

**Reader Konstantin Todorov**

**THE FLAVOUR OF ORTHODOXY<sup>1</sup> OR**

**THE ROYAL PATH**

**THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL VIEWS OF HIEROMONK**

**SERAPHIM (ROSE)**

**Part 2**

**The Dangers from the Left**

**1. Starting point**

How can we, in our times, find the patristic path of moderation, the middle road between the extremes or, as the Holy Fathers call it, “the royal path” in terms of ecclesiological orientation? In his article titled “Royal Path” Fr. Seraphim started seeking the answer to this question by turning to the teachings of Rev. John Cassian for “the royal path” in the spiritual life. At first glance, this seems a strange starting point. Is there a direct link between the path of sobriety, i.e. watchfulness and reflection in the spiritual life, for which Rev. John Cassian spoke, and the Orthodox ecclesiology today? Perhaps this should be seen only as an example given by Fr. Seraphim by analogy so that we can judge from it how careful we should be in terms of going into extremes when we construct our position of faith? This is not the case. Fr. Seraphim says: “**Applying this teaching to our own situation** (italics mine - KT), we may say that the ‘royal path’ of true Orthodoxy today is a mean that lies between the extremes of ecumenism and reformism on the one side, and a ‘zeal not according to knowledge’ (Rom. 10: 2) on the other.”<sup>1</sup> According to Fr. Seraphim, the spiritual force through which we can find the right path both in our personal spiritual life and in the teachings of the Church are judiciousness and sobriety - this “good gift” that we should strive to achieve with all our might through humility. So the correct orientation in the ecclesiological questions is directly dependent on the level of our spiritual life, the level of our Church consciousness, on the simplicity and humility with which we approach the complex issues of modern church life. This idea, which is expounded in the “Royal Path”, is developed and elaborated on by Fr. Seraphim in many places in his articles. In order to keep the flame of our inner spiritual life – here is the essential prerequisite so as to

---

<sup>1</sup> The Royal Path. True Orthodoxy in an Age of Apostasy – In: *The Orthodox Word*, Vol. XII, No. 5 (70), pp. 143-149.

be able to find our bearings in what is happening in the life of the Church. Exactly for this reason, Fr. Seraphim's attention is mainly directed at the state of spiritual life in the various Orthodox jurisdictions.

## **2. The spiritual condition of contemporary Orthodoxy**

The waning of the Spirit, the lack of zeal and of burning Faith, the widespread lukewarm and indifferent attitudes to the questions of spiritual life in contemporary Orthodox world - these deplorable signs of the ever greater departure from the life in Christ, according to Fr. Seraphim, are the most conspicuous characteristics of contemporary Orthodox Christianity. Spiritual idleness, indifference, lack of interest in the spiritual life - this is the general situation of contemporary Orthodoxy that prompted Fr. Seraphim to comment:

"In viewing the sorry spectacle of almost all the Orthodox Churches and 'jurisdictions', one can only conclude that here is the exact opposite of what Christ came to give: almost universal lukewarmness and indifferentness, extinguished lamps that give no more light, a salt that has lost its savor, an Orthodoxy that seems to be solely a matter of habit, faith swallowed up in worldliness, producing senseless compromise and apostasy.

This sight is surely enough to dampen the zeal of any Orthodox Christian - until one stops to realize that all of this is Orthodoxy in name only, that without the divine zeal that characterizes true Orthodox life it is not Orthodoxy at all, but only the extinguished remains of a once-burning fire."<sup>2</sup>

"The extinct remnants of the once burning fire ..." - Is that the only thing left today of the autocephalous Churches? Fr. Seraphim uses even stronger words, "Before the eyes of 20<sup>th</sup>-century humanity the once-glorious Orthodox world is entering the last stages of its dissolution..."<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Fr. Seraphim believed that contemporary autocephalous Churches can no longer be accepted unconditionally as Orthodox in the true sense of the word. According to him, the spiritual decay in them has taken apostasy to a level on which their own hierarchs have become the engine of the processes leading to the disintegration of the Orthodox consciousness and preparing the ground for the final blurring of any differences with the heterodox,

"Even now the burnt-out shells of 'Orthodox' church organizations are making their political preparations ('preparing the people') for the coming Unia - no longer merely with the Latin church, but with the whole apostate and unrepentant Christendom."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The Zealots of Mount Athos - In: *The Orthodox Word*, Nr. 46 (1972): pp. 220-223.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 227-228.

“Charred shell of the 'orthodox' church organizations ...” – aren't these words spoken as early as in the 1970s too strong? Perhaps many will consider them extreme, but this is a good occasion for us to realize that the criteria of modern “comfortable” Christianity have strayed too far away from the patristic teachings. Trying to guide us to a comparison with them, Fr. Seraphim reminds us that “the zeal is the very center of the life in Christ's Church.”<sup>5</sup> Is this so today? Fr. Seraphim also points out that the burning spirit, the zeal, is the **norm** of the Orthodox Christian life. This is not supposed to be the share of only a minority of ascetics. To such a life are called upon all Christians. Actually, one of the main reasons why true Christian criteria today are blurred, and basic Christian concepts misplaced and replaced, is the lukewarm attitude and the lack of zeal. The liberal and modernist theology perceives the true Christian life, Christian asceticism as “fanaticism”, and what they consider the way of “moderation” is actually a coldness of the heart, self-indulgence, the beginning of apostasy, a refusal of dedicated and zealous serving of God. Yet, the Lord accepts **only** dedicated and zealous ministry, reiterates Fr. Seraphim.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, it is the presence of such zeal that is one of the signs that the Church of Christ is still alive. And what about where this zeal is absent? ... There today's faithful are mocked for their zeal, and their attempts to protect their position of faith from ecclesiastical communion with heretics or those who tacitly support them, is seen as “schism”. But this can be the assessment of people who “are either not genuine Orthodox Christians, or else they have formed mistaken notions of zealousness.”<sup>7</sup> This is one of the tragic consequences of the lost zeal – with it the faculty for correct orientation is also lost: the “... lukewarm Christians do not understand the Faith of Christ, nor the wiles of the enemy of man's salvation.”<sup>8</sup> Their thinking becomes worldly, what is crucial for salvation becomes insignificant, while the fight of the zealous is seen as an incomprehensibly petty “battle for 'details', such as the preservation of the Church calendar or the non-commemoration of the Patriarch.”<sup>9</sup> But with apostasy, warned us Fr. Seraphim, as well as with every other sin, the devil never offers something obviously evil but he tempts us by such minor “trifles” which gradually accumulate and eventually cut a whole broad road leading to destruction.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., . 223.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

Normally, a multitude of voices rise to soothe and lull the Orthodox conscience with arguments that the committed acts of apostasy are not really something so significant and serious, and that in the history of the Church such things have also happened before, and most importantly - they are not something concerning the nature of Faith, they are not dogmatic issues. However, Fr. Seraphim is adamant:

