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Orthodox Theology on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century

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The religious renaissance that has taken place in Russia over the past ten years must be among the most significant phenomena of the end of the twentieth century. Notwithstanding all efforts to destroy religion undertaken over seventy years, immediately after the weakening of the atheist regime millions of people began to turn from unbelief to faith. This renaissance, experienced within all religious confessions, was particularly noticeable in the Russian Orthodox Church: within ten years, the number of monasteries grew from 18 to 500, the number of theological schools from 3 to 50, and the number of priests and bishops more than doubled. Quantitative growth went hand in hand with qualitative changes. The Church, which for decades had only been able to serve the “religious needs” of its members, turned to those outside and engaged in a wide range of missionary, educational and diaconal activities. This required considerable changes within the Church, a reassessment of the role of the Church in society.

It cannot be ignored, however, that certain areas of Church life have been left practically untouched by this process of reassessment and rebirth. Russian theological scholarship in particular, which in the early 20th century had been at a high level but during the years of the Soviet regime had been practically annihilated, did not experience a renaissance. During the 1990’s vast numbers of religious books published prior to the Revolution have been reprinted, but the original theological studies by contemporary authors can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Church bookshelves and religious bookstores are filled either with popular Church writings, publications on Church-related issues, books with miracles and prophecies about the end of the world or, once more, with reprints of pre-Revolutionary books. Scholarly theological works in the strict sense of the word are hardly sold at all. This is because theological

scholarship in Russia has not yet come to its feet— as yet there is no new generation of Orthodox scholars to revive the tradition of theological creativity that was cut off by force.

In this paper I would like to share some thoughts and comments about the problems arising for Russian theological scholarship today. The approach of a new millennium provides a good opportunity to analyse the current state of Russian theology as seriously as possible, to think about the ways in which it could and should develop in the future, and to formulate the principal tasks facing it. What I have to say today is the fruit of several years of thought on the fate of Russian theological scholarship. I would like to emphasise, however, that I am not speaking here as a representative of a Church institution but simply expressing my personal opinion as a theologian and a priest.

1. Understanding the lessons of the past

In order to understand where Russian theology will be heading in the new millennium, we must first draw a conclusion about the twentieth century. We have not yet fully come to understand our recent past— otherwise, there would be no voices calling for the re-establishment of Church life as it existed before the Revolution, for the return to the ideal of “Holy Russia,” as it was supposedly realised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

First of all we must draw lessons from what happened in the Russian Church at the beginning of the century. The Church with its privileged position, its enormous spiritual and moral potential, where such figures as St. John of Kronstadt could be found, where theological scholarship stood at a high level, proved powerless under the pressure of revolutionary sentiments and militant atheism. Not only were theological academies and seminaries not immune to atheist influences, but some actually became centres and breeding grounds for atheist and nihilist ideologies. The system of common religious education did not bear the expected fruits. Those who in the last decade of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth had studied catechism in school were the very people who threw icons into the fires burning all over Russia in the 1920's and 1930's, and took part in the pillaging of churches and the desecration of sanctuaries.

It is essential to understand the reasons for the cold, near-total indifference to religion of the educated classes of early twentieth-century Russian society (i.e. the aristocracy, the intelligentsia and students, including those at theological academies). It was precisely this cool indifference which led to the defeat of the Church in its struggle against atheism and nihilism (if we may speak of any “struggle” at all, rather than capitulation without battle). A witness from these times, Metropolitan Benjamin (Fedchenkov), a seminary rector during the years of the Revolution, gives a good description of this:

Spiritual life and the fire of religious zeal had by then started dwindling and weakening. Faith had become mere duty and tradition, prayer-- a cold and routine ritual. Inside us and those who surrounded us there was no fire... Neither then, nor now, am I in the least surprised that we inspired no one to follow us; how could we, who were not burning ourselves, set other souls ablaze?... We were cold inside. Should we be surprised, how the faithful even held out with us

in church any longer? But they were simple souls... We could no longer inspire intelligent people or higher circles, nor even maintain them in the churches, in the faith...

The leading hierarchs and spiritual leaders of the early twentieth-century Church felt the approaching thunderstorm and hoped for a radical Church reform, which would fundamentally change the position of the Church in the country and would infuse new life into the Church's organisation. The three tomes of "Responses of diocesan bishops on the matter of Church reform," published in 1906, show that nearly all bishops were aware of the inevitability of radical changes. Reform should touch all spheres of Church life: the highest levels of administration, monasteries, theological schools, parishes etc.

The Local Council of 1917-1918 which re-established the Patriarchate, adopted a great many decisions of the utmost importance on key issues of Church life. It essentially gave the green light for reforms in the field of Church administration, ecclesiastical courts, parish life and religious education. It developed a strategy for Church-State relations. The Council adopted extremely important decisions concerning relations with other confessions. For the Russian Church, the Moscow Council of 1917-1918 could have become what the Second Vatican Council would be for the Roman Catholic Church nearly half a century later: it could have been the beginning of an "aggiornamento," a radical renewal of all Church life. It turned out to be too late, however, to implement the Church reform: the Bolsheviks rampaged over the country and the Church could no longer concern itself with organising its inner life. The Church took the path of martyrdom, and its main task now was to survive under the conditions created by a cruel regime hostile to the Church. The Local Council did not succeed in finishing its work, and its decisions were not implemented. The last hope of Church renewal was destroyed by the "renovationist" movement, in reaction to which the thought of even the smallest reform could evoke nothing but revulsion among the faithful.

