



ЛЕЖАЩЕ КРЪПА  
БРАЗНО БГЪ МОЛИТСА

# Introduction: Josaphat Kuntsevych, from Confessional to Transnational Saint

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**Summary.** The paper examines the regional and local scale of the cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. As one of the *beati moderni*, the cult of Blessed Josaphat Kuntsevych was granted official recognition for the Basilians, as well as for believers within the Kyivan Uniate Metropolitanate and across the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was only after his canonisation in 1867 that all restrictions on its spread were lifted; a visible sign of this universal acceptance was the transfer of his relics to the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome. The introduction traces the mechanisms, strategies, and actors involved in shaping Kuntsevych's image both as a confessional and as a transnational saint, situating these dynamics within the historiography of and contributions to this volume.

**Keywords:** Josaphat Kuntsevych; sainthood; Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; Rome; historiography.

This volume on Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych presents research which was first shared at the conferences marking the 400-year anniversary of the saint's martyrdom in 2023. On 13–14 October 2023, Vilnius University hosted the international conference “Josaphat Kuntsevych: History, Legacy, Memory”, which was co-organised by academic and ecclesiastical institutions from Lithuania and Ukraine, under the patronage of the Archbishop Gintaras Grušas of Vilnius and His Beatitude Sviatoslav, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. The six thematic sections of the conference examined the hagiographic, cultural, and liturgical heritage of St. Josaphat, with contributions from scholars from Austria, Lithuania, Germany, Poland, and Ukraine. The event formed part of a series of state-level commemorations held in Lithuania.<sup>1</sup>

1 For more information, see “У Вільнюсі розпочалася Міжнародна наукова конференція «Йосафат Кунцевич: історія, спадщина, пам'ять»”, in: *Український Католицький Університет*, 2023, access online: <https://kyiv-christ.ucu.edu.ua/blog/u-vilnyusi-vidbulasya-mizhnarodna-naukova-konferentsiya-josafat-kuntsevych-istoriya-spadshhyna-pam-yat/>.

A month later, the international conference “Identity and Cult: Theological, Cultural, and Historical Dimensions of Josaphat Kuntsevych” was held at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Co-organised by the Ukrainian Catholic University and partner institutions, and also under the patronage of His Beatitude Sviatoslav, it brought the commemoration to the heart of global Catholicism. Alongside both conferences, the exhibition “That All May Be One: On the Occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Martyrdom of St. Josaphat Kuntsevych” was displayed (its materials have since been published).<sup>2</sup>

For a better understanding of the role and meaning of the cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – not only in the Kyivan Uniate Metropolitanate but also within Catholicism – it is worth highlighting several facts from the history of Catholic sainthood at that time. Between 1540 and 1770, the Catholic Church only canonised 27 men and women, and declared a further six to be Beati. Among these six was Josaphat Kuntsevych, which was a significant achievement for the Ruthenian Uniate Church. Saints of the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-centuries were usually members of reformed religious orders, often their founders or leading figures.<sup>3</sup> Simon Ditchfield used the term *beati moderni* to describe such figures, including Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila, and Carlo Borromeo. Ditchfield pointed out that “it was in the course of absorbing these figures into the canon of saints that the distinction between ‘*sanctus*’ and ‘*beatus*’ came to be given clear, legal form, with ‘*sancti*’ enjoying the right to universal veneration and ‘*beati*’ to particular worship”.<sup>4</sup>

In 1643, after following all the newly established bureaucratic procedures (read Birgit Emich’s article for more details), the Catholic Church beatified Josaphat Kuntsevych. This act granted official permission for regional veneration, specifically within the Kyivan Metropolitanate, and was likely for a defined Church community. Yet a number of questions arise: Before his canonisation, was his cult truly limited to the regional sphere? What did the regional dimension of a cult of a saint mean? And how did local devotion in Polatsk and its surroundings shape the wider spread of the cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych, especially in the southern part of the Kyivan Metropolitanate?

The Basilians played a central role in spreading the cult of the saint. Kuntsevych, not only as a monk but also as a reformer of Eastern Catholic monastic

2 Bishop, Monk, Saint, 2025; Vyskupas, vienuolis, šventasis, 2025.

3 D. Sidler et al., 2024, p. 37.

4 S. Ditchfield, 2024, p. 316.



**Figure 1.** Conference participants in the Senate Hall of Vilnius University (13 October 2023, Vilnius). Photo by Information Department of the Basilian Order, 2023.

