



253. April 10/23, 1978 Palm Sunday

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : October 10, 2016

Dear Mr. Stamos,

May the blessing of our Lord be with you.

Thank you for your letter. Even though you express basic disagreements with us in it, we are glad that you have spoken frankly of your feelings, as in the long run this is the best path to mutual understanding and, if possible, agreement.

The questions you raise are very deep; the differences between our and your attitudes are the result of many years of apparently a quite different experience. I can understand how some of the statements in our articles might shock you coming “out of the blue,” as it were; but if you were more familiar with what has been happening in the Orthodox world in the 20th century I think you would find our words rather milder and more moderate. As a matter of fact, we have deliberately taken a very moderate stand, in comparison with some of the positions both to the “left” and “right” of us. You grieve over the “division and alienation” which our publication seems to represent. I assure you that we grieve together with you over this—but this division and alienation have been in our Orthodox Church now for fifty years and more. It is not our doing; we are only commenting on it. I agree with you 100% that we all need more love—we must constantly force our cold hearts to this, both for our friends and our enemies, and also our persecutors, where such exist.

But the answer to this sad division and alienation is by no means simple. You yourself seem to express in your letter a certain disturbance over the fact that in the very act of your writing about our disagreements with some Orthodox Patriarchs, you yourself are expressing disagreement with us! I myself think we should not be very disturbed over these disagreements; they exist and we should frankly admit it and try to have the most Christian and Orthodox response to them.

The fact of, not merely disagreements, but actual schism is, alas, all too real in the 20th-century Orthodox Church. The Church of Greece since 1924 has been split in two. About one-fourth of the people of Greece, and probably over half of the monks and nuns, belong to the “Old Calendarist” jurisdictions which have refused to follow the innovations of the latest Patriarchs of Constantinople and have broken communion with them. For this they have suffered persecutions, imprisonments, even martyrdom at the hands of their Orthodox brothers—the Greek government, supported by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the State Church of Greece. The latter (the “New Calendarist” churches) have excommunicated the Old Calendarists, proclaiming their Holy Mysteries to be without grace; until very recently (and perhaps even now, I don’t know) children born of Old



Calendarists marriages were officially registered with the government as “illegitimate”—something even the Protestants do not suffer in Greece. In return, the Old Calendarists have excommunicated the New Calendarists, and some of them (but not all) have declared and believe their Mysteries to be without grace. There are entirely separate Orthodox hierarchies in Greece, neither thus having any communion with the other.

I give you this example for your reflection. Such a grievous state of division and alienation is a fact of today's Greek Orthodox Church. What is to be our Christian attitude to it? Shall we be silent, or neutral?—This is hardly possible, since every Orthodox Christian must receive the Holy Mysteries somewhere, and he cannot receive them in both of the divided Greek Churches. (In America, there are only a few Old Calendarist churches, so the question may seem remote to most people here; but for the Greek people as a whole it is an urgent question.) What should a bishop or priest do? He must instruct the people; even if he says nothing at all, the very fact that he belongs to the “Old” or the “New” Calendarists places him in the position of either proclaiming loyalty to the “old” tradition of Orthodoxy, or else agreeing (to some degree) with the path of modernization and abandonment of the “old” ways.

A similar state of division exists in the Russian Church, although it has not taken the extreme forms of the Greek schism. The Patriarch of Moscow and the leading bishops openly preach communism (both in the political and in a religious sense) and brazenly lie to the world about “freedom of religion” in Russia. We know that most of them do so under compulsion, and therefore we do not judge them too harshly. We in the Russian Church Abroad have our own bishops and have no communion with the Moscow Patriarchate, leaving its final judgment to a future council of bishops in a free Russia (which we pray will one day exist). But priests and laymen in the Moscow Patriarchate in Russia itself are today loudly protesting the anti-Christian acts of their own bishops, and some even proclaim that the Church there is governed by communist agents in bishops’ robes. At the same time there exists a Catacomb Church which for fifty years has had no communion with the Patriarchate and is mercilessly persecuted by the Soviet government (we have published much material on these new martyrs in *The Orthodox Word*). Again—a sad state of division and alienation. How can we be neutral, unless by retreating into the cowardly state of being “uncommitted” which is so common today?

The martyrs and confessors in Russia write to us that the best hope for them right now is the loud protest of free people against their persecutors. I personally would feel myself a betrayer of my brothers in Christ there if I were not to use the opportunity given me to speak the truth about them; but to do this I cannot help but contradict the lies of their bishops who say even now that “there is no persecution of religion in the USSR; those who suffer are only political criminals.” I do not feel in the least that I am sinning against the commandment of loving my brethren by doing this. On the contrary, my silence would betray love, and would only help the deliberate campaign of the Moscow church representatives to silence and exert influence on the Orthodox Churches of the free world.



I would hope that you can understand all this, even if you may not agree with our position.

The fulfillment of God's commandment of love is by no means an easy or a simple thing. There are many "hard sayings" in the Holy Scriptures which seem (superficially) a direct contradiction of love. To those who do not do good works our Lord Jesus Christ says: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). Even to many who prophesy and work miracles in His name, our Lord shall say: "I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:23). Our Saviour tells us sternly: "Suppose ye that I am come to bring peace on earth? I tell you, Nay, but rather division. For from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two and two against three; the father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father," etc. (Luke 12:51-53). St. John, the Apostle of love, writes of those who have not right belief; "If anyone come to you and bring not this teaching, receive him not into your house and give him no greeting, for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works" (II John 10-11). St. Paul warns against new teachings: "If any man preach to you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema" (Gal. 1:8).

I am sure you know these and other "hard sayings" of the Scriptures and have reflected on them; I only cite them here (without going into interpretations of them) in the hope that you will not be too ill-disposed towards some of the seemingly uncharitable statements you have found in our publications. In writing them I assure you that we are trying to follow the Gospel, to the best of our knowledge and in obedience to the teaching of many bishops, martyrs, and confessors of our own times, both in the Greek and Russian Churches, both abroad and in America.

In the history of the Orthodox Church there have been innumerable cases of "hard words" spoken by defenders of Christ's truth. I will give you only one example: In 1439, the Greek Church accepted Roman Catholicism at the false Council of Florence. One Greek bishop (St. Mark of Ephesus) refused to sign the decree of Union, accused those who accepted the Union, aroused the people against it, refused to allow the Patriarch of Constantinople even to be present at his funeral—all of these "negative" things he did out of love for Orthodoxy, and because of him the Greek people is still Orthodoxy today; if they had followed those who preached "peace" at that time, the Greek people would be Roman Catholics today and thus, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, deprived of the grace of God. (The Russian Church at that time refused to accept the Union, and broke off communion with the Greek Church until the Patriarch of Constantinople himself renounced the Union and returned to Orthodoxy.) Such champions of Orthodoxy are precisely the ones the Orthodox Church has canonized and accepts as her standard of how to act when the Faith is threatened.

There is no need to multiply such historical examples; I am sure you understand the point I am making. I am well aware, to be sure, that there can be a "fanatical" approach to this whole subject, and we condemn it as much as you. I only hope you can see the principles on the basis of which we try to speak.



I am sorry that our words have given you the impression that our attitude is “schismatic” and that we regard everyone but ourselves as un-Orthodox. That is certainly not what we have intended to convey. However, there is no benefit to any of us from hiding the truth: the hierarchy in Russia (and some other Communist countries) is indeed enslaved by the godless and does the will of the government; many people in Russia and in the Moscow Patriarchate itself have admitted it. And further, I don’t see how it can be denied that those in the free world who fraternize with the atheist-controlled church leaders and thus aid the atheist purposes which they pursue in the free world—rare larking in seriousness and responsibility. Such people are acting according to the wisdom of this world, not the wisdom of Christ and His Church. We (and many others) say such things because we hope that Orthodox people (and even these leaders themselves, if possible) will see this and become serious about their Christian responsibility; if nothing is said, the false path which Orthodox leaders are now pursuing will continue without opposition until a new “union” is proclaimed, which will deprive Orthodox people of their birthright and inheritance and—unless by a miracle of God—of the very salvation of their souls. Our differences with those who are preparing the “Eighth Ecumenical Council” are very deep and will not improve by silence; they involve a whole different view of Christ, the Church, and salvation. In mentioning a few of the leading Orthodox hierarchs by name we (following many of our bishops and confessors) are merely warning the Orthodox people whom not to follow. We say little of the priests who have to follow these leaders (we know that many of them do so with a disturbed conscience), and nothing about laymen, who generally are much less aware of what is going on and are much less responsible for it.

From your letter I understand that you are afraid that the tone of our publications and missionary work will cause—or already has caused—discord among the small number of Orthodox Christians in Redding. You mention specifically Mrs. Harvey and the Romingers. Let me say a word here about each of them.

I think it is possible that you are misinterpreting Mrs. Harvey’s attitude. She has her own attitude (shared by most devout Russians) about church life, and I doubt that she would want to participate in church life based on some other attitude. Since you seem to have a different approach to church life, it is only natural that she would not be attracted by it. But this is certainly not a matter of her being any kind of “fanatic” or thinking herself “more Orthodox” than you or others; far from it. She, like many Russians in America, has suffered much: the godless took her homeland, her parents had to flee abroad under very difficult circumstances, she herself was born in exile in a totally strange land, then she was forced to flee even that refuge. Russians who go through such experiences and traumas, if they are religious, cling to their Faith as their dearest possession and are very closely attached to their bishops and priests. For them the question of church life is primarily based on trust and personal loving contact with their bishop or priest. Often church life takes place in the catacombs or near-catacombs; at best, in difficult immigrant circumstances. The question of church organization, church building, etc,—has a very secondary place in their outlook on Christian life, and they see that when there is enough peace and quiet for these questions to come to the fore, the same worldly influences, empty disputes and wrangling enter into Orthodox



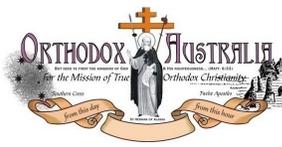
church life as in any other church organization, and so they most often are just not interested in these things, and will even flee the opportunity to take part in them. If she gives you the impression that she is “avoiding your fellowship,” it is probably as a result of this attitude and nothing else.

