

The Demise of ROCOR, the Synod of Metropolitan Agathangel, and the Ecclesiology of the Cyprianite “Synod in Resistance”

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Introduction

The synod commonly styled “ROCOR-A”, that is, the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia under the presidency of Metropolitan Agathangel of Odessa, claims that its hierarchy is the only canonical successor to the hierarchy of the ROCOR as it existed prior to the submission of all the ROCOR bishops, excepting the then-Bishop Agathangel, to the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007. This claim rests on three assertions:

Assertion 1. Agathangel of Odessa was the only anti-MP bishop who remained a loyal and obedient member of the Laurus synod until the bitter end of ROCOR as we knew it.

He broke with them at the last minute because being absorbed into the Moscow Patriarchate was simply too much to swallow, unlike several of the ROCOR's prior anti-Orthodox and uncanonical acts, which, though distasteful – or perhaps not - were still within the realm of palatability for Bishop Agathangel. On the basis of this distinction, he claims the mantle of succession. He was the only man left standing after the fight, so to speak, since the bishops of ROCOR who had providentially escaped the control of the fatally infiltrated New York synod before 2007 – such as Valentin of Suzdal, Metropolitan Vitaly, Lazarus (Zhurbenko), et al – and were subsequently declared schismatic, defrocked, etc., by that same New York synod already controlled by the pro-Soviet party, truly were, according to the obedient Bishop Agathangel, schismatic and defrocked.

Thus we have, according to the Agathangelite position, three sets of ROCOR bishops or former bishops as of May 2007:

- a.** False bishops who perform invalid mysteries within the false churches of ROAC, RTOC, ROCiE, etc.
- b.** True bishops who perform valid Mysteries within the true Church of the MP: Abp Mark, Abp Laurus, & Co.
- c.** One true bishop who did not elect to join his beloved brother true bishops in their tragically imprudent submission to the true and grace-bearing Church of the MP: Bishop Agathangel.

Assertion 2. Unlike their rivals, Metropolitan Agathangel and his synod loyally and obediently accept all of the decisions and acts of the ROCOR synod prior to their unfortunate decision to be swallowed by the Moscow Patriarchate.

This includes the 1994 decision to proclaim the theory of Metropolitan Cyprian of Fili regarding the status of “uncondemned heretics” as the anciently accepted teaching of the Orthodox Church, and to enter communion with the “Synod in Resistance” under Met. Cyprian (and thereby definitively destroy the possibility of communion with the Synod of the Genuine Orthodox Christians) precisely on the basis of embracing this theory.

Assertion 3. Metropolitan Agathangel logically, then, sought out his brother “moderate” bishops of the Synod in Resistance to consecrate other bishops for the ROCOR-A.

This act finally and ontologically anointed his group's status as the “real ROCOR,” since, as is well known, the “real ROCOR” was Cyprianite in its ecclesiology and its ecclesiastical alliances.

How should we in the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians regard the claims of the Agathangelites? Let us begin by examining the ecclesiological position of the ROCOR prior to 1994, and then from 1994 to 2007.

Part I : Historical Summary

A. The ROCOR's Ecclesiological Position vis a vis “World” Orthodoxy Prior to 1994

From the start, one needs to recognize that the ROCOR never formally broke communion with any jurisdiction of World Orthodoxy except the Moscow Patriarchate, the Evlogian Parisian schism, and the North American Metropolia/OCA schism, i.e., the other Russian groups.

Many in the Genuine Orthodox Church of Greece, used to decades of detailed, agonizing, and careful articulations of, and impassioned arguments about, ecclesiology, find it hard to realize that for most of its history, most of ROCOR's bishops and clergy did not think carefully about such questions, except perhaps in regard to the Moscow Patriarchate and the other Russian groups. There were outstanding individuals in the ROCOR, such as the Holy Confessor Metropolitan Philaret, who saw clearly how ROCOR should deal with the apostasy of global “World Orthodoxy,” but most of the ROCOR bishops and clergy simply had an instinctive (albeit healthy) distaste for modernism and ecumenism that never led them further - to undertake the process of rational discussion necessary to make clear decisions about these problems.

