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Editorial

Unfinished Business from the Sacred Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow, 1917–18

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Over the past five years, the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 65) has precipitated many scholarly conferences and publications. Then during 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation has generated similar output, even if the historical importance of Luther nailing his theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg—if, indeed, he ever did so—has been greatly overstated. Despite the current penchant for anniversaries, however, the centenary of another occasion of major importance for one of the world’s largest Churches—and one that definitely took place—has been almost entirely ignored.

On 15 August 1917, the first Sacred Council of the Russian Orthodox Church for 250 years opened with a solemn liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral within the Kremlin. The Moscow Council convened at a time of tumultuous political upheaval. Following the February Revolution, which was sparked by mass demonstrations in Petrograd (now St Petersburg) and brought about the mutiny of the army, Tsar Nicholas II had abdicated and a Provisional Government, allied with the Duma which was the lower legislative house, had assumed office. The new government sought to control the Church by replacing members of its Holy Synod, and revolutionary fervour disrupted numerous parishes as the established order, at once social and ecclesiastical, was called into question.

The Provisional Government wished to promote the Council as a democratizing event within the Church. Hence it was politically and ecclesiologically important that a majority of the Council’s 564 members were laypeople. However, during the first of four sessions the Socialist October Revolution took place. The Winter Palace was occupied and the Provisional Government, which had installed itself there, surrendered. The Bolshevik faction around Lenin, which rapidly asserted itself over the other Socialist groupings, used its power to nationalize monastic and church land, grant equal rights to all religions, nationalize and secularize the education system, and decree the replacement of church marriage with civil marriage. In January 1918, during the first week of the Council’s second session, its former president Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev was murdered by Red Army soldiers in front of his own monks, and many other clergy were martyred with similar barbarity.

The Council's definitions and decrees were published soon after it ceased work on 7 September 1918, but were not reprinted until 1994.¹ They were unavailable in a Western language until an Italian translation appeared in 2003.² Hyacinthe Destivelle also translated them into French and included them as a large appendix to his 2006 study of the Council.³ A decade later they are at last available in English in a translation of Destivelle's excellent volume.⁴

The decrees of the Council were tremendously important for the Church. During the first session, far-reaching institutional changes in central governance were mandated and a conciliar structure was established. Excepting the newly-installed Patriarch and the Metropolitan of Kiev, the eleven other bishops on the Holy Synod were subject to election and rotation. Moreover, the Supreme Council comprised three bishops from the Holy Synod, five clergy, a monk and six laypeople. Moving to the local level, the functions and composition of diocesan assemblies, diocesan councils, deaneries and deanery councils were all defined in detail, with similar principles operating to those centrally. Diocesan assembly members, being clergy and laypeople in equal numbers, were to be elected for three years, and the diocesan council included both clergy and lay members, who were elected for six years. Bishops were to be elected by ballot by the bishops of the region along with clergy and laypeople, and their power was restrained by the requirement that any exercise of episcopal veto was subject to central review. At the deanery level a similar balance was maintained, with monastic superiors also represented.

These conciliar organs, and the inclusion of priests and laypeople in them, had been discussed for more than a decade, following the 1905 Revolution that had led to constitutional monarchy. It is to this, rather than to secular Socialism, that they owe their political origin. However, they were also rooted in the Russian theological concept of *sobornost'*. This term is broadly synonymous with the Greek *katholikos*. Nonetheless, whereas in both Western and

¹ *Sviashchenniy Sobor Pravoslavnoi Rossiiskoy Tserkvi. Sobranie opredelenii i postanovlenii* [*The Sacred Council of the Orthodox Church of Russia. Definitions and Decrees*] (Moscow: Izdanie Sobornogo Soveta, 1918); *Sobranie opredeleniy i postanovleniy Sviashchennogo Sobora Pravoslavnoi Rossiiskoi Tserkvi 1917–1918: Vypuski 1–4* [*Collection of the Definitions and Decrees of the Sacred Council of the Orthodox Church of Russia 1917–1918: Issues 1–4*] (Moscow: Izdanie Novospasskogo Monastyria, 1994).

