Metropolitan Nikodim Remembered

Dimitri Pospielovsky writes:

Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod, a president of the World Council of Churches, died of a heart attack on 5 September in Rome during an audience with Pope John Paul I. Metropolitan Nikodim came to Rome for the funeral of Pope Paul and remained in the city for the inauguration of his successor.

Nikodim was born Boris G. Rotov into a party-card carrying communist family 49 years ago in a village not far from the ancient Russian city of Ryazan. A brilliant, though highly controversial figure in the contemporary Russian church hierarchy, he was a living testimony to the miraculous vitality of the Church in the face of atheist propaganda, persecution, the total ban on all forms of organized religious education and the absence of religious literature. His father was a militant atheist. His mother was officially an atheist as well, although privately Nikodim said that she had been a secret believer. He apparently discovered this only after he himself joined the Church. This occurred during his 'teens in the 1940s, when a limited number of churches were re-opened after their almost total annihilation in the previous decade. He simply dropped into an open church on his way back from school, was deeply impressed by what he saw, was soon secretly baptized and began to serve as an altar boy.

A brilliant school record meant that he finished high school at the unusually early age of 15 or 16. He joined the biological faculty of the Ryazan Pedagogical Institute. Simultaneously he secretly enrolled for the correspondence course of the Leningrad Theological Seminary and Academy, where he was recommended by the late Bishop Afanasi (Sakharov), a saintly martyr who had spent over 30 years in prisons, camps and exile. His "double life" was soon exposed in the Soviet press; he was expelled from the Pedagogical Institute in 1947; joined the Church openly and became a monk in 1947 at the age of 18, receiving the monastic name of Nikodim.

This was the beginning of his meteoric career in the Church: parish priest at the age of 21; dean of the Yaroslavl Cathedral at the age of 25, by which time he received his Master's degree from the Theological Academy; head of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Jerusalem at the age of 28. In 1960, at the age of 31, Archimandrite Nikodim took over the all-important post of Chairman of the Department of Foreign Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate from Metropolitan Nikolai of Krutitsy, who ran foul of the authorities over Khrushchev's new assault on the Church, which by 1965 cost the Church two-thirds of its houses of prayer, five out of eight seminaries, and some 60 monasteries and convents, leaving only 18.

During all this period (1959–64) of violent persecution Nikodim continued to assure western opinion in all his public speeches and interviews that there was no persecution, that the Church was free. This was one of the sources of the controversy over Nikodim. Some began to suspect that he was a plant of the regime. This view, however, was not shared by informed Orthodox believers in the Soviet Union. The general consensus of even the most anti-regime clergy is that he was always a deeply convinced religious believer, however controversial his policies might be.

Nikodim's church career continued to unfold as rapidly in the 1960s as before, despite his failing health: he suffered from diabetes and a heart condition, aggravated no doubt by the pressure which he was under, both from believers and the State. In 1972 after two heart attacks he retired from the Chairmanship of the Church's Foreign Relations Department, but still remained its most influential active member to his death. In 1961, at the age of 31, he was ordained bishop and two years later became Metropolitan of Leningrad, only second in seniority to the Metropolitan of Krutitsy. Having attained such high positions in the Church, he used them to expand and deepen the Church's ecumenical activities and contacts, particularly with the Roman Catholic Church.

It was on his initiative that the Russian Church, unilaterally in the Orthodox world, issued an encyclical in December 1969 allowing Roman Catholics to receive the Holy Sacraments of confession and communion from Orthodox priests. This reciprocated a similar decision of the Roman Church. His official explanation for this decision was that it applied to cases where Roman Catholics lacked their own clergy and in cases of emergency. But in practice Nikodim has knowingly given communion to Roman Catholic tourists visiting his cathedral in Leningrad, and even to Roman Catholic clergy and laity present at an Orthodox liturgy which he celebrated on a visit to the Vatican. All these ecumenical activities have caused considerable controversy in the Orthodox world in general, and among the more conservative elements of the Church in the Soviet Union. These views are shared by Patriarch Pimen.