At the same time the questions raised by the 1917-1918 Local Council still await resolution; they have lost nothing of their actuality. It seems to me that real changes in various areas of Church life can be achieved only when we return to this Council and consider its decisions in the context of today's situation, and today's situation in the context of its decisions.

The experience of the new martyrs and confessors of Russia, whom the Russian Church is gradually canonizing, must be more deeply understood. The Synodal Commission on canonisation has from the outset rejected the course of the Russian Church in Exile, which canonised all the new martyrs at once. It has decided instead to canonise the new martyrs individually, after through study of the life and death of each one. It is clear, however, that this approach makes canonisation a process of many decades, if not centuries. For this reason certain Church circles have been increasingly adopting other ways: the practice of adding names to lists of "locally venerated" saints, thus effectively bypassing the Synodal Commission. (Clearly most people will not start enquiring in detail, on what "level" canonisation has taken place, or distinguish between saints venerated locally or by the whole Church). But where do these processes lead? Can—and should—the Church control the matter of adding this or that name to the calendar of saints, or should it be left to the discretion of "popular piety?" All this

requires serious theological analysis. And, most importantly, the witness of the new martyrs themselves demand theological understanding. For what cause did they suffer? What lessons should we learn from their life and death? Should the Church of the new martyrs remain as it was in the nineteenth century, or should their exploits radically change, renew and transfigure?

It is necessary to attain a deeper theological understanding of the entire experience of the Russian Orthodox Church in the years of persecution. A clear and unambiguous answer must be given to the matter of so-called "Sergianism." Are we to consider the course of loyalty to the communist regime, chosen by the holy Patriarch Tikhon in the last years of his life, and continued by Metropolitan (later Patriarch), Sergius a forced compromise deserving of our condemnation, or should we accept that it was the only correct course for the Church at that time, enabling it to survive during the difficult and tragic years of Leninist and Stalinist terror? Should we repent to the hierarchs of the Russian Church in Exile, as they insist we do, for the fact that with all our might we strove to survive under an atheist regime while they lived blissfully in the free West, or should we rather declare that there was no "Sergianism," that "Sergianism" is a myth created in order to discredit the Russian Church? Is not "Sergianism" identical to the position that the Apostles took when calling on Christians to pray for the Roman Emperor, a pagan and a persecutor of Christianity, that Byzantine hierarchs took in seeking a "symphony" between the Church and the state, and that the Patriarchs of Constantinople took in the years of Turkish hegemony? One would wish for a clear theological answer to such questions, cutting short all the confused talk circulating on this matter in Russia today.

In short, it is essential to reach a common understanding of all that happened to our Church in the twentieth century. Only then we can move into the twenty-first century with a clear vision of where the Church is to go.

2. The Heritage of Russian theological scholarship

Another important task is the interpretation of the rich legacy of Russian theological scholarship. In the early twentieth century theological scholarship in Russia equalled, and in certain areas even surpassed, that of the West. Some writings on biblical studies, patristics, Church history and liturgics by Russian scholars and professors of its theological academies are still valid today.

After the Revolution, Russian theological scholarship as good as ceased to exist for several decades. The theological schools that re-opened in 1946 did not aspire to re-establish theological scholarship at the pre-Revolutionary level. They set themselves the far more modest task of training candidates to fill priestly and episcopal vacancies. Works by pre-Revolutionary authors continued to be used as textbooks since contemporary theological literature proved practically inaccessible to Russian theological schools. This situation continues in theological seminaries and academies to this day.

In the meantime, Western theological scholarship continued to move forward. An enormous leap took place in biblical science. Critical editions of the texts of Holy Scripture saw the light of day as well as many monographs, studies and articles on individual books of the Bible, on biblical history and theology. Much was also done as regards the patristic heritage. Many-

volumed critical editions of the fathers appeared, serving as a working basis for patristic scholars. Many other branches of theological scholarship profited from the discovery of new sources and the appearance of more advanced research methods. This wealth remained practically inaccessible for Russian theologians. Only in the last few years have biblical and patristic studies been published in Russia that take into account the achievements of contemporary Western scholarship.

At the time when Russian theological scholarship had been totally crushed in Russia itself, it continued to flourish in the West, among the Russian emigration. It was in exile that the gap between pre-Revolutionary Russian and contemporary Western science was bridged by theologians of the Russian emigration, in the works of representatives of the so-called “Paris school.” Living in a foreign country, these scholars continued the traditions of Russian theology under new conditions. Their face to face encounter with the West proved very fruitful for them: it spurred them on to re-interpret their own spiritual tradition, which had not only to be defended from attacks, but also to be presented in a language that the West could understand. The theologians of the Russian emigration fulfilled this task brilliantly. Thanks to their works the Western world encountered an Orthodoxy which until then it had known only from hearsay.

