

## **'For the Life of the World'**

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Metropolitan Kyrill of Smolensk  
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*Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian-Orthodox Church since 1989  
SYNDESMOS Executive Committee member 1977-1980  
Rector Leningrad (now St Petersburg) Theological Academy 1974-84  
Moscow, Russia*

Thank you dear brother President.

I wish to start with a few words which should probably be a report on the theme of the Assembly 'For the Life of the World'. In several hours you will start your pilgrimage along the Volga, and lands which until not long ago were called Holy Russia. But you will not see this 'Holy Russia'. You will see churches, you will see believers, but you will not see a land which you may call 'holy' And that is why from the very beginning of your pilgrimage I would like to tell you about the Church and about the country where you will have your pilgrimage, to tell you about our joys and our pains, to tell you about our fears and our hopes.

But I would like to start with a recollection of that far away year of 1971, when I, a young hieromonk, was invited by Metropolitan Nikodim to his office, and he was silent for a long time before talking to me, and then he produced two envelopes, and said, in these envelopes are two letters to the President of SYNDESMOS Mr. Albert Laham, whom I am very glad to meet here among us. In one letter it said that the Russian Orthodox Church accepts the decision to join SYNDESMOS, and in the other it said that the Russian Orthodox Church postpones the decision to join SYNDESMOS. And he told me, you will have to make this decision, which letter to give to the President, and you will have to take into consideration the very complex political situation which exists in our country, and the difficult situation of the Church which now faces us. What was the difficulty facing the Russian Orthodox Church in making a decision about joining SYNDESMOS? I will say a few words about the decision of our Church at that time. The Church was under the strong control of the Government, as was the whole spiritual life of the people, and most of all the authorities did not want a youth movement to appear inside the Church, for it or for the Orthodox youth to become active. It did not want this, but the Church wished it ardently, and we had to find the correct forum, the correct instrument to help to stimulate the youth movement in the Church. But in such a way as not to inspire a pogrom or demonstration in the Church, or to harden their policy with regard to the Church Metropolitan Nikodim realized quite well that SYNDESMOS, as an international body, with wide youth contacts, could become such an instrument to push and to stimulate Orthodox youth movement inside our country and inside the Church, for it to enrich our youth with an experience of youth work, because these skills were lost at the time.

And what dangers could exist at that time? It is well known that the authorities at that time were closely watching the activities of the Russian emigration. And SYNDESMOS was an organization where Russian émigré youth took an active part. And it was quite obvious that my task in 1971 was first and foremost to establish relations with this youth, which would have been beneficial for the joining of the Russian Orthodox Church, while also not scaring our authorities, and not create new stumbling blocks I went to the Oslo SYNDESMOS meeting with great reservations and doubts, I never knew what I had to extract or encounter,

and the first meeting between the Russian Orthodox youth separated by state borders. But with everyday our relations became more friendly and straightforward, and I would like to recollect with gratitude the leadership of SYNDESMOS at that time: the President Mr Albert Laham, Mr Gabriel Habib, the General Secretary who realized the importance of the establishment of relations between Orthodox youth separated by political borders and to help in any way possible

In the middle of the Assembly I realized quite clearly that I had to hand over to the President the letter about the Theological Schools joining SYNDESMOS. And during the 21 years since I never thought I was wrong at that time. And I must say that the joining of SYNDESMOS despite the fact that any Orthodox youth activity was banned enriched us considerably with new contacts. With great love and gratitude I wanted to mention the contacts between the Russian Orthodox youth and the Finnish Orthodox youth organizations in the 70's and early 80's. Finland was a sort of booster for us. Through the Finnish network we established our own network of international contacts and we gained the skills of international work, and with gratitude I mention the names of those who helped us in this good work I would like to mention the name of Alexis Haikonen, the General Secretary of SYNDESMOS, and who contributed greatly to the relations between the theological schools of the Russian Orthodox Church and Orthodox youth movements around the world.

