

MARXISM-LENINISM LIVES AND PREVAILS IN THE CHURCH

Anonymous Clergy Document

"A manuscript arrived in our editorial office that was sent by several priests of the Russian Orthodox Church, who have served for a long time and whose flock is not in the Moscow Eparchy.¹ In size it was a book [64 pages], as genre, a *crie de coeur* (which of course it is for the contemporary clergy). The priests willingly signed their names to the document, but we were only willing to print this text under pseudonyms. It is true that each is going toward Golgotha, but it is also true that one need not provoke immediate imprisonment. The following should be clear from the text itself, we will only add here that for a priest to be forbidden to serve is more than to prohibit their profession. For a priest today not to be able to assist at the liturgy, is like prohibiting a philosopher from thinking, or to stop a poet from composing verses. It is the loss of freedom.

The manuscript was entitled "Church in capital and small letters", which can be downloaded as a pdf file (www.novayagazeta.r/file/pdf/cerkov.pdf). Its authors are prepared to discuss the issues with believers, atheists, agnostics, or believers of other confessions. In this published version (which gives the full sense of the manuscript's contents) we present some excerpts but without editing for content and style." - *Novaia Gazeta*, Nr. 65, September 4, 2008

[The mixing of published excerpts below reflects the fact that longer sections of the *Novaia Gazeta* published version contain more detailed references to biblical meanings and church history, deemed somewhat redundant to REE readers, whereas the G2W excerpts gave more space to the specifics illustrating contemporary complaints about abuses within the Russian Orthodox Church management structures. - Translator]

... It would of course be desirable, for understanding and discussing the issues that trouble us, if that could be done on the pages, or on the websites of the Church's information sources. Unfortunately, however, to send this collection for consideration to the editorial board of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, for example, would be too much like during Soviet times sending the manuscript "GULAG archipelago" to the editors of *Pravda*. Marxism-Leninism is gone, but its ideas are still alive and are prevailing somewhere, namely in the church..

Currently, religious-political goodwill toward the clergy, aside from their ability to buy church supplies in a diocesan store, is evident in the inevitable subscription to the chief official publication of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) - the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Scanning its shiny pages, it is hard to avoid the thought, whether there is anyone anywhere, who in principle would be interested in the texts presented in such officiousness. Even in Soviet times, once in a while an article with serious content would appear.

People may ask whether an open discussion of failings in the church is too much like airing dirty laundry [the Russian expression is: cleaning rubbish out of a hut]. We do not think so, because the hut we are talking about is open to all - so too with the church and its trajectory, it cannot be otherwise. Decisive is that all who enter the hut, including those who live in it, do not confuse rubbish, layers of soot and dust in it with the building, nor confuse the pile of rubbish in front of the hut with the hut itself.

¹ The translator has chosen to use the anglicized word "eparchy" to refer to a diocese, a bishop's area of territorial responsibility. A priest's charge will be referred to as a "congregation" (those who meet in a local church building for the liturgy) or "parish" but the reader should keep in mind that these terms evoke somewhat distinct legal and pastoral meanings in the Russian Orthodox context, compared to an American of western Catholic one.

Spiritual seekers, standing before the doors of the church with the question in mind - do I enter or not? usually alert some of the prophets among the clergy and faithful to possible falsity, in a word, to darkness appearing as light. The first option is to quietly turn around and walk further. The second option, to stay, bodes the greater danger of later driving them out under the rubric of "heretic", "mason", or quite simply a "diversant" [one who thinks differently] as enemy of Orthodoxy. All of these reactions drive people out of the church more effectively, than atheistic propaganda did.

Church in Capital and Small Letters

The word for church in its basic meaning refers quite simply to the building, the "temple", a gathering place for prayer. When used with that simple meaning, the word 'church' is written in small letters [in Russian]. But then of course the question arises about the highest meaning of the term we are discussing.... On that point theological discussion has not yet died down. Here, without commentary we will employ the following meaning: Church is the organic unity in Christ of all thinking beings (people and angels), who have turned to God of their own free will. The Greek term *eklessia*, that corresponds to 'church', can refer to a distinct or separate assembly. As is easy to guess, we have in mind here the separation from all sin and evil. That is the one Church that includes all that manifest the image of God in their love to humans, who are committed to being "holy and unspotted"... So this religiously risen person appears to his Creator together in unity with all other such risen ones - the one Church - 'Church' written in capital letters. In practical terms, however, on our sinful earth we see the real existing earthly church - 'church' written in small letters - in which expressions of the ideal Church emerge, and uniting many forms for articulating the religious life of humanity.

One of the important, if not the most important reasons for the Revolution and Bolshevik tyranny ... was the deep crisis within the church. The terrible tragedy of the Russian Church, yes indeed of the entire country, was in its destructive excesses ... comparable to the fall of the Byzantine Empire or the exile of Israel [in Babylon]...

