

Moscow Patriarchate Criticized

The Russian Orthodox Church from the time of Peter the Great's church reforms was governed by the Holy Synod (established in 1721) which in its turn was controlled by the Oberprokurator whom the Emperor appointed. At the Council of 1917-18 the Patriarchate was restored (see RCL Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 18). In April last year the 60th anniversary of the Patriarchate's restoration was celebrated. The following document from the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR is addressed to the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios.

Your Holiness!

The Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR was formed on 30 December 1976.¹ We were subsequently happy to learn that you, Your Holiness, in your Christmas Message, called upon leaders of the Churches and heads of government to declare 1977 a year of religious freedom. This we saw as a blessing, from the first among the leaders of the Orthodox Churches, upon the activity of the Christian Committee. Your appeal also had a special significance for us, because we could not and cannot count upon open approval for activity in defence of believers' rights from the topmost hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The hierarchy, according to its vocation, ought to be the first to speak out in defence of persecuted and oppressed Christians, and to call upon all its spiritual children to fight for the flouted rights of the Church, just as the All-Russian Council (Sobor) of 1917-18 and the great Primate of the Russian Church, Patriarch Tikhon, did. It is not our aim to condemn the hierarchy of our Mother Church for deviating from its pastoral duty. For 50 years now it has followed the course chosen by Metropolitan Sergi Stragorodsky at a time when a storm of infernal malice, unknown in the two thousand-year history of the Ecumenical Church, rained down upon the ship of the Russian Church. The enemies of Christianity succeeded not only in physically destroying all the greatest strengths of the Russian Church, but also in delivering her an enormous

spiritual blow. The extent of a man's strength at the moment of trial by fire is known only to the Lord who reads men's hearts: only He knows the measure of guilt and responsibility of our church leaders. But in summing up half a century of the course chosen by the Moscow Patriarchate, we cannot fail to testify to its spiritual fruits.

The episcopate's rejection of the charisma of confession, as expressed in its official renunciation of the martyrs and confessors of freedom for the Church, and its false statements about the prosperity and freedom of the Russian Church, led to a situation where the duty of a church leader to intercede for the people was forgotten. And this led gradually to complete blindness and deafness towards the needs of the Church's spiritual children, and to the extensive erosion of pastoral and ecclesiological consciousness.

To our eyes, it seems that the great St Seraphim's prophecy, widely known in the Russian Church, is being fulfilled. God revealed to St Seraphim that a time would come when the leaders of the Russian Church would deviate from the observance of Orthodoxy in all its purity, for they would teach *human* doctrines and commandments, and their hearts would be far from God. The leading hierarchs of the Russian Church are not only failing to defend their spiritual children. Under the conditions of a State which is dominated by an ideology hostile to Christianity, the struggle to preserve outward well-being has so transformed the minds of church leaders that they are beginning to do what is completely unacceptable for the Church: merging Christianity, and its hopes and aspirations, with the ideology of the adversaries of the Church of Christ.

In 1977 a new Soviet Constitution was adopted in the USSR, which patently discriminated against the rights of believers. As an alternative to the constitutionally proclaimed freedom of anti-religious propaganda, believers are merely granted freedom for "the performance of a religious cult", and certainly not freedom for religious preaching or missionary activity. This

attempt to limit the many-sided and all-embracing life of the Church merely to the performance of a religious cult, the attempt not to permit the spread of Christianity and to prevent young people coming to church, is a fundamental tendency in the struggle of an atheistic State against religion. But even the freedom to perform a religious cult becomes a fiction when, in the face of the insistently felt need of believers to participate in the liturgy and the Church's sacraments, the authorities refuse to open Orthodox churches. In the last 25 years, we do not know of a single case where a new Orthodox community has been registered. And this applies to a situation where Orthodox people cannot find a functioning church for thousands of kilometres. Numerous appeals to the authorities asking them to open a church have produced no result [...]

