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БЕЛОРУССКАЯ ПРАВОСЛАВНАЯ ЦЕРКОВЬ НА НИЗОВОМ УРОВНЕ: ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ, ФУНКЦИОНИРОВАНИЕ И РОЛЬ ПРАВОСЛАВНЫХ БРАТСТВ И СЕСТРИЧЕСТВ В БЕЛАРУСИ

С. А. МУДРОВ¹⁾, Н. В. ЗАХАРОВ²⁾

¹⁾Полоцкий государственный университет, ул. Блохина, 30, 211440, г. Новополоцк, Беларусь

²⁾Сёдертёрнский университет, аллея Альфреда Нобеля, 7, Худдинг, 14189, г. Стокгольм, Швеция

Изучается роль братств и сестричеств Белорусской православной церкви, которые в настоящее время выполняют важные социальные, образовательные, информационные и благотворительные функции, в том числе на региональном уровне. Анализируется, каким образом деятельность братств и сестричеств зависит от локального религиозного контекста и как они вписываются в более широкий контекст возрастающих роли и значения церкви в современной Беларуси. Более подробно рассматривается деятельность Союза сестричеств и сестричеств в Лиде и Новогрудке, работа которых направлена преимущественно на достижение важных социальных и благотворительных целей. На примере братства Трех Виленских Мучеников в Минске представлена деятельность братств, ориентированная главным образом на образовательную и миссионерскую работу.

Ключевые слова: церковь; православие; Беларусь; братства; сестричества; благотворительные организации; социальное государство; гражданское общество.

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THE BELARUSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AT GRASSROOTS' LEVEL: THE ORGANISATION, FUNCTIONING AND ROLE OF ORTHODOX BROTHERHOODS AND SISTERHOODS IN BELARUS

S. A. MUDROV^a, N. V. ZAKHAROV^b

^aPolotsk State University, 30 Blochina Street, Navapolack 211440, Belarus

^bSödertörn University, 7 Alfred Nobel alle, Huddinge 14189, Stockholm, Sweden

Corresponding author: S. A. Mudrov (s.mudrov@psu.by)

This article is devoted to the analysis of the growing importance of brotherhoods and sisterhoods of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Currently these organisations perform important social, educational, informational and charitable functions, up to and including at regional level. This article analyses how the conditions and the logic of their operation are dependent

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Авторы:

Сергей Александрович Мудров – кандидат социологических наук; доцент кафедры социальных коммуникаций финансово-экономического факультета.

Николай Валерьевич Захаров – кандидат социологических наук; руководитель исследовательских проектов в области глобального антирасизма и религии.

Authors:

Sergei A. Mudrov, PhD (sociology); associate professor at the department of social communications, faculty of finance and economics.

s.mudrov@psu.by

Nikolay V. Zakharov, PhD (sociology); head of the research projects and study groups on global antiracism and religion.
nikolay.zakharov@sh.se

on local religious contexts and how they are inscribed in the broader context of the growing role of the church in emerging community welfare in contemporary Belarus. In this article, special attention is given to the analysis of activities of the Union of Sisterhoods and the sisterhoods in Lida and Novogrudok. These sisterhoods mainly work to achieve important social and charitable objectives. In the case of brotherhoods, their main activities have been confined to educational and missionary work, as seen in the example of the Three Martyrs of Vilna brotherhood in Minsk.

Keywords: church; Orthodoxy; Belarus; brotherhoods; sisterhoods; charities; welfare state; civil society.

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Introduction

The Orthodox Church has always underlined the importance of social, educational and charity work, as a fulfillment of the Gospel's principles. Moreover, such work has provided a good chance to involve ordinary parishioners in activities where they can act as members of the church and, at the same time, perform functions regarded as important, significant and useful by the wider public. Those parishioners who wanted to be involved in social, educational and charitable work were often united in entities called brotherhoods and sisterhoods, although at times they avoided formal organisation, acting as volunteers¹. These brotherhoods and sisterhoods, keeping their religious essence, embraced at the same time some features of regular non-governmental organisations (NGOs), functioning in a partial dependence on the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC).

