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First Open Letter to Patriarch Aleksii II

Your Holiness,

In 1965, when the Khrushchev era of persecution of the church came to an end, Fr Nikolai Eshliman and I wrote an open letter to Patriarch Aleksii I denouncing the church authorities – the patriarch, the synod and the bishops – for their collaboration, servility and complicity in the persecution of the church.

As a result we were punished. Patriarch Aleksii I received an order from the KGB and the Council for Religious Affairs to ban us from church ministry. Obedient to the persecutors of the church, he denied us the opportunity to fulfil our priestly duty.

It was only 21 years later, on the wave of the political amnesty accompanying *perestroika*, that I was freed from exile in Yakutia. At the same time, by order of that same KGB, the Holy Synod revoked the decision of Patriarch Aleksii I concerning me. The late priest Eshliman was, however, not rehabilitated into the church.

In those remarkable days I could have foreseen only in a nightmare that in the kaleidoscopic series of events shortly to come – the collapse of the USSR, of communism, of the power of the soviets and the KGB – I would again be repressed; but this time by the free ‘good will’ of the patriarch and the bishops. And repressed even more cruelly than before – by defrocking: even the godless state security did not go as far as that.

This appeal, Your Holiness, is one more desperate attempt to get through to the conscience of the head of the church, who carries the whole weight of responsibility for the current state of affairs in the Moscow Patriarchate.

As regards the resolution to defrock me, I consider it uncanonical for the following reasons:

- 1 The Holy Synod, the highest church administrative body, was wrong to take the decision as it contradicts a resolution of the highest legislative body of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Local Council (*Pomestny Sobor*). On 15 August 1918 the Council adopted a special resolution forbidding the persecution of priests for their political activities and rehabilitated in holy orders the former member of the State Duma Grigori Petrov (forbidden by the Synod in a similar situation to mine in 1907). This resolution of the Local Council has not been revoked and is therefore still legally valid.
- 2 The resolution of the Synod to defrock me contradicts the decision of 8 October 1993 which threatens to defrock any priest who has become a *candidate for deputy*. This decision was applied to me on 3 November, that is seven days before official registration as a candidate for deputy of the State Duma (registered by the Central Electoral Committee (*Tsentrizbirkom*) on 10 November).¹ So I was defrocked only *for the desire to become a deputy*.
- 3 The resolution of the Synod contradicts the principles of Church Law: defrocking is a serious disciplinary punishment applied either for deviation in the realm of dogma or for crude infringement of Christian morality.
- 4 The resolution makes incorrect reference to ancient canonical church rules (Rule of

the Holy Apostles 6 and 81, Rule 11 of the *Dvukratny Sobor*, Rule 10 of the Seventh Ecumenical Council).

Before the Revolution of 1917 the members of the Fourth State Duma included dozens of bishops and priests in the Russian Orthodox Church, and there is no reason to think that the church leadership at the time was any less familiar with these ancient rules than you, Your Holiness.

Knowledge of these rules did not prevent either you or your reverend colleagues (Patriarch Pimen, Metropolitan Pitirim Nechayev) from sitting in Gorbachev's Soviet Parliament, where you were industrious deputies, nor does it prevent Synod member Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk, who took part in defrocking me, from serving as a deputy in the present Supreme Soviet of Belarus. Your Holiness, if you consider that the above-mentioned ancient rules can justly be applied to me, why have you not also applied them to Metropolitan Filaret, and why have you not passed judgment on your own service as a deputy, and the deputyship of other clergy in the recent past? Neither have you passed judgment on the scandalous fact that clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate – deputies and non-deputies – participated directly in the political struggle on the side of the opponents of president and government on 3 and 4 October 1993.

I therefore have every juridical and moral justification, Your Holiness, for declining to acknowledge the decision of the Holy Synod of 3 November to defrock me as legal and for regarding it 'as if it had not been taken'.

I continue to consider myself a priest and intend to appeal to the impending Local Council of the ROC.

