

Roman Catholicism in Post-Soviet Russia: Searching for Acceptance

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Perestroika and the fall of Communism have brought unprecedented freedom and new opportunities for Roman Catholicism, and other religious entities in Russia, but also new challenges and threats. The punitive 1918 and 1929-laws on religion and extralegal repression of the Soviet era are gone, and churches now function in a much more open society. Still, the Russian Federation has continued, albeit in milder form, its predecessors' tradition of state supervision of religious activity, and all religious bodies have to deal with often unsympathetic local authorities, build a church structure on the narrow, sometimes nonexistent, base inherited from Soviet times and confront what Patriarch Aleksii II called a "spiritual vacuum" in which "the moral level of the people is falling catastrophically."¹ This "spiritual vacuum" has left churches in the new Russia particularly vulnerable to the threat of consumerism and materialism which the new openness to the outside world has brought.

According to official Vatican statistics, there are approximately 1,285,000 Roman Catholics in the Russian Federation, with 327 parishes and 51 mission stations, served by 192 priests and 312 sisters.² A recent study by Sergei Filatov and Lyudmila Vorontsova estimates only 150,000 faithful, however.³ In 1991, apostolic administrators were installed in Moscow, Novosibirsk, and Karaganda (now in the independent nation of Kazakhstan). Two more apostolic administrators, one in Saratov and one in Irkutsk, were named in 1999.⁴ The heavy concentration

¹*Slovo Sviateshego Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi Aleksii Vtorogo, na eparkhal'nom sobranii dukhovenstva Moskvi 23 dekabria 1994 goda (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskoi Patriarkhii, 1995), 11.*

²*Annuario Pontificio*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), passim.

³Sergei Filatov and Lyudmila Vorontsova, "Catholic and AntiCatholic Traditions in Russia," *Religion, State & Society* 28, no. 1 (2000) : 79.

⁴Apostolic administrations are groups of the faithful which "for special and particularly serious reasons are not erected as dioceses." *Annuario Pontificio*, 1924. The archbishop and bishops responsible for the Catholic Church

in what is now the Apostolic Administration of Western Siberia, some 1,000,000, is the heritage of mass deportations of historically Catholic Volga Germans, Poles, and Lithuanians in the Soviet era, with 200,000 Catholics in Northern European Russia and only 50,000 in Eastern Siberia and 35,000 in Southern European Russia, respectively.⁵

In caring for its flock the Russian Catholic Church not only has to deal with the uneven distribution of faithful across the entire territory of the Russian Federation and historic differences between foreign ethnic communities but also the emergence of distinct social categories or constituencies. The core element is what Ralph Della Cava calls "old Catholics"; that is, Poles, Germans, Lithuanians, and others who have maintained both their traditional Catholic faith and their ethnic identity. Thanks to Germany's willingness to admit anyone who can prove German nationality, large numbers of "Russian Germans" have emigrated in recent years. Also eroding Russian Catholicism's historic base is assimilation; Della Cava identifies a second group of Catholics as the russified descendants of what had been foreign minorities.⁶ Then there are a small but often highly educated and influential number of Russians who came to Catholicism since the 1970's either from atheism and agnosticism or from Russian Orthodoxy.⁷ Most of these see Russia's future as an integral part of the West and hence, in words of a leading spokesman for this group, Yuli Shreider, "it is the Latin-rite (Western) Russian Catholic community that has the best chance of bringing a western cultural influence to bear."⁸ But a few argue that the proper expression of the Catholic Church in Russia is through a revival of the Apostolic Exarchate for Catholics of the Byzantine Rite,⁹ established in 1917, and although

in Russia have been named to titular sees rather than the cities in which they actually live and work to avoid the appearance of creating a parallel hierarchy to the Russian Orthodox Church. But Orthodox still have been quick to see their presence as evidence of Roman proselytism.

⁵*Annuario Pontificio*, passim.

⁶The first Mass in Russian at Saint-Louis des Français in Moscow, in Soviet times one of only two Catholic churches open in Russia, was said in 1991. Today Masses in Russian are more and more the norm.

