

# The Black Quinquennium: The Russian Orthodox Church 1959-1964

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The almost universal view of Khrushchev as a liberalizer and someone who introduced reforms after the Stalin terror is accepted by most academics as well as journalists. But as far as this view touches religion it is a myth. If the centrality of the Christian Church, to both the present and the future, as an alternative ideology to communism (which it certainly is) were accepted, the popular view of Khrushchev would be overturned. For religion in general, and the Russian Orthodox Church in particular, his period in office was a disaster. Stalin had given a new deal to the Church during the Second World War, after which its leaders were able to utilize a period of stability to re-establish foundations which had been destroyed during the purges of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup> What Khrushchev subsequently did to the Church was more in line with the brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 than with the nurturing of Solzhenitsyn's talent by the first publication of his work in 1962.<sup>2</sup>

No one has yet satisfactorily explained why it was religion in particular which should have to bear the brunt of Khrushchev's belligerence. Either his liberalizing methods brought him under such criticism from his Politbureau colleagues that he had to demonstrate his abilities as a strong man in some other direction, or the leadership was seized with fear when it realized how strong the Church had become and in such a short time after all the confident predictions of its demise. The Church did surely demonstrate itself at that time to be the only viable rival to communist thinking.

The element of fear may therefore have paraded itself in all sorts of ideological clothing, but it can nevertheless be discerned beneath the verbiage; and one can also discern a sense of outrage that the successive pronouncements of Lenin and Stalin, backed by the might of the law and the secret police, had been powerless to eradicate Christianity from Soviet society.

The attack was against religion in general, not just against the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> Proportionate to membership, the Russian Orthodox

Church probably did not bear more of the brunt of the persecution than the Baptists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics or Jews. If it looked to be a special victim, this was because it had a more visible place in society, at least in the Russian Republic, than any other religious denomination. Not only are its churches a dominant feature of the countryside and even of many towns, but it even had a certain "established" position since it was permitted to have not only a functioning administrative structure, but the right to develop foreign relations, to print a very limited amount of religious literature and to ensure its future by maintaining theological seminaries and academies for training the priesthood. While some other denominations shared one or two of these privileges, none enjoyed the range of them available to the Russian Orthodox Church. It sounds from this as if the Orthodox Church basked in a climate of great favour. It must, however, be emphasized that this was not so. The privileges were only relative ones—relative in particular to the devastations of Stalin's purges. By comparison with any Church in a western democracy or with any absolute standard of human rights, the Russian Church was already subjugated to a power hostile to it and committed to its eventual eradication.

By the late 1950s, however, the church hierarchy must have thought that the plans for building a religion-free society had been put on the shelf.<sup>4</sup> A *modus vivendi*, humiliating to the Church in its political subservience, had been put on paper by Metropolitan (later Patriarch) Sergi as early as 1927, but implemented only when Stalin needed the backing of the Russian Orthodox Church to win the Second World War.<sup>5</sup>

The new anti-religious campaign of 1959-64 was sudden and ferocious, and seems to have caught the Orthodox Church unprepared. That it passed largely unremarked in the West does not alter the fact that in the Soviet Union it was as public as any event could have been. People saw church buildings which had been venerated for centuries destroyed before their eyes. National and prominent local church leaders were arrested or dismissed in the new purges. The cases of some of them received wide publicity in the press and on the radio. The lives of ordinary families were disrupted by violent new measures taken against them (such as removal of actively Christian children to state boarding schools).

It was the State—not even minimally the Church—which disturbed the existing *status quo*. If there were two events which publicly epitomized the change, they were the defection of Alexander Osipov, a well-loved teacher at the Leningrad Theological Academy, to the ranks of the atheists,<sup>6</sup> and the dismissal in 1960 and subsequent death in mysterious circumstances of Metropolitan Nikolai, who, more than

any other single figure, had symbolized the relative improvement in the standing of the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-war period.<sup>7</sup> From that day to this there has been no clarification of the circumstances behind Metropolitan Nikolai's death or of the chain of events which led to it. It is known, however, that the hand of the State lay heavily upon the Synod of Bishops, an uncanonical body irregularly convened, which met in July 1961 (see document pp. 24-7) and made (or was intimidated into making) a pseudo-canonical framework for the disastrous new relationship which the Church was being forced to embrace *vis-à-vis* the State.<sup>8</sup>

