

Russian Catholicism

YULI SHREIDER

The Catholic community in Russia is unique. We are a minority among Christians here but we also represent the Universal Church. A significant proportion of Catholics in Russia are descendants of Polish, German and Lithuanian families and are therefore living as if in diaspora as representatives of national Catholic churches with a firmly established tradition of their own. The community of Russian Catholics, however, occupies a rather special position: they are a group of people who belong to Russian culture, are organically Russian, but who – mostly as adults – have chosen to confess the Catholic faith. They are by no means fugitives from Orthodoxy, but people who have found that their path to Christ lies through the Catholic Church. Neither is this a new phenomenon in Russia. We have only to think of Lunin, Chaadayev and the Abrikosov family. The community organised by the Abrikosovs in 1910 continued to exist into Soviet times. Despite persecution and the fact that most of its members spent many years in labour camps, the continuity of the community was preserved. Even today there are some of us who think of themselves as having become heirs of the Abrikosov community in the 1980s. I have come across old monks from that community whom Russian Catholics have gathered.

The phenomenon of Russian Catholicism deserves special attention. Before the revolution, its converts were drawn from the highest society. Members of the aristocracy were the first among them, for example, the Princess Volkonskaya. Her villa in Rome still bears witness to a very interesting interlude in Russian culture. The society which gathered around her included the writer Gogol'. Another Catholic convert was the Jesuit Prince Gagarin, whose library formed the basis of the Gagarin Library in Meudon between Paris and Versailles. This library contains one of the best collections of Russian literary journals. Later, Russian Catholics were drawn from the merchant class and the intelligentsia. One example is the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, who in emigration in 1929 converted to Catholicism and became the director of the Russian department of the Vatican library. His son still lives in Rome, and, like his father, has not cut himself off from Russian culture – rather he is an organic part of it.

Russian Catholics are of course a small element in Russian culture and are probably always going to remain a numerically insignificant minority. What is the point of such a minority continuing to exist? It seems to me that in Russian Catholicism we see Russian culture leaning towards the roots of western culture and western Christianity. Vyacheslav Ivanov, later echoed by Pope John Paul II, said 'Europe must breathe with two lungs: Catholicism and Orthodoxy'. In order for this to happen, however, lungs need to share a common blood supply. It may also happen as a

consequence of the existence of Russian Catholics within a Russian culture based on Orthodox foundations, who are, as it were, a channel to the sources of western culture. In Russia, however, 'Westernism' has always been associated with left-wing ideas, with ideas of revolution, socialism, the violent overthrow of the monarchy and other supposedly progressive concepts and so it has never been wise for us Russian Catholics to call ourselves 'Westernisers', because this concept has always been associated in Russia with a certain destructive and atheistic tendency. Nonetheless, Catholicism may be referred to as a 'Westernising' phenomenon, remembering that 'Westernising' in the Catholic sense is not to be seen as in opposition to the spiritual traditions of the East, but rather as in opposition to that desirable Westernising which has dumped western cultural rubbish onto Russia instead of pointing to the West's Christian foundations. At the basis of western European culture lies Christianity in its western form, in its western manifestations so to speak.

It is both interesting and important to discuss the differences between the spiritual traditions of East and West, but in the present climate it would be even more fruitful to discuss what they have in common and their essential complementarity. Nowadays many westerners are interested in Orthodox traditions – icon painting, liturgy, the Church Fathers, Russian religious philosophy – all the riches incorporated within the Byzantine Orthodox tradition. In my opinion, a reciprocal encounter is needed: Orthodoxy should in turn assimilate the spiritual wealth developed in the western Christian tradition. It is a tradition which demands that serious attention be given to social problems, to the affirmation of an individual's worth as one made in the Image and Likeness of God and as one doing Christ's work on Earth despite his or her fallen nature. God calls on us to transform not only ourselves but the world we live in. The salvation of the world cannot be realised by earthly means; only by becoming one with Christ can the history of the Earth be fulfilled. Nevertheless, it is within the framework of this earthly history, within the bounds of this world a place where we can hear the word of God spoken to us all, where we can preach the Gospel, prevent people slaughtering each other like dumb animals and treating each other as mere instruments to solve social problems. The theme of the Christian nature of culture perhaps sounds more strongly in the Catholic tradition than in the Orthodox tradition, which places emphasis on the world to come. In this sense, the two traditions complement one another. I do not believe that there is any real barrier to mutual relations with the Orthodox, as Russian Catholics hold Orthodoxy in the highest esteem. To some extent, we can be Catholics only insofar as we are capable of being Orthodox, of recognising our link with the traditions of the undivided church of the first millennium after Christ. We do not recruit Catholics from among the Orthodox. I am convinced that Catholic mission among the Orthodox would be senseless and harmful. It would introduce completely unnecessary complications into the relationship between these two great confessions. However, nothing like this is in fact happening.