The ROCOR's official policies regarding concelebration with jurisdictions other than

those mentioned above, were never consistent, and the policy as it developed in the 1960's and onward, of mostly not concelebrating, was unwritten and *de facto*, not *de jure*. The ROCOR synod allowed the diocesan bishops almost complete discretion in this matter, and therefore the practice varied from one diocese to another. The most obvious contrast was between the North American dioceses, which were generally strict, and the European diocese, most of whose clergy, following the lead of their "abba," Abp. Anthony of Geneva, always saw themselves as part of "World" Orthodoxy and were willing to concelebrate with anyone other than the Soviets and the Evlogians, including the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Thus ROCOR had completely pro-World Orthodox bishops and clergy who denied that the ecumenism of "World" Orthodoxy was an impediment to concelebration and naturally objected loudly to anathematizing the ecumenists. But ROCOR as a body never *stated* this group's position as being the position of the ROCOR – they acted as individuals, or at most, as individual dioceses, until 2007, when their position became the official ROCOR-MP line.

ROCOR also had a large "mainstream" of bishops and clergy of who did not want to pray with the ecumenists but recoiled sentimentally from saying that they were really outside the Church. Until 1994, however, the ROCOR never explicitly subscribed to the full-blown, cataphatic Cyprianite position, that it is *de fide* that "uncondemned heretics" are guaranteed to remain in the Church and that to believe otherwise is un-Orthodox.

There was also, in the midst of all this confusion, a small but distinguished group of ROCOR bishops and clergy who held and clearly articulated the Orthodox position – that notorious, unrepentant heretical bishops are to be regarded as pseudo-bishops even prior to a conciliar judgment - but they taught this only as *individuals*, or, at most, at the diocesan level. During the long reign of Metropolitan Philaret, this "strict" party gained the upper hand in forming the mindset and projecting the public image of the ROCOR, and it was due to their influence that the *de facto* policy of non-concelebration spread organically through most of the ROCOR's dioceses. Their position, however - that the ecumenists were simply, obviously heretics and outside the Church - was *never* formally adopted by the ROCOR synod. During the sad, twilight reign of Metropolitan Vitaly, who never seemed to be able to make up his mind whose side he was on, this party completely lost their grip on the direction of their Church.

The one synodal act of ROCOR which came close to stating a clear position was the Anathema of 1983, but its use as a canonical basis for formally breaking communion with the World Orthodox hierarchies was publicly rejected by the 1986 Nativity Encyclical of Met. Vitaly, which clearly states that the Anathema applies to no one, a position which the other members of his synod did not dispute. From that point on, the Anathema was a dead letter; there were cathedrals where the ruling bishops disdained even to proclaim it pro forma on the Sunday of Orthodoxy. The 1994 decision regarding Cyprianism finally destroyed any remaining possibility that the ROCOR would formally assert that a local council could anathematize heretics, much less that a heretic is outside the Church even prior to a conciliar judgment.

The “mainstream old ROCOR” attitude to examining the canonical tradition and employing its criteria for breaking communion with heretics was encapsulated perfectly by a brief reply I elucidated from Bishop Kyrill of Seattle, the present ROCOR-MP Archbishop of San Francisco, while speaking with him in his quarters above the Church of the Resurrection on 6th Avenue in San Francisco, in December of 1999:

Fr. Steven: “Vladika, our bishops simply must ascertain the canonical criteria for remaining in communion or breaking communion with other hierarchies, and then formally act on them in regards to 'World Orthodoxy.' This is a matter of our spiritual survival.”

Bishop Kyrill: “Fr. Steven, I don't know about such things and I don't want to know about such things.”

That about says it all.

What held ROCOR together, humanly speaking, then, was not a clearly articulated ecclesiology, but rather Russian patriotism, the anti-communism of the Cold War era, and an instinctively conservative piety. Its bishops were responsible for governing a large, world-wide diaspora whose churchmen fell everywhere on the spectrum of opinion regarding most church matters, and the Council of Bishops always preferred compromise or avoidance to clarity with its concomitant: confrontation. As a body, despite its noble history and outstanding examples of piety and pastoral love of many pious bishops and clergy, the ROCOR never dealt realistically or effectively with the growing apostasy of ecumenism. In the end, its lack of a clear and defensible position left it an unguarded city open to its enemies, and it was destroyed.

