

St. George Newsletter

May 2012

This year on May 17 the Russian Orthodox Church marked the fifth anniversary of the reunion of its two parts. On this occasion, a new film was produced by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk. This film may be viewed on his site: <http://hilarion.ru/2012/05/16/4668>

The Mystery of the Reestablishment of Unity has Occurred

protopriest Peter Perekrestov

On May 17, the Russian Orthodox Church will mark the fifth anniversary of the day of reconciliation with the Russian Church Abroad. On the eve of this important date, Pravmir is publishing an interview with Protopriest Peter Perekrestov, Senior Priest of the Cathedral of the Mother of God “Joy of All Who Sorrow” in San Francisco, CA, and official member of the ROCOR delegation of 2004, Senior Secretary of the 4th All-Diaspora Council and Chairman of its Organizing Committee.

- Fr Peter, you have taken active participation in the work of reestablishing unity within the Church. Tell us, do you remember the day when you learned that unification will take place?

- The reestablishment of Church unity was a long, thought-out, difficult and prayed-for matter. For me, there were four important milestones in this process. By the end of the 1990's, I came to understand that the activity of the Russian parishes of the Church Abroad had reached a dead end and that in Russia, there was only one church—the Moscow Patriarchate. The Russian people only know this Church, and if we, the children of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, wish to participate in the rebirth of the Church in Russia, we must be more open and objective to everything happening there,

including what is occurring today in Church life.

The second milestone was the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church of 2000, which glorified the Holy Royal Passion-bearers and adopted a very important document, the “Basic Social Concept of the ROC.” This document succinctly defined the relationship of the Church to the state and to the heresy of ecumenism.

The third milestone: in 2004, I was one of the delegates who accompanied His Eminence Metropolitan Laurus during his first official visit to Russia. The first divine service at which we prayed was Liturgy on the site of the execution of the New Martyrs at Butovo. During the greeting of His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II before Liturgy, I felt for the first time in my life the power and significance of the Patriarchy, and realized with sadness what we in the Church Abroad have been deprived of for so many years. Visiting holy sites, participating in meetings with His Holiness the Patriarch, and observing how Metropolitan Laurus, with his humility and modesty, won over the hearts of everyone he met, and seeing the faith and piety of the Russian people, I clearly saw that the unification of the two parts of the Russian Church is the will of God, that this will inevitably happen, and that no mortal could hinder it.

The fourth milestone was no doubt the 4th All-Diaspora Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, which convened in May 2006 in San Francisco. By then, the draft Act of Canonical Communion was prepared, and it was left only for the Council of Bishops (or by designation of the Council, to the Synod of Bishops) of the ROC/MP and ROCOR to confirm it. In May 2005, Metropolitan Laurus convened the 4th All-Diaspora Council with the aim of discussing the question of establishing normal ecclesiastical relations between the

Churches in Russia and abroad. Preceding this Council were many arguments, a great deal of anxiety and concern, there was even an attempt to sabotage the Council, or at least to postpone it.

The first days of the Council were extremely tense, and by Wednesday, May 10, the third day of the event, one had the impression that it will not only be impossible to reach unity, but even mutual understanding. Schism, it seemed, was inevitable. And then a miracle occurred: on May 11, 2006, the participants of the 4th All-Diaspora Council in San Francisco unanimously declared that they fully trust and love their First Hierarch, His Eminence Metropolitan Laurus, and the Council of Bishops, and bore witness that they bow before Divine will and will submit to the decisions of the coming Council of Bishops. In the Resolution of the Council, its participants expressed their decision to heal the wounds of division within the Russian Church. If I were to name a concrete day when it became clear to me that unification will occur, that would be May 11.

- *Were there any fears in connection with the reestablishment of unity? Any special hopes? Were they justified?*
- Of course, the main fear relating to the reestablishment of unity was the loss of the clergy and flock abroad which was against unification. It was this specifically that brought the most pain and suffering to Metropolitan Laurus. He had to endure incredible slander. I remember how at the All-Diaspora Council, one young priest stood up and said that he does not so much distrust the hierarchy of the Moscow Patriarchate as much as distrusts the hierarchy of the Church Abroad itself! The meek Metropolitan Laurus had to hear things like this, and yet he gave everyone a chance to speak and did everything he could to protect them from schism.

As far as special hopes are concerned relating to the external, I had none relating to the reestablishment of unity. I was most worried about the canonical and spiritual aspects of this matter: without reestablishing unity, the Russian

Church Abroad would have been left without canonical foundation, and would not have fulfilled its mission as defined by her founders. On the spiritual level, our church life by the end of the 1990's was threatened with the loss of that spirit of moderation and conciliarity which were so inherent in the Russian Church Abroad. I realized, soberly and clearly, that unification was not a panacea to all our ills, either for us or for the Church in Russia. Church unity, especially in the face of assaults by the enemies of Christ and His Church, is normal for the church, it is not simply a luxury.

- *Tell me, what do you remember about May 17? What moment, what unofficial moment, do you remember most clearly?*
- Those blessed days live in my memory to this day and evoke joy and tears. I remember well how Metropolitan Laurus, the clergymen, the Synod Choir from New York and several hundred believers boarded the plane in New York to fly to Moscow. The plane began to ascend and everyone boldly sang "Christ is Risen," there was such joy, such indescribable spiritual uplifting. Metropolitan Laurus began to walk the aisles of the plane, and everyone hastened to receive his blessing and talk to him—he was very approachable, simple, a real father. Vladyka said something to everyone, joked, tenderly stroked people's heads.

