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Ukrainian Sacred Design:

Exploring The Visual Identity Of The Orthodox Church Of Ukraine Through Theo-Aesthetics, Fonts, And Multicultural Influences

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In 2013-2014, against the backdrop of the Revolution of Dignity, Oleksiy Chekal, as a devout Christian and Ukrainian citizen, left the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) on moral grounds. This church supported the idea of a "Russian world" and did not listen to the suffering and essence of its people. Then, starting in 2018, he actively participated in the creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Ecumenical Patriarchate).

Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart begins his classic *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*[1] by speaking of beauty as more than just "truth"—beauty is inseparable from truth as a measure of theological authenticity. By touching on Church aesthetics, we enter God's beauty territory and must know sacred symbols' language and understand their operation in religious space. Christianity has always had "aesthetic theology" that comprehended faith through reflection and embodied spiritual experience in artistic thinking and images. The sacred visual language resembles an iceberg's tip, hiding most of the theological and liturgical identity of religious communities beneath the surface.

Graphic images developed by professional designers can effectively embody abstract ideas, theological content, or transcendent concepts. Through cross shapes, heraldic features, christograms, monograms, and ecclesiastical abstract symbols, they can represent and convey ideas about secular and divine power, as well as interaction with the supernatural world.[2]

As I worked to develop a new visual identity for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, I tried to follow the tradition of the sacred visual language. The cross is the central symbol of Christianity, so an equilateral cross inscribed in a circle was chosen as the main visual symbol of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The round shape of lead bulls and chrysobulls (hanging seals for important diplomatic and ecclesiastical documents) and crosses in circles found throughout ancient Christian Syria or Kyivan Rus became the basis for the Church's logo. This emphasized connections with both European heraldic tradition and earlier Byzantine and Eastern Church sphragistic practices.

The appearance of this particular form of the OCU cross had its own history. (Fig. 1) As a child, I spent a lot of time in Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. I was particularly impressed by a fragment of ornamentation in a domestic room under the stairs to the choir, where time had not affected the paint so much and the colors remained fresh and vibrant. Even then, I realized that

[1] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Eerdmans, 2003).

[2] Ildar Garipzanov, *Graphic Signs of Authority in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 300–900* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 416.

ancient church art was meant to be bright and lively, conveying the joyful outlook of the news of the resurrection of Christ, rather than to assume the patina of time. Anemia and dullness lead to a lack of will in faith and thoughtless copying in church art, while joyful colorfulness and creativity give strength to fight for dignity and make a person responsible for every step and stroke.

(Fig. 1). The process of creating a central graphic image for the Unification Council of the Eastern Orthodox Churches of Ukraine (2018) based on the symbolism of St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv.

In 2014, I arrived at Maidan (Independence Square) in the centre of Kyiv, the site of major pro-democracy protests in 2004 (Orange Revolution) and 2013-2014 (Revolution of Dignity/Euromaidan). In these events, the process of the final liberation of the Ukrainian people from the imperial influence of Russia was launched both on the mental and on the religious level. For an outside observer, these events marked the beginning of Russia's current aggression against Ukraine. For Ukrainians, however, this war and genocide have been going on with varying intensity for twelve centuries, starting with the plundering of Kyiv by Andrei Bogolyubsky and the theft of the Virgin of Vyshgorod Icon (which the Muscovites called the Virgin of Vladimir). As soon as I arrived, I went to visit my teacher, Yurii Koreniuk, one of the great restorers of the mosaics of Saint Sophia and Saint Michael's Cathedral. When I was on the scaffolding under the dome of Saint Sophia, I dozed off for a few minutes and then woke up to see the entire composition of the vaults and a clearly defined cross that I had never seen before. It was formed by the archangels, with their wings, and featured the image of the Pantocrator in the center. There was nothing mystical about it; it was a natural symbolic genesis of forms that had semiotic and artistic connections important for sacred art. This is how an artist works—he looks for clues and signs to realize the continuity of semiotic solutions.

After descending from Saint Sophia's scaffolding and seeing the mosaic "The Unmovable Wall," I spent several days on the Maidan. I dreamed of adding the Oranta image to the cross silhouette, with its motifs of creating protection and preserving ordered world space: "Wisdom has built her house" (Proverbs 9:1). Oranta forms a pillar, foundation, and barrier against chaos—the chaos of Russian occupation and destruction that Ukraine faced during the Revolution of Dignity. Being in the epicenter of Ukrainian resistance, entering the military tent church on the Maidan, and meeting friends at Saint Michael's Cathedral, which sheltered the protesters, I realized what kind of church I wanted to belong to. It would be a church standing at the forefront of human suffering and love, not hiding behind formality, cowardice, and imperial authoritarianism. During these

days, it became clear that Ukrainian national identity doesn't correspond to the exclusionary nineteenth-century nationalism that sometimes gets criticized by some Western politicians and theologians. Our modern identity, both nationally and ecclesiastically, is not associated with ethnophyletism but with an open multicultural embrace for all who profess similar values, with ontological unity.

Lidia Lozova, in her article *Identity, Local/National Identity in the Church and the Graphic Identity of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine*,[3] offers a constructivist and relational understanding of the identity of the local (or national) Church. In the constructivist understanding, identity is based on an abstract and rather closed ideological *construct*, in which ethnicity can play a key role. On the other hand, a relational understanding of identity emphasizes its rootedness in living, real-life relationships and interactions. Relational identity does not close in on itself but addresses the other, existing in relationship and dialogue with it, both vertically (in the religious dimension, with God) and horizontally (for example, between different voices within a culture, with other cultures, between generations, etc.)

This formed the basis for my further exploration of Ukrainian church aesthetics, separating it from the Moscow imperial tradition and aiming to emphasize not only poetic and vivid picturesqueness but also the diversity and richness of cultural strata in Ukraine. I was guided not only by the traditions of Kyivan Rus art but also by the baroque flourishes of Zaborovsky Gate or Cossack *skoropys* (cursive script), the religious artistic pursuits of Ukrainian diaspora designers unencumbered by the Soviet dreariness, and the modern graphic ideas of Heorhiy Narbut and Vasyl Krychevsky.

The visual phenomenon of *nomina sacra* deserves attention in religious projects and font solutions. This term, coined by German scholar Ludwig Traube in the early twentieth century, describes a Christian paleographic practice connected to Jewish traditions of specially writing divine names, particularly the Tetragrammaton (YHWH).[4] This Jewish practice likely inspired early Christians to create the *nomina sacra* system in the late first century, which developed into a coherent system for spelling sacred names in Christian manuscripts. Over time, *nomina sacra* evolved into specific Christian symbols where letters and graphic elements formed distinct monograms like the Chi Rho.[5] These abbreviations became integral to Byzantine church art and Orthodox iconography. The principle of "shortening" the middle of words reflects reality's mysterious transformation into signs that become "figurative text"—secret markers for abstract concepts or real events, as in Constantine's victory over Maxentius. Thus, performative signs, crosses, christograms, and monograms embodied cultural guidelines, religious hierarchy, political power, and theological doctrines, functioning as independent agents of the Church and society's interaction as powerful as Byzantine icons.

Icons naturally transform into signs and vice versa. For example, icons of Saint Simeon Stylite (Fig. 2) the Elder gradually simplified through design principles into reliefs and drawings found throughout Syria,[6] eventually becoming simple signs that Middle Eastern Christians engrave on stones above home entrances or on metal encolpions.[7] I implemented this design vocabulary in OCU church art through