When Met. Agathangel and his spokesmen, then, claim to carry on the “traditional ROCOR attitude” regarding ecclesiology, this is difficult to deny or confirm, since there was no identifiable “traditional ROCOR ecclesiology,” just a cacophony of conflicting sentiments roughly expressed by inchoate opinions drowning out the “still, small voice” of ecclesiological truth articulated by an increasingly powerless minority

An artificial and alien creation, however – the Cyprianite theory – was imported late in the day as a weapon with which the pro-MP party planned to give a mortal stroke in their long, systematic, death struggle against the freedom and orthodoxy of the ROCOR.

B. The 1994 Union with the “Synod in Resistance”

The agents of the Russian government and its subsidiary, the Moscow Patriarchate, who were orchestrating the campaign to crush ROCOR beneath the feet of the MP with steadily increasing success throughout the 1990's, knew that they could not get the ROCOR rank and file suddenly to acknowledge this atheist-created criminal

organization as a real Church, much less the “Mother Church.” Everyone knew that the ROCOR *pre-dated* the Moscow Patriarchate in its present form, and that such an obviously bogus organization as the MP could not possibly constitute the canonical hierarchy of the actual Russian Orthodox Church. The ROCOR mainstream may not have known what they felt about anyone else, but they knew what they felt about the MP: it was not the Church. Moreover, the ROCOR right wing not only felt it, they understood it clearly and could explain it.

Archbishop Mark and Archbishop Laurus, the hierarchical front men for the KGB operation to destroy the ROCOR, found in the ecclesiological theory of Met. Cyprian an ideal Trojan Horse to carry the acknowledgement of the MP as the CHURCH even into the bastion of right wing ROCOR opinion. Over the objections of Met. Vitaly and Abp. Antony of Los Angeles, as well as those of the retired Bishop Gregory (Grabbe), the ROCOR Council of Bishops (*Sobor*) proclaimed in July of 1994 that the ecclesiological teaching of Met. Cyprian was precisely that also of the Russian Church Abroad. Explicitly on the basis of this shared ecclesiology, the ROCOR and the “Synod in Resistance” established canonical communion.

The pro-MP forces lost no time in fanning the miasma of this “moderate ecclesiology” through the ranks of the ROCOR right wing, to fuddle their minds and weaken their moral will to fight back. Suddenly one was hearing all the time, from all quarters, that the MP was the “Mother Church” and that it “undoubtedly had grace,” that to deny the grace of this holy “Mother Church” was “blasphemous,” and so forth. Many of those who became closest personally to the Cyprianites were from among the conservatives in the ROCOR, because historically it was the *conservatives* who had always been sympathetic to the Greek Old Calendarists by temperament and outlook. This was, perhaps, one of the developments which the agent-architects of the 1994 union had foreseen. Now even erstwhile right wingers were heard to be saying that the MP was a Church and that its Mysteries were therefore “grace-filled.”

The next step was to go from “they have grace and they are a Church” to “therefore we must not remain separate from them.” The intellectual acrobatics of the labyrinthine Cyprianite dialectic lie a bit outside the ordinary person's capacity for subtlety – a fact that, far from denying, the savants of Cyprianism frequently point out to us, their intellectual inferiors. A trained, fully initiated Resister – normally equipped with a PhD – understands why he steadfastly refuses to receive what he steadfastly believes to be genuine Holy Mysteries from men he steadfastly regards as real bishops and priests, but such a peculiar gnosis is rather difficult to maintain for the ordinary sort of mind. In the 1990's, the erudite mystagogues of this rarefied understanding were too few to initiate fully the rank and file of the ROCOR, and therefore many of the latter, being but mere mortals, and having accepted that “the MP is our Mother Church,” rather easily took the next mental step: “It is inevitable that we must join them.”

At this point, Troy was burning. With a critical mass of the former right wing of ROCOR captivated by this thought, frogs hypnotized by the snake, the task of Moscow's loyal servants in the ROCOR hierarchy became quite easy. The “union” with the Bolshevik

“church” had quietly become a foregone conclusion.