As you know the beginning of 1985 is called the start of perestroika in the Soviet Union. Perestroika may have started for some, but for the Church there was nothing. More than that, for three years, 1985-1988, while a democratic image was being presented to the whole world by General Secretary Gorbachev, and while the Soviet Union was regarded by all as a democratic state entering a period of reform, nothing was changed in the relationship of the Church and the State. The Church was under control, and was in a position where its social and public activity was strictly limited, the only place available for us to work was the churches. Our people came there to pray, and we celebrated the Eucharist there, and the Church was living there at that time. And sometimes I asked a question why, how could we have survived these 70 years of Babylonian activity, how could we have received the strength to help the Russian Orthodox Church to overcome the genocide practised? For it is precisely this term which must be used for the '20's and '30's persecution. How could the Church have overcome the very dangerous attacks during the Khrushchev period? Where did the Church receive the strength to survive and to preserve itself within the narrow framework of the policy of the Brezhnev regime? And I see only one answer. The Church was deprived of everything, the Church buildings, the possibilities to conduct religious education, social work, of newspapers and journals, that which remained of the Church was the Divine Eucharist, shared in the Christian community. That which the atheists called cult, thinking that 'cult' was that which had the least influence on people. The greatest power is given by education or the mass media. But they were wrong, because it was in the divine service that the Church has drawn her strength, and it has remained alive and strong only because it has had an opportunity as a community of faith to gather around the table of God and to celebrate the Divine Eucharist

And so until 1988 we did not know what perestroika was, but then in 1988 signs appeared that the situation had changed. The question was posed about changing the laws which regulated the status of religion in the USSR. The Church was given an opportunity to adopt its own statutes, to legally regulate its life, gradually processes began to give new opportunities for religious education, and one should say here that this process of great transformation of the relations between Church and State was completed in 1991, and the final

step was made in August 1991 when the control was removed completely over the activity of the Church, and the state bodies which exercised such control were abolished. So in what situation does the Church find itself now? It now has all the opportunities available. Legally we now have full freedom of faith. We can open churches and monasteries and we have been doing it quite successfully for the last four years. We have opened about 7000 new churches. If you consider the fact that until 1988 we had only 7000 churches, this means that the number of churches has doubled. The number of monasteries has also increased many times during this time, from 16 to 149. We had three seminaries and two academies. Now we have eight seminaries, three academies and over 20 theological colleges, which practically offer a reduced curriculum of a seminary, in order to train the clergy as fast as we can. Parishes are opened now quite freely, there is now heroism which is demanded from people to open one. It is sufficient for 10 people to express their wish to open a parish, and they will be registered to open a parish with no problems with the state.

There are many joys in our lives now. Not only because the Church is growing and increasing but above all because the faithful and they are tens of millions, for the first time for many decades can feel themselves as full-fledged citizens. We believers have always been citizens of a second or maybe a third class. Believers were banned from certain professions in this country. One could not pursue one's professional career while openly being a believer. Every believer should conceal his beliefs if he wanted to make a career. The fact that believers feel free in Russia today is perhaps the most important thing for the Church, which, together with its people, has suffered so much. The Church has suffered above all because the people suffered for their Christian beliefs. We have also special, mystical signs of a Divine presence among us in these years. Miraculously, last year the relics of St Seraphim of Sarov were rediscovered, who predicted before his death almost exactly what happened last summer, when his holy relics were carried throughout Russia from St Petersburg to the village of Diveevo near Nizhni-Novgorod, in the Volga region. This year the Lord has given us a special joy, as miraculously the relics of St Patriarch Tikhon were discovered. The remains of both St Seraphim and St Tikhon were spoken of as non-existent. It was said that they were concealed in places about which nobody knew, but miraculously they were discovered, and for us it is a testimony that God gives us a sign of His blessed presence among us.

