



I would say to Bartholomew: You are about to look in God's eyes, what on earth will you say?



A story of Matushka Ulyana Taborovets from Berestye village is both typical and unique: a seized church building and house, curses of fellow villagers – “men of fervent prayer” from the OCU – and a strong, united community.

There were no gloomy faces at the congress of persecuted communities called by the organisers “The Faithful” that took place in the Kiev Lavra of the Caves on February 22. Believers were sharing their problems with one another, but nobody complained. Despite the fact that they were brought together by the common affliction, cheerful atmosphere prevailed. People were happy to see each other, to talk, learn, share, and just to feel that they are not alone, that each community is a part of the large church family.

Even against this background, Matushka Ulyana Taborovets from Berestye village, Rovno Region, stood out by her energy, sincerity, geniality and some kind of genuineness. She did not look like a mournful martyr, as people often imagine the spouse of the priest who suffered from schismatics’ attacks might look like. When they were defending their church, she was heavily pregnant, and at the moment of the church seizure she was giving birth to her sixth child. Although at first we only planned to

ask Ulyana to give us a brief comment, we found ourselves deep in conversation that resulted in a full interview.

How the church was seized

– Ulyana, we have talked to representatives of many communities that lost their churches, and they all have the same story. What happened in your village?

– It was the usual scenario. They stirred up trouble among people and spread false information about our church, although until then we had been serving there for 15 years. I will speak honestly – those who were our parishioners remained with us. Those 150-200 people who attended the services still do that. As for those who took [the church building – *editor's note*], they had never been to church in all their born days. For a month, we had been defending our church.

On March 3, 2019, our whole community assembled in the church and voted to remain in the bosom of the Mother Church [the UOC – *editor's note*]. While others at that very moment gathered in a school for a village meeting. Among those who were at that meeting were not only Orthodox Christians, but also Pentecostals and Baptists. For example, if you were born in my village, but live in Kiev, you could come back and vote as a villager. That is to say, there were none of our parishioners at the meeting in the school, because they all were in the church.

After that we were defending the church for a month. There were four attempted seizures. The first time was when they entered the sacristy through side doors, and one of them decided to make an inventory on the altar. Leaning against the altar, he started describing items in the sanctuary and in the rest of the church. After that we gathered for a prayer vigil. We were constantly praying. Priests would come and celebrate akathists, and we would be praying.

At the time I was forty weeks pregnant, and it was very hard for me. Once, when I was already at a maternity hospital, they organised a “corridor of shame” against us. Their intention was that our people and our priest would walk through them while they would be shouting “shame on you.” Just think about it – shame on who? On a person who came to pray for your health? On who then? It was a very difficult period. We were singing Jesus prayer and “I believe,” and they at the same time were singing “Shche ne vmerla Ukraina” [Nay, thou art not dead, Ukraine]. There were shouts and spitting, and our priest suffered beatings several times during that month.

The church was seized on April 2 [2019 – *editor's note*]. The police were there, not letting our parishioners in the church. People came and used an angle grinder to cut off the lock. They were beating old people and pulling young girls by the hair. These are very painful memories. People were

being insane. You could look in somebody's eyes and it was like there were no eyes. I think that those who were there regret about it now. In our district four churches were captured, and all the instigators were from our village. Our parishioners could not even walk down the street without being insulted. And even now when going to a house to pray, they are being stopped and insulted by swear words... The church building, the church house and even a small temple in the church cemetery were seized. Now in order to bury our parishioners, we have to go to their "priest" so that he would open the gate and let us in the old cemetery. We celebrate funeral services in the yard or near a grave.

– Wh ere do you worship now?

–We worship with Batyushka at home. We have a small house in our yard that we were going to dismantle, but through the will of God we have not done it and arranged a praying house. Some one hundred and forty people come to worship. Also, we celebrate night Liturgies once a week with some fifty people in attendance.

About animosity in the village

Two years have passed, and families are beginning to communicate – only now! Yet, one cannot say that everything is all right. A kind of war is going on in our village because there is a division into "yours" and "ours." When we were going to purchase a plot of land for constructing a church, we were prevented from it. Those who were to sell this plot of land were intimidated. They were told: you, traitor, you just try to sell it, and so on. Yet, we have bought a plot of land for a church, but they started law proceedings.

They have registered a man on this territory and are trying to deprive us of the six hundred square meters. They have been suing us during two years, week after week, first for a church, and now – for a plot of land. We request to return registration to our community. We have neither registration, nor a church. It is hard to tell you what we have endured and are still enduring. There are many priests born in our village. Some are celebrating in cathedral churches, while we are celebrating in a little house. Only those who have lived through it will understand. We keep painful memory of yelling "Shame on you!", 'Moscow priest, go away!'

Authorities, do not divide people!

– What would you ask of the authorities?

- I would like to ask the authorities not to divide people. We all here are the citizens of Ukraine. I and my children are the citizens of Ukraine. We speak Ukrainian at home and sing Ukrainian songs every other

day. Why do they call me "a traitor from Moscow?" Only because I have not betrayed my faith? According to the Constitution of Ukraine, all people have the right to worship according to their conscience. People believe as they like. Even Satanists and Moslems can worship, isn't it so? While Orthodox Christians of the Moscow Patriarchate – as they call us, have no right even to peaceful and proper funeral in the village. Why?!

A very old woman, aged 100, died. Their priest (of the OCU – *editor's note*) was walking along the cemetery and asked: Who are you burying? The answer was: a Moscow person died. But she never went to Moscow, she was an Ukrainian and lived here all her life. Look how many church buildings have been seized, and none of us has taken them back by force. Therefore we have only one request to the authorities: give us an opportunity to register as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, give us an opportunity to build a church. The head of the village council told me: you will fall on your knees begging for the plot of land, but I will not give it to you. We failed to keep our church building, but those who were our parishioners remained with us.

About Patriarch Bartholomew

– What would you say to Patriarch Bartholomew?

– You are about to look in God's eyes. What on earth will you say, old guy? I am saying "old guy" because I do not think of him as of patriarch any more. He has violated canons and has become a schismatic himself by recognizing schismatics. The intruders from the OCU have divided four villages in our district with four church buildings there and justified their actions. What would I say to him? (Patriarch Bartholomew – *editor's note*). I have no right to judge, but actions... They are awful. What has he done? To my knowledge, many tears have been shed, and even blood in some churches.

*Union of Orthodox Journalists/
DECR Communication Service*