I have of course been referring to the Latin-rite Catholic Church. The case of the Greek Catholics is rather more complicated, but this is another issue altogether. It is more of a Ukrainian than a Russian question nowadays. My subject is the community of the Latin-rite Russian Catholics. Our services are conducted in Russian, but according to the Latin rite. We feel that it is very important to affirm this particular form of Catholicism in Russia, not as one possible transmutation of Orthodoxy, but as one of the possible avenues to Christianity in our country which is favoured by certain people – not a large number, but a number significant enough not to be dismissed. It is the experience of Christian preachers that a certain type, perhaps even certain types, of non-believers find Catholicism to be the most natural and direct way

to Christ. I believe that Russian culture can only gain by this as it engenders diversity, which is always beneficial to a culture if it is diversity in what is good rather than in what is evil. St Thomas Aquinas suggested that freedom from evil and choosing wisely yields a greater diversity of options than choosing foolishly. Evil is monotonous and boring, but good is varied and creates myriads of unforeseen possibilities. In choosing the path to Christ, we find many ways of following that path.

It is my belief that the creation of a Russian Catholic community, uniting western Christian spirituality with Russian culture, is one of the options presented by this manifold good. On 24 February 1991 the Russian Catholic community held its first service in the Church of St Louis in Moscow, a traditionally Catholic church built by the architect Gilardi in 1832. This was the first time that a priest had served the mass there in an accurate Russian translation. This seems to me to be very important: for the first time a Catholic service was presented not as a Polish or Lithuanian act of worship, not as something copied from the West and somehow transported to Russian soil, but as a fact of Russian spiritual culture and self-awareness. Bringing Catholicism within Russian culture is the most important task of the Russian Catholic community. It is not enough simply to 'russify' the mass: a whole range of western cultural achievements – that is to say, basically Catholic cultural achievements – must be introduced to Russia. Here we are not talking about those separate cultural fragments which Russian culture assimilated long ago, such as secular poetry, which has developed in Russia along the lines of western tradition since the eighteenth century, or symphonic music, which once it had taken root in Russian soil was enriched by Russian musical tradition, or even science: we all know the history of socialist doctrines, but hardly anyone knows about the social teachings of the Catholic Church as set out in a whole series of Vatican documents. It is 100 years since the publication of the encyclical *Rerum novarum* in which the Church's social teaching was formulated: basic principles which the Church recommends for the development of social life, in particular the demand that workers earn enough to acquire some kind of private property. It must be possible for workers not only to earn their living but also to achieve economic independence. Here we can look back to medieval arrangements too. In medieval France, as well as in other states, there was an important law that no worker could be deprived of his tools in lieu of debt, which would have meant that it was no longer possible for him to do his work. It is very interesting to compare the social principles of *Rerum novarum*, and the subsequent papal encyclicals usually issued on anniversaries of that first one, with the teachings of socialism. They have much in common, since socialism is a doctrine of social justice based ultimately on Christian principles and above all on the principle of love for one's neighbour. However, it is the means which socialism teaches us must be used to achieve this social justice that are fundamentally opposed to the teachings of the Church, for they are based on the alienation of the individual from productivity and deprive him of his freedom and his right to own property which should be the just reward for his labour and the stimulus to motivate further effort. It is clear that we in Russia know nothing at all about this whole aspect of Catholic culture.

