

The End of the Cold War Reaches Nice



On 19 May 2011, a French court once more confirmed that the Russian Federation, and not the Paris Exarchate (currently under the Patriarchate of Constantinople) is the legal owner of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of St Nicholas in Nice. On the confirmation of this decision, the Russian Federation decided to transfer the Cathedral to the Russian Orthodox Church in perpetuity, for its free and unlimited use.

In France, the Diocese of Korsun, the relevant body of the Russian Orthodox Church registered with the French authorities as a corporate entity, is authorised to deal with the matter. This Diocese has at once taken up the obligations assigned to it by the decision; firstly, to take over the administration and responsibility for the contents of the church building, and, secondly, to carry out a smooth transition in its liturgical and parish life. As well as this, the Diocese of Korsun will carry out appropriate restoration and improvements at the Cathedral after decades of neglect suffered at the hands of its previous custodians. The Diocese is conscious that the Cathedral has become an integral part of France's cultural heritage and a symbol of Franco-Russian friendship.

To further this objective, in August the Diocese of Korsun diocese sent two of its two clergymen, a priest and a deacon, to Nice. The priest is Fr Nicholas Ozolin, the French-born son of Archpriest Nicholas Ozolin (the same name), formerly a lay member of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia in Germany. The well-respected Archpriest Nicholas has for decades served as a priest of the Paris Exarchate. Presumably, the Moscow Patriarchate considered quite logically that the son of a well-known priest of the Paris Exarchate, who had himself grown up in the Exarchate, would effect a smooth transfer of the Cathedral to the Russian Orthodox Church.

These clergy were given instructions to take over the parish administration, as well as begin negotiations with officials of the Association for Orthodox Worship in Nice (ACOR). The clergy were to secure the keys and deeds to the church building, end all commercial activities on its property (in particular, abolishing entrance fees charged for visitors to the Cathedral), ensure proper worship (1) and welcome parishioners, pilgrims and visitors.

The arrival of the Russian Orthodox clergy and their mission was known to the leading elements of the Paris Exarchate, under whose direction the liturgical life of the parish had existed. Inasmuch as the clergy of both dioceses concelebrated on the feast of the Transfiguration on 19 August, the Diocese of Korsun has already shown its openness to dialogue with the Exarchate. It wishes to resolve the situation in a spirit of peace and brotherly love, without prejudice to any party.

The Diocese of Korsun, headed by Bishop Nestor (who, although from Russia, for a time himself served as a priest in the Paris Exarchate) does not accept that ACOR, which brought and lost the litigation against the Russian Federation, is the same as St Nicholas Cathedral parish or the community of Orthodox believers in the region. It is a well-known fact that the number of believers belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church in Nice has increased significantly in recent years because of new immigration from Russia. Clearly, neither the owners of St Nicholas Cathedral, the Russian Federation, which, due to ACOR's failure to recognise its rights and negotiate in good faith, entrusted the Cathedral to the Russian Orthodox Church, nor the Diocese of Korsun, which is now responsible for St Nicholas Cathedral, intends to prohibit access to the church building to anyone. This is a place of prayer; now open for free admission to all comers. Traditional Orthodox parish and liturgical life at the Cathedral is now ensured (1).

The Bishop of Korsun and the head of the Paris Exarchate will address all canonical questions. It is hoped that problems will be resolved in a spirit of peace and mutual understanding. The Diocese of Korsun will naturally take into account the wishes and aspirations of all Orthodox believers living in Nice and its environs without exception. It will make every effort to see to it that its decisions lead to reconciliation amongst the existing communities and to strengthen inter-Orthodox unity and co-operation (2).

Sadly, members of the bitterly divided Paris Exarchate (many of whom want to return to the Russian Orthodox Church, which it broke away from some eighty years ago, when it was persecuted by atheism) is still refusing to hand over the keys to the Cathedral. This is under the pretext that they should continue to occupy the Cathedral despite the defeat of atheism in Russia twenty years ago and the resurrection of the Russian Orthodox Church over the last two decades. In today's situation, this occupation is illegal squatting in the eyes of the French courts.

Since 12 September, in conformity with instructions issued by the local authorities, admission to St Nicholas Cathedral has been free. A parish spokesman told the Interfax-Religion agency that, 'Church services will take place as scheduled'. Recently, bailiffs came to the Cathedral and presented the previous occupiers of the building, ACOR, which only recognises the authority of the Paris Exarchate, with a notice of immediate execution of the court decision of 19 May 2011 (3).

Earlier, Viktor Khrekov, Press Secretary of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, had commented on the illegal refusal of ACOR to hand over the property to

Russia, telling *Interfax-Religion*, 'For them, the Cathedral is a 'cash cow'. They sell tickets for admission, according to various estimates, they earn up to one million euros a year', explaining that the Church did hold services, but they use it primarily as 'a moneymaking tourist attraction' (3).

Meanwhile, on 12 Sept 2011 at the Exarchate's Cathedral in Rue Daru in Paris, the present head of the Paris Exarchate, Archbishop Gabriel of Comana, appeared to condemn the Russian Orthodox Church and Faith, opposing them to 'the freedom of the Church and the universality of the Orthodox Faith' (4). This is an extraordinary statement about a multilingual Church composed of several independent and decentralised Metropolias and over fifty nationalities, who freely choose to confess the Faith of the Russian Orthodox Church. We cannot help seeing in these extraordinary, anti-unity claims either undisciplined and anti-traditional Protestant-inspired modernism ('freedom') or else politically or ethnically-motivated Russophobia.

Notes:

1. 'Proper worship' refers to the fact that for years many of the modernistic liturgical and pastoral practices in Nice have been most peculiar and not at all in the Tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church.

2. Nearly all of this above statement is quoted directly from <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/1609577.htm>, 31 August 2011 (Patriarchia.ru is the official website of the Russian Orthodox Church).

3. Quoted from <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=42215>, 13 September 2011.

4. <http://www.aeof.fr/uploads/files/discoursdelarchevequegabrielldaru150ans.pdf>?PHPSESSID=3c197fa41d16651485e0c0bbd1548668.