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THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN RUSSIA, 1991-1996. THE LATIN RITE:
TOWARDS A "NATIVE" RUSSIAN CHURCH?

RALPH DELLA CAVA

Abstract

Five years have passed since the Roman Catholic Church first began to
reestablish the Latin Rite throughout the Russian Federation. But the Church's future
is by no means certain.

Numerically, membership is declining as emigration siphons off the bulk of its
once large ethnic German constituency, while "Russification" and secularization
challenge its presence among the descendants of other ethnic Catholics and young
people.

If it is to flourish, must and can Roman Catholicism present itself as an
alternative to Russian Orthodox Christianity? That proposition -- how best to
"inculturate" itself among "native" Russians of Orthodox persuasion -- is being
discussed informally in several Catholic quarters (even though official Catholic policy
adamantly eschews "proselytism" in any form).

For its part, the very suggestion of a Catholic missionary enterprise poses one
of the most volatile questions in current Catholic-Orthodox relations. Since the spring
of 1996, its intensity has sharpened as the Moscow Patriarchate has openly lobbied in
favor of a more restrictive new law of religion, currently in preparation by a sub-
commission of the Duma.

In assessing the first five years of renewed Catholic life in Russia, the paper also
explores Orthodox and Catholic arguments -- as they have emerged in the current
debate over a new law -- about the nature of religious liberty in Russian society.

INTRODUCTION

In April 1996, five years to the month after the Vatican set in motion new structures to
administer to the spiritual needs of post-Soviet Russia's less than half a million Roman
Catholics,¹ a clearer, if by no means fully developed, picture of that church has at last begun
to emerge.²

Current portraits tend to draw on vital statistics. Of course, without them it would be
impossible to get a sense of the institutional church. Its key features come wrapped in figures -
- about membership size, the number and make-up of ecclesiastical jurisdictions, the ethnic
origins of believers, formal relations with government authorities, the course of ecumenical
dialogue, and the status of clergy and vocations. But, for whatever reasons, even sympathetic
observers have focused only fleetingly on some of that community's more fundamental, often
contradictory, dimensions that are likely to shape its destiny.
At the risk of overstating them and perhaps even sparking controversy that some might prefer to postpone, I believe three of these dimensions are already discernible. Moreover, they speak to real-life dilemmas and are likely to prevail for some time to come. If brought under closer scrutiny and considered together, however, they should help us see with greater accuracy the course of the Catholic church in Russia and something of the changing society in which it subsists.

First of all, Russian Catholicism is today a church of multi-faceted minorities. A minority in numbers, its members also descend mostly from non-Russian ethnic minorities. Moreover, while it is less frequently underscored in public, these constituencies make up a community speedily diminishing in size, at least over the short run, if current emigration opportunities as well as tendencies towards "Russification" continue to prevail. Precisely what shape the Church's future composition may take depends on other imponderables, but certainly to some extent on current pastoral policies that are not devoid of controversy.

Second, the Catholic community in Russia most resembles a classic "mission church" of the pre-war era, at least, in two specifically restricted senses. First with regard to manpower, second to material resources, it is -- and will likely long remain -- almost entirely dependent on the largesse of Catholics abroad. This is understandable, laudatory and expected of a world religion that is at once local and universal and expressly committed to the "communion" of all believers. But, apparently, such dependency has already proven as much a liability as an advantage -- both among Catholics themselves and in their relationship to other confessions.

Third and last, Catholicism's course is also being shaped -- willy-nilly -- by the changing fortunes of the nation's millennial and numerically largest church, the Russian Orthodox, and by the ecclesiastical politics of its supreme authority, the Patriarchate of Moscow and All Russia. While cooperation between the First and Third Rome reportedly continues to improve in loco, several issues of historic and immediate concern have of late shown signs of strain. Moreover, recent changes within the ranks of the Russian Orthodox Church have challenged the good will of both communions and could potentially affect the status of the Catholic church in Russia.

In this paper, I shall discuss only the first of these dimensions, that which encompasses Catholicism's human composition and institutional structure, as well as the several critical issues I see ensuing from them, such as the imminent reduction in the number of faithful, the impact of secularization, and the current ambiguity of its "missionary" or pastoral direction.
DECLINING NUMBERS

Scattered over nine time zones of the Eurasian land mass, divided into two ecclesiastical jurisdictions, called Apostolic Administrations, and presided over by prelates (an archbishop for European Russia with a seat in Moscow, a bishop for Eastern Russia centered in Novosibirsk), some 400,000 Latin-rite Catholics comprise less than one-half a percent of the 170 million citizens of the newly independent Russian Federation. By 1995, they ranked both in absolute and relative numbers far behind other major confessions, listed here in ascending numerical order, of Jews, Moslems, Protestants (mostly Baptists), and of course Russian Orthodox who claim 57% of the population as nominal believers.

For the present generation, Catholics are likely to retain much of the semblance of a multi-ethnic minority. The Volga-Germans who arrived in Russia from the time of Peter the Great can still be counted in the hundreds of thousands. Poles and Lithuanians many of whom, like the "Germans," were deported in modern times to Stalinist gulags number in the scores of thousands, while foreigners -- diplomats, businessmen, political refugees and students -- total well under ten thousand. In the last couple of years Armenian, Georgian and other Catholics from the Caucuses, escaping recent regional conflicts and wars, have settled in and around Sochi on the Black Sea. There, they make up an important, although entirely new, segment of the Church. Finally, Moscow and St. Petersburg still comprise the two single largest Catholic constituencies, estimated at 50,000 and 20,000, respectively.

However, the immediate demographic prospect for this community is to shrink drastically in size for two irreversible reasons. For one, the Federal Republic of Germany, acting on an inviolable policy of nationality, has already granted the "right of return" to over a million so-called "Russian-Germans," about a third to a quarter of whom are Catholics. Despite reported difficulties which newcomers endure in adapting (most speak no German, at all) and for the state in absorbing them (unemployment is rising sharply and drastic cuts in welfare costs are imminent), plans continue firm to welcome the estimated remaining million over the next five years.

Meanwhile, the bulk of German Russians has migrated en masse out of the neighboring ex-Soviet republic of Kazakhstán, whither they were once deported, then prospered, but after the break-up of the Soviet Union felt themselves unwelcome among a Moslem majority. They now await the call to their ancestors' homeland in new settlements around Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg) in the northwest of Russia, and in older ones around the Lower Volga Basin and throughout Siberia.

Apropos of this exodus, totally unforeseen in 1991, a bitter-sweet quip makes the rounds of church circles these days: that pastors will soon run out of their proverbial -- and real --
flocks. Indeed, a long-time observer of Central and East Europe concluded that the majority of the most active "German" parishioners in Russia has already emigrated. Consequently, he fears, the very "stability of Catholic church life [there] is now threatened." 7

Understandably, bishops have been of two minds in the counsel they offer. On the one hand, they are loathe to prohibit parishioners from emigrating for a better life, but feel obliged to warn them of the trials that lie ahead. On the other, they strongly encourage all who have roots in the local communities (most are farmers, others small tradesmen and craftsmen) to stay, while owning up to the unpredictability of the current political transition and the unlikelihood of immediate economic progress. A joint pastoral letter to this effect was issued in the autumn of 1995 by the two prelates of Russia and that of Kazakhstan. 8

RUSSIFICATION AND RISING SECULARISM

But there is a second reason for this community to continue to diminish. Precisely among the grandchildren of Germans, but especially of Poles, Latvians and Lithuanians, who tend more than their parents and grandparents to see themselves as "Russians" in language and culture, the pull of the "ethnic" church per se is no longer a guarantee of their participation in Catholic life. As Fr. François Euvé, a French Jesuit who spent two years in Russia, has astutely observed, most young people, whether of an ethnic origin or not, belong to a generation that must as adults "discover Christianity" [for themselves]. And that holds for all the Christian churches in Russia. 9

But, will young adults indeed "discover" religion? In my opinion, this is likely to happen in the future only with difficulty. In fact, as every religious worker, from priest to pastor (and rabbi to mullah), now reports, the "boom years" of the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, when conversions to Christianity -- both to Orthodoxy and Catholicism (and to many other faiths, for that matter) -- were widespread, are clearly over. 10 Conversions (primarily of atheists and agnostics) continue, but at a sharply reduced rate. True, new age sects, Eastern religions and some recently arrived varieties of Pentecostal Christianity have not wanted for new adherents, teenagers and retirees particularly. But, as one analyst notes, "the total number in their communities does not amount to much." 11

Church-going may be a more accurate index of the accompanying current decline in religiosity. A recent survey claims that only three to five percent of Moscow's nine million nominal Russian Orthodox believers attend Sunday services -- comparable to Paris or São Paulo. In April 1996, only some 140,000 individuals, down by 50,000 from 1995, took part at the midnight Easter procession and liturgy held in the capital's 300 or so working churches, according to the Moscow police count, considered reliable. And even that estimate, a well-
placed Orthodox priest confided to me. was probably overly generous by a third. No comparable data is available for Catholics, except that several Moscow clerics concur that Sunday mass attendance is down over the last five years, as is the number of adults seeking baptism or religious instruction.

On the whole, religion in the second half of the nineties faces new and stiff competition that simply did not exist five and ten years ago on today's scale. Everywhere in Russia there are signs that the glitter of modernity and the attractions of consumerism are just as seductive for all social segments, but especially for young adult professionals -- the so-called "new Russians" -- as they are for their contemporaries elsewhere around the globe.

Not only do the shops of Moscow and other large cities offer everything that money can buy (and there is no want of takers despite rank pauperization of some segments of society). But also, the motor forces behind modern consumerism -- the newly privatized mass media, telecommunications and entertainment industries and their allies and partners in the global conglomerates -- are proving second to none in home-grown talent and competitiveness. Indeed, these molders of "modern" culture can and do draw on a pool of highly educated young technocrats and technicians, (still trained cost-free in the public sector, but increasingly no longer available to it). At the same time, this now private sector enjoys the protection of the one-time nomenklatura that has turned these former state enterprises into its own personal property and profit.

Awareness of this trend -- at least, theoretically -- is understandably pronounced among Russia's Catholic clergy which for the most part hails from industrialized nations. As a result, the ideological context and conflicts of modernity are more thoroughly familiar to them than to their Orthodox counterparts who paradoxically had been "shielded" from them by Marxist materialism, a doctrine members of both faiths find equally anathema. As to the level of sensitivity among the Orthodox -- in terms other than misplaced, historically-rooted perceptions of secularization either as a malefic import from West Europe to undermine the Russian nation or as a lure of Latin Christianity to win Orthodox converts -- that seems only now to be taking root, and, according to two Orthodox observers, extremely slowly at that.

In neither confession, however, is there any sign that a head-on campaign as such against real and potential inroads of secularism has been executed or is in the offing. That, per se, is not at the top of anyone's agenda as "brick and mortar" exigencies get first priority. However, Catholics in Russia have publicly taken up questions that in the West would be considered closely related. For example, abortion, drug abuse, and AIDS -- in so far as they are now commonplace in Russia -- have been dealt with in the national Catholic media.
In addition, other recent issues which have originated as religiously neutral, secular concerns, such as alternative military service (a response to widespread draft-dodging as the war in Chechnya rages), protection of the environment (as the tenth anniversary of Chernobyl reveals new horrors of the nuclear age), and the defense of the physically impaired (particularly children and war veterans which Russia's unravelling public health net has simply neglected), have lent themselves readily to interpretations in the religious press from the perspective of Catholic social teaching. That compendium of principles and experience regarding modernity which was intensely developed over the last century stands in sharp contrast to the scant body of Russian Orthodox thinking in the same period all but fully thwarted as it was in Russia by Soviet rule.

The point of this minor but not irrelevant digression is obvious. As the new secularism and secularization continue to advance in Russian society, the local Catholic church will surely draw on this singular resource to face them. It may also seek to "develop" and apply it to specific social problems jointly with its Orthodox "sister church" in the defense of a common Christian heritage. Attempts in that direction, not always successful, are already a matter of record from the Catholic side, while reasons to believe that mutually similar ideological interests could lay the ground for cooperation were recently brought to my attention, from the Orthodox side.

INSTITUTION & "MISSION"

Coping with the rising new secularism and declining rates of both new church membership and overall liturgical participation has understandably had to take a back seat to the urgency and need to begin anew. A brief glimpse at efforts to reverse seven decades of repression and persecution is indeed of interest, not only in and of itself, but also because of the question it raises about the eventual direction of the spiritual mission of the Catholic Church in Russia.

Let us look at the making of church infrastructure.

Of hundreds of pre-revolutionary ecclesiastical properties, Catholics have managed to get back to date only one of its two former churches in Moscow (one of which is beyond repair, while a third, the well-known Church of St. Louis, had already been allowed to hold services during the last decade or so of the Soviet period). Of some thirty remaining churches in Saint Petersburg, only two have been legally returned. So has one in the ancient capital of Vladimir, several hours north of Moscow, one in Volgograd, another in Astrakhan and two others in the Siberian cities of Tomsk and Vladivostok, a vast region where some fifteen had existed prior to Soviet rule. Two new churches have been built in Marx-on-the-Volga (an impressive
modern brick building) and in Kaliningrad (a wooden structure pre-fabricated in Germany),
and a stone house of worship in Novosibirsk. All three cities having been areas of Russian-
German and Polish predominance. 18

In all, some twenty church buildings are now functioning in the European part of Russia,
fewer in the Siberian jurisdiction, and the total of which is hardly sufficient to serve widely
scattered communities. But, until it becomes precisely clear which of these parishes will
remain permanently, few new churches are likely to be built from scratch. Moreover, building
and repair costs (along with the purchase or rental of properties and equipment of all kinds)
have become so prohibitive in the last few years that prioritizing the expenditure of ever
scarcer funds has become an absolute necessity. 19

Nor has registering parishes, as required by the 1990 Soviet law on religion (still in
effect, but now undergoing revision in the Russian Duma), been by any means easy. 20 Each
local authority, rather than a national agency, commands the process. Lawyers (and their sky-
high fees) as well as local politics can slow it down, especially when some traditionally-minded
Orthodox believers have expressed their dissatisfaction. Indeed, in some places local officials
have been so discriminatory against Catholics that a high official in the Moscow Apostolic
Administration registered a public protest in April, 1996. 21

But the task proceeds apace: just under 200 Catholic parishes of the Latin rite, all of
varying membership size, now enjoy legal recognition (although not each claims its own
church building). Some 86 are within the Moscow Apostolic Administration, another 110
within Novosibirsk’s, while about 20 more are still in various stages of being registered. 22 Of
course, the rise in the number of parishes does not imply any corresponding rise in the number
of Catholics, since parish growth is really an artifact of registration requirements without
which the lawful recognition of religious communities cannot be granted. 23 (The same can be
said for all confessions except for those which arrived in Russia for the first time after 1990
and so give the impression of growing exponentially).

To enable Catholic life to flourish, much of the scarce resources has, not surprisingly,
been allocated to installations dedicated to the training of future church leadership. This is
especially necessary since all but three of Russia’s approximately 130 Roman Catholic priests
are foreign-born. 24 To replace them eventually with Russian nationals, a major seminary,
"Mary, Queen of the Apostles," with a current enrollment of approximately thirty students was
established in Moscow in 1991, but transferred to Saint Petersburg in December 1995, when
an historic property much in need of repair and which originally housed future priests prior to
the Revolution was finally returned. 25 A minor seminary opened its doors in Novosibirsk in
October 1993, Fittingly, the first Russian-born seminarian is expected to be ordained in 1999, on the eve of the Third Christian Millennium. Rounding out the Catholic "educational plant" is a theological academy for lay men and women, the Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas; it was established in Moscow in 1990 primarily for the training of catechetists. Today, it also offers a three-year program of study in philosophy and theology, taught both by clergy and laity, among whom are several professors of the Orthodox faith as well as several Russian converts to Catholicism who are well-known Moscow intellectuals.

Catholic mass media consist primarily — and modestly — of three publications in the Russian language, aimed primarily at keeping Catholics abreast of church activities at home and abroad. The eight-page, black and white, tabloid-size Svet Evangeliya, (Light of the Gospel), the official weekly of the Apostolic Administration of Moscow, first appeared in 1994. An intellectually sophisticated and, since its December 1995 issue, a multi-colored, illustrated magazine of culture and religion, Istina e Zhizni, (Truth and Life), has been published monthly since 1990, but is no longer an official church publication. Last, the monthly bulletin of the Apostolic Administration "for Catholics of the Asiatic Part of Russia," Sibirskaya Katolicheskaya Gazeta, (The Catholic Newspaper of Siberia), published its first number in January 1995. The total circulation of all three publications may reach eight to ten thousand copies a month.

Largely without access to commercial radio and television stations, the Moscow Apostolic Administration initiated in April 1996 an hour-long religious radio program, entitled Dar (Gift). Transmitted over the Moscow facilities of Christian Channels, a joint Russian Orthodox-Roman Catholic broadcasting venture (begun in June 1995 and supported by West European Catholic donations), the show has been aired at midday five times a week since May 1996 and covers everything from the history of Catholicism in Russia to catechetical explanations of Gospel readings.

Finally, in the area of social action, region-wide "Caritas" affiliates of Caritas Internationalis, a world-wide association of nationally-based, independent Catholic humanitarian and charitable organizations have been established in Moscow and Novosibirsk and several local affiliates in other cities; communities of Mother Theresa’s Little Sisters continue to serve children and the aged as they have done since 1989; an American Assumptionist priest single-handedly runs a mission for Africa’s students and growing numbers of political refugees; lastly, "Maria House," a church-sponsored half-way house for drug addicts in Moscow, rounds out the sum total of the Church’s direct social presence in Russia.
"MISSION" OR INCULTURATION?

It is now possible to turn from this account of institutional infrastructure to the larger question of the spiritual goal or mission which they do and ought to serve. It takes little else than the preceding description to concur with Fr. Euvé, the French Jesuit on whose first-hand account of Catholic institutional life I have partly drawn, that under the present circumstances "the missionary dimension [of Catholicism in Russia] has not in any real sense ceased to be of concern; but, it is indeed thought of as less urgent because of other stressing problems."

From this observation, Fr. Euvé goes to the heart of the matter: that of "inculturation." A concept given emphasis from the outset of the papacy of Pope John Paul II (1978), while building on the texts of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), inculturation is the definition Catholic thinkers assign to the anthropological and pastoral task of making the universal message of the gospel truly one with every particular people, their language, traditions and culture.

In a certain sense, it is a concept that flies in the face of a "missionary" church -- i.e., one sustained by "outsiders" who may sometimes think of their own language, traditions and culture as superior (a condition not wanting in the West's colonization of Latin America, Asia and Africa). The contrast forms the very core of the debate that has been and is inherent to any "proselytizing" faith, such as Christianity, which believes itself enjoined "to go ... and teach all nations."

At this point, it would be instructive to turn to Fr. Euvé's observations specifically about "inculturation" in Russia, not only as a "task for the upcoming years," as he puts it in his article, but also because the discussion about how best to inculturate "is surfacing more and more in the internal discussions of the church in Russia." I cite him at length:

Some Catholics who would not renounce their Russian identity in favor of some abstract universalism want that the Church in Russia become incarnate in contemporary Russian culture without, however, giving up its "Catholic" dimension. In this way the impression can be avoided that the Church is either a foreign "import," or a mere revival of behavior patterns of the past. In the eyes of these Catholics, the Church in going to such pains need not take on the Byzantine rite [a rite identical to Orthodox liturgy, celebrated by Latin Catholics, but no longer with the intent of doing so to convert Orthodox believers to Catholicism] -- they still consider Moscow as the heiress of Byzantium -- even though several [others] would prefer that the Church do just that [i.e., adopt the Byzantine rite]. The question continues wide open and meets with similar considerations in
Orthodox circles, which are sensitive to the missionary dimension. This debate is being conducted especially among young people who thereby turn out to be the decisive stratum for the Church of tomorrow.

Let us now restate the question raised earlier: in the service of precisely which spiritual goal or mission is the infrastructure of Catholicism to be put, or better phrased, which "people" is it meant to "inculturate?" From Euvé's analysis and my own, there are at least four "constituencies" at stake.

The first and obvious one is made up of those Catholics for whom the new-won freedom of religion most likely signified, as Fr. Euvé put it, the "revival of behavior patterns of the past." These are the Catholics who over seven decades safeguarded their faith at great personal risk and who persisted in the ethnic formulas and identity that were inextricable from that faith, but which in Soviet times brought down on them and their descendants outright social opprobrium. Their saga is no less admirable now that the overwhelming majority has opted to emigrate.

Those who choose to remain and retain the somewhat "oddly-pronounced" prayers and slightly "off-key" hymns of their ancestors will not be forced to change overnight. One of their own descendants, Bishop John Werth, a Jesuit and today the Apostolic Administrator for Siberian Russia, has assured them of that. But, he insists that, in time and albeit with much compassion, they can expect to have "corrected" all those "distortions" which his flock acquired while wandering in the wilderness. As pastoral work proceeds, the once "German" church and "Polish" church will one day become the Catholic church. As the bishop told his clergy, "that is our task!" 32

The second constituency consists of the linguistically and culturally "Russified" descendants of mostly Polish and Lithuanian, but also -- like Bishop Werth -- German Catholics, who for the most part, hail from the large urban centers. For them "Russification" is no longer some involuntary submission to imperial subjugation, but the very coin of a "modernizing," multi-cultural realm, and they are already committed, as Euvé would have it. "for the Church in Russia [to] become incarnate in contemporary Russian culture."

True, at the old, pre-revolutionary Polish church of the Immaculate Conception, the center of Catholic parish life in the heart of Moscow, a mass was celebrated last Sunday in Polish. But, so were masses celebrated in Korean and in Spanish -- and two in Russian! Among those attending the latter, there could be found a goodly portion of Euvé's young people who will help set the direction of a more completely Russian, rather than a merely "Russified" ethnic church, to come.
There is a third constituency which perhaps is now locked for good in its own recent and heroic past, somewhat bewildered by the present state of society, surely overwhelmed and overshadowed by the lightening imposition of a world church where before only one, theirs of the catacombs, had existed. But which, nonetheless, might still serve as leaven for the future. It is rarely mentioned in public documents as a group, probably, in part, because it falls short of being a cohesive group.

But the two characteristics which almost all its “members” have in common are their origins in the university intelligentsia, on the one hand, and their conversion to Catholicism -- from atheism or agnosticism, rather than Russian Orthodoxy, on the other. As participants in and heirs to the religious “boom years” of the seventies and eighties, many retain close ties to their peers and colleagues who during the same era and in far greater numbers had, for their part, converted to Russian Orthodoxy.

In fact, almost all owe their spiritual calling in one way or another to a remarkable, reform-minded Orthodox priest, himself raised by a Jewish mother converted from secularism, Fr. Alexander Men’. His still unsolved murder in 1990 cast both anti-Semites and Russian Orthodox ultra-nationalists in a suspicious light.

But it is Fr. Men’s exemplary life as a pastor, preacher and counselor, and in his call for spiritual and liturgical reform within the Orthodox church, his broadly ecumenical sympathies, and his highly favorable revision of the pan-Christian thought of Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Berdayev that constitute one of the richest legacies of contemporary Orthodoxy. Those who were affected by him -- and it is difficult to arrive at a reasonable estimate of their actual numbers -- and who call themselves the “spiritual children of Fr. Men” continue to perpetuate his memory and ideas.

Today, the Catholic heirs of this remarkable intellectual and cleric occupy teaching posts at both the Seminary and the Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Some can also be found on the staff and editorial board of Istina i Zhizn’, the independent Catholic monthly published in Moscow. The latter enjoy especially strong ties to confreres, friends and acquaintances in Orthodoxy, and see themselves serving as a sort of bridge between the two religious traditions. Like Fr. Men’, they also cultivate a “pan-Christian” approach to spirituality and liturgy. As members of the intelligentsia, they also seek to impart to the Catholic Church in Russia the “great tradition” of Russia -- its culture, literature and language -- while embracing fully the intellectual traditions of Western Europe and the faith of the First Rome. (To some extent, they can be considered heirs to the historical legacy of Russia’s “Westernizers,” but that is a question -- like the intimate history of the group itself -- that cannot be taken up here).
Where this group stands on inculturation is another matter. Some members -- as do several Orthodox confreres -- would hold that Orthodoxy has been so corrupted by decades of religious repression -- and by the collaboration of some of its present-day hierarchs with the Church's oppressors in Soviet times -- that only Catholicism offers the fulfillment of Russia's Christian past. At the same time, they do not hesitate to stand shoulder to shoulder with their Orthodox allies, clergy and laity, who are working to reform that Church from within.35

As to the rite in which they should pray, most of those I have met and have in mind in this discussion would unflinchingly affirm the Latin rite. But, I have personally encountered one Catholic (and only one), a native-born Russian who still considers himself "spiritually" Orthodox; if given the choice, he would publicly embrace the now discarded (with Rome's endorsement, I should add) Russian language Byzantine rite.36

Mention of such an option, referred to en passant by Fr. Euvé (who may have had more evidence of its prevalence than I or than he himself might have chosen to let on), must necessarily lead us to a consideration of the fourth and last Catholic constituency, conspicuous by its absence in almost all public discussions, including Fr. Euvé's: native Russians of Orthodox tradition.

BELIEVERS OF ORTHODOX TRADITION: RUSSIA'S NEW CATHOLICS?

Before even considering Catholicism's prospects for inculturation among native Russians of Orthodox persuasion, it must be pointed out that its very mention comprises one of the most volatile questions in current Catholic-Orthodox relations (and the only one I shall focus on in the remainder of this essay).37 Neither the relatively improved contacts in loco, reported by some, nor the continuing "dialogue" between the ecumenical officers of the Roman Curia and the Moscow Patriarchate have succeeded in diminishing its intensity. In fact, to the Russian daily, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, on 13 April, 1996, just several days before the celebration of Orthodox Easter, Aleksey II, Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, remonstrated in no uncertain terms against "pseudo-missionaries," in whose "whirlwind of pseudo-religions" he seems to have included both Catholics and Protestants.38

That reproach is by no means novel. It can be found at the heart of the Patriarchate's authoritative position paper, submitted at the end of March 1996 to the "Working Group" of the Duma Commission on Religion that has been charged for over a year with the revision of the 1990 Soviet law on religion (currently in force throughout the Russian Federation). In late April 1996, The Moscow Times revealed that one of its key, and rather startling, proposals sustained that.39
foreign religious groups "entering Russia on the invitation of Russian religious organizations" be permitted to carry out their activities here "only through the religious organization which invited them."

The position paper concluded: "Independent activities by foreign religious organizations are forbidden."

Understandably, when it comes to defining "foreign religious organizations," or "who" gets to "invite" them into the country, or what the phrase "independent activities" was intended to mean, the devil is in details, as the saying goes. Fortunately, for faiths falling into this puzzling catch-all of non-"traditional" religions, "none of the Patriarchate's more radical demands were included in the final draft bill of the Working Group," according to the Moscow bureau chief of the Keston News Service, one of the most authoritative sources of religious news from Russia. 40 Another expert also spoke reassuringly that the final law itself would probably strongly resemble the original and thus reconfirm not only freedom of conscience and religious choice, but also the unrestricted right of religious institutions to operate in Russia. 41

Rather than trying now to put the question of inculturation into its larger historical perspective, it must suffice here simply to characterize the current positions of both Orthodox and Catholics.

In essence, the Russian Orthodox Church's opposition to an unfettered religious market place stems from its contention that the country's entire religious domain resides solely within its own and exclusive ecclesiastical jurisdiction. In defense of this denominational "protectionism" (not unlike that proffered to Catholicism in some so-called "Catholic countries"), the Church appeals primarily to history, to "tradition." (a recurring phrase, whose lack of precise definition makes it a kind of "wild card" in the debate) and to the current, however nominal, Orthodox demographic majority of the country. From Orthodox canon law, it further invokes the principle of "canonical territory," a term which in essence implies that Russia is off limits to all other Christian confessions; those who would trespass engage in morally illicit proselytism. 42

Orthodoxy's claim to exclusivity does allow for some exceptions, however: non-Christian ones. "Unofficial" Orthodox spokesmen had already developed this line of reasoning a year earlier, also before a parliamentary hearing on the proposed new law of religion, and one which bears a strong resemblance to the Patriarchate's 1996 position paper. A Russian free lancer for The Moscow Times reported their appearance before the 1995 hearing as follows: 43
[The unofficial spokesmen of the Russian Orthodox Church] emphasized that historically Russia has had four traditional religions: Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

These four religions should, they urged, be granted a special status and should be given special relationships with the state, both of which must be codified in law.

They urged the adoption of measures directed against 'newcomer' religions. It is typical that according to this point of view [the free lancer opined], it is not Christianity as a whole, but Orthodoxy alone that is considered a 'traditional' Russian religion.

At present, as in the past, Islam is more acceptable to the Orthodox Church than Catholicism and Protestantism.

And this is completely understandable: After all, neither Jews, nor Muslims, nor Buddhists are viewed as competitors.

As for Catholics, they refute both arguments head-on -- that of the Orthodox spokesmen's and that of the Moscow journalist's. In the former case, they insist, they too are a "traditional" religion of Russia; in the latter, they aver no desire to compete for souls on Orthodox soil.

In presenting the claim as a "traditional" faith, the able Apostolic Administrator of European Russia, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, whom I interviewed in May 1995, convincingly laid before me copies of imperial Russian decrees, some dating to the 18th-century, granting Catholics the right to worship as well as establish an episcopal see. (Although that see was in present-day Belarus, then a part of Russia, what is of critical significance to today's Catholic geography is that by the end of the 19th-century it encompassed more than a hundred-fifty officially registered parishes that lie within the regional limits of modern-day St. Petersburg).

Against the journalist's charge of "competition", Catholics cite chapter and verse of documents issued since Vatican Council II which proclaim Orthodoxy nothing less than a "sister church" -- meaning, it is the only Christian confession with which Rome declares itself to share fully in both the unbroken apostolic succession of its bishops and the validity of all seven sacraments. Likewise, they point to recent Vatican and papal decrees prohibiting Catholic clergy to "proselytize" among Orthodox in any form. To that end, moreover, Rome has explicitly forbidden the practice of the Byzantine liturgy in Russia and recently decreed its
use as a "method" to unite Orthodox Christians with the See of Peter a "historic form of union" that has run its course and is no longer valid. 44

If that indeed is Rome's last word, what of that "Russian Orthodox" Catholic, whom I mentioned above, who would embrace the Byzantine rite? Or more to the point, so as to clear the air about inculturation, what of any other Russians -- whether of Orthodox Christian origin or any other religious "tradition," who, while on Russian (or is it, Orthodox?) soil, might choose -- as did some converts of the "boom years" -- to embrace Catholicism?

The Russian Orthodox Church would reply that the historic option for a Russian Christian can only be the Orthodox faith. 45

Surprisingly for the prospective convert, the Catholic Church by virtue of its current pastoral practices seems effectively to be in full agreement. 46 Indeed, inside Russia, it publicly and emphatically dissuades would-be converts of traditional Orthodox origins: priests are enjoined to counsel them, instead, to seek out religious instruction in the Russian Orthodox faith.

At this juncture, the complexity of the human and institutional dilemma attendant on inculturation among the Russian people is self-evident. Let us assume for the moment that there are very few prospective converts from Orthodoxy -- and on this matter, hard data is mute. Better yet, let us even assume, for the sake of argument, there is only one.

In this case, to be sure, most American and West European Catholics, and Protestants too, would find the Catholic pastoral practice of "dissuasion" wanting in a sound theological principle. If in the name of bettering Orthodox-Catholic relations (as one Catholic priest who is obviously critical of such a tendency inquires 47) individuals' choice to embrace Catholic Christianity of their own free will is denied, would not the principle of freedom of conscience and of religious choice be breached?

Obviously, this hypothetical situation -- that is also real enough -- not only speaks to the spiritual, moral or religious dilemma of the individual. It also addresses a larger "political" question. By defending the plenitude of every person's right to believe and embrace the faith of her or his choice, the Catholic church in Russia would also be guaranteeing its own right and that of every other religion to be free to profess and act upon its own credo.

Of course, when "push comes to shove," the Catholic church in Russia cannot but speak unequivocally to both issues, that regarding freedom of conscience and that of religious liberty. It would in the end not only welcome a non-Catholic -- and a baptized Orthodox would be no exception -- who persists in the desire to become a Catholic; but it would also yield nothing of its own inalienable institutional right to administer to its faithful without hindrance. On both counts, it is likely to receive broad support from all other confessions.
As for the Orthodox, some indeed stand ready to defend such principles. They recall only too vividly the recent Soviet past when other "laws" permitting religious choice effectively annihilated it; they too also lament the historic schism between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and the tensions that have arisen today that would prevent that separation from being overcome. They engage actively in inter-confessional dialogue; and while they cherish their own magnificent expression of the Christian faith, would not deny a fellow Russian the freedom to choose another.

But these believers are still in a minority, its priests have suffered ecclesiastical disciplining and endured the often bitter ideological censure of their opponents. They can hardly be considered a bulwark in the defense of every faith's right to be "inculturated," but their very persistence means some of the portals through which such a complex process must pass are still open.

For the future of Catholicism's inculturation among Russians of Orthodox origins, "tradition," nationality and history is filled with uncertainty. Whether such an option now stands on the threshold of a new beginning, or whether it has already exited from history with the closure of the "boom years," is difficult to assess.

But as long as there are some Russians that would choose Catholic over Orthodox Christianity, either in its Latin or Byzantine rite, or others from either side of the Great Schism who would dedicate their lives to ending its differences, then Catholic pastors and their flocks, now five years a-gathering, are obliged to rethink their presence in Russia.

Whether such a re-thinking has in fact begun, and at what levels of a by now quite structured institutional church, is also difficult to evaluate.

But, if I understand Fr. François Euvé's essay correctly, there are Russian Catholics who believe that it should begin without delay.
ENDNOTES

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1. For an account of Vatican efforts, diplomatic and ecclesiastical, in 1991, see Oxana Antic, “New Structures for the Catholic Church in the USSR,” Report of the USSR, 13:21 (May 24, 1991), 16-19. It must be remembered that when the first ecclesiastical jurisdictions were demarcated, the former Soviet Union still existed. In it at that time, Catholics were comprised of approximately 5 million Ukrainian Greek-Catholics, three million Lithuanians, and under half a million Latvians.


I am indebted to both accounts for some basic data, but point out that neither draws the conclusions that I do here. They are hereinafter cited simply as Euvé and Krindatch.

