

HOME	HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	RELEVANT DOCUMENTS	MEDIA COVERAGE	COMMENTS ON THE CURRENT SITUATION
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**INTERVIEW WITH BISHOP BASIL OF SERGIEVO** for the BBC RUSSIAN PROGRAMME 'VERA I VEK' (FAITH IN OUR CENTURY)

(Interviewer and producer: Faina Ianova)

*Your Grace, vладыko Vasili, tell our listeners what has happened, what is going on now in your, church, your diocese, how all this started, and what is the future? A lot of questions, but let's start with a few years ago, how it all started?*

The difficulties that we have been experiencing actually go back a number of years to before the death of Metropolitan Anthony, and really came to the surface for the first time when Bishop Hilarion [(Alfeyev)] was here in England. Many people will be aware that eventually Metropolitan Anthony had to ask that Bishop Hilarion be removed from the diocese, and in fact he asked that he not come back to Britain.

*But why did Bishop Hilarion appear here in the first place?*

He was invited by the diocese to help, really, with the developments which were taking place, largely of course, in connection with the coming to Britain of so many new Russian speakers from the countries of the former Soviet Union.

*And what happened? Did he help? What was wrong?*

Well, what was wrong was that suddenly for the first time in the history of the diocese, Metropolitan Anthony found himself in a situation where someone who was working with him, that is, Bishop Hilarion, was actually appealing constantly to higher authority, that is, his real supervisor was not the local bishop, but the Department of External Church Relations.

*Appealing and asking to do what?*

Well, obviously I don't have the details, but the effect of his presence here was to seriously divide the clergy, into those who were supporters of himself, and those who were supporters of Metropolitan Anthony.

*Who was interested in that? Who would be interested in dividing the clergy?*

It weakens the position of the local bishop, and it seemed quite clear at the time, that it was part of a programme which was designed to bring the diocese under closer supervision from Moscow. Metropolitan Anthony had always managed to keep considerable independence during the years of the communist regime; but with the opening of communication, the possibility of easy travel back and forth, this independence became more and more difficult to achieve.

*And yet Vlada Antonii was happy to have Russians here. He adored his motherland and his mother Church. How far did he understand what the Moscow Patriarchate was planning to do through what was going on in London?*

Well, I think he understood to the extent that when he realised that there would be a huge influx of new Russians with a completely different experience in life, a historical experience from the diocese which had developed in this country over many years 40 years, he actually said, 'This is going to ruin everything I have done'. And we are talking now about a period in the mid-nineties, when he realised that were serious problems facing us.

*He said this to you?*

Yes, in fact he said it also to the Patriarch.

*And what was the reaction of the Patriarch?*

I don't know, but he repeated that comment to me. I think there may have been some disappointment because when you look at the situation from Russia, it is quite clear that their first concern should be the new arrivals here from the former Soviet Union.

*Why would Moscow be so interested in dividing the parishioners and the priests that existed here for so many years, thus really undermining the life of the diocese? Why would they be interested in that?*

Within the Russian Church as a whole, within the Moscow Patriarchate as a whole, the diocese of Sourozh has been a unique entity. It

is recognised everywhere that it operates on different principle of internal governance. It is much more open, transparent, financial transparency is insisted upon, there is a much higher level of consultation with clergy and with laity. And that is really following on from the decisions taken by the All-Russian Council of 1917-18. Metropolitan Anthony always said that he considered this diocese to be following on from that tradition, from the tradition which was in practice established just before the revolution - but which could never be carried out in Communist Russia.

*And when Vladyka Anthony understood there was a danger that this tradition and this life would be undermined, did he ever have thoughts of leaving the Moscow Patriarchate?*

Well, I can tell you personally, that he certainly thought of it and was very worried about what the future would hold for the diocese. He did think of leaving. It is hard to believe, because in his public statements, of course, he was always very positive about staying, but in his private statements he was really quite nervous.

*It is very important what you have said just now, because a lot of people, including some of your parishioners say that it is only your thought, your decision. They don't understand why, and I am very glad that you are actually explaining things. Now, don't you think, vladkyo Vasili, that by postponing this decision, you, both of you, I mean vladkyka Antonii and yourself actually brought this disaster on the diocese?*

I am afraid I have to agree with you. The decision which has been taken now should have been taken much earlier. It should have been taken by Metropolitan Anthony, but in his last years he simply lost the energy to carry it out. He was ill, he was tired, and he let things just drag on, and we found ourselves then in a very weak position with his death. Because before his death he was able to basically protect the diocese, and offer it a kind of umbrella under which to live and develop.

*I am very glad that we are talking about it in this vein, because a lot of people try to say that you plotted to make a raskol (schism) in the diocese on a national basis.*

This is completely erroneous. The division which one can see - you don't have to imagine it, you don't have to invent it, it simply exists - is the division between those who are prolonging and developing the life of the diocese along the lines it developed under Metropolitan Anthony's guidance, and those who would like to see not only the life of the diocese and the life of individual parishes brought much more closely, under the control of Moscow, but also to reproduce in this country the type of church life that people are used to in Russia.

