Ukrainian revolution in 2014, and in December, Ukraine's president and nearly 200 bishops and religious leaders gathered in a church in Kiev to choose a head of a new independent Ukrainian church.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of Eastern Orthodox Christians, handed a decree of independence to the newly appointed Metropolitan Epiphanius of Ukraine in a four-hour ceremony in Istanbul on Sunday.

The Moscow patriarch had overseen the largest community of Orthodox Christians in the world, with about 150 million worshipers in Russia and most areas of the former Soviet Union. The loss of the Ukrainian Orthodox cuts the number of parishes beholden to Moscow by a third.

For Irina Saralidze, a parishioner of the Clifton church who immigrated to the city from Moscow eight months ago, the move was inconsequential. It was mired in political nuances that she did not quite understand.

“It doesn’t really matter. I believe in one God,” she said in Russian. “I don’t care what church I have to go to pray.”

But for those with Ukrainian roots, the schism was monumental.

Wolodymyr Mohuchy, a member of the Clifton church since 1971, immigrated to the U.S. from Ukraine in 1950 and said he had long awaited Ukraine’s independence to extend to its church.

“Thank God it finally got accomplished,” Mohuchy said. “Everybody’s uplifted by it.”

Olena Tytko Halkowycz, a Teaneck resident with Ukrainian ancestors, watched the ceremony in Istanbul online and said she was touched by scenes of the Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, celebrating with his family.

“I feel that we reached another milestone in the history of Ukraine,” she said.

Monday’s divine liturgy followed the same script as the many before it, and yet the Christmas carols had a different feel to them, Holchuk said.

The lyrics spoke of a new happiness, he said, and this time, that could genuinely be taken to heart.

John Lenczuk, president of the Ukrainian Orthodox Holy Ascension Church, anticipates more happiness ahead.

He believes the newly independent Ukrainian church will bring more parishioners to Clifton now that every facet of Ukrainian orthodoxy has united under one church.

“Everything is where it should be,” he said.

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