

The Rapid Decline of the ROCA: A Summary of Events of the Last Ten Years*

With the repose of Metropolitan Philaret of blessed memory, the Church Abroad began to quickly slide downhill. Already toward the end of the seriously ill First Hierarch's life, several other hierarchs in dioceses far removed from the administrative center began from time to time — without informing Metropolitan Philaret — to take part in services with representatives of other Local Orthodox Churches with which the Church Abroad had no eucharistic communion whatsoever. Thus Archbishop Paul of Australia concelebrated with Serbian and Greek hierarchs. Archbishop Anthony of Geneva made it a rule to serve with everyone, with anyone he thought fit, once again without informing the First Hierarch. In principle, Archbishop Anthony held the opinion that a bishop has the right to serve with whomever he wishes, and that the matter in no wise concerns the laity. Archbishop Alipy unlawfully participated in the consecration of a Serbian church in Chicago. Archbishop Mark of Berlin would also serve at his own discretion, where and with whom he liked.

When news of these violations of the fundamental position of the Church Abroad would by chance reach the Metropolitan, he would immediately contact the guilty hierarch, demanding an explanation from him concerning what had taken place.

In other words, if unlawful concelebrations did take place, they were done not only without the knowledge and consent of the First Hierarch, but even contrary to his explicit will.

Soon after the repose of Metropolitan Philaret, the situation took a decided turn for the worse.

Many people well-versed in ecclesiastical matters were shocked by the very first Nativity Epistle of Metropolitan Vitaly in 1986, in which it was already stated:

“At the present time the majority of Local Churches have been shaken throughout by a dreadful twofold blow: the new calendar and the heresy of Ecumenism. Despite this lamentable situation, however, we dare not assert (and may God preserve us from this; for such is the duty only of an Ecumenical Council!) that they are devoid of the grace of God. We have pronounced an anathema upon the heresy of Ecumenism for the benefit of the faithful of our Church alone [?!], yet we thereby also call upon the Local Churches (in a modest but firm, gentle but decisive manner) to give serious thought to the implication of our action...”¹

That which is obvious to all Orthodox Christians from their very school days, the First Hierarch of the Church Abroad has chosen to forget: namely, that the term “anathema” testifies to the fact that the given individual or group, owing to its false teaching, has fallen away from the Ecumenical Church and no longer belongs to her. Anathema pertains only to heretics, and in no wise to “the faithful of our Church alone”.

* Tserkovnye Novosti/ Church News, No. 51, Feb. 1996, pp. 1-4.

¹ Emphasis throughout added by the author of this article.

Further in this epistle follows another novelty: "*De facto, we concelebrate neither with new calendarists nor with Ecumenists; but if anyone of our clergy by economia [?!] has ventured to participate in such a concelebration, then this isolated fact in no way affects our stand in the truth.*"²

A number of people began to make broad use of this gracious permission of the First Hierarch to employ "economia". Archbishop Mark of Berlin in an interview granted by him to the [Russian] journal *Vertograd* (No. 1, 1993) reported that "when I happen to be in Serbia I serve in any monastery, in any church — the late Patriarch German gave me this right." Archbishop Mark is not in the least troubled by the fact that Patriarch German was at that time nothing more, nothing less than the Chairman of the World Council of Churches. He it was who, in mantia and omophorion, served some sort of service with the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Ramsey, in his cathedral in 1971.

On December 10, 1989, the newspaper *Moscow News* (No. 50) printed a long article by the well-known writer Soloukhin under the headline "Toward Unity", with the subtitle "On Mutual Relations with the Russian Church Abroad". Soloukhin proposed his own formula for the unification of the Church Abroad with the Moscow Patriarchate and reports that "*from the Church Abroad's quarter a certain warmth has wafted ever since Metropolitan Vitaly has come to head the administration*". Such was Soloukhin's impression after a personal meeting with the Metropolitan.

In 1993 Archbishop Mark wrote in his official publication *The Bulletin of the German Diocese* (No. 1): "*Our diocese has not missed the opportunity for serious dialogue. Representatives of our diocese have participated in discussions with representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate on several occasions. While expressing our willingness to develop this dialogue in the future, we went to the furthest limits permitted by our Bishops' Sobor*" [?!].

The late Bishop Gregory [Grabbe] wrote a report to the Bishops' Sobor concerning this declaration, but no reaction to it was forthcoming. Then he wrote again, this time to the First Hierarch as President of the Synod, requesting that he inform him when and by which decision of the Synod or Sobor was Archbishop Mark authorized to conduct a dialogue with the Moscow Patriarchate? However, he nonetheless did not receive a reply.