I am able to testify that it was the grace of priesthood that helped me to endure severe trials with integrity: persecution by the communist authorities, the KGB's Lefortovo prison camp, exile and also 21 years' persecution by the church authorities.

Your Holiness, I regard holy orders as too valuable a treasure to give up without a fight: my religious conscience and moral principles will not allow me to submit to your decision, which contradicts canon law.

Convinced of the rightness of my cause and placing my hope in the help of God, I turn to you, and through you to the whole Russian Orthodox Church, speaking the bitter and impartial truth.

The church leadership has gone well beyond the bounds of canon law in defrocking me. This is just one typical act which bears witness to the deep all-embracing crisis in the Moscow Patriarchate – a crisis for which the heavy responsibility rests with you, Your Holiness.

Our church is sorely in need of profound reforms after long years of violence and persecution, but it has seen no changes of note during the years of your rule. These years have nevertheless proved favourable for the spiritual healing of Russia, for preaching, missionary service and apologetics. But there are too few good, experienced and faithful pastors. And therefore the voice of the church is not ringing out loudly; it is not able to help society overcome moral chaos.

The church is cutting itself off from the life of society; it is ossifying, turning into a marginal, ritualised structure. The church claims to be 'keeping out of politics' – but in fact it is becoming ever more politicised.

Within the church, profascist, procommunist and 'Black Hundreds' forces are growing ever stronger. Your successor in St Petersburg, Metropolitan Ioann, ranking second in the Holy Synod, has become the figurehead for these forces. Like many of

his supporters, he does not intend to 'keep out of politics', but on the contrary is actively foisting his extreme political views on society, occupying an antidemocratic position with the silent connivance of yourself and the Holy Synod.

I would like now to list those areas of church life which need profound changes. Without such changes rebirth of the Orthodox Church is unthinkable.

Changes in Personnel

The archives, and in particular official reports written by first chairman of the Council for the Affairs of the ROC, Georgi Karpov, are giving us a detailed picture of the process whereby in September 1943, on the orders of Stalin's MGB (Beria and Lieutenant General G. Karpov) and on the basis of the 'Sergian' ideology of collaboration, an organisation of an entirely new kind was constructed on the ruins of the church of the martyrs and confessors destroyed by the persecutors of religion. This new type of organisation was the Moscow Patriarchate. It was actually run as a branch of the most powerful ministry in the land; its bishops and administrative apparatus were entirely in the hands of agents of that ministry.

In the 1940s and 1950s the main aim of the security services as regards the church was to maintain the strictest control over it. In the years of Khrushchev's persecution, however, the organs laid two most important functions on the Moscow Patriarchate: promoting disintegration of the church from within by members of the church hierarchy compromising themselves in the eyes of believers and non-believers; and complicity on the part of the clergy in the mass closure of churches.

Both these other additional 'obligations' required the organs themselves to infiltrate into the church and advance in the hierarchy those of their agent proteges who were distinguished by their amoral behaviour. Those who could fulfil the role of 'church *kapo*' – those who would actively promote the closing of churches, and even do so with their own hands – also became part of the 'agency'. Both types of agent were clearly active in the business of destructive antireligious agitation.

Mass closure of the churches as a state-organised campaign turned out to be of temporary duration and was stopped in 1966; but the destruction of the church by moral disintegration continues even to this day.

The names of the most odious hierarchs in this category of agents are well known. Mefodi, Serapion, Gedeon, Melkhisedek – it would not be difficult to add more names to the list.

Their presence in the church hierarchy is a cause of deep offence in the hearts of the flock. Innumerable complaints to departments of church and state remain unanswered. And you, Your Holiness, do not take any measures, although you are well enough informed about the harm which these false pastors are doing to the church.

And, finally, one more painful subject.

If it is not cleansed of the taint of the spy and informer, the church cannot be reborn. Unfortunately, only one archbishop – Archbishop Khrizostom of Lithuania – has had the courage publicly to acknowledge that in the past he worked as an agent, and has revealed his codename: 'Restavator'. No other church hierarch has followed his example, however.