On the eve of the signing of the Act, Metropolitan Laurus and all of the clergymen and laity of the Church Abroad attended all-night vigil at Sretensky Monastery in Moscow. There was the same sensation one gets on Great Saturday: pious vigilance, awaiting the divided Body of the Church to very, very soon resurrect in unity. There were many making confession, and I joyfully noted how outside, along the church, the clergymen of the Church Abroad were hearing confessions, both from parishioners of the Church Abroad and a multitude of native Russians. After the service, all the worshipers, and the churchgoers of Sretensky, and the pilgrims from Russia Abroad, participated in a common trapeza under the open skies. People became acquainted, shared

their feelings, and doubtless it was already felt that on the level of the people of the Church, there was a unification of hearts taking place. On May 17, we waited for a long time for the arrival of His Holiness Patriarch Alexy. First we greeted Metropolitan Laurus, then, donning his mantle, he awaited the Patriarch upon the cathedra. It seems that my most vivid recollection are the faces of the people in church, they exuded pious trepidation and joyous anticipation.

During Liturgy, a special moment for me was the Velikaya pokhvala, when the protodeacon intones aloud the names of the diptych, the list of primates of all the Local Orthodox Churches, while the choir sings Many Years. Thanks to unification, the Church Abroad once again became a full-fledged part of the Universal Church: before unification she only had Eucharistic communion with the Churches of Jerusalem and Serbia. It is as though you had lived for years at a lake, very large and very clean, but then found yourselves on the shores of a sea, immense, with an enormous sky and powerful waves. A whole new world opens before you! And so for our generation, which had not known a Patriarch and existing in a sort of ecclesial isolation, the day of the signing of the Act opened another world, a world of the fullness of Orthodoxy!

I also remember dinner after the signing of the Act. Metropolitan Laurus was in attendance, along with many bishops, the participants of the church history conferences which had been held during the reunification process, the members of the negotiation commissions and other guests. I sat next to a wonderful priest, Protopriest Sergy Pravdoliubov, whose family boasts no fewer than eleven glorified saints. The atmosphere at that dinner was very joyous and spontaneous. Vladyka Laurus set the tone of simplicity, and it was infectious: everyone talked, shared some moment or other during the unification discussions, made speeches, but they were not “official” and formal, but genuine and heartfelt. There was a very comfortable mood at that dinner, warm and joyful, as though the finale to the process of unification and the very signing of the Act.

- *How did Metropolitan Laurus survive this—for his doctor advised him not to take on the difficult schedule of the trip?*
- Of course, it was hard for Metropolitan Laurus. He was already in his declining years, and his health was very weak. Still, one thinks that the most difficult for him were the emotional tribulations and the realization of his responsibility before God, his flock and the Russian people. This physically weak elder accomplished a heroic feat, which demanded unbelievable spiritual effort. Thank God, he was surrounded by clergymen and flock who were devoted to him, which was a great consolation for him on the trip. Bishop Evtikhy of Domodedovo, referring to Metropolitan Laurus once, called him “the greatest novice of the Church Abroad.” Despite the apparent impossibility, Vladyka Laurus fulfilled this final act of obedience laid upon him by God.
- *How do you view the consequences of these last five years? Has the attitude against unification waned, after all, many urged a second schism—have the differences of opinion been resolved?*
- A good number of opponents to unification, even one bishop and a series of clergymen, by God’s mercy did not only reconcile with unification but became convinced proponents of Church unity. Those who broke away can be divided into three groups: 1) those who saw as time passed that nothing changed in the internal life of the Church Abroad, that “Moscow did not seize all our property” and are once again parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia; 2) those who saw how various groups which were against unity quarrel and divide amongst themselves, have stopped going to church altogether; and 3) those who persist in schism, unfortunately, and will unlikely ever return to the bosom of the Local Russian Church.
- *What problems in your opinion do the Churches in Russia and Abroad need to resolve first of all? What is most troubling?*

- There are always plenty of problems in the Church: they existed during the time of the Apostles, and during the golden age of theology, and continue today. Ecclesiastical problems are very broad, and the two parts of the Russian Church have their own conditions, their own challenges and difficulties. Just as it is sometimes difficult for us to make sense of reality of life in Russia, with all its nuances, Russians likewise have a poor understanding of our life, our church order and the challenges which face the people "scattered abroad." So it is providential in a way that although the Russian Church is now one, still, it is administratively separated into the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Church Abroad. By the way, both parts have the opportunity to cooperate and make decisions in general church affairs: all the bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia are members of the Council of Bishops of the Local Russian Orthodox Church. We are also represented in the Inter-Council Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church.

- *What is the greatest significance in the reestablishment of unity?*

- In a spiritual sense, the greatest significance in the reestablishment of unity is that by God's mercy the two parts of the Russian Church, in the persons of her Primates and representatives, were able to humble themselves, repent, forgive, set aside all that is personal and temporary and in fact overcome division and fulfill the will of God. The family of the Only-Begotten, in the form of the Russian Church, is once again whole, and this cannot fail to bring joy. Although five years have passed since unification, for us "emigres," it seems that it just happened yesterday, and we do not cease to thank God for His mercy to us.

As far as I know, this was an unprecedented event. Yes, it has happened in the history of the Church that a part that had broken away returns. But in this case there is not the adherence of one part of a Church to another one or of repentant schismatics: two equally significant parts which were broken apart once

again, after 80 years of division, have united. This was a MYSTERY, similar to the Mystery of matrimony, and therein lies the great importance of the reestablishment of church unity.

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