The situation today is that brutal pressure from a totalitarian regime has given way to the brutal economic conditions of a liberalised economy. One could be forgiven for thinking that life is a difficult choice between serving the Moloch of totalitarianism or the Mammon of liberal capitalism. If one turns to the teaching of the Catholic Church, however, it becomes clear that this is an evil dilemma which is thorough-going criticism from a Christian standpoint. What is more, this is not criticism from some specifically Catholic position, but criticism on the basis of the Gospel and

teachings of the Church Fathers, common to both Catholics and Orthodox. The only thing which is specifically Catholic about the exercise is the determination to examine contemporary problems in the light of Christian theology and by means of a critical analysis of the actual social problems which arise in new historical circumstances. Christianity does not present a Utopia or promise heaven on Earth, but points to ways of opposing the evil which threatens to turn our earthly lives into an inferno and place our souls in a constant state of temptation.

Christians of every denomination face a challenge: how to address people's needs and help us all to build a better life in which our lawful and natural demands are met. People turn to religion for the light of the Gospel. The Church is obliged to show how the Gospel overcomes the dilemma of choosing between Moloch and Mammon. The current interest in religion in our country testifies mainly to the fact that religion was suppressed and people were afraid to show interest in religion or the Church, or even to think about them. Under a totalitarian regime people are afraid not only to act, but also to think. It was much safer and more comfortable to think in the way you were supposed to. Christian preaching was ruthlessly suppressed under totalitarianism, because it undermined its very basis. Sociological surveys have revealed a remarkable fact: that amongst these turning to religion, the number of those showing an 'interest in the western Church' has grown most sharply, and although most of these lean towards the Catholic Church, there is a significant interest in Protestantism too. This does not mean that people are abandoning Orthodoxy, but it does indicate a certain dissatisfaction with the Russian Orthodox Church in its current situation. It would be inappropriate for me as a Catholic to evaluate this situation. I believe that the living force of Russian Orthodoxy will be able to heal the deep wounds inflicted by communist persecution. My comment on these findings is not that everyone is wanting to become Catholic, but simply that there is a developing interest in western spirituality, because it offers a way to God which has not been developed in Russia. Nor am I claiming these data as the basis for any kind of hope that the number of Catholics are going to remain a tiny minority in Russia. I believe, however, that these figures do reflect an interest in Catholicism and justify the existence of Russian Catholics – of Catholics, that is, not belonging to one or another national church, but as a community of Russians who are enriching Russian culture with an experience it lacks.

In the first place, as I have already mentioned, they have experience of a theological basis for Christian social teaching. It is not true to say that this is absent from Orthodoxy: Orthodox theologians have devoted a good deal of time to the subject. We need only mention the first generation of Slavophiles; and there is work going on today as well. The difference lies only in the fact that in Catholicism these teachings developed into a particular theological concept, a social doctrine. Today we are in dire need of a Christian social doctrine oriented towards the conditions of modern-day Russia. Catholic theologians and philosophers, both cleric and lay, have a natural role to play in working this out. Let me stress that I am not suggesting the introduction of a ready-made doctrine to Russia, but rather that social teachings be developed which take into account the experience of the western Church. The second element in the experience of Russian Catholics which can enrich Russian culture is that of western science, which is rooted in a Christian understanding of the universe as rationally and freely created by God out of nothing. This understanding is crucial if science is to overcome its contemporary crisis and develop harmoniously.

