

BOOK REVIEWS

Constantin Simon, S.J.: *Pro Russia: The Russicum and the Catholic Work for Russia*. Rome: Orientalia Christiana Analecta 283, Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2009 – Reviewed by Francesco La Rocca

The Pontifical College Russicum, the Catholic institution aimed to train priests of Byzantine-Slavonic rite, is one of the most controversial institutions in the recent history of the Catholic Church. Once labelled by the Soviet government as a “nest of spies”, the Russicum has undergone some major changes in the last times. Its history is also the history of the evolution of the Catholic approach to the Orthodox Churches: from the last unionist attempts at the beginning of the 20th century up to the ecumenism promoted by Vatican Council II. This evolution is retailed by Constantin Simon S.J.’s *Pro Russia: The Russicum and the Catholic Work for Russia*.

Pro Russia is an extensive report (903 pages and 65 photos) not only of the history of Russicum, but also of the history of the entire Russian Catholic movement. The author, Constantin Simon, is professor at the Pontifical Oriental Institute on Russian issues. His deep knowledge of the Russian history and culture allows him to deal simultaneously with ecclesiastical and secular history, literature, Western and Oriental theology: an interdisciplinary approach which definitively characterizes *Pro Russia* too.

The book is divided in two major parts. At the very beginning, Simon points out that, as “the Russicum was not built on air”, a broad introductory study is needed. That is why the first section of the book, indicatively headlined as *The Long Way to Russicum*, does not deal directly with the college’s history, but delves into the events and characters who brought about the foundation of Russicum. Starting from the first Russians whose presence in Rome is recorded, the author analyzes the history of the little Russian community in Rome, whose identity will be inevitably influenced by the events occurred in their homeland (the description of the relation between Gogol’ and Rome is interesting and significant). In two other chapters, Simon focuses more on ecclesiastical topics: the birth of the Russian Catholic movement, both in Russia and abroad; the renewed interest of the Vatican for Russia following the stormy events at the beginning of 20th century. Particular attention is paid, in the last chapter of this first section, at those two figures who influenced most the new college: Cyrille Korolevskij and Michel d’Herbigny S.J., personalities whose names are definitively not unknown to the scholars of Eastern Catholicism.

The second part of the book deals more specifically with the Russicum. Simon describes minutely its foundation, its rectors and its students. The theme which Simon holds dearest is undoubtedly the evolution of the Russicum from a bastion of uniatism to a “meeting place” with the separate Eastern brethren. That is why great attention is paid to the years of Paul Mailleux S.J., who was personal friend of one of the most important Russian Orthodox individuals of his time, Mitropolin Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod, a figure that Simon himself describes as “a friend of the Russicum”. The description of the Mailleux’s years concludes the second and last part of *Pro Russia*.

Actually, three appendixes are added, where Simon pledges into the history of Vendelín Javorka (first Russicum rector, who spent several years in a Siberian gulag) and the life of Blessed Fedor Romža (former student of the Russicum, Greek-Catholic Bishop of Mukačevo, killed by the Soviets in 1947). In the third appendix, the letters (in Russian) of Romža to his Russicum superiors are reported. A collection of photos of the Russicum and of the most important Russian Catholic personalities brings the book to an end.

Significantly enough, Simon does not finish his book drawing a balance of the Russicum. On the contrary, he states his opinion at the very beginning of the book where, after a brief

introduction of the college, clearly claims that “Catholics no longer view, or should no longer view, the Russian Orthodox Church as a dangerous rival...therefore, the Russicum seems to have outlived its original purpose. No longer are Catholic Byzantine priests especially needed in today’s Russia...which leaves the second purpose of the Russicum conceived in the wake of Vatican II: that of ecumenism and dialogue with the college as a true meeting place for Orthodoxy and Catholicism. It remains to be seen if the college can truly assume this role in the future.”.

Apart from some rare typing mistakes that one can find throughout, the major criticism that one can raise, comes paradoxically, from what is one of this work’s major strong points: the attention to detail. Simon expands on almost all the topics he deals with: biographies, events, cultural and ecclesiastical movements, historical trivia and so on. Some footnotes are so broad as to fill entire pages on their own. If this makes *Pro Russia* a real mine of information, on the other hand it inevitably penalizes the reading. Overwhelmed by information, even the most interested reader is led to lose the thread. But again, all this is an unavoidable consequence of the mass of information that the author has been able to gather, information which contributes to giving a complete report on the Russicum and on the early Catholic Russian movement.

