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Московский Патриархат  
Сурожская епархия  
Василий, епископ Сергиевский  
Великобритания  
Оксфорд  
Ул. Банбери, д. 94а  
Тел: (44) 1865 512701  
Факс: (44) 1865 512882  
Эл. Почта: sergievo@ntlworld.com

Patriarchate of Moscow  
Diocese of Sourozh  
Bishop Basil of Sergievo  
94a Banbury Road  
Oxford, OX2 6JT  
Great Britain  
Tel: (44) 1865 512701  
Fax: (44) 1865 512882  
E-mail: sergievo@ntlworld.com

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To all the Clergy and Members of the Diocesan Assembly, Diocese of Sourozh

You will be aware that for some years the Cathedral parish in London has been troubled by conflict between two groups of parishioners with very different interests and, indeed, styles of churchmanship. There are those who wish to see the cathedral and the Diocese brought more directly into line with the Mother Church under the control of the Department of External Relations than was ever the case while Metropolitan Anthony was alive, while on the other hand there are those who wish to continue along the path set out by the founder of the Diocese, who was its head for more than forty years.

A campaign has been underway at various degrees of intensity, both locally and on the internet, since well before Metropolitan Anthony's death, and has greatly intensified in the last four months since the outspoken criticism of the Diocese by Archpriest Andrey Teterin on 3 December 2005. Though these troubles appear to be local, they affect the health of the Diocese as a whole and in particular prevent the building of relationship between the cathedral and communities in the 'provinces'.

After prayerful consideration of our situation and having listened carefully to senior members of the Diocese, I have written to Patriarch Alexis of Moscow and All Russia the letter that is enclosed.

A few points require expansion.

Full-time Russian priests are needed. We have been told, however, that the Patriarchate cannot supply such priests to our Diocese. What is more, priests who do come from Russia find it extremely difficult to adapt to the kind of Orthodoxy that has developed in Western Europe in parishes derived from the first Russian emigration of more than eighty years ago.

Some have pointed out that there is a huge amount of Russian money in Britain, especially in London, and that some of this could be used to finance the work of the Russian Church in this country. But money is expected to bring with it control. The continuing problems in Manchester prove this point. This is why from the beginning Metropolitan Anthony refused categorically to accept help from the Patriarchate. The unavoidable conclusion is that finance will only be available from Russian sources for a diocese that is very different from that which Metropolitan Anthony created.

It is now quite clear that we are faced with two different tasks, and that they should be kept separate. On the one hand there is a great need for pastoral care for the newly arrived Russians, and on the other, the development of the Diocese of Sourozh along the lines envisaged by Metropolitan Anthony. We have a thriving diocese with some thirty communities scattered throughout Britain. We run two children's camps, an annual conference, and publish our own liturgical texts and journal. We sponsor two very effective charities, one working in Russia, the other in Britain.

You will have seen the kind of thing that is being said in petitions, open letters, on the internet and in the press. A claim is made that there is support within the Patriarchate for those who are waging the campaign against the leadership of the diocese. This claim has not been denied. Recently a 'withdrawal of labour' has been declared at the London cathedral, causing considerable disruption during Holy Week.

There have been many attempts by clergy and laity at all levels to resolve the conflict. Metropolitan Anthony himself spent many hours speaking with members of the cathedral parish, but finally had to admit that he had failed.

We have to accept that the two groups have different interests and needs. Those who have embraced the vision of Metropolitan Anthony should be given the opportunity to carry this vision forward, while those who wish to create parishes that are outposts of the Patriarchate should be free to do so.

The Diocese closest to ours in terms of its history and present character is the Archdiocese of Russian Orthodox parishes in Western Europe led by Archbishop Gabriel of Comana within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. I am therefore proposing that we be granted permission to seek acceptance within the Ecumenical Patriarchate on a similar basis.

If my proposal is accepted by the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the clergy of the Diocese would normally be expected to follow their bishop. I do not wish to force such a move on anyone, however, and will grant canonical release to any of the clergy who wish to remain in the Moscow Patriarchate – or go elsewhere. The laity are, of course, free to position themselves where they wish.

The nature of our situation is such that I have not been able to take the clergy and the Diocesan Assembly into my confidence and develop a common position. In the end, the decision to ask for release has had to be mine and mine alone. That is the nature of the bishop's role in the Orthodox Church. But I do hope that the large majority of you will understand the reasons behind the position I have adopted and will feel able to follow me. Metropolitan Anthony has left us a huge legacy and I believe we should do all we can to see it bear fruit in the years to come.

Part of this legacy is his vision of a 'local' Orthodoxy in Western Europe. The Archdiocese of Russian Parishes based at rue Daru in Paris shares this vision, as does the Patriarchate of Moscow. Since the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Ecumenical Patriarchate are in communion with each other, there is no reason why we should not work together, each in our own way, for the same end.

An information sheet is also enclosed and should be copied and distributed to interested parties as necessary.

Yours ever in Christ,

BISHOP OF SERGIEVO  
Administrator  
Diocese of Sourozh