Moreover, it was precisely in the West that the representatives of the “Paris school” succeeded in overcoming what Florovsky has called the “Western captivity” of Russian theology. This “captivity,” which started from the seventeenth century, had bound Russian theological thought for nearly three centuries in the tight chains of Latin scholasticism. Only a return to the true Orthodox Tradition, to the patristic roots of Russian theology, could achieve this liberation; and this was accomplished by the representatives of the “Paris school” as well.

I would distinguish five main streams within the theology of the “Paris school,” each characterised by its own sphere of interest and its own theological, philosophical, historical and socio-cultural settings. The first, associated with the names of Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern), Fr. Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Archbishop Basil (Krivocheine) and Fr. John Meyendorff, was dedicated to the cause of “Patristic revival.” Taking as its slogan “Forward— to the Fathers” it turned to study the heritage of the Eastern Fathers and revealed to the world the treasures of Byzantine spiritual and theological tradition (in particular, the writings of St. Symeon the New Theologian and St. Gregory Palamas). The second stream, represented in particular by Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, is rooted in the Russian religious renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; here, the influence of Eastern patristics was interwoven with German idealism and the religious views of Vladimir Soloviev stream. The third prepared the ground for the “liturgical revival” in the Orthodox Church and is related to the names of Fr. Nicholas Afanassieff and Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. Characteristic of the fourth stream was an interest in Russian history, literature, culture and spirituality; to this stream belong G. Fedotov, K. Mochulsky, I. Kontzevich, Fr. Sergius Tchetverikoff, A. Kartashev and N. Zernov, to name but a few. The fifth stream developed the traditions of Russian religious philosophical thought and was represented by N. Lossky, S. Frank, L. Shestoff and Fr. Basil Zenkovsky. One of the central figures of “Russian Paris” was Nicholas Berdyaev, who belonged to none of these [streams]. Considering himself a religious philosopher rather than a theologian, his works nevertheless touched on and

took forward many theological questions. Mention must also be made of such outstanding spiritual writers as Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh and Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov).

The representatives of the "Paris school" have filled an entire library, and all their books are now accessible to Russian readers. But can we say that the seeds sown by the theologians of "Russia in exile" have sprung up in the reviving Russian Church? Can we say that their theology is widely appreciated, or at least that we value it on its merits? I will not linger over such preposterous cases as the burning of the books of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann and Fr. John Meyendorff by people who, apparently, had never read them. Nor will I do more than mention the critique of the "Paris school" that can be heard in circles of Orthodox fundamentalists and zealots for the "purity of Orthodoxy". With a few rare exceptions, such criticism comes from unqualified persons lacking in theological education. Rather I will speak of something more important. The works of theologians of the "Paris school" are popular among the intelligentsia but they are not studied systematically in the theological schools, which prefer to base their curricula on the old nineteenth-century patterns of thought. Thus their works have not yet become the common heritage of Russian theological scholarship: the "Patristic revival" for which Florovsky and Lossky strove, the "liturgical revival" which Afanasieff and Schmemmann hoped for, has not yet begun in Russia, in large part precisely because we have not yet fully assimilated their heritage.

The heritage of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, one of the most outstanding Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, has not yet been really studied in Russia either. Lossky's and Metropolitan Sergius' (Stargorodsky) criticisms of Bulgakov's "sophiology" were far from exhausting or closing the argument, but only the first phase of a discussion which has not yet gained momentum.

Neither have we grasped the religious-philosophical direction represented by the young Losev in the first years following the Revolution and connected in particular to the philosophy of the "Name of God" and the doctrine of the "Name-worshippers". This has not yet received sufficient theological assessment. Even though the movement of the "Name-worshippers" was crushed at the beginning of the century on the orders of the Holy Synod, discussion of the matter regained impetus in the years preceding the Moscow Council (1917-18), which was supposed to come to a decision about this but did not succeed in doing so. Thus the Church's final assessment of Name-worshipping remains an open question to this day.

I would emphasise that this is by no means simply an issue of local concern, nor of merely historic interest, but a matter of no less theological significance than the argument between "Palamites" and "Barlaamites" in the middle of the fourteenth century. Name-worshipping was an expression of the centuries-old Athonite tradition of the activity (prayer) of the mind, while the "synodal" theologians were backed by the traditions of Russian academic scholarship. Study of the conflict on the worship of the Name could illuminate the mutual relations between the monastic theology of the experience and the "academic" theology of educational institutions.

The heritage of Russian theological scholarship offers a vast field for further theological creativity. The pre-Revolutionary Orthodox scholars and the theologians of the Russian diaspora have prepared the soil on which a genuine revival of Russian theology could take

place today. It suffices to use the fruits of their work, to bring their inheritance to life and to continue the work which they began.

3. Holy Scripture

It is well known that Protestant sects using the Bible as their main weapon enjoy considerable popularity in contemporary Russia. In any collision between an Orthodox Christian and a Protestant missionary, the latter will almost certainly demonstrate a superior knowledge of Holy Scripture just as for most Orthodox Christians the Bible is by no means read regularly, and there is little interest in Biblical commentaries. Close to none are familiar with the achievements of modern Biblical scholarship.

The role of Holy Scripture is becoming a particularly burning issue in the Orthodox Church today. The Bible is not part of the life of most Russian Orthodox Christians. Orthodox like to state that, in contrast to Protestants with their sola scriptura ("Scripture only") they possess both Scripture and Tradition. However, Tradition (with a capital "T,") includes Scripture as an inseparable component: an Orthodox Christian may not be ignorant of the Bible.

For the Bible to become part of the life and experience of contemporary Christians, the first thing that is needed is a new translation. This could be either a corrected Synodal version or a totally new one, with no link to the Synodal text. Its importance would lie in the criteria it would have to meet. Firstly, it should be based on a contemporary critical edition of the Biblical text. Secondly, it should achieve maximum precision in transmitting the spirit and the letter of the original. Thirdly, it should not break with Church tradition.

Translations of Bible texts may be the work of one specific translator, they may be experimental, they may be aimed at a specific audience. But the Russian Orthodox Church needs a translation that would be the fruit of co-operation between several translators with the participation of experts among biblical specialists and ecclesial circles. The work of Bible translation could be directed by a Synodal biblical commission.

It is indispensable that the achievements of modern biblical criticism become accessible to Russian Church circles, and above all to theological schools where future clergy are trained. We have to rid ourselves of prejudices towards Biblical scholarship, of an attitude virtually regarding the sacred text as having fallen from heaven in the very form in which it is been found in the *textus receptus* and has been transmitted in the Synodal version.

It is no less important that works of contemporary Western specialists in Bible translation, Biblical and text criticism have become accessible to Russian readers. Some of these works have already appeared on bookshelves; but, for the time being, this is merely a drop in the ocean.

Finally, the production of a commented Bible is indispensable, one reflecting the achievements of Biblical scholarship of the twentieth century. This new commented Bible should include several layers of commentary: textual (based on the achievements of contemporary Biblical criticism), historico-archaeological (taking into account the data of contemporary Biblical archaeology), exegetical (containing a theological interpretation of the text based on its inner

characteristics) and ecclesial-theological (based on patristic exegesis and taking into account both literal and allegorical interpretations of Eastern and Western fathers). Such a project is not within the capacities of one or a few scholars. Its realisation, and the realisation of other comparable projects, necessitates an institute of biblical studies or, at least, a centre for biblical studies within one of the theological academies.

4. The Patristic Heritage

It is essential to raise the study of the patristic heritage to an essentially different level than it occupies today. This study is the basis on which the Church must be built up. Without a firm patristic foundation, the renaissance of Russian theology is unthinkable for, in the words of Fr. Georges Florovsky,

...patristic literature is not only the static treasure of Tradition... The works of the Fathers are for us a source of creative inspiration, an example of Christian courage and wisdom. It is a school of Christian thought and philosophy..., an eternal world of never-ageing experience and spiritual vision... It is only in this world that the straight and true way towards the new Christian synthesis, which modern times long for, lies open. The time has come to "church" our minds and to resurrect for ourselves the sacred and grace-bearing foundations of ecclesial thought.

This requires that critical editions of the patristic works must be introduced into scholarly use; and work with these editions demands, in turn, people with a knowledge of ancient languages (in the first place Greek and Latin, but also Syriac, Ethiopian, Coptic etc.). Russian theologians entering the new millennium are in the pleasant situation of finding that all the painstaking ground-work in the preparation of patristic texts has been done in the West, and that voluminous collections of the works of the Fathers exist. It remains only for us to use this richness in our work.

It is extremely important to renew systematic work on the translation of the Church Fathers into Russian. Individual translations are already appearing now, yet only a few people are involved in this, they have very limited resources and do not normally co-ordinate their endeavours with one another. Before the Revolution, all four theological academies (Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Kiev and Kazan) had been involved in work on translations. Thanks to the efforts of professors and students of these academies, large collections of the works of the Fathers in Russian came into circulation. These old translations, of variable quality, need to be thoroughly reviewed. We can not limit ourselves to reprinting pre-Revolution translations of patristic works whose language is unintelligible for modern readers.

Besides the review of old translations it is equally necessary to translate patristic works that have never existed in Russian. Among the authors who were not translated in the pre-Revolutionary era find such key figures as St. Maximus the Confessor and St. Gregory Palamas. Syrian patristics are nearly non-existent in Russian; there are almost no translations from Coptic and other oriental languages. Even Latin patristics are by no means fully represented. All this gives huge scope for future work which, once more, exceeds the capacities

of individual researchers. It seems necessary to create one, or even several, centres for patristic studies, either independent or affiliated to an institution of higher theological education. We need to acquire a school of Russian patrologists; its creation will demand systematic work.