⁷Ralph Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996: The Latin Rite," *The Harriman Review* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 52-54.

⁸Yuli Shreider, "Russian Catholicism," *Religion, State & Society* 24:1(1996): 60.

⁹Filatov and Vorontsova, "Catholic and Anti-Catholic Traditions in Russia," 78-79.

suppressed under the Soviets, still exists on paper.¹⁰

A major seminary, Mary Queen of the Angels, was opened in Moscow with about 30 students in 1991 and transferred to St. Petersburg in 1995 and a minor seminary began in Novosibirsk in 1993.¹¹ In 2000, Russian seminarians studying in these institutions and abroad totaled 47.¹² In the first Catholic ordinations in Russia since 1918, three Russians became priests on May 23, 1999,¹³ a hopeful step towards inculturation, since in 1996 all but three of the 130 priests in Russia were foreigners.¹⁴ The Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas in Moscow, founded in 1990, offers a three-year course of studies in philosophy and theology.¹⁵

The Russian Catholic apostolate also includes catechism classes, study circles, homes for the elderly, youth clubs, childrens' shelters, and the like.¹⁶ There are two official Catholic newspapers, the weekly *Svet EvangeIiia* in Moscow and the monthly *Sibirskaiia Katolicheskaiia Gazeta* in Novosibirsk, plus an independent sophisticated monthly magazine, *Istina i zhizn'*, and, since 1996, a five-day-a-week radio program.

Both the successes of and difficulties for the Catholic Church in Russia stem from its close links with the Catholic church worldwide. Thus, such international religious orders as Jesuits, Dominicans, Benedictines, Franciscans, Missionaries of Charity, Divine Word Fathers, and others have sent personnel and resources to Russia. Also active there are a variety of official and unofficial organizations, such as the American Catholic Charities, its German counterpart Caritas, *Communione e Liberazione*, and The Church in Need, in addition to aid sent directly from the Holy See. Until recently all the Russian Catholic clergy were trained in established seminaries and universities abroad; for example, a Russian convert from a nonreligious family

¹⁰*Annuario Pontificio*, 1112

¹¹11Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996," 50-51.

¹²*Annuario Pontificio*, passim.

¹³"Premiers nouveaux prêtres," *La Documentation catholique* 2207 (4 July 1999): 649.

¹⁴Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996," 50.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶For example, in 1996, Salesians staffing the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Moscow opened a children's shelter nearby. Felix Corley, "Catholic Shelter Works with Vulnerable Children in Moscow," *Keston News Service* (22 January 2000): 4-9.

studied for the priesthood at the Dominican Aquinas Institute at Saint Louis University. This is in sharp contrast to the often rigid and anti-intellectual Russian Orthodox seminaries,¹⁷ as well as the many overzealous and unprepared Protestant missionaries in Russia. Too, Catholicism can draw on a body of theological thought and social teaching to deal with-contemporary issues that Orthodoxy had no chance to develop under Communism.¹⁸

On the other hand, the Catholic Church in Russia must conform to the broader goals of the Vatican, in this case Pope John Paul II's forceful continuation of John XXIII's and Paul VI's ecumenical outreach to the Orthodox Churches in hopes of eventual reunion, reiterated, for example, in his recent visits to Georgia, Romania, Greece and Ukraine. Hence, official Catholic policy, while defending the right of Eastern Rite or Uniate Catholics to practice their faith in the Western Ukraine and Belarus, discourages converts from Orthodoxy either to Eastern Rite or Latin Rite Catholicism.¹⁹ This means no Catholic Byzantine Rite in Russia, although, as mentioned above, some Russian Catholics believe this would be a more authentic expression of the Church in Russia. Similarly, the creation of apostolic administrations rather than dioceses as described earlier is an attempt to counter Orthodox opposition to the existence of parallel canonical structures on the same territory.