Existing literature provides some information about these brotherhoods and sisterhoods, with a description of their origin, essence and historical role in different places, including Belarus². Activities of the BOC have been analysed both by sociologists and by political scientists [1; 2]. However, the issues of the contemporary role and activities of brotherhoods and sisterhoods in the BOC were not given full consideration. Moreover, civil society is often seen as weak and underdeveloped in Belarus, and the role of NGOs is often wrongly seen as predominantly political. This article emphasises the importance of the church in the border overlap between state and third sector, its contribution at grass roots level to the growing role of community and extended kin in times of moral challenges and economic shortages. Filling the existing gap in current literature, this paper analyses the contemporary activities of brotherhoods and sisterhoods in Belarus, including their participation in various social and charitable projects.

The aim of this article is twofold: to map grass roots activities of believers in Belarus and to bring these activities into the broader context of discussion of the role of the third sector in social protection in Belarus. Theoretically our study is informed by a neo-institutionalist approach to the study of civil movements and voluntary associations [3]. The concept of organisational field can be defined as a structured set of actors involved in solving a set of problems, as well as the connections between these actors and categories of knowledge that arise from the interaction between them [4]. Actors in such organisational fields are stratified by the amount of resources they have at their disposal, the number and strength of their connections, and also by the legitimacy of their claims to participate in this field [5].

For grass roots voluntary organisations such as religious brotherhoods and sisterhoods aiming to co-operate with government bodies and church authorities (or at least solving the same social problems with them and sharing the same understanding of existing challenges), the problem of legitimization is one of the most significant. For relatively new participants in the field, or for those participants whose claims are not enshrined in the regulatory norms of this institution, legitimacy, according to Scott [4] can be increased in several dimensions:

a) regulatory, when it comes to the adoption of organisational forms that are acceptable in the given field, adherence to legislation, etc.;

b) normative, when there is, for example, the adoption of existing or introduction into the organisational field of new norms or ethical codes;

c) cultural and cognitive – adaptation of existing language, theoretical knowledge, and myths to strengthen the significance of the organisation [4].

¹An interesting example here can be given by the Minsk parish in the honour of the icon of Theotocos «Pantanassa». According to priest Kirill Sholkov, rector of the parish, they have no formal brotherhood or sisterhood, but they have around 400 volunteers in the parish, doing various social and charitable work.

²Андрущенко Н. Просветительская и благотворительная деятельность православных братств на Беларуси // Христианство как интегрирующий фактор мировой культуры : сб. докл. XXIV междунар. Кирилло-Мефодиевских чтений / ГУО «Институт теологии имени святых Мефодия и Кирилла» Белорус. гос. ун-та ; С. И. Шатравский, свящ. Святослав Рогальский. Минск : Христиан. образов. центр им. святых Мефодия и Кирилла, 2009. С. 182–185.

This article will analyse the increasing role of Orthodox brotherhoods and sisterhoods in the civil sphere of Belarus through the prism of the above-mentioned levels. The data for this article has been obtained from the unpublished reports of sisterhoods and in-depth unstructured interviews with the representatives of the brotherhoods and sisterhoods. The unpublished

reports were received directly from the brotherhoods and sisterhoods themselves, and the interviews were arranged with the use of online technologies. Almost all the people whom we approached agreed to be interviewed; there were no requests for anonymity, therefore the real names of interviewees have been mentioned in this article.

Historical background

The foundation of the first Orthodox brotherhoods in the territory of what is now Belarus takes us as far back as the 11th century. According to Gennadiy Toropovich, «At the foundation of the [first] church brotherhoods, the Christian life of the first centuries was taken as an example, based on the commandments of the Saviour and apostles, who were speaking about the community and love, which Christians should have among themselves»³. After the Union of Brest, which opened the era of imposing Roman Catholicism in Belarus, the Orthodox brotherhoods were playing a crucial role in the defense of Orthodoxy, publishing books and pamphlets, and founding new churches and monasteries. Such a defensible role (to protect Orthodoxy) lost its significance after Belarus joined Russian Empire; therefore, in the 19th and early 20th century brotherhoods and sisterhoods were mainly fulfilling charitable functions, helping sick, poor, and other people in need. The educational mission of brotherhoods was not completely driven out; interestingly, in the early 20th century some brotherhoods even declared politically-driven objectives, aimed at the «struggle against the revolutionary movement»⁴. The 1917 October revolution and the subsequent dominance of anti-religious policies in Belarus destroyed these formal or-

ganisations of parishioners: they were not tolerated by the communist regime, which severely restricted the rights of the Orthodox Church, leaving it a very narrow (ghetto-like) space to function.

