

Английская версия:

An Open Letter from Bishop Basil to the Members of the Diocese of Sourozh

16 May 2006

The events of the last three weeks have been very distressing for a great many people and your endurance is much appreciated. It is clearly important to address a number of questions that people are asking about the current situation in the Diocese of Sourozh, and about my recent actions:

Why did I write to Patriarch Alexis to ask for release from the Moscow Patriarchate?

Why did I do it at this particular moment?

Why did I do it without previously consulting with the clergy and Diocesan Assembly?

There are also very serious concerns about how to proceed in the current situation, and guidelines are needed. These will be addressed in a further letter.

Why did I write to Patriarch Alexis to ask for release from the Moscow Patriarchate?

I took this course of action because it has become clear that the agenda of the Moscow Patriarchate is to make Sourozh conform to their idea of a 'normal' diocese outside Russia. That is, one which is under the direct control of the Department of External Church Relations (DECR), and whose primary concern is for the new arrivals from the former Soviet Union.

Metropolitan Anthony, however, had never intended to create a 'normal' diocese in this sense. His vision was of an outward-looking diocese that was integrated into the local culture and was able to convey the truth of Orthodoxy, the 'Good News' of Orthodoxy, to the people of the country in which they lived. In fact, if he had not worked to create such a diocese, none of us would be part of the Moscow Patriarchate today.

As I said in my letter to Patriarch Alexis, a diocese organised around recent immigrants whose main concern is that the life of the Russian Church in this country should be an exact replica of that at home, cannot be effectively combined with the life of the established diocese in Britain. Already the parishes in Dublin and Manchester have been removed from the Diocese and placed

directly under Moscow in order to devote themselves primarily to the new arrivals. And so I suggested that the members of Sourozh who are committed to Metropolitan Anthony's vision should be allowed to align themselves with the group that most closely corresponds to Sourozh on the continent: the Archdiocese of Russian Orthodox Parishes in Western Europe that has been in existence since 1931 and is also – in terms of tradition, if not of administration – a part of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Why did I do it at this particular moment?

In order to understand my reasons for acting at this time it is important to appreciate a number of background events of which some of you may not be fully aware.

As you know, since Metropolitan Anthony's death I have been given the task of Administrator of the Diocese, but there has been no move to appoint me as its head. This did not matter at a personal level, but it made it very difficult to work alongside Archbishop Anatoly, who was senior in age and rank, although I had the responsibility for the running of the Diocese.

Meanwhile, tensions in the diocese, which had begun well before Metropolitan Anthony's death, escalated rapidly after a conference of the Russian Christian Movement at the London Cathedral on 3 December 2005. At this conference Father Andrey Teterin, a member of the cathedral clergy who arrived in this country two years ago, launched a public attack on me and on the Diocese itself (a transcript of this talk is available). At this time, close associates in the Russian community who had heard the attack said to me: 'He would not say these things unless he thought he had backing at a higher level. A Russian priest does not attack his bishop without being sure of some form of protection.'

I already knew that the parishioners whom Father Andrey was gathering around him were also in close contact with Archbishop Anatoly. Archbishop Anatoly's sympathy with the position taken by Father Andrey was clearly revealed in the comments he made the next day at his talk after the Sunday Liturgy (a transcript of this also available).

On 10 December 2005, Father Andrey sent a letter condemning me and my administration of the Diocese to Metropolitan Kirill, Patriarch Alexis, Archbishop Innokentii and, interestingly enough, to the Russian Ambassador. This clearly revealed his expectation of support at a higher level (By then I had already been told by members of the London parish that some people had approached the Russian Ambassador to criticise my leadership of the Diocese.)

I had no alternative but to suspend Father Andrey, and he went to Moscow at Metropolitan Kirill's request, meeting him on 26 December 2005. He returned in good spirits and sent an e-mail to me expressing his willingness to apologise in return for being restored to his duties. I did not respond to this immediately, as I was in France for a week's holiday.

On 13 January 2006 Bishop Mark, Metropolitan Kirill's assistant at the DECR, rang to say that he had been asked by Metropolitan Kirill to deal with the situation in Britain. He said that Metropolitan Kirill was not happy that Father Andrey had not already been reinstated. I spoke to Father Andrey that afternoon, secured from him the promise of a public expression of repentance, and restored him to his duties. That Sunday after the Liturgy, I announced the lifting of Father Andrey's suspension, having told him that I would not insist on a public expression of repentance. He took the microphone and openly thanked the parishioners for their support. In the kitchen they were heard to cry out, 'We have won!'

Things then went from bad to worse at the cathedral, with petitions being circulated against me by members of the Parish Council, and Parish Council meetings becoming almost unmanageable. Throughout all this Archbishop Anatoly did nothing to help me. In fact, in his reply to a letter I wrote to him asking for assistance, he replied only with further criticism of my leadership. The problems were all of my making, he said, and while Metropolitan Anthony was alive, all had been well.

A campaign was now being waged on the internet – in Russian – by my opponents in the cathedral parish, led by Mikhail Sarni. This included the statement by a London parishioner that there was support in Moscow for the 'suffering members' of the Diocese of Sourozh. On March 30 I wrote to Metropolitan Kirill pointing this out and saying that unless the Patriarchate denied that this was the case, this campaign would never stop. I also asked him publicly to support my authority. I received no reply to this, but only a denial from Bishop Hilarion, through Metropolitan Kirill, that he was in any way involved.

Since Father Andrey was obviously a focal figure for this group of parishioners, I eventually forbade him to come to the cathedral. I also asked Metropolitan Kirill to help us during Lent by sending someone from Russia on a temporary basis. He declined to send the priest I asked for, and offered to send instead Father Michael Dudko, a senior member of the DECR.

Father Michael Dudko made no secret of the fact that he was coming as an 'inspector', so I

encouraged parishioners to meet with him and share with him their thoughts on the situation. Father Michael was very sociable and accommodating, but did not reveal very much about his own assessment of the situation. He did not speak at any length with the Dean, Father John Lee, nor with Father Alexander Fostropoulos or with Irina von Schlippe, whom I had specifically recommended.

He did, however, reveal to a member of the Oxford parish that from the point of view of the Patriarchate, Metropolitan Anthony had been an outstanding bishop and it was understandable that he would build a unique form of diocesan life around him. Now that he was dead, however, it was time for the Diocese to become a normal diocese of the Russian Church.

This point of view was then confirmed in the course of my last conversation with Father Michael Dudko on Bright Monday (24 April 2006). He said that he would be returning to Moscow at the end of the week, would write a report on what he had seen and discuss it with Metropolitan Kirill. Metropolitan Kirill would then be getting in touch with me by phone or in writing to let me have his recommendations.

It was at this point that I finally decided that the time had come to act, and wrote to the Patriarch, asking to be released, along with those members of the Diocese who wished to follow me, to join the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The reason, then, that I decided to act was that I could see myself gradually being worn down by the pressure of the opposition, which was supported by Archbishop Anatoly from within the Diocese and by the Department of External Church Relations from without. At the same time morale among those whom Metropolitan Anthony had brought into Orthodoxy and the Russian Church was plummeting day by day. The longer I waited, the less would be the chance of successfully releasing the followers of Metropolitan Anthony's vision from the grip of a Patriarchate that seemed determined to 'bring them under control' and thereby inevitably stifle their life and activity.

Why did I do it without previously consulting with the clergy and Diocesan Assembly?

The necessity for total confidentiality has been made clear by subsequent events (see my letter of the 9th of May). In less than twenty-four hours after I indicated to Father Michael Dudko that I would not withdraw my letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch, I had already been sent into retirement. If I had discussed such a move seriously and openly with the clergy or people, similar

instantaneous action would certainly have been taken.

This would have meant that I would have been unable to make provision for the clergy to be released from the Patriarchate in the event that, as has happened, the Patriarch refused my request and deprived me of my position as Administrator.

In summary, the actions I have taken have been in order to preserve the legacy of Metropolitan Anthony as understood by those who have lived and worked alongside him for many years.

In the circumstances I still see what I have done as the only way to make a positive move forward in the interests of the Diocese as a whole, and ask you to bear with me in patience while a resolution is worked out.

Please keep in touch with events on www.dioceseinfo.org which is updated at least once a day. Before the weekend we shall provide some guidelines as to how to respond to the current situation. If you have comments on this letter, please send them to bishopbasiloffice@ntlworld.com, with the subject title 'open letter'.

Yours ever in Christ,

BISHOP OF SERGIEVO

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