*And besides the tradition which was established in this diocese, how does your Russian Orthodox Church in Britain differ from the Russian Orthodox church in Moscow? From the point of view of services, from the point of view of theology, even from the point of view of faith?*

It is quite clear that from the point of view of faith there is no difference: there may be interesting theological differences but they would be differences of emphasis. Our diocese, of course, because it was outside Soviet Russia for so many years, although not directly connected with the Paris school, was heavily influenced by thinkers in that theological milieu, people like Fr John Meyendorff, Fr Alexander Schmemmann, Fr Nikolai Affanassiev, Vladimir Lossky; people like that ...

*Berdyayev?*

Berdyayev, yes this whole sort of intellectual flowering that took place in the 20s, 30s 40s and later in Paris was really very important for our life.

*They are so venerated now in Russia, actually.*

They are, and I hope that their influence will increase there. \

*And when did you decide finally that it is time to ask the Ecumenical Patriarch to take your diocese under his omophor?*

I watched very carefully what was happening in the diocese, and what you might call an increasingly strident move, certainly within the London parish, which is by far the largest parish, in a sense to turn the clock back, and to reverse some of the decisions which were taken by Metropolitan Anthony, in liturgical detail, and this kind of thing, but also when I saw that Fr Andrei Teterin was willing openly to criticise in a radical way .....

*Who is this Fr Andrei? Was he sent by the Moscow Patriarchate?*

We invited him to come here, to help us, and that went quite well really at the start, but he became either more disillusioned, or alienated from what he found here, and at the beginning of December last year, he spoke publicly, very critically of the diocese, the leadership, and also the quality of life which .....

*Criticising what? What in the leadership did he criticise?*

He criticised severely the establishment of the Russian Christian Movement, which I had blessed, which was meant to pick up developments which occurred in the diaspora in the 1920's and 30's, and still continues to work in France today and elsewhere, and which really is a programme for - I was going to say - *enchurchment*, of bringing peoples lives into a relationship with the Church, not just a formal connection, but where your life actually reflects Church reality as the Body of Christ ....

*Sorry to interrupt, but this is what they lack so much exactly in Russia..!*

Well, it is just beginning in Russia. It is not as if it is completely absent, but it has to be done everywhere actually. But it seemed to me that to have a Russian language group in this country, working specifically for these ends was a very important contribution to...

*So this Fr Andrei Teterin and some kind of group of people in the London parish that started writing and being rebellious, and what happened?*

Well initially I suspended Fr Andrei from speaking until he explained why he had taken this line, because here he was criticising openly a movement which had been blessed by his own bishop, which is not the way normally a priest operates, and rather than explain...

*He wouldn't dare to do it in Russia?*

No, no, no it wouldn't happen in Russia. But here he felt able to do it, and when he did approach me he presented a letter which was actually a self justification, and he sent this self justification not only to myself, but to Metropolitan Kirill, to the Patriarch, to the Russian Ambassador in London, to Archbishop Innokenty of Korsun in Paris, and brought the whole thing into the open. Well, at that point I said to myself, this priest is no longer under obedience to me, and should be stopped from celebrating.

*Can I ask you, was he sent to you from Moscow Patriarchate? With this kind of behaviour in his mind from the outset?*

I don't know. He came because we asked him to come, but he was officially sent by the Synod, by a decision of the Synod. So that was why he was here. And he very often would repeat: 'My allegiance is to the Patriarchate and to the Synod, and not to my local bishop'.

*That's very charming!*

So when I realised then that he actually had support in Moscow, I began to become quite nervous. And we then found ourselves with an increasing numbers of petitions being signed, being circulated. Eventually petitions against myself were being circulated by members of the parish council. Now this is completely contrary to church discipline, and I suspended these members of the parish council who were acting in this way, told Metropolitan Kirill about it, and he recommended that I should restore them. In other words he basically backed them against me. Well, you know, its very difficult to run a diocese if you are being undermined by your own hierarchy.

*Difficulty is an understatement - it is impossible.*

It's impossible, actually, it's quite impossible. I actually wrote to Metropolitan Kirill saying that the people who are opposing me say publicly on the internet that they are supported in Moscow, and that if Moscow does not deny this, they have no reason to stop doing what they are doing.

*Did you have any support within your diocese?*

Yes, of course, and actually among the Russians, because all these issues divide the Russian community very, very much. It is not a question of dividing English from Russian. But within the Russian community. There was deep ....

*That is very important, because we are coming back to this national division which people accuse you of. It was actually a division within the Russian community.*

Yes, because there are people within the Russian community who feel very differently from these others, and want very much to continue the work of Metropolitan Anthony, who like being in this particular diocese with its life as it is. So I basically listened to them and followed, acted and reflecting their anxieties and concerns.

