

“Things that are impossible to accomplish by formal means may be accomplished by virtue of grace”

Archpriest Nikolay Afanasiev

OPEN LETTER:

My brothers and sisters in Christ!

I am grateful to everyone who spoke during our assemblies, who expressed their views in open letters, analyzed our current crisis and proposed specific solutions. However, in the process of familiarizing myself with your opinions, I have unexpectedly come across an interesting aspect of our discussion, namely, that all of our positions polarize around one and the same dilemma, one and the same horizontal choice: Moscow or Constantinople? Why is that?

THE CRISIS

We have become hostage to the conflict between the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Patriarchate of Constantinople over the ecclesiastical crisis in Ukraine. However, that crisis is part of a general crisis in the Orthodox Church. This latter crisis did not start last year. It is important to understand that the fathers of the Ecumenical Councils have described the fundamental characteristics of the Church, but, nevertheless, we lack a dogmatic doctrine of the Church as such. Therefore, by studying the history of the Church we can see that **we do not have a definitive ecclesiological model of the Church**. Generally speaking, in the history of the Orthodox Church we can find three basic types of ecclesiology, namely:

- **The Eucharistic (Sacramental) ecclesiology** of the early Church (1st – 3rd centuries AD);
- **A Byzantine version of the universal ecclesiology** of the Middle Ages (especially after the Great Schism);
- **Our modern ecclesiological situation** dating back to the 19th century; this is the era of a “parade” of national autocephalous jurisdictions, and this particular situation does not fit into either ancient or medieval type of ecclesiology.

Today we can discern the following trends in the life of the Church. The Patriarchate of Constantinople is trying to impose a Byzantine universalist model on everybody, but the medieval canons are no longer working. The Patriarchate of Moscow and others are acting in the spirit of the new “federative union” of

autocephalous Churches, a model which has not been envisaged by the canons.

In the 20th century there were also some churches who tried to bring back the principles of the ancient Sacramental ecclesiology; the two most prominent examples of this approach include the Orthodox Church in America, as well as our own Archdiocese.

I do not have enough space here to explain the principles of every ecclesiological model, but the balance of the hierarchical principle and the principle of *sobornost* (conciliarity) in the workings of the Church at every level of ecclesiastical life within those models is different, sometimes diametrically. **Because of that, we have a conflict between the new historical context and the canons of the Church, as well as a conflict between the ecclesiological doctrines and real-life church practices; against this background, we can discern all of the characteristic features of a growing ecclesiological crisis!**

The first signs of this crisis became apparent as early as in the 19th century in Russia, prompting some Russian theologians to do research in this area. The most important studies on the subject of ecclesiology were authored by **Alexey Khomiakov** (especially his emphasis on the principle of *sobornost* in the life of the Church) and Archpriest **Evgeny Akvilonov**, who prompted a revival of the Sacramental (Eucharistic) ecclesiology (the Gospel teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ). **Afterwards, there was a very wide debate on the subject in the Russian Church and the Russian society in general as part of the preparations for the Local Church Council, as well as the ensuing decisions of the Moscow Council itself taken in 1917-1918.** The matters related to ecclesiology and the Church reforms were the core items on the agenda of that Great Council. Because of the tragic circumstances well known to all of us, these reforms were never implemented in the Russian Church, but became part of the organizational structure and day-to-day life of the Churches of the Russian diaspora, namely, in the United States of America, in our own Archdiocese in Western Europe, the diocese of the Moscow Patriarchate in the United Kingdom, and, to a lesser extent, in the Russian Church Outside of Russia. The work of Khomiakov, Akvilonov, and the fathers of the Local Council of 1917-1918 was carried on by the theologians of the St. Sergius Institute in Paris. Ecclesiology was the central topic of their research, especially in the works of **Archpriest Nikolay Afanasiev and his disciples Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff.**

However, it was not by accident that I recalled the other principle in the life of the Church, namely, the hierarchical principle.