We need monographs about the Fathers of the Church, as well as texts on different aspects of their teaching. Such secondary literature, also very rare in Russia, exists abundantly in the West and should help readers to understand that the Fathers are people who, many centuries before us, trod the same path as we today, and whose works are relevant to our contemporaries. Such literature should bridge the gap between the ancient Fathers and contemporary Christians, helping the latter to find their way in the sea of patristic writings and, most importantly, to see today's reality in the light of patristic experience.

5. Orthodox Worship

One of the issues raised during the course of the preparations for the 1917-1918 Local Council was the question of liturgical language: by then the problem of understanding liturgical language was already acutely felt. The Archbishop of North-America Tikhon (later Patriarch of all Russia) wrote in 1906: "A new Slavonic translation of the service books is important for the Russian Church (the current one is outdated and in many places incorrect), and it could forestall the demands of certain persons to celebrate in vernacular Russian." Another hierarch, Bishop Seraphim of Polotsk, wrote as follows about the need to improve the Slavonic translation of the services:

In polemics with Catholicism, Orthodox theologians always mention their services and their great edifying value as one of the advantages of the Orthodox Church. In practice, however, the services are far from fulfilling the purpose for which they were composed by their grace-filled Orthodox authors. The main reason for this lies in their incomprehensibility to the majority of believers. For this reason the liturgical language must first and foremost be improved, so as to make it clearer and more understandable.

An edition of liturgical texts in a new Church Slavonic wording was made and printed in a small quantity shortly before the 1917-1918 Local Council, but it never wide Orthodox audience. Discussions on the issue of liturgical language at the Council remained unfinished. The ensuing course of events is well known: the attempts by the "renovationists" to "russify" the services, and the refusal of church-goers to accept these. Similar endeavours are still firmly thwarted by the believers, who defend Church Slavonic as a stronghold of Orthodoxy.

Yet all this does not remove the unavoidable problem of the relative incomprehensibility of Church Slavonic. Alongside all that is justifiably being said about the need to preserve Church Slavonic, it is also evident that Church services are to be understood; otherwise they lose their edifying force. The liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church contain a wealth of theology and moral teaching that must be accessible to people. It is clear that at the time of composition, the Byzantine liturgical texts that we use to this day were intelligible— if not to all, then at least to educated people.

The issue here is by no means simply a case of the translation of the services into Russian. We speak about a much more global task facing the Russian Orthodox Church, and first and foremost its theologians. His Holiness Patriarch Alexis II of Moscow and all Russia has clearly formulated this task:

Church Slavonic is not understood by all: for this reason many liturgists of our Church long ago raised the issue of translating the full cycle of liturgical texts into Russian. However, attempts to translate the services into contemporary vernacular have shown that more is at stake than the replacement of one vocabulary with another, or of one type of grammatical forms with another. The liturgical texts used in the Orthodox Church are the heritage of Byzantine antiquity; even translated into Russian they require special training... The issue of the incomprehensibility of Church services is therefore not exhausted by questions of language only, although these certainly must be raised and resolved as well. We face a more global and truly missionary task: to teach people to understand the meaning of Church services.

One of the means to achieve this missionary task is to prepare an improved Slavonic translation of liturgical texts. The work begun by the 1917-1918 Local Council must be continued. On this matter, Patriarch Alexis II has stated that

We must consider how to organise the liturgical life of the Church in such a way as to bring to life its educational and missionary element. Here we pay particular attention to the work started, but not completed, by the 1917-1918 Local Council of putting liturgical practice in order, and we shall complete the work on a new edition of liturgical texts that has also begun within our Church.

Will these words of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church become a reality?

It is obvious that we also have to ask whether the use of Russian is permitted, at least in certain elements of the services (in particular, the Gospel, Epistle and Psalter). The 1917-1918 Local Council gave the following answer to this question:

Church Slavonic is our main language of worship. In order to bring our services closer to the understanding of simple people, the rights of the liturgical use of Russian are recognised as well... When approved by Church authorities, the partial liturgical use of Russian is desirable even at present (reading of the Word of God, of certain hymns and prayers, the replacement of individual words and expressions etc.) in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the services.

When deciding on the use of Russian readings from the Psalter the following difficulty inevitably arises: the Synodal translation of the Psalter, based on the Hebrew text, differs tangibly from the Slavonic translation, made from the Greek. It is obvious that if the liturgical use of the Russian Psalter is decided upon, a Psalter translation from the Greek is indispensable. "There are many other issues which will arise as soon as the work on making church service[s] more comprehensible begins[. A]n answer to these issues cannot easily be given today, in the heat of the battle against "neo-renovationism," when the polemics around the "Russification" of services have become very acute. But sooner or later, answers will have to be given.

For the time being, the first task is to edit special handbooks explaining worship in understandable modern Russian. A parallel text of the Divine Liturgy with a Russian translation should be compiled; the same goes for those of the All-night Vigil, the main Christian feasts, the order of Baptism, Matrimony and other sacraments. These texts should be available in churches in great numbers so that those wishing to learn the meaning of the services may do so.