With the establishment of regular communications with Russia, the matter of the unlawful concelebration by hierarchs and clergy of the Church Abroad with ecumenists and new calendarists came to a head. Those parishes in Russia which came under the omophorion of the Church Abroad, bearing in mind her widely known strictness regarding the observance of the canons, began with great alarm to behold the gradually increasing violations of the fundamental principles and statutes of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. These were followed by quite manifest violations of the canons themselves.

Nevertheless, the number of the Church Abroad's parishes in Russia began to increase rapidly, and by 1991 already three hierarchs had been consecrated for them from among local candidates. However, the Synod of Bishops, not trusting the bishops in Rus-

² For a fuller analysis of this Nativity Epistle, see *Orthodox Christian Witness*, vol. XX, no. 25, 1987.

sia (owing to the machinations of the KGB), sent Bishop Varnava to Russia as its representative. With his arrival in Russia began the woes of the Free Russian Church, which all but destroyed her.

The reception by the Church Abroad of parishes in Russia (initially in Suzdal) immediately evoked the criticism of several clergymen of the Church Abroad (Protopriest V. Potapov, Protopresbyter A. Kiselev, and Protopresbyter M. Znosko), whose articles had appeared in print in Russia. Protopresbyter M. Znosko not only criticized the actions of the Synod of the Church Abroad, but even made a donation to the Moscow Patriarchate to the sum of \$8,000 toward the construction of the Church of Christ the Saviour, for which he received a note of thanks published in the newspaper and signed by Patriarch Alexis. A short while later this did not hinder the Synod of Bishops from raising Protopresbyter Znosko to the episcopal office.

The Synod's "representative" in Russia, Bishop Varnava, in commencing his activities, began — in flagrant violation of the most fundamental canons — to meddle in the diocesan affairs of the local bishops, to receive into his jurisdiction clergymen put under ban by them, and he even formed a judicial commission to try clergy not subject to his authority. One member of this spiritual "court" was the Protopriest A. Averyanov, who himself was under investigation by the Synod!

Bishop Varnava completed his criminal activity in Russia by getting mixed up with the provocative organization "Pamyat", participating in a noisy demonstration by cruising around Moscow in one of their cars, and he then disgraced the Church Abroad by writing a letter — on Synod letterhead — to Vladimir Romaniuk, addressing him as "Locum Tenens of the Kievan Patriarchal Throne", with the request that the Church Abroad be received into eucharistic communion with the Ukrainian *Samosvyatsy*!³ For these offenses Bishop Varnava was not only not deposed, but he was even offered the diocese of Australia, which he himself declined. Glory be to God, at last, after innumerable scandals, the Synod of Bishops had the sense to recall its "representative" from Russia.

All of the hierarchs in Russia had repeatedly and persistently complained against the lawlessness perpetrated in their dioceses by Bishop Varnava and Archbishops Mark of Berlin and Anthony of Geneva, but to no avail; neither the Synod, nor the Sobor, took any measures whatsoever to curtail the violations of the canons by hierarchs of the Church Abroad.

In 1993 the Bishops' Sobor met at the Lesna Convent in France from April 24/May 4 until May 2/15. At one of the sessions of that sobor — after an insistent reminder by Bishop Gregory that in all decisions it is imperative to take into consideration the canons, Metropolitan Vitaly exclaimed in a loud voice that "*now is not the time to be occupied with the canons, but to act*". Through a third party Metropolitan Vitaly asked

³ *Samosvyatsy* (lit., "self-ordained"), a disparaging name for members of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, whose first Metropolitan, Vasly Lypkivsky, was "consecrated" in Kiev in 1921 by a sobor of presbyters, no bishops being present. They claimed to be following an ancient practice of the Church of Alexandria.

Bishop Gregory not to prolong the sessions of the Sobor with his references to the canons.

The first session of the 1994 Bishops' Sobor opened in July in San Francisco two days after the official glorification of Archbishop John Maximovich. The decisions of this sobor were fraught with very serious consequences.

First of all, without the knowledge or consent of the five bishops already existing in Russia, the Sobor resolved to consecrate Archimandrite Eftikhii to the episcopacy, which, of course, only aggravated the already quite strained relations between the Synod of Bishops and the hierarchs in Russia.

Secondly, in addition to the above — in violation of its very own resolution, made at the Sobor in France the previous year, to uphold the decision of the Sobor of 1975 forbidding communion with the Greek Old Calendarists until they had united among themselves — the San Francisco Sobor entered into eucharistic communion with the hierarchy of Metropolitan Cyprian (Koutsoumbas). This hierarchy, scandalous throughout its history, holds the opinion (as, by the way, does Metropolitan Vitaly) that the New Calendarists-Ecumenists “have not lost grace”, and therefore in exceptional circumstances it is permitted to have communion with them.⁴

The second session of the 1994 Sobor was held in November, again in France at the Lesna Convent. The previous July Bishop Ilarion had visited the parish in Santa Rosa, California. While conversing with a reporter from the local newspaper, he told him that “the bishops may issue a statement on reunification [with the Moscow Patriarchate] when they meet in November at a convent in Normandy, France”. Bishop Ilarion later requested that his refutation be printed in *Church News*, which was done.⁵ However, his prediction proved to be quite reliable. In the epistle of that sobor we read that “*free from any outside interference, the Hierarchs of the Russian Church*” came to the conclusion that “*the time has come to seek a living contact with all the parts of the One Russian Orthodox Church, which have been rent asunder by historical circumstances.*”⁶ At present such “parts” can only be: the Moscow Patriarchate, the former Metropolia in America — which has even rejected the designation “Russian”, and the Paris Archdiocese.

In January of 1995 the journal *Pravoslavnaya Rus*, No. 2 (1527), informed its reader concerning “a joyous event” — the reception into communion of Bishop Petros of Astoria, who by simony had received his consecration at the hands of two hierarchs of the Church Abroad (and whose certificate of consecration had been annulled by Metropolitan Philaret). Bishop Petros is a member of the synod of Archbishop Chrysostom [Kousis] of Athens and at that time was under investigation by his own hierarchy with whom the Church Abroad has no communion.

⁴ See *Church News*, No. 39, July-August, 1994, pp. 1-3; and No. 40, September-October, 1994, pp. 2-4.

⁵ See *Church News*, No. 40, September-October, 1994, pp. 1-2.

⁶ For the complete text of this epistle in English, see *Orthodox Life* No. 6, November-December, 1994, pp. 7-10. For a more detailed analysis of its contents, see *Church News*, No. 42, January-February, 1995, pp. 1-5.

The late Bishop Gregory, as former Secretary of the Synod, submitted a report concerning this to Metropolitan Vitaly which was supplemented with details supplied by the former clerk of the Synodal Chancellery. But, after a long period of silence, Vladyka Gregory received a notification signed by Metropolitan Vitaly stating that all the information submitted by him was "based on gossip"!

In 1994 the St. Petersburg journal *Vozvrashchenie*, No. 2 (6), carried an interview with Bishop Evtikhii — newly consecrated by the Synod — in which he stated: "*We decided to address an epistle to the hierarchs, clergy, and laymen of the Moscow Patriarchate on overcoming the mistrust, ill-will and disagreement [between us]. This could be seen as the first step in the process of the preparation for the All-Russian Local Council. At a pastoral conference of the clergy the matter of cadre [i.e., personnel] was resolved and plans drawn up for the formation of a bilateral commission for a dogmatic evaluation of the divergence of position within the Russian Orthodox Church, between the jurisdictions of the Synod of Bishops of the Church Abroad and the Moscow Patriarchate. We welcome the amicable participation in this work of any representatives of the episcopacy or clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate.*"⁷

In July of 1994 the journal of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, *Episkepsis*, printed a communiqué that in Germany, in the city of Dortmund, a conference was held "of the Committee of the Orthodox Churches in Germany, to which belong the parishes of the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Antioch, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moscow, and also the jurisdiction known as the 'Russian Church Abroad' ... *The formation of this Committee is in keeping with the plans made by the Pan-Orthodox Committee (Chambésy, Switzerland, 1993) towards organizing the Orthodox diaspora and is a response to the desire expressed by the Roman Catholic and Evangelical Churches for their closer collaboration with the Orthodox Church.*"

One must not consider Archbishop Mark the sole culprit in this participation of the German diocese in this exclusively ecumenical undertaking. The Synod of Bishops is just as responsible for this deviation from the path of the Church Abroad, for it took no measures whatsoever to prevent such duplicity: on the one hand the heresy of Ecumenism is still being solemnly anathematized, while on the other hand a prominent diocese of the Church Abroad actively participates in this heresy!