The most prominent agents of the past include *Drozdov* – the only one of the churchmen to be officially honoured with an award by the KGB of the USSR, in 1988, for outstanding intelligence services – 'Adamant', 'Ostrovsky', 'Mikhailov', 'Topaz' and 'Abbat'. It is obvious that none of these or the less exalted agents are preparing to repent. On the contrary, they deliver themselves of pastoral maxims on

the allegedly neutral character of informing on the church, and articles have even appeared in the church press justifying the role of the informer as essential for the survival of the church in an antireligious state.

The codenames I discovered in the archives of the KGB belong to the top hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate. They all know about each other's activity as agents and cover up for each other. One may well ask whether it is possible for Christians who have poisoned themselves with this kind of work to continue offending against their holy orders as if nothing had happened, without feeling the desire to repent for their faintheartedness and treachery. Is it not time for all archbishops and priests who cooperated with the secret police to reveal to the people of the church the truth about our church's tragic history, and to put it to that same church to judge whether it has any further use for hierarchs who are CPSU and KGB collaborators, or whether the time has finally come for them to step down and for the people of the church to exercise their right to choose their own pastors freely? For decades, however, the leaders of the church organisation created by Stalin and his colleagues-in-arms have been trampling on the rights of ordinary churchgoers.

A Return to Basic Conciliarity (*Sobornost'*) in Church Life as the Main Route to the Rebirth of the Church

The security organs created the Moscow Patriarchate in 1943 in order to consolidate and perpetuate their total control over the church as an organisation. Within the church they established a harsh regime of internal discipline based on their own model as a military organisation, with rigid hierarchical subordination directly contradicting the resolutions of the Local Council (*Pomestny sobor*) of 1917–18 which saw the start of the active participation of laymen and clergy in the life and direction of the church.

This, incidentally, is the reason why the resolutions of the 1917–18 Council are still being carefully kept back from the faithful. To begin with the communist regime saw to this; now it is the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate which is interested in hiding this information from church and society, since it contradicts the current Regulations (*Ustav*) of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The key resolutions of the Council meant that the structure of power in the church and the principles of its organisation could be based on conciliarity (*sobornost'*): this is in fundamental contradiction with the current principles of autocracy and authoritarianism. Only conciliarity, however, can become the basis for a canonical structure for the Russian Orthodox Church.

What is also needed is a change in the Regulations of the church to enable the community of parishioners to choose their own priests, and to ensure that archbishops ordain and appoint priests only in accordance with their will. In the same way the Bishops' Congress (*S'yezd*) will choose the bishops and the Free Local Council (*Svobodny pomestny sobor*) will choose the patriarch. Only if a genuinely churchly arrangement like this is put in place will it be possible to overcome the crisis in the life of our church. At present, however, ruthless totalitarianism gives absolute power over the people of God to the archbishops, enslaving people's souls with lies and spiritual terror. Is it not because this authority over the people of the church is so attractive that the functionaries in the Moscow Patriarchate have no intention of helping in the democratic transformation of Russia? And is this not also the reason why reactionary 'red-brown' politics has turned out to be so tempting? Russian Orthodox priests were quick to give their blessing to politicians of this kind during the recent

political disturbances, calling the lawful rulers of Russian 'Jewish forces' (see the article by Fr Vladimir Sedov, one of the defenders of the White House, in the newspaper *Den*, no. 1).

Nostalgia for Bolshevism has probably been the motive for reprisals against me because of my support for those politicians who intend to overcome the legacy of totalitarian slavery by helping to build a new Russia in which no one will have the right to infringe the conscience or faith of the individual.

Providence has set me face to face with inhuman totalitarianism, and I know what it really stands for. I consider it my duty as a priest to expose the darkness leading Russia to death.

The Need to Do Away with the 'Black Cashbox' in the Church in Order to Stop the Plunder of Church Finances

The organs of state security arranged for a 'black cashbox' to be established so that a significant part of church income could be hidden from the controlling organs in both church and government.

