

Helping Russian Orthodox Renewal

Paper 1: The Russian Orthodox Church in its Historical Context....

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Frustrated Mission

The Russian Orthodox Church is the bearer of a frustrated Russian national mission. For a time in the sixteenth century it seemed as if 'Rus' might become both a nation-state for East Slavs and the centre of a renewed Orthodox ecumene, following the fall of Byzantium. But in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Russia became not a nation but a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional empire, which included a large non-Russian, non-Orthodox, even non-Christian population. The Orthodox Church was gradually downgraded: it lost its Patriarchate and most of its property, while its monasteries were required to take on secular tasks. Peter the Great ordered that if a priest heard a confession which could be construed as seditious he should report it to the authorities. The Church was separated from the state education system, and universities had no theology faculties. Similarly, in the villages the parish was separated from the peasant commune.

Spiritual Elders

In many countries the Church plays the role of mediator between high and low culture, but in Russia it had great difficulty in doing this, not least because until 1870 there was no Bible in vernacular Russian, only in Church Slavonic, which was difficult for ordinary people to understand. Yet during the nineteenth century there was a remarkable revival of the Orthodox spiritual elders, the startsy, of the kind depicted by Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. They practised ascetic and meditative techniques derived from Byzantine hesychasm and achieved a tranquillity and spiritual insight which made them very attractive to people of all social classes looking for advice and support. Peasants and nobles, illiterate people and famous writers all flocked to them. The church authorities looked askance at them, but perhaps they did achieve a kind of mediation between high and low culture. Otherwise it was left to an ordinary priest, Fr Gapon, to try to present a petition to the Tsar on behalf of the working people: in January 1905 his followers were massacred by troops blocking the way to the Winter Palace.

Bolshevik Persecution

In 1917 the Patriarchate was restored by the Provisional Government. But the incoming Bolsheviks 'separated' church and state in a way which meant the complete subjugation of church to state. Thousands of parishes and monasteries were closed

and many clergymen arrested, a fair proportion of whom died in prisons and labour camps. The Patriarchate was suspended and only restored in the middle of the Second World War, when Stalin wanted the support of Orthodox believers. Even thereafter the Church was not allowed to conduct any kind of religious activity other than weekly divine service in a consecrated building. Processions, Bible reading, Sunday school, charitable work, even the ringing of church bells, were all forbidden. The Church was kept under the strict supervision of the state-run Council for Religious Affairs, which dominated church appointments and assessed clergymen according to what they contributed to the policies of the Soviet state, for instance in promoting the international peace movement. Those who were zealous in the faith were downgraded.

Problems and Challenges

Even today much of the church hierarchy was appointed in this manner, constituting what might be seen as the last bastion of the Soviet state. It has changed less than any other body in Russia in the last twenty years. There are individual priests doing a magnificent job in looking after the congregations and addressing the desperate social needs of contemporary Russia, but they often do not receive the support of their bishops and the Church in general. Many of the Church's resources go into restoring church buildings, which are certainly needed, but is this the right priority?

The Russian Orthodox Church is in a difficult position. It is not the official state Church, like say the Church of England, so that it cannot command the automatic loyalty of Russian politicians. At the same time, it suspects that other denominations, for example American evangelical movements, are better equipped and financed for the propagation of the faith within Russia. That is why it sponsored the 1997 Duma legislation placing restrictions on denominations which have not been long established in Russia.

Given the magnitude of the problems of old people, orphans, the homeless, the mentally ill and so on in Russia today, the Russian Orthodox Church has a great opportunity to make social work a major objective and begin to win back those many Russians who have become disillusioned with it since the fall of communism. In spite of all its difficulties, it is spiritually strong enough and has a sufficiently rich tradition to accomplish this task.

Paper 2: ...and Today

Theodore van der Voort

Fr Theodore van der Voort, an Orthodox priest, works with the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, overseeing its programme of aid to the Russian Orthodox Church.

I believe that there are good reasons not to be wholly pessimistic about the situation in Russia. The starting-point for the work of Aid to the Church in Need with the Russian Orthodox is the aim of helping the Orthodox to help themselves and to facilitate their

task of re-evangelising Russia. We also hope that as a result of this cooperation relations between the Orthodox and Roman Catholics will gradually improve.