We have a 'Catholic club' which I hope is just the start of further ventures of this kind. I see it as a vehicle for spiritual cooperation. Let me stress that this is a Catholic

club, not a club of Catholics. It is by no means only Catholic parishioners who attend it – indeed, I have the feeling that the most committed young people at the Catholic church of St Louis are happy with the educational and religious activities which take place at the church. A significant number of those who come to our club do not consider themselves Catholics. This is very important. We are a channel through which Catholic culture can pass into Russian culture, and people come to us in order to experience this Catholic culture. This is much more important than any increase in the number of ‘confessing’ Catholics. I would never contemplate planning the growth of the Catholic Church, for that is a matter for providence, a question of the health of the church. The real issue is increasing the influence of Catholicism, with the particular aim of strengthening the Orthodox Church. That is what is important. I have recently been surprised to discover that Catholics are appearing in the depths of Russia. In Moscow and St Petersburg the population is very diverse, including people of all kinds of faiths. Amongst Krishnaites, Buddhists and so on, Catholics are seen as members of just one more exotic faith such as one would naturally expect to find in any imperial capital. One danger for Catholics is that some groups who have departed from canonical Christianity are trying to maintain that they represent traditional Catholicism. These include various groups practising the cult of the Mother of God, using Catholic images of the Virgin Mary and Catholic sources for her miraculous appearances in such places as Lourdes and Fatima, and even pictures of the pope venerating her. It is true that the worship of the Mother of God is an organic element of both Catholic and Orthodox practice, but in the apostolic churches the difference between the cult of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and the cult of the Mother of God is always clear. Any Catholic knows that there are only three hypostases of the Trinity to which he or she can turn with the words ‘Lord, have mercy’. It is with another request that we turn to the Mother of God: ‘Pray for us’. There is a fundamental theological difference here, and its non-observance by the Marian cults makes them absolutely incompatible with both Catholicism and Orthodoxy. This is essentially a violation of the first commandment and therefore a deadly sin. The Catholic Church cannot endorse such teachings.

Catholic activity in the capital cities, then, is to some extent evidence of interest in the unusual. The appearance of Catholics in the depths of Russia, however, bears witness to an organic interest in Catholic spirituality. The fact that such an interest exists is more important than the number of those involved. The spread of Latin-rite Catholicism as evidence of interest in western spirituality is, I believe, a positive phenomenon. It is specifically Latin-rite Catholicism which appeals to sympathetic Orthodox believers. They are not seeking a new Union. Their interest is more in line with the interest in Eastern-rite Catholicism now prevalent among Catholics in the West, which aims for mutual spiritual enrichment, not artificial unification. I do not believe that there is much prospect of a Greek Catholic Church in Russia, a Catholic Byzantine Russian Church, Eastern-rite Catholicism on Russian soil. This would not be an effective way either of approaching the spiritual experience of Western Christianity or of bringing the churches closer together. On the contrary, it would mean extra difficulties for everyone, both Orthodox and Catholics. The church of Christ can live only by feeding itself on Christ’s love and realising this love in its daily life. I believe that we Western-rite Catholics have a more natural place in Russia than Greek Catholics, especially since we do not attempt to proselytise the Orthodox or steal their flock. There are enough newcomers to religion who find that for them Catholicism is the most natural path to Christ. For most Russians, of course, the most natural path is through Russian Orthodoxy – although Baptists and other

Protestant denominations play a significant part in our country. I believe that no road that really leads to Christ should be closed, even if some of these roads do not happen to appeal to me personally. What is important is that the chosen roads should not lead people away from the truth or towards new schisms within the church. The schism which took place 1000 years ago between western and eastern Christianity was traumatic enough. It was only with difficulty that the Russian Orthodox Church survived the schism at the time of Patriarch Nikon; and the consequence of Bolshevik persecution was more divisions within the Russian Orthodox Church and new wounds for Christianity in Russia. May God save us from yet more schisms! Whenever people choose a faith they should bear in mind the possible harm they might do to church unity.

Pope Pius XII devoted a special encyclical to the message that the Church is the mystical body of Christ and that the head of the Church is Jesus Christ himself. This signified a break with the notion that the pope is the head of the Universal Church. As Jesus said to the apostle Peter, 'I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church' (Matthew 16:18). These words prophesy a special role for the throne of St Peter in the Church; but even so the role of head befits only Christ himself. Recognition of this fact by the pope means an end to any attempts to unite the Universal Church through Union – that is, by placing all local churches under the jurisdiction of Rome. History has clearly demonstrated that this kind of union is by no means the best way to achieve true church unity. Those unions created at various points in history do now constitute organic parts of the Catholic Church; but the idea of expanding them or creating new ones is not regarded as a desirable option today.