² *Il concilio di Mosca del 1917-1918*, trans. Dmitrij V. Pospelovskij, Günter Schulz, Vladislav Cypin and Hervé Legrand (Bose: Qiqajon, 2003).

³ Hyacinthe Destivelle, *Le concile de Moscou (1917-1918) : la création des institutions conciliaires de l'Église orthodoxe russe* (Paris: Cerf, 2006).

⁴ Hyacinthe Destivelle, O.P., *The Moscow Council (1917–1918): The Creation of the Conciliar Institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church*, eds Michael Plekon and Vitaly Permiakov, trans. Jerry Ryan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

Greek Orthodox usages *katholikos* may designate a unity that is centralized and abstract, *soborniy* emphasizes the gathered and collective nature of unity, which may be manifested in a church assembly or in council.

Indeed, the re-establishment of the Patriarchate of Moscow following its abolition by Tsar Peter the Great—who had taken direct control of the Church in 1700, following the death of Patriarch Adrian—enabled a more independent and critical relationship with the state. At the opening of the Council’s second session, the new Patriarch Tikhon anathematized the Bolsheviks. Several decrees of great political import were promulgated. The Council called for the state to return parish schools to parochial jurisdiction and for the Orthodox faith to be taught in all schools. It defended the ancient Orthodox rite of ‘crowning’ as a legal form of marriage, and closely delimited the circumstances in which children could renounce the Orthodox faith prior to adulthood. It also asserted that church buildings and other property could only be disposed of by the Church itself.

Returning to ecclesiology, it is noteworthy that the Council did not envisage the Patriarch acting as his Church’s supreme governor. The Council asserted that it alone, composed of ‘bishops, clerics, and laity’, possessed the ‘supreme power—legislative, administrative, judicial, and supervisory’ within the Church and must be ‘convoked periodically, at determined times’ to exercise this. The Patriarch, in contrast, was to preside over the ‘government’ of the Church, being as a bishop first among equals and ‘accountable before the Council’, which he was responsible for convoking. Moreover, the authority to canonize was devolved to metropolitan provinces, although the institutions necessary to enable this were never established.

The rebalancing of the functions of clergy and laypeople was not limited to internal legislation, administration, law and supervision. As frequently happens when the faith is under attack, laypeople assumed a greater range of missional functions by force of circumstance, and these received conciliar endorsement. Especially notable is lay preaching, including during the divine liturgy, when such a preacher could vest in the *sticharion* (tunic). ‘Brotherhoods of evangelization’ were envisaged bringing together clergy, monks and laypeople, with provision made for salaried missionaries.

The Council’s membership included leading theologians and philosophers such as Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdyaev. Yet set alongside modern Roman Catholic conciliar documents, its own decrees are striking for their focus on organizational matters rather than theology. The extended introduction to the parish statutes is, however, a notable exception, constituting a powerful statement of the centrality in Russian Orthodox ecclesiology of the parish as a ‘particular little Church’.⁵ It opens by describing the goal of the Christian life as being ‘salvation of the soul unto life everlasting’, which requires the incorporation of believers by the Spirit into the Trinitarian unity of Christ’s body the Church. Since the Christian faith was born, the document continues, it has been in ‘individual, small churches, led and guided by bishops’ that the ‘ecclesial spirit’ has been realized. In modern Roman Catholic ecclesiology, bishops have tended to be viewed as fairly distant ministers of unity as the number of Christians and parishes has multiplied. In the Greek Orthodox Church, dioceses have tended to remain

⁵ Destivelle, *Moscow Council*, pp. 241–7.

smaller and bishops more closely associated with parochial life. However, the Russian Orthodox Church combines large dioceses with an ecclesiology focused on the parish, which is here identified as the primary locus of the Christian life. The souls of the faithful of a parish are directly entrusted to its clergy, who exercise their own charismatic leadership. The fact that the Council was largely funded by a tax on the sale of candles, which was levied directly on candle factories, serves as an apt reminder of its grounding in this local piety and charism.

Despite addressing several matters of major political and ecclesiological importance, the Council was unable to complete many aspects of its work. On 7 September 1918 it was disbanded after the Bolsheviks confiscated the Moscow Seminary, where some council members had been lodging, and expropriated the Church's cash reserves. Some twenty unexamined reports included the statutes for a proposed Biblical Council and for theological academies. Moreover, important work to promote Christian unity, particularly with the Anglican and Old Catholic Churches, was left in abeyance. This followed the establishment of a Commission for Church Unity, which in a resolution proposed to the Council did 'not see any insurmountable obstacle on the road towards such a goal'.⁶ The Holy Synod was empowered to establish a permanent commission to develop co-operative working with these and other 'friendly Churches' (*druzhestvennye Tserkvi*). This was the predecessor body of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Relations, which was established in 1946.

The Council is essential background for understanding the ecumenical links that were forged during the interwar period between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of England, notably via the Oxford-based Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, which was founded in 1928. This connection was no mere relationship of expedience, pursued by the Russian Orthodox in order to gain publicity and sympathy and by the Anglicans as an act of pastoral goodwill. Rather, the Church of England shared (and continues to share) many ecclesiological features with the inclusive and parochially-focused Orthodoxy promoted by the Council: an emerging conciliar structure, a strongly local identity, the active participation of laypeople throughout church life, a deeply-rooted social presence through the institution of marriage and the education system, and a mutually respectful relation with the state.

It might well be asked what has happened to this agenda. In reality, much of what was mandated at the 1917–18 Council, including even fundamentals, has not yet been implemented. Local councils have since then been convened by the *locum tenens* for the purpose of electing a new Patriarch following the death of the office holder on four occasions (1945, 1971, 1990 and 2009). However, only once, in 1988 at the Trinity Monastery of St Sergius at Zagorsk (Sergiev-Posad), has a council been summoned by the incumbent. This was partly to commemorate the millennium of the baptism of St Vladimir and the Kievan Rus', to which Russian Orthodoxy traces its origins, but also to approve without amendments a new set of church statutes. These included the requirement that a local council be called at least once every five years. This has not happened, even though Stalinist persecution is long past and the Russian Orthodox Church now enjoys enthusiastic state support. Far from serving as the Church's legislative, administrative, legal and supervisory authority, the local council has had

⁶ Destivelle, *Moscow Council*, p. 122.

all its significant functions assumed by the Council of Bishops, which in 1917 had the sole function—which it in fact never exercised—of judging the Patriarch.

Surprisingly, though also understandably, the region in which the Council's directions have been most fully applied is Western Europe, including the diocese of Sourozh, which covers Great Britain and Ireland. In the statutes of the Archdiocese of the Russian Orthodox Churches in Western Europe, the Council's acts and decisions are recognized as authoritative. Decision making is conciliar, with an equal representation of clergy and laypeople in the assembly and council. The archbishop may normally be overruled by a four-fifths majority of the assembly.

In concluding his assessment of the application and reception of the Council's decrees, Destivelle avers: 'It would be chimerical to think of the Soviet era as a mere parenthesis and imagine that the decisions of the council could be applied today.'⁷ Rather, he vaguely suggests, we need to 'pour an ever-new wine into ever-new wineskins'. The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity may well find it easier to deal with relatively centralized Churches. However, as Destivelle himself explains, the Council predates the Soviet era, having opened seven weeks before the October Revolution and been in active preparation for over a decade. In his foreword, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk is somewhat more direct: many of the issues that the Council addressed remain pressing today. These, he acknowledges, include the role of laypeople in the Church, the ministry of women, the place of the Church in society and Christian unity.

If the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, the mandate of the 1917–18 Council cannot be dismissed as no more than a pragmatic response to a difficult set of circumstances. However, lack of awareness of the Council's proposals for the reform of church polity cannot be attributed solely to Russian Orthodox conservatism. Many of the proposals are consistent with more recent developments in the ecclesiology of 'friendly Churches', such as those of the Anglican Communion. Yet in Russia, they have been viewed as compatible with a theology that highly esteems Patristic sources and with a profoundly mystical, historic liturgy. This presents potential ecumenical partners with an appropriate challenge to take their own theological and liturgical traditions seriously, and even to deepen their appreciation of these.

⁷ Destivelle, *Moscow Council*, p. 189.