There has never been a truly systematic analysis of the effects of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, nor are any overall statistics available of the number of people affected. At that time the late Nadezhda Teodorovich, whose work has never received the recognition it deserves (very little has been translated into English), was the closest observer of the Soviet press and from that source alone she compiled a list of 44 trials of Orthodox bishops, priests, monks and nuns. At several there were numerous people in the dock at once. She found over 300 examples in all in the Soviet press and on the radio between 1956 and 1965 where members of some religious denomination or other were under severe attack, but usually without full details of names or the length of sentence.<sup>9</sup> Nikita Struve filled out the picture in a book initially published in French,<sup>10</sup> but the most convincing evidence of all came in the *samizdat* accounts by such eye-witnesses as Anatoli Levitin and the late Boris Talantov, men who knew personally some of those being martyred for their faith, who saw the KGB dispersing the protesting faithful before the bulldozers moved in to raze their beloved church to the ground. Unfortunately no comprehensive account of the evidence contained in these sources saw the light of day until 1970.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>The overall aim of the press campaign was to assassinate the characters of the clergy so that no popular acclaim would follow them to their prison camps or illuminate the aureoles of those who went to a martyr's death. But the effect of the campaign was almost the opposite of what was intended. By 1963 Stalin had been dead a decade and people were less inclined to bow their head meekly in the face of the terror.

Just as devastating as the State's attack on the personnel of the Russian Orthodox Church was the beginning of what had the look of becoming the annihilation of its key institutions: monasteries, theological seminaries and parishes.

In 1958 the Russian Orthodox Church was able to state that it had 69 monasteries and convents.<sup>12</sup> Within six years this number had fallen to no more than ten, with a mere handful of monks and nuns in each.<sup>13</sup>

Among these was the Pochayev Monastery in the Western Ukraine, one of the two or three most hallowed centres of pilgrimage on Soviet soil. The authorities almost certainly intended to close it, as they successfully managed to do with the even more loved Monastery of the Caves at Kiev.<sup>14</sup> That Pochayev remained open is probably due, more than to any other single factor, to the campaign of protest mounted in the West in its defence and instigated by the selfless action of a group of monks and lay-people who lived in and near the monastery.<sup>15</sup> Soviet law nowhere mentioned the existence of monasteries, let alone did it afford them any recognized status, which undoubtedly facilitated the State's campaign. The new purge reduced the number of seminaries from eight to three,<sup>16</sup> though the academies for higher theological learning, housed in the same buildings as the seminaries at Zagorsk near Moscow and in Leningrad, continued to operate. It is not known how many students there were before these closures, but the number was certainly inadequate to supply the personnel needed for a Church which was becoming more flourishing. The number of active Orthodox parishes in the post-war years is usually given as somewhere between 20,000 and 22,000, while the Khrushchev purges secured the closure of at least half, possibly even as many as two-thirds, of these.<sup>17</sup>

The repression against ordinary believers was less overtly dramatic, but was pursued with a vindictiveness which showed the general public how widespread the application of these new measures was intended to be. Often what was done bore little relation to the rights of the individual at law.

The sharpest area of conflict was inside the family circle: did parents have the right to bring up their children in their own religious tradition? There were—and still are—considerable ambiguities. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights, a document accepted by the Soviet Union, contains this right as one of its fundamental clauses. Soviet law forbids religious education for children under the age of 18,<sup>18</sup> but it has never barred the attendance of children at church. Nevertheless, local officials, acting either under the stimulus of secret administrative decrees or on their own initiative in the hysterical climate of the time, in many areas barred children from church or from receiving communion when they went there. They often forced the priest to administer this ban himself under threat of removing his registration, a probable prelude to total closure of the church.<sup>19</sup>

One of the first to document this campaign against children was Feodosiya Varavva, who in a detailed letter written in 1964 from her home in Lvov, Ukraine, addressed the Eastern Patriarch and the United Nations.<sup>20</sup> She wrote:

Since children have for two years now been barred from the church and from communion, last May I went to see a government official

in Lvov, whose name is Vinnichenko. I showed him the Soviet laws and, on the basis of these, I demanded that children should be permitted to receive communion. He showed me some brochure, but did not allow me to read it, since it was a secret instruction. Then I understood why he refused to let me read it. In January 1964 a secret meeting was held by the communist atheists, at which they decided to take away children from those parents who were bringing them up as Christians; they would prosecute the parents, because the communist atheists had entrusted all education to the schools, in contravention of Soviet law.<sup>21</sup>