In May of 1995 the parish in Geneva held a special meeting in connection with the visit to Switzerland of the Patriarch of Moscow, who wished to serve in the cathedral of the Church Abroad. Such a prospect evoked great consternation amidst the parishioners, and in the course of the discussion Bishop Amvrosy declared that he "*was in contact with a representative of the Synod, Archbishop Mark of Berlin, who has been to Russia many times and has already gone a long way in negotiations with the Moscow Patriarchate. He will be able to give us competent advice concerning our relations with the Patriarch of Moscow.*"

⁷ The entire style of this statement, especially the phrase "the matter of cadre", smacks of Soviet/Communist Party jargon and sounds quite odd in the mouth of an Orthodox hierarch. (Trans. note)

Issue No. 12 (1537), 1995, of *Pravoslavnaia Rus* carried a report of the concelebration of Archbishop Anthony of San Francisco with Metropolitan Amphilocheus: one time in his own cathedral, another time in the Serbian church. The Church of Serbia is not only an active member of the ecumenical World Council of Churches, but it proved to be the first Orthodox Church to initiate a dialogue with the Jews!

Likewise in 1995 the information bulletin of the *Otrada* society published an article in its August issue, No. 6, entitled "A Miracle of the Lord". Apparently only from this source alone could the reader learn that, according to the instructions of Metropolitan Philaret of Minsk, Patriarchal Exarch of Belorus (KGB code name "Ostrovsky"), "*Fr. Theodore (Povny), on the night of June 19, from Minsk contacted by telephone the First Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad himself, who, after a most lengthy conversation, gave his blessing for the removal of a small portion of the relics [of the Righteous Martyr Athanasius of Brest, — Ed.], and for its transfer to Metropolitan Philaret. Protopriest Theodore Povny arrived at the Lesna Convent where a moleben to the Righteous Martyr Athanasius of Brest was served with great fervor. After which, on June 27, Archbishop Seraphim of Brussels and Western Europe, together with Fr. Theodore, removed a particle of the relics, and Fr. Theodore delivered it to Minsk*", for further solemn transferal to Patriarch Alexis (KGB code name "Drozdov").

At the beginning of the new year of 1996, the Church Abroad's Geneva parish of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, together with the Moscow Patriarchate parish, organized a joint Christmas party with presentations by the children of both parishes. To the protest of several of the Synodal parishioners, the rector of the parish, Bishop Amvrosy, announced that he didn't deem it necessary to involve the children in ecclesiastic disagreements.

From this brief summary of the more significant events in the life of the Church Abroad since Metropolitan Vitaly came to head it, it is quite clearly seen how far she has strayed from the path of his predecessors. On the one hand she is passively leaning towards Ecumenism, while on the other hand she is actively entering into relations with the Moscow Patriarchate.

If union with the Patriarchate should take place, then a schism will occur in the Church Abroad. And the position of those parishes in Russia which blindly followed after the Synod of Bishops and rejected their own local hierarchy of the Free Russian Church may prove to be especially difficult. They seriously risk the possibility of once again finding themselves in the embrace of that very Moscow Patriarchate which they abandoned in search of the authentic Church Abroad, of which at present there remains, alas, naught but its once glorious name.

With the gradual surrendering of the basic principles of the Church Abroad, there inevitably likewise followed the collapse of her outward prestige. The Synod's Department of Public and Foreign Relations also soon ceased its existence. It had not only published a bulletin from which several of the Local Orthodox Churches had begun to make reprints, but on occasion it also held press conferences, gathering the representatives of the major newspapers, to whom it was then possible to present the ideological point of

view of the Church Abroad, and, more importantly, to explain precisely what the Moscow Patriarchate represents.

After several months of Metropolitan Vitaly's leadership, the theological courses being held under the auspices of the Synod of Bishops were closed by his decision alone and in quite a scandalous manner. These courses had roused great interest among both the Russian and American public. According to the initial plan, they were first to have been developed into an ecclesiastical seminary, and then later into a School of Theology. It was from precisely such courses as these that the St. Vladimir Academy of the American Metropolia began its existence. There had been no resolution from the Synod concerning the closure of these courses.

Very soon, and likewise in an unseemly manner, the American parish, which used the lower chapel of the Synod building on feast-days, was also closed by Metropolitan Vitaly.

In the very Synodal cathedral — always renowned for its well-ordered and splendid services (which was the first concern of all three of the preceding First Hierarchs) — there is now not a single permanent resident priest, and thus, in order to have occasional and personal services performed, its parishioners are sometimes directed to go to other parishes.

Such is the terrible price of the surrender by the Church Abroad of her fundamental positions of principle.