It is essential to deepen theological understanding of liturgical texts. Time clearly shows the need for books that expand on the dogmatic significance of Orthodox worship and introduce the meaning of Church feasts to Orthodox faithful. And we need books giving and explaining the order of the sacraments of the Church, written in a simple and accessible style. Priests face a paradoxical situation: since so many people still wish to be baptised, there is no time for lengthy catechism, yet neither are there any books which could make up for its absence.

Thus it is evident that the Church needs to develop a strategy for its educational, catechetical and missionary work, making the treasures of Orthodox worship fully accessible. Without such a strategy, the implementation of the “global missionary task” mentioned by His Holiness the Patriarch will be unthinkable.

6. Orthodoxy and other Christian confessions

Relations between Orthodoxy and other confessions were also among the issues discussed at the 1917-1918 Local Council. A “committee on the unification of the Churches” was created; this conducted seven sessions before the Council was closed, dealing mainly with the possible reunification of Anglicans and Old Catholics with the Orthodox Church. The issue of heterodoxy has since been discussed by the theologians of the Russian emigration, many of whom have played an active role in the ecumenical movement themselves.

Ecumenism is discussed rather widely in Church circles today. Church life is divided between supporters and adversaries of ecumenism, the latter by far exceeding the former. There is no real dialogue between them: neither side wishes even so much as to hear the other. When polemics do take place, they are politicised to the extreme: ecumenism is tagged as a bogeyman, Church hierarchs and theologians are accused of the “ecumenical heresy” in order to discredit their activities.

It seems to me that dialogue with other Christian confessions is indispensable for us. Encounters between heads of churches and representatives of their administrations are necessary: only through personal contact can the numerous barriers that exist between Christians of different confessions be overcome. Yet encounters between theologians, both on an official and non-official level, are no less important. We need theologians not only with perfect command of the treasures of their own tradition, but also with a sound understanding of other Christian tradition's with which they enter into dialogue. At present, the Russian Church has virtually no such specialists.

Church divisions, schisms, attitudes towards and relations with heterodoxy need to be reassessed theologically at a new level, taking into consideration the ecumenical experience of the twentieth century. Russian theology has seen the widest possible array of views on this

matter: from the total negation of the presence of divine grace in non-orthodox churches to the total negation of any real division between the churches. Even now some still think that “human barriers do not reach up to heaven”; and there are others who, on the contrary, are convinced that no salvation is possible for non-Orthodox. Obviously a certain variety of views here is entirely acceptable and natural; yet whatever position a member of the Orthodox Church may express, it is essential that this be supported not only by neophyte passion or zeal for the purity of Orthodoxy, but by deep knowledge as well: for any position acquires the right to exist only when it is carefully argued and theologically founded.

The abysmal crisis of the world ecumenical movement today must be considered. Initially it was precisely this— a “movement:” there was much spontaneity, enthusiasm, and a lot of hope. Such outstanding personalities and inspired theologians as Fr. Sergius Bulgakov and Fr. George Florovsky stood at its origins (with all the differences between their positions, they were united in supporting the movement as the most important of inter-Christian initiatives). Yet with time the number of theologians of their stature in the ecumenical movement has dwindled, and the institutional factor has grown ever more prominent. The ecumenical movement has become a bureaucracy, and lost a considerable amount of its initial enthusiasm. This is one of the reasons why, by the end of the twentieth century, many were disillusioned with ecumenism.

Of course, ecumenism is not limited to the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical organizations. It exists on the level of individual churches, individual communities and even families. Life itself often puts people in situations that oblige them to be “ecumenists”. Mixed marriages in particular cause people to live, as it were, in two church traditions at the same time. But even every-day ecumenism demands a theological basis, and mixed marriages are an issue that must be treated on a theological level as well.

Theologians must seek for answers concerning the future of Christianity in the third Millennium. We cannot deny the fact that Islam, notwithstanding its many divisions, is a monolithic religion, at least in culture and morals: it has succeeded in creating a strong civilisation that conquers ever-new frontiers. But is there a “Christian civilisation” in the modern world? Are Christians united in the face of the challenges of our era, such as atheism, nihilism and humanist liberalism? What do the Christians of the third Millennium have to offer to counter these phenomena which challenge Christianity and threaten its very existence?

All these matters must be discussed in dialogue with Christians of other confessions. The great Jubilee of the coming of our Lord and Saviour to the world, which is being celebrated by Christians who are divided and often even hostile to one another, is yet another opportunity for dialogue to be enhanced with new impetus, new content, new inspiration.

Still, local discussion within the Russian Orthodox Church is necessary as well concerning a whole array of questions related to inter-Christian co-existence and interaction in the twenty-first century. This should assimilate all that has been undertaken by the Church in the field of ecumenical co-operation, and develop a strategy for further action. Metropolitan Kyrill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad states the following:

Today we face a unique opportunity to include all healthy theological forces in this process of assimilation: theological schools, monasticism, hierarchy, clergy and individual theologians. The time has come for serious debate on the participation of the Orthodox Church in the ecumenical movement. It should be a serious, thoughtful discussion, not a malicious row. Those engaging in it should be theologically educated, responsible and spiritually experienced persons. Neophyte squabbles are totally misplaced in such a discussion.