”Even as in the days of St. Maximus the Confessor, it (i.e. ecumenical ecclesiology) is a dogmatic issue; for he **who commemorates an open heretic**, who declares that the Orthodox Church is not the Church of Christ but only a 'part' of it (see the Enthronement Address of Patriarch Demetrius), thereby joins himself to his heresy and takes him for his leader on a path whose ruinous outcome is now surely more than evident.”<sup>10</sup>

This can hardly be put forward more clearly and unambiguously. But even after 1960s, the liberal theology was still capable of sending the Orthodox conscience to sleep, although since then the manifestations of apostasy became more daring and even shocking: the mutual lifting of anathema between Rome and Constantinople without the formal consultation with other local Orthodox churches, the multiple cases of joint prayers with heretics and even communion of Catholics in Orthodox churches! Fr. Seraphim, whose sharp mind penetrated the essence of apostasy, came to the following conclusion:

”**The crisis of Orthodoxy lies in the loss of the savor of True Christianity** (italics mine KT). This savor has been largely lost not only by the Moscow hierarchs, but by most of the Russian ‘dissidents’ as well, as likewise by the ‘Paris’ school of émigré theologians, by the apostate Patriarch of Constantinople and all who follow him, by new calendarists and renovationists and modernists of every sort, and by the simple people everywhere who imagine they are Orthodox because their fathers were or because they belong to a ‘canonical church organization’.”<sup>11</sup>

### **3. The sins of the hierarchs and the attitude of the congregation towards them**

In his article “The Catacomb Tikhonite Church 1974” Fr. Seraphim examines the address of the famous Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn to the Third Worldwide Council of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, held in September 1974 in the monastery “Holy Trinity” in Jordanville, NY. In 1973 Solzhenitsyn left the Soviet Union and settled in Switzerland. The brave fighter against the Soviet regime was not a church person and did not have the sufficient ecclesiastical consciousness so as to understand the struggle of the Church Abroad. In his letter to the ROCOR<sup>12</sup> Synod he developed some arguments typical

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> The Catacomb Tikhonite Church 1974, *The Orthodox Word*, Nov.-Dec., 1974 (59), 235-246.

<sup>12</sup> ROCOR - the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, also called the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA).

of the thinking of the liberal intellectuals, who sincerely respected the Church, but at the same time badly misunderstood Her mission in this world. In the first place, Solzhenitsyn called ROCOR hierarchs to unity both with other Russian church jurisdictions abroad, and especially with “the Russian Orthodox people”. However, he did not realise that the Church unity can only be achieved in the Truth, while everything else is unprincipled compliance motivated by the tactical considerations related to the state of affairs rather than essential and doctrinal ones. As a sincere and honest man, he did not ignore the betrayal of Sergianist hierarchy, but believed that because of it, the Church Abroad should not “substitute in imaginary fashion a catacomb church for the real Russian Orthodox people”<sup>13</sup> and make common cause with this church, rather than with the “millions of Orthodox believers”. Solzhenitsyn was convinced that the fall of Sergianist bishops is their personal responsibility and was unrelated to the mass of believers they led. He wrote:

“The sins of submission and betrayal allowed by the hierarchs have lain as an earthly and heavenly responsibility upon these leaders, but they do not extend to the church body, to the numerous conscientious priests, to the mass of those who pray in the churches – and they can *never* be transmitted to the church people; the whole history of Christianity persuades us of this. If the sins of the hierarchs were relayed to the faithful, the Church of Christ would not be eternal and invincible, but would depend entirely on the accidents of character and conduct.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the responsibility for the “sins of submission and betrayal committed by the bishops ” are not the responsibility of the church people, but the church people are responsible for their choice - whether, in their turn, to demonstrate submission and “obedience” to the apostate hierarchy and follow it, or remain faithful to the Church truth and Church justice. Those who follow the hierarchs in their fall uncritically or because of some considerations, albeit despite their will, become more or less accomplices in this downfall and cannot avoid its repercussions. Since ancient times, in the Church, precisely the church people have been those who are guardians of the Truth. If they are not interested in their faith, or are indifferent to the apostasy of the bishops, then obviously they have become much less religious. And exactly with such a congregation, apostate hierarchs feel much more comfortable.

Paradoxically, exactly Solzhenitsyn’s belief that the betrayal of the bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate does not affect the church congregation serves best those bishops and their betrayal respectively. This is so because this belief leads to the conclusion that the congregation can without any uneasiness or

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

inconvenience attend the services in the churches of the Patriarchate, be in prayerful communion with its clergy and follow their leaders without fearing any unfavourable consequences, regardless of the direction in which the latter lead the congregation. It is like claiming that the crew and passengers are safe because they are not responsible for the wrong direction the captain sails the ship and the perilous reefs he steers it towards. Thus the views of the sincere but not sufficiently enchurching intelligentsia prove to be really convenient and even catering to the criticized by them hierarchy of the apostate church establishment. Fr. Seraphim revealed this very clearly:

“This view is based on *an entirely false view of the nature of the Church* which artificially separates the hierarchs from the believing people and allows ‘church life as normal’ to go on no matter what happens to the Church leaders. On the contrary, the whole history of the Church of Christ persuades us of the exact opposite. Who else was it but the Bishops of Rome who led the Church of the West into apostasy and schism and heresy? Is it the fault of ordinary believing Roman Catholics that they, the largest group of ‘Christians’ in the world, are today *outside the Church of Christ*, and that in order to return to the true Church they must not only reject the false doctrines of Rome, but also completely reform their religious mentality and unlearn the false piety which has been transmitted to them precisely by their bishops?”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, there is a significant difference between the individual transgressions of the leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate and their sins against the Faith and the Church. The latter are precisely those whose consequences affect the congregation following such hierarchs. Solzhenitsyn did not distinguish between the two groups of sins. “If he were speaking – writes Fr. Seraphim – only of the *personal sins* of hierarchs, he would be speaking the truth. But the Catacomb hierarchs and faithful have not in the least separated from the Moscow Patriarchate because of the personal sins of its hierarchs – *but rather because of their apostasy from Christ, which does indeed involve not merely the hierarchs, but also the whole of the Church's faithful.*”<sup>16</sup>

For this reason, the true Orthodox Christians consider the priesthood and the faithful of the Moscow Patriarchate participants in apostasy and schism. But at the same time their attitude towards the latter is one of compassion and sympathy - as towards the ordinary believers who went to the few churches still functioning in the Soviet Union at the time, as well to the conscientious priests who strived to serve well, as far this was possible under the pressure exerted by the communist authorities. In his article “What does the Catacomb Church think?” Fr. Seraphim analyzes the letter of one of the catacomb shepherds to his spiritual children. It was written in 1962 and it is one of the few documents of the Catacomb Church

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

in Russia which became known in the West. It presents a sober assessment of the clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate and is alien to any prejudice or condemnation, "... sincere and unhypocritical priests ... do exist in the churches. Of course, it is difficult for them, but they somehow try to squeeze through the eye of the needle. To seek such people among the bishops is almost a hopeless cause: the overwhelming majority of them 'know what they are doing' and now St. John Chrysostom's words sound especially true, 'I fear no one in the world; I fear only bishops'."<sup>17</sup>

Based on the same sound assessment, Fr. Seraphim also never considered the Moscow Patriarchate irretrievably fallen away from the body of the Church, nor their entire congregation - a collection of heretics or heathen. He was always aware that the apostasy and schism in the Moscow Patriarchate and the official local Churches existed in various levels and degrees, in conjunction with their corresponding considerable or limited opportunities for reunification of these apostate bodies with the Church. Fr. Seraphim identified the correct attitude towards our brethren abiding in the jurisdictions of "World Orthodoxy" with manifestation of love, understanding, and compassion. For him, however, this did not mean hiding the Truth, keeping quiet the ecclesiological assessment of the situation of their jurisdictions and of the individual ecclesiastical condition of their members. On the contrary, true love is always united with Truth. That is why the true Orthodox Christians should never participate in the affairs of official local Churches or have communion with them in prayer and in the sacraments: "for the sake of the purity of Christ's Church, [they] *must remain separate from the schismatic body and thereby show it the way of return to the True Church of Christ.*"<sup>18</sup>

The testimony of the true Orthodox Christians "in the midst of a cold and dying world" is a heavy cross to bear. It puts them in a position of a despised minority, of unimportant "marginal people", out of the limelight and the circles that create "great" and "significant" events. The spiritual and moral norms, under which they strive to live, come into an ever increasing conflict with the acceptable norms of modern society and this will force them to impose greater and greater voluntary self-restrictions on themselves. How many are the people who can condemn themselves to such a voluntary exile in society? Can we expect this from the majority of Christians? And isn't Solzhenitsyn right in saying that "The majority of people are not saints, but ordinary men. Both faith and the Divine services are called to accompany their usual life, and not to demand every time a super-heroic act."? Perhaps this is the voice of "common" human reason, but definitely this is not the voice of the Truth of Christ, because as Fr. Seraphim reminds us, "the whole history of Christ's Church is the history of the triumph of Christ's

---

<sup>17</sup> What Does the Catacomb Church Think? - In: *The Orthodox Word*, No. 96 (1981).

<sup>18</sup> The Catacomb Tikhonite Church 1974, *The Orthodox Word*, Nov.-Dec., 1974 (59), 235-246.

heroes. 'Ordinary' people follow the heroes, not vice versa. *The standard is heroism, not 'ordinary life'.*<sup>19</sup> According to the humanist view of the liberal intelligentsia expressed by Solzhenitsyn, faith must accompany the 'ordinary' life of 'ordinary' people, to strengthen them, to assist them in carrying life's burdens, and that is it. For humanism the norm is what **we are**. Developed just a step further, this thought leads to today's well-known and widespread conception of Faith and the Church as called upon to provide spiritual comfort, solace and ... success (!) to man in his earthly life. For the Christian worldview, on the contrary, the norm is what we are not but what we **have to be** through the perspective of true life, the one in eternity, at that. Christian faith and the Church are not intended to serve the earthly life of man. Today, the lowest level their denigration has reached in this sense is the modern ritual serving 'Christians', which satisfies their needs of performing certain ceremonies at key moments of their life - baptism, wedding, and funeral service. However, this is not the true purpose of Christian faith and the Church. They are called upon to lead people along the path to eternal life and to prepare them for it. Therefore Fr. Seraphim gives the following warning, "The confession of the True-Orthodox Church is absolutely indispensable for the 'ordinary' Orthodox Christians of Russia today (and all official orthodoxy - KT) if they hope to remain Orthodox and not go further on the path of apostasy."<sup>20</sup> This is a warning that anyone who considers himself an Orthodox Christian should hear.

#### **4. Refraining from ecclesiastical communion with the official local Churches**

So, what should we do? How should sincere Christians who are under the jurisdiction of official Orthodoxy and who disapprove of their hierarchs' apostasy act? Fr. Seraphim reminds us the pledge of our Saviour that His Church will continue to live until the very end of this world and the gates of hell shall not prevail against Her. Therefore, there is no doubt that the Church of Christ and the true Orthodoxy do exist today, and one who thirsts for the Truth must learn to seek them. They are not "where numbers and fashion and conformity to the world prevail, but where there are a striving and a burning for God's truth and righteousness. The fire of true Orthodoxy is still alive in many places: in the Catacomb Church of enslaved Russia, in the persecuted True Orthodox Christians in Greece, in the maligned Russian Church Outside of Russia, in the Zealots of Mt. Athos."<sup>21</sup>

"... **Where there is burning desire for God's truth and righteousness**" (italics mine - KT) - there we can find the true Church of Christ and true Orthodoxy, according to Fr. Seraphim. How different this approach

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The Zealots of Mount Athos. - *The Orthodox Word*, Nr. 46 (1972): 219-228.

is from the ecclesiological structures of official Orthodoxy, for whom “canonicity” is fundamental and where less and less room is left for the Truth! This is some inane “canonicity” detached from the Truth, turned into a formal legal norm with the help of which one can justify any wrongdoing perpetrated by hierarchs who head the visible church body. The obvious purpose of this “canonicity” is to keep the flock in subordination to its ruling hierarchy, **regardless of the direction they guide it to**. This may even be in the direction of moving away from Christ. What Fr. Seraphim says is that nothing in the Church could be separated from the Truth or be indifferent to it. Furthermore, we shall find the true Church where there is “striving for righteousness,” that is, striving for genuine spiritual life rather than coldness, conformism to the zeitgeist and “comfortable Christianity.”

Fr. Seraphim does not hesitate to point out the solution for those who wish to remain faithful to the Savior and His Church. This is **termination of ecclesial communion with the apostate hierarchy of the official Orthodoxy**. In similar situations the Holy Fathers took precisely the same decision - termination of ecclesial communion with the apostate hierarchy. Fr. Seraphim refers to the example of St. Maximus the Confessor:

”The Church of Christ knows no greater champion than St. Maximus the Confessor, to whom the partisans of ‘church unity’ offered all the same arguments that are offered today to the True-Orthodox Christians who refuse to be in communion with those ‘Orthodox’ who have left the path of piety and truth. Of St. Maximus only two things were asked: that he accept a compromise statement of faith (the ‘Typos’) and receive communion with the Patriarchs and bishops who accepted it. The emissaries of the Byzantine Emperor explained to St. Maximus that ‘the Typos does not deny the two wills in Christ, but only obliges one to be silent about them for the sake of the peace of the Church’; they told him ‘have in your heart whatever faith you want, no one forbids you this’; they accused him of causing disturbance in the Church out of his stubbornness: ‘You alone are grieving everyone, for it is precisely because of you that many wish not to have communion with the local Church’; they threw in his face the favorite argument of ‘Christian liberals’ of all times: ‘You mean that you alone are being saved and everyone else is damned?’ and they culminated their argument with the appeal so powerful today: you will be left behind, for not only have all the Eastern Patriarchs accepted the Typos, even the emissaries of the Pope of Rome, the last Orthodox Patriarch then in the world – ‘tomorrow, Sunday, will receive communion of the Holy Mysteries with the Patriarch of Constantinople.’ And to this St. Maximus, a simple monk who for all he knew might be the only Christian left to believe as he did, replied in words that should be

written in gold for every True-Orthodox Christian today to read: *'Even if the whole world should receive communion with the Patriarch, I will not.'*<sup>22</sup>

Of course, this position of St. Maximus is not arbitrary, there is nothing subjective in it, nothing voluntary or willful. It is consistent with the third canon of the Third Ecumenical Council, which forbids the Orthodox 'to obey bishops who have departed from or are departing from Orthodoxy.' According to Fr. Seraphim, precisely this should be the ecclesiological position of today's Orthodox Christians who are seeking to abide in the fullness of Christ's Truth, to be living members of Christ's Church. While those who claim that the termination of ecclesiastical communion can only happen following conciliar condemnation should take into consideration the fact that the condemnation of a given heresy by even a multitude of fathers, without holding a council, is a sufficient reason for this termination according to Canon XV of the "the Second Council. This particular canon treats those acting in this way as ones who "have not created schism, but have protected the Church from schism." Moreover, in 1983 - only one year after the death of Fr. Seraphim - the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia condemned ecumenism conciliarly as a heretical doctrine incompatible with Orthodoxy. As to 'Sergianism', it was condemned by numerous holy fathers - the Orthodox New Russian Martyrs and confessors, who ceased their ecclesiastical communion with Metropolitan Sergius and his Synod, as well as the Spirit-bearing fathers in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, who shone forth with their righteous life, among which is Fr. Seraphim (Rose) himself.

With the example of St. Maximus the Confessor, Fr. Seraphim convincingly shows the patristic path that true Orthodox Christians should follow and also clearly warns against the disgrace, ignominy and false accusations they must be ready to bear. But this should not dissuade them; they are compelled to choose this thorny and narrow path, because they cannot remain faithful to Christ the Saviour while remaining in communion with "those who disdain the ecclesiastical calendar, renovate theology and piety, legitimize the Sergianist schism, pray with heretics, and by word and act proclaim that 'nothing separates us' from those most miserable and unfortunate 'Christians' of the West who for centuries have not known the Grace of God."<sup>23</sup> Christians must obey God rather than man; they must abide in the immutable Orthodox faith and stay away from those who adjust it to the humanistic spirit of the time. This is Fr. Seraphim's deep conviction. For this reason he resolutely repeats after the "divine St.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Catacomb Tikhonite Church 1974, *The Orthodox Word*, Nov.-Dec., 1974 (59), 235-246.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Maximus”: *“Even if the whole world should receive communion with the apostate hierarchs, we will not. Amen.”*<sup>24</sup>

## **5. Refraining from ecclesiastical communion with the “official” Orthodoxy and the issue of Grace**

Today all Orthodox Christians who do not wish to participate in the apostasy of the official local Churches agree that they should refrain from Eucharistic communion and prayer with them. However, opinions differ on the issue of whether these churches have completely dropped out of the Ecumenical Church or whether their sacraments are still full of Grace and valid. Moreover, these differences initiated divisions among the True Orthodox Christians themselves.

Even before World War II, the Greek old-style movement split (in 1937) in two major streams - “Florinites” and “mateits“. At the same time, during the 1920s and 1930s in Russia, the conscience of Christians was subjected to a similar ordeal, though from the other great seduction for Orthodoxy in the past century, Sergianism, which treacherously forced the Orthodox Church into submission to its enemy - the Communist atheist authorities. Among the Russian confessors of Faith who ceased communion with Metropolitan Sergius and his subordinates there also appeared a very wide spectrum of opinion about the status of the official church hierarchy cooperating with the Soviet authorities. Yet, the Russian confessors remained united despite their different views regarding the divine Grace of the Sergianists, and over time the ecclesiological positions of the most prominent hierarchs even converged. Objective prerequisites for this were, on the one hand, their excellent theological education, and on the other, the brutal repressions of the Bolsheviks, which naturally strengthened the spirit of solidarity among the confessors. However, in the 1920s and 1930s the repressions were so persistent that they led the Russian Orthodox Church to almost complete physical destruction. After the crackdown on the True Orthodox clergy and laity, the persecutors also subjected the Sergianist hierarchy to extermination. On the eve of the Second World War, the Bolsheviks almost completely fulfilled their task sparing the life of only an insignificant part of the Sergianist establishment.

The church opposition in Russia was completely destroyed, with the exception of that part which succeeded in switching to catacomb existence in extreme underground conditions. Not at any time until the end of the communist regime and the collapse of the Soviet Union was the open existence of Orthodox church jurisdiction other than the official Moscow Patriarchate permitted in Russia. During this

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

period, there were only occasional and fragmentary snippets of information about the ecclesiological views shared by representatives of the Catacomb Church.

Similarly to the confessors within Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which was formed by the church emigration abroad after the Revolution, ceased her church communion with Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodski) and his subordinated clerics (in 1931) while at the same time she refrained from pronouncing upon the validity of the sacraments and on the presence or absence of Grace in the Sergianist hierarchy. Here is how Fr. Seraphim reflected on this issue:

“The strict rule of the Russian Church Outside of Russia forbidding her members from receiving Sacraments from clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate is not founded on any statement that these Sacraments lack Grace, but rather on the sacred testament of Metropolitan Anastassy and other great hierarchs of the Diaspora forbidding any kind of communion with the Patriarchate as long as its leaders betray the Faith and are in submission to atheists.”<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, various prominent overseas hierarchs and theologians had expressed their opinion that with its betrayal the Moscow Patriarchate had placed itself outside of the Church, but only in the form of personal theological views (teologumeni), without these views growing into an ecclesiological position of the Church Abroad herself. Over the next decades, the test of time showed that this position was really wise. Thanks to it, the Church Abroad avoided useless and even harmful disputes on this topic, as well as possible internal tensions and divisions as a result of them.

However, it is important to note that the position of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad was not just a prudent way, in the interests of unity, to evade a question whose discussion could lead to conflicts and divisions. If this position had only been the result of some pragmatic ecclesiastical and political approach, it could hardly have been maintained for several decades, especially given the solicitations for a categorical and definitive answer put forward urgently at particular moments, within ROCA as well. This position was deeply rooted in the theological understanding that the process of apostasy of the official local Orthodox Churches from the Orthodox confession of faith nowadays is precisely **a process**, and it is extremely risky to even presumptuously try to determine whether in a given church jurisdiction this process has gone as far as the complete departure of the same jurisdiction from the Ecumenical Church. Actually, the reason to terminate ecclesial communion with the hierarchy, clergy and congregation of certain jurisdiction is not based on the judgment that this jurisdiction is devoid of Grace, i.e. that it has completely fallen away from the body of the Church. If we accepted the opposite, it would be the same as claiming that the doctor should place quarantine, that is, limit any contact with a patient

---

<sup>25</sup> The Catacomb Tikhonite Church 1974, *The Orthodox Word*, Nov.-Dec., 1974 (59), 235-246.

suffering from an infectious disease only after establishing the patient's death. On the contrary, the infection should be restricted as soon as it is detected. Similarly, in the church sphere, the ecclesial communion with hierarchs who preach heresy or tacitly allow its spread must be terminated as soon as it has been established that in their deviation from the Orthodoxy these hierarchs have crossed the boundaries set by the dogmatic and canonical Church Tradition. However, this does not mean that hierarchs together with the clerics and laity in communion with them must immediately be declared fully and automatically fallen away from the Church and accordingly considered devoid of Grace. God is the One who gives or takes away Grace. Even an individual local Church has no power to adjudicate on that. Only the congregational reason of the Ecumenical Church can ascertain the conclusive apostasy of a given church community from the body of the Church. But in our time of deepening crisis in the Orthodox religious consciousness on all levels and particularly among the hierarchs in the official Orthodoxy we cannot rely on this happening visibly.

The limited human reason poses the following dilemma, "If you are not in communion with the official church, that means you consider it without Grace and in apostasy; but if you think it is not in apostasy, why you are not in communion with it?" This is a problem - in the words of Fr. Seraphim - "only for the rationalists." It is exactly rationalism that needs to receive an unconditional answer to the question "is there Grace in official Orthodoxy or not" at all cost and it audaciously embarks on exploring it. However, it should be remembered that the Church of Christ is a theanthropic organism in which there is a visible, invisible and mysterious side where the human will and God's Providence act. Human injustices, lies and betrayals in the Church are evident for us to a greater or lesser extent, and we ought to reject them and to distance ourselves from them. But the action of God's Grace defies the rational analysis of the human mind. Today we would not be able to establish a precise and comprehensive set of criteria and to claim that if particular church hierarchy does not meet them, then undoubtedly it is completely devoid of Grace. That would be an idea bordering in its insolence on the understanding prevalent among the official Orthodoxy that Grace condescends or is revoked depending on the acts of the ecclesiastical authorities, which overlooks the necessity that these very acts should be in full compliance with the rules of the Church and holy evangelical truths. For our salvation it is enough not to participate in the affairs of apostasy and it is beneficial to refrain from definitive judgements on the validity of the sacraments of the official local Churches - both in a negative and in a positive sense.

The position of the Catacomb Church within Russia was also of crucial significance for Fr. Seraphim.<sup>26</sup> In his article “What does the Catacomb Church think?” of 1981, he cites the letter of a catacomb cleric to his spiritual children. As he examines the ecclesiological views set out in it, Fr. Seraphim concludes, “The attitude of this epistle to the Russian church situation and the Moscow Patriarchate is, one can fairly say, identical to the attitude of the Russian Church Outside of Russia “.<sup>27</sup> The words of the author of this letter confirm the following conclusion: “... those detached (from Metropolitan Sergius and his Synod -KT) did not ask the question if there is Grace or not among the followers of Metropolitan Sergius. They did not pose this question or try to solve it.”

### **6. The specific role of Sergianism in the modern antichurch front**

Fr. Seraphim expended a lot of effort also to study the latest trends in the development of the so-called world or official Orthodoxy, and the evolving of its ecclesiological concepts respectively. In the apostate erosion of official Orthodoxy, in which the ecclesiological heresy of ecumenism holds a special place, there are sufficiently obvious grounds for termination of the ecclesial communion for those who sincerely wish to find their bearings in the modern church situation and seek the Truth. The practice of ecclesiastical communion with the heterodox is unacceptable and clearly sanctioned by church canons. In Sergianism things are much more complicated. Until the early 1960s the Sergianist Moscow Patriarchate shunned the ecumenical movement and even classified it as unacceptable to the Orthodox. Of course, this was in line with Soviet foreign policy. The Moscow Patriarchate and then the other local Orthodox churches in the Communist Bloc countries became members of the World Council of Churches only in 1961. This happened again by order of the authorities in Moscow, who decided that for them it was more advantageous to use these churches for foreign policy influence rather than confrontation with the West by opposing them to the heterodox. Immediately after the new directive, ecumenism invaded the Moscow Patriarchate with such force that in the 1970s there were even cases of Communion of Roman Catholics and Unitarians in its churches. So, since the 1960's onwards ecumenism and Sergianism were two factors working together in order to destroy the Orthodox Church. Until then the Sergians claimed about themselves that they adhered strictly to Her dogmas and that the compromises that they allowed with respect to the secular authorities did not go beyond the historical

---

<sup>26</sup> Fr. Seraphim employs the terms ‘Catacomb Church’ and ‘The True Orthodox Church’ as synonyms. Besides, we need to keep in mind that for him the Catacomb Church in Russia consists of all Orthodox clergy and laity who broke communion with Metropolitan Sergius after 1927, keeping their fundamental Orthodox positions, and not only those who immediately or eventually arranged their underground church life.

<sup>27</sup> What Does the Catacomb Church Think? - In: *The Orthodox Word*, No. 96 (1981) pp. 21-23.

practice of the Church. Of course this was not true, but it required enormous efforts to expose those false claims. In the heat of the fight in post-revolutionary Russia, it was not easy at all to find the right direction and expose the treacherous ideas of Sergianism, which impaired the very concept of the Church Herself. The confessors of Orthodoxy endured a fiery ordeal. They defended their principled position without theological disputes with the Sergians, who lacked the moral strength to oppose them. The theological dispute in Bolshevik Russia was a matter of life and death, because the Sergians' place in it was readily taken by the Chekists with their characteristic "arguments" - exile, imprisonment, torture, death. Fr. Seraphim wrote, "An interrogations jubilant Chekists-interrogators with sarcasm and evil joy would prove the 'strict canonicity' of Metropolitan Sergius and his Declaration, which 'has not altered either canons or dogmas'. The mass executions, persecutions and tortures which descended upon the faithful of Christ's Church are beyond description."<sup>28</sup> At the same time Metropolitan Sergius imposed 'injunctions' on those bishops and priests who did not obey him and ceased ecclesial communion with him. Thus the latter refused to be involved in subordination to the Soviet authorities and to cooperate with them in their fight against the Church. It is, therefore, not surprising that Metropolitan Sergius' "injunctions" were like signs for the Main Intelligence Directorate to arrest and send into exile those Confessors of the Faith.

At the cost of their own life, the Russian martyrs and confessors asserted the Orthodox understanding of the nature of Christ's Church and left us invaluable experience. Fr. Seraphim fully grasped the meaning of their feat not only as martyrdom for Christ, but also as a theological achievement in defence of the Orthodox teaching of the Church, and he spared no effort to make that known to the Orthodox Christians in the West. He diligently collected any information available to him about the life of the Catacomb Church in the Soviet Union and about the ecclesiological views of Her representatives, both in the pre-war period of the original persecutions followed by the gradual transition towards underground existence, and in the postwar decades. In 1982, the last year of his life, he published his book *Russia's Catacomb Saints. Lives of the New Martyrs*, in which the Sergianist and the authentic Orthodox view of the Church are presented as contrary to each other. Fr. Seraphim felt complete solidarity with the positions of the martyrs and the confessors, which he presents to the readers. Therefore, in our attempt to outline his ecclesiological views, we can treat these positions as his own. However, they are meaningful not only regarding the ecclesiological situation in Russia, because Sergianism is not a typically Russian phenomenon alone. Its features and manifestations can be identified anywhere in the so-called worldly or official Orthodoxy. What can most of all characterize Sergianism during the time of

---

<sup>28</sup> *Russia's Catacomb Saints. Lives of the New Martyrs*, p. 17, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA 1982.

the Communist regimes is the subordination of the Church to the theomachists, depriving the Church of Her inner spiritual freedom and ultimately - the insidious and cruel inclusion of the church hierarchy in the struggle of the militant atheists for moral and spiritual destruction of the Church. In the conditions of political freedom and disappearance of the fear of repression, Sergianism transformed into a frank betrayal and the selling of the holy evangelical principles and the freedom of the Church for the friendship with those in authority and the resulting material benefits and prestigious social status. Similar developments can also be found in the local Churches which were not under the Communist rule. It is enough to recall the treacherous behavior of the Patriarchate of Constantinople toward the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy Patriarch Tikhon in the 1920s: the recognition of the so-called renewalists for legitimate authority of the Russian Church primarily for the benefit of the Bolsheviks, the calls directed to Patriarch Tikhon for retiring in the name of the 'peace' in the church, the appeals to the Orthodox to reconcile with the renewalists. We see exactly this spiritual and intellectual unscrupulousness, repulsive political servility and gravitation towards the powers that be just for benefits which the Constantinople Patriarchate expected to receive from the Soviet authorities, and also because of bowing to the pressure from the Turkish Kemalist government - a staunch ally of the Bolsheviks.

So everything said by Fr. Seraphim about Sergianism, directly or through the words of the quoted by him confessors of the Russian Church, refers not only to the Moscow Patriarchate but also to the rest of the official Orthodox churches. In fact, he states this directly, calling the official Orthodoxy "that apostate 'Orthodoxy' which has lost the savor of Christianity."<sup>29</sup>

During the Second World War, in 1943, the Soviet Union, and then after the war, also the rest of the countries from the newly formed Communist bloc saw the beginning of a new period in the relations between the state and the Church, in which the Moscow Patriarchate, and eventually the local Orthodox churches in the other socialist countries were converted into "state churches" of the communist governments. Such was the design of the Stalinist "church revival." Even though the Moscow Patriarchate "managed to deceive the credulous generations of church leaders in the West," it could not deceive the Confessors of the Faith in Russia, who in the postwar decades were not only in the catacombs, but also among its own flock. To one of them, the famous Boris Talantov, Fr. Seraphim paid particular attention in his book "Russia's Catacomb Saints" describing his suffering for the Faith and publishing his extensive works. In the late 1960s Talantov wrote, "Did Adaptation (Sergianism) save the

---

<sup>29</sup> The Catacomb Tikhonite Church 1974, *The Orthodox Word*, Nov.-Dec., 1974 (59), 235-246.

Russian Orthodox Church? From what has been set forth it is clear that not only did it not save the Russian Orthodox Church during the despotism of J. Stalin, but on the contrary, it furthered the loss of genuine freedom of conscience and the conversion of the church administration into an obedient tool of the atheistic regime<sup>30</sup>. Both in the period before the war in Soviet Russia and in the postwar years in the countries of the socialist camp, the local Orthodox Churches had to deny the existence of any religious persecution by the authorities before the rest of the world. In the Moscow Patriarchate, Stalin was declared a “faithful guardian of Orthodoxy”, and the Patriarchate itself served as a screen behind which faith was eradicated, unbelief was propagated and the atheistic society of the “builders of communism” was created. The postwar generation of bishops possessed a different spirit even in comparison with the Sergianist bishops before the war. The servility of the newly ordained bishops to the authorities was so great that they “under one pretext or another even resisted the opening of churches and the assignment to parishes of priests who had been in prison.”<sup>31</sup> Some even went as far as personally going “to close monasteries instead of defending them (this I saw with my own eyes)” - indicates the author of the Catacombs epistle from 1962.<sup>32</sup> All this prompted Boris Talantov to conclude, “The Moscow Patriarchate and the majority of bishops secretly participate in organized activities of the atheistic regime, aimed at closing churches, limiting the spread of the faith and undermining it in our country.”

Furthermore, the church administrations in the USSR and in the so-called countries with “people’s democracies” were given “new tasks”. They had to serve the active dissemination of communist propaganda in the world on behalf of the Church. To this end, by order of the authorities, in the 1960’s the church administrations re-oriented their policy by abandoning their strict adherence to the dogma and the canons of the Orthodox faith and became actively involved in the ecumenical movement. This process began in 1961, when the Moscow Patriarchate was the first to become a member of the World Council of Churches. The so-called ‘irenic theology’ appeared, which dealt with issues of peace, condemned the arms race and reprimanded US imperialism for carrying out nuclear tests, while extolling the Soviet peace initiatives and omitting to note the reciprocal Soviet nuclear experiments. The Holy Scripture was placed at the service of the Soviet foreign policy and in it for the first time were discovered ... references related to the idea of disarmament! Anticommunism was declared hostile to the Christian teaching. At the same time communism was spared the same judgment even though it proclaimed itself

---

<sup>30</sup> *Russia’s Catacomb Saints. Lives of the New Martyrs*, p. 471, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA 1982.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 469-470.