In: Collection of the Basilian Order of Saint Josaphat, access online: <https://osbm.in.ua/news/actual/21454/>.

life, helped inspire the foundation of the Order of St. Basil the Great in 1617. Unsurprisingly, the Basilians became leading promoters of Kuntsevych's cult within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and, after 1639 (after gaining a seat of the procurator at the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus), in Rome. Ruthenian Basilians were key actors in shaping local expressions of the saint's cult; that is, it can be stated that Kuntsevych was, first and foremost, a Basilian saint, not a Ruthenian patron or saint,<sup>5</sup> as this was in line with the trends of the time concerning the creation of Catholic saints, by associating them with one monastic order or another. Representatives of the orders were among the main lobbyists during, and beneficiaries after, the beatification processes. These orders, to which the newly beatified persons had belonged before their deaths, were given the prerogative to spread the cult of the newly beatified.

The studies presented in this volume (those by Nataliia Fedyshyn, Nataliia Bondar, Nataliia Zabolotna, and Olga Tkachuk) demonstrate how the Basilians established Kuntsevych's cult across their network of monasteries in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Visual strategies played a key role: images of Josaphat

5 N. Sinkevych, 2025.

Kuntsevych, alongside regional sacred objects such as the Pochaiv icon, were disseminated through engraved prints, thus engaging a wide range of audiences. These engravings functioned as an early form of mass media. Their composition – placing Kuntsevych next to the Pochaiv icon – reflects the Basilian strategy of promoting the cult in accessible and regionally adapted visual forms. Rūta Janonienė successfully demonstrates that the cult spread in the Uniate Church centres, mainly in Basilian monasteries, through recording the presence of images of Kuntsevych and the consecration of side altars. The researcher argues that Kuntsevych became visually present in many monasteries and parishes in Lithuania and Belarus during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the investigation of the spread of the cult of Kuntsevych in Basilian monasteries remains relevant. Micro-level research into monastery documentation, such as chronicles, financial books of expenses and incomes, inventory descriptions, registers of deceased monks, and visitation reports, could reveal how the cult was being practiced in centres not directly linked to the places where the saint had actually lived or where his relics were kept. This includes examining whether liturgies and other services dedicated to Kuntsevych were being regularly performed. The diaries and memoirs of the monastic elite may offer valuable insights into the personal piety of abbots and archimandrites, as well as into the devotional practices of the Basilian elite.

The beatification of Josaphat Kuntsevych in 1643 meant that official permission had been given to spread his cult, primarily among Basilians, and not only within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth but also throughout Basilian monastic orders across Catholic Europe and beyond. A peculiarity of the Basilian monastic orders was that there were several branches which were formally called Basilian, but which were institutionally separate orders. The latest research by Oleksandr Pronkevich, as well as his article in this volume, convincingly demonstrates why the cult of Kuntsevych spread among the Spanish Basilians. In 1625, shortly after the martyrdom of Kuntsevych, a report was published in Spanish in Seville: *Relacion verdadera de la muerte y martirio que dieron los cismáticos de la Rusia en el reyno de Polonia, a su Arçobispo, llamado Iosafat*, which was most likely translated by Jesuit Benito de Sojo.<sup>6</sup> In 1684, the *Life of Kuntsevych* was published in Spanish in Madrid, translated by the Spanish Basilian Miguel Pérez from the 1665-dated Roman edition in Latin.<sup>7</sup> This clearly demonstrates that the cult had spread beyond the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. These texts, circulating in Spanish, likely

6 O. Пронкевич, 2025; see also O. Pronkevich, 2024.

7 “Prologo”, 2024.



**Figure 2.** Sarcophagus containing the relics of St. Josaphat Kuntsevych in the Basilica of Saint Peter in the Vatican, 2010. Photo by Babizet, 2010.

In: *Wikimedia Commons*, access online: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Св\\_Ўосафат.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Св_Ўосафат.JPG).

reached Latin America. The fact that Rūta Janonienė found 18<sup>th</sup>-century images of Josaphat Kuntsevych in contemporary collections in Mexico suggests that the cult achieved a transatlantic presence. Further research is needed on its spread in the Basilian monasteries of Italy, the Kingdom of Hungary, and Romania during the Early Modern period.

Kuntsevych was an unusual example of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century martyred archbishop, a period when most martyrs were monks, nuns, or priests. According to Dzianis Liseichykau (presented in this volume), it was Kuntsevych's administrative activity as the Archbishop of Polatsk – rather than his missionary work – which led to his violent death at the hands of the Orthodox inhabitants of Vitsyebsk, supported by the local political elite. Archbishop Kuntsevych disciplined the parish clergy by introducing detailed rules and constitutions through annual sobors, by stressing education and penalties for disobedience (read Teodor Martynyuk's paper for more details).

In addition to the Basilian sphere, another major regional framework to emerge as a promoter of the cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych was the Kyivan Uniate Metropolitanate – one which positioned itself as the primary centre of veneration. Both formally (according to the Roman bureaucracy) and informally (as a colleague and subordinate of the archbishop), it was the Kyivan Uniate Metropolitan Yosyf Veliamyn Rutsky who authored one of the first public texts on Kuntsevych's death and who was to oversee the beatification process. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych spread widely, and not only in Basilian monasteries but also in the episcopal centres associated with him – particularly in Polatsk, Vitsyebsk, and Vilnius. While the successful spread of the saint's cult across Ruthenian Basilian monasteries is undisputed, there is still no comprehensive study confirming – or disputing – its broader development within the Kyivan Uniate Metropolitanate. The Zamość Council of 1720 officially introduced a feast day for Josaphat Kuntsevych into the liturgical calendar, and reforms following the council included the publication of liturgical texts.<sup>8</sup> Through a comprehensive micro-level study, parish visitation protocols and eparchial records could shed light on how devotion to Kuntsevych developed across the Metropolitanate during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In political terms, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the primary region where Blessed Josaphat Kuntsevych was allowed to be venerated. It was not only the Catholic elites but also the political elites – that is, the Polish King and the *szlachta* (the Commonwealth's nobility) – who were involved in the beatification process, which began immediately after Josaphat's murder in 1623. King Sigismund III Vasa, who was a devout Catholic, supported the prosecution of the murderers and punished the City of Vitsyebsk by revoking its Magdeburg rights (for a period of 1624–1642). Thus, the city was punished politically, and the murderers were executed (for more details, see Dzianis Liseichykau's article).<sup>9</sup> The Polish King's support played an important role in the beatification process. Due to bureaucratic requirements, Rome expected confirmation from the political authorities, who would officially affirm that there was a need for a saint for the region (for more details, see the article by Birgit Emich). The Catholic nobility in the vicinity of Vitsyebsk and Polatsk, and later in other voivodeships, contributed to the beatification process and took care of the relics, which were moved from one place to another during the wars taking place at the time, due

8 See more in *Замойський провінційний собор*, 2025.

9 Дз. Лісейчиков, 2024.

to the threat of destruction (for more details, see the article by Dorota Wereda). Their support demonstrates how the cult became both a religious and a political tool for integrating Eastern Rite Ruthenians into the Catholic culture of the Commonwealth. The cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych became one of the factors in this cultural integration and in cultural transfer. In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Dominicans, Jesuits, Bernardines, Piarists, and Capuchins were both authors and owners of Polish and Latin texts about Josaphat Kuntsevych. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a distinct and recognisable Polish image of Josaphat Kuntsevych emerged: in historiography, he is sometimes referred to as a Polish martyr.<sup>10</sup> The Polish-Lithuanian state, as a region, became a place in which the cult was spread, and not only for Uniates and Basilians but also for Roman Catholics and Catholic monastic orders.

Was he, therefore, a confessional saint, venerated primarily as a Uniate figure, or had his cult already transcended confessional boundaries?<sup>11</sup> Willem Frijhoff has argued that saints always construct a group identity, within confessional and cultural limits, yet, their meaning changes over time: “In all the Christian traditions, saints are represented to foster the construction of group identity (such as martyrs or emblematic saints for the nation, the town, the confession, the professional group, even the family), for apologetic purposes and for the conquest of a proper identity in a confessional context”.<sup>12</sup> The questions he poses in his works – whether sainthood is always local, whether saints are restricted to particular communities, and whether confession is a meaningful category<sup>13</sup> – frame this discussion well. Andrzej Gil and Maria Takala-Roszczenko have emphasised Josaphat Kuntsevych’s role in shaping the Uniate confessional identity,<sup>14</sup> while Valentyna Los and Nataliia Sinkevych, working with 18<sup>th</sup>-century sources from the southern part of the Kyivan Uniate Metropolitanate, have disputed this interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Kerstin Jobst and Stefan Rohdewald have highlighted, instead, the cult’s integrative and transnational dimensions, bringing together Uniates and Roman Catholics from across the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They analyse the role of political factors in the establishment of the cult<sup>16</sup> and emphasise its transnational dimension (for

10 See, for instance S. Ditchfield, 2024, p. 316–317.

11 See also I. Almes, 2024.

12 W. Frijhoff, 2003, p. 383–384.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 374.

14 A. Gil, 2010; M. Takala-Roszczenko, 2013, p. 90–97.

15 B. Лось et al., 2020.

16 K. S. Jobst, 2017.

Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, and Lithuanians alike),<sup>17</sup> best reflected in the widely recognised expression applied to Josaphat Kuntsevych: the ‘Apostle of Unity’.<sup>18</sup>

Another perspective, as well as additional evidence in favour of Kuntsevych’s recognition as a confessional saint at that time, arises when considering the efforts of the Orthodox Metropolitan in Kyiv, Petro Mohyla, in 1643. It was in this year, when Kuntsevych was beatified in Rome, that Mohyla formally proclaimed in Kyiv the canonisation of 118 Pechersk saints.<sup>19</sup> The dispute between the Orthodox Church and the Uniate Church over saints was one of many which lasted throughout the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and concerned almost all areas of church life, but it was the saints who were the key evidence for confirming the authenticity of faith. Consequently, in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Orthodox Church’s recognised saints far outnumbered those of the Uniates, with dozens compared to only one Uniate – namely, Josaphat Kuntsevych. Perhaps this was one of the key factors which made it impossible to develop the image of Kuntsevych as a Ruthenian saint. Maybe there was no place for him in the pantheon of Ruthenian saints among the huge number of newly officially proclaimed Kyiv-Pechersk saints. These questions require further comparative studies.<sup>20</sup>

Josaphat Kuntsevych’s canonisation in 1867 removed all restrictions on universal veneration throughout the Catholic Church, and yet political and national factors remained decisive. The Russian Empire’s suppression of the Uniate Church in 1839 sought to erase the Ruthenian Uniate culture, replacing the cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych with that of the Orthodox St. Euphrosyne of Polatsk. The strategy of erasing the memory of the cult of Josaphat Kuntsevych in Polatsk is a classic example of the politicisation of sanctity. This is just one episode in the politicisation and nationalisation of St. Josaphat Kuntsevych during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is described in more detail in the article by Stefan Rohdewald.

By the twentieth century, Josaphat Kuntsevych was already being increasingly regarded as a transnational saint, a saint for Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Poles. But, as Arūnas Streikus argues, over time, his cult became most closely identified with the Ukrainian Church: the Pontifical Ukrainian College in Rome was renamed in his honour, and his relics in St. Peter’s Basilica became the focal point of the Ukrainian Catholic presence in the Vatican.

17 S. Rohdewald, 2010; K. S. Jobst, 2012a; K. S. Jobst, 2012b.

18 For a more detailed overview of the historiography, see Ch. Fukushima, 2020.

19 A. Naumow, 2001, s. 28.

20 See investigation by Nataliia Sinkevych about Josaphat Kuntsevych as the Ruthenian patron in N. Sinkevych, 2025.

In summary, the title of ‘Blessed’ (1643) conferred on Josaphat Kuntsevych implied a confessional and regional saint, but practice already pointed toward a broader Catholic and even transnational veneration. His canonisation (1867) confirmed this trajectory. The international conferences of 2023, together with the articles presented in this volume, underscore both the confessional and the transnational nature of the sainthood of Josaphat Kuntsevych.

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