When Met. Agathangel and his followers, therefore, point to their acceptance of the Cyprianite ecclesiology as one of their *bona fides*, one cannot help but be struck with sadness. A dagger plunged into the heart of their beloved Church still appears to them, rather, as a standard of the Faith.

Part II : Quo Vadis, Agathangele?

When Met. Agathangel and his followers were casting about for a solution to their problem of having only one bishop, they did not immediately decide on the Synod in Resistance. A committee of Agathangelite clergy heard out a delegation from the GOC-Kiousis synod at a meeting in Astoria, New York, regarding the history and ideology of the Resisters. As one of the GOC delegates later informed me, however, they did not seem terribly interested, but rather spent most of the session passing a flask of spirits among themselves and making funny remarks. This is entirely in character with the “traditional mainstream of the old ROCOR,” where it was *de rigueur* to pooh-pooh scrupulosity over canonical and dogmatic matters as betraying an unspiritual, even Roman Catholic, mindset, and where a rather charming foolishness for Christ's sake often flowed from the vodka bottle. Hearing this story made me smile fondly, recalling happy days of yore and childlike companions I knew and loved. It also conveyed to me that, as usual, the “mainstream of ROCOR” *did not know about such things and did not want to know about such things*.

So, as we all know by now, the ROCOR-A ended up going to the Resisters for their episcopal consecrations. This is their third assertion and, as it were, resounding coda in the argument that they are THE continuation of ROCOR: their apostolic succession now depends completely upon the legitimacy of a synod recognized - chiefly through the good offices of our friend Archbishop Mark - as the ROCOR's sister Church in 1994.

When defending their choice of ecclesiastical allies, sometimes Agathangelites who have the sense to be a little nervous about the Cyprianite teaching pass it off as a “*private opinion of Met. Cyprian which has no normative status*.” This, however, is not true. The ecclesiology of the Cyprianites is not simply a private opinion of the elder Met. Cyprian. It is a formal and oft-promulgated position of their synod, and it is their formal and only justification for being separate from the legitimate authority of the genuine Greek Church, that is, the Synod under Abp Chrysostomos. They do not deny this. The entire legitimacy of the existence of the Cyprianite group is based on this ecclesiology's being not only a permissible theologoumenon, but actually an article of faith so anciently accepted, so universally acknowledged, so clear, that it justified the elder Cyprian's refusal, on the basis of Apostolic Canon 34 and the 15th Canon of the 1st and 2nd Council, to re-unite with the other Florinite bishops in the early 1980's.

The contrary, however, is painfully obvious: The Cyprianite position - that notorious heretics are *guaranteed* to remain within the Church until being expelled by an

ecumenical council of such a strict and peculiar construction that it is rather difficult to demonstrate that any such council has ever taken place in the history of the Church - far from being the teaching of the Church, is an idiosyncratic and tortuous, albeit clever, argument crafted after the fact in order to justify a schism. Its learned defenders assiduously employ the most erudite and courtly language, ingeniously invoke various Fathers, astound their interlocutors by flights of dialectical genius, and invariably print their opinions on very fine stationery, but the teaching itself remains – alas – untrue.

These are not matters of only secondary importance to the ROCOR-A, because the synod whose very existence is justified solely by the claim that this theory is an accepted dogma of the catholic Church, is precisely that synod which provided the canonically required co-consecrators for the ROCOR-A bishops. If the teaching of Met. Cyprian is not really a dogma of the Church, then the Cyprianites really are schismatics, and, if so, what does that mean for the apostolic succession of the Agathangel synod?

The leaders of ROCOR-A, when they decide to become serious about the Faith instead of dreaming nostalgically about the glories of “old ROCOR,” the “White Idea,” and so forth, will need to re-examine the 1994 decision, subject it seriously to an honest critique, and go where the truth leads. Being the “genuine heir of the old ROCOR” in one's ecclesiological understanding is actually not a good thing. The indifference of the “mainstream of old ROCOR” to ecclesiology enabled the KGB to destroy them.

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