Today the aim is to achieve an understanding of the organic unity of the whole Christian Church and of the danger of any breach of this unity by the creation of interdenominational tensions. It is this danger which we must be very careful to avoid. Hence, I am convinced that it is the Latin-rite (Western) Russian Catholic community that has the best chance of bringing a western cultural influence to bear, because there is less of a temptation to proselytise, less chance of inter-church conflicts, and virtually no arguments over the ownership of church buildings or division of parishes. None of these issues poses a serious danger for us at present. On the contrary, new areas for close cooperation are opening up, for example in education, in charitable activity and above all in the shared task of evangelising our country, particularly among the young. Practical cooperation is already taking place, in fact. At the St Thomas College of Catholic Theology both Orthodox and Catholics teach and study together, bringing about mutual spiritual enrichment. I have already mentioned the Catholic club; and there are also Orthodox societies which are glad to invite representatives of other Christian denominations, particularly Catholics, to their meetings. Recently an interdenominational research centre on philosophy, psychology and the sociology of religion was set up, and joint research and discussion has started on the subject of the family from a Christian perspective, on the initiative of the apostolic administrator for the Latin-rite Catholics in European Russia and with the blessing of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Catholic charity Caritas is active in distributing humanitarian aid, and not only among Catholics. Help is given not according to denominational affiliation, but according to need. I believe that before long we will be preaching together and working together to carry the light of the Gospel to all who need it. It seems to me that there is a steady impetus towards the achievement of a level of Christian unity acceptable to all through practical collaboration. Unity is being hindered only by temporary circumstances such as the political situation, misunderstandings which arise and mistakes made by one group or another.

One of the most important elements in this steady impetus towards unity is the general need to overcome the harm done to human beings by the long dominion of militant atheism. For a long time antireligious propaganda taught that religion makes people narrow-minded, that it alienates them from the world and prevents them achieving their potential, and that 'liberation' from religion leads people to be socially active. In actual fact the opposite is true. Without God, one cannot be genuinely open to others and one's individuality is severely restricted by one's role and social situation, and by one's attitude to society, the authorities and ideology. Only religion can make a person free. Becoming aware of one's responsibility to God makes one more responsible towards people and society as a whole. The Catholic faith places a particularly strong emphasis on this idea; but this does not mean that it is not expressed in other religions too. Communist ideology called on us to unite, and Christianity is doing the same today, but unity varies. There is the unity of a swarm of bees in which each has its own strictly defined place beyond which it cannot stray. On the other hand, there is the unity of the living organism, which has different organs and cells, with their own diverse functions, all mutually dependent on one another. Christian unity, for which the very fine Russian Orthodox term is '*sobornost'*', is unity in diversity, a unity in which we recognise one another's worth and in which diversity is a value. It would be very boring if everyone were identical. We would not then be individuals, but copies of one another. No one would need anyone else, because everyone would be the same, but if on the other hand I am able to see in others something essential to me which I lack – that is, the fullness of Christ, the form and likeness of God – then I become a different person, open, no longer restricted by my own limitations, but transcending them.

Trying to be broad-minded helps one to understand the values of one's own culture and nation better and to love the place where one lives and the people with whom one is most closely linked. This is the famous principle of '*sobornost'*': we are indivisible yet distinct. This seems to me to be genuine Christian unity. People are distinct from one another because each of us is unique, but people are indivisible because each depends on the rest. The Christian churches are also distinct: it would make no sense to amalgamate all different confessions into one average denomination and thus lose the particular gifts of each, creating something neutral or a narrow-minded sect. Here, there is diversity; but we are also indivisible in Christ. Only by combining these two principles is it possible for the Christian Church – and the whole of humanity – to exist. There are many forms of religion in existence and many ways of revealing the truth. There is ultimately only one truth, but it presents itself to us in different ways and we reach it by a variety of paths. Catholicism acknowledges different kinds of spirituality and even embraces two theologians: the theology of St Thomas Aquinas plays the predominant role; but there is also the Franciscan theology of St Bonaventure. The 'angelic' doctor St Thomas and the 'seraphic' doctor St Bonaventure complement one another and exist as distinct but indivisible tendencies within Catholic spirituality. I believe it is very important to teach and study different approaches and to learn how to see what is of value in different ways of thinking, while retaining unity in Christ.

