

A New Year and a New Era for the Russian Orthodox Church



As the New Year dawns, a new era for the Russian Orthodox Church also dawns. Diocese by diocese, the Church is now preparing to send delegates to its Local Council, the first of the twenty-first century and the first to be free of party political interference.

This Council alone is authorised to choose the next Patriarch. It will meet from 27 to 29 January with all 203 bishops of the Church, delegates from the clergy, monastics and laity from each diocese, both inside and outside Russia, from stavropegic monasteries, synodal establishments and theological academies - over 700 delegates in all. The Local Council will be preceded by an extraordinary meeting of the Council of Bishops, to be held on 25 and 26 January 2009.

The rules of the Russian Orthodox Church state that any candidate for the Patriarchal office must be a bishop who is at least 40 years old, have a higher theological education, extensive pastoral experience as a diocesan bishop and a good standing in society - for according to the doctrine of the Incarnation, the Church, the Body of Christ, takes part in social life.

On paper there are over 100 bishops who meet these criteria. Of these bishops, there are both young and old. Some might oppose bishops who are in their seventies, because it would be felt that they are too old and could only assume their duties for a few years. On the other hand, age brings the experience and wisdom which more energetic youth often lacks. Others may also

oppose some senior bishops, since they were appointed during Soviet times. They feel that compromises were made then. However, such views must take into account the possibility of unjust slanders, the danger of excluding upright candidates through prejudice and KGB disinformation from the past, of repentance since the Soviet epoch - such as the repentance expressed by Patriarch Alexis in *Izvestiya* and in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, No 10, 1991 and afterwards.

One of the greatest challenges to be faced by the next Patriarch will surely be to accomplish the Churching of the societies where Russian Orthodoxy is by far the majority faith. Under Patriarch Alexis, in the age of the Second Baptism of the Russian lands - a millennium after the First Baptism of the Russian lands - most were baptised. Furthermore, well over 20,000 churches were reopened or built, in addition to those that already existed. However, that is still a pitifully small number of churches for majority Russian Orthodox countries with some 150,000,000 nominal Church members.

In fact, many members of the Russian Church today belong to a fourth century society, not so much post-Christian as in the West, but in many ways pre-Christian. This is a society which has over the last twenty years seen tens of millions of baptised, but little instruction given to them, on account of the sheer shortage of manpower and time. In particular, missionary work, both internal and external, needs to be carried out in order to counter increasing secularisation, as values penetrate into nominal Russian Orthodox societies from the apostate West. Russian Orthodox societies had already been greatly weakened by seventy years of Communist persecutions, prohibitions and ignorance. This was even before the West flooded them with waves of anti-Tradition selfish individualism, social irresponsibility and pornography after the fall of Communism.

However, the greatest challenge of all may be to keep unity. Although the Russian Orthodox Church confesses unalterable universal dogmatic teachings and fixed liturgical traditions, Russian Orthodox are naturally of many different personal and political persuasions, levels of education and social status. They range from those who travel the globe attending perhaps dubious conferences (they would say in defence of Orthodox values) to anti-technology traditionalists who appear to wish to ghettoise themselves, like certain Siberian Old Believers (they would say in defence of Orthodox values).

Moreover, within the Church there are people who belong to over fifty nationalities. Over half of all Russian Orthodox churches are outside the borders of the Russian Federation. It is, providentially, not a State Church, but a multinational Church. It is for this reason that some favour a candidate from, say, the Ukraine or Moldova, where, as in the native Estonia of Patriarch Alexis, some parishes celebrate in two languages. At the very least, the future Patriarch must, like the former Patriarch, have an international vision.

In this context there are threats from some in the Baltic Republics, Moldova, the Caucasus and above all the Ukraine. Sadly, these threats are encouraged by nationalists and secular-minded power-seekers, nominally belonging to other Local Churches. From the extreme west of the Ukraine, Galicia, formerly part of Poland and once allied with Nazi Germany, have come representatives now in power in Kiev. They are set on creating nationalist schism and imposing their agendas on the Church. Unfortunately, they are financed and encouraged by anti-Orthodox political organisations and their secularist allies, military, economic, ideological and pseudo-religious.

Just before his repose His Holiness Patriarch Alexis II had already prepared his Christmas Message to the faithful. In it he wrote these prophetic words:

My Patriarchal service has also been accomplished with God's help. Christ the Chief Shepherd has strengthened me in prayer before Him, granting me the joy of living communion with many of you, He has given me wisdom in speaking to the powers that be and the representatives of various lands and peoples...Over the past year we have commemorated the ninetieth anniversary of the evil slaying of the royal passion-bearers. As we remembered them, tens of thousands of faithful who had come to the place of their sufferings asked for their help for our people in their spiritual rebirth, in righting their historic paths. Let us firmly hope that the Lord will make us worthy to overcome all the consequences of the tragedies, conflicts and crimes of the twentieth century, raising Holy Russia up from strength to strength.

May God grant that the words of St John of Shanghai and San Francisco, uttered in the menacing year of 1938, be fulfilled: 'Blessed are you, Russian Land, cleansed by the fire of suffering! You have passed through the water of baptism, now you are passing through the fire of suffering and you will enter into your rest'.

Many in ROCOR and also inside Russia will be looking for a candidate to the Patriarchate who resembles Metr Antony (Khrapovitsky). But it is not possible to find exactly such a candidate. Such figures appear perhaps only once in every two or three centuries. We have to start from reality. Whomever the Local Council chooses, an expected or an unexpected candidate, and however he is chosen (perhaps he will be one of three final candidates to be drawn by lot by an elder – as Patriarch Tikhon was chosen in 1917), we can only pray for this Council. We must pray that the chosen candidate will be able through the Holy Spirit to be a worthy helmsman to steer the Church aright through the present and inevitable future storms of this world.

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19 December/1 January 2009
St Boniface of Tarsus