Yet the problem lies precisely in the fact that for the time being Russia lacks such theologically educated people. The discussion (or rather, rows) are engaged in by ill-educated and irresponsible people. A new generation of theologians is needed, one sufficiently competent to participate in this discussion. We also need to part with prejudiced approaches and stereotypes, which may undermine even the richest of dialogues. Finally a healthy climate within the Church is needed, one which presupposes the existence of such a discussion and allows its participants to have an opinion of their own.

7. Theological Education

Theological academies and seminaries should, in principle, play a leading role in the renaissance of Russian theology: they concentrate within their walls the primary forces that might take the lead in this process. However, Russian theological schools have as yet not grown into centres of independent theological scholarship, first of all because their overall level of education remains unimpressive: they are approximately one century behind modern times. The “Western captivity” mentioned above has by no means been outlived in our theological schools: the teaching of many subjects still follows scholastic schemes characteristic of the mediaeval West, brought to Russian soil in the times of Peter Moghila. Modern Western theological scholarship has long ago abandoned these schemes and hinges upon a totally different foundation: the critical study of primary sources. But students in Russian seminaries still learn by heart the “five qualities of the mind of God” or the “four qualities of the will of God” and the like. We need the encounter with the contemporary western scholarship in order to part with a scholastic heritage long ago abandoned there.

The number of theological schools has grown nearly twenty times over the past ten years, yet this has not by any means led to a rise in educational standards. On the contrary, standards have dropped: the already meagre number of teachers have been lured away to the newly created theological schools. As a result of the absence of qualified teachers, quite frequently people with only the most foggy idea about theology end up in teaching positions.

The situation in some provincial seminaries and theological colleges is particularly troubling. More often than not, graduates become teachers in the same school, more or less short-circuiting the possibilities for qualitative improvement of the educational level: a graduate from a particular school can not give his students anything substantially different from what he studied at this school himself. A leap forward in quality requires teachers with a higher level of education than that which they have received from their own school. It is therefore necessary to invite secular specialists, university professors and teachers from other institutions of higher education to teach in seminaries. In addition, it is necessary to send students abroad for training. Students

and teachers educated initially in a theological school in Russia, subsequently in a Western university, would familiarise themselves with the achievements of twentieth-century theological scholarship and learn to do theology on a contemporary level. On their return to Russia they could create a school of a new type and level.

The need for reform of the entire system of theological educational of the Russian Orthodox Church has been voiced for a long time. A plan has already been proposed: it suggests the restructuring of seminaries from secondary to higher educational institutions by extending the educational programme from four to five years, with the academies being changed to some kind of post-graduate programme, while reducing the programme to three years and adding some subjects. However, the present plan does not provide any means to raise radically the academic level of the teachers themselves, and subsequently of the students. Prolonging the study programme of a secondary educational institution by one year does not make it an institution of higher education. The same process takes place everywhere: what earlier was called a college becomes an institute, institutes become universities, universities become academies, and academies, since there is nothing left to change into, split into two. Will this raise the educational standards of these schools? Hardly. And it is hardly worthwhile for an Orthodox theological school to prolong its existing classes without radical qualitative changes.

A radical reform of theological schools is inevitable, and sooner or later it will take place— it is merely a matter of time. The reform will touch upon the curricula and all other aspects of the educational process, including the disciplinary system (which in our theological schools is totally out of line with any modern educational institution). In the new theological schools the emphasis will not be on the passive learning by heart of a given quantity of material, but on its creative understanding, on the student working independently with the primary sources. This is precisely the approach not only of Western universities, but also of many Russian educational secular institutions.

When, then, will this reform take place? It will obviously happen when a new generation of Orthodox scholars comes to the fore, the very same who will receive both a Russian and a foreign education, helping them to attain the level of contemporary international scholarship. Students from the Russian Church are already today studying in Greece, Italy, America, Britain, Germany, France and other countries in a few years they will start coming back to Russia. For the time being those that have returned are very few, and they are not in demand: there is no place for them in theological schools. But soon they will be counted by the dozen, and it will become impossible not to take them into account: the Church will be obliged to make room for them within its system of theological education. These persons— on condition, of course, that they do not struggle for survival individually but are united in their efforts— will be able to secure the transition to a qualitatively different standard in both Russian theological scholarship and the entire system of theological education.

It is crucial that as many Church people as possible realise the need to raise the educational level of the clergy. At present, educated priests (especially in monastic circles) are viewed with suspicion within the Church, as representing a potential threat to Orthodoxy. In reality the threat comes precisely from illiterate and uneducated priests. In the early 1990's, when vacancies for

the priesthood suddenly appeared, they were hastily filled with people lacking sufficient training and sometimes lacking any theological education whatsoever. This turned out to be a time-bomb. In many ways the problems that are surfacing in Church life today are caused by the lack of elementary theological training of certain priests. In particular the increasing misuse and abuse of the Sacrament of confession, as well as many alarming irregularities in the practice of spiritual direction, noted by the Holy Synod in December 1998 when it issued a special decree on the subject, is in many ways the result of the ignorance of certain priests of the basics of Orthodox theology and Church history. Deeper knowledge of these areas could help such priests to find guidance in the in the complicated and spiritual direction.