But together with this joy, there are many sorrows, difficulties and hardships. Before telling you about these sorrows and difficulties, I would like to tell you the following. Since the Revolution in 1917, three generations of people have lived without any form of religious education. I mean not only the schools, but also Divine services, because not every person had the courage to openly visit a church. I began by saying that you will be going through a country which cannot be called Holy Russia, precisely because during these 70 years, if you take the whole country, the whole population, the tradition of Orthodox education of people was completely abolished, cut off. The most elementary things which the Russian people always knew, such as making the sign of the cross, or what is Christmas or what is Easter, became unknown for our people today. Therefore the most important task for our Church today is the task of new mission, new Christianisation of the people, of a restoration of the tradition of Orthodox education, I would like to say that 1988 as the year of the 'Millennium of Baptism of Rus', marked another anniversary as well. The Church as you know was strongly persecuted under Stalin and Khrushchev, and under Brezhnev it was put into a ghetto. It was not abolished physically, but it was forbidden to come out of that corner. All the life of the Church was limited to the walls of the church building. And what happened in the Church was under control. And the significance of the 'Millennium of the Baptism of Rus' was in the fact that in that year, for the first time, the Church went out of the church building, the

celebration of the Millennium was not only a church celebration, but also it became a national celebration. And for many people this celebration was a shocking experience. Very many people believed that there was no Church at all in the country.

I will never forget a strange conversation I once had in the United States. It happened in the 1970's. A young woman came up to me and said, if you represent the Russian Church, that means you have some Church life in Russia. You are lying, you have no Church life. I asked her, why do you say think so? She said, I recently visited the Soviet Union as a tourist, and on Sunday I asked a guide in the Intourist office to show me the way to a church. The guide answered that we have finished with those prejudices, there are no churches in the Soviet Union. There are places where old women go, but I don't know where it is. So it is difficult to say whether the guide deceived her in full conscience, or was he one of those people who really believed that religion was destroyed, that it was prejudice and that it had no future. Our citizens were very surprised when the Church actually went out of its buildings. I will tell you a small story. In my diocese there is a small town. In June 1988 I met the Mayor of that town, and I asked him to have the opportunity to celebrate a service at the local stadium. He was surprised and asked why, what for? I said there were too many people for the church, and realized that the authorities did not know what was happening in their own country. They didn't know anything about the Russian Church, I told him nothing, but told him to be prepared for a lot of people on that occasion. He was very surprised, when he saw the religious procession later, in which over 40,000 people participated, almost the whole town. The Mayor said to me that he was amazed, and had never thought there were so many believers in the country. He thought that the Church was a small group of old women, who come to the service on Sunday.

I think the Church coming out of the church building showed to the whole country that the Church is alive. The whole society realized in that year that in spite of the one-part state, there is a spiritual, ideological alternative for people, and then after 1988, the democratic processes began to develop very actively in our country, the Church faced a temptation, which attracted many of our clergy. In 1990 there was a general election, and it soon became apparent that the communists had lost the support of the people, and people were seeking a political alternative. And you can imagine that many people began to say that this alternative may be found in the Church. Why? Because the Church managed to survive the hard conditions, and managed to show its strength. Secondly the Church has always opposed Marxism, and thirdly, there are no other alternatives. And actually in many places, people were ready to vote for clergymen, not because they were good or bad, but only because they were priests. And the Holy Synod of our Church decided to limit the possibilities of priests to be elected to local councils or parliament. This was a right decision, because the Church announced that it did not want to play any political role, or be a political leader. If we speak about what happened after 1990, I would like to underline the following: the Church participated in social life, and in 1991 in August the personality of His Holiness the Patriarch found itself at the centre of political events. His position was very important for the victory of democratic forces. But even at that moment the Church emphasized that she did not act a political force or leader, but wanted to be a spiritual leader, and wanted to be the conscience of its people, which should say the truth to its own people. I told you about the political problems around the Church because unfortunately in our country there are forces which wish to use the Church for political purposes, both right and left-wing, nationalists and centrists, but everyone with great pleasure is willing to use the Church symbols in order to attract more people, and to use the Church's authority for political purposes.

