

## Looking Back on Old Sourozh

**These are interview answers given to a student who is at present working on a Ph D concerning the History of the Sourozh Diocese.**

**1) The Sourozh troubles (as they have been called) are regarded as a crisis almost entirely precipitated by the arrival in the diocese of large numbers of ethnic Russians after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. How far is this really the case or did this event merely act as catalyst to previously existing tensions in the diocese?**

Sourozh troubles? At the time His Holiness Patriarch Alexey II called them a 'schism' in public pronouncements, which I translated as the official translator. True, the crisis was precipitated by the arrival of Russian Orthodox from the ex-Soviet Union, but this was only a catalyst - its cause lay far, far deeper and had been festering for decades. The recent arrivals merely lanced the deep boil.

Essentially the whole problem was a problem of insularity, of being cut off from Russian Orthodox reality, a problem which had historical roots in the general captivity of the Church authorities in Moscow and their inability to control their own tiny Diaspora, let alone the majority of the Russian Orthodox Diaspora which belonged and belongs to a completely autonomous ROCOR. However, there was the specific case of island Britain, which was even more cut off than the rest for the usual geographical reasons, and where a personality cult had developed. So when reality struck the cloud cuckoo land of the largely exclusive, upper class Anglican-style clique/club which the rulers of the 'Sourozh Diocese' by the early 2000s largely were, this was a long overdue encounter with reality.

What had happened until then had resulted in the exiling (in a typically hypocritical, racist, backbiting and sending to Coventry way) of all 'dissidents', i. e. of all those who knew what Russian Orthodoxy was actually about and would have nothing to do with insular fantasy and the personality cult which was at the heart of the so-called Sourozh 'Diocese'. The problem came to a head because the dissidents were no longer a small minority who could be got rid of by making them leave (and sometimes find refuge in ROCOR), but were the vast majority, composed of all the new arrivals from the ex-Soviet Union who knew what Russian Orthodoxy was actually about and rightly 'wanted the Church back'.

In this way those who had ruled the roost in Sourozh for decades before, oppressing the faithful Russian Orthodox minority and forcing them out, suddenly themselves became the minority – and a very small one at that.

Realizing that they were now cornered and had lost power, they left, as they had forced so many into doing before them. What goes round, comes round. In this way they proved the ‘big fish in a small pond syndrome’ – anyone can remain a big fish as long as they make their pond very small. And that is what they did, made a very small pond for themselves.

Of course, the trouble was that the by then free Patriarchate had allowed such a situation to develop. With many others, I too made public several articles in the early 2000s, warning and pleading with the Moscow authorities to do something about their own Church locally. They did not do anything until it was too late. I doubt whether that was deliberate policy (waiting until the troublemakers had left of their own accord), as conspiracy theorists would have it, more it was a result of inertia and above all a lack of suitable individuals in Moscow to take over (see the answer to Question 2 below). This was why the new Sourozh bishop had to be nominated by the ROCOR Archbishop Mark, who was possibly the only Russian Orthodox bishop who knew the reality of the situation.

The ultimate historical roots of the Sourozh schism lay in the Diaspora schism between the minority of Russophobic, liberal, politicized elements in the Diaspora (in Europe called Evlogians and based in Paris) and the majority of the Diaspora in ROCOR. This schism took place in London in the 1920s, as elsewhere in Europe. (Though the roots of this schism lay in turn in the liberalism, modernism and fringe Orthodoxy of pro-Revolutionary intellectuals and aristocrats in Saint Petersburg before the Revolution. It was these individuals who emigrated to Paris after 1917). After 1945 the London Evlogians returned to the Patriarchate, but mainly without enthusiasm.

The situation was then saved, from the Patriarchate’s viewpoint, by sending a young priest, precisely from Paris (the heart of the Evlogian/Saint Petersburg schism) after World War II, who would be acceptable to the London ex-Evlogians and secure the situation, so that the ex-Evlogians would not return to the Paris schism. This priest was Fr Antony Bloom, around whom, especially after his mother’s death, there grew up a unique and utterly insular personality cult. This would inevitably result in clearly predictable difficulties after his death, since the death of the subjects of personality cults always results in difficulties, as it shows that they are not immortal.

Personally, I became fully aware of this situation (I had already been disturbed by several things I had seen) only in 1976, when during a six-week study visit to Russia I saw Russian Orthodox reality. The last scales fell from my eyes and I saw how peculiar and eccentric the Sourozh Diocese was. This was reinforced after 1976 when I had contacts with ROCOR – far bigger in Britain than the Sourozh ‘Diocese’ in terms of numbers of Russians, but not in terms of English

people, because Metr Antony Bloom had created a mini-diocese ('Sourozh') largely through about 1,000 English converts, mainly of Anglican background, to his personal and peculiar brand of Orthodoxy, and by ordaining men whom other bishops would not touch for canonical reasons – and then by living in Greece and studying at St Serge in Paris. I realized that the Russian Orthodox reality inside Russia and ROCOR were identical; it was Sourozh that was out of kilter, just like the Evlogian group based in Paris.

The last straw came in 1982 when I and my wife had personal contact with Metr Antony and we clearly realised that he was a morally compromised individual and that the whole thing was a personality cult. At the same time in 1982 the then Fr Basil Osborne, whom I had first met when he was a young deacon in 1972, told me that the clear intention of the ruling clique of liberal academics in Sourozh (mainly convert clergy) was to 'go over to the Greeks' as soon as Metr Antony was dead. It was at that point that I left the Sourozh diocese, as so many others before me and after me, long before 2006. It was only in 2012 that I received an apology for my treatment thirty years before from His Holiness Patriarch Kyrill in Moscow. What a disaster - the Russian Orthodox Church authorities in England had been chasing Russian Orthodox away from them!

**2) Several priests have told me that the arrival of Metropolitan Hilarion in the diocese was the main reason that events came to a climax when they did as his short but intense sojourn in the parish polarised the debate. Is this a fair assessment?**

Entirely true, but again he was only a catalyst. If it had not been him, it would have been someone or something else. The polarization had always been there. And we should remember that Bp Hilarion was made bishop and sent by Moscow at the specific request of Metr Antony. However, that does not excuse Moscow. You do not send a newly-baked, very naïve, very young and very inexperienced bishop into a hornets' nest – which is exactly what they did.

**3) In all the documents and interviews I've conducted both sides accuse the other of the same methods – i. e. it is seen as a coup by small (or even miniscule, four or five people) but highly influential group who 'masterminded' the activities. Is this a fair assessment? It seems to me that both can't be right?**

The schism was fomented by a small clique of individuals. Bp Basil as a very weak individual was as much a victim as anything else of that very small group. He had been under control for as long as his very practical wife, whom I knew well and respected, had been alive. Once widowed, he began going off the rails.

Altogether 300 people left in the Sourozh schism (the other 700 or so individual whom Metr Antony had converted had very quickly lapsed, often after only a few months), but only a few, four or five, led them; most, converts and often elderly, were unconscious of the game being played with them and were deluded and therefore deserve compassion. They had been hoodwinked all along.

It is true that on the ground in London and England in general, the other side, the pro-Russian Orthodox, was also led by a very small group of individuals. However, the latter were massively supported by the whole of the Church inside Russia, all those in ROCOR in England who were conscious of the situation and above all, by the vast mass of recent arrivals from the ex-Soviet Union in England. Whether Churched or unchurched, they instinctively knew, as we had known for decades, what was right and what was wrong.

**4) The influence from the Motherland: This spectre rides high in the belief of many of the 'anti-Moscow' people – e.g. the Russian State (FSB) seeks to control the Russian Diaspora through the Church. It seems to me that this can't be discounted as fantasy as the Russian State and Foreign Office does seem more interested in 'consolidation' of the Diaspora - and it could be argued, why shouldn't it? Diasporas are increasingly important to every motherland these days and the Russian Diaspora punches below its weight in terms of numbers (at least in the political sphere).**

This is without doubt paranoid fantasy and self-justification ('we are leaving the Russian Church because it is not politically free'). Not in the sense that there must surely be Statist/nationalist, politically-minded individuals in the Russian State/FSB/Establishment who would like to control the Russian Diaspora, but it takes two to tango. They can fantasize, but if the Diaspora does not want to play ball, their fantasies are irrelevant. And the Russian Diaspora (as is proved by the history of ROCOR both before and since 2007) does not want to be embraced by such individuals. However, as I also know from contact as an official ROCOR representative in meetings with His Holiness Patriarch Kyrill, Metr Hilarion and Archbp Innokenty (formerly in Paris) in Moscow, the Patriarchate is equally independent and utterly resistant to attempted encroachments by nationalistic individuals – it remembers the State protestantization of the Church before 1917 and does not want a repeat of that. The Church inside Russia much enjoys the freedom She has from State interference.

The people who make such fantastic statements about a Russian State 'takeover' are thinking in Anglican terms, in other words in terms of a State Church, founded by the State and directed by erastians. They are the ones who are not politically free and not culturally free. They are talking about themselves and indeed, such people are often Anglicans, who have little concept of how the Orthodox Church

actually works. Interestingly, the Sourozh schism was taken up at the time by the British Establishment press, with newspapers like The Times and the Telegraph defending the Russophobes and making the whole story into base, simplistic tabloid-style propaganda of the cowboy sort. 'Greek = good; Russian = bad'.

This is in tune with the whole Anglican, US and generally Western view of the Orthodox Church. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Victorians already saw the Russian as bad, as propaganda for their imperialistic 'great game' (unheard of in Russia), of which the Western invasion of the Crimea was part. Between the 1920s and 1948 the Patriarchate of Constantinople was largely under the Anglican thumb, since 1948 and the US deposition of the legitimate Patriarch Maximos (abducted into exile in Truman's personal presidential plane to Switzerland) and replacement by the US candidate (what better example of Western, not Orthodox, erastianism?), it has been CIA controlled. The Western problem has always been that it does not control the Russian Church, hence the remarks by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Tony Blair that the Russian Church is the greatest enemy of the West. Anyone showing independence is an enemy!

Sourozh was a political plaything for the British media, just another opportunity for the British Establishment to justify its politically-motivated Russophobia. It is in the light that we should ultimately see the Sourozh schism, as playing into the hands of the Russophobic British Establishment. And it was basically carried out precisely by individuals whose sympathies were wholly with the British Establishment, including one who, to my knowledge, had worked for MI5. (I exclude the Russian paranoid fantasy that Bp Basil, as an American citizen, was a CIA agent - though you can see how some could end up thinking like that).