

Irina von Schlippe

From a Russian Sourozh parishioner of 45 years' standing

The problems in Sourozh started in the 1990s, when Metropolitan Anthony was still at the head of our Diocese. This is documented in writing and also on film: numerous video recordings made both by visitors from the former Soviet Union and by professionals, both local and Russian (Valentina Matveeva, St Petersburg, Russia).

Bishop Basil inherited the problems from Metropolitan Anthony, together with all other responsibilities of the Diocese. Taking over from an aged Bishop (with emphatic support from the Diocese and formal support from the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate). The Diocese was most appreciative of the Patriarchate organising an intensive Russian course for our new Bishop.

Bishop Basil is most active in his Diocese, visiting the many scattered parishes, ordaining new clergy, blessing new parishes and extending the renown of our Diocese in the United Kingdom by his writings and sermons.

He does this in spite of an intensive campaign by a small minority of Russian-speaking parishioners who use the Internet to publicise their personal grievances and unjustifiably pretend to speak in the name of all Russians.

They do not represent the Russians in our Diocese.

The vast majority of us comes to church to pray and to receive the Sacraments, not to fight for power.

The vast majority of Russians in our Diocese realise that we have the opportunity of praying in a Russian church ONLY because the community led by Metropolitan Anthony and now by Bishop Basil has created the necessary conditions for it: in material terms, it obtained accommodation for worship (the Cathedral in central London, the numerous places of worship elsewhere), accommodation for clergy when possible, regular sites for holding camps for the Diocese's children. In spiritual terms, the community, led by Metropolitan Anthony and now Bishop Basil, sustains a regular Liturgical life all over the country, complete with communal studies of the tenets of our faith, engages in publishing and broadcasting the Orthodox message in several languages, runs classes for our children and ensures a secure pattern of contacts for them in summer camps and at Diocesan Liturgies. Our community has created the only Orthodox University chaplaincy for students of all nationalities in London, followed by several in other universities of the land. It also provides chaplaincy at UK prisons and for asylum seekers. In fellowship with groups from other Orthodox denominations, it has taken part in the establishment of the only Orthodox Higher Education establishment which flourishes in Cambridge.

All this was done entirely by ourselves, Orthodox Christians of the Sourozh Diocese of various nationalities, including a large proportion of Russians, and without any financial help whatsoever from the Moscow Patriarchate: this was a decision taken by our late Metropolitan. Everything we bought, rented or organised was paid entirely by ourselves and by our friends in the non-Orthodox community around us (which included many private Russian friends, of course, acting as individuals, like everybody else).

We also, under Metropolitan Anthony's guidance and with the help of major specialists in Orthodox ecclesiology, worked out an administrative system which follows best Orthodox practice.

While our main activity has always been Orthodox worship and striving for personal salvation, our community also engaged in continuous and sustained charitable work. In addition to the two major formal charities which the Diocese supports (St Gregory's Foundation which supports self-help projects in the former Soviet Union and a drug rehabilitation scheme which works in Britain on an entirely innovative project helping children of former drug addicts), our community has been visiting the elderly and sick in their homes, prisoners in prison and their families; the sick in hospitals and at home, with special emphasis on Russian-speaking patients who come to the UK for treatment.

We are and have been for decades the main Orthodox presence in the United Kingdom in the press, in broadcasting, in meetings at all levels.

This is due to the extraordinary quality of our leaders, but also to our being a British Orthodox presence, venerating British Saints, firmly rooted in the Russian tradition and in the teachings of the universal Orthodox Church.. Sourozh speaks about universal truths, bypassing any national interests and concerns, and it speaks in a variety of languages. Even our services use several languages – Church Slavonic and English are the main ones, but we also use Greek, Romanian, French, German, Arabic, Dutch – whatever fits the occasion, so that all who come to our services and conferences can feel welcome and at home in our Orthodoxy.

We are a strong community and for years we have hosted many Russian visitors without any trouble whatsoever. We are fully aware of the immense body of support which the teaching of Metropolitan Anthony has created for us in Russia and we are entirely sure that we are on the right path.

We have serious problems now, but these are not national problems, neither are they problems of language.

They are problems faced by an established Orthodox community with its own strong life under attack by an extraordinarily numerous immigrant group of Orthodox neophytes. The majority of these immigrants have only a limited experience of church life in their own country, though they may have experience of attending church services.

Some of them find our worship difficult to follow because they do not know any English, but our English-speaking Orthodox (and these include the children and grandchildren of the original Russian founders of Sourozh community) do not understand Church Slavonic. The many converts in the UK (and this includes the majority of our priests) have learnt to follow the services with the assistance of books – Sourozh has published the full text of the Divine Liturgy in a parallel edition. This is used as a matter of course by us, the old-timers, the founder members of the community, and the newcomers ought to follow suit. Many do. A few militate for an exclusively "Russian" worship and an exclusively "Russian" community in the most disgusting ways, physically pushing the local people, insulting them to their face, not to speak of pouring hatred and lies over our community in print and on the Internet.

Unfortunately, over the years we have seen the highest church authority in Moscow listening to these people who bring our Church into disrepute and who bring great hatred and unhappiness into our places of worship, our community meetings, our common work. We see that their petitions, full of lies and distortions, are accepted at face value and we see with horror that the liars are believed while the real community is completely disregarded.

The authorities in the Patriarchate do not seem to understand us, and they certainly behave as if they had the right to impose their will on us – including their own choice of leadership – although this goes directly against the teaching and practice of the Orthodox church. It is by encouraging the divisive activity of the “militant Russians” who follow the traditional techniques of Soviet propaganda professionals and by encouraging the creation of enclaves of direct patriarchal rules on the territory of an established Diocese that the leadership in the Moscow Patriarchate, our own Mother Church, has encouraged and exacerbated the current problems of our Diocese.

We can survive and we can continue our work within the Universal Orthodox Church. We feel the deepest possible sadness for the parishioners, our brothers, sisters and children, who are bewildered and suffering in our Cathedral – the very place where they should be receiving the love which we are so very ready to give, the assistance in their new lives in an entirely different country which we could render them. May God help us all, wherever we are, to resolve this difficult situation. May God forgive all of us that we allowed it to develop.

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