*And what happened then?*

I continued to think about this whole situation, and while it seemed to me that there was a huge opportunity for developing the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church in this country, I did not feel that this diocese of Sourouz, which in 1993 had somewhere between 2 and 3 thousand members, could be expected to meet the needs of an immigrant community which was perhaps 100 times its size? And that the appropriate decision, the appropriate arrangement would be for the diocese to be aligned with the equivalent diocese in Western Europe, that is the diocese of Russian parishes under the ecumenical Patriarchate, and I wrote to the Patriarch to that effect.

*The Patriarch said that you must incorporate all of them, and try to do your best, but at the same time they were undermining your*

work.

It was this contradiction which eventually led me to feel that I could not continue where I was.

*So you wrote a letter to the Patriarch asking him to let you go from the Moscow Patriarchate, yourself and your diocese?*

Well, those who wanted to. I am not interested in forcing anyone to do anything, so those clergy and people who wanted to stay, and that could easily be the vast majority of the people and a certain number of the clergy, would certainly be free to stay with the Patriarchate of Moscow.

*And the Patriarch did not give you his blessing to do so?*

He did not give me his blessing. He wrote back a lengthy letter, took time to write a lengthy letter, which did not really address the issues which he knew existed in the diocese, but did offer me a chance to come and see him, but since there was no indication in that letter that he actually understood the situation, although it seemed to me I had made it quite clear that I was having difficulties here, and why, I did not feel I could accept that offer. It did not seem to me, if you wish, to be a genuine move.

*And then you applied to the Ecumenical Patriarch? Or was it simultaneous?*

It was not simultaneous. The letter I wrote to Moscow was received there on 28th April, and I wrote then on 2nd May to the Ecumenical Patriarch. But also just saying, I have asked to be released, and I asked him to consider my position, you know, favourably, when the time came.

*And what is your position at the moment, Vladyko?*

Well, I still think that the proper functioning of the diocese under conditions of the level of internal autonomy that we enjoyed under Metropolitan Anthony, is really probably only achievable under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. I cannot see our maintaining it within the Patriarchate of Moscow.

*Were you accepted by the Ecumenical Patriarchate?*

I have had no reply yet. He will obviously have to think about this very carefully, and consult. \par \i\par And meanwhile?\par \i0\par Well, I quote m sitting here. I was retired by an Ukaz of the Patriarch this past Sunday, \

*On what grounds?*

Well, there is nothing in the Ukaz to tell us on what grounds. It is just a statement that I am retired, and the temporary administrator is appointed, Archbishop Innokenty, who is responsible for the [Moscow Patriarchate] diocese and the parishes in France, and we will await then the report of the Commission which he offers to establish, which apparently has been established now. No!

*A Commission to investigate the diocese and the causes for the crisis? But it seems that you have really nothing to do with it?*

Nothing to do with what, sorry?

*Whatever they will find, or want to investigate, they just send you home?*

Yes, well, but that is the way it is.

*Tell me please, what was your status after Vladyka Antonii?*

When Metropolitan Anthony died, I was appointed the administrator of the diocese, not the ruling bishop, and as a result I kept the title of the bishop of Sergievo, but was actually administering the diocese of Sourozh. It is coming up to I suppose about three years that that decision was taken and in that time I was not confirmed as the bishop of Sourozh.

*And what do you read into this?*

Well, I think that if the Patriarchate had full confidence in me, you know, they would have confirmed me as the bishop of Sourozh, so I conclude that they did not have this confidence, so that, for whatever reason...

*Sorry to interrupt you, Vladyko, you are very modest, there are thoughts from independent sources that it wasn't that they did not have confidence in you, but that they were apparently preparing to send their own bishop to this diocese.*

Well, I don't know anything about that. But the whole thrust of the policy of the Patriarchate, and this was in a sense expressed very

clearly by Fr Mikhail Dudko, who brought the Patriarch's letter to me. The attitude is that, yes, that under Metropolitan Anthony, the diocese developed in its own way, it had its own particular character, but now with his death, it is simply appropriate that it become much more like an ordinary Russian diocese. But this was not actually what Metropolitan Anthony was telling us: he was telling us that this diocese needs to become rooted in England.

*But this is to destroy Metropolitan Anthony's legacy, isn't it?*

That is the way I interpret it. Yes.

*Only you, or others?*

Others yes. Oh yes.

*Well, finally now, Vladyko, you are waiting for the answer from the Ecumenical Patriarch, and with you a lot of people are waiting for this answer?*

Yes, and not only in England, but elsewhere. It is absolutely fascinating what great resonance our problem has in Western Europe and elsewhere in the Orthodox world, because in a way it is bound up with the direction of the Church as a whole, takes in those countries that are not by cultural tradition Orthodox.

*Well, this should give you great strength, Vladyko.*

Well, it does, actually.

*Thank you.*

Thank you very much.