Improvements in the level of education in theological schools should be accompanied by a new, well-thought out and focused recruitment policy. Priority for admission to theological schools should be given to the most promising high-school graduates (and not to those who promise most obedience and loyalty to the administration). The most gifted, talented, seminary graduates, those most dedicated to the Church, should be admitted to theological academies (and not solely the offspring of archpriests or episcopal subdeacons who are offered a place “by acquaintance”). Only those who have at least graduated from seminary should be ordained to the holy orders; to episcopal sees only those having a higher theological education should be admitted. Naturally, education can not be the only criterion: other criteria should be taken into account as well. Nevertheless it is indispensable to establish an educational census. In many Western churches one cannot become a priest without a bachelor’s degree in theology, nor become a bishop without a PhD. In Russia certain bishops, while already occupying a see, still follow correspondence courses in a theological school.

I foresee opposition from those who consider education unnecessary for priesthood: “in the ancient Church there were bishops and priests who could neither read nor write, who knew no theology, and still achieved genuine holiness.” First of all I would answer to this that there were nevertheless other bishops and priests who could not only read and write, but who were among the most brilliantly educated of their times (Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom and others). Secondly, even those bishops and priests who did not know how to read or write were theologians: they studied theology orally (which was quite a wide-spread way to study in those days). Thirdly, we are no longer in the fourth, the fourteenth or even the nineteenth century; we are entering the twenty-first century, where it is very unlikely that an ample space will still exist for the ignorant and the half-educated. Priests wishing to build the Church in the coming century, to defend it from the attacks of enemies both internal and external, priests wishing not only to save themselves, but others as well (which is precisely the essence of priesthood), not only the ignorant and the illiterate, but also the intelligent and the educated - such priests must be educated themselves. They have to have a perfect understanding of the treasures of Orthodox theology. In our times— as in all times— it is impossible for a priest not to be a theologian.

When theological schools change into genuine centres of theological scholarship; when theologians from a new generation and a higher scholarly level take up teaching positions, when highly educated, enlightened people are raised to episcopal and priestly functions, then it will be

possible to speak not only of the renaissance of theological scholarship in the Russian Orthodox Church, but a genuine rebirth of the Church itself.

8. Looking towards the future

On the basis of the above, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The renaissance of Russian theological scholarship is possible, but it will take place only when theologians of a new level appear in Russia, with the education that our own theological academies and seminaries cannot yet provide; when specialists in biblical studies, patristics, Church history, other theological disciplines as well as ancient and modern languages appear, then and then only will the new school of Orthodox theologians be born, one that can take over from the “Paris school” and formulate a theological vision for the twenty-first century. Such a school could take shape within Russia or beyond its borders. One would wish it to appear in Russia, where all the necessary conditions are already in place.
2. The renaissance will take place when we come to an understanding of the entire historical experience of the Church in the twentieth century, the experience of survival under the conditions of religious persecution.
3. The renaissance will take place when a process of radical changes on several levels of Church life begins, a process initiated by the Local Council of 1917-1918.
4. The renaissance will take place when Holy Scripture takes the place that befits it in the life of the Orthodox Church.
5. The renaissance will take place when systematic work on the translation and publication of the writings of the Church Fathers begins.
6. The renaissance will take place when worship becomes accessible to the people.
7. The renaissance will take place when the heritage of Russian theological scholarship and the experience of the “Paris school” have been assimilated and implemented by Russian theologians.
8. The renaissance will take place when Russian theology frees itself from its “Western captivity,” when it returns its own roots in ancient Christian and Byzantine tradition. This return also requires fresh theological forces and a new, creative approach adopted by all main theological disciplines.
9. The renaissance will take place when Russian theological scholarship leaves the “ghetto” where it has already spent eighty years, when it reaches the level of modern Western research.
10. The renaissance will take place when the theological schools of the Russian Church are reformed, when their curricula and educational approach are adjusted in accordance with the need to develop properly the creative potential of their students.
11. The renaissance will take place when a climate is created within the Russian Church that will facilitate healthy theological discussions on the most essential questions of contemporary Church life.

The Russian Orthodox Church disposes of colossal human resources, probably more than any other Church of the Christian world. Western theological seminaries (Roman Catholic in particular) are closing one after the other, while we witness explosive growth in the number of theological schools. The West complains about the lack of “vocations,” about the dwindling numbers of people wishing to dedicate their lives to the service of the Church, while in Russia the ratio for entry into certain theological schools is still five candidates to one place. We simply have to learn how to use this potential most effectively, how to recruit more scrupulously, to attract young and creative forces and to set them on the right track, not fearing to send people to “retraining courses” abroad and to offer them positions upon their return.

The historical situation in Russia on the threshold of the twenty-first century is extremely favourable for the renaissance of theological scholarship. The Church still holds an unused credit of confidence, a credit of support from the worldly powers, from the people. It would be a crime to miss this historic chance.

Translated from the Russian by Hildo Bos.

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