

## **Bishop Anthony of Sourozh replies to Syndesmos**

Syndesmos News Vol IX no.1, 1991

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh  
(together with the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese.)  
London, June 1990.

Metropolitan Anthony is head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain.  
*This letter was sent in reply to the 'Letter to Bishops' written by delegates at the III SYNDESMOS Orthodox Youth Festival, in Spetses, August 1988*

Dear members of SYNDESMOS,

This response to your «Letter to the Bishops of the Orthodox Church» is long over; the reason for the delay lies in the fact that our Diocese wanted to study it carefully and involve in the process both the clergy and the laity of Sourozh, that is, the members of the Russian Orthodox Diocese of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We are happy to see that young Orthodox of all countries are taking the initiative and challenging the Hierarchy of our Church on matters which transcend the concerns of any of the national Churches. Our national Churches «at home» are not and cannot be sufficiently aware of the multinational situation of Orthodoxy in the Diaspora; they need both the testimony and challenge which can be offered only from within the Orthodox Dispersion. Thank you for taking a first step in this direction.

In the name of the Diocese of Sourozh, that is, in the name of the Laity, the Presbytery and in my own name, I now offer the following comments to your letter.

We all tend to think of resolving problems in terms of organisations; of establishing structures. This is a mistake. It is life that can create forms; structures must express life, and must be supple and fluid enough to vary according to local situations and real needs; even the Canons of the Church are yardsticks and precedents to be learnt from, not immutable rules intended to force life into obsolete patterns; they were legitimate for situations which no longer exist but now need a new vision. This is the way in which the Canons were gradually framed; some express the very being of the Church, some were intended to meet concrete situations which no longer exist. We must, all of us, look deeply into the concrete situation in which we live and ask ourselves what is God's will for us here and now, learn to discern the promptings of the Spirit of God, and discern God's activity in our own time and place. Structures cannot create the visible unity of the Orthodox Church any more than diplomatic agreements can bring together divided Christians. One does not build unity, one grows into it, by adhering ever more completely and perfectly to the Gospel, and giving to things temporal, ethnic, cultural, national, their legitimate, yet secondary place.

We must recognise the fact that the Orthodox are divided on more than one level; to love one's language, culture, heritage is legitimate: to reject others who do

not share it and cling to their own treasures is not. The younger generation is in danger of either clinging to the past of their families, or trying to create new ethnic forms and so ceasing to be what their parents were, in order to become members of the secular society in which they live. Creating new ethnicities in order to break down barriers is no solution-this would add one more problem to those that already exist.

Special considerations should be given to the schisms which have their origin in the political upheavals of the last century; the generation which is yours does not know from direct experience how and why they occurred. It is easy to condemn those responsible for them and their present heirs and followers, but think of the tragic destinies of the generation of your own parents and grandparents and their contemporaries; think of all they lost, and of all they endured, and then you may understand why they seceded from their Mother Churches and formed temporary ecclesiastic administrations (or jurisdictions) which have survived until now, and have begun to seem as obsolete to their members themselves. With a change of political climate in Russia and other countries, and a greater openness and understanding by all parties concerned (I am thinking of the Old Believers in Russia and abroad, of the Old Calendarists in Greece and elsewhere, of the schism between the Serbian Patriarchate and the Church in Macedonia, and others) ways must be found to recognise one another. An offer was made a few years ago by the Patriarchate of Moscow to the Russian Church in Exile to re-establish communion in prayer and sacraments while retaining administrative independence and without any change in political stance being expected. This new openness is gradually bearing fruit.

You seem to dislike the term «Diaspora»; it describes accurately a state of affairs: Orthodox people of different nationalities happen to live in all countries of the world as a religious minority, with a varying degree of scatteredness- in some places as individuals, in others as small or relatively big parishes, too distant from one another to maintain contact; in other places small or larger dioceses in the midst of much more numerous non-Orthodox bodies, always too small and still too ethnic to be one of the denominations of the country where they live. Yet there is one other dimension to being a Diaspora, a positive one. The dominant position of our Churches in the countries from which we come, and their close association with the State have accustomed us to think in terms totally alien to early Christians in terms of what one often calls «the gathered community»; yet the vocation of the Church is to bring the Gospel to all creatures, to be like a handful of seed which the Master of the harvest scatters far and wide, so that it brings fruit in all places where even one seed falls. The Russian Philosopher Berdiaeff wrote a very beautiful article on the subject in the early years of the Russian exile, telling us that we were sent by God into the whole world to bring Orthodoxy to all those who had lost it and needed it; the Apostles, twelve men, and the few disciples did not stay cooped up together; they parted from one another to bring the Good News to those who sat in darkness. Though distant from each other, they knew that they were one, because they all were in Christ and doing the work He had sent them to do. This is a true meaning of «Diaspora»: to be a mission, a band of witnesses. To do this we need hardly any structures- only a keen fellowship between us all and a sincere, earnest dedication to the service of God. In this context differences of language, of culture, of ethnicity, are no impediments; they only enrich the message, make it more human, more accessible in its rich variety to all those who receive it.