Our earthly church, like others, is an organization and a society with specific characteristics, that on many points are like those of Soviet society. Although this fact may be grounds for malicious joy for the Soviets, it fills us, the spiritual leaders of the Russian Church, with deep pain. Yet were we to keep silence about this fact, instead speaking too easily about the large size of our church, about its innumerable saints, about martyrs and confessors who were murdered by godless state power, then we would deepen the pain and open the gate and door to more malice...

Neglect of the Holy

During the 20th century our own landsmen (not Jews or Westerners) crushed the Russian Empire and the by then insipid salt of the existing Russian Church.... Two decades before that catastrophe, alert contemporaries raised the alarm about the "neglect of the holy" that was happening under the facade of pompous imperial and churchly ceremonials. St. Filaret of Moscow, John of Kronstadt, or the great philosopher Vladimir Soloviev and Count Sergei Witte - all of them warned in their own ways, against the portending revolutionary ills and a bloodbath of the innocent, if the condition of the church and of the state would not change radically. ... But that is the issue - no one wished to let go of the sins and habitual vices in their own hearts - just as is true today. ...

The new cult of service to the martial ideology of the newly formed Red Empire of the USSR and its atheistic anti-church offered nothing fundamentally new. It consisted mostly of ghostly parodies of the churchly *cultus*. Glorifications, new hymnody, honoring of relics, street procession, and the struggle against opportunism - all were caricatures of elements of the Orthodox canons and cult, an illustration of Voltaires' ditty about the devil as God's monkey. Yet divine Providence would not have tolerated such imitative monkeyshines, had not the ritual side of Orthodoxy become an empty shell, as it did early in Byzantium and in Israel before: self-satisfied, harmless, robbed of its spiritual content. In fact, the visible side of the rituals, once understood as an expression of God's love, inspired from above, had degenerated long before the Bolsheviks, and had become a caricature. So-called Soviet power merely brought it to its logical conclusion. ... In a perversely perfectionist way the Soviets applied methods of pressure and violence to destroy the dissenters and people of other faiths - methods unfortunately that the office holders of the church had not feared to use in the past. The most grotesquely glaring anti-churchly expression was however Marxist-Leninist ideology. It was a scary caricature of the paralyzing conservatism of the "Collection of archives", that Orthodox teaching had been reduced to. Yet the defenders of dynamic religious thinking long ago had already challenged the atmosphere of theological stagnation within the Russian Church....

Fortunately, the Russian school of Orthodox theology was able to take several steps, although only after the Revolution in Parisian exile, thanks to the work above all of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, John Meyendorff and Vladimir Lossky. Even if their views differed on many issues of the church, all fostered open and free discussion of all theological questions. ... Archpriest Georges Florovsky identified as key cause for the collapse of Orthodoxy through the Revolution, the criminal "preparation" of church dogmas: what does not develop will die. ... If barriers are set against the scholarship of human reason in order to protect revealed truth, one is "preparing" dogmatics, and the theologians become its grave diggers.

We must receive the doctrine of the Church as a talent given us from God, but dare not forget at the same time, that the Savior himself in His parable of the talents, pointed out how we should deal with the talents. ... But instead of understanding the dogmas as entrusted to us by God, we have managed to bury this treasure with full force, and keep on doing so. ...

Stagnation after the Transformation

Through the grace of God Russia was able to shake off the Bolshevik yoke relatively painlessly. ... With that the Russian Church freed itself from its seventy year imprisonment in an atheistic state. Inwardly, however, she did not free itself so easily from the Bolshevik syndrome, in which she was saturated in many ways. ... It does not concern us here to call the clergy of the Russian Church to repentance because of their cooperation with the KGB - that happened, and still does, also within the church. What we do seek to raise as a concern for pondering, is to identify in what ways the Church today is still linked to Bolshevik slavery.

Nearly twenty years have passed, since the Russian Church left its Soviet "Egypt" ... Old and new monasteries were opened or re-opened, religious literature was circulated, sermons were preached through the media, seminaries and other educational institutions opened their gates, and priests go into schools and other secular institutions unhindered. But that about covers the list of what has changed - they concern exclusively the external organization of the church. We cannot yet speak of an inner renewal, it does not exist.

As before, the earthly church is not merely a closed society, it remains the same old pot, whose broken fragments after the explosion were re-assembled and carefully glued together again.

It seems, as if all its members had dreamed of a complete restoration of what had once come apart, symbolized by the rebuilding of the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow. Practically at no level is there an analytical discussion or analysis of the failures of the past. Nor is there an attempt to discover the root causes for the church catastrophe within the lap of the Russian Church itself. In contemporary secular Russia there is a process underway, even if it merely drags along, to look at the recent past and current problems, in order to raise consciousness, and it is making progress. As to the causes for the needs and sickness of our existing church, about all we hear from the church's representatives is an abrupt "because of our sins", but that is all. ...

