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Patriarch Aleksii II: a Personal Impression

JOHN ARNOLD

Since the election of Aleksii II as Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia in June 1990, much interest has centred on the man called to lead the second largest church in Christendom at a time of great instability in both church and state. He was the undoubted choice of the church itself in a free and unfettered election, but comparatively little is known about him, partly because the choice was in some respects surprising, partly because he is by nature rather shy and retiring, not given to self-publicity and wholly without flamboyance. Indeed, he retains the quiet dignified style and manners of the old Baltic aristocracy from whom he is descended on his father's side. He was born and his basic character and personality were formed in the independent Estonia of the 1930s. In this respect he is unlike the other leading hierarchs. We can only speculate as to whether this element of 'apartness' leads to difficulty in relationships with colleagues and whether it played a role in his election, the Synod already presaging in 1990 the need for and possibility of returning to the virtues and characteristics of the pre-Soviet era. As well as being a gentle man, Patriarch Aleksii is evidently a gentleman (*dzhentl'men*), carrying with him a touch of old St Petersburg, where his Swedish ancestors settled in the time of Peter the Great and which he served for four years from 1986 as Metropolitan of Leningrad. Nevertheless, it was his base in mainly Lutheran Estonia (as deacon from 1950 and as Bishop from 1961) that helped him to lead something of a charmed life in dangerous years and also provided him with a background of genuine and deep-seated devotion to ecumenism. There can be no doubt of his personal commitment. It would have been easy, and in some ways expected, for him to have given up his international ecumenical responsibilities upon his election as Patriarch. He delighted all his friends in the Conference of European Churches (CEC) by agreeing to serve out his term as President and Chairman until after the next Assembly in Prague in September 1992.

It is in the CEC that I have met the Patriarch intermittently since 1964 and frequently since the last assembly in Stirling 1986, at which we were both elected to the Presidium. At the first joint meeting of the Presidium and Advisory Committee in 1987 Metropolitan Aleksii, as he then was, was elected Chairman and I was elected Vice-Chairman. We have therefore worked together as the officers (together with the General Secretary, M. Jean Fischer) of a regional ecumenical body. I have already spoken of his deep commitment to ecumenism. The obverse of this is that over a period of 30 years he has been constantly learning from other churches and from other situations. The ecumenical movement has given to an admittedly small cadre of Russian church men (and even fewer women) an unparalleled apprenticeship in leadership and a kind of running seminar in world affairs and theological development which was simply unobtainable in the Soviet Union. As Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk said at the European Assembly 'Peace and Justice' (Basel 1989),

The voice of the church returned to the country in a roundabout way, via active outer work, by means of resolutions and documents of ecumenical organisations. . . . It is difficult to measure the degree of the church's impact on the formation of the new approaches to the issues of justice, peace and integrity of nature, but the very fact of such input is obvious. . . . We are grateful to God for the gifts by which he enriches his people in the ecumenical movement.

Certainly Metropolitan Aleksii, with his observant gaze and quick mind, was for a whole generation one of the chief channels of communication. Things learnt abroad have been put to use at the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, not least during his long service from 1962 to 1986 as Chancellor (Head of Administration).

Working closely with him, I have always been impressed by his grasp both of the principles and of the details of administration and by his exceptional memory, which has often come to my aid in committee work and in officers' meetings. We are both members of the Personnel Committee and here his pastoral gifts also come into play. With the staff, as with everyone else, he is friendly, thoughtful and courteous, though not hail-fellow-well-met; and in difficult discussions about the ecumenical balance of appointments he is scrupulous in distinguishing between his roles as a representative of the Orthodox Church and as an officer of the CEC.

The style of CEC meetings is now much less hierarchical and deferential than is customary in the Orthodox churches. Without losing his innate dignity, the Patriarch adapts easily to the more relaxed style; indeed, he positively enjoys it. And without ever going beyond his own church's official position, he is quietly appreciative of the considerable personal contribution made by women, including ordained women, to our work. I have found it easy to establish a working relationship with him in the conduct of meetings and in committees. He never wastes words, but knows when to make a point cogently and effectively. He is by nature and experience cautious and prudent, rather than rash and innovative; but he can also be decisive, as when we took the initiative on our own authority to convene a meeting of European church leaders in the spring of 1990 to help one another find our bearings after the astonishing events of the autumn of 1989.