The controversy has been so intense that highly placed conservative churchmen in the Soviet Union confidentially claimed that there was a complete break of communication between the Patriarch and Nikodim, and that there were two incompatible factions: the diminishing one of the Patriarch who condemned Nikodim's ecumenism, and the other one supporting Nikodim's "modernism". Evidence proves that even some of the bishops who could be called Nikodim's men, whom he protected from the authorities and who were consecrated on his insistence, do not share his over-loyal and over-obedient attitude towards the regime. But his view that in this world, with its atheist-materialist offensive against Christianity, the differences between the major Christian faiths are probably far less important than the values and beliefs which they share with each other, finds support in many of the younger Russian clergy. It is, therefore, unlikely that his death would mean a reversal of the ecumenical policies of the Russian Church.

Within the Orthodox world one of Nikodim's perhaps most long-lasting contributions was the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in America by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1970. The Orthodox Church in America, formerly the Russian-American Metropolia, is the outgrowth of a Russian Mission for the Natives of Alaska, established there at the end of the 18th century. The Metropolia broke its canonical ties with the Moscow Patriarchate after its *Locum Tenens*, Metropolitan, later Patriarch, Sergi declared complete loyalty to the atheist Soviet regime, and in 1929 requested written declarations of such loyalty even from the Orthodox clergy of Russian origin residing abroad. It was in the 1960s that Metropolitan Nikodim offered to negotiate the legalization of this Church's independent status from Moscow. In this initiative he received the support of the late Patriarch Alexi in the face of opposition from the Moscow Patriarchate clergy in America (a total of some 50 parishes) and from some of the conservative clergy within the USSR, among them, apparently, the then Metropolitan and now Patriarch Pimen. Providentially, Patriarch Alexi's very last deed, on the eve of his death in 1970, was the signing of the Tomos which granted the newly-born Orthodox Church in America its canonical status of 15th independent (Autocephalous) local or national Orthodox Church, thus fulfilling the wish of the late Patriarch and martyr, Tikhon. As the ruling Archbishop of the Russian Diocese of North America, Tikhon had suggested an eventual autocephaly for that diocese in his 1906 report to the Russian Synod of St Petersburg.

My personal recollections of Metropolitan Nikodim are mixed. On the one hand, he always impressed me as a brilliant man who in conversation understood what one was trying to say before one had the time to finish one's sentence. At the same time, I was once struck by the *naïveté* of his apparent acceptance of Marxism as a social expression of Christian

ethics. Was this an attempt to provoke me into a debate? At any rate, he listened without protest as I put forward the elementary arguments that the violence of Marxism could not be reconciled with Christianity, and that the concept of class warfare bred hatred not love.

I once reproached him after a press conference that some of the things he had said were not true, while others appeared as such because he concealed half the facts. His reaction was: "Why did you not speak up and present these facts for the public at the press conference?" In the same conversation he said that western criticisms of the Church in Russia and its status, especially if they came from "such respected persons as, for instance, the Archbishop of Canterbury, can be of great use to us. Then in my next report to Kuroedov I tell him that state policies towards the Church are giving adverse results in relations with the West, and will quote the words of criticism uttered by western church or other leaders". To my remark that it is a bad temptation for a Christian to witness a bishop not telling the truth, he retorted: "It is you people in the West that react this way. We're used to this sort of thing in the Soviet Union, and we don't react."

"But it is terrible", I said, "that lies are accepted in such a way."

"I didn't say this was good or bad. I'm just stating a fact", said the Metropolitan with a sad smile. And then he went on to describe his own strategy as that of a man who in dense traffic prefers to select small side roads, and thus a longer distance, while still going towards his aim, rather than get stuck in a traffic jam or end up in an accident on the main road. He hoped that in this way he would achieve more for the Church in the long run.

Nikodim was a great admirer of the late Patriarch Sergi, the one who had directed the course of the Church onto the road of complete civic and political submission to the Soviet atheist State. He argued that Sergi was forced to do so by the provocations and blackmailing techniques of the schismatic Living Church. Sergi, Nikodim argued, saw that Russia's historical development was inseparable from the Orthodox Church under whatever regime. By his tactics he aimed at regaining the legitimization of the Church and its re-entry into the national social organism. In this Nikodim saw himself as Sergi's follower, and justified his policies by the need to convince the authorities that the Orthodox Church must remain an organic part of Russian life in all aspects, being an inseparable historical expression of Russian spirituality without which the nation would not be able to last long morally.

In dissident circles it has been said that Metropolitan Nikodim, despite his devotion to the Church and his sincere faith in God, never managed to break psychologically with his communist-Stalinist past, still seeing the system as a mighty monolith and somehow failing to see the dichotomy between the regime and the nation. Could it be that in his theories on

the re-acceptance of the Church into the national organism he "missed the boat" as it were? What if the true national organism, as represented in this case by some 60 million practising Orthodox believers, is alienated from the atheist regime? What if integration with the national organism involves drifting away from the regime and its policies? It is this "establishment" posture of Nikodim which appears to have precluded him from taking advantage of the changing internal situation of the Church in the last decade or so. With the religious revival and the influx of a great many young intellectuals and students, the Church in Russia has gradually ceased to be a church of elderly peasant women. Thus, even in terms of power relationships, the potential of the Church *vis-à-vis* the regime seems to be changing in the former's favour.

It is to be hoped that as a consequence of this human and spiritual metamorphosis the post-Nikodim generation of church leaders will take a more independent stand in its dealings with the regime and win more rights for the Church. It cannot be ruled out that the concept of the national integration of the Church will be interpreted by them not as unquestionable and unconditional loyalty to the regime.

As for the moral side of Nikodim's policy of active compromise and co-operation with an establishment which suppresses and persecutes belief in God, only God can judge. We can only pray that the Lord will be merciful to His departed servant Nikodim, to whom He gave the gift of a great intellect and whom He burdened with such difficult tasks. For "to whom much is given, much will be required".

John Lawrence writes:

I knew Metropolitan Nikodim for more than 20 years, ever since his first visit to England as a young man not yet consecrated bishop. I did not regard him as a reliable witness to facts. Public life in the Soviet Union is a lifelong school of evasion, cover-up and double-think and, as Dimitri Pospielovsky indicates, Metropolitan Nikodim bore the marks of his upbringing in an activist Party family. Yet I, like others who knew him better, never doubted his Christian convictions, and my feelings for him were always warm. I shall never forget a dinner in London when he and I sat side by side out of earshot of anyone else who understood Russian, and he took the chance of telling me of the consternation that his conversion caused among his family and their friends. Now that he is beyond the reach of the Party's anger, I can at last speak freely about this.

At the first Christian Peace Assembly in Prague in 1961, he was the chairman of one of the sub-commissions, and I was the vice-chairman.

The Soviet delegation had obviously come with instructions to secure a severe condemnation of the Vatican's "war mongering". This was before the Second Vatican Council, but the Protestants and Anglicans of the West rose as a man to oppose this blanket condemnation, and it fell to me as Nikodim's vice-chairman to convince him that, while we were ready to join in sharp condemnation of certain elements in the Curia, we absolutely refused to condemn those others who were working for reconciliation from within the Vatican. Metropolitan Nikodim seemed to relish his instructions to attack the Vatican and he argued his case with great ability and force, but of course I would not yield. When he saw that he had lost the argument, he changed course very quickly and with great skill and, so far as I could tell, without seeking fresh instructions. In a very few minutes we had the text of a resolution to which everyone could agree. The next time I saw him, he had understood what great changes had taken place under Pope John and his hostility had quite gone, soon to be replaced by the friendly feeling towards Rome which he showed for the rest of his life and which brought him much criticism.

In 1968 I spent some weeks in the Soviet Union, partly in the diocese of Novgorod, which was under Metropolitan Nikodim's jurisdiction, being adjacent to his diocese of Leningrad. Visible church life in Novgorod had sunk very low, and I made a severe criticism of Metropolitan Nikodim's conduct of its affairs in *Frontier*, which I was then editing. I knew that he would know what I had written, and I did not expect to be welcome in his house after that. But the next year I was in Leningrad again and was taken to see him. I entered his presence uneasily, but he received me gently and with more than usual affection. I think he understood my motives in criticizing him, and I suspect that he may have been able to use my criticism to strengthen his own case in discussions with the Soviet authorities.

Paul Oestreicher writes:

To attend the funeral of Metropolitan Nikodim in his Leningrad Cathedral was a kind of pilgrimage. Twelve years earlier I had been in this same romanesque basilica when Nikodim was celebrating the Liturgy. To know him primarily as an astute ecclesiastical politician – and that was my main experience of him – and then to experience him leading his people in worship, was to be left in no doubt that here was a devout Russian Christian, who expressed himself most profoundly in the Liturgy. Those few who were privileged to visit him privately in his *dacha* outside Moscow experienced this devotional dimension of the man by praying

with him in his private chapel, a place of beautiful simplicity which expressed loving adoration.

But Nikodim was no simple man. He was as complex a personality as those in the novels of Dostoevsky. Intellectually brilliant, brought up in a communist home, he stumbled on the riches of Orthodoxy as a schoolboy and found his fulfilment there. He was to become a world figure, within his chosen sphere as controversial and scintillating as Nikita Khrushchev, whose policies radically harmed the Church in the years when Nikodim was establishing himself as the Church's chief spokesman abroad, and to no small extent at home.

Nikodim was deeply patriotic but also came to know and love the outside world. His patriotism made it easier for him to defend Soviet foreign policy without reserve, even when he must have recognized at least the partial validity of his opponents' arguments. His intellectual self-discipline was such that he never allowed his doubts to get in the way of his rhetoric. He was convinced that the one way to serve the Church well was to do the bidding of the State, in public at least, and certainly when abroad. Whether this was a kind of inner martyrdom for him, when he knew – specially in the Khrushchev years – what the State was doing to the Church, only God (and maybe a few intimates like his cousin and protégé, Metropolitan Yuvenali) will know. He knew, too, that many of his colleagues, suspicious of his meteoric rise to power, could not easily accept his apparently uncritical acceptance of Soviet policies. This was even more true of many of the common people, and it must have hurt him not to win their love.

But at his funeral (and on other occasions) I was left in no doubt that he had won the deep respect of his fellow believers. Ten thousand people came to bury their Archbishop with sincerity and reverence. He had not spared himself for a moment of his life: he had worked for a situation which would leave the Church intact, and intelligently alive to face what he saw as an eventually hopeful future. He cared deeply for the seminaries, and considered that one of his greater achievements was to have negotiated permission for many more seminarists to train for the priesthood.

His greatest achievement politically and ecclesiologically was to have brought Russian Orthodoxy out of its ghetto into the world of modern ecumenism. In the process he built up close and trusting relationships with many churchmen, Catholic and Protestant, throughout the world. He took his Church into the World Council of Churches and died as one of its Presidents. But to him it was more important to end the long and bitter feud with the Church of Rome. His thesis for his master's degree, written when he was already enmeshed in the webs of diplomacy, was on the life of Pope John XXIII. He came to love the Roman Church and worked hard to bring about intercommunion. Indeed he "jumped the

gun" and was known to be happy to give Communion to his Roman colleagues. This, not surprisingly, was not understood by many traditional Orthodox Russians and brought him perhaps even more criticism at home than his political stance, for which there were many Orthodox precedents.

Nikodim had wit and warmth. Even as a young man in his 30s he had complete self-confidence. He was able not to take offence when opposed, at any rate not personally, and in politics he knew when to back down. I doubt if he had the patience to play chess well, but he would have excelled at the kind of game played against the clock. Indeed his whole life was lived against the clock. He was a diabetic and the heart attack which killed him was, I think, his fifth.

I knew him best in the years 1964–68 when we were both on the Working Committee of the Christian Peace Conference. In that context I knew him usually as an opponent. My defence of the Christian Peace Conference on the one hand, and my refusal to accept many of its political taboos, were to him inconsistent and even disloyal. For all his ecumenical convictions, he never found Anglicanism and the English easy to deal with. Archbishop Michael Ramsey quite perplexed him. The Anglican kind of openness seemed contradictory and even devious to him. During a debate on the Middle Eastern problem (a subject which deeply concerned him since he started his foreign career at the Russian Mission in Jerusalem) I spoke for a particular resolution, but on hearing the whole debate I was persuaded to change my mind and voted against the resolution. This was my kind of integrity, but to Nikodim it seemed perfidious. Yet even when feelings were running high I never lost my respect and even admiration for him. One hot day I rolled up my sleeves: "Uncultured," he said to me, "A priest must have higher standards." Whatever he thought of my unpredictable views, he took my priesthood seriously, as I took his, and his ultimate integrity.

The Russian Orthodox Church today is stronger than when Metropolitan Nikodim entered its service, both despite him and because of him. I believe he would readily accept that evaluation. Those at his burial, who came to take their personal leave at his coffin, as is the Orthodox custom, came, many of them I believe, to forgive and to ask forgiveness – among them most movingly Metropolitan Anthony from London. They were expressing something of the Communion of Saints that transcends the conflicts into which Nikodim threw himself. "Sin boldly" Luther once wrote, "but believe more boldly still." Nikodim would have understood this "simul justus et peccator" better than most of us who take no great spiritual risks.