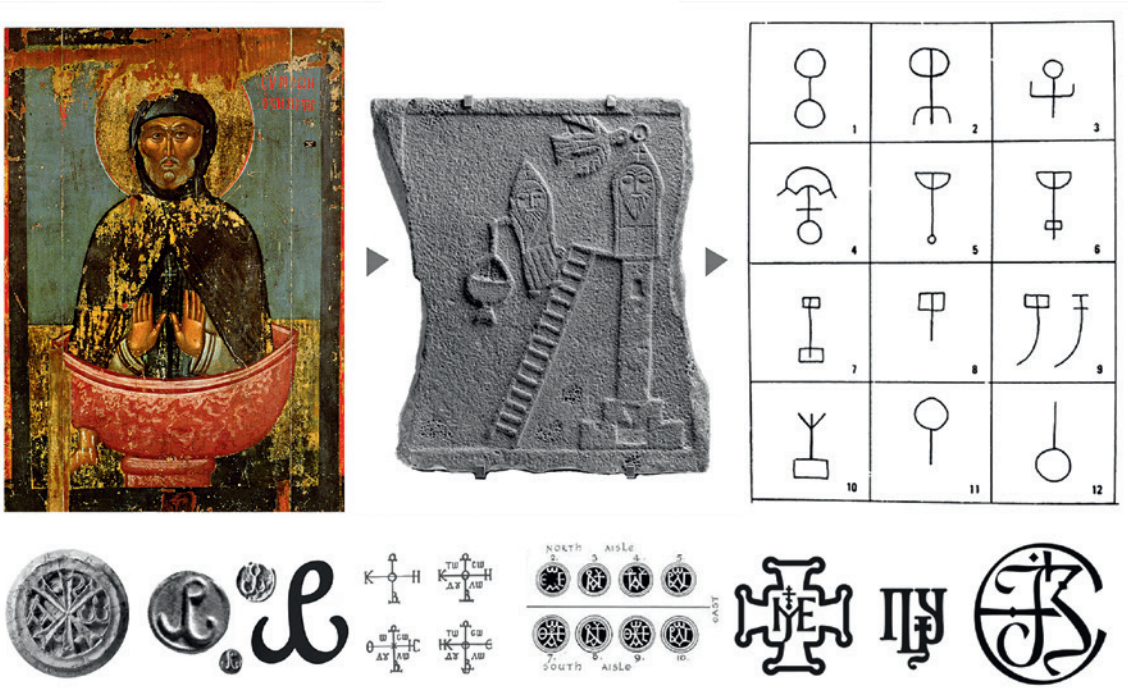
[3] Lozova, Lidiya. "The Visual Identity of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine." *Orthodox Christianity and Identity Politics* (Brill, 2025), (forthcoming).

[4] Ludwig Traube, *Nomina sacra: Versuch einer Geschichte der christlichen* (Kürzung, 1907), 295.

[5] Chi Rho is an early Christian symbol formed by superimposing the first two letters of "Christ" in Greek (X and P).

[6] Romualdo Fernandez Ferreira, *Simbolos Cristianos en la Antigua Siria* (Faculté Pontificale de Théologie, 2004), 280.

[7] In this instance, a name given in early Christian times to a species of reliquary worn round the neck.



(Fig. 2). The principle of forming sacred symbols in Christian art. a) Saint Simeon Stylites and his signs. b) Byzantine sphragistics and monograms. c) Monograms for the OCU.

logos, books, and iconography, drawing inspiration from Ukrainian visual culture. Early name-signs were created as Chrismons and Mother of God monograms for the Unification Council of 2018. The ME monogram was developed for Metropolitan Epiphanius's seal, while a complex four-letter monogram was drawn for Metropolitan Yevstratiy Zorya. When emphasizing the importance of the inscription, I used the paleographic principle of weaving Cyrillic script.

Religious artists expressing the inexpressible proceed not from known methods or schemes, but from uncertainty and contemplation, from chance meetings and hints that produce unexpected creative results. Strong images are born from fragility, just as Arvo Pärt's or Valentin Silvestrov's music emerges from pauses and subtle nuances. Otto Scharmer's *Theory U* [8] emphasizes this idea: direct action doesn't lead to discovery but ends in defeat. One must descend into uncertainty and confusion to rise again—like ancient Sumerians going into deep pits to see stars better, or Jonah in the whale's belly, understanding the power of prayer. Solving extremely difficult tasks requires passing through stages—Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will, and Silence—then returning to discovery and insight.

This is exactly how the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's graphic image appeared—through confusion of responsibility, difficult search, and groping for vision and path. This makes a design project deep and meaningful, giving birth through empathy and intuition to "art that touches the human heart."[9] This can be called "cardio design" in reference to Hryhorii Skovoroda's "philosophy of the heart."

[8] C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges. 2nd ed.* (BerrettKoehler Publishers, 2016), 533.

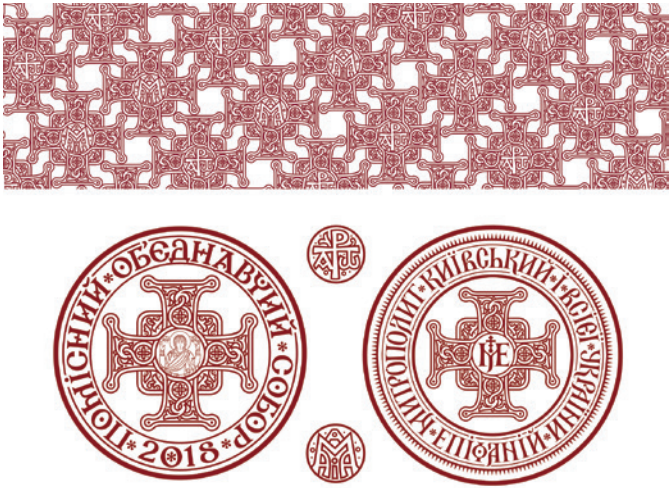
[9] Hryhorii Skovoroda, *Povna akademichna zbirka tvoriv, 2nd ed.* (Vydavets Savchuk O.O., 2016).

[10] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 462.

(Fig. 3). Prayers for Ukraine. Book illustration and original font from the Prayer Book (2017).

First searches and the Prayer Book of 2017

An important preparatory stage in forming the Ukrainian Church's visual identity was creating the *Ukrainian Orthodox Prayer Book* in 2016-2017, compiled by Fr. Andriy Dudchenko (Fig. 3). Fascinated by Ravenna and San Marco mosaics and using early Christian symbolism of birds (peacocks, larks, doves) and plants (lilies, mallows, sunflowers), I realized this vibrant flourishing was inherent in the Ukrainian book tradition. For the chapter headings, I developed a font based on Greek inscriptions above Saint Sophia of Kyiv's central apse conch. Separating Ukrainian and Moscow traditions through ornaments and fonts was necessary. This *Prayer Book* had two distinctive aspects: it was based mainly on Greek liturgical tradition, not Russian, and opened with a prayer for Ukrainian Orthodox unification, bringing together those believers.



(Fig. 4). Design elements of the Unification Council (2018): 1) Ornament of crosses and monograms. 2) Seal of the Unification Council with lettering in the W style of inscriptions on the tenth-century Church of the Tithes. 3) Personal seal of Metropolitan Epiphanius with monogram.

Visual identity of the Unification Council and the Logo of the OCU

My further studies in Greek paleography and decorative art were essential for redirecting the anti-colonial church design toward universal Orthodoxy. When I was invited to develop designs for the 2018 Unification Council, I realized my efforts weren't in vain. It was imperative to combine Ukrainian and Greek artistic traditions and introduce new religious design trends.

The discovered cross type had to be filled with meaning, achieving symbolic resonance where each fragment contained the whole in condensed form. The Oranta image was the most suitable, especially considering existing heraldic traditions in our country. The cross was filled with floral ornaments from the 2017 Prayer Book and decorative elements from Saint Sophia's wall frescoes. Beyond the main cross logo, the Unification Council's visual identity included monograms, seals, patterns, and printed documentation design (Fig. 4).

The inscription font developed at the intersection of two traditions: Greek solemn elongated uncial from Byzantine manuscripts and Basilica Cathedral mosaics in Cefalù, and Baroque monumental font from Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra representing the Ukrainian tradition. Combining this aesthetics graphically expressed the kinship and confidence of these traditions.

(Fig. 5). Main symbols of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. 1) Logo-Cross with the image of the Oranta. 2) Coat of arms of Metropolitan Epiphanius, Head of the Church 3) Simplified crosses with monograms. 4) Simplified additional monograms and symbols of the OCU.

(Fig. 6). Graphic principle of general principles of construction on the basis of the main cross for logos of different dioceses in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. 1) Kharkiv Diocese 2) Dnipro Diocese 3) Bila Tserkva Diocese

With Metropolitan Epiphanius's support, I continued developing this artistic idea as the OCU's brand image. The logo appears on seals, vestments, infographics, book covers, and church plaques. The cross's central part can contain different meanings: Oranta, Christogram, Christ's image, or OCU abbreviation. Both solemn and simplified logos were developed, and this family of graphic symbols has entered the Church life and urban visual space.

The logo became more than a graphic sign, creating a complete visual identification system. As David Hart noted, symbols delay aesthetic power to reveal "depths," temporarily eliminating the aesthetic for the epistemological, revealing something more fundamental than random forms.[10] The symbolic order is inevitably a taxonomic hierarchy, metaphysics of the sign, and discourse concerning inner truths (Fig. 5).