Perhaps the clue to his success and to his survival as a church leader in difficult times is that he is, more often than not, slightly but not too far ahead of events. He is not and never has been an outspoken dissident or revolutionary leader. That is not in his character. But I have never heard him make a passport speech, go beyond the line of duty in supporting the policies of the Soviet government, speak ill of anyone, or indeed say anything discreditable. At times when others have said things of which they might have reason to be ashamed, he has been noticeably reticent. When he has spoken critically in my hearing, it has usually been in a pastoral rather than in a political context. For example, I learned from him to see the tragedy and futility of the war in Afghanistan through the eyes of grieving mothers in his diocese, as the long stream of coffins came back to Leningrad for burial. But when I visited him in Moscow in December 1989, I remember his coming in at midnight after an evening session of the Chamber of Deputies, quietly proud of having cast his vote, his 'za', for the deletion of Article 6 from the Constitution – the one guaranteeing the privileged position of the Communist Party in the then USSR.

Three actions at the time of the abortive coup of August 1991 seem to me to be typical. At the crucial time he was engaged in what on any other day would have been the most momentous event, namely celebrating the liturgy for the Feast of the Trans-

figuration for the first time since the Revolution in the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin. He changed just two or three words in the intercession to make it clear that the faithful were praying for the people and not for the usurpers, sending out a signal which is much more potent in the context of the Orthodox liturgy than it would be in the West. I have since reflected that it must take the same kind if not the same amount of courage to change the words of the liturgy in those circumstances as to jump on a tank and make a speech. His statement of 20 August with its demand to hear directly from President Gorbachev and its appeal to the army not to shed fraternal blood, and his broadcast on Radio Moscow in the middle of the night, certainly played their part in the eventual outcome. In the long run, however, the greatest good may have come from the way he conducted the funeral service for the three martyrs, who included a Jew, thus sending an important signal to antisemites in both church and nation.

Now he faces huge problems arising from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, touching the integrity and unity of the Russian Orthodox Church itself. Much interest in the West is focused on his attitude to the Roman Catholic Church and his refusal to send a participant observer to the recent Synod on Europe in Rome. On the other hand he supported the sending of a representative of the Conference of European Churches to the Synod and at the same time strengthened (by the addition of Metropolitan Yuvenali of Krutitsy and Kolomna) the Russian Orthodox delegation to the Fifth Ecumenical Encounter between the CEC and the CCEE (Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences in Europe) in Santiago de Compostela in November 1991. He made a clear distinction between, on the one hand, a Synod set up by the Roman Catholic Church to further its aims and objectives on its own terms and, on the other, a joint venture between all the European churches on a basis of equality and mutual respect. The respective results of the two meetings appear to have vindicated this distinction. He has been a consistent supporter of the series of Ecumenical Encounters, in which he has played a leading part; and he has gained the respect and affection of the Roman Catholic participants, notably Cardinal Martini of Milan (President of CCEE) with whom he co-chaired the immensely successful European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel in 1989.

The Patriarch was recently my guest in Durham, where he won the hearts of my family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. He is a charming and solicitous host; and his residence in Peredelkino is run with warm-hearted efficiency by Mother Filaret and a small group of nuns. The furtherance of the monastic life has always been close to his heart, and several houses, especially the convent at Piukhtitsa in Estonia, owe much to his patronage and protection. I sometimes feel that his real *métier* would have been to be an Abbot (like his friend Cardinal Hume?), living in the liturgy which he loves and celebrates with such dignity, guiding and animating a community, seeking individual and corporate salvation. He has, I know, suffered great sorrow in his personal life and is deeply marked in his whole manner by acquaintance with grief. Unmoved by ambition, he would, I think, have preferred a quieter life.

However, he has been called by his church and by the exigencies of the age into a position of great responsibility and difficulty. He cannot possibly meet *all* expectations, because those expectations are themselves contradictory and some of them are based on western models of leadership which have never been the norm in the eastern church. We would do better to look in him for those fruits of the Spirit against which there is no law: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22) and be thankful for what we find. I pray for him regularly and would encourage others to do so too.