I would like also to say a few words about the political situation in the country now. The Soviet Union has collapsed, disintegrated, nationalistic parties and groups are gathering momentum, in Russia and other parts of the commonwealth, and centrifugal forces are also gathering momentum. The Church declares that it doesn't support any concrete political order, but the Church supports the spiritual unity of the people. The Church wants the relations between Russians and Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Moldavians, to be good. It cannot be a matter of indifference to the Church, as they all belong to the same Church: and the Church sees its task in preserving the historical unity above political powers. This historical unity is a reality, the mixed blood in our veins means that we cannot be divided on national borders, because in one sense we are one people. And if this people wants to live in sovereign states then that is their right, and the Church respects this right, but the Church will use all possible means to prevent them becoming enemies, to make political and national borders from becoming front lines in a war, to prevent the tragedy which happened in Yugoslavia, and without being involved in political processes, the Church at the same time stands for the spiritual unity of the people, and remains a force which unites people. This may be the reason why today many political forces are attacking the Church, calling it an imperial structure, and calling for it to divide itself into the same number of autocephalous Churches as there are states in the ex-USSR. But I want to tell you that during the council of Bishops in April, this question was discussed, and the Bishops declared that they believed that the Church should stay united as a single spiritual force capable of preserving that historical unity of the people.

I would like to say a few words about the fact that in the last few years, in a situation of religious freedom, our Church has faced many difficulties, above all a real invasion of non-Orthodox into Russia. For twenty years I have been working in the ecumenical movement, and it seemed to me that there were was a real ecumenical solidarity, that the more years we spent together would help us gather together in the face of historical difficulties to solve our problems together, but they must say that for many of us there is today a test of our ecumenical loyalty, because what is happening today in this country could hardly be imagined two years ago. Protestants are coming into this country, Catholics, they are organizing missions, and establishing missionary structures, acting as though it was a spiritual wilderness in this country, as if Christianity didn't exist in this country at all. It has become a subject of our relations with the Roman Catholic Church, and with some Protestant Churches. But unfortunately we should admit that we have achieved little in these negotiations

The same Volga river where you will be going, is also a subject of consideration by missionary groups. What is the danger of these missionary groups? The tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church has been stopped, while at the same time after the collapse of the communist regime, there is a spiritual void which has been created among people. People are disappointed with Marxist ideology, and many people are open to faiths which have no Orthodox tradition to support them. Today, a Russian can just as easily become an Orthodox, a Catholic, a Moslem, or even a Pagan, because the tradition of Orthodox life has been lost, and at this time people feel a great desire to hear about Christ and faith. The same Protestant preachers who come here, declare that they are amazed by the way people listen to the word of God. This situation is a great challenge to the Orthodox Church. The Russian land is the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian people is faithful to God, and was entrusted to the fold of the Moscow Patriarchate, which is fully responsible for the Christianisation of its people, and I should say that many pastors are sacrificing themselves today, and in their faces we can see examples of truly ascetical heroism.

But we should also note that there are other problems and difficulties. 7,000 churches have been opened, but we do not have 7,000 priests appearing in a moment. These 7,000 priests should be prepared and trained, but people are demanding priests today. I, as a Bishop, have to receive people who are demanding priests, but if I say that I have no priests at the moment, and I cannot simply ordain a person from the street and send him to you, and then people say that our Metropolitan is the same kind of bureaucrat as our secular authorities, and people do not understand why I do not send them a priest. Can you imagine what would happen to the Russian Orthodox Church if we ordain people without any theological education? I will give you a small example. In my diocese there is a small town about the same size as Chernobyl, the same terrible nuclear power station, and the staff of this station to send someone to bless the station and to open a Church there, and of course to find a priest. They collected some money, are going to build a church, and are now demanding a priest. I understand that this priest who will work with these physicists and engineers, totally de-christianised people, this priest should be properly prepared to work with such people. I have no such priests available, and I tell them to wait, as I cannot send such a priest at the moment. And they answer 'send us anyone' capable of baptizing, praying and celebrating services. It is a good request, but it is quite evident that when a priest comes to such a town he immediately becomes the focus of public attention, and thousands of people turn to him, and address their problems to him, and if this priest is not capable of answering these questions, tomorrow, the people will stop coming to church.

The image of this town, with its nuclear power station, this polluted nature, dangerous technology with a highly educated population, is the image of contemporary Russia, which has found itself in such a difficult political, economic and ecological situation, where people just long for faith, where they have lost their Orthodox tradition and where the Church for historical reasons cannot meet these spiritual thirst in full measure. (...) I pray that your voyage and that your work in this land will bring a contribution to the life of this world. May God bless you all.