It was four years later that the Marriage and Family Law was introduced, rendering it easier to find legal justification for the removal of children from parents who wanted to bring them up in anything other than the "spirit of the builder of communism" (Lenin).<sup>22</sup> To this day this has remained a common practice, a constant threat hanging over the unity of a Christian family. It is impossible to estimate how much psychological damage has been done to generations of children by the conflict which the State has deliberately generated between the authority of school and parent.

Although Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign was short-lived compared with the Terror of the 1930s, it had long-term effects. The most important of these were a new level of subservience on the part of the church leaders to the State, the determination by a significant minority to defend the rights of believers, and the growth of a rift between this latter group and the church leaders who sought accommodation with the State. A study of the complexity of these new relationships must await the last article in this series. This is not the place, either, to assess the motivation and personality of Metropolitan Nikodim, the man who more than any other symbolized the new relationship of the Church to the State after the deposition of Metropolitan Nikolai.<sup>23</sup>

It would, however, be appropriate to conclude with a word about the international reactions (or lack of them) to the catastrophe which hit the Russian Orthodox Church between 1959 and 1964. In the middle of this period (November 1961) Nikodim led the Russian delegation to the Third General Assembly of the World Council of Churches which was held in New Delhi. He and his companions acted as though everything at home was completely normal. There was no world reaction to the absence of Metropolitan Nikolai, although he was well known to some of the delegates present. He had already been removed from office and was to die on 13 December, exactly one week after the conclusion of the Delhi Assembly.

Of all the events which occurred on the international church scene

during those years, that was the one occasion when most could have been done to shore up the beleaguered defences of the Russian Orthodox Church. But no one knew what was happening in the Soviet Union and it seemed to be no one's business to find out—not even that of the World Council of Churches. The success of a subsequent small-scale attempt in Paris to save the Pochayev Monastery gives some indication of what might have been achieved.

From the perspective of 20 years later one can safely say, however, that Russian Orthodox believers, despite their isolation, came through the ordeal with their faith strengthened, and that the regime's attempt to achieve the opposite was a failure.

<sup>1</sup>See "The Russian Orthodox Church 1945-1959" by Philip Walters, in *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 218-24.

<sup>2</sup>This was Solzhenitsyn's story, *Odin den Ivana Denisovicha (One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich)*, first published in the Soviet journal *Novy mir*, No. 11, 1962, pp. 8-74.

<sup>3</sup>"Khrushchev's Religious Policy, 1959-64" by Donald A. Lowrie and William C. Fletcher, in Richard H. Marshall, Jr. (ed.), *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union, 1917-1967*, Chicago, 1971, pp. 131-55.

<sup>4</sup>See the article referred to in footnote 1.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets: Persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church Today*, London, 1970, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Bourdeaux, *Opium of the People: the Christian Religion in the USSR*, London, 1965, pp. 108-22.

<sup>7</sup>William C. Fletcher, *Nikolai: Portrait of a Dilemma*, New York and London, 1968, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup>"Opisaniye Arkhiyereiskogo sobora 1961 g." (anon.), mid-1960s, *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 701, 41 pp. For substantiation of the claim that this Synod was uncanonical, see Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, reference "Regulations, Orthodox Church (1961)" in *Index*, p. 358. A central aim of Orthodox churchmen who pressed for reforms in the 1960s, was to secure an open debate on the 1961 Bishops' meeting at the full *Sobor* which was eventually convened for the election of a new Patriarch in 1971. This attempt failed.

<sup>9</sup>"Processi e condanne contro sacerdoti e credenti nell' URSS (1956-1965)" by N. A. Teodorovič, in *Russia Cristiana*, No. 73, January 1966, pp. 13-27; No. 74, February 1966, pp. 24-36.

<sup>10</sup>Nikita Struve, *Les Chrétiens en URSS*, Paris, 1963, published in English as *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, London, 1967.

<sup>11</sup>Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*.

<sup>12</sup>*Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov (The Russian Orthodox Church)*, Moscow Patriarchate, 1958, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup>Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia*, p. 303.

<sup>14</sup>Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 74-84, 97-116.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, London, 1968, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup>Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, pp. 30-1.

<sup>18</sup>Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, pp. 159-61.

<sup>19</sup>Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, p. 160.

<sup>20</sup>English translation in Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, pp. 164-70.

<sup>21</sup>*ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup>*Religious Liberty in the Soviet Union*, Keston College, England, 1976, pp. 37-8.

<sup>23</sup>See the article "Metropolitan Nikodim Remembered" in *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 227-34, and photograph facing p. 240.

## Appendix

### A Landmark in the History of the Russian Orthodox Church

*In 1961 during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, the bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church were summoned to an important meeting. At this meeting they passed a resolution which effectively removed all administrative power within the parishes from the clergy and placed it in the hands of the dvadtsatki (parish councils of twenty). As in practice most of the decisions within a parish are taken by the executive committee (churchwarden, secretary and treasurer) of a dvadtsatka, and as in practice those elected to this committee (as well as to the dvadtsatka) have to be approved by the local soviet, the latter institution has considerable power within the parishes and has been able to appoint people who have disrupted parish life. The resolution passed in 1961 by the bishops was later ratified in 1971 at the Local Council (Pomestny Sobor) which elected Patriarch Pimen.*

*The extracts published below from a samizdat document (Arkhiv samizdata No. 701) describe the 1961 meeting which was to prove "a landmark in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church". This document was probably written in the mid-1960s.*

#### INTRODUCTION

On 18 July 1961, the day of St Sergius of Radonezh, a Council (*Sobor*) of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church was held in the Trinity-St Sergius Monastery. This Council passed a resolution on certain changes in the structure of parish life. This resolution made the Council a landmark in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church and established an entirely new direction in the system of parish administration.

Strictly speaking, we are departing from truth in calling this assembly a Council, in the real sense of this word. It was a Council only in form—indeed to be accurate, it scarcely resembled a Council even in this respect. To begin with, the bishops who had been summoned to the monastery for St Sergius' Day did not know, right up to

the very eve of its opening, that they were to attend a Council.

Arriving at the monastery in response to the Patriarch's invitation, none of them (apart from a very few) knew why they had been summoned from their dioceses. This, let it be said, is unprecedented in the entire history of the Christian Church. How many Councils had there been in the 2,000-year history of the Church: ecumenical and national, orthodox and heretical—but not one where, on the eve of its meeting, the bishops did not know that the next day they would have to take part in a Council, in which they would be required simply to keep their mouths shut and silently to sign a document relinquishing control over the administration of the Church.

Even in tsarist times, when there were no Councils and a subservient Synod met in their place—even then, if a hierarch was summoned to the capital he at least knew that he would be attending a session of the Synod. Now the bishops were summoned from their dioceses without any indication of the purpose of the summons. Since their arrival was timed to coincide with St Sergius' Day, when many bishops traditionally liked to visit the monastery, each could suppose that he alone had been invited—perhaps to discuss some personal matter.

Arriving at the monastery, and finding their colleagues present in large numbers, the bishops made the sudden discovery (even then, not from an official announcement but from one another) that "they were to be hanged tomorrow". Which is to say that a Council would be held for a no less painful execution: the signing of a death-warrant to the authority of the church hierarchy, and the handing of all authority over to the laity.

This did not come, by the way, as a complete surprise. Already in April the Holy Synod had issued a decree which pre-figured—or rather pre-decided—what the Council would do. This decree anticipated everything that the Council was now to legalize.

[. . .]

THE AGENDA

The bishops sat at their tables, thinking that they were about to consider in Council all the urgent needs of the Russian Orthodox Church and all the pressing problems, and that they would then take all necessary steps to improve church life.

Would they say something? What would the Patriarch say before the assembled bishops? What decisions would these "angels of the Church" arrive at, now that they were gathered here for the first time in many years—since the Local Council of 1945?

Anyone who expected some sort of spontaneity in the thoughts expressed and the speeches made would, however, have been gravely mistaken.

The truth was that the Patriarch's speech, along with every resolution on every question, had been drawn up long before; drawn up, and thoroughly scrutinized in every respect.

The agenda was as follows:

1. Expanding the membership of the Holy Synod.
2. Changes in parish administration. Report by Archbishop Pimen (Izvekov), Chief Administrator of the Moscow Patriarchate.
3. Entry of the Russian Orthodox Church into the World Council of Churches. Report by Bishop Nikodim (Rotov), Chairman of the Department of Foreign Relations.
4. Participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Prague Peace Movement. Report by Bishop Ioann (Vendland), Patriarchal Exarch for Central Europe.

There were no other items.

It would seem that apart from the above matters, the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church did not need to make any other decisions, because all was well. Evidently, assembled in the luxurious chambers of the Patriarch's residence they were not at all disturbed by the mass closure of churches and the dissolution of monasteries all over the country, by the imposition of unbearable taxes on the clergy which forced them to sell their possessions (or, if they were stubborn, have them distrained). Or by the fact that since the spring choirs had been broken up in

very many churches, that several seminaries had already been closed and others were threatened with closure in the autumn, and that any uncircumspect priest, innocently agreeing to recommend some church-going lad for admission to a seminary, would instantly be deprived of his registration, which is to say prevented by the civil authorities from pursuing his calling as a priest.

[. . .]

THE PATRIARCH'S SPEECH

After a brief prayer, His Holiness Alexi, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, opened the Council.

The first question—on expanding the membership of the Holy Synod—was decided very swiftly.

Hitherto, the Synod had been composed of the Patriarch, in the chair, three Metropolitans (of Krutitsy, Leningrad and Kiev), and two or three bishops summoned in rotation. Now, the Chief Administrator of the Moscow Patriarchate, Archbishop Pimen, and the Chairman of the Department of Foreign Relations, Archbishop Nikodim, were to be included in the Synod as permanent members. By this change alone the centre of power in the Synod passed into the hands of the Moscow hierarchs, and the role of those from other towns was diminished.

This had, of course, been decided beforehand. The holders of power had arranged everything, and there could be no objections. Having expended all of several minutes on this question, the hierarchs immediately passed to the second item on the agenda.

"We are gathered here", said the Patriarch, "not to argue and discuss at great length, but to make a unanimous decision . . ."

In these words, the Patriarch invited the bishops to keep silent. It was self-evident—there was nothing to argue about, nothing to debate. All that was required was a unanimous vote of approval, to put a seal on the proposal, as there could be no alternative to it.

As a matter of fact, the old man spoke quite sincerely, and even, it may be said, quite correctly. Everyone understood that no real discussion was possible. There could be no alternative decision to the one which had been proposed by someone



somewhere. Nothing could be decided other than what had already been decided by someone somewhere.

Perhaps discussion was necessary? But to what purpose? What would be the point? For the sake of appearances? Was it not better in that case to keep silent, rather than indulge in futile hypocrisy?

Everyone knew very well that in the previous year, when the Patriarch had been asked to reorganize parish administration, he had at first refused, even falling ill from nervous strain, and was not himself for two weeks. But then, seeing that there was nothing to be done, he reconciled himself to it, deciding that this concession might be a chance to delay the approaching end.

Above we said a few sharp words about the clergy. We can take all these back. What good does it do to speak ill of the hierarchs? We shall be silent—the more so because when someone in authority addresses a meeting, it is the place of his juniors to be silent. We shall be silent, because at this particular meeting the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia chose to give his opinion of the clergy. Let us listen to what he had to say.

He spoke as follows: "Church life, especially in the provinces, is in full decline. Complaints against the clergy are forever mounting. People complain about the clergy to the Patriarch and to government organs, and there is no end or limit to these complaints." Complaints, complaints, complaints . . . His Holiness did not say whether they were just or unjust. Nor did he mention what action the bishops had taken in response to these complaints. But it would appear from his speech that the complaints were just. It would appear that the parish clergy was entirely at fault, and that the bishops were quite unable to call them to order.

Nothing was said about the hierarchs. As it turned out, they were now assembled to deal with a matter which until then had been entirely outside the sphere of their activities. The priests were exceeding their rights, exceeding their powers, and breaking canon law. And if priests break the law, the only answer is to change this law.

Quite a strange conclusion—but in the mouth of His Holiness it sounded quite firm.

Usually in such cases, when someone or other breaks the law, the first consideration is how to call him to order. Only

then, if it is found that those who break the law are innocent, and that the fault lies with the law itself which is harmful and impossible to obey, does the question of whether to change or repeal the law arise. But on this occasion the question was not put like that. It was stated, simply, that the law was being violated and therefore must be changed.