Practical Projects

I have visited 49 bishops out of a total of 67 and 48 dioceses out of the 68 dioceses in the Russian Federation, from Murmansk to Sakhalin, from Belgorod to Magadan. Only one or two bishops have refused to see me at all. Aid to the Church in Need has received suggestions of projects worthy of support from 31 dioceses. The projects fall broadly into five categories:

- Theological academies and seminaries (16 out of a total of 17 visited) and other theological schools (10 out of 27 visited).
- Education of catechists and the printing of catechetical literature.
- Orthodox mass media.
- Religious literature as published by, for example, the Library of Foreign Literature (under Yekaterina Geneva) and the St Andrew's Biblical-Theological College (under Aleksei Bodrov).
- Missionary projects.

The last category, missionary projects, includes the provision of 'chapel boats': there are now two in use on the Volga and the Don and a request has just come in for a third. ACN has just had requests for a 'chapel truck' to be used for visiting about 50 prisons in the Urals, mainly during the winter when the marshy bogs and swamps are frozen, and for a 'chapel train' for use near Arkhangelsk: it will consist of two carriages, one equipped as a chapel and the other as an office with kitchen, dining room and bedrooms.

Russia is not Western Europe

Help can be effective only when the general situation in Russia is properly understood. Russia involves vast distances, especially in Siberia. It is not a law-governed state; and even if good laws are passed they will not change much, because of the legacy of communism, corruption and bureaucracy. What is important is to build up a network of personal contacts so that you can achieve your goal with the minimum waste of time, energy and money.

One advantage is that unlike the general public in the West, the Russian population is not indifferent to religion. As in the West, relatively few people go to church. But even non-churchgoers in Russia are normally very friendly to Orthodox priests and prepared to help. The Russian Orthodox Church and the army are the institutions enjoying the highest level of confidence among the Russian population. I have found that wearing clerical garb is a positive advantage in my relations with state officials, local bureaucrats and the man or woman in the street.

Of course the Church reflects the problems of society and is itself not free from corruption, bureaucracy and the burden of the communist past. There have been scandals in the press about individual bishops. The Church faces internal problems

with right-wing xenophobes and even 'fascists' among its members. These are mainly former members of the Communist Party who have now thrown in their lot with the Church. As they are very well organised and scream loudly in the mass media, they attract more attention than is justified. We must remember that other former Party or Komsomol members have repented and are now trying to help the Church as much as possible, exploiting their old contacts in order to build up the Church. Meanwhile the Patriarch has a very difficult job keeping the Church together.

The concept of 'ecumenism' is not popular in the Church today. To many people it sounds like the word 'communism', and reminds them that in communist times only a thin layer of privileged hierarchs and church staff-members were involved in the ecumenical movement, which brought with it the privilege of travelling abroad: they were the Church's jet-set. No developments in the ecumenical movement were passed on to the lower clergy and laity, however. This was impossible under the Soviet regime. It is a mistake to think that the younger generation of bishops are necessarily more open-minded than the older ones. Many of the latter are rather well-educated, whereas most of the younger bishops have not had the opportunity for travel abroad. It will take some time to overcome this legacy of the past.

Grounds for Optimism

In my view there are nevertheless many signs of hope.

The Russian Orthodox Church has decided to remain a member of the World Council of Churches. Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk has argued that Orthodox students should continue to be sent to the West to study, even though many bishops see this as a threat because the students will be better educated when they return to Russia and inclined to ask questions. Meanwhile non-Orthodox students are to be invited to study at Russian theological educational establishments.

The Council of Bishops which met this August has produced a paper outlining a Social Doctrine for the Russian Orthodox Church. It is certainly not the last word on the subject, but it is a first important step. In one important passage, the document asserts the right of an Orthodox believer to disobey the state if it is inciting citizens to act contrary to their own consciences. If this right is widely promoted the Church will find a real role in helping to reform Russian society.

Despite all the problems facing the Russian Orthodox Church. I am amazed to say that I have noticed no deterioration in the attitude of the population towards the Church over the past five years. It may be that this is not because the Church is perfect, but because secular organisations are perceived as more corrupt and getting worse. Dressed in my priestly garb, I was having a glass of beer recently with a German journalist in a cafe near a station in Moscow, when a group of Spartak Moscow football supporters turned up. Half of them came up to ask my blessing and the other half went to buy me more pints of beer.

I would conclude by encouraging Westerners to think positively rather than patronisingly about the current situation and the potential role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the future.