It is our clinging to structures that divides us; the multiplicity of national jurisdictions would not separate us if no jurisdiction claimed superiority over others, rights of power instead of the privilege of serving more faithfully than others, if cooperation in all things was the rule. We still need bishops and clergy who speak national languages to serve those who have not yet acquired a common language with other Orthodox living in the same territory; we must cherish our languages, as both prayers, spiritual writings and theological statements often cannot be translated adequately and need living interpreters. We must be deeply rooted in our culture in order to appreciate, assess and share the culture of others. However, we have no right to claim any superiority for our own heritage, but a deep knowledge of it enables us to share its riches with all those who can be enriched by it.

Structures are, of course, necessary to keep together those who share the same heritage, to inspire them to act from within a common and shared experience, for the life of the Sacraments etc., but they are not an aim in themselves. And least of all should they be seen as or used as levers of power. There are a number of structures of oppression in our Church; we forget too easily that the one who is highest is the servant of all, not the overlord. Least of all should the Church face the surrounding world from a position of power, neither should the Church face it from one of subservience. In all human relationships the Church is to be the conscience of the world, of every, of any society; speaking the truth in charity, but clearly, without ambiguity, without calculation, daring to criticize or to approve of things without considering the danger it may involve for herself. Together with all men we must cooperate in the building of the city of man, but adding to the building a dimension which we alone can add- a dimension of depth, of width, of holiness that would allow the only true man- our Lord Jesus Christ, true man and true God- to be its First Citizen; a city of man coextensive with the City of God. Every Christian must make concrete choices that may be at variance with those of others, yet all must aim at one and the same thing- not at creating a liveable society, but a city so truly human that it may become truly divine.

Building the City of God means giving ourselves to God- discarding both our strength and our weakness and allowing God's grace to act freely in and through us; this is missionary work, but not proselytism. Not an attempt at making others as we are, but sharing with them the transfiguring joy of knowing God and of communing with Him, so that they may become themselves, as unlike us as they are unique in the eyes of God. It is not in uniformity that we can be one but in oneness that is attainable only through uniqueness, like musical notes capable of forming one perfect accord because they are themselves, without confusion but also without competition.

I have mentioned the existence of structures of oppression creating distinctions and establishing false hierarchies of value. One is blatantly offensive and must be broken down: it is the position of women in the Church. The Orthodox Church has made more than one unwarranted statement on the subject but has not yet even begun to think about it; the problem is considered as external to us, coming from those Churches that have «lost their way». This is untrue; it is at the heart of our Church's life. It must be thought out and seen with new eyes; to be referred to tradition is not enough, a tradition the meaning of which or whose origin cannot be traced is not a tradition, but traditionalism- a superstitious survival of prejudices and

misapprehensions. It is for your generation from within the Gospel and the Faith given us by God in Christ to confront these evils.

Other problems are to be faced and resolved: our relationship with the Oriental Orthodox Churches, with whom we share the same faith while we express it in different ways- who will triumph? Those who assess the spirit of these Churches or those who cling to the letter?

Other matters intrinsic to our Church must be examined: who must we admit to Baptism? To integration into the Orthodox Church? Who should be allowed to be married in the Church? How should we receive converts? Are we prepared to live our Faith or only to speak of it? This raises all the problems of Christian ethics; one can be a heretic in action while expressing every iota of it in words if our life gives lie to our proclamation. Fasting and the ascetical life, the conditions and frequency of Communion; the ways in which religious education must be re-thought to cease to be information and become a setting on fire; and many local problems are and will be your responsibility. According to the way you solve them Orthodoxy may become one of the many irrelevant denominations or faiths of the world or its light and inspiration.

It is for you to choose, and to act both daringly and humbly.

May God's blessing and power be in and with you.