The author of the Patriarch's speech, A. V. Vedernikov, had evidently not thought all his arguments through while he was writing. He did not reason out that if priests break the law, then the bishops by their very title ("bishop"—"overseer") are there to oversee and discipline the clergy. He did not reason out that if deficiencies in the parishes are reported, and for some reason nothing is said about how the bishops have reacted to the deficiencies, the implication is that the bishops have no real power, and therefore the episcopate is in fact superfluous. It was odd that nothing was said about what the bishops were doing to remedy the deficiencies. It would seem that there were deficiencies in the parishes and everyone was complaining to the civil authorities and to the Patriarch—but not to the bishops, who apparently only learned of the complaints from the Patriarch at the Council, or from the newspapers.

We have already said that, if at the start of this account some sharp words were said about the episcopate, then we are ready to take them back—since it is not our place to judge bishops. But now the Patriarch himself is speaking, and saying that the Church is gripped by an incurable disease and can only be saved by . . . the laity! In other words, the Patriarch himself at the Council of Bishops declared publicly that the clergy was in a wretchedly bad state, and that there could be no question of the bishops being able to put matters to rights.

Not one word, not even one brief hint of what the bishops should do to improve church life! The situation is grave, the clergy is unfit—as the number of complaints shows, therefore . . . therefore all parish administration must be put into the hands of laymen. Someone should have asked whether His Holiness the Patriarch considered it normal that laymen should complain about their pastors to the civil authorities—authorities which not only express open hostility to religion but have

as one of their priorities the eradication of religion. Someone should have asked whether anyone had checked through all these complaints. But no, not one word was said. Not one word did the Patriarch utter in the speech that had been prepared for him behind the scenes about canon law, which clearly entrusts all church administration to the bishops and to spiritual leaders appointed by them. Nor did he utter a word about how a Council of Bishops could presume to revoke a resolution of the 1945 Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. It would seem that the person who composed the Patriarch's speech was either in a hurry, or else decided that he could get away with not mentioning it.

Thus the Patriarch's speech boiled down to the idea that complaints were numerous, that something must be done, and that this—self-evidently—should be to hand over the administration to the laity in the form of the Parish Councils of Twenty (*dvadtsatki*).

The bishops sat and listened, listened and sat. It was clear to each of them what these appointed organs of the civil authorities, these Councils of Twenty (or rather of three, or even two) would mean, and what sort of defenders of Orthodoxy these would be. They had all seen the emergence in recent years of many dubious persons, who had hastily learned how to cross themselves and could scarcely tell the liturgy from mattins. In the hands of these "laymen" was now placed the fate of the parish churches and their priests. But what could one do? The bishops only had to think back, to remember a little table and three well-dressed, well-known figures behind it, in order to shrug their shoulders and keep silent. One might as well bang one's head against a brick wall. Besides, a new system would bring some sort of guarantee of an extension for a while of the Church's

existence, which made the bishops feel slightly easier in their minds.

After all, if some new system, however draconian, is proposed, it implies that a complete eradication has not yet been decided upon. There would be some sort of respite, however brief, and then—what God might grant. Meanwhile life would be possible, and even easier. Once the Councils of Twenty took control, fewer demands would be made on the bishops. We live in times when it is hard to see clearly. Pressure is applied—but then you look closer, and the situation is not so bad. [...]

There remained one most important task: to collect the signatures of the bishops. One of them went along the table with a sheet of paper. The bishops took out their fountain-pens and signed—marking their decision now and forever. "The unlawful has been made law", they muttered afterwards in the corridors. "The unlawful has been made law", whispered the monks of the monastery, discussing the bishops' decision that evening. "The unlawful has been made law", sighed the parish priests in the provinces, sensing what it was to be dependent on churchwardens. "The unlawful has been made law", repeated the hierarchs again and again, as in the autumn of that year they saw the fruits of their decision: the Parish Councils of Twenty ceased to pay them any attention at all, and in time refused to give even the customary dues. [...]

Thus ended the Council of Bishops of 1961.

The results were not slow to show themselves. Soon more than two thousand churches were closed down around the country . . . and thousands of priests were deprived of the right to celebrate the liturgy . . .