Since then, restrictions were strongly and violently imposed in succession; it is not surprising therefore that the sisterhoods and brotherhoods were able to resume their activities in the BOC only in the twilight of the communist era. According to Elena Zenkevich, the revival of sisterhoods in contemporary Belarus can be traced to December 1988, when a key role was played in this process by Metropolitan Philaret (Vakhromeev). The starting point of this revival stems from a particular event: in a sermon after the Sunday Liturgy, Philaret asked parishioners to participate in charitable and social work, specifying that help was needed by some hospitals in Minsk. As Zenkevich emphasizes: «Twenty people responded to this call, and on 15 December 1988, under the chairmanship of [Metropolitan] Philaret, the organising meeting took place to establish the sisterhood named after St. Sofia of Slutsk, whose relics are at the Minsk Cathedral»⁵. These were the first steps, which opened a new era for the fulfillment of social, educational and charitable functions of the Orthodox Church.

Sisterhoods and the Union of Sisterhoods: towards legitimation and expansion

Reflecting growing religious participation and religious revival, the newly established brotherhoods and sisterhoods attracted a great number of people, who were willing to serve the church in various capacities, including giving help to those in need. Initially these organisations aimed at registration as separate legal entities, which would ensure a higher degree of autonomy, including gathering donations for social initiatives and participation in competition for grants from various international foundations. Later on it was decided at the highest levels of the BOC to structure and standardise the process of registration: the legal department of the Exarchate drafted a standardised

statute of brotherhoods and sisterhoods. It was also decided in the Exarchate that registration would be allowed in case of real necessity and if there was at least several years' experience of successful work by brotherhood or sisterhood⁶.

The activities of sisterhoods have been formalised via the Union of Sisterhoods, which was formally established in November 2000. The Union has never had a state registration; in 2008–2019 it had a status of a «separate structural entity» of the Belarusian Exarchate. One of the main objectives of the Union, as formulated in its official documents, was to «revive and develop social services of the Belarusian Orthodox

³Торопович Г. Роль нынешних православных братств и сестричеств города Минска в жизни Белорусской православной церкви : диплом. работа. Жировичи: [б. и.], 2002. 146 с. (Hereinafter the translation is ours. – S. M., N. Z.).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Зенкевич Е. (н. д.) Статья для БАСР. (The translation is ours. – S. M., N. Z.).

⁶This information is derived from the authors' interview with Elena Zenkevich. The interview was conducted in Minsk on 21 February 2020.

Church on the basis of Christian values and traditions»⁷. As was recognised by Metropolitan Pavel, who had been in charge of the BOC in December 2013 – August 2020, «for many years the social service by the Belarusian Orthodox Church was conducted almost exclusively by the sisters of mercy (i. e. members of these sisterhoods. – *S. M., N. Z.*)»⁸.

The Union aimed to provide informative and legal support for sisterhoods and served as a platform to exchange the most valuable experience. It has never taken on a formal controlling function; the sisterhoods continued to function either as constituent parts of local parishes, or in close alliance with them, having the assistance and supervision from their parish priests. In April 2019, by the decision of the Synod of the Bela-

rusian Orthodox Church, the Union of Sisterhoods was transformed into the Association of the Sisters of Mercy of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. To some extent, this was a lower status, since the association became a structural entity of the synodal department on church charity and social service⁹. As was explained by Fr. Kirill Sholkov, head of department, «the association is better, since sisterhoods report to priests and bishops, and there is no need for centralised organisation»¹⁰. Interestingly, there has never been some similar «umbrella» organisation for brotherhoods, although some of them (youth brotherhoods) have functioned in close cooperation with the synodal youth department.

The number of sisterhoods has been steadily growing, as can be seen in the table.