In recent years pressure on the Church has been intensified. More and more often local authorities have forced Orthodox parishes to accept as churchwardens people who have previously had no connection whatever with the parish. At the same time, truly believing parishioners who attempt to become members of the "council of twenty" [parish council. *Tr.*] with the aim of restoring health to parish life, are prevented from doing so because the local authorities refuse to register them. As a result the parish is weakened in the face of forces which are striving to destroy the Church. In Moscow the state apparatus is gradually introducing new conditions whose implementation is constraining church life more and more in the functioning parishes. Recently some Moscow churches were forbidden to accept people younger than 35-40 into the church choir. For more than ten years now it has been obligatory for churches to register the documents of people being baptized, or the documents of parents in cases where children are being baptized. Lists of those who have registered are systematically passed on to the local authorities, after which those whose names appear on the lists are subjected to administrative pressure. Recently in one of the Moscow churches, a new category of people was added to these lists - the god-parents of children being baptized. There is every reason to fear that soon this innovation

will become obligatory for all the churches, and thus the circle of believers to whom the existing "judas" practice extends, will become significantly wider. In their attempts to make life difficult for the Orthodox monasteries, the authorities have also begun to subject to administrative treatment even believers who send parcels and remittances of money to the monasteries by post. Although these actions by the authorities do not amount to direct persecution of Christians, they are nevertheless almost more dangerous. Christians know how to respond to direct persecution. Here, however, one compromise leads to another, as though with the agreement of the Church itself, and the freedom of its inner life is gradually paralysed. . . .

In our times, under the complex conditions of the Church's existence in a secularized and openly hostile world, it is becoming more and more clear how essential it is to immerse oneself in Christian doctrine on the Church, on its nature and structure, and on its relationship to the world. When we think about the Church, our thoughts naturally turn first of all to its head and founder, our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ the Saviour the fullness of the Godhead is united, unconfused but inseparable, with the fullness of human nature and human energies. In relation to the Church, the Body of Christ, this means that there is no kind of human activity which is not called to adoration, to following exclusively "the divine and all-powerful will". There is no sphere of human creativity which cannot be inspired by the all-hallowing grace of God. These are the ecclesiological consequences of Orthodox christology. Such is the will of God concerning the Church and its appointed place in this world. But it is not only the atheists, the builders of a godless society, the originators of legislation which permits the Church only to "perform a religious cult", who oppose this. How are we to reconcile with the demands of Orthodox ecclesiology the recent statement by Patriarch Pimen (in an interview with a correspondent of *Freie Welt/Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* No. 2, 1978) that in their liturgical life the members of the Russian Church are guided by the canons of Orthodoxy, but in their working and public lives by the principles proclaimed

60 years ago by the October Revolution, that is, principles aimed at completely depriving all humanity of God? This statement by the head of the Russian Church is tantamount to an agreement in principle with ecclesiological Nestorianism,² an official testimony that under Soviet conditions a Christian must be ambivalent and lead a double life: in church he is a Christian, sincerely believing that "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it" (Psalm 127:1), but outside the church, he is a member of the Communist Party, or at least, a communist by conviction, sincerely participating in and sympathizing with the building of the city of godless prosperity. The unconscious retreat from, or the conscious rejection by, the episcopate of the fundamental principles of Orthodox (Chalcedonian)³ ecclesiology, and its practical demands, has led to a situation where at the present time the ruling church leaders, and the administrators of the theological seminaries and academies, are putting more and more noticeable effort into instilling ecclesiological Nestorianism and monophysitism⁴ (monothelitism)⁵ into the minds of the clergy, and especially into the minds of those studying in theological institutions. Within the confines of the church the clergy are required to observe church canons, but outside the limits of "performing a religious cult" they must be guided by these canons only insofar as they do not contradict the general policy of destroying religion, and the discriminatory legislation in particular. Anyone who carries out missionary work not only risks being persecuted by the state organs, but also risks receiving canonical prohibitions from his superior in the Church. The latter, moreover, is inspired by "the interests of the well-being of the Church", and reacts with exaggerated sharpness to its instability and vulnerability. This is the Nestorian type.

