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Editorial

Amongst certain sections of the Russian Orthodox Church there has been an abiding interest in Roman Catholicism and in the possibility of achieving some kind of reunion or at least intercommunion between the two great sister churches. The nineteenth-century Orthodox philosopher and mystic Vladimir Solov'yev, who dreamed of reunion, was himself eventually received into the Catholic Church.

From the very start of the Soviet period, as Aleksandr Nezhny reminds us, the government of the USSR regarded the Vatican with deep suspicion as a source of anti-soviet subversion. Taking its cue from the secular authorities, the Russian Orthodox Church maintained relations with Rome which at best could be described as coldly polite. The early 1960s saw a change: the Khrushchev government decided to permit Russian Orthodox observers to attend the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) at the invitation of Pope John XXIII, and from then the relationship between Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy grew very cordial. In Russia, and particularly amongst intellectuals, there was great interest in the Vatican Council. Many were excited by its ecumenical agenda: it seemed to be acting in fulfilment of the hopes of Solov'yev.

The early 1960s did indeed see an alteration in the strategy of the Vatican towards Russian Christianity. The Russicum, founded in Rome by Pope Pius XI in 1929, was set up to train priests for eventual work in Russia. The aim was for the Jesuits to use Eastern-rite Catholicism to draw Orthodox Christians into communion with Rome. This strategy changed at the time of the Vatican Council, when in the words of the Russicum's current director, Fr John Long, 'we recognised that the Orthodox churches have a pastoral role in the areas where they are established. We should not try to be in competition, we should help them.' The Russicum opened to the Orthodox in 1969, with the first Russian students arriving from the Moscow Patriarchate. Two of these are now Orthodox bishops.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Russian Orthodox champion of ecumenism in general and of rapprochement between the Orthodox and Catholic churches in particular was Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad. Symbolically, he died in the course of an audience with Pope John Paul I in 1978. So zealous was Nikodim in the cause of Catholic–Orthodox reconciliation that a persistent but unproven rumour holds that he was in fact a secret Catholic bishop recognised by Rome and granted jurisdiction throughout Russia by Pope Paul VI (see most recently Serge Keleher, *Passion and Resurrection – the Greek Catholic Church in Soviet Ukraine 1939–1989* (Stauropegion, L'viv, 1993), p. 101). In 1969, on Nikodim's initiative, the Holy Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate directed Russian Orthodox priests to give Holy Communion to Roman Catholics who requested it. (This directive was later rescinded.)

Meanwhile, as Felix Corley explains, from the late 1960s the KGB was once again increasingly suspicious about the Vatican's intentions towards the USSR. A secret 1974 report from the KGB to the Central Committee of the CPSU, signed by

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Andropov, expresses concern about alleged Vatican attempts to use the Russian Orthodox Church itself as one of its weapons in its 'ideological fight against the USSR'. The Vatican aims 'to support forces in [the Russian Orthodox Church] which, in its opinion, are capable of developing into an organised opposition to the state structure existing in our country and to oppose atheism.'

It is not clear exactly who might be included amongst these 'forces'. Would the Vatican be trying to enlist members of the hierarchy? Hardly, argues Nezhny. 'Is this not remarkable?' he comments on Andropov's allegation. 'The Vatican, it would seem, has been attempting to weave together a real counterrevolutionary network within the Russian Orthodox Church. Using whom? The KGB agents "Antonov", "Abbat", "Adamant", "Pavel" or "Drozdov", which is what these revered metropolitans have been for so many years?' Perhaps, then, Rome would be more interested in enlisting the help of ordinary clergy, including those regarded with suspicion by their own hierarchs? Nezhny notes that the 1974 report attributes 'pro-Catholic leanings' to Fr Aleksandr Men'. 'So this is what the secret police thought of the pure and tolerant Christianity of this Orthodox priest.'

It is now clear that the election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II in 1978 traumatised the communist world and gave substantial new impetus to fears of subversive intentions on the part of the Vatican. Corley writes of 'alarm verging on panic at the highest levels' in the Kremlin. As usual, the Russian Orthodox Church was employed in strategies set by the Communist Party. It was directed to forge closer links with Western European Catholics 'critical of the policies of John Paul II'.

In the dying years of the Soviet system, the traditional hostility of the Communist Party towards the Vatican melted away, and Mikhail Gorbachev's audience with the Pope in 1989 coincided with the legalisation of the Ukrainian Catholic Church. It is ironic that over the same period relations between the Russian Orthodox and the Catholic churches grew steadily worse, and have continued to deteriorate since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The Orthodox Church is seriously alarmed by what it construes as a policy of aggressive 'sheep-stealing' on the part of the Vatican. A milestone on the descent to hostility was reached on 13 April 1991 when Rome named several apostolic administrators to Russia, headed by Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, without any prior discussion with the Moscow Patriarchate. In November 1991 the various Orthodox churches declined to send observers to a synod on Europe convened by the pope, and the representative of Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomaios delivered a strong protest at Vatican policy. In March 1992 the heads of 14 Orthodox churches convened in Istanbul and condemned Catholic proselytism.

