

With the passage of time two more priests of the Russian Church Abroad in the United States, with their parishes, also decided that the time to depart had come. They had been very disturbed by the events of 1986, but decided to proceed more slowly and see if the Russian Church Abroad would correct itself and change its course. Since this did not occur, they also petitioned the Holy Synod of Archbishop Auxentius to receive them into its North American Diocese. One of those priests, Father Seraphim Johnson, wrote the following to Metropolitan Vitaly:

Saint John of Kronstadt

October 19/November 1, 1987

Most Reverend Metropolitan Vitaly
Synod of Bishops
75 East 93 Street
New York, N.Y. 10128

Dear Metropolitan Vitaly:

I am writing this letter to you with a heavy heart. Since 1970 I have been a member of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, being baptized in it when I converted to Orthodoxy. I have many friends in the Church and have been fortunate to have known several of our bishops well.

It was difficult for me to leave my earlier affiliation with the Episcopal Church, to which I was tied by family and by sentiment; but the truth of Orthodoxy was more important to me than those ties, hard as they were to break. My wife and I joined the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia because it offered the purest expression of Orthodoxy, free of the compromises made by the other jurisdictions in this country. My parishioners have similarly chosen the Synod Church because of its uncompromising Orthodoxy: they have come from Judaism and the Protestant and Catholic Churches, and also from other Orthodox jurisdictions which no longer were teaching and practicing the Orthodox Faith. For all of us, the Faith has been more important than earthly ties or convenience. For many of us, also, the monastery in Boston and the parishes inspired by it have been important teachers and influences. We have learned from the fathers there and found they were teaching the same things we heard from such teachers as Metropolitans Anthony and Philaret, Archbishop Saint Hilarion, Archbishop Averky [of Jordanville], Bishop Gregory [Grabbe], and you, Vladyka Vitaly.

The events of the last year have been a great shock to us all. We have been puzzled by many things we saw in our bishops' dealing with accusations of sin, but we assumed that these were human failings, not something which truly affects the Faith. We were horrified when a number of parishes and the Holy Transfiguration Monastery withdrew from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia last winter. At that time we were very confused, since our spiritual guides seemed to be going in different directions. We prayed that God would guide us, and for the time we felt that He wanted us to stay in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. We decided to wait and watch both sides, trusting that God would not abandon us, but would show us the way we should go. We decided as a parish to dedicate our Great Lent this year to asking for His guidance and enlightenment. We believed that He would make clear to us what we should do; we

would see which Church He was blessing, which Church was sound, and then we would know what He wanted us to do.

The results of our patience have not been at all what we expected. You and many of your bishops and priests have written statements and clarifications to present the view of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia on the questions which have been raised about Orthodoxy, the heresy of Ecumenism, and the role of economy in the life of the Church. And every time we have read an explanation, it has made things harder to understand; every clarification has muddied things more. Let me list a few of the things which we have been dismayed and amazed to learn:

a. Concelebrations. The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia is now said to be in full communion with the Serbian and the Jerusalem Patriarchates, even though both are very active in the ecumenical movement. In addition, we have learned of concelebrations with the Finnish Church (which not only uses the New Calendar, but even celebrates Pascha with the non-Orthodox), the Ecumenical Patriarchate (both with Greek parishes in this country and with its Russian priests in Europe), and others. We have heard of parishioners going back and forth to Moscow Patriarchate parishes in Europe with their bishop's blessing. Right here we have seen how, several years ago, the Kursk icon—the Synod's greatest holy treasure—came to Washington and was taken by a local Synod priest to the OCA cathedral for a moleben, although we were given no opportunity to have it visit our own parish. Among my parishioners are several who left the Ecumenical Patriarchate; they made written promises, at Bishop Gregory [Grabbe's] direction, saying they would not receive the Mysteries in churches of the Patriarchate; they endured family conflicts and separation from friends by leaving their Patriarchate parishes. You can hardly imagine how they have been distressed by concelebrations with the church they left; now they ask why they had to leave, and what can I say? It seems they made a foolish choice and grieved themselves for nothing in the eyes of many of your bishops and priests. You have personally told me not to give Holy Communion to members of other jurisdictions; how can you then permit your clergy to concelebrate with their priests? How does it help bring someone to a correct understanding of the errors in his church, if he sees your clergy concelebrating with his own?

b. Strange Teaching. We thought we understood the Orthodox Faith and that the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia was a careful teacher of that Faith. But we have been unsettled by things which have been written in the last six months.