The Catholic Church in Russia also functions within a new secular political framework. Laws enacted by the Soviet Union and the Russian Soviet Federal Soviet Republic in October 1990 guaranteed freedom of religion both for citizens and for properly registered religious

¹⁷See the gloomy picture of Russian Orthodox seminaries painted by Hieromonk Hilarion Alfeyev of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Affairs, "The Problems Facing Orthodox Theological Education in Russia," Report delivered at the consultation of Orthodox theological schools held in Belgrade, Serbia, from 16-24 August 1997. [published in *REE*, XIX, 1 (Feb. 1999) 1-28 - Ed.]

¹⁸For example, articles in the Russian Catholic newspaper *Svet Evangelia* relied heavily on the papal encyclicals *Gaudiam et Spes* and *Centesimo Anno* to analyze the 1996 presidential election from a Christian perspective without endorsing particular parties or candidates. *Svet Evangelia*, 9 June 1996, 5-6. See also Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996," 47.

¹⁹In recent years, the Catholic Church has defended the right of Eastern Rite Catholics to "preserve their patrimony" while admitting that previous efforts to reunite Orthodox to Rome "were not always correctly understood or approved." Hence "new paths" to unity must be sought. Pope John Paul II's message to the Ukrainian Catholics, *Magnum Baptismi Donum*, 14 February 1988, quoted in *La Documentation Catholique*, no. 1962 (15 May 1988):485. In 1990, 1991, and 1993, the International Orthodox-Catholic Commission for Theological Dialogue formally rejected "uniatism," and in 1993, it announced that the Latin and Eastern Rite Catholic Churches "no longer intended to proselytize among the Orthodox." "Déclaration de la Commission mixte internationale pour le dialogue théologique entre l'église catholique et l'église orthodoxe," 23 June 1993, quoted in *La Documentation Catholique*, no.2077 (1-15 August 1993): 711, 713.

organizations; the law of the Russian Republic went beyond the union version by including foreigners and stateless persons and simplifying the registration process.²⁰ The 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation again endorsed religious freedom; Article 14.1 stated that "religious associations (ob'edineniia) are separated from the state and equal before the law," while Article 28 "guarantees everyone freedom of conscience, [and] freedom of religion, including the right to profess any religion individually or in cooperation with others."²¹

It was only after a long and often contentious debate, however, that the law "On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious organizations (ob'edineniia)" spelling out the implementation of the constitutional guarantees was signed by Boris Yeltsin on 8 September 26, 1997.²² Although the 1997 law "recognizes the special role of orthodoxy in the history of Russia," in the same paragraph it states its respect for "Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions as comprising an inseparable part of the historic heritage of the peoples of Russia."²³ Attempts by the Moscow Patriarchate to make Orthodoxy *the* expression of Christianity in Russia²⁴ were rejected after protests from many quarters, including Archbishop Tadeusz Kondruszewicz of Moscow's expressed concern in 1996 lest the Catholic Church be classified as a "foreign religious organization"²⁵ and Pope John Paul II's June 24, 1997 letter to Boris Yeltsin.²⁶

Still, the 1997 law and its implementation have drawn criticism, both from religious entities inside Russia and such outside bodies as the United States Commission on International

²⁰Peter Roudik, "The Russian Federation," in *Religious Liberty: The Legal Framework in Selected OSCE Countries* (Washington, D.C.: Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2000): 106. For the texts of the 1990 laws, see *La Documentation Catholique* 2023 (3 March 1991): 228-39.

²¹*Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (Moscow: INFRA.M---NORMA, 1997) 7, 11.

²²Federalnyi Zakon "O Svobode Sovesti i o Religioznykh ob'edineniakh," <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/cr021071.htm>: 1-20.

²³*Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996," 55.

²⁵Quoted in *Svet Evangeliia*, 16 June 1996, 2.

²⁶Text in *La Documentation Catholique*, 2167 (5 October 1997): 804. Yeltsin vetoed an earlier more restrictive draft of the 1997 law, noting that it violated the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and other international conventions. "Religious Liberty: the Russian Federation," 109.

Religious Freedom.²⁷ Particularly troubling are the distinctions between religious "organizations (ob'edineniia)" which have the right to engage in a wide range of religious activity, but only after a long and complex registration or re-registration process; "foreign" religious organizations, which are not permitted to engage in religious activity; and "groups (gruppy)," which can function only on the most basic level.