Development of the OCU style and the network structure of beauty

Together with the main logo, a graphic principle was developed for transforming the Church's main logo into logos for various dioceses and parishes. They combine specific regional symbols and ornaments with a stable structural base: an equilateral cross on a square (Fig. 6). This design principle supports the idea of a hierarchical connection between heavenly and earthly, God's sanctifying power extending in concentric circles throughout the universe. Saint Sophia's symbol itself has a concentric structure: Christ, God's Wisdom, the Mother of God, the Church, and particular Christian communities.

Examples include the Dnipro Diocese cross containing Cossack Baroque elements (as this region was the sixteenth-seventeenth century center of the Cossack Republic), with fonts reflecting Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and Cossack *skoropys*/ traditions. The Bila Tserkva Diocese, with longer historical continuity connected to the twelfth-thirteenth century Kyivan Rus, uses more ancient ornaments and fonts reflecting the spirit of that era. For Kharkiv Diocese, modern graphic language was chosen with Art Deco and avant-garde influences, using pre-imperial Cossack coat of arms based on the bow and arrow.

The stylistic range of various design projects since the creation of the local Church of Ukraine is wide, but maintaining a professional design level and taste is crucial to uphold the general concept and the vision for Ukrainian sacred art. More local church and monastery project examples appear in illustrations (Fig. 7).

An integral part of OCU identity is its signature font—one of few designed specifically for churches or religious organizations. The typeface combines influences from the Hellenistic and Ukrainian typography, with Latin

(Fig. 7). Logos for various churches, monasteries, and church-related cultural projects. 1) New Athos Monastery in Lviv 2) Church of St. Alexius the Man of God 3) Church dedicated to the Cathedral of All Kiev Saints 4) Greek Stavropegia in Ukraine 5) Logo of St. Andrew's Church in Kiev 6) Logo of a church shop 7) Ukrainian Chaplaincy Mission in Cyprus 8) Charitable Church Brotherhood (Lutsk) 9) Logo for the Church of St. George the Victorious in a military unit (Kharkiv) 10) Logo for the Church and Scientific Center (Kyiv) 11) Synodal Publishing House of the OCU.

script absorbing the smoothness and liveliness of the Oriental linework. This font design expresses the Ukrainian Church's return to historical ties with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and departure from three hundred years of the Moscow imperial occupation (Fig. 8).

Emblem of the Coat of Arms for Metropolitan Epiphanius and the Patriarchal Visit in 2021

From the first days of the autocephalous Ukrainian Church, seals were needed to authenticate the documents of the new unified Church. The coat of arms for the OCU Primate Metropolitan Epiphanius was created based on modernized Byzantine and Kyivan heraldic traditions (Fig. 5). The OCU monogram in the cross's middle creatively references several sources: the Chi Rho sign, Christmas star from Ravenna mosaics, mallow flowers (traditional for Ukraine and early Christianity as ancient Eucharist symbols), and the Ukrainian trident. Metropolitan Epiphanius's coat of arms was created for the visit of Patriarch Bartholomew, designed to harmonize with the Constantinople Patriarch's coat of arms.

The branding for Patriarch Bartholomew's 2021 arrival in Kyiv was extremely important for our Church. Its key element was the symbolic and topographical image of the two Churches and cities, designed around the dialogue between the two Saint Sophia Cathedrals and their Mother of God mosaics—Kyiv and Constantinople. Additional symbols included the Great School of the Nation in the Phanar and Saint Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in Kyiv. The Ukrainian logo part incorporated Ukrainian Baroque ornaments and

(Fig. 8). Official font of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Supports Cyrillic, Old Cyrillic, Greek, European Latin and other scripts.

twentieth-century graphics. These two Churches' images were realized in numerous book and jewelry gifts that the OCU presented to the Mother Church as tokens of gratitude for granting the Tomos of Autocephaly (Fig. 9).

Publishing Activities of the OCU

In 2023, the long-awaited redesign of OCU liturgical literature began within the Synodal Publishing and Educational Department. The principle of stylistic scaling was used, creating modules based on ornamental elements forming floral frames. Several

(Fig. 9). Topographical and symbolic image of the visit of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople to Ukraine (2021). Graphic rhyme between cities, churches, and temples dedicated to Sophia, the Wisdom of God.

alphabets for initial letters diversified publication typography. I developed a system of illustrations and decorative finishes based on the printing traditions of Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, Pochayiv Monastery, and other monasteries, emphasizing the OCU'svisual brand (Fig. 10).