1) The teaching in your Nativity Epistle effectively denies the 1983 anathema and states that all the local Orthodox Churches are grace-bearing. It says that the anathema has no general meaning, but only applies to members of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia who hold ecumenical views; for the rest it is only a warning; but that is not what an anathema is.¹ It is the Church's statement that anyone holding those views is cut off from the Church of Christ! When you cut someone off from the Church, you do not cut them off from just the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, but from the whole Church of our Lord Jesus Christ! And even if we were to grant that it applies only to our Church, how then can members of our Church serve with those condemned by it?

¹ *Editor's Note:* In an earlier, different interpretation of the Anathema Against Ecumenism, the then Archbishop Vitaly had written the following: "The spiritual fate of all the local churches within the universal Orthodox Church depends on their acceptance of this anathema" (*Orthodox Observer*, Montreal, April, 1984)

At the very least, the members of our Church should follow the direction and “warning” of the anathema. When I read this Epistle to my congregation, the reaction was one of shock; it was only with difficulty that I was able to persuade some of my parishioners not to leave the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia at that moment; several initially doubted that they could continue to receive the Mysteries in our parish as long as it was a part of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. Those who had come to the Synod from other local Churches came to me in sorrow and asked why they had bothered to leave them, if there was still grace in them.² My flock agreed that this was not the Orthodox Faith they had been taught in the past.

2) An amazing ecclesiology has been presented by Father Alexander Lebedev in his two Open Letters. I might have been able to dismiss this as his own personal misunderstanding of the Faith, except that you and the other bishops have adopted his letters as “official” answers to those leaving the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. I received my copy of his first letter at the direction of Bishop Hilarion. You and Archbishop Laurus have printed and distributed copies extensively, the Synod of Bishops (as reported in the most recent issue of *Tserkovnaya Zhizn'*, the official Synod journal) has publicly gone on record as thanking Father Alexander for his letters, and now the second letter has been printed in *Orthodox Life*, thereby making these letters the public position of your Church. Father Alexander offers an ecclesiology which I had known well as an Anglican, but which I never expected to see in the Orthodox Church. He states that in the question of which Churches one is in communion with, each diocese can decide for itself. He says that one diocese can be strict, another lenient, but all can be in the same Church; therefore, the Los Angeles diocese is not in communion with any other local Orthodox Churches; the Midwest diocese is in communion with the Serbs and the Constantinople Patriarchate; your diocese is in communion with some Serbian bishops, but not others (an impossible situation in itself); the Western European diocese is in communion with all local Orthodox Churches. This is not Orthodoxy! All I can think of when I read such things is the poor Episcopalians: for them, one diocese has women priests, another does not recognize such priests; in one parish the Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ, while in another it is just a memorial, etc. And now I am told that the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia follows the same principle of ecclesiology.

3) In both your Nativity Epistle and Father Alexander's letters there is also a novel understanding of “economy.” The theological textbooks which I have consulted deWne economy as a waiving of the strictness of the Church's rules to facilitate the admission of people to the Church and the Mysteries. As Father Alexander says, by economy you might admit someone to Holy Communion even though he had not kept the full fast beforehand for some weighty reason. But to turn around and use this as an excuse for concelebrating with those one has in fact anathematized, even if one pretends that the anathema is only a warning, is not acceptable. That does not help to bring anyone to the Church, but rather drives them away and confirms them in their error. Father Alexander disingenuously argues that by accepting clergymen from the other local Orthodox Churches, you have acknowledged that those Churches still have grace: but he fails to mention that those clergymen were received without observing the canonical rules, precisely because their churches were considered to be in heresy! It was an act of

² For clarification on what the Bishops of the Holy Orthodox Church in North America teach on the presence of sacramental grace being present in the local churches enmeshed in Ecumenism see [Statement of March, 2003](#).

economy to receive them as priests; but if their churches were truly Orthodox, then you and your bishops have violated canonical procedure in accepting such clergymen without releases from their former bishops and have made yourselves schismatics. The concept of economy does not mean that a priest or bishop can do anything he feels like [in this matter], although Archbishop Anthony of Geneva says this in a letter to his flock; economy is strictly limited in application and purpose, and the teaching we have seen from you and Father Alexander is a novelty with no place in the Orthodox Church.

Certainly it is possible that we have been misinformed on these points in the past. We have done much reading and study in the last nine months to see if this is so. I have even asked Father Alexander for enlightenment on “economy” and for sources for his teaching of it, but have received no reply from him. But whether we are right or wrong, we have concluded that we do not agree with the doctrines being taught now by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. Unless we can be shown by something other than invective and unsupported statements that we are in error in our understanding, we must continue to believe as we have in the past and as we have been taught by your predecessors.

c. Admission to the Mysteries in Synod Parishes. We have long been aware that in specific parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, the stated policy of the Church in regard to admission to the Mysteries has not been followed. We have seen and heard of cases of non-Synod Orthodox being admitted to the Mysteries, for example, at Jordanville. This has been particularly distressing when it has involved members of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church in America, since in those cases there are explicit prohibitions by the Council of Bishops of such actions. I have found it awkward to have to turn away New Calendarists in my parish (at your direction, Vladyka), while I know they will be admitted to Holy Communion at the Russian parish of Saint John the Baptist in Washington, D.C. In fact, my parish would be much larger if I had been willing to admit New Calendarists to the Mysteries; it now seems that I have injured my parish in vain by turning them away when I need not have. But now the question of receiving the Mysteries has gone even beyond this. In western Massachusetts there is an open follower and propagandist for the teachings of Apostolos Makrakis, a Greek philosopher who was condemned as a heretic by the Churches of Greece, Russia, and Serbia; Bishop Gregory [Grabbe] would not admit this man to membership in the Synod on the grounds that he was a heretic; but [this man’s] own son testifies that [his father] has been admitted to Holy Communion in the monastery in Jordanville. Additionally, a case has come to light recently of the admission of a Monophysite Copt to Holy Communion in the Synod parish in Houston. This act occurred repeatedly, with the knowledge of the priest and also of Bishop Hilarion, who refused to stop it, saying that he could not, since it had been going on for a long time already.

d. Canonical Disorder. As if the above-mentioned items were not sufficient indication of canonical disorder in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, we have had several additional manifestations of this problem.

1) After the Synod parishes in both Mount Holly Springs and Atlanta joined the Greek Old Calendar Church, Bishop Hilarion advised those who wished to remain in the Synod to attend parishes of the Orthodox Church in America; this was done despite the prohibition on any communion in prayer or mysteries with the OCA.

2) The Synod had generally maintained cordial relations with Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili in Greece; his views on grace in the New Calendar jurisdictions

generally agree with those now being proposed by the [Russian] Synod. But last spring the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia has directed its Greek parish in Thessalonica to join a different Old Calendar jurisdiction, that of Archbishop Chrysostom [Kiouisis]. The Synod argues that geographical integrity requires the Greek parish to transfer its allegiance, but neglects to comment on the fact that one member of Archbishop Chrysostom's synod is Bishop Peter of Astoria, Long Island, New York. Is Bishop Peter to become a member of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia on the same grounds of geographical integrity?

3) The Synod of Archbishop Chrysostom [Kiouisis] has deposed Metropolitan Cyprian for Ecumenism because he teaches that the New Calendar churches have grace. How can the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia have entered into communion with this synod (by handing over a parish to it), when you maintain in your teachings and actions that there is certainly full grace in the New Calendar churches? This action has an appearance of opportunism, aimed at preventing the establishment of a hierarchy in North America for those parishes which have left the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia in recent months.

4) In the Second Open Letter of Father Alexander Lebedev, published in the March–April 1987 issue of *Orthodox Life* (Vol. 37, No. 2), he quotes with full approval a statement that the Synod of Metropolitan Cyprian is the only valid Old Calendar hierarchy in Greece and that “with two or three possible exceptions” all other Greek Old Calendar bishops are “an absolutely astonishing collection of erratic cranks, deposed renegades, self-important gurus, half-baked dabblers in theology, and other characters so bizarre, so fantastic, that, to discover parallels, one would be compelled to draw from the more exotic or comical specimens of fictional literature” [page 41]. If this is so, how can you hand over your Greek flock to these latter bishops, ignoring Metropolitan Cyprian and his “valid” synod? And if this is not the view of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia on the Old Calendar bishops in Greece, why did Archbishop Laurus and Bishop Hilarion publish it in your at least semi-official English-language magazine? . . .

The end result of all the attempts to explain the issues raised by those who left the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia in recent months has been confusion and the revelation of heretical and disordered thinking in theology and the administration of the Mysteries of Christ in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia.

We have contrasted this with what we have seen from those who left the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia and organized themselves under the omophorion of Archbishop Auxentius of Athens. Certainly there have been human weaknesses, with mistakes made and, sometimes, harsh words spoken; but on this earth we will find no perfection, and who among us could honestly say that he had never said or done anything which he later came to regret? But with these mistakes, we also see a firm commitment to the Orthodox Faith and a clear statement of the dangers of Ecumenism, the latest and most dangerous heresy yet. I am enclosing a copy of the oath which all priests have to sign when they join with Archbishop Auxentius; if only the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia had such an oath and enforced it! Then there would be no question of its opposition to Ecumenism.