Even in the period of Khrushchev's mass persecution of religion the organs of state security made sure that the 'black cashbox' continued to operate. Genuine church income was a forbidden 'taboo' area for any state financial inspector, absolutely inaccessible and beyond control, although at that time a discovery of financial abuse could have made the authorities' search for a formal reason to liquidate religious communities a good deal earlier.

There is reason to believe that money extorted from the church went secretly to finance state security operational activities, and that significant sums found their way into the pockets of security service functionaries.

Money extorted from the church's 'golden triangle' was sometimes passed on straight to the security organs by the elders and priests in charge – for example, the well-known case of the Rostov UKGB major Khvostikov who was sentenced to be shot in 1985 for bribery and extortion from clergy. A more reliable route, tried and tested, was, however, from elder to priests in charge to local dean to ruling archbishop to state security organs.

In 1991 the umbilical cord linking mother and daughter organisations was cut, but the practice of taking church money from parish funds did not stop; it was just that the main recipient fell away.

Apart from insignificant sums which were still needed for bribing functionaries, most of the secretly collected money began to pile up with those archbishops who were staging posts in the financing of the KGB.

The legalisation of church income and the liquidation of the 'black cashbox' are the basis on which the financial health of the church will be restored and simony and extortion put to an end. The 'church racket' is a good illustration of the economic theory of Marx about the exploitation of labour and unjust capital. The role of the exploiting capitalists is played by the bishops, and into the role of the mercilessly exploited workers steps the class of ordinary priests.

Your Holiness,

In 1990 the Law on Freedom of Conscience was adopted, giving complete freedom to the church and, in particular, unlimited freedom to preach, which is the main business of Christianity. The years since then have shown, however, that the Moscow Patriarchate is a ceremonial institution which cannot carry the Word of God to the

Russian people. It does not fulfil Christ's commission to the church on earth.

It is the church that should have been at the head of the process of spiritual regeneration and of the healing of Russian society during the period when communist ideology was collapsing. But the Moscow Patriarchate proved powerless. As a result its authority in society has been falling significantly.

At this time of fundamental historical change the church ought to have been offering unequivocal support to everything that was new and directed towards the healing and recovery of Russia, and to the president whom you, Your Holiness, blessed when he assumed office. The historical tradition of the church in difficult times has been to support good and renounce evil. Nevertheless, Your Holiness, at the most critical moment of the political crisis of 21 September to 4 October, you and the Holy Synod occupied a neutral position and under cover of this formal neutrality and the organisation of talks between the warring sides you in essence gave your blessing to forces of reaction, sending your representatives – clergy and monks from the Danilov Monastery – to the bunker of the White House. They completed their mission, encouraging and blessing the putschists, the snipers, indeed all the Khasbulatov camp. You refused to support the new Constitution of a free Russia which would have brought peace and stability to the state, you refused to support President Yel'tsin at the critical historical moment, and proved incapable of passing judgment on the rise of fascism.

The false intermediary position of the church leadership in the conflict between the Khasbulatov–Rutskoy camp and the president is the result of the same false peacemaking which the Moscow Patriarchate has pursued for 50 years at the behest of the communist regime and the state security. False peacemaking is objectionable to God and can only end in failure.

Without genuine repentance and a purging of the '*nomenklatura*' peacemakers all mediation by the patriarchate – as we have seen in the example of the Karabakh conflict – is doomed to failure. The Synod's message in connection with the construction of a memorial church at the site of the murder of the tsar's family in Yekaterinburg and your own Christmas message both call on the Russian people to repent. Your Holiness! Show me an example of repentance for the people and the Russian Orthodox Church like that of your brother, the Romanian patriarch Teoctist, who genuinely repented before the Romanian people and their church. Show me the example of your own repentance, 'for it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God' (1 Peter 4:17).

Deputy of the State Duma Fr Gleb Yakunin

19 January 1994

Read at a press conference on 24 January 1994

Notes and References

¹ The original text incorrectly has '10 October'.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins).