

AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL WHO ARE CONCERNED FOR THE FUTURE OF THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF SOUROZH

Submitted by Martin Olsson

18th January 2003:

In recent months there has been widespread speculation about the future of the Diocese of Sourozh, some of which appears to be based on rumour of questionable reliability. This letter is offered as a contribution to more open debate. It gives the perspective of an ordinary lay member of an outlying parish of the Diocese, who is concerned that the unique nature of what has been built up over the last seventy years should not be lost.

In November 1987, on the Feast of the Entry of the Mother of God into the Temple, I was received with my family into the Orthodox Church, following a year's preparation as catachumens. Our reception took place in Saint Anne's Church in Exeter; thus we became members of the Parish of the Holy Prophet Elias within the Diocese of Sourozh.

In Orthodoxy I found a Church which preached the Gospel of Christ not only with one voice, but in a fullness I had never encountered before. I found a Church which expressed its faith with certainty but without dogmatism. A Church whose teaching of the nature of the Trinity was an expression of its experience of divine-human communion, not a difficult intellectual abstraction. A Church whose view of the human condition insisted on the connectedness of body, mind and spirit, insisted that fasting and feasting are essential realities of the Christian life, not notional exercises for the over-pious, and insisted on the tragic reality of death, without which the Resurrection has little meaning. I found a community that regarded children as full members, learning with the rest of us what it means to have put on Christ. In short, I found a tradition of spirituality that included everything I had grown up with as an Anglican in my youth, but also immeasurably more.

I also found a Church which appeared to be truly universal. In a very English provincial city, English people who have come to Orthodoxy from all Western denominations and from none worship with Orthodox people originally from Russia, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Georgia, Syria. Visitors from Orthodox countries, whether they happen to fall under the jurisdictions of Moscow, or Constantinople, or Antioch, or Alexandria, worship in full communion with us. When we celebrate the feast-days of our local British Saints, they celebrate with us. On the eves of the Great Feasts we pray regularly "for those who are celebrating these services throughout the world." At every Divine Liturgy we include prayers for our sister Orthodox parish in Uganda. Greek and Slavonic are heard in all our services, but the prevailing language is English. Orthodox visitors from abroad seem happy with this. Non-Orthodox English visitors hear the teaching of the Orthodox Church in language they can understand, and are enriched. Many come again. Some stay, as I did, and are received into the Church. We could say of our parish, in all truth, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Much of this is due to the unstinting efforts of our parish clergy to build an Orthodox community in an English setting, much also to the inspiration of Metropolitan Antony, whose teaching through radio and the written word has led so many people in England to re-examine their spiritual lives. Whatever its origins, it seems that here is a small seedling of the universal Orthodox Church, taken root in England but accessible to all. By historical accident it lies within the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. Nonetheless it is not from its Russian roots only, but from the fullness of Orthodox tradition, that it draws its nourishment.

The Diocese of Sourozh, within which I found this extraordinary community, is currently in crisis as to who shall take on the mantle of Metropolitan Antony. I am not in a position to offer an opinion as to who this should be. I would only ask that whoever it is should be someone who has taken time to understand the unique nature of what it is that has taken root here, and to be prepared to nurture and strengthen it. I find it difficult to see how we would be able to declare "AXIOS" of someone who neither knows us nor is known by us.

Martin Olsson

Bondleigh, Devon , 18th January 2003:

St Macarius of Egypt

St Breward of Cornwall

St Sulpice of Bourges

The Righteous Theodore of

Novgorod

St Mark of Ephesus.

A PERSONAL OBSERVATION WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN A DEPOSITION FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY INTO RECENT EVENTS IN THE DIOCESE OF SOUROZH, IF ONE HAD CONFIDENCE IN THE OBJECTIVITY OF THIS COMMISSION

Submitted by Martin Olsson, Lay member of the Devon Parish of the Holy Prophet Elias,

Mid-Pentecost 2006

"For they do not speak peace, but against those that are quiet in the land they conceive words of deceit."

Psalm 34:20

On the BBC News website dated 13th May 2006, Liubov Alieva, claiming to speak for the newly arrived Russian guests in our Diocese, is quoted as saying "We represent the majority." I want to question this, and to suggest that it is never those who clamour who make up any majority. In the present situation the majority are those who quietly, week by week, attend the Divine Liturgy, love and help their neighbour as far as they can, ask God's forgiveness for their shortcomings, and from time to time remember to say, with Saint Peter, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." The majority are "those that are quiet in the land", who are deeply distressed at the scandalous quarrelling that is tearing the Diocese apart, and can see no possible justification for it in a Christian community. Unfortunately, because it is the way of quiet people to wish to remain quiet, the voices of those who clamour and quarrel are the only voices that are heard. Sometimes, therefore, a time comes when those of us who prefer to be quiet need to speak out nonetheless. For myself, that time has come when I see good people traduced, insulted and humiliated for no better reason than their love for the Christian community they have built up and devoted their lives to over many years.

I was received into the Orthodox Church in the Diocese of Sourozh in 1987, following a year of intensive tuition in Orthodox theology and practice. At that time the Diocese had two distinct

missions. Looking Eastward, it shone as a beacon of inspiration and hope to the faithful in Russia who were still suffering the deadening restrictions imposed on their religious lives under Communism. Services broadcast into the Soviet Union from Ennismore Gardens helped many to endure through those dark years. At the same time, the Diocese put down roots in England. Many non-Russians first found their way to the beauty and fullness of Orthodoxy following a visit to Ennismore Gardens; many more were, like myself, drawn by the deep wisdom and spirituality of Metropolitan Anthony's frequent broadcasts on British radio and television. So, while fulfilling an essential role in supporting the suffering Church in Russia, the Diocese of Sourozh also became the forerunner in establishing an Orthodox presence in Britain which was not an ethnic enclave, but which embraced Orthodox Christians from all traditions - an Orthodox presence which has spread from London to parish communities throughout the country, often in places where the actual Russian population is minimal.

After the collapse of Communism, it seemed that the Diocese of Sourozh would no longer have to divide its energies in this way, but could concentrate on developing its outward looking mission in Britain - an Orthodox presence undeniably in the Russian tradition but accessible and welcoming both to Orthodox from other traditions and to newcomers from whatever background. That was Metropolitan Anthony's vision, and I believe it remains the vision of most of those who built up the Diocese over the years.

Another consequence of the collapse of Communism, however, was the wholly unexpected size and speed of the flood of immigrants now free to come and seek a better life in Britain, and particularly in London, a flood which in terms of numbers quickly overwhelmed the established diocesan community. Most, I believe, behaved as considerate guests, and were grateful to find in their adopted city an existing, fully functioning church in the Russian tradition. **A few, though, appear to have come with a very different agenda and a determination to impose it.** I think it is best summed up by another quotation from the BBC website of 13th May, from Ivan Leonidov. He says "It is the right of our people, *our cultural right*, to keep this property [i.e. Ennismore Gardens]." I will not dwell on the question of property: it seems inconceivable to me that a supposedly Christian community should tear itself apart over an argument about property. What concerns me in this statement is the reference to "cultural rights." I can only interpret this as a wish on the part of some of the newcomers to reinvent the Diocese of Sourozh as an introverted, ethnocentric cultural ghetto, sealed off from the wider community and happy to be so. Nothing could be further from the vision of Metropolitan Anthony, and nothing could be more damaging for the future of the Orthodox faith in Britain. Christ, whose Church we are, forbids us to hide our light in this way: "Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a lampstand, so that it gives light to *all*." (Matthew 5: 15).

I fear, though, that the hierarchy of the Moscow Patriarchate may have more sympathy with the concept of a "Russian Church for Russians" than that of an open, multinational Orthodox presence in Britain. I think it likely that moves were afoot, even during Metropolitan Anthony's lifetime, to "normalise" the Diocese of Sourozh by strengthening control from Moscow. (Certainly there were tensions apparent already in January 2003, around the time of Bishop Hilarion's visit, when I felt the need to write an open letter about the future of the Diocese; I attach that letter with this submission as evidence that the present difficulties predate the death of Metropolitan Anthony, and cannot be seen, as some have argued, as the result of mismanagement on the part of Bishop Basil.) If I am right, the departure of Bishop Basil from the Moscow Patriarchate, together with those of us who share his - and Metropolitan Anthony's - vision of the future, was probably inevitable at some point. Certainly Bishop Basil himself reached this conclusion, which was why, with a heavy heart I am sure, he asked to be released to serve under another jurisdiction. Surely at this point the

appropriate response would have been for the Patriarch to say "We are deeply saddened at your decision, but if you feel you must go, go with our blessing"? What was it that Moscow found so threatening about the possible departure of one Bishop, a handful of priests and a few hundred of the laity? So threatening that not only was Bishop Basil's request refused, but dire hints were made about Moscow breaking off relations with Constantinople and tearing the Orthodox world apart?

Or is it (as I fear, though I want not to believe it) ultimately a question of the Moscow hierarchy exerting power simply because it has power, and wishes to be seen to exert it whatever the consequences?

"But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be the first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Attachment: written 18 January 2003: