

Present and Future of the Church

Mother Maria (Skobtsova)

Translated by Vera Winn

No matter what kinds of hardships and torments the Church endures throughout her history, for Orthodox Christians the fundamental promise of the Church stays unchanged—the Gates of Hell will not overcome her. We can question the survival of our homeland, we can even believe that no country, no society, no way of life is marked for eternity. The only unquestionable thing is that the Gates of Hell will not overcome the eternal life of the Church. In the days of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, it will be the same Church that was founded on the feast of Pentecost. Unfortunately, this fundamental hope of the Orthodox Christian does not eradicate all the difficulties and doubts related to the historical existence of our Church.

The Church is eternal, but that does not guarantee that the power behind the Gates of Hell would not call for the persecution of the Church, distort her historical essence, and force her again and again to hide in the catacombs. Nor does it mean that her truth victoriously and eternally reigns over the world. We believe in the ultimate victory of the Church, but, alas, we also know that throughout the entire history of the Church, this victory has never been achieved and will not be fully achieved until the end of the world.

The worldwide victory of the Church is prevented, first of all, by the presence

of evil, the devil himself, who will fight her until the end of the world. And secondly, it is hampered by the fact that the Church, being not only a divine but also a human institution, accommodates—along with her members—all human predispositions, weaknesses, sins, and vices. These always affect the life of the Church and prevent her from shining gloriously and triumphing over the world.

Over the two thousand years of the Church's existence, human intervention has been distorting it in two ways. The Church has either been under persecution, or under the patronage of the state. Now the age of persecution has come again. For twenty years, our Church has been enduring persecutions in Russia. It is difficult to tell which is harder for the Church and what distorts her image more—the persecutions or the state's patronage? Persecutions first claim the most avid and devoted children of the Church for death and martyrdom. They corrupt the weak who begin to denounce, betray, or break away from the faith. They destroy the opportunity for preaching and teaching, they suppress freedom of speech, and thus deprive entire generations of the truth of the Gospel. In the time of persecutions, past and present, the Church has had to hide in catacombs so her voice was no longer heard among all, and the external signs of the Church's life ceased

A presentation given in March 1936 at a monastic meeting in Paris chaired by Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgiyevsky)

to be seen. Such are some of the tribulations of the ongoing persecution of the Church. Yet persecutions also manifest the holiness of the Church, they unite her true disciples, they purify her life from tepidness, banality, indifference, and superficiality. Persecutions unite our "little flock" and exact a selection that is like a test before that judgment that faces us in the last days.

State patronage slowly implants unchurchly concepts into the Church's life. It falsifies the image of Christ, it shifts the planes. The Church is gradually transformed into a social institution. She becomes a bureaucratic organization corrupted by the non-Christian ideals imposed by the state. Such adulteration of the Church's body goes so far that even the Church hierarchs declare the validity of capital punishment from a Christian perspective, and plead for the inseparability of the Church and Monarchy. Church membership becomes mandatory so that the Church automatically includes all the subjects of the state. This brings weakness and infidelity into the Church's body accompanied by the de-spiritualization and formalization of the Church's life. The truth of Christ is substituted with innumerable rules, canons, traditions, and superficial rites. External growth and seeming splendor flourish at the expense of the internal life and ascetic feat. The Church's body stiffens. Such are the dangers of state patronage.

Of course, state patronage of the Church also has positive aspects—a certain freedom (albeit within state boundaries), external well-being, the continued might of the Church as an institution, etc. And yet, both persecutions and patronage are curses that over two millennia have distorted the true way of the Church's life and will

perhaps continue distorting it to the very Day of Judgment.

We have to assess the present situation of the Church from this perspective. In today's Russia, the Church is enduring persecutions that alternately intensify and subside. We can even say that lately they rather tend to subside. But this is not important. What is important is that in essence, the government views the Church as part of the national organism, and an undesirable part at that. However, even if the government would view her as a desirable part of the whole, the picture would basically be the same. The government feels entitled to enforce an obligatory attitude toward the Church. The government has positioned itself above the Church. Today, it confiscates the Church's treasures, sends believers to concentration camps, executes the hierarchs. Tomorrow it will announce pardons and perhaps, out of its "benevolence," will issue some "awards." In response to persecutions, the Russian Church generates more and more confessors and martyrs. Our Church is washed with blood; it is producing multitudes of saints, more than it has generated during the first centuries of pagan persecutions. However, this is not the complete picture of the situation within our Church, otherwise we could talk about it by comparing today's persecutions with those of the first centuries A.D. before it was officially recognized. Today we are dealing with a phenomenon that seems to us a pure miracle because of how unique and unprecedented it is historically. We have a small fragment of the Church that has never before been seen anywhere in the world. This fragment, this group exists in perfect freedom—freedom from both persecutions and state patronage. I am talking about our emigrant Church. Scattered through numerous countries, not organically tied to the governments

that have provided it with refuge, left to itself, presenting no concern to any authorities, the emigrant Church is free to live by her own rules. This freedom brings great historical and even providential significance to our existence, at first sight unbearable and abnormal. From the spiritual perspective, this condition may be the only normal situation that has ever occurred in the entire history of the Church. We are free, and therefore we ourselves are responsible for all our failures and even our inertia. We cannot blame the authorities or the environment for anything—they do not persecute us and they do not corrupt us with their patronage. If anything is wrong with us it is because we, ourselves, are wrong.

It is curious that even now, when we can exercise our freedom in our own Orthodox domain, we are not free completely from an ecclesiastical mentality that is rooted in the relationship between Church and state. This mentality manifests itself in two tendencies that are particularly evident when we look at the two separate Church groups that have broken away from the mainstream Church in exile.

One is the “Karlovac”¹ group which still has not overcome the ecclesiastic psychology which is in some way tied to the state. It mourns its widowhood with a mentality that is extremely conservative and highly caesaropapist. It keeps the traditions of the synodal period,² denounces “heresies” and any nonconformity, and dreams of restoration of the old order of life when the state was punishing people for the crime against the Church, and the Church in turn was required to condemn crimes against the state.

The other group is assembled around the so-called “Patriarchal Church.”³ It

attempts to foster in the free countries where it dwells the mentality of the persecuted, of the underground, of sometimes hysterical ecstasy. It accepts the whole specter of the limitations of freedom that were inevitable under the authority of the power of persecutors but are incomprehensible and almost criminal in places where those persecutors are now powerless. This group agreed to deny the very fact of persecutions of the Church in Russia because in Russia it is prohibited to state otherwise.

These two churches are equally enslaved to the adherence to the state and equally do not understand the great providential meaning of the freedom that is given to them. Of course, it would be a mistake to attribute these characteristics to all the people who belong to these groups. There are people in both churches who are free. Similarly, in our “Evlogian”⁴ Church that represents the mainstream of church life in exile and is connected to the throne of the Ecumenical Patriarch, we too have people who are dedicated primarily to traditions, rituals, and memories of the past. But in general, such are the tendencies, the historical fate and essence of these groups.

For us the conclusions are clear. Our Church in exile bears an immense responsibility because it is necessary for us to fulfill ourselves in a free world. We need not only to preserve those spiritual values that were given to us and that the authorities in today’s Russia are crushing by all available means, but also to restore the values that were eliminated by the earlier benevolent authority. Perhaps we should create new values—the values of spiritual freedom, values of openness to the world and addressing spiritual issues that are tearing it apart, values of openness to culture, science, and art, to new ways of life.

¹ A group that became officially known as Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, originally the Karlovatski Synod, formed by exiled Russian hierarchs at the meeting in the Serbian town of Karlovac on September 13, 1922. The group declared itself independent of the governance of the Church in Russia suffering in Bolshevik captivity and autonomous of any other external ecclesiastical authority, representing “all Russian Orthodox outside of Russia.” – *Ed.*

² The period in the history of the Russian Church between the abolition of the patriarchate by Peter the Great in 1700, his formation in 1721 of the Holy and Governing Synod founded on Protestant ecclesiastical principles rather than Orthodox canon law and serving at the pleasure of the tsar, and the election in 1917 of Patriarch Tikhon as the Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus’. – *Ed.*

Pondering the condition of our emigrant Church, we can compare it to a complicated process that takes place in a human body when it has some major circulatory arteries cut. The blood is still pressing forward and without the opportunity to stream along wider arteries, it finds its way to the capillary vessels. We, the emigrant Church, feel ourselves like such a capillary vessel that should exert itself to the limit so that the life of the Church, the blood of the Church's life could push forth. Therefore any form of inertia, any spiritual laziness, any passive existence in the atmosphere of the Church's grace is unforgivable. We should stay alert. Moreover, we must consciously and responsibly accept our ecclesiastical destiny as a quest, as a cross that God has laid on our shoulders. We are responsible for the free religious creativity of Russian Orthodoxy, for the Orthodox culture, for the preservation and augmentation of our inheritance.

What is the destiny, what is the future of our Church in exile? Will new traditions will emerge in the climate of unique, unprecedented freedom? How will it face the Church community in Russia and the Russian people in general? It is a difficult responsibility to talk about the future. However, some aspects of it can be either assumed or logically deduced based on the present state of affairs.

Religious persecutions that have been carried out in Russia for twenty years have already lost their internal rigor. Atheists are complaining that their agents do not have enough enthusiasm to fight the Church. New processes that we can guess about rather than see from the outside are taking place in today's Russia. However, the logic of these processes is so convincing that it confirms such guessing.

Over the last year, two coherent political processes have finally confirmed what was already sensed before. Lenin's friends and associates, important figures of the October Revolution have been either executed, demoted, or voluntarily retired. There was a coup that we should compare not to the Thermidor, but to the Brumer. Revolution is over. Its results are being stabilized. The power represented by Stalin strives to transform itself from the revolutionary party power into the power based on national recognition. For Stalin, the great scale of his bloody and monstrous reprisals against his accomplices necessitates wide national acceptance. Such is the logic of affairs. The time is coming—and it has partly come already—when the authorities will begin to buy people's acceptance with the help of various handouts and concessions. The Church might also receive such handouts. In a small way, it has already been done. We know that recently the authorities allowed church bells to ring, and that last Christmas the previously banned Christmas trees became almost mandatory. Of course, the issue is not exhausted by Christmas trees and church bells. One can surmise that some degree of tolerance will become an official line of Stalin's religious policy. It will be quite easy to do. They have only to declare that Church people connected to the hated Tsarist regime have already been annihilated, that the new corps of believers are loyal Soviet citizens, and therefore their Church does not pose any danger to the Soviet state. And if that is the case, then it should be allowed to exist. Of course, we don't know for sure, but the logic of affairs suggests that it is the case. Furthermore, one can assume that religious excitement will rapidly increase and wide circles of Russian youth who now cannot get acceptable answers to fundamental metaphys-

³ A group of the Russian Church in exile that eventually became known as the Western European Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate, maintaining canonical ties with the hierarchy in Moscow. This group split again in 1931, with the majority of the parishes transferring under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (see later reference to "Evlogian" Church.) – *Ed.*

⁴ The majority of the parishes of the Western European Exarchate under the omophorion of Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky), after 1931 in the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. – *Ed.*

ical questions will be enticed into the sphere of the Church's interests. Perhaps, even more—there is hope for a period of flourishing religious life and thought, and the intense searching for spiritual answers.

But there is always one question that we cannot escape. What kind of people, with what spiritual upbringing, will come into the Church? It is not important that atheism was the central element of their education. Judging by the fragments of information we get from the Soviet Union, we can see that atheism has become quite exhausted and does not give anything nourishing to the searching human soul.

There is a quaint Soviet word, *reset*, and it is reasonable to predict that reset would happen quite widely and painlessly. But there is one terrifying thing that cannot be reset easily. It has nothing to do with the modern Soviet worldview, but it has everything to do with the way it is manufactured, i.e., with the dictatorship not of power and force, but with the dictatorship of ideas—the “general party line” along with belief in its easily achievable infallibility. Basically, this is the major terror of modern mentality of the Soviet person. This person knows that today he should think the way Stalin himself and his infallible party orders him to think. This person knows what to think about atheism, science, economic development, foreign policy, revolution in Spain, private trade, marriage and family, in short, about all large and small issues of social and private life. This person submissively accepts all the mandatory attitudes.

If something in the world would change tomorrow, and the party for some reason would have to modify its views not only on minor, but also on cardinal mat-

ters, that Soviet citizen would then open the next issue of *Pravda* or *Izvestia* to find out exactly what the party wants him to know and think. It might turn out that regarding a certain issue it is necessary to think not the way he thought yesterday but the way it is required today. And since the main premise of his worldview is belief in the infallibility of the party directives, he painlessly resets his worldview in accordance to the new party requirement. I was amazed to read André Gide's book in which he describes how Communists in the Caucasus region were unclear on how to react to the Spanish revolution. Then Gide realized that the latest issue of *Pravda* with its mandatory viewpoint on this issue had not yet arrived. When it finally came, no doubts remained—it was required to fully sympathize with the Spanish revolution. Sometimes this goes even further—after the party's directives change, the person would publicly and with utmost self-deprecation repent for his views of yesterday as if they were crimes. I purposely dwell on the details of this distorted, servile, and sick mentality in order to point out how deeply belief in the infallibility of the party and dogmatism are rooted in the Soviet psyche. Everything in Soviet Russia must be obligatory and authorized. We would not find a single spark of freedom or diversity of attitudes; in other words, we cannot count on any other kind of mentality but the one I just described.

The conclusions, albeit quite tentative, are as follows. When people who have been brought up by the Soviet regime become part of the allowable and tolerated Church, they will carry this very mentality with them. What does this mean? It means that in the beginning they might eagerly study different views, attend services, etc. And then they will decide that they truly belong

to the Church, and at the same time, as people who are completely alien to the antinomian thinking, they would ask: “There are several opinions on such and such issue. Which one of them is correct?”—because for them several different opinions cannot be correct at the same time. And if one of these opinions is true, therefore others must be false and therefore exterminated. The Church for them would be as infallible as the Communist party, so first of all they would address this question to the Church. But soon enough they will begin attributing the principle of infallibility to themselves and start speaking on behalf of the whole Church. People who even in the area of ponderous and ambiguous Marxism were burning with passion of heresy mania and eagerness to destroy their opponents, in the Orthodox Church might become even more aggressive in exterminating “heresies” and in guarding “true Orthodoxy.” One can grotesquely imagine them charging people for the wrong way of crossing themselves, and sending them to the Gulag for refusal to go to confession. Free thought will be punishable by death. Here one cannot have any illusions—if the Church in Russia is recognized and becomes outwardly

mighty and successful, it cannot count on any cadres other than the people brought up in an uncritical, dogmatic spirit of authority. This means that freedom will be suppressed for many years. This means a new Solovki,⁵ new prisons and concentration camps for those who are seeking the Church’s freedom. This means new persecutions, new martyrs, and new confessors.

If not for the belief that Christ’s truth is always free, one could despair over such perspectives. Yet the freedom of the Church will not completely fade until Judgment Day; the uniqueness of our Church in exile that exists in freedom has a providential character. It prepares us for fortitude and heroism. Metaphorically, it trusts us with a great treasure and gives us strength to preserve it. And, finally, most importantly—no matter what happens in the life of the Church—whether cajolery of the state, persecution by the atheists, or distortion of the spirit of Christ’s freedom—there is nothing to be afraid of because the Gates of Hell will not overcome her.

Our way, our mission, our quest, and our Cross is to carry the free Christ’s Truth through all ordeals. ✽

⁵ Solovki was a common name for Solovetsky Monastery on the island on the White Sea, turned by the Soviets into an enormous forced labor camp. – *Ed.*



Maria Skobtsova (St. Maria of Paris, née Elizaveta Pilenko, 1891–1945) was a Russian poet, philosopher and theologian. She was tonsured a nun by Metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky) in Paris and devoted herself to social work among the Russian refugees, theological writings, and icon painting. During World War II she became a member of the French Resistance and together with her associates saved many Jews by providing them with baptismal certificates. In 1945 she was martyred at the Ravensbrück concentration camp. In 2004 she was glorified as a saint by the Ecumenical Patriarchate together with Fr. Dmitry Klepinin, Yuri Skobtsov, and Yuri Fondaminsky.