The communist leaders used to make great efforts to screen Soviet reality from the eyes of foreigners, and failed ignominiously. ... Just so, anyone who comes to the church today, notices right away that there is much that does not fit with the shiny images conveyed in the church periodicals. Its editors have strict instructions, to report only about the positive. There too it is analogous to Soviet bliss - when you got home you were greeted by radio, TV and the press with news stories about over fulfilling the five year plans. ...

Marxism-Leninism collapsed, but its ideas remain very much alive, and that not just anywhere, but specifically in our Church. Every priest, in order to demonstrate his reliability church politically, must purchase all church supplies and utensils only from the diocesan shops, and must be a subscriber to the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Paging through its shiny pages, one cannot help but wonder whether the articles set in such an apotheosis of officiousness, really and truly interest anybody. During Soviet times at least, an interesting and substantive article would sometimes appear.

The reason for this is clear: We must present our Orthodox church in all its grandeur. Why should we discourage the people with discussions about unpleasant things? That would only chase them all away. But, sooner or later, what is suppressed or unspoken will break open, and "everything secret will become known" (Luke 8:17). ... With such revelations we offer the church a major service. Anyone coming to the church today quickly notices the difference between how the church presents itself, and what is really happening. Alienated, the visitor hangs about for awhile, unable to find that depth, that truth, the ecclesial or the spiritual that his soul is seeking, and leaves the church again, often never to return. If during the 1990s those far from the church still held Orthodoxy in deepest respect, especially when they learned of the persecutions during the Soviet era, today such respect has shifted to rejection, to condemnation and even antipathy. That is a logical development, unfortunately, not only because, to put it gently, of the not very convincing appearance of many clergy, but because of the union of the church with the might of this world and its structures.... If during the "Egyptian" epoch of the Russian Church everything could be excused with a reference to the "damn Bolsheviks", that is no longer credible today - the red slavery is dead. What has remained, that went hand in hand with it, is the feudal system.

Churchly Serfdom

From school we know that the chief feature of serfdom was the violation of human rights, or more correctly, the outlawry against serfs. When we look more carefully at the bishop's seat today, one could say, it is a palace; the bishop is the landholder and the rest of the clergy are merely peasants. As was true in old Russia, congregations are obliged to pay a portion to their Lord every month. Formerly that was called "giving a tenth to the bishop", now it is designated "dues to the eparchy."

The bishop has the right, to transfer a priest with no need to give a reason; something which also happens often to experienced priests. Either the priest displeased the bishop, because

he failed to send in the tenth on time, for example, or it happens simply to send the message that priestly service is not easy living. Once the priest receives the transfer order, he must leave immediately, without any regard to protests from the congregation, who have come to love their priest, never mind the personal and family difficulties of a sudden move. In many eparchies, it is easier for a priest to get an audience with a government minister in Moscow, than an audience with his bishop. Some wait for months. Many priests, especially older ones, refuse to be transferred, and instead leave the church, to find a secular job. The result is personal tragedies and broken fates. Nor can a priest move to another eparchy, to another 'landholder', if his bishop has imposed on him a ban on celebrating the liturgy. ...

So of course, no priest dares, without permission of his bishop, to attend a seminar or a secular conference, even if they are about philosophical or theological topics, no matter how many invitations he has received. And to present a paper, or a publication without review and permission from the censor office of the eparchy (now called "Information Department") is deadly. So for the simple priest, the only option left, if they wish to survive in their parish, is to keep quiet, to interfere nowhere, and most importantly, to bring together the money to forward to the eparchy.

...

Nor should we forget the compulsory services. From time to time, all clergy in an eparchy are required to listen to hour long speeches, often so long winded and boring that even an experienced Party comrade would be astonished. Other required services are the street processions with hours of speech making thereafter in the city centers. Officially these are called "processions" where the priest must appear with icons and banners. Whether such a forced assembly of unhappy people, whose only thought is 'when will this finally be over', can really be called a "procession" before God is doubtful. Such types of activity the Bolsheviks called demonstrations, but they were usually happier events because many carried a bottle with them!... Other shortcomings could be added: excessive bureaucracy, intrigues, flattery, spying, denunciation and suppression of personality...