Alas, I must admit that, compared to the Orthodox Church in America and the Russian Church Abroad, **in our own diocese this principle is present to a much lesser degree.** Yes, according to the tenets of ecclesiology the fundamental element of the Church consists of a Eucharistic gathering (a community) of God's people headed by a bishop elected by believers and ordained by successors to the apostles. At first sight, it looks like these elements are sufficient for building a local Church, and all of them are present in our own Archdiocese.

On many occasions, I have been told that we are building a local Church in Western Europe, **but we are not living in isolation.** For a very long time, I was convinced that Metropolitan Eulogius had made the right choice when, faced with the chaotic reality of church life during that era, he has placed his Church under the canonical aegis of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, whereas other Churches, including the American Metropolia and the Russian Church Abroad, have decided to live independently. These days, I hold a different position on the subject.

Of course, all of the decisions taken in those times were provisional, but please have a look at the composition of the Churches of the Russian diaspora. Even in the very beginning, dealing with a situation that was provisional in nature, Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) and his fellow church leaders have intuitively understood that the difficulties caused by ecclesiastical schisms require a hierarchical organization of the Church. They have established a Synod and convened a Council of bishops. Metropolitan Platon did essentially the same: together with his flock, he has been looking for ways to establish a local Church in America based on the Russian Metropolia, and ended up increasing the number of bishops in their Church and forming a Synod. As we know, the provisional status of the diaspora Churches has been perpetuated and eventually became institutionalized on a permanent basis; **the hierarchical foundations of those Churches have empowered them to overcome the difficulties and preserve themselves.** Yes, the Orthodox Church in America has not yet been recognized by several Patriarchates, but it maintains Eucharistic communion with all Orthodox Churches. And yes, the Russian Church Abroad has come under the aegis of the Patriarch of Moscow, but it has maintained its autonomy in the matters of governance and ecclesiastical life. According to many predictions, the Russian Church Abroad was destined to be "absorbed" by the Patriarchate of Moscow within ten years. However, twelve years after, that Church has not lost a single diocese; on the contrary, we can see that our parishes in Italy have decided to join the Russian Church Abroad after leaving our Church. I do not share the conservative spirit of the Russian Church Abroad, but I do have respect for it.

So, what do we see when we look at the history of our own Archdiocese? In the beginning, Metropolitan Eulogius used to have bishops in many countries, including France, England, Germany, and the Czech Republic; he could follow the steps of the Russian Church Abroad, as well as the American Metropolia. However, Metropolitan Eulogius and his faithful have decided that the “canonical umbrella” of the Patriarchate of Constantinople would be the best guarantee of the existence of their Church. The Archdiocese ended up being left with just one ruling bishop, as well as a number of vicar bishops in France without any real powers. **There is yet another problem: the Statutes of the Archdiocese do not specify the functions of the conference of bishops, while the role of the pastoral assembly in the management of Church affairs has completely lost its relevance.**

This is exactly why our Church has ended up having just one bishop! Of course, we could try putting all the blame on Constantinople for not giving us any bishops, but I see this as our own internal problem.

Those who uphold the principle of *sobornost* tend to treat clericalism as something contrary to collegiality. This is a mistake. Father Alexander Schmemmann has always maintained that the hierarchical principle and the principle of *sobornost* in the life of the Church are closely interlinked: the Church has hierarchy exactly because it has *sobornost*. **Let me recall that the Council of Moscow has not rendered the hierarchical principle obsolete. All of the proposals and decisions advanced in the course of the Council have undergone an expert examination by the conference of bishops, whose opinion was considered to be decisive.**

So, where exactly did the Archdiocese end up without a hierarchy?

In our day and age, a situation where a Church has just one bishop cannot be considered to be a working model for building a local Church. The problem related to the “canonical umbrella” has first emerged back in 1965, but, at that time, nobody was able to draw the right conclusions from what happened. And this is what has eventually drawn the Archdiocese into a state of crisis it is facing today.