3. I do not mean here the politically pejorative use of the term “mission” which Vatican Council II and the introduction of the concept of inculturation made obsolete. This is discussed more fully elsewhere in the text.


5. Based on Krindatch and Euvé. Some Moscow journalists put the Moscow total under 20,000.

6. Interview with Dr. Gerhardt Albert, the Assistant Director of Renovabis, a charitable institution of the German National Conference of Bishops, in Freising on 25 March 1996.

7. Identification withheld on request.

8. I have not yet seen the text of the pastoral letter, but was told of it by a reliable source.

9. See Euvé.


11. Krindatch, 7, puts them at no more than several dozen, while the several “churches of Christ” and other Pentecostals at more than fifty.


12. Interview with Fr. Christopher Hill in Moscow on 26 April 1996.

(After this article was completed in its present form on 13 May 1996, the noted Russian sociologist of religion, Sergey B. Filatov, addressed himself to the likely numbers of actually practising Orthodox believers; he estimates them to range anywhere from 50 to 100 persons in each of the approximately 1,000 existing Orthodox...

13. Interviews with Fathers N. Mieklejohn and S. Caprio in Moscow on 22 and 23 April 1996.

14. Conversations with two orthodox believers, one a priest, the other a layman in Moscow, in early April 1996. A further symptom of that awareness are the steps now being taken by the Patriarchate to establish -- in response to the resolutions of the episcopal synod held in December of 1994 -- a permanent commission for "mission" activities, by which I understand, a program to reach out to would-be Orthodox believers among Russia’s overwhelmingly still unchurched population.

But, Fr. Sergey Chaplin, a high official in the Patriarchate’s Office for Foreign Church Relations, told me on 26 April 1996 in Moscow, that this commission is still only in its most formative stages, its headquarters still to be determined (the presiding official is the Bishop of Belgorod, six hundred kilometers south of Moscow), and its areas of programmatic activities only generally defined.

15. Several issues of Svet Evangeliya, (Light of the Gospel), an official weekly of the Apostolic Administration of Moscow, recently took up these questions; see the issues of 03 March, 17 March, 07 April and 21 April 1996.

16. According to Luc Trouillard, the Secretary General of Caritas International, a federation of national Catholic welfare and humanitarian organizations, attempts at a joint Orthodox-Catholic conference on social welfare in October 1994 fell short of everyone’s initial enthusiasm when the Moscow Patriarchate canceled an agreement to convene it at its headquarters at the Danilovskiy Monastery in Moscow, and later when it reduced its delegation to a single representative. The interview took place in Rome on 09 April 1996.

Catholic efforts, despite such frustrations, are still of high priority. They have received the most favorable response from among "para-ecclesiastical" Orthodox activists of ecumenical persuasion, found at such institutions as the Christian Channels broadcasting stations and the Library for Foreign Literature, both in Moscow.

From the Orthodox side, there are firmly held ethical and moral positions which in principle, Roman Catholics share equally strongly, such as opposition to abortion, pre-marital sex, and euthanasia (mercy-killing). In my recent discussion about this with Fr. Sergey Chaplin on 26 April 1996, I did not, in all fairness, come away with the impression that as a result of common tenets in these areas some joint programs could or would be soon established.

17. This discussion focuses mostly on the European part of Russia, since the author soon expects to travel to Siberia to get a first-hand look at the Church in that vast region.


On proposals by "unofficial" representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church to a 1995 parliamentary hearing on revisions to the 1990 law to include "measures directed against newcomer religions" which included among others, the Roman Catholic Church, see Mikhail Gorelik "Freedom of Conscience," The Moscow Times (25 March 95).


22. Euvé, 602.
23. Krindatch.

24. The exact figure is uncertain. The above number, limited to the Moscow Apostolic Administration, was suggested in an interview on 23 April 1996 with Fr. Stefano Caprio, an Italian priest who in 1989 was among the first Catholic clergymen to take up a permanent assignment in Russia, in this case as chaplain to the Italian Embassy in Moscow.

Of the 130 priests, about 70 are in pastoral work, the rest in educational or administrative work. Figures for the Siberian administration are unavailable to me at this time. Neither is the proportion of religious to secular, nor the number of female religious. Of religious orders and congregations, Franciscan, Salesians and Jesuits may provide the greater number of priests, but that must remain a speculation. To my knowledge, none counts many seminarians among their ranks, although some are reportedly studying abroad.

It should be noted that the rank disproportion of native to foreign clergy holds also especially true for the Jewish rabbinate, almost all of whom throughout the former Soviet Union are volunteers from the Hassidic Lubavitcher community in Brooklyn, N.Y.; see James Rupert, "After Survival, Revival for Ukraine's Jews," The Washington Post (30 March 1995) and Frank Brown, "Let my People Know," The Moscow Times (25 November 1995).


27. The first ordination in the Moscow Apostolic Administration took place in 1995; the candidate, it should be noted, was an Irish-born deacon.

28. This monthly's editorial independence of ecclesiastical authority, its unique inter-confessional direction, and its interesting founder-publisher, a Russian convert and Dominican priest, Fr. Alexander Khmelinsky, deserve a separate essay.

29. Two English-language publications on the Catholic church in Siberia, Vladivostok Sunrise and a Letter from Siberia, are published by American supporters.


31. Euvé, 605; the translation from the German is my own. Italics in the passages cited in the text are not in the original article.

32. In his remarks before Siberian diocese's pastoral conference in 1994, Bishop John Werth, S.J., gives not only a moving account of the history of the Catholic peoples of Russia's Eastern half, but also a compassionate, anthropologically sensitive, approach to the issues of "inculturation" in the region; see his "Vystuplenie pered Uchastnikami Pastyrskoy Konferentsii v Novosibiske, 3-9 Oktyabrya 1994 g.," Logos - "Dialog Vostok-Zapad," 50 (1995), 131-140.

33. I have discussed Fr. Men' in passing in a still unpublished essay, entitled "Jews and Christians of Russia and Ukraine Speak about Anti-Semitism - Notes from a Travel Journal, May-June 1995" (manuscript), 28 Pp. That essay contains references to Yves Hamant's forthcoming biography in English translation and to some of Fr. Men's own writings.

I should also stress that several members of this "group" owe their spiritual beginnings to the Dominican Order (the Ordo Predicatorum of St. Dominick's), whose lay members -- the so-called "Third Order" (the other two being priest and nuns) -- kept their charisma and work alive, clandestinely, during the period of Communist rule. I am presently engaged in studying this current.
34. Each year for the past three a conference has been convened on Fr. Men’s legacy by the Library for Foreign Literature in Moscow. It is one of the most important ecumenical centers in Russia.

35. I have specifically in mind here the Orthodox clergy and laity of the Moscow parish of Saints Cosma and Damian which I also mention at greater length in my article on anti-Semitism cited in note 33.

36. There are pre-revolutionary historical precedents of Russian Christians who were spiritually Orthodox, confessionally Roman Catholic, and liturgically Byzantine. I cannot discuss them here.

For a brief account of the now defunct Vatican Commission Pro-Russia, the purpose of which was to employ the Russian language Byzantine rite to convert Russian Orthodox Christians, see my "Roman Catholic Philanthropy in Central and East Europe, 1947–1993: A Preliminary Inquiry into Religious Resources Networking" in Transnational Religion, State and Global Civil Society, edited by Susan H. Rudolph & James Piscatori (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

37. The most authoritative Orthodox statement on this question is Joseph Poustooutov (Pustoutov, in English transliteration), "Point de vue orthodoxe sur prosélytisme et unité chrétienne," Irenikon, 1 (1995)?, 64-78.


The story was originally filed in early April, by the Oxford-based Keston News Service, one of the most reliable information services on religion in Russia (and whose Moscow bureau chief is a practicing Orthodox).

40. Telephone conversation with Larry Uzzell in Moscow on 01 May 1996.

41. Also see the The Moscow Times (30 April 1996) for comment by Mr. George Law, Vice-President for the Association of Religious Renewal and a close observer of Russian religious issues. Law believes that the more liberal provisions of the original law are likely to remain in force and that in practice any law will matter little "since the religious organizations operating here rely more on their relationship with local leaders than on rules adopted at the federal level." Law further affirmed that preventing "outside" religious groups from establishing themselves really depended on the local ties and "the particular strength of the Orthodox Church in its connection with the local government."


To add fuel to the fire, the same article reports, Communist party presidential candidate, Gennady Zyuganov, whose party holds the largest plurality in the Duma, voiced up to the Patriarchate in mid-April -- around the very time of Aleksiy II’s interview and reportedly in words not at all dissimilar -- by condemning the failure of the State Duma to pass "laws providing priority to all traditional religions" and by further declaring his belief that "the state should support the church morally and materially." But the possible political benefits once thought to come from this seem to be negated by the endorsement of Boris Yeltsin by the Patriarch during his visit to Tbilis on 30 April 1996, according to a Tass-Interfax wire of the same date.

42. The point made by Joseph Poustooutov, "Point de vue orthodoxe sur prosélytisme et unité chrétienne," Irenikon, 1 (1995)?, 64-78, is that proselytism signifies bringing the Gospel to those who have never heard it. Consequently, he argues, for an apostolic church -- i.e., one claiming to be founded by any of Christ's original twelve apostles - - to embark on a religious "mission" in a territory of another Church where the Gospel has already been preached does so as a consequence of "confessionalization," i.e., the breakdown of Christianity into various confessions which took place "above all in the aftermath of the of the division of the West by the Protestant Reformation and the wars of religion which ensued" (66).

44. For a discussion of these documents and pronouncements from an Orthodox standpoint, see again Joseph Poustooutov.

For the Catholic side, see, among other accounts, Della Cava, "Roman Catholic Philanthropy in Central and East Europe, 1947-1993: A Preliminary Inquiry into Religious Resources Networking," also cited above.

Two last points need be made here because they cannot be discussed in the text. First, the phrase "historic form of union" refers primarily to the Greek-Catholic Byzantine rite, pejoratively invoked by Orthodox as Uniate or Unia (meaning union with Rome), and particularly applied to the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, but not excluding like Byzantine rite Catholics in Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Belarus where union with Rome dates from 1596 and 1648. At the same time the Vatican proposes to discontinue this "historic form of union," it has also gone on record, defending the right of historic Byzantine Catholics to enjoy the freedom to continue in their practices.

Second, most Vatican observers concur that behind Rome's efforts is the aspiration within the current Papacy of putting an end to the Great Schism for all time.

45. "No one any longer believes," the Patriarch affirmed in his interview, "that Russia could become Catholic or Protestant." Were such a choice made, it is to be regretted, if not condemned, as the result of individuals being irrevocably "cast into the whirlpool of pseudo-religions" or, in the case of the "young and old, but spiritually inexperienced," of having been "caught in the nets of exotic preachers." See "Tserkov' sozdana Bogom dlya ego chad na zemle," Nezavisimaya Gazeta (13 April 1996); the translation is mine.

46. Of course, Catholics would reject the Patriarch's suggestion that its teachings are exotic or its faith false, or the need to submit to constraints whether of a new law deeming it a "non-traditional religion," or of any other.

47. The interview took place in Moscow on 23 March 1996; my source requested anonymity.

48. I am preparing an account of this Orthodox cohort. For a representative sample of their recent thinking, see the articles by Father Ioann Sviridov and Igumen Ignatiy (Krekshin) in the 7-13 March 1996 issue of the Paris-based Russkaya Mysl'.

For the most recent attack made against them, see "Provoslabnye i Katoliki: Novye shtrichi k dialogy," Russkaya Mysl', 21-27 December 1995.