True Bishops as Shepherds of their Flock

Nevertheless, "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:50). As writers we assert with emphasis that we know bishops who are bearers of light, so we know that it can be different in the church. This is a comfort and gives us hope, that there are bishops, who show concern for what really matters, for what is expected of a spiritual leader: an open ear, understanding, sympathy and compassion. In short, a spiritual warmth that our cold world needs so desperately. The doors of such bishops are open to anyone, without prior appointment, clergy and laity included, even the man from the street. One goes to such a bishop the way one approaches one's father, or even more, one's mother, from whom you receive comfort and counsel. Formalities are kept to a minimum, there are no formal reports, resolutions or bureaucratic barriers. And voila, leadership in such an eparchy is more efficient without the "riding around on officious horses"... here there is a spirit of genuine love - that of the bishop for his flock, and of his flock for the bishop....

Instrumentalized and Manipulated Church

It is not only the politicians who like to fill the ideological vacuum that appeared with the collapse of Marxism, it is true also for some churchmen. Since nothing new or halfway decent occurs to them, and likely will not, they turn their eyes to old traditions, that is, to Orthodoxy as one element in the 19th century triad of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nation". This is justified by

linking it to the Christianization of Russia. Fortunately some of the bishops know full well where a restoration of an alliance between state and church leads. An Orthodoxy that wants to raise its people to humility, obedience and silence is one thing, it is something quite different if such commands are transferred over to the sphere of the state....

Another extreme is to confuse goal and means. That applies not only to sacraments and rituals, it also applies to church regulations and canons, that many Orthodox perceive in the form of an Old Testament or even heathen literalism... When you ask such literalists if they personally intend to obey the old church rules, they avoid answering by asserting: the most important thing is to hold high the Tradition and not to revise anything. Yet all acknowledge, that were all points of Orthodox church law obeyed, no more than 1% of the clergy would remain, the number of communicants during the Great Fast would drop to zero. How many monasteries are there, never mind parishes, where the liturgy is celebrated according to its fullest order?...

There are unfortunately too many so-called traditions in our church, which are poorly or not at all anchored in the great holy tradition... It would be nice if we could restrain ourselves from taking some of the excellent witnesses of our church's tradition and turning them into a "Tradition of the Startzi" that is, to immediately cast in stone and set them up for show in some heathen pantheon. We are to preserve the tradition (1 Tim. 6:20), but not bury it after we have frozen and killed it. We need to be clear when the tradition speaks to goal, and when to method. No wonder then when the traditions as understood by the literalists degenerate into heathenism in Orthodox dress, such as the panic fear about numbers, symbols or the barcodes churned out by modern civilization.

Hence, many of our bishops and priests see possibilities in our canon law for keeping the faithful under order and control, as in an army.... In the church statutes you can find, if you will, far more punitive possibilities, than is true for military service manuals, such as in transfers to other parishes, working the night shift, or making them pay some excessive church fines. ...

It is quite naive to think, that one could explain to a bishop or abbot, that such methods turn a monastery into a barracks, if not into a totalitarian sect. An officer would more likely cease his tyranny of a soldier, than would a power hungry churchman see in the church regulations anything more than a tool for punishment. ... This is a bigger issue than the decay of Christendom or about the permeation of heathenism in the church, it is quite simply about the end of Christendom. In many places a person in the church is humiliated and harassed solely for "its salvation". ...

As to theology, we merely point to the following. One would think that a discussion conducted with goodwill and objectively about the issues raised here as an organic process of development within the church would be considered necessary, rather than that we accuse each other of heresy. For that to happen, the bastions of censorship will have to come down. ... Another task, closely linked to the problem of a developing theology is the exposition of revealed divine truth in "a modern form" as it is put today. ... We must answer scholars and philosophers, who demand of us an account of the hope that is in us, not only in humility before God, but seek where possible to speak in their language - the language of modern scholarship and philosophy. An Orthodox priest today, especially one with higher education, must know such languages. Otherwise his parish will consist solely of aunties and children. That is what the Bolsheviks used to wish for, that the church consist only of old women and old, drunken priests. If we are to do more than merely continue the Leninist project, then the sermons and writings of our priests must be renewed to include scholarly and philosophical concepts. Yet here too we stumble upon that system of serfdom noted above. ...

The actual Christianization of our existing church is far from complete. ... This depends not only on our leading hierarchs, but on each one of us, if we are to bring an end to the lordship mentality and the fawning before the powers of this world. It depends on us whether the church will free itself from the Bolshevik spirit and legacy, to break the bonds of serfdom so that a turning to a better way becomes possible....

We would rather that the issues broached in this essay did not need to be sprung on people in this way, but rather in church papers and websites. That is not yet possible, unfortunately. To send this manuscript to the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate would be like sending the GULAG Archipelago manuscript to the editors of Pravda in Soviet times. Yet the times are changing....

Translated by Walter Sawatsky, from Russian and German excerpts as appearing in Novaia Gazeta, 19 September 2008 and G2W, Nr. 4, 2009, 18-21.