We have waited and watched with prayer for a correction of the Synod's course, but all that we have seen is further progress on the way of accommodation. And then we read Archbishop Auxentius's clergy oath, and we saw the Orthodox Faith being taught without compromise or equivocation. You cannot imagine how my heart was moved

when I finally saw an Orthodox bishop speaking the truth of the Faith in opposition to what you have rightly called the “pan-heresy” of our time: Ecumenism. Now we must act as God has shown us. Therefore, with earthly sorrow, I must inform you that my parish of Saint Cosmas of Aitolia in Riverdale, Maryland and I have been received under the omophorion of Archbishop Auxentius. It gives me greater grief than you can believe to do this, Vladyka, but what else can I do, except follow the Orthodox Faith where it is taught most fully and clearly.

Please be assured that we bear you no personal ill-will and will continue to pray for you and your brother bishops as long as we all live. It is our greatest hope and prayer that you will be able to correct the problems which have arisen in the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, and that someday soon we may once again be united in receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

With love in Christ,
Priest Seraphim Johnson

Declaration of the Clergy

The undersigned ,

Having in mind that:

1) the introduction of the new calendar brought disastrous consequences into the liturgical order and harmony of the Church and created a schism in its midst;

2) the acceptance of the new or “corrected” calendar by the innovators and schismatic hierarchs stands in opposition to the law of God in that, according to Saint Theodore the Studite, “No authority has been given to the hierarchy to transgress in any matter whatsoever that which is the rule, but [it has power only] to continue in that which has been passed down and to follow in the steps of those who have gone before”;

3) the faithful people of God acted in a manner pleasing to God when it rejected the innovation, because, according to Saint Cyprian of Carthage, “He that separates and divides the Church of Christ cannot possess the robe of Christ”;

4) the Pan-Orthodox Councils (such as those of 1583, 1587, and 1593 under the Ecumenical Patriarch Jeremias the Illustrious, and the Council of 1848 under the Ecumenical Patriarch Anthimus) have forbidden and condemned the change or alteration of the calendar (“Whoever does not follow the customs of the Church . . . and wishes to follow the newly-devised Paschalion and new Menologion of the ungodly astronomers of the Pope, and sets himself in opposition in all these matters, and wishes to overturn and to destroy the doctrines handed down by our Fathers and the customs of the Church, let him be under anathema, and let him be outside the Church of Christ and the Assembly of the Faithful”—the Council of 1583);

5) the Encyclical of 1920 of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, “To the Churches of Christ Whosoever They Might Be,” proclaims that the union with the (heretical) churches of the West is not impeded “by the dogmatic differences which exist among them” and that this union is desirable and seemly, and that one of the first steps towards its accomplishment is “the adoption by all the Churches of one single calendar so that

the great Christian feasts may be everywhere celebrated simultaneously . . .”;

6) the ecumenistic innovation of the calendar change also cultivated the ground for the steps that followed, such as the meeting of Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in 1964 in Jerusalem, and all the subsequent acts and heretical pronouncements which were made “with bared head;”

7) the “lifting” of the Anathema against the Papacy in 1965 is not a true lifting, in that the Papacy has not renounced its heresies, but, to the contrary, it places under its Anathema even the “Orthodox,” according to the dictum of the Fathers: “If anyone does not anathematize all heretics, let his portion be with theirs;”

8) the enrollment of a Church as a member of the World Council of Churches altogether constitutes an acceptance of the Branch Theory and a denial of Orthodox ecclesiology and faith, and the common prayers and pronouncements in themselves constitute a proclamation of heresy;

I therefore confess that I reject every ecclesiastical and liturgical relation or association with the ecumenistic churches and those who are in communion with them. I confess and proclaim with the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council: “We follow the ancient traditions of the Catholic Church. We keep the institutions of the Fathers. We anathematize those who add anything to or subtract anything from the Catholic Church.”

I confess that I join and am united to the saving and true Church of the True Orthodox Christians of Greece under the jurisdiction of His Beatitude, the Archbishop, kyr Auxentius, under whose spiritual guidance and pastorship and obedience I shall be.³

The undersigned

On
(date)

.....
(name)

³ Taking into account other developments such as the "Balamand Statement," the signed proposals and agreements with the Monophysites, and the confusion that exists in the minds of many Orthodox clergy, monastics, and laity of the position of the Bishop in the Church, this Declaration has been updated accordingly. See [Declaration of the Clergy](#) for the current text.