Nevertheless, the Russian Catholic church has been able to navigate the federal legal channels fairly successfully. As of June 29, 2000, for example, all Catholic parishes in the Apostolic Administration of Northern European Russia that had applied for re-registration had succeeded.²⁸ Even the Jesuits achieved re-registration as the Russian Independent Region of the Society of Jesus, although only after a long legal battle.²⁹ On the other hand, because the two foreign-born apostolic administrators appointed in 1999, Clemens Pickel for Southern European Russia and Jerzy Mazur for Eastern Siberia, lack residence permits and have had their applications for Russian citizenship refused, their administrations cannot be registered as religious organizations.³⁰

On the local level, where major responsibility for implementation of the 1997 law rests, however, the picture is less favorable. Regional authorities not only often administer the law to the disadvantage of non-Orthodox, especially foreign-based, churches, but also enact legislation more restrictive than the federal statute; in 2000, fully one-third of Russia's regions had done so.³¹ In Moscow, for example, although the Church of the Immaculate Conception finally was

²⁷Philip Walters, "'Russia 'at a Crossroads' Says Official US Report on Religious Freedom," *Keston News Service* (5 May 2000): 3-4.

²⁸"Russian Reregistration Report," *Keston News Service* (24 July 2000): 7.

²⁹Since the Russian branch of the Society of Jesus had been established by a provincial through a decree from the Jesuit Father General in Rome, it initially was only offered the right to exist as a foreign "representative office," which would not be permitted to engage in "cult or other religious activity." Another obstacle was that the provincial who made the appeal of the original refusal to the Constitutional Court did not have a Russian residence permit. Only after he was replaced as provincial by a man who did have one was re-registration granted. Tatyana Titova, "Russia: Jesuits Finally Achieve Re-Registration," *Keston News Service* (18 September 2000): 1-3.

³⁰The secretary to the papal nuncio in Moscow, reported, however, that residence permits for foreign clergy usually were granted without difficulty. Tatyana Titova, "Marry a Russian, Catholic Bishops Told," *Keston News Service* (22 September 2000), 2-6.

³¹*Ibid*, 4 .

reconsecrated in December 1999 after years of legal wrangling,³² the Church of SS. Peter and Paul is still occupied by a coal institute despite a 1992 decision by the Moscow City Soviet to return it to the Catholics.³³ And while this year local authorities in Nizhnyi Novgorod went out of their way to furnish buildings for a new Catholic church there,³⁴ in 1998 the governor of Orel ordered a Catholic church transferred to the Orthodox Church,³⁵ and in Belgorod officials have refused since 1997 to register the Catholic parish there.³⁶ On May 11, 2000 tax police raided a Jesuit center in Novosibirsk; although no charges were filed and seized material returned, no apology or explanation was given.³⁷

Even more important than governmental policy in shaping the environment for the Russian Catholic Church is what Professor A. YU. Grigorenko of the Herzen Pedagogical University recently labelled the Russian habit of "conflation of national and confessional self-identification."³⁸ Hence the unofficial and often official image of the Russian Orthodoxy is that it is *the* national church with the right and obligation to play the leading role in public life, while Roman Catholicism is a foreign and even dangerous transplant,³⁹ views repeatedly and forcefully

³²See the description of Catholic efforts to reclaim the church from a construction factory which had occupied it since 1937 in Bob Greenall, "A Catholic Controversy, Or, The Storming of Factory 46," *Moscow News*, 9 July 1992: 5. For the reconsecration, see "Inauguration de l'église de l'Immaculée Conception á Moscou," *La Documentation-Catholique* 2217 (2 January 2000) : 46.

³³Tatyana Titova, "Moscow Catholics to Contest Privatisation of Confiscated Catholic Church," *Keston News Service* (10 July 2000): 1-5. Every year on the feast of its patrons Archbishop Kondruszewicz leads a procession from the nearby Church of Saint-Louis des Français to SS. Peter and Paul to celebrate Mass outside the building to protest the delay.

