Arrested Development

Nicholas Denysenko

Hyacinthe Destivelle, O.P. *The Moscow Council (1917–1918): The Creation of the Conciliar Institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church*. Edited by Michael Plekon and Vitaly Permiakov. Translated by Jerry Ryan. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015.

Contemporary global Orthodoxy is in the process of confronting unprecedented challenges. The most formidable issues facing Church leaders are the relations between Church and state, the structures of the Church, the tension between conciliarity and authority, and seismic shifts in culture, to name a few. The autocephalous Orthodox Churches address these challenges in various ways, as pastors and theologians appeal to notions of consensus among the Fathers in the past as models. Occasionally, pastors and theologians will also consider creative models of the Church for engaging the modern world. The University of Notre Dame Press's recent translation and publication of Hyacinthe Destivelle's comprehensive analysis of the Moscow Council of 1917–1918 grants English-language readers access to one of the most discussed and perhaps least understood historical examples of such models.

Destivelle's study is comprised of five parts with two appendices. Part 1 discusses the Council's origins; part 2 treats the tumultuous period of 1905–1917 immediately prior to to the Council; part 3 surveys the Council itself; part 4 analyzes the decrees of the Council; and part 5 analyzes the application and reception of the Council. Two appendices present the texts of the Council in English, the first covering the definitions and decrees of the Council, and the second providing the text of the statute. The study is introduced with a foreword by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev.

The primary theme underpinning the content of Destivelle's study is the persistent tension between authority and conciliarity in the years leading up to the Council and its reception. Destivelle's survey of the situation of the Church in Russia in the late nineteenth century is brief, but to the point. He identifies the problem of ecclesial paralysis that Church leaders sought to resolve through the convocation of the Council. Destivelle discusses the general impotence of the Church that had been caused by the creation of the synodal system and the subservience of the Church to the state through the Spiritual Regulations legislated by Tsar Peter I in 1725. He also discusses the incapacity caused by the clerical caste system.

In his treatment of these issues, Destivelle demonstrates his careful reading of the texts, and he arrives at carefully considered conclusions. For example, the author cautions the reader to avoid a hasty reduction of the paralysis of the Russian Church as attributable solely to the Petrine system.[1] Destivelle refers to verifiable signs of Church renewal in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, a period in which many saints were glorified and certain monastic centers attained spiritual prestige. This period manifested a creativity and a

[1] Hyacinthe Destivelle, O.P., *The Moscow Council (1917–1918): The Creation of the Conciliar Institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church*, ed. Michael Plekon and Vitaly Permiakov, trans. Jerry Ryan (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 15.

healthy ecclesial vitality that partially mitigated the problem of structural paralysis. Destivelle depicts the Russian Church as attempting to elevate its influence on the life of the people without relinquishing its privileged place as the official governing religion in Russia. His study shows how the Church struggled to negotiate the rapidly evolving political situation from subservience to the Tsar, through the failed reforms of the provisional government, to the fierce persecution of the Soviet state.

Remaining on the topic of Church-state relations, Destivelle refers to this matter on several occasions. In his conclusion, he notes the paradox of the Council's legacy and the subsequent problems of Church-state relations, brought on by the fact that the Council sought to retain the Church's privileged position within the state and that it was encouraged to do so in large part by the uncertain political situation that existed until the Bolshevik persecution of the Church increased in intensity. Destivelle acknowledges the difficulty in assessing the Council, since its deliberations on many matters were caused by circumstances. He considers John Meyendorff's assessment of the Council as among those most well-informed, and Meyendorff had criticized the Council for failing to treat the problem of Church-state relations in depth.[2] Destivelle states that the political situation actually contributed to the convocation of the Council. Some readers might view Destivelle's caution as a hesitance to criticize the work of the Council fathers, however, a closer look at his treatment reveals him to be a scholar who acknowledges the difficulty of offering comprehensive statements on issues impacted by seismic political shifts. In this vein, the work of the Council is truly unfinished, and an opportunity is ripe for the inheritors of the Council to learn from its lessons.

In his analysis of the Council, Destivelle masterfully shows how the concept of *sobornost* developed by the Slavophile movement influenced the preference for conciliarity threaded throughout the discussions of the Moscow Council.[3] The author's attention to the nuances of nomenclature is particularly helpful to the reader, especially when he discusses the reception of the Moscow Council later in the study. When referring to the inclusion of the word *collegiality* in the statute of the Archdiocese of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Western Europe, Destivelle comments on the irony resulting from the Council's aversion to the notion of collegiality, since the "colleges" were a vestige of the Petrine ecclesial system the Council sought to subvert.[4]

Destivelle points to the unprecedented lay representation in the Moscow Council as one of its most prominent achievements, but his study also illuminates the lack of universal reception of this conciliarity both among theologians and for succeeding councils. Destivelle contributes three particularly brilliant insights relevant to the Council's legacy of conciliarity. First, he chronicles the reception of the Moscow Council within the Russian Orthodox Church. His survey of the Council's legacy in time demonstrates the succeeding generation's attempt to receive the Council in accordance with the needs of the times. Second, he analyzes the tepid reception of the Council by Nicholas Afanasiev. Readers might be surprised at Afanasiev's perception that the Council improperly interpreted the idea of the priesthood of the laity by making the laity coadministrators with the bishops. Destivelle elucidates Afanasiev's concern that the juridical authority of the Council came into direct conflict with the charismatic authority of the bishop.[5] He resolves the matter satisfactorily, while gently critiquing Afanasiev's con-

[2] Ibid., 183.

[3] Ibid., 18.

[4] Ibid., 168

[5] Ibid., 177

cern, by summarizing the conciliar constitution of the Church as a temporary solution that met the needs of the times, which did not threaten the charismatic principle. Finally, the reader should not ignore Destivelle's consistent treatment of the parish by the Council and its successors. For example, he juxtaposes the 1945 and 1961 statutes on the administration of the Church and the subsequent alienation of the parish priest to the 1988 revision which restored rectors "to their role of authentic parish leadership."[6] The 1917–1918 Council had envisioned the parish as a tightly-bound community led by the pastor with the participation of the people. The 1945 and 1961 decrees subordinated the priest to the elected parish lay leader (*starosta*), reverting the parish to a community in which its leader performed solely cultic roles and was subordinate to a state official. The 1988 regulation restored the spirit of conciliarity expressed through the entirety of the Moscow Council. The genius inherent in Destivelle's presentation is his ability to show how the Church attempted to retain the spirit of conciliarity implemented by the 1917–1918 Council despite the frequent interference of the communist state in Church affairs.

[6] Ibid., 161

The reader benefits from two conclusions: first, the Council attempted to restore conciliarity while simultaneously honoring the charismatic leadership of the bishops, which was especially evident in the recreation of the patriarchate. Second, the reception of this principle is a process which remains incomplete today, as evidenced by the divergent assessments of the Moscow Council and the successive revisions of the statutes at all levels of Church life. Destivelle discloses the complexity of implementing and receiving an ecclesiological principle through his thorough examination of the details of the Moscow Council.

Destivelle delivers more than a broad and careful analysis of the Council's impact and reception. The book also contains precious primary sources: English translations of the Council's decrees and statutes. Advanced readers will be familiar with the material concerning the patriarchate, but the study also includes documents demonstrating the theological creativity of the Council on matters such as the authorization of lay evangelizers and the active participation of women in Church ministry. Readers might be tempted to quibble with the scope and breadth of various sections of the study. For example, Destivelle limits his discussion of the impact of the Council on the Church to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Archdiocese of Western Europe, when the Council clerarly also influenced Church life in North America and theologians throughout the world. One might also speculate on how the conciliar legacy of hesitance to address Church-state relations impacted the Moscow Patriarchate in the post-Soviet period. Destivelle has created multiple opportunities for scholars to continue the work he has inaugurated by taking up these and many more issues in future volumes. His work is an instant classic and a necessary desktop resource for all serious students and scholars of Russian Orthodoxy and ecclesiology. ✠

Nicholas Denysenko is Associate Professor of Theological Studies and Director of the Huffington Ecumenical Institute at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, and is deacon at St. Innocent Orthodox Church in Tarzana, California.