I believe that the common dangers facing the whole of Christianity today are a factor conducing to unity amongst those who want to hold firmly to the Christian orthodoxy of the Holy Fathers. We might recall the generally-recognised importance of the letter from Pope Leo the Great to Archbishop Flavian of Constantinople in working out the definition of the relation between the divine and the human in the person of the Saviour produced by the Council of Chalcedon. Many of the contemporary

religious movements which oppose Christian orthodoxy ought to be labelled manichaeism or gnostic. This could lead to real cooperation amongst the traditional Christian churches, united in the potential energy of a common apostolic heritage.

The experience of recent years has highlighted some important questions associated with Catholic-Orthodox relations in Russia. Their doctrinal proximity (including mutual recognition of the validity of their sacraments and of their apostolic succession) gives rise to specific problems. One major problem is that of 'canonical territory', the question of the lawful existence of a Catholic episcopate in Russia. This question does not arise in relation to Protestant denominations, or to Islam or Judaism. The fact that it is a problem between Catholicism and orthodoxy witnessed to the ties of friendship between the original western and eastern branches of Christianity. Of course the apostolic administrator of Latin-rite Catholics in the European part of Russia is not called the 'Bishop of Moscow'; He is in fact called the 'Bishop of Hippo' — that is, he holds the title to the north African see that once belonged to St Augustine. Hippo is west of Moscow'; Sourozh in the Crimea, the nominal see of Metropolitan Anthony who looks after the English members of the Russian Orthodox Church, is East of London. Thus the titles of bishops reflect the ancient division in the territory of the Church. Nevertheless, in some circles the existence of a Catholic bishop in Moscow is interpreted as disregard for church traditions and as Catholic expansionism. Accusations of 'proselytism' levelled from among the Orthodox against Catholics belong to the same category of problem. Conversions from Orthodoxy to Catholicism are rare and are not encouraged by our priests, but for the sake of good relations Catholics must consider carefully how their actions appear in the eyes of the Orthodox. Even the word 'ecumenism', which has a definite positive connotation for Catholics, puts many Orthodox on their guard. All such problems are soluble, however. My personal opinion is that Catholics should openly recognise the Patriarch of Moscow as having 'primacy of honour' on the territory of Russia, and should realise their special responsibility for developing good relations between the sister churches.

In this context, it seems appropriate to mention the fact that at the end of 1995 our archbishop created a commission to collect material for the beatification of Friedrich (Fedor) Haaz, a German Catholic who was called 'the saintly doctor' by Orthodox believers because of his selfless charitable work amongst prisoners. The positive popular opinion of Dr Haaz among the Orthodox is one of the main reasons why the Catholic Church is preparing to recognise him as a saint.

An even greater responsibility rests on Russian Catholics in connection with two papal encyclicals of May 1955, *Oriente lumen* and *Ut unum sint*. These concern a new understanding of the unity of the Christian Church, the possibility of mutual enrichment from shared spiritual experience, and the study of common sources of Christianity and of a common philosophical and theological tradition. After reading these encyclicals one Russian Catholic commented that to be a real Catholic today one must be an Orthodox believer of considerable depth. Some might regard this kind of remark as a joke, but in fact it expresses an ecumenical outlook. It may be that it is the destiny of Russian Catholicism to be one the important channels by which the best of the eastern spiritual tradition can enrich western Christianity.

(Translated from the Russian by Philip Walters and Emma Watkins)