Number of Sisterhoods

Year	1999	2000	2001	2003	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2017	2020
Number of sisterhoods	31	53	68	82	84	98	114	127	131	178	about 200

Source: Report on the activities of the Union of Sisters of Mercy of the Belarusian Orthodox Church in 2015; Descriptive report on the activities of the Union of Sisters of Mercy of the Belarusian Orthodox Church in 2017; information by Elena Zenkevich.

However, the current information about the number of brotherhoods and sisterhoods is a bit ambiguous; it is reflective of the fact that most of them have chosen not to register. According to the office of the Plenipotentiary on Religious Affairs, there are 15 brotherhoods and 10 sisterhoods in the BOC¹¹. This comes to a stark difference when we take combined figures (registered and non-registered organisations); in this case it will be around 200 sisterhoods and 35 brotherhoods. The

explanation lies on the surface: charitable work, help to poor and sick do not require, in most cases, formal registration; there are always opportunities to conduct this work remaining just a structural part of a parish. Since the membership in sisterhoods and brotherhoods ranges from 3 to 200 people, one can currently estimate that several thousand people have been involved in this work, with majority in the western region of Belarus, especially Brest region.

Union of Sisterhoods: mapping tasks and defining modes of operation

As is evident from the annual reports of the Union of Sisterhoods, its activities embrace most areas of social and charitable work, including assisting people with disabilities, counselling services to families and people in crisis, financial (or non-monetary) assistance to people in need, participation in various international projects. The annual reports list the activities that were undertaken by the union, with a detailed specification of the sources of income, relevant expenditures, and the events which took place. If we look at one of

the typical reports (say, for the year 2009), the following should be noted.

First, the union emphasizes its status as a separate unit of the BOC, stating the number of employees (only four, two of them working on a part-time basis). It provides information about its budget, which in 2009 was slightly more than 154 million Belarusian rubles (around 55 thousand US dollars, based on the average exchange rate for 2009). Almost entirely (more than 99 %) this amount of money was received from

⁷О Союзе сестричеств милосердия [Электронный ресурс] // Союз сестричеств милосердия Белорусской православной церкви. URL: <http://www.sestra.by/about/o-soyuze-sestrichestv> (дата обращения: 12.02.2021).

⁸30-летие возрождения сестринского служения отметили в Беларуси [Электронный ресурс] // Официальный портал Белорусской православной церкви. URL: <http://www.church.by/news/30-letie-vozhrozhdenija-sestrinskogo-sluzhenija-otmetili-v-belarusi> (дата обращения: 12.02.2021).

⁹Журналы заседания Синода Белорусского Экзархата от 16 апреля 2019 года [Электронный ресурс] // Официальный портал Белорусской православной церкви. URL: <http://church.by/docs/zhurnaly-zasedaniya-sinoda-belorusskogo-ekzarhata-ot-16-aprelja-2019-goda> (дата обращения: 12.02.2021).

¹⁰This quotation is from the authors' interview with priest Kirill Sholkov. The interview was conducted by telephone on 26 March 2020.

¹¹Информация о конфессиональной ситуации в Республике Беларусь // Уполномоченный по делам религий и национальностей : [сайт]. URL: <https://belarus21.by/Articles/1439296790> (дата обращения: 12.02.2021).

foreign donors, and was aimed at the implementation of different projects. No funding for the union was provided either by the church, or Belarusian governmental and non-governmental structures, but the union obtained grants from the World Council of Churches, and the church agencies in Germany, Sweden, and Norway. Also, the union was involved in a large UNFPA project on domestic violence; the project included a separate section on religious communities, with the Union as a key and responsible partner. The outcome was the BOC's project on domestic violence, and a textbook was drafted, becoming an important and unique contribution to this sensitive issue from the largest Belarusian confession.

According to the union's reports, the main activities have been confined to the following: (1) development of cooperation and the service to provide help; (2) informational and educational activities; (3) project activities and fundraising; (4) organisational and administrative activities¹². More detailed information in the report reveals other trends. For instance, as described in section (1), cooperation was developing with the Orthodox Foundation of Prince Konstantin of Ostrozh (Bialystok, Poland) – mainly within the project «Without barriers», aimed at helping people with disabilities. Also, the executive secretary of the union Elena Zenkevich was invited to give lectures at the faculty of social and pedagogical technology of the Belarusian State Pedagogical University. The report lists a number of organisations with which some bilateral cooperation was developed: the Governmental Committee on Labour and Social Protection, Association of Multiple Sclerosis, Organisation

of the Prisoners of Concentration Camps, Association of Social Workers and some others.