Over two years, the following books were published: *Liturgical Psalter, Large and Small Service Book, Large and Small Episcopal Service Book, Book of Hours, Holy Gospel, Easter Gospels, Divine Services for Holy Week, Prayer Book, All-Night Vigil, Divine Liturgy*, and a multi-volume collection of homiletical works by the OCU Primate His Beatitude Metropolitan Epiphanius.

(Fig. 10). Easter publications of the Synodal Publishing and Educational Department of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Projects for the Future and Shrines Awaiting Dwesign Care

In 2023, a strategic group of intellectuals (to which I belong) led by historian and archaeologist Maxim Ostapenko began searching for opportunities to form a topological, aesthetic, and ontological vision for Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and National Archives projects. This group aims to save this world-significant shrine from ROC ideology and restore the Lavra's Ukrainian identity and historical continuity, associated with saints and statesmen like Anthony and Theodosius of the Kyiv Caves, Yelysei Pletenetskyi, Konstanty Ostrogski, Petro Mohyla, Ivan Mazepa, and others. For nearly a millennium, Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra has been a national shrine and a place of identity formation for people in Ukraine. The modern visual concept is based on the "Lavra Cross," uniting four key aspects: Faith and Spirituality/Thought and Education/ Creativity and Art/Will and Statehood. These areas represent

where people have worked to preserve the continuity of ecclesial and political identity in Ukraine. The Lavra Cross should become a strategic reference point for reviving the "free person" in Ukrainian Church and society, embodying Baroque Kyiv Christianity and modern "open Orthodoxy." Each symbolic element (spiritual, museum, educational, rehabilitation for war veterans) will undergo the stages of research, creation of senses, shaping, and scaling. The design will unite sub-projects within the Archives and the monastery, including a shared variable font, complex infographics, and graphic tools supporting the creation of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra's visual identity (Fig. 11).

(Fig. 11). Projects related to the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra 1) Logo for the 950th anniversary of the Assumption Cathedral 2) Project to preserve church engravings 3) Easter greeting from Avraam, abbot of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra.

Projects for the Ukrainian Diaspora and Cultural Diplomacy

Graphic work related to the Ukrainian Church image extends beyond the OCU and Ukraine. Developing a style for diaspora parish and church structures worldwide is ongoing. In each case, I shape aesthetics through paying attention to the local traditions while applying gentle Ukrainianization. For the Holy Trinity Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Cleveland, Ohio, a font was created similar to those developed by Ukrainian diaspora designers in America. For the Ukrainian Orthodox parish of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos and Great Britain of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in London, I combined national, Anglo-Saxon, Ukrainian, and Greek traditions with iconic visual elements: Hagia Sophia of Constantinople, Saint Michael's Monastery in Kyiv, Holy Sepulcher Church in London, and Big Ben as an element of London cityscape (Fig. 12).

Cooperating with different churches is crucial to show how Ukrainian specialists, artists, and scientists can study and build bridges of mutual respect and tolerance through beauty and art. Valuable experience and successful results have already been achieved in joint projects with Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, and Eastern Churches (Fig. 13).

(Fig. 12). Graphic image for the church Holy Trinity Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Cleveland) and logotype for Ukrainian Orthodox parish of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos (London)

(Fig. 13). Multicultural projects of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. 1) Christ is Risen for the Church in Thessaloniki (Greece); 2) Christmas greetings for the Syriac Orthodox Church.

(Fig. 14). Design and fonts for collected hymns of the Ukrainian church Octoechos and hymns of the Vespers, which are inherent in the Kyivan church singing tradition.

[11] Hans Uns von Balthasar, //The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics//, trans. by E. LeivaMerikakis; ed. by J. Fessio, J. Riches (Ignatius Press, 1982), Vol. 1, 12.

Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* that beauty can cross boundaries and create connections where people and ideas differ. Orthodox philosopher and theologian David Bentley Hart clarifies that beauty eliminates our differences, questions them, and demonstrates universal harmony.[11]

I hope that in the future it will be possible to complete the formation of a strategic vision for the aesthetics of our Ukrainian Church and establish "The Centre for the Study of Sacred Art," which could involve not only artists and designers but also priests and art historians who would help determine the future aesthetic image of our Church. This article can be summarized by paraphrasing the words of the Ukrainian poet and political prisoner of the Soviet era, Vasyl Stus: "*The Church and Art will be needed by their country and the whole world only when their prayers and creativity merge with the pain, joy, and faith of their people.*" (Fig. 14). ❋

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