³⁴Xenia Dennen, "Russian Regional Snapshot: Religious Tolerance in Nizhni Novgorod," *Keston News Service* (1 June 2000): 4-5.

³⁵Roudik, "Religious Liberty: The Russian Federation," 127.

³⁶Roman Lunkin, "Russia: State Officials and Orthodox Oppose Catholics in Belgorod," *Keston News Service* (3March 2000): 1-5.

³⁷Felix Corley, "Tax Police Raid Siberian Catholic Centre," *Keston News Service* (30 May 2000): 1-3; Geraldine Fagan, "Novosibirsk Catholics No Longer Seek Redress for Tax Police Raid" *Ibid.*, (21 June 2000): 1-5.

³⁸Andrei Yur'eviiia Grigorenko, "Religiia, obshchestvo, gosudarstvo v sovremennoi Rossii (nekotoryie aspekty problemy)," in *Religioznye organizatsii i gosudarstvo: perspektivy vzaimodesistviia: materialy konferentsii: Moskva, 22-23 fevraliia 1999 goda* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Rudomino", 1999), 27.

³⁹For a fuller treatment of these images, see my "Roman Catholicism in Today's Russia: The Troubled Heritage," *Journal of Church and State* 39 (Autumn 1997): 681-96, and the works cited there. For the Soviet period,

stated by Patriarch Aleksii II and other Orthodox leaders.

Thus in August 1997, the patriarch said that "you cannot claim that there is a Catholic tradition in modern Russia,"⁴⁰ and in December 1998, that the Russian Orthodox Church was "the last and only barrier preventing the disintegration of Russia,"⁴¹ while the August 2000 Jubilee Council of the Russian Orthodox Church urged cooperation between the Church and the Russian state in "patriotic education," economic policy, and joint action against "pseudo-religious structures."⁴² Similarly, at their January 7, 2000 conference in Bethlehem, fourteen Orthodox patriarchs denounced "the proselytizing activity conducted by certain Christian confessions or religious groups in regions where the Orthodox Church has carried out its pastoral work for centuries, even until now."⁴³

Although some local authorities openly favor such a central role for the Orthodox Church in the new Russia, Presidents Yeltsin and Putin have been more cautious. While Patriarch Aleksii II had a prominent place at Yeltsin's inauguration as president of the Russian Republic in 1991 and of the Russian Federation in 1996, and was summoned to the Kremlin to witness Yeltsin's dramatic resignation on December 31, 1999, Yeltsin did veto the more restrictive draft of the 1997 law and ordered that a special Program on Prevention of Political and Religious Extremism in Russia in 1999-2000 be established.⁴⁴

Within hours after becoming acting president on December 31, 1999, Putin announced his commitment to "freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, the right to

also see Roman Solchanyk and Ivan Hvat, "The Catholic Church in the Soviet Union, in *Catholics and Politics in Communist Societies*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 49-92 and Constantin Simon, "How Russians See Us: Jesuit-Russian Relations Then and Now," *Religion, State & Society* 23, No. 4 (1995): 343-57.

⁴⁰Quoted in Filatov and Vorontsova, "Catholic and Anti-Catholic Traditions in Russia," 81.

⁴¹Quoted in Roudik, "Religious Liberty: The Russian Federation," 128.

⁴²Lawrence Uzzell, "Letter from the Director," *Keston News Service* (22 September 2000): 3.

⁴³"L'incarnation et la nativité de Jésus-Christ, gage de sanctification de l'histoire et du monde: Message des Primats des Églises orthodoxes à l'occasion du Jubilé du deuxième millénaire du christianisme," *La Documentation Catholique* 2221 (5 March 2000): 228.

⁴⁴Roudik, "Religious Liberty: The Russian Federation," 126.

private property,"⁴⁵ and in the decree on a new national-security policy signed January 10, 2000 omitted the December 1997 national-security policy reference to "the important role of the Russian Orthodox Church," but did cite "the negative influence of foreign missionaries."⁴⁶ One the one hand, his efforts to reassert federal authority over the regions will help protect the Russian Catholic Church and other non-Orthodox faiths against local pressures, but in the long run such a reconstituted central power bodes ill for small minorities such as the Russian Catholics, particularly if as previously in Russia's history the Orthodox Church is accorded a special place.

Russian Catholics, above all the astute and diplomatic Archbishop Kondrusziewicz, are well aware of the official and unofficial constraints under which they function and have stressed that their mission is to minister to their flock, not to proselytize. "I always repeat," said the archbishop in a 1994 interview, "that for me Russia was, is, and will remain an Orthodox land. In Russia, conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism is a rare occurrence. And I am against such conversions."⁴⁷ The Russian Catholic Church assiduously fosters ecumenical contacts with Orthodoxy⁴⁸ and even has Orthodox professors on the faculty of the Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁹

At the same time, however, the Russian Catholic Church insists that it is a *Russian* church, not a foreign transplant; in a May 1995 interview with Della Cava, Archbishop Kondrusziewicz produced copies of decrees dating from the eighteenth century allowing Catholics to worship in the empire.⁵⁰ The Catholic Church also defends its right to receive those seeking baptism, contrary to the Russian Orthodox Church's belief that the nation, despite its "spiritual vacuum," still is holy Russia, formed by Orthodoxy, to which even its unchurched sons

⁴⁵Quoted in Frank Brown, "Putin commits to religious freedom, *St. Louis Review* (28 January 2000).

⁴⁶Geraldine Fagan and Lawrence Uzzell, "Church-State Relations in Putin's Russia: What's Next?," *Keston News Service*, (14 April 2000): 2-3

⁴⁷Quoted in *Istina i zhizn'*, no. 9 (1994): 13-14.

⁴⁸Schlafly, "Roman Catholicism in Today's Russia," 693; Dennen, "Religious Tolerance in Nizhni Novgorod," 5; Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996," 49.

⁴⁹Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996," 51.

⁵⁰*Ibid*, 55.

and daughters rightfully belong. "When a Russian asks for baptism in the Catholic Church," Archbishop Kondrusziewicz said in a 1994 interview, "one cannot say we are engaging in 'proselytism'." In 1995, Fr. Bernardo Antonini, rector of the Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas, was blunter: "How can one say to a man that if you live in Russia, you must be Orthodox? . . . Nonsense!"⁵¹

In the first post-Soviet decade, the Roman Catholic Church in Russia has made great progress reestablishing structures almost totally destroyed in Soviet times and mediating liturgical and theological changes since 1917 for a flock that had been insulated almost completely from them. For the foreseeable future, it will put primary emphasis upon developing its infrastructure: reclaiming property, especially churches, confiscated under Communism;⁵² coordinating the efforts of its heterogeneous clergy and religious; and above all, forming a body of native priests, religious, and trained lay personnel. At the same time, it will continue to press for full legal acceptance as a legitimate component of the new Russia.

The Catholic Church in Russia is well aware that it never will be more than a tiny minority. Even if the Vatican figure of 1,285,000 is accepted, this is less than one percent of the population of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile Catholicism's traditional ethnic base is being eroded by emigration and assimilation, not to mention the secularization that openness to contemporary Western culture has brought in countries like Poland and Ireland. Nor will it play a major role in defining Russian culture and identity in the new millennium. But the Catholic Church is hopeful that, in addition to being allowed to function in a climate of religious freedom, it will be recognized, in Shreider's words, "as a community of Russians who are enriching Russian culture with an experience it lacks."⁵³ Whether this is possible depends much more on the path the new Russia takes than on anything the Russian Catholic Church says or does.

⁵¹Quoted in *Svet Evangeliiia*, 25 June 1995, 5.

⁵²in a 1996 interview with Ralph Della Cava, Archbishop Kondrusziewicz stressed that money was so short that few new churches would be built and expenditures for repair and rental carefully scrutinized. Della Cava, "The Roman Catholic Church in Russia, 1991-1996," 50.

⁵³Shreider, "Russian Catholicism," 58.