Informational and educational activities (described in section (2)), apart from informing a wider audience about ongoing activities and projects of the sisterhoods, also included organising and participation in many conferences and round tables. The union, for instance, organised the round table «Children and violence», participated in the International Organisation for Migration seminar «Counter-trafficking in the Republic of Belarus», where it presented the union's activities in this area.

Section (3) provides descriptions of small project activities, listing also a larger project «Women in Action», sponsored by a religious organisation from Germany. As Elena Zenkevich emphasized, the sisters are like «universal social workers. If there is an orphanage near the parish, the sisters will work there; if there is something else – the sisters will be there»¹³.

In Minsk (and also beyond the capital) the most famous and well-performing organisation is the Sisterhood at St. Elizabeth Convent. There are also active sisterhoods at some parishes in Minsk, but if one speaks about the regions in Belarus, then interesting and meaningful examples can be found in the activities of sisterhoods in Lida and Novogrudok (Grodno region). These sisterhoods work actively in the area of education, giving help to orphans and victims of domestic violence, and the effectiveness of their work is not smaller than that in the capital. In the following section we provide a closer look at these voluntary organisations.

Sisterhood in Lida, named after St. Ephrosinia of Polotsk

This sisterhood was established in 1997, and in the same year it obtained official registration, as a religious organisation. St. Ephrosinia's Sisterhood embraces the most important areas of social and charitable work, including giving help to orphanages, hospitals, people in need and the victims of domestic violence. It emphasises the importance of its religious foundation, specifying that it «acts in accordance with the rules and traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church», in order to fulfill the duties of «service and help to those in need, orphans, sick and old». In addition, this sisterhood aims at helping to develop religious education, encouragement of good morality and piety, as well as the development of useful recreation and good relations within families. There are 40 members in the sisterhood, representing various professions and activities. For instance, senior sister Zhanna Voronis worked for many years at the administrative post of «Lidselmash»

company, whilst also dedicating her time to social and charitable activities¹⁴.

The help to the local orphanage¹⁵ began from the first months of the sisterhood's foundation, although it took some time to get the appropriate permission (it was necessary to develop a workplan in order to obtain the formal agreement of the city's department of education). Sisters, who are trained to work with minors, come to orphanage for regular talks with children, organise celebrations of the main religious feasts and tours to different places in Belarus. Also, every year (since 2000) the sisterhood has organised a summer camp for orphans; its role and significance is depicted in the following way: «Children are fond of going to the camp, since there they can get what they need most of all: a feeling of freedom, independence, self-value, and, of course (even if for only a short period of time) to feel themselves part of a large and friendly family,

¹²Отчет о деятельности Союза сестричеств милосердия Белорусской православной церкви за 2009 г.

¹³This quotation is from the authors' interview with Elena Zenkevich. The interview was conducted in Minsk on 21 February 2020.

¹⁴Воронис Ж. Сведения о Сестричестве в честь преп. Евфросинии Полоцкой.

¹⁵It was closed in 2015; now members of the sisterhood provide their help to the local children's social shelter.

where everyone shows care, love and respect. Here every child is a member of a large family... <...> ...It is, of course, not easy for the sisters to work in this camp, since when you work with these children you have to set an example in everything: in words, deeds, even in small details»¹⁶.

Another principal area of work in Lida was related to the issue of domestic violence, with the implementation, since January 2010 of the relevant project «Assistance to the victims of domestic violence». From the very beginning it was aimed at the provision of advice and, in case of necessity, shelter to women and women with children who had been physically assaulted by family members. The practical arrangements reflected a high degree of the project's efficiency: renting a flat (safe house) in Lida (where women could be ac-

commodated on a temporary basis, free of charge, including provision of free meals); wide advertising of an emergency phone number for women in danger (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week); regular workshops and seminars for families, sisters and priests. Initial funding for this work was provided by the sisterhood and the foundation «Pravoslavnaya Initsiativa». From 2011 to 2015, the project was funded by the UNFPA, which ensured excellent financial support for all aspects of these activities. Since 2015, the sisterhood has remained the sole source of funds; but the project is still functioning, providing shelter to those in need. In Belarus, where the issues of domestic violence are not at all times given appropriate consideration, the activities of such a centre, under the aegis of the largest confession, have been of particular significance.

Sisterhood in Novogrudok

This sisterhood, named after St. John Theologian, was established in 1999, and in 2000 it obtained official registration. Currently, there are 14 members of sisterhood, mainly representing educational organisations of the town. Reflecting the background of its members, the main activities of the sisterhood have been in the area of education, or, as stated on the sisterhood's website, «spiritual and moral education and religious education». More than 20 years of work ensured the establishment of successful working partnerships with local educational and governmental institutions, reflecting the influence and significance of the sisterhood. In practical terms this is seen in the following. First, in all schools of Novogrudok an optional course «Basis of Orthodox morality» was introduced – with the use of a syllabus, approved by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus. Second, a Sunday school of the sisterhood functions twice a week; the sisterhood owns a library, with the collection of books and films. In addition, its members have developed teaching resource books on «Religion», «Old Testament» and «New Testament».

One needs to note that the activities of the sisterhood have also specifically targeted disadvantaged groups: for instance, a social service «Hand of Help»

was established in June 2018, with the objective of helping lonely and incapacitated people¹⁷. In the concluding remarks of a lengthy 2018 report, the following was emphasized: the regularity of common events with educational and cultural establishments; the organisation of more frequent pilgrimages for school pupils, a greater interest of parents in the spiritual upbringing of their children, including those attending local kindergartens. The practical results, as emphasised by the senior sister of the sisterhood Irina Kokosh were noted in the following: «Schoolchildren became less aggressive, more respectful towards older people; they use fewer rude words, they are more tolerant towards the weaknesses of other people, and they think about purpose in life and destiny of humans»¹⁸. In a school № 2 of Novogrudok, an innovative lab for spiritual and moral upbringing has been functioning since 2002; this has led to rising prestige for the school, with an increasing number of parents choosing it as the best option for their children. As was noted by Irina Kokosh, who commented on the outcome of the lab's functioning, «the behavior of pupils was changing rapidly: rude pupils become less rude, manners change, and the parents are grateful that at home children get more obedient and more careful»¹⁹.

Brotherhoods: education and mission

Unlike the sisterhoods, the brotherhoods are more diverse in their activities, and these activities are not confined to charitable and social work only. In fact, the charitable and social work is not the main focus of many brotherhoods; instead they are more focused on educational and missionary activities. To an extent, we

can divide and classify brotherhoods by the following criteria or parameters.

First, there are «discussion clubs» brotherhoods, serving like meeting places or discussion forums for members of the parish, or those connected with them. In this case, members of brotherhood meet on a re-

¹⁶Воронис Ж. Сведения о Сестричестве в честь преп. Евфросинии Полоцкой.

¹⁷Кузьмич В. (протоиерей), Кокош И. Отчет Сестричества в честь Святого апостола Иоанна Богослова в г. Новогрудке за 2018 г.

¹⁸Кокош И. Возвращение к истокам. Новогрудок : [б. и.], 2012. 10 с.

¹⁹Там же.

gular basis and discuss the issues which are of interest to them – often on the intersection of religion, politics, moral dilemmas etc. Sometimes these discussions concentrate on purely religious issues, including the language of services, relations with other Orthodox or non-Orthodox churches, the role of the laity in the church etc. However, as we said, this is regarded as an aspect of the brotherhoods' activities, but can hardly be regarded as a key one. Therefore, a second group (educational and cultural brotherhoods) is certainly more important, being intertwined with some practical aspects.

An example of the first group (the «discussion club» brotherhoods) can be found in the leaflet, produced by the brotherhood named after St. Seraphim of Zhivovichi, which operates from the Minsk's Church of the Icon of Theotocos «Vziskaniye Pogibshikh». This leaflet indicates that the main objective of the brotherhood is to «unite young people... for an active participation in the life of the Orthodox Church, including helping to preserve the spiritual and cultural values of the people of White Russia [Belarus]». This leaflet lists the following activities of the brotherhood: «...to travel together, visit museums, cinema and exhibitions, play sports», as well as to participate in Gospel talks, to publish educational and information leaflets, and to help the parish»²⁰.

As for the second group, a typical example of the educational and cultural activities can be found in the Brotherhood of Three Martyrs of Vilna (founded in 1992), which has been doing important work to support the status of the Belarusian language, including the use of this language in the church. The members of this brotherhood worked in the commission to translate the Bible into Belarusian. The brotherhood also publishes religious books in the Belarusian language. Therefore, its informal title («island of Belarusianness») in the BOC is not accidental. Describing the activities of the brotherhood, one should note the

publication of the annual «Church calendar» (in Russian and Belarusian languages), with the numerous additions: about family, Belarusian holy places, local Orthodox churches etc.²¹ On the top of this, the brotherhood also publishes the journal «Orthodoxy» and runs «A laboratory of Church history», which has already published some results of its research: reference books on churches and holy places in Belarus. This brotherhood holds an official registration; a former chairman of the brotherhood Nikolay Matrunchik offered the following explanation on how it was obtained and why it was needed: «Approximately a year after the creation of the brotherhood we got the approval of the Church hierarchy for registration. Metropolitan Philaret always trusted us and supported our initiatives. The brotherhood was already known in Belarus and diaspora; therefore the registering authorities had no objections. Besides, there appeared opportunities for the development of international ties, and our foreign partners wanted to cooperate with the officially registered organisation»²².

Nikolay Matrunchik also pointed out that they wanted to establish a Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods in Belarus, and the certain steps were made in this direction, while Metropolitan Philaret was not against this initiative. However, it was not possible to realise this initiative; possibly because a similar Union of Brotherhoods in Russia was perceived with some suspicion by church authorities. Nikolay Matrunchik believes that brotherhoods could be regarded as NGOs, subordinated to church structures, which have to agree their activities with church hierarchy. Indeed, church representatives speak about this subordination. As was stated by the then BOC's press-secretary Fr. Sergiy Lepin, who commented upon auditing procedures of the Three Martyrs of Vilna Brotherhood, «this brotherhood is an official structure of the BOC, not a private civil initiative. The leadership of the brotherhood reports to the BOC's hierarchy»²³.

Recruitment and resource mobilisation

The establishment of brotherhoods and sisterhoods happens, in most cases, when there are active people in parish, willing to do important charitable, educational, missionary and informational work. These people take the initiative to gather their allies and to establish a formal structure. The motivation could be different – from the desire to fulfill the Gospel's principles to serve to those in need and to the wish to establish a «real community» in the parish. Then, as a rule,

the initiative of laypeople, supported by parish priests, should be approved by the hierarchy of a relevant diocese of the BOC. As Fr. Pavel Sergeev, who established St. John Theologian Brotherhood in Minsk, said, he did not see a real Eucharistic community in the cathedral, no youth community, and he wanted to change it. At that time, being a layman, he took some decisive actions to establish the brotherhood: «I invited people from the cathedral to the meetings, I distributed leaf-

²⁰Братство в честь преподобномученика Серафима Жировичского [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://hramvp.by/images/brat.pdf> (дата обращения: 12.02.2021).

²¹Брацтва ў гонар віленскіх мучанікаў Антонія, Іаана і Яўстафія // Приход Свято-Петро-Павловского собора г. Минска: [сайт]. URL: <http://sppsobor.by/bractva/vilna/zvestki-pra-bractva/409#more-409> (дата обращения: 12.02.2021).

²²This information is from the authors' interview with Nikolay Matrunchik. The interview was conducted by telephone on 28 February 2020.

²³Отец Сергей Лепин: Матрунчик реагирует на проверку Братства импульсивно и неадекватно [Электронный ресурс] // Наша Ніва. 1 сент. 2019. URL: <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=236471&lang=ru> (дата обращения: 12.02.2021).

lets. We began to gather since July 2011 – first around 5 people; by October 2011 we had around 20 people. We decided to start with our social services, helping, for instance, the children, suffering from the cerebral spastic infantile paralysis. People were coming and joining us, very quickly. We received everyone, not necessarily church-goers, since social service was our main objective»²⁴.