Within the Church, there is a mechanism of *reception* (also referred to as *agreement or acceptance*); to a certain extent, it is present in all of the existing ecclesiological models. We could speak about the concepts of internal and external reception. For instance, in accordance with the decisions of the Moscow Council our diocese has reinstated one of the norms of the early Church, namely, the election of a bishop. When a local Church elects its own bishop, it performs an act of self-determination, and this is considered to be internal reception. Afterwards,

the Church needs an external reception, whereby the neighbouring Churches would express their own consent to that decision, and their bishops would consecrate the candidate chosen by the local Church in question.

Our Archdiocese still adheres to some of the tenets of the ancient Church, but we must not forget about the fact that it is impossible to compare the circumstances of the early Church with our own circumstances today. For many centuries now, the Church has been dominated by a universal ecclesiology, whereby the bishops represent the highest ecclesiastical authority; the system of autocephalous national jurisdictions has been in existence for almost two centuries. This must be seen against the background of the dramatic history of our civilization and the Church itself.

Who among those who prepared the Council of Moscow could have envisioned the demise of the Russian Empire? Who of the fathers of the Moscow Council could have predicted the exodus of the refugees and the formation of the new Churches in the West? Who of the emigrants could know that the years of emigration would eventually turn into permanent residence? Who of the founding fathers of our diocese could have foreseen the line of behaviour of the Patriarchate of Constantinople either back in 1965 or today?

It goes without saying that a bishop is of utmost importance in the life of a Church; a Church is not a Church without a bishop. First and foremost, a bishop must strive to preserve the unity of his Church. However, there are many reasons that may prompt a bishop to leave his Church. The modern canonical norms call for a reception, an act of acceptance performed by three bishops who would consecrate a new bishop.

It was not by accident that I pointed to the fact that, to ensure compliance with the principle of reception, we need the acceptance of neighbouring Churches; however, in today's Europe there are no neighbouring Churches who would share our convictions and our way of life.

Considering the above, I can only arrive at one possible conclusion: in our day and age, it is simply impossible to build a local Church based on the principles of the Moscow Council and the Eucharistic ecclesiology within the boundaries of a single diocese!!! This assumption is corroborated by the disappearance of the former diocese headed by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh in the United Kingdom.

Nowadays, the only possible foundation for building a local Church is a self-governing group of dioceses having its own Synod composed of like-minded bishops, where the hierarchical framework of the Church is combined with the principles of *sobornost*!

I see one more endogenous reason for our current crisis; I am talking about our pessimism and our minimalism.

Just look at us: from the very start, all of our thoughts and suggestions are only oriented toward looking for external reception. **We jump right to the stage of trying to find someone from the outside who would come to our rescue, trying to figure out which autocephalous Church would allow us to live according to our Statutes, enjoying freedom, just like we used to do in the past.** However, the key ideas of “freedom” and “just like we used to do in the past” reveal a desire for a tranquil life. But did Jesus Christ really promise us tranquillity in this life? “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) — these are the words He addressed to us.

Therefore, every Christian has a moral obligation to display courage in the face of the threats of this world.

I do agree that freedom is not tantamount to anarchy, that the gift of freedom entails a great degree of responsibility. But what is it we do? Except for a single letter where one could discern some optimism, but where, unfortunately, I was unable to find any specific calls to action, everything that I hear is full of frustration and lamentations: “The Archdiocese is not the same as it used to be”, “we have run out of steam, we only have a handful of parishes”, “there is only one bishop left in the Church, and there are no candidate bishops”, “there are no students at the Institute who would come from our diocese”, “we are always quarrelling”, “soon, the diocese will break apart”, “everything is coming apart, we have no unity”, etc. **And this is exactly why our conversations sometimes sound like we are discussing the conditions of our capitulation, revolving around the choice of an “army that would be better for us to surrender to”. This is nothing but a shame!**

We are losing faith in our own Church and in ourselves. We like to hold debates on all imaginable issues, but we do not want to assume responsibility for anything: we want someone else to decide our fate for us.

The diocese has been unable to move forward during the last 10 years because

we have been too passive, turning a blind eye to all of the problems confronting us. We have not been paying any attention to our provincial parishes in France, as well as our parishes in other countries, and ended up losing all of our parishes in Spain, and are now in the process of losing all of our parishes in Northern Europe. **And here is our cardinal sin: we have not been teaching our faithful anything about the very foundations upon which our Archdiocese is built!** As recently as three years ago, I have addressed the meeting of the deans, the Council, and the General Assembly, putting forward a large number of specific proposals, including a proposal to establish a number of commissions in the Archdiocese (including a theological, a liturgical, a historical, and a publishing commission) **in order to make sense of the past experience and the history of our Archdiocese, so that we could determine our identity.** Many of those present were in agreement with me, but the Council has not been able to pass the required decisions. **This is why I am not surprised by the fact that some of the faithful of the Archdiocese know nothing about either the Council of Moscow of 1917-1918 or the works of the theologians of the Paris theological school, and are unable to understand the Statutes of the diocese. The faithful do not perceive themselves as a Church.** By the way, it is not easy to find our Statutes on the diocesan website. Why is that? Where is the spirit of openness and *sobornost*? This is why, at our meetings, we hear a lot of political, national and personal predilections, but no clear ecclesiological arguments.

At our meeting held on the 23rd of February 2018, we have demonstrated our unity, and this has been the manifestation of our internal reception. But, when we are faced with a crisis, this is not enough, and we will not be able to live like we used to. And this is a good thing!!! We should no longer live our lives passively and contently. **A crisis is not only a symptom of an illness, but also a chance for the body to regenerate itself in the process of overcoming it!**

Yes, I agree with many of the criticisms of our current situation, but I do not agree with the general feeling of pessimism and minimalism.

PROPOSALS (WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE):

- 1) I suggest that we temporarily take off the agenda the issue of external reception, i.e. forgo putting to vote the question related to the choice between different Patriarchates. We are not yet ready for negotiations! **Before negotiating with anybody, we need to reorganize our internal organizational setup, so that it corresponds to our identity and our vision of the desirable future. I suggest that we put any and all**

negotiations on hold. We need this pause to implement some serious changes.

- 2) **If we are, indeed, Christians, we need to put to work all of the existing capacities within our Church in order to begin perceiving ourselves as a Church.** Therefore, first and foremost, I would like to ask the professors of our Institute to analyse our crisis. It looks like we forgot that we have the Institute in our diocese. **However, we cannot really move forward without a serious theological examination of our present situation!** This should have been our first step last year.
- 3) We must awaken an interest in our Church in every member thereof. This is why I propose organizing **a series of discussions about the Great Council of Moscow (1917-1918), as well as the history of our Archdiocese,** in every parish.
- 4) Yes, the history of the Archdiocese is almost 100 years long, and it is a unique history. From that, I conclude that the Archdiocese is ripe for change. **We are ready for the next stage of the formation of a local Church, ready for establishing a Metropolitanate (an autonomous Church) that would take into account our identity!**

To accomplish that, we need to amend our Statutes. **We must embark on a far-reaching project of working on the new Statutes of our Church!**

This approach is not new: a similar idea has already been touted during the times of Archbishop Sergius, and has a following among the members of our current Council. I don't understand why the members of the Council have decided to shelve this idea. **The concept of forming a Church consisting of a number of small dioceses is in conformity with the decisions of the Moscow Council and the principles of Eucharistic ecclesiology.**

The territorial span of our diocese is way too wide. According to Fr. Alexander Schmemmann and Metropolitan John Zizioulas (a prominent Greek theologian), a bishop should not just be a guest of honour at parish feasts. A bishop should be closer to his flock, he must take an active part in the life of the faithful in all of its aspects. In many Patriarchates, we can see small dioceses where bishops are in charge of 5-10 parishes. In Russia and Ukraine there are also metropolitanates consisting of a group of small dioceses.

I propose forming several separate dioceses (in the United Kingdom, Benelux, and Italy), as well as to divide the parishes in France into 3-4 dioceses. (We do not need vicar bishops with no real powers, this would be wrong from the ecclesiological perspective).

All of the candidate bishops must be elected by the faithful of our Church at General Assemblies. The role of an autocephalous Church would only be to confirm the choice of the first hierarch of our Church.

We do not have to have a full complement of candidate bishops right away. There is as practice in the Church whereby a bishop may be provisionally in charge of a neighbouring diocese which is temporarily without its own bishop; sometimes this situation may last for several years while a new candidate is being trained. For the first several years, we may do the same and train our candidates for their jobs. We do not need bishops who do not share our convictions! In addition to making sure that a candidate meets the established criteria, the training should include a special study course on the history of the Moscow Council and our Archdiocese.

- 5) We must strengthen the hierarchical foundation of the Church. **In order to form a Synod, the Church should have a minimum of 7-8 bishops.** Needless to say, we need to find a balance between the respective powers assigned to the Administrative Council, the Synod, the Pastoral Assembly and the General Assembly, as well as to come up with a way to harmonize the activities of the diocesan administrations with those of the Church as a whole. This would be in accordance with the spirit and the decisions of the Moscow Council.
- 6) We should not be forgetting about the **future development of the concept of sobornost**. I see gaps in this area, particularly with regard to the representation of parishes at General Assemblies through delegates. Sometimes a delegate would present his own position at an Assembly rather than the position of his parish; in a situation like this one, could it really be said that he is representing his parish? When we are making serious decisions, this is important. **Without abandoning the current delegate-based system, we should find an additional way for our parishes to make their voices heard at the general meetings of the Church in its entirety.**
- 7) **The individual parish statutes are also in need of revision and clarification,** especially in those countries where the organizational setup of

religious communities is not based on the principle of “cult associations”, e.g., in Spain.

- 8) **Within our Statutes, we must envisage a possibility of growth for our Church**, for forming new dioceses and accommodating entire groups of new parishes, including those which are currently separated from us by schisms. Nobody knows how exactly their situations are going to unfold, but our Statutes should make room for such scenarios.
- 9) Therefore, I repeatedly suggest that, in our new Statutes, we envisage the formation of a number of standing **commissions, namely theological, liturgical, historical, and publishing commissions**, entrusting them with examining the problems encountered in the day-to-day life of our Church and performing theological analysis. Of course, the work these commissions should be based on the direct participation of the professors of our Institute, as well as competent clergymen and laypeople.

The very history and past experience of the Archdiocese are in need of careful reflection and study; we should also examine other phenomena in the modern life of Orthodox churches worldwide (for example, the restoration of the ministry of deaconesses as decided upon by the Patriarchate of Alexandria three years ago).

- 10) Our Statutes do not provide for a clearly defined **course of action in such crisis situations as the one currently facing us**. I propose including the relevant provisions in the new Statutes.

Of course, I understand that our Statutes must follow the French legislation on associations, as well as the relevant laws of other countries where our parishes are located.

- 11) We should start thinking about a new name for our Church. There is no need to reflect the administrative status (diocese, archdiocese, metropolitanate) in the name, because it may change.

I suggest the following name:

The Orthodox Church of the Russian Tradition in Western Europe Based on the Statutes of the Moscow Council of 1917-1918

This name embodies our history and our identity, and also allows for different options in terms of our autonomous status within an autocephalous Church.

PROPOSAL (HOW WE SHOULD ACHIEVE ALL OF THE ABOVE GOALS):

In a situation of crisis, we need extraordinary solutions. I have heartfelt respect for all the members of the Archdiocesan Council, but I think that our Council lacks the required potential, competencies and powers to function in a crisis situation. It is also no secret that the members of the Council have disagreements between themselves.

As of now, our statutes do not provide for any specific measures to be taken in a situation of crisis; we are free to arrive at any decisions that would not contradict the Law of associations.

1) **Therefore, I suggest that we make full use of the principle of *sobornost*.**

If we believe that our Archdiocese is a successor to the Moscow Council, we must convene our own Paris Council and act in the spirit and based on the principles of the Moscow Council of 1917-1918. This is the only way forward!

Our efforts must progress on every level, including the professional level, the level of the Church as a whole (pan-ecclesiastical level), and the parish level.

Professional level: we should establish a broad-based and competent **Commission on the Statutes** to develop the new Statutes.

Pan-ecclesiastical level: we should discuss and adopt the draft Statutes at Church assemblies.

Parish level: the draft has to be discussed by parish members.

2) **I suggest that we amend the agenda of the Assembly scheduled to take place on September 7th, putting to vote the following proposals:**

- To acknowledge that the current situation in the Archdiocese is a crisis situation calling for extraordinary measures.

- To temporarily suspend the negotiations with autocephalous Churches.

- To acknowledge that we should draft the new Statutes of the Church.

- To establish a Commission on the Statutes in order to draft the new Statutes.

- To determine the composition of the Commission, the procedural aspects of its work, as well as the term of its mandate;

- To elect the members of the Commission.

Considering that we are fond of long debates, leisurely lunches and lengthy informal discussions, I propose extending the Assembly to include the next day, namely, Sunday September 8th.

3) I suggest that the following individuals be included in the Commission *ex-officio*:

- The Archbishop
- All of the members of the Council of the Archdiocese
- All of the deans
- Those professors of the St. Sergius Institute who are part of the Archdiocese and are willing to work on the Commission.

I also suggest the election of ten members of the Commission from among the delegates of the Assembly, namely, five clergymen and five laypeople.

We may invite all members of the Church to work on the Commission as participants or consultants, provided that they are willing to do so.

I propose the following criteria for selecting the members of the Commission: **willingness and competence.**

4) Here are my proposals with regard to the procedure and the duration of our work.

If the Commission is elected on the 7th of September, it may hold its first meeting on Sunday, September 8th, or in mid-September.

We may offer to the members of the Commission for examination the documents adopted at the Moscow Council, the current Statutes of the Archdiocese, the Statutes of the Orthodox Church in America, as well as those of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. We may also take into account the Statutes of the Diocese of Sourozh dating back to the times of Metropolitan Anthony, as well as the draft statutes of the Metropolitanate that was being developed under Archbishop Sergius. We should use everything that may be of interest.

At its first meeting, the Commission will determine its work procedures and the specific tasks to be accomplished. The Commission may decide to form a number of sub-Commissions (chambers) to consider different chapters of the Statutes. The

members of the Commission will continue their work while the Commission is not in session.

I suggest that the second meeting of the Commission be held on 1-2 November of this year (holidays in France); during that meeting, the Commission will adopt the first draft of the Statutes.

This year, in accordance with the Statutes, we must convene a **regular General Assembly, which I propose to schedule for November 11th**. The agenda of the Assembly should include the following item: “A discussion of the draft of the new Statutes”.

After the Assembly the delegates will bring the draft of the new Statutes back to their respective parishes for discussion.

In mid-December the Commission on the Statutes will hold another meeting to discuss the comments and suggestions made by the parishes, and will prepare a final draft.

In the beginning of February 2020 we will convene another (extraordinary) Assembly and vote on the draft of the new Statutes, which our delegation will take to the negotiations with an autocephalous Church.

That Assembly will also make a choice with regard to the general direction of the negotiations, specifying the name(s) of the autocephalous Church(es) we will be negotiating with on the basis of the draft of our new Statutes.

It should be noted that the draft of the new Statutes should be prepared solely by ourselves, without any prior consultations with an autocephalous Church; this would be an ideal version of the draft we will bring along with us to the negotiations.

***Sobornost* is our main asset! If the Assembly votes in favour of the draft of the new Statutes, the decision of God’s people will be our main advantage during any negotiations.**

- 5) The delegation we will send to the negotiations should in no case be small (e.g., 2-3 people), and no secret negotiations should ever take place! I am fully convinced that the Archdiocesan Council does not have enough powers to engage in negotiations in a situation of crisis. **The General Assembly should elect a delegation to participate in the negotiations!**

I propose electing a delegation consisting of ten members of the Commission on the Statutes as follows: five clergymen and five laypeople, headed by the Archbishop.

The delegation has to be authoritative and broad-based (resembling the delegation of the Russian Church Abroad), so that it could hold its own discussions within the delegation in the course of the negotiations. The delegation should, by all means, include laypeople, because they are more open and daring compared to the clergymen who are constrained by their pastoral responsibility to be more reserved.

A diplomatic mission requires both audacity and responsibility.

And yet another consideration: our delegation must include theologians.

If the negotiations are a success, and we are able to reach an agreement with an autocephalous Church, **the draft of the new Statutes, accommodating this agreement, should again be forwarded to the parishes to be studied and commented upon, and the comments should be examined by the Commission.**

The next extraordinary Assembly may be convened in 2020. **That Assembly will give the draft one final consideration and approve the finalized version of the new Statutes to be registered in accordance with the French laws.**

- 6) **We have to put together a special prayer request, and all of our parishes should use it in their prayers to God for the entire duration of our work in front of the Icon of the New Martyrs, Fathers of the Moscow Council of 1917-1918.**

Such an icon does exist, it was painted in 2012; I suggest that copies of that icon be sent to all of the parishes of our Archdiocese.

I also suggest announcing a one-day period of fasting on the eve of every Assembly.

- 7) I propose urging all parishes **to make financial contributions** to the diocese before every Assembly and making the necessary arrangements to cover the expenses related to **the work of the Commission on the Statutes**, with all the parishes making their contributions based on their respective budget sizes.

MANIFESTO

As you can see, I have presented to you my concise analysis of our current crisis, as well as a specific program of action.

I have a very clear understanding of the fact that the entire potential of our Church will have to be mobilized. However, this effort would awaken our entire Church, and it will be an example of the true *sobornost*, of our unity, our courage and our responsibility for the future of the Church. When we are done with this work, we will become different; we will grow up in Christ, and we will begin respecting ourselves.

Mikhail Nazarov, an expert on the history of the Russian emigration, has noted that the cultural influence of Metropolitan Eulogius' Church jurisdiction far exceeds its physical size. This makes me confident that the Archdiocese has the required spiritual potential, as well as inner strength. Let us translate this potential into action!

But what about the time factor? We should not be bothered by this. The timeline of the world history passes through the Church, and, when we begin working diligently and productively, the time will fly by quickly. **At this very time in our history, when Constantinople has abandoned us, but we have not yet entered into an alliance with another autocephalous Church, we are the masters of our own destiny.** Our Lord has given us a chance to change the course of our history, starting a new stage in the process of building a local Church. **Afterwards, when we come under control of an autocephalous Church, that chance will be taken away from us!**

Our Lord expects us to be brave. He helps those who multiply the talents entrusted to them rather than bury them underground (Matthew 25:14-30). The Lord loves those who spare no effort (Matthew 11:12).

I am reaching out to you, our dear Vladika John! You are our Archbishop, you are in a precarious situation, you are tired of the disagreements among your faithful, and, deep down in your heart, you have already made a decision. **But I am begging you not to resign and not to take any steps that would split our Church apart!** If we are divided 70-30 percent, that would also be a defeat. I am asking you, Vladika, to pay attention to my proposals. The Archdiocese has already completed its long journey in the desert, and that journey was longer

compared to the journey of ancient Israel: not 38, but almost 100 years. This means that the diocese is ripe for a new stage in its life. All we have to do is to make a final effort to enter our Promised Land, where we will continue taking the life of our Church to the next level. You are the only bishop among us, but please remember what Our Lord said to Joshua who also was a sole remaining leader of Israel: “Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:9). **Vladika, you are our Joshua, lead us to the Promised Land!**

First and foremost, I am reaching out to those who were born here, to those for whom our Archdiocese is the beloved ancestral home. I am your adopted son and younger brother, to quote Apostle Paul - a grafted branch in the Archdiocese. Here, I have found everything I had been looking for, and I don't want to lose it.

The current Statutes of the Archdiocese are no longer able to stand up to the challenges we are facing today.

Neither a diocese with minimal rights nor a powerless vicariate would give us an opportunity to achieve any progress in our ecclesiastical life in accordance with our identity. Are you really going to allow the glorious history of the Archdiocese to end in such an inglorious way?

Dear professors of our Institute, I am also reaching out to you. You are the successors of the great theologians of our Paris school of theology, you represent its teachings at conferences and workshops in front of the theologians belonging to other Orthodox churches, as well as the Western denominations. Now is your time to accomplish an important theological task in the name of the Church to which you belong. Please support my initiative, perform an analysis of our current crisis from a historical, ecclesiological and canonical perspectives, and agree to join the Commission on the Statutes. **In the absence of a Synod of bishops in our Church your expert opinion becomes the only authority we could draw upon!**

Dear clergy of the Archdiocese, dear monks and nuns, brothers and sisters! We must forgo all of our political, patriotic and personal predilections, we must get rid of our passivity, our laziness and our cowardice, our disagreements and arguments, our scepticism and lack of faith.

And we must ask ourselves: **Who are We?**

We are the descendants of the sons of God, We are the successors of Abraham in faith, We are the disciples and the brothers of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, We are the children of Our Heavenly Father!

We have been anointed by the Holy Spirit; We are living in an eschatological hope!

We are God's people, We are the Church, We are Israel!

From now on, history will be our judge!

If we are unable to preserve our unity, all that would be left for us to do is to cry by the rivers of Babylon... This is why, acting in the spirit of *sobornost*, we must find a "King Solomon's solution".

At this point in time, I don't know which one of the autocephalous Churches would be willing to continue a dialogue with us on these new conditions. **What I do know for sure that we are just as good as the Russian Church Abroad or the Orthodox Church in America, and maybe even better!** In spite of the current crisis, our Archdiocese is a real treasure. **A Church that accepts our identity will enhance its own authority!**

After we are done working on the draft of the new Statutes in the spirit of *sobornost*, we will be regenerated; we will grow up and become more mature.

We will enter the negotiations in the spirit of openness and responsibility. **We will be full of determination, we want to be highly autonomous, we have grown out of the current Statutes of the Archdiocese, we need a Church with our own new Statutes and our own Synod.** And we are driven by a dire need to do all of this **right now rather than later.**

Nevertheless, we will keep our prophetic spirit under control, we must be ready for a certain degree of compromise. We would be grateful to the autocephalous Church that would recognize us, and, together with that Church, we will keep looking for ways to build a local Church in Western Europe.

Together with that autocephalous Church and other Orthodox Churches, we will keep looking for ways to achieve unity. Our theologians will support that autocephalous Church in the arduous work of arriving at a true Evangelic ecclesiology, and, based on the latter, the revision of the ancient canons; we will be reaching out to others inviting them to join us in those efforts. This is exactly what the theologians of the Russian diaspora – Afanasiev, Schmemmann and Meyendorff – have been writing about. Yes, this is a great effort that will last for the entire duration on the 21st century.

Today, faced with a global ecclesiological crisis, as well as the crisis of the ancient canons, a Church that would be gathering stones instead of throwing them, thus contributing to unity, will end up being duly recognized, and blessed with an honour of taking a lead in the world of Orthodoxy in the spirit of love not based on any formal order, but by virtue of grace.

I am well aware of the fact that optimism is not the same thing as idealism, but it may also be said that realism is not tantamount to pessimism. What would an experienced swimmer do if he has to cross a turbulent stream, getting to the point on the other bank that would be exactly opposite his current location? Before swimming, he would walk upstream, because he knows that, when he finally starts swimming, the current will bring him to his destination. **This is exactly what I am proposing: we should set a noble goal for the Church, and the current of life will bring us to our destination.**

Therefore,

LISTEN, ISRAEL! BE COURAGEOUS AND BE WISE!

I am ringing the alarm bell!

In the spirit of the Moscow Council of 1917-1918, I hereby urge you to convene our own Paris Council, because this is what the Church has always done in the times of trials and tribulations.

Together, we must do a great deal of work within a limited time frame.

So, help us God!

With love in Christ for all of you,

Your humble brother, Archpriest Georgiy ASHKOV

Biarritz, Lourdes

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