To preach about the complete invulnerability and "everlasting freedom" of the Church is an example of ecclesiological monophysitism in its extreme Docetic⁶ form. "The Church is always free, do not be concerned about the freedom of the Church" is what even highly authoritative elders preach from the pulpit, affirming as they do so the complete illusoriness of the Church's

sufferings and its legal limitations, just as the Docetists affirmed the illusoriness of the suffering of Christ's human nature. Ecclesiological monothelitism is represented by extreme distrust of all human creativity and human activity, including activity in defence of people's rights. It essentially denies that God can act in history through the human will and the creative activity of man. In the minds of the episcopate and a significant portion of the clergy, both these diametrically opposed types of unorthodox ecclesiology co-exist peacefully and even unite in hostility to and suspicion of, or indifferent aloofness to, human rights activity, to campaigns for the opening of churches and registration of new communities. It is not rare for the bishops to use their authority against such undertakings of zealots for the faith, with the intention of stifling their enthusiasm.

[. . .]

If the forces of Ecumenical Orthodoxy, and its free voice, do not come to the aid of the captive Russian Church, then only divine intervention will be able to save us. Perhaps that is what the words of St Seraphim of Sarov, quoted above, were referring to.

This year is the 60th anniversary of the Patriarchate of the Russian Church. Sixty years ago, at the All-Russian Council (*Sobor*), the synodal form of church administration, dependent on the authority of the State, was overthrown. The Council decided that henceforward the Russian Church was "independent of the State and, guided by its dogmatic and canonical principles, would in church legislative, administrative and judicial affairs enjoy the rights of self-determination and self-government" (*Decisions and Resolutions*, Issue No. 1, pp. 4-6). "The Patriarchate is restored and church government is headed by the Patriarch" (*ibid.* Issue No. 1, p. 3). It was also decided that the Patriarch had the duty of interceding before the state authorities (*ibid.* Issue No. 1, pp. 4-6).

Thus the restoration of the Patriarchate was indissolubly connected in the collective mind of the Russian Church with the acquisition of full religious freedom and self-government. But now, after 60 years of tragic history for the Russian Church, it must be admitted with sorrow that the charisma of primatial

service, as the embodiment of the freedom of church self-government, is not being realized in the Russian Church, whose Patriarch and bishops have deviated from the ordinances of the Council.

[. . .]

Your Holiness! It is essential that concerted efforts should be made by the fraternal Orthodox Churches to study the tenets of Orthodoxy in the context of the contemporary world, which is secularized or openly hostile to the Church. It is essential to clarify the fundamental ecclesiological principles by which the Church must be guided in its mutual relations with State and society. Since we appeal to you, as first among the leaders of the Orthodox Churches, we hope that you will do everything possible to ensure that this urgent ecclesiastical matter starts to be put into practice.

[. . .]

The sickness of the Russian Church is a serious one. But we believe that the Lord, he who raised Lazarus after four days, will not abandon us in his mercy. Prostrating ourselves before you, Your Holiness, we beg for your especial prayers, and those of all Orthodox Christians, for the revival of the Russian Church to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Moscow

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¹The document announcing the formation of the Christian Committee was in fact dated 27 December 1976 (see *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 33-4). *Tr.*

²The doctrine that there were two separate Persons in the Incarnate Christ, one divine and the other human, as opposed to the orthodox doctrine that Christ was a single Person, at once God and man. *Ed.*

³At the Council of Chalcedon (451) the Incarnate Christ was defined as one Person in two natures, which are united unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably. *Ed.*

⁴The doctrine that Christ had only a divine nature as against the orthodox teaching (Chalcedonian definition) of a double nature, divine and human. *Ed.*

⁵A 7th century heresy which claimed that Christ had only one will. It was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 680, which proclaimed the existence of two wills in Christ, a divine and a human will. *Ed.*

⁶Docetism was a tendency in the early Church (particularly among Gnostics) which considered Christ's sufferings to be apparent rather than real. *Ed.*