In his book review in this issue of *RSS*, Peter Hebblethwaite regrets what he sees as a tendency in some Catholic circles to violate the ecumenical principle of 'stressing what unites rather than what divides'. He argues that in the new era of religious freedom in Russia the Catholic Church could be a good ally of the Russian Orthodox Church 'on condition that it accepts that the "conversion of Russia" is in the first place a task for the Russian Orthodox Church.' The two churches should 'acknowledge each other as "sister churches" who start from a position of equality.'

There is no shortage of official assurance from the Catholic side to show that the Vatican agrees with Hebblethwaite. Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the general of the Jesuits, says that the purpose of the Jesuit house in Moscow is to serve as an 'open door'. 'Anyone who would like to know more about the Catholic Church can inform himself – and also enter into contact with the Orthodox Church, which is the church of Russia.' In June 1992 the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Russia distributed a letter to all Catholic dioceses in Eastern Europe, which includes the following

guidelines.

The apostolic structures . . . are meant to respond to the needs of Catholic communities present in those territories. They are in no way intended to bring the Catholic Church into conflict with the Russian Orthodox Church or with other Christian churches present in the same territory.

In full respect for religious freedom, which is an inalienable right of every person, bishops and priests will take care to consider attentively the motives of those who ask to enter the Catholic Church. Such people must be made aware of their obligations toward their own community of origin.

The letter speaks of the commitment to promote Christian unity, and argues that the way to achieve this

is certainly not proselytism but rather fraternal dialogue between the followers of Christ . . . with the aim of reestablishing that full communion between the Byzantine Church and the Church of Rome which existed in the first millennium.

Many Russian Orthodox clergy and faithful, and indeed many outside observers of the Russian scene, would say that these splendid principles are being honoured more in the breach than in the observance. 'For the sake of promoting a harmonious coexistence with the Orthodox Church,' urges the letter,

and in order to give proof of the openness which should exist in all the pastoral initiatives of the Catholic Church, the bishops and apostolic administrators are to inform the ordinaries of the Orthodox Church of all important pastoral initiatives, particularly those regarding the erection of new parishes intended to meet the needs of the local Catholic communities.

Critics of current Vatican policy towards Russia can point to many instances when this particular guideline has been violated – notably with the appointment of the apostolic administrators in 1991.

Is the Russian Orthodox Church overreacting? Is there in fact any prospect that the Roman Catholic Church will win over significant numbers of traditional Orthodox believers? 'It is easy to point to facts indicating that there is no serious future for Catholicism in Russia,' says Sergei Filatov in his article on the subject. In his view, despite what the Orthodox Church claims, Catholic missionary activity in Russia is at a very low level of intensity. Nevertheless, Filatov goes on to argue, the ground is favourable to the reception of Catholicism. He notes the high level of pro-westernism to be observed amongst the population today – an uncommon phenomenon in Russian history. The results of surveys conducted in 1992 'bear witness to the fact that the search for national identity is being pursued within the framework of western values and concepts.'

Filatov and Lyudmila Vorontsova show that the number of people calling themselves 'just Christians' rose from 22 per cent in 1990 to 52 per cent in 1992. According to Filatov, these figures give an insight into the real state of the Russian religious mind today – amorphous, spontaneous, eclectic – and reflect the fact that most people get their religious information not from specific churches but from the media, fiction and conversations with friends.

Filatov believes that the combination of these two requirements – that religion be of western origin and that it have a cultural and aesthetic content – are currently

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predisposing the Russian people to be exceptionally receptive to Catholicism. He records the appearance, particularly among young people and the intelligentsia in the capitals, of 'spontaneous, self-styled Catholics, who have no connections with a church.' Vorontsova and he reach the following conclusion:

the Orthodox Church and the religious life of the majority of people exist as it were in two different dimensions. There is the dogmatic teaching of the church and its official attitude towards various current problems; and there is the body of believers, who are not very familiar with the position of the church and who, as far as we can see, are not particularly anxious to know about it. They attend services more or less regularly and do not require anything further from the church. The religious life of the majority of people is completely autonomous and is developing according to its own laws.

In Filatov's view, these laws now mean that 'Russian Catholicism is taking shape without regard for what anyone may have decided.'

April 1994

PHILIP WALTERS

ERRATUM

The article 'Ideals and Understanding' by Iain G. Matheson published in *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 21, Nos. 3 & 4, 1993, pp. 387–9, was incorrectly dated. It was in fact written on 9 August 1992.

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Sergei Filatov graduated from the History Faculty of Moscow University. He has worked at the Centre for the Study of the USA and Canada in Moscow, and since 1989 at the Analytical Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences. His book on Catholicism in the USA appeared in 1993, and he has also collaborated with Fr Gleb Yakunin on a book on religion and democracy.

Józef Gula was born in Poland in 1926. He received a master's degree in Theology at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, and a doctorate in Polish history at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London.

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Aleksandr Nezhny, a writer on Russian religious affairs based in Moscow, came to prominence as a campaigning journalist for religious freedom in the early days of *glasnost*.

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