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Patriarch Aleksii II: I Accept Responsibility for All That Happened

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Since the appointment of Aleksii II to the patriarchal throne of Moscow and All Russia, much has happened in the life of the Russian Orthodox Church which could hardly be described as normal. For the first time in many decades the small voice of the Church has started to sound its own, independent note. Bound by countless official instructions, exhausted but not broken, it has continued to exist through the most difficult of times. Together with its congregation, in spite of everything, it has given comfort and spoken up for just and eternal values to the very best of its ability.

True, things have not always gone smoothly and as they should, but the Russian Orthodox Church, as time has shown, has been able to retain and preserve its ideals, its traditions. Now it is exactly a year since the enthronement of the new Patriarch. To mark the occasion, our correspondents have met him again to continue their conversation about matters topical, spiritual and temporal.

Your Holiness, during the Soviet period every Patriarch who came to head the Church was obliged to confirm on the day of his election that he would adhere to Metropolitan Sergi's 1927 Declaration on the principles governing the relationship between the Church and Soviet power. You did not do so. But nevertheless, I get the impression that you would justify the Declaration. How do you feel about it in fact?

The main thing is that I do not wish to adopt the stance of seeming to renounce it. That Declaration is a part of the history of our Church. As I am a churchman, I must accept responsibility for all that happened in the life of my Church: not only for what was good, but also for what was difficult, regrettable, mistaken. It would be too easy to say I didn't sign it and know nothing about it.

Whether or not that Declaration helped during those difficult times, we must let history judge. I would not like to pass judgement on the action which Metropolitan Sergi took. We could only commiserate with him on that evening. By all accounts he was offered an 'alternative': either he must sign, or hundreds of bishops already under arrest would be shot.

The pain which he felt then, I sometimes feel in my heart too today. . . . But looking back on events from today, or simply looking at them from the point of view of historical truth, it is clear that Metropolitan Sergi's Declaration cannot be considered voluntary, for he was forced under terrible pressure to say things which were far from true, in order to save people's lives. Today it is possible for us to say that falsehood runs throughout his Declaration, which aimed at 'setting the Church in a correct relationship with the Soviet government'. But this relationship – and in the Declaration it is clearly described as the subjection of the Church to the interests of state politics – is by no means correct as far as the Church is concerned.

Metropolitan Sergi wanted to save the Church through his Declaration. I know that many people who hear that would object that only Christ can save the Church, not people. That is true. But it is also true that without human endeavour, God's help will not save it. An Indestructible, Universal Church. But where is the famous Carthaginian Church? Are there Orthodox believers nowadays in Capladonia, in Little Asia, where Gregory the Theologian and Basil the Great were so famous? Before our very eyes the Church was destroyed in Albania. And there were forces in Russia which wanted the same thing.

Over the past year, I think, we have been able to emerge in a real sense from beneath the state's forced tutelage. For that reason, with our distance from the state an established fact, we have the moral right to say that Metropolitan Sergi's Declaration has disappeared entirely into the past and that we are no longer guided by it.

That does not mean that we are speaking out against the state. It means that we think perhaps the state can be mistaken, very badly mistaken, sometimes even criminally mistaken, and that when this happens, we have the right and the duty to bear witness before God, before our consciences, before the whole world to this infringement of God's truth.

Yes, over the past year you have behaved in a way that a convinced follower of Sergi maybe would not have acted. It is as though it was not you that V. Furov, then vice-president of the Council for Religious Affairs, described in 1974 as one of the most loyal bishops of the Russian Church, who understand the Church's 'lack of interest' in the strengthening of religion.

When I was appointed bishop to Tallinn – this was in September 1961 – I was told by the local authorities that the *Komsomol* was planning to turn the Alexander Nevsky cathedral into a Plantetarium and that the Piukhtitsa convent, from which the nuns were due to be removed by the end of September, would be turned into a rest home for miners. I managed to persuade the authorities that such behaviour would be unacceptable. And then, in the 30 years during which I headed the diocese of Estonia, there was not one case of the administrative closure of a place of worship, and the number of nuns in the Piukhtitsa convent doubled – from 80 to 160 by 1988. This does not mean, of course, that I was free in my leadership of the diocese and in my work in the patriarchate. If I got my way over one issue, I was sometimes forced to yield over another. Were there other organisations or other people among those who were obliged to take responsibility not only for themselves but also for the fates of thousands of others who were not forced to act in the same way during those years in the Soviet Union?

Of those people who were pained by such concessions, by the failure to speak out, by the forced passivity and expressions of loyalty of the church leadership during that period, I ask forgiveness, understanding and prayers – not only before God, but before those people too.

Today the Church is really freeing itself from the burden of the past. Relations with the state are being normalised, new possibilities are opening up. Will it be able to take advantage of these or will it fall victim to its own internal divisions instead, maybe leading to a schism?

The threat of schism is the main thing that saddens me in the life of the Church today. The Church and its people must have wisdom, tolerance, a sense of responsibility. A university teacher has a responsibility to his conscience only for the complete

expression of the truth. But a priest must think above all of how any one of his words might be received in people's souls.

Priests who support a schism in order to prove that the positions they have adopted are 'principled and correct' are prepared to deny altogether the existence of spirituality in Russian society, in our Church. The further this goes, the more difficult it will become to heal the schism which is developing with the Church in Exile and with those parishes which it is creating in Russia. They are increasingly governed by a spirit of 'party-mindedness', by which I mean a willingness not so much to seek the truth but to stick to old adopted positions.

I would like to remind you that the Church in Exile promised from the very beginning that once the Moscow Patriarchate had gained its freedom, the synod of the Church in Exile would present all the actions it had taken during the years of forced separation to the Patriarchate for judgment. Now they put the matter differently: all the priests of the Russian Church must go to them for judgment and repentance. I would suggest, however, that no one should be judged; that rather we should all repent – the Karlovtsy Council included, either for their official support of Hitler, or for the message sent by the Council of Bishops of the Church in Exile to President Johnson of the USA in which they called 'for God's blessing on the heroic American army, selflessly struggling in Vietnam, with hopes for its victory'. In the jungles of Vietnam, after all, it was not communist ideas but children that the napalm bombs burnt. We made no such declarations about Afghanistan.

I would like to say this: the Church must not split on political grounds. While we lived in Russia and they lived in America this did not constitute a schism, just a sort of separation. But when there are two churches on the same street in each of which the priest, instead of preaching the Gospel, spends his time explaining why believers should not go to the neighbouring church, that would constitute a schism. We cannot have a 'free Russian Church', a 'liberal Russian Church', a 'monarchist Russian Church' or even a 'Kadet Russian Church'. When society is being torn apart by national and political contradictions, the Church should be a place where the most disparate people can be reminded of, and sense, the unity of their value as children of God, the unity of their faith and the unity of God's love for us all.

Among the internal tensions threatening the unity of the Church is the problem of the Union. Can this be resolved through legalisation of the Uniate Church?

As far as legalisation is concerned, this is a matter which comes under state jurisdiction. The Union was dissolved by an Assembly of Uniate clergy in L'vov in 1946. This Assembly took place under extreme pressure from the Stalinist administration. But there is nevertheless no doubt that it expressed a mood which was strong among at least a sector in the Uniate clergy. What they were aiming to achieve by this was later compromised, on the one hand by state pressure, and on the other by the extremely short-sighted policy of some of our local bishops. Before the revolution we tried to send the best, the most educated, the most spiritual bishops to these areas. In the period after the war the bishops, whose presence in these places had been agreed to by the authorities, did not always possess these qualities.

Today, religious life in Ukraine is not free from external, political pressure. The question of the future of the Union in western Ukraine can be decided only by a Council, and specifically a religious not a political gathering, which would not simply be a repetition of the L'vov assembly with a 'minus' sign. To the voice of such an assembly, if it were speaking under sober and spiritual circumstances, we would listen.

Your Holiness, what do you consider to have been the most important event in the life of the Russian Orthodox Church in the past year?

A return to our lost spiritual roots has begun. The relationship between the Church and the state has, I think, entered a new phase – particularly now that the Church has been granted the rights of a legal entity. The year has been a tense one, full to overflowing. The conditions in which the Church exists today make the carrying out of a full church life possible. This includes: catechisation; the revival of church parish Sunday schools; charitable works; philanthropy; social activity in hospitals, old people's homes and prisons. It also includes the restoration of tens, hundreds, thousands of places of worship, which are being returned to the Church. The restoration of these places of worship which have been vandalised and profaned is a complex process, but it inspires optimism.

Of course, there are many problems. There are many areas where we must start from square one. For example: during the time I spent in the Novosibirsk diocese I consecrated six new churches. Today building of this sort is going on virtually everywhere. In Moscow, a church is to be built to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the conversion of Rus' to Christianity and the Kazan' Cathedral on Red Square is to be renovated. At the beginning of 1988 in Moscow there were 45 active churches; today there are already 130. However, many are in such a state that they must literally be rebuilt. And where are craftsmen and architects capable of putting up a church to be found today? Unfortunately, their secrets and their skills have been lost. We must seek out and revive their craft. And for the moment it seems we cannot manage without the help of foreign firms. The church to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the conversion of Rus' will probably be built with the help of the construction companies which built the huge Orthodox Cathedral of St Savva in Belgrade.

The country's switch to the market is bound to increase the burdens on people. Tell me, does the Church support the new economic policy?

The return to the market, for it is a return and not a switch, is going ahead in Russia too. The Church will naturally be watching closely to ensure that this return does not have too harsh an impact on human lives. We will support it and perhaps, by so doing, participate in the creation of a system of social protection for people. We should not forget the lessons of socialism – perhaps not the Soviet variety, but European socialism.

One final question: the western press has reported that Patriarch Aleksii's health is unsound. It is true that you have to travel all over the country, hold services, meet people. How are you coping with the strain?

Thank God, as far as my health is concerned I have nothing to complain about for the moment. I am very busy and there is no time to feel ill. And it is true that over the past year I have visited 15 dioceses. I have been to Ukraine, to Moldova, Karelia, Estonia and various provinces of Russia. I have met priests, the public, believers, young people. I have conducted more than 220 services.

Now I am resting for 10 days, then I will set off immediately for Belorussia, then Kostroma, Nizhni Novgorod, Vladimir, Yaroslavl', Kolomna, Leningrad and Valaam. Believers like to see their Patriarch and I am happy to spend time with them.

Such a dynamic life-style helps me in the service of Divine Liturgy and other religious duties. Through this I derive strength for myself and for my duties.

I admit that sometimes I feel like resting a little, spending some time by myself with nature. In the old days during my free time I would walk in the forests in Estonia, as much as 30,000 paces a day. Unfortunately my duties no longer permit this. But all the same I hope that an hour or so for walking will come along, and for the reading of spiritual and secular literature.

*Interview conducted by G. Alimov and G. Charodeyev
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