To sum up, *Pro Russia* is an extremely interesting piece of work, a seminal read for those who are involved in the study of contemporary relations between Catholicism and Eastern Christianity.

Reviewed by: Francesco La Rocca, University of Bologna, Italy

Toivo Pilli: *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, Vol. 37, Milton Keynes, Colorado Springs, Hyderabad: Paternoster, 2008. 295pp. *Review by Valdis Teraudkalns.*

In this book Baptist historian, Lecturer at Baptist Theological Seminary (Tartu, Estonia) Toivo Pilli provides us with a detailed and skillfully written account of Estonian Baptist history during years of Soviet regime. This is a significant contribution to the studies of Baltic Baptist histories. This book marks the next, more advanced stage of Baltic Baptist historiography. In the past historical works written on Baptists in the three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) have been mainly of a popular type, aimed at creating among local Baptists a sense of their historical roots and providing members of the movement with enough material to keep up cultural memory, linking a new generation of believers with the past. Such a type of works is always selective and its approach is closer to the “telling how it really was” approach of historical positivism. In the inter-war period when universities in all three newly established independent republics were free to develop their own theological traditions, academic circles, often dominated by persons belonging to ruling churches, mostly were not interested in the history of religious minorities. During the Soviet period we can see the same pattern – scientists who in spite of obligatory ingredients of atheistic ideology from time to time published valuable works on religion in the Baltics concentrated on the main religious groups (in Lithuania – Catholics, in Latvia – Lutherans, Catholics, Orthodox, in Estonia – Lutheran and Orthodox).

After the collapse of the Soviet system ways opened up for Baptists to start writing their own histories of an academic character. One work close to project undertaken by T. Pilli is the Latvian Baptist history written by now deceased Latvian Baptist bishop Janis Tervits (*Latvijas baptistu vesture. Faktu mozaika*. Riga: Latvijas Baptistu draudzu savieniba, 1999). However there is at least one important difference between these two monographs – Tervits distrusted the official archives of the Soviet period and purposefully ignored them as ideologically charged. Toivo has

used a lot of archive material, critically analyzing it and balancing information gained from archival files with other sources like interviews, published and unpublished materials. Thus the reader has access to diverse voices coming from various sources.

At the beginning the author examined how the Free Church movement started in Estonia. It is important for understanding the composite character of Estonian Baptist identity that after the Second World War, it developed by the forceful unification of Baptists, Revivalist Free Churches, Evangelical Christians and Pentecostals. As in other Soviet republics, Estonian Baptist identity was refashioned by external forces. Thus book speaks not only of Baptist distinctives but also shows the Estonian Baptist movement as a place of interaction between various streams of Evangelicalism within the territory of the USSR and not only from there. Through various channels the movement had access to a wider world as well, as it continued to cherish traditions and theologies of Holiness, Pentecostal and other movements that influenced it before the war. We can also see how a small informal circle of Baptist intelligentsia in the 1970s and 80s were inspired by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Küng and other contemporary theologians, thus not only challenging ruling Soviet ideology but also stepping outside a traditional Evangelical subculture.

The author moves chronologically through the periods of Soviet rule – the first years of the second Soviet occupation until the death of Stalin, from Khrushchev to Brezhnev, opening doors in the eighties. In each of these periods Soviet religious policy differed. Then the author takes the reader through the internal dynamics of Estonian Baptist identity by analyzing various aspects of Baptist theology and praxis - open communion versus closed communion, baptism of believers versus open membership, more structured worship versus spontaneous liturgical style, the influence of dominant Christian groups (Lutherans) – these are only some of the topics discussed. A reader acquainted with international Baptist history will recognize among questions raised by Toivo topics familiar to other Baptist groups around the world. Thus local becomes global and boundaries are blurred by placing local Baptist histories in the context of global dynamics.

This book is a valuable source for foreign researchers who otherwise would not be able to use materials written in Estonian. It extends the scope of research that often has concentrated on Slavonic Baptists to other ethnic groups of the former USSR. We can hope that in the next volumes of *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* we will be introduced also to other Baptist groups of that region.

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