As we mentioned earlier, most brotherhoods and sisterhoods have chosen to function without official registration, which does not make any obstacles for their daily activities. Some have chosen to register: this was normally a choice for the organisations which planned to attract some external resources, including grants. As was explained by Fr. Pavel Sergeev, their choice to register was inspired by the desire «to be independent, to attract external resources, not to ask for these financial resources (from the Church. – S. M., N. Z.)». However, the registration turned to be a challenge: «It lasted for half a year – we had to prove that we are a real brotherhood, not a sectarian organisation. The documents we brought to the Office of Plenipotentiary on Religions disappeared from time to time; we had to bring them again. We developed a new statute, new activities, new directions of our work; but

every time we were requested to make minor corrections, like to put comma in a different place. It looked like a vicious circle; eventually we decided to stop direct personal communication with the office and to send all documents by registered mail. Guliako (head of the office in 2005–2020. – S. M., N. Z.) even came to the Minsk Diocese, trying to block our registration. This only changed when Metropolitan Philaret defended our brotherhood... I am still not sure why the office of Plenipotentiary was afraid to register a small youth brotherhood»²⁵.

However, this case was probably an exception rather than the rule: it appears that in most cases the process of brotherhoods and sisterhoods registration did not encounter any formal obstacles²⁶, although the vast majority of them chose not to register. It seems to us that the state has remained tolerant towards the activities of brotherhoods and sisterhoods in any format, both registered and non-registered, since it shares the same understanding of existing problems in social sphere. Besides, non-registered organisations have been able to act, if the necessity arose, via local parishes or even dioceses, especially in the regions where the diocesan bishops have encouraged brotherhoods and sisterhoods activities.

Concluding remarks

The brotherhoods and sisterhoods of the BOC have now become firmly established not only on the religious, but also on the civil society landscape, acting both as religious organisations and NGOs. These organisations have provided excellent opportunities for the faithful of the church to devote their time and efforts to serving the wider community, in the areas where such services are in high demand. Hundreds of people have been involved in the day-to-day help to the ill and poor, people with disabilities and people in need of protection. A substantial amount of educational work has been conducted, with the drafting of reference materials on domestic violence, drug and alcohol addiction, relationships in families and the upbringing of the children. The importance of this work is especially noticeable at regional level, since the needs of people living outside the capital city are at times overlooked by governmental authorities and NGOs. Individual self-conception as a Christian is intertwined in these voluntary associations with a broader collective identity expressed through collective action. Even more important is that the forms of help that the church can suggest neatly fit into the existing landscape of its organisational fields, providing necessary structural opportunity for their operation and contributing to their increasing importance.

One also needs to note that, apart from doing important social, charitable, educational and informational work, sisterhoods and, especially, brotherhoods serve as important meeting and discussion places for the local religious communities. Looking on the differences and taking the gender dimension into consideration, our study shows that the brotherhoods are more autonomous, while sisterhoods managed to establish a sort of an «umbrella» organisation – the Union of Sisterhoods, which had successfully functioned for more than 18 years, until it was transformed into the Association of Sisterhoods in April 2019. The number of organisations, which have obtained official registration, is relatively low – this is reflective of the policy of the BOC towards the issue of brotherhoods' and sisterhoods' registration. At the same time, many of the activities conducted by these organisations can be done without formal registration (in case of necessity, the registration is normally obtained without obstacles). Overall, the development and the role of these organisations also depends on the perspectives taken by the bishops; in the regions where the bishops are more positive and supportive of the sisterhoods and brotherhoods, their role is normally more substantial and their presence is more vivid on both the parish and diocesan levels.

²⁴This quotation is from the authors' interview with priest Pavel Sergeev. The interview was conducted by telephone on 26 March 2020.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶This is our assumption. Unfortunately, Plenipotentiary on Religions declined our request for an interview and refused to provide information on the registered brotherhoods and sisterhoods.

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