

Personal Journey through Memory in Ukraine (Letter to the Editor)

R. Cauda (Roberto Cauda)¹

¹ Chairman of the Department of Healthcare Surveillance and Bioethics.
Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Roma, Italy.

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E-mail address:

roberto.cauda@unicatt.it

Reprint address:

Roberto Cauda
Sacred Heart Catholic University
Largo Francesco Vito 1
00168 Rome
Italy

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Zofia Szarota
Pedagogical University of Cracow, PL
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Abstract:

The images of destruction in Ukrainian cities that we continue to see on television every day, and the dramatic reports done by journalists, reminded me of a visit I made to that tormented country more than 20 years ago that I want to share with this brief note. In particular, I remember taking part in a series of meetings with Ukrainian colleagues in two cities, Lviv and Kiev as part of an initiative promoted by the Vicariate of Rome, in the person of His Excellency Monsignor Lorenzo Leuzzi which involved professors from the Catholic University such as myself, and from the University of Tor Vergata both from Roma, Italy. Obviously, colleagues from the University of Lviv participated, and Prof. Krcmery was also present representing at that time the University of Trnava, Slovakia. The title of the conference was '*Humanism in Medicine*'. The meetings were held on the occasion of the apostolic visit of Pope St. John Paul

II which took place in June 2001. I still have vivid memories of that unforgettable trip and the meetings I had with Ukrainian colleagues. The topics either dealt with the ethical and scientific aspects of responsible childbirth, the use of stem cells in medicine and theology, the ethical aspects of human genetics and lastly, medical culture as an opportunity for teaching humanism. Indeed, I was a speaker in this last session (see photo). I also enclose both the bilingual program, in English and Ukrainian, with the complete list of speakers and the poster advertising the event. The opening prayer was given by His Eminence Cardinal Harchbishop Marian Yavorsky.

Having lived this extraordinary cultural experience it gives me unspeakable sorrow to think that some of those colleagues with whom we shared this experience during the Congress and in the following days may now find themselves in a situation of objective danger.

Notably, I certainly appreciated the high scientific level of my colleagues and their extraordinary commitment both on the technical side and more generally on ethics and Medical Humanities. This was evident from the visits we made to the hospitals. What was quite evident to me at the time was that while there was excellent medical training, the same could not be said of the technological equipment and instruments which were objectively further behind than those to which I was accustomed. It is clear that my memories are crystallized to this brief but intense experience and many of the things I saw then have probably changed for the better. In fact, I am sure that after 20 years even the technical aspects have improved even if unfortunately the present war have brought destruction.

I am also pleased here to recall that following the diaspora that is taking place in these days, the Italian Ministry of Health, aware of the exceptional nature of the moment and the excellent professional preparation of Ukrainian doctors and nurses, has allowed them to temporarily practice their profession in Italy without further constraints.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the conference was not so much the focus on strictly scientific aspects as on the great attention paid, especially by Ukrainian colleagues, to ethical-moral aspects. I interpreted this aspect and their acute interest in retrospect as a desire to regain possession of those ethical-moral aspects that during communism had been overwhelmed by the so-called historical materialism.

In addition to the scientific meetings, I was exposed to Ukrainian culture and religion, and learned how different nationalities, languages, traditions and religions coexist in this country. In fact, there is an Orthodox majority but also the Uniate Catholic faith especially present and active in the western part of Ukraine, in particular in Lviv which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I am pleased to recall, because the memory is still alive among the faithful, the figure and personality of *Cardinal Slipyj*. The Cardinal had been the object of persecution in the Communist period and through John XXIII he was allowed to immigrate to Italy where he died in Rome in 1984. His body was subsequently transferred (1992) to Lviv where he is buried.

The highlight of the mission in Ukraine was the mass in Kiev of St. John Paul II which was sincerely attended by a very large number of faithful who were not at all frightened by the pouring rain. The memory I have of that memorable celebration was the huge number of people who attended and the strong words of the Polish Pope that resonated in his sermon. I have vivid memories of the days leading up to ceremony. In fact, the whole city was celebrating and dozens and dozens of people met up, who had travelled by all means to the capital to take part in this extraordinary event. To think today that the cities I visited, Lviv and in particular the capital Kiev, with its priceless heritage, such the St. Sophia Cathedral, are at risk of destruction, causes me great pain. No less serious is what is happening to individual citizens who have suddenly found themselves thrown from a peaceful third millennium into a war that in some ways recalls the 20th century with the Second World War and, in terms of violence against civilians, the wars of the ancient times. It is too early to draw conclu-

sions, but certainly whatever the outcome of this terrible war, it will leave an indelible memory of dead and wounded. In the immediate future, Europe will have to deal with a major influx of immigrants occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic. This can aggravate a situation which is already very difficult in itself and not only in terms of health. The percentage of people vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2 in Ukraine is unfortunately very low (30-40%), so there may be a risk that these refugees could be a trigger for a new outbreak of the virus.

This war brought not only a COVID-related health problem, but dissolved the entire hospital and public health network of Ukraine that had reached or was about to reach before the war levels equal to European standards.

In this serious moment that sees the pain of so many refugees, it is important that either at the borders of Ukraine or in the countries that will accept them, the health of people is taken into great consideration by ensuring the continuity of treatment for chronic diseases and by establishing Public Health criteria such as the restoration of vaccinations to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

In this regard, it should also be remembered that during catastrophic events such as the earthquake in Haiti, even in this case, skipping all the preventive measures in the bombed cities, there could be an increase in infectious diseases of fecal-oral transmission. No less important is the focus on sexually transmitted diseases in relation to the episodes of violence that have been reported in recent days. As previously said, this war event follows another disastrous event that is represented by the COVID-19 pandemic that still persists today. The combination of these two disastrous situations makes helping the Ukrainian population extremely difficult and complicated. In spite of this, the help to Ukraine is an inescapable moral duty for everyone, especially for physicians and more generally for health care workers whose mission is to bring relief to people.

At the end of this short note, I would like to thank Prof. V. Krcmery and Tropicteam (1-4), with whom I have been sharing both scientific and international solidarity aspects for over 30 years, for having asked me to bring my small testimony contribution on the occasion of this

Ukrainian crisis. This allowed me to recall the apostolic visit of the Holy Father St. John Paul II in 2001 and the scientific events parallel to this.

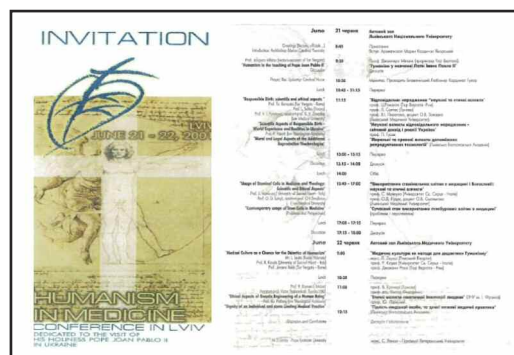


Photo: Invitation of conference 'Humanism in Medicine'

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