<sup>32</sup> What Does the Catacomb Church Think? - In: *The Orthodox Word*, No. 96 (1981).

to be an atheistic ideology. “The Soviet theology” created entire theories, according to which the communist social order was the only happy and fair social order as allegedly indicated by the Gospel itself.<sup>33</sup> Irenic theology sought “peace” in all possible spheres and in its desire to be “consistent” in this respect, it went so far as to preach equality of the value system of all faiths. Cardinals entered through the royal gates into the Orthodox altars, and Orthodox hierarchs openly prayed with the heterodox. As summary evaluation of the activity the Moscow Patriarchate on the international stage in the postwar decades, Fr. Seraphim quotes Boris Talantov, “The activities of the Patriarchate (Moscow, KT) are directed toward leading the development of the Christian movement in the whole world by means of deceit and lies along the most inaccurate path possible and by this at undermining it.”<sup>34</sup> As an illustration of the latter, he cites the statement of the Moscow delegation at the Ecumenical meeting on the Island of Rhodes in 1961. In this statement it is literally claimed that the Orthodox “reject Christian apologetics and the ideological struggle with modern atheism.” In general, warns Talantov, “the activities of the Moscow Patriarchate abroad represent a conscious betrayal of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Christian faith. It has stepped forth on the world arena as a secret agent of the world anti-Christianity.”<sup>35</sup>

If we try to summarize Fr. Seraphim’s views regarding the specific place and role of ecumenism and Sergianism among anti church phenomena of our time, we can say the following - Sergianism appeared in the strongest and most spiritually stable of all local Orthodox Churches – the Russian Church. This happened at a time when that Church was subjected to ruthless repressions aimed at its complete physical destruction. In Russia, Sergianism represented an internal betrayal, which subjected the Church to the militant atheistic reign and turned it into a tool of its policy. The most tragic result of this betrayal was that it undermined the moral powers of resistance of the majority of the clergy and that of the church people, and over time led them to the path of apostasy, which had already been taken by a significant part of the hierarchy of the other Orthodox Churches but under different conditions and for different motives. It seems as if Communism, and with it Sergianism, came to accelerate the erosion of the Orthodox churches by crushing, through a combination of violence and betrayal, the spiritual strength of those among them who would otherwise have yielded to the spirit of apostasy far more reluctantly had they been left only under the influence of temptations, fame and riches of this world.

---

<sup>33</sup> *Russia's Catacomb Saints. Lives of the New Martyrs*, p. 466, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA 1982.

<sup>34</sup> *Russia's Catacomb Saints. Lives of the New Martyrs*, p. 460, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA 1982.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The achievement of these goals paved the way for the unhindered invasion of all local Orthodox churches by ecumenism.

### **7. The main aspects features of the Sergianist ideology**

Although Sergianism is characterized by the unnatural symbiosis between the church hierarchy and the anti-church atheistic authorities, at the same time it is not just a church and a political phenomenon. Sergianism also implies an expression of a certain ecclesiological view. Its main tenets contradict the patristic theological view of the Church. The main ideologist of Sergianism, Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodski), after whom it was named, along with his followers, viewed the Church primarily as an organization whose external forms had to be preserved at any cost. Therefore, above all, the Church needed a legal central management approved by the authorities. Everything else was less important. In order to achieve this goal, all compromises were acceptable, including even the complete subordination of the inner life of the Church to secular authorities, despite them being guided by an openly anti-Christian ideology. This suicidal spiritual and moral capitulation of the Church before her enemies was justified by the argument that in order to continue Her mission in the new social and political conditions, she had to be “rescued”, by which they meant the “rescue” of Her visible organization and most of all - Her management structure.

Obviously, this view is quite different from the patristic view of the Church, according to which not men save the Church, but they themselves are saved in Her. The Lord Himself takes care of His Church, which cannot perish. On the contrary, the more Her children have the strength to walk the path of confession, the more She consolidated Herself. The core of the theandric life of the Church is the spiritual life of Her body in Grace and Truth, and not the existence of its organizational structures. Since ancient times, Christians have known exactly what they must preserve above all when subjected to persecution. St. John Chrysostom gives as an example the behavior of the snake when it is attacked by enemies. Then the snake mostly guards its head. For Christians, this is their Faith. In other words, in the first place is the spiritual, not the material sanctity. If we betray the Church, if we cooperate with the theomachists, if we break away from the Truth of Christ, then we will lose what is most important for us and it will be no victory at all that we will have preserved the temples, that there will be legal hierarchy, church organization with its central management legitimized by the authorities. Fr. Seraphim called such “rescue” of the Church “liquidation of the Orthodoxy in Russia.”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

However reality itself refuted the apologists of Sergianism, who stressed the “saving” of the Church in order to justify their alliance with the anti-Christian Bolshevik authorities. The following historical developments clearly showed that cooperation with the enemies of the Church cannot lead to anything good. After using the betrayal of the Sergianist hierarchy in order to crush the powers of resistance of the church people, the Bolsheviks directed their blows against the “legalized” church organization, out of which on the eve of World War II no more than a hundred churches remained open on the entire vast area of the USSR, and only four serving bishops (including Bishop Sergius himself) were granted freedom among the entire episcopate of the Russian Church. For the sake of comparison, at the same time those who had adopted a catacomb church life, i.e. the truly Orthodox Christians or “tthonovetz” as those who had ceased communion with the Synod of Metropolitan Sergius called themselves, had several thousand secret church communities and monasteries in hiding.

The Sergians also sought ideological excuses for their actions and did not hesitate to use the word of God in order to justify with it their cowardice, conformism and betrayal. “There is no authority except from God,” “we should pray for the authorities” and similar formulas were employed as weapons to soothe their own conscience and the conscience of the congregation. Prayers for the authorities were introduced even in the divine service. And there they did sound sacrilegious. Priests and church people had to pray for the success of the atheistic reign, which openly proclaimed its goal to destroy the Church and faith in God. At the same, time, under the pressure of this same reign, the Sergianist hierarchy had to abandon the church prayers for martyrs who had died for their faith, and for confessors bearing their sufferer’s cross in the Soviet camps and prisons. The authorities considered these prayers a political demonstration and the Sergians obediently forsook all martyrs and confessors. Moreover, Metropolitan Sergius blamed them for the “confrontation” between the Church and the Bolsheviks, denying that they suffered and died for their faith, and declaring them political criminals. The Soviet authorities periodically arranged farcical discussions with the participation of Sergians, who declared before foreign journalists that in Soviet Russia there was no religious persecution and there had never been such. The Sergianist ideology unashamedly “glorified” this and similar lies by creating and developing new and hitherto unknown theories, in which cowardice, deception and betrayal were pronounced wise steering of the Church ship and confessor’s bearing of “the cross of humiliation”.

Sergianism not only reduces the Church to the visible church organization. The Sergianist hierarchy self-proclaims itself **the Church**. It holds the clergy and faithful in submission with the threat that any interruption of ecclesial communion with the Sergianist hierarchy means lapsing in “schism”, dropping out of the universal Church and eternal doom. The very criterion of belonging to the Ecumenical

Orthodox Church, as we can see, is not doctrinal but entirely disciplinary and administrative. This is not the fullness and purity of the Orthodox Faith, but exclusive and mere jurisdictional belonging to any of the mutually recognized hierarchies of the official churches. Therefore, for the official Orthodoxy, the primates and hierarchs of the local churches who openly preach heresy are by "default", "in" the Ecumenical Church, but those Orthodox Christians who have ceased communion with them because of that particular preaching are "out" of it - because the former are "inside" the organization (which replaces the body of Christ) and the others are "outside" it. As a result, the "dropping out" of the latter should be automatic, on the strength of their differentiation from the organization. And this follows regardless of the reasons for the interruption of ecclesial communion, even though this interruption is based on the dogmatic and canonical Church Tradition. This formal administrative and disciplinary "ecclesiology" is far removed from the patristic understanding of Christ's Church. It reduces affiliation to the Church to membership in a legitimate organization. Faith has no decisive influence in this respect. People holding most varied views and doctrinal beliefs - from extreme liberals, ecumenists and modernists to the extreme "zealots" and "traditionalists" - regardless of their often irreconcilable contradictions and mutually exclusive perceptions, are all together "in" the universal Church provided they belong to any of the structures of the official Orthodoxy.

Naturally, when a particular church authority has no moral prestige, it cannot rely on the sincere support and love on behalf of the clergy and the faithful. Then, it can keep them in submission through manipulation - only with the help of the "canonical" coercion and inspiring fear of "falling away" from the Church. Sergianism destroys the prerequisites for genuine sobornost, by turning it into a screen concealing the arbitrariness and tyranny of the ecclesiastical authorities towards the clergy and the congregation. In this scheme there is no room for spiritual freedom in Christ and the living Orthodox conscience. They are unceremoniously trampled upon and replaced with "obedience" understood as humble obedience to the hierarchy, even when it preaches or tolerates heresy and/or uses lies catholically to cover up the most outrageous and deeply immoral acts of its members.

Moreover, the Sergianist hierarchy usurped the right to manage God's Grace. In a carefree manner, Metropolitan Sergius "suspended" even the most authoritative hierarchs of the Russian Church who broke communion with him or only rejected his administrative regulations as antichurch and troubling the conscience of the congregation. He announced that all clergy "suspended" by him, but not complying with it and continuing to serve were outside the Church, had fallen from God's Grace, and the sacraments they performed were invalid. This way of thinking actually accepted that Grace condescends or is withdrawn in a completely superficial manner depending on the acts of ecclesiastical authorities,

regardless of their fidelity to the Truth of Christ, no matter whether such acts express this Truth or whether in letter and spirit they reflect the church canons and evangelical holy truths. From the standpoint of such logic, for our salvation we do not need to abide in the Truth of Holy Orthodoxy, but to belong to the “canonical” church and administrative structure. However, the very “canonicity”, this key concept for Sergianism, is justified in a manner similar to “belonging” to the “ecumenical Church”. The criterion of “canonicity” does not proceed from the canons of the Holy Church. The decisive criterion for the “canonicity” of a particular hierarchy or local church is for them being recognized by the hierarchies of the other local churches. On the other hand, the Ecumenical Orthodox Church is reduced merely to the automatic addition of the local churches. At the same time, the fact that today many hierarchs and prominent representatives of the official local Churches preach openly non-Orthodox and heretical views, enter in prayerful communion with heterodox and even non-Christians, and generally trample the canons of the Orthodox Church deliberately and boldly, is completely ignored. Yet, they are “canonical” because the others (who do the same) recognize them as such. So the church hierarchy begins to be perceived as canonical in itself, in the entirely perfunctory and self-sufficient sense of the word. This easily leads to the paradoxical situation that everything which stems from the “canonical” hierarchy is “canonical”, even if it is in clear violation of church canons. Conversely, all those who cease their ecclesiastical communion with such a hierarchy, on the strength of this very act and completely independently of the reasons for it, are “non-canonical” and “outside the Church,” even if their actions are in full agreement with the dogmatic and canonical tradition of the Church of Christ.

Fr. Seraphim himself concisely formulated the main premises of the Sergianist ideology in his letter to Fr. Alexey Young from February 6 (January 24 - o.s.) 1975, “It seems that in 'Sergianism' we have an important key to understanding the situation of the Church as a whole. Sergianism will become subject to increasingly harsh and sharp disputes ... The essence of Sergianism is linked to the problems inherent to all Orthodox churches today: **the loss of the spirit of Orthodoxy, disregard for the Church, embracing the 'organization' as the body of Christ , the belief that Grace and the sacraments act 'automatically' .** Logic and prudent behavior will not help us overcome these stumbling blocks. It will require much suffering and spiritual experience and few will understand the essence of things.”<sup>37</sup>

This summary says a lot. First, Sergianism is not a specifically Russian phenomenon; it is inherent in the entire modern official Orthodoxy. Second, in the order in which the characteristics of Sergianism are listed, Fr. Seraphim first distinguishes those which relate to the spiritual side: **the loss of the spirit of Orthodoxy, disregard for the Church**; only then come the strictly ecclesiological characteristics. It seems

---

<sup>37</sup> <http://ortho-hetero.ru/index.php/publicism/1498> back translation from Russian!

they are secondary, derivatives of the primary and fundamental problem, which is the erosion of the spiritual foundation. Just by having in mind this fundamental framework of Fr. Seraphim's ecclesiological thinking, we could spare ourselves the shock of his concern that the ills of Sergianism ("these stumbling blocks") in the life of ... Russian Orthodox Church Abroad should be overcome – this coming from the most principled and outspoken ideological opponent of Sergianism! It turns out that the ideological confrontation and the true spiritual opposition are two very different things. If the former is not naturally rooted in the latter, then it lacks a source of spiritual resources and stability to draw from. The real battle is fought at the deeper, spiritual level and it is against the erosion of Orthodox spirituality, of the Orthodox Church and spiritual consciousness – an erosion whose powerful source is the fundamentally anti-Christian spirit of the times. If this battle is won, then the struggle on the ideological level is not difficult. The Sergianist ideologemes collapse in a flash and have no power over all those Christians seeking to be faithful to the Church Tradition in spirit and truth. Conversely, if we do not oppose the destructive spirit of the time in essence, then our ideological resistance will sooner or later be deprived of spiritual power on real and inherently ecclesiastical grounds. This naturally leads to the "removal" of ideological contradictions. This is not difficult, since internal erosion has led to the homogenization of the spiritual content of one's life, of one's true values with life and the value system of those you perceived as your ideological opponents. It is exactly such processes that have led today to the unthinkable in the recent past union between the Moscow Patriarchate and the larger part of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. However, if the fight with apostasy on the ideological level continues, even though devoid of spiritual foundation, then the lack of spiritual resources is usually compensated by fanaticism, bitterness, anathemas ... This is exactly what we witnessed when after the union, the rest of the Russian Church Abroad disintegrated into fragments, most of which have adopted precisely such extreme positions. And Fr. Seraphim's sad words, "... and few will understand the essence of things" proved prophetic.

But let us return to Sergianism itself. Having outlined Fr. Seraphim's main views on the deviations to the "left", his evaluation of Sergianism as an "ecclesiological disease" characterized by "the loss of contact with the spiritual roots of Orthodox Christianity and the replacement of *living and whole Orthodoxy by outward and 'canonical' forms*"<sup>38</sup> becomes completely understandable. Fr. Seraphim's final conclusion is, "Sergianism is a profound error that denies the very nature of the Church of Christ."<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> *Russia's Catacomb Saints. Lives of the New Martyrs*, p. 16, St. Herman of Alaska Press, Platina, CA 1982.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