As for the Romingers, they visited us today and both Fr. Herman and I discussed some church questions with them. They seem open to understanding our point of view on these questions, but they are level-headed people and the concern they have over these questions is a real one, proceeding from the questions themselves and not from any opinion we may have about them. They also wish not to sin against love, and not to judge anyone—but also not to adopt a misleading “peace and love” which merely hide problems that really exist and are urgent. We are not at all trying to “press” them into adopting our opinions on various questions; this is a matter of their free choice.

Whatever you may think of all this, I hope that you at least understand our point of view a little better. As for the situation in Redding, I will be frank with you. Our Archbishop has blessed us to open a mission station at Mrs. Harvey's, and we will have occasional services there. This will not be any “organized parish,” but just a mission station to serve (to begin with) those people in Redding and outlying towns who already come occasionally to our monastery for services.

With regard to “jurisdictions,” we are in full communion with the Greek Old-Calendarist jurisdiction of Archbishop Auxentios in Athens and with the Catacomb Church in Russia; with other jurisdictions our relations are strained, and in some cases broken altogether (owing to the sad history of 20th-century Orthodoxy, outlined above). Our Church as a whole simply refuses to accept the excommunications hurled by the various jurisdictions against each other under the heated circumstances of controversy; but on the other hand a state of free intercommunion does not exist between us. In our own case, we would not be able to concelebrate with the priests of any other jurisdiction; as for laymen (whose responsibility in these sad divisions is much less, but who still must be striving to be conscious and responsible Christians), those who wish to receive Holy Communion must go to confession first and must be prepared to accept instruction from the priest in preserving oneself in true Orthodoxy. Most Orthodox people today, at least in America, do not seem very open to taking such guidance, and would find our approach too “strict.” To name but one problem that could arise: many decrees of the Greek and Russian Churches in the 20th century have forbidden the giving of Holy Communion to members of masonic lodges. In open disobedience to these decrees, many priests and even bishops of several jurisdictions do give Communion to them, our Church does not. We are no “fanatics” on this question, but we are required to explain to Orthodox Christians who in their ignorance have joined masonic lodges, that there are religious aspects to masonry which make it incompatible with membership in the Orthodox Church.

Judging from your letter, you will not find what I have said very consoling. The Romingers told us that you wish to have a “soft” (I don’t recall their exact word) approach to Orthodox Christians in Redding so as not to frighten anyone away. I can tell you frankly that anyone who is easily



“frightened” at such things as we have written will probably not be at home with us. In our experience, rather few of the Orthodox Christians in any given locality have much interest in the services of our Russian Church Abroad and in our attitude towards church questions; most find us indeed too “strict” and “hard.” We understand this and try to keep quietly going our own way, at the same time warning our own faithful about what is happening in the Church. If you wish to have your own services or organized parish in the Greek Archdiocese, we will certainly not interfere or indulge in any “jurisdictional rivalry.”

Now, after saying all this to you, I really have not told you what is in my heart. Why all this “strictness” and lack of full communion? Is it some kind of phariseeism? I pray that it is not, and believe it is not. We (and the bishops and confessors whose path we follow) fear more than anything else the loss of our eternal souls and those of the flock who follow us. Our times are critical; the devil is going about devouring the souls of Orthodox Christians; a false religion of “peace and harmony” is being spread in order to prepare for the reign of Antichrist, who, as the Gospel and whole new Testament clearly teaches, is to come before the end of the world and take by a subtle seduction—so subtle that “even the elect will be deceived, if it were possible”—all but the “little flock” which Christ our Saviour will find when He comes. With all this in mind, and with the experience of anti-Christianity in action which those of us in the Russian Church have had either directly or through our close ones—our whole tone and approach is and has to be urgent and uncompromising—although always within the bonds of love, “speaking the truth in love” as far as we are able. We do not expect many in America to understand or follow us—sadly, because we believe that this is the authentic Christian Orthodoxy handed down to us by our Saviour through His Apostles and all His Saints.

Having said all this, I repeat that you are welcome to join us in any of our services. We will be reading the Twelve Gospels of the Passion (in English) on Thursday evening at about 7 p.m.; the bringing out of the epitaphion will be on Good Friday at 2 p.m. (but the Lamentations service will be not in the evening but only early in the morning, 2 a.m., following monastic tradition); Liturgy Great Saturday about 11 a.m., and midnight Matins and Liturgy on Pascha itself. If after all that I have written here, there remain differences in our approach to the Faith, these differences have not yet gone so far that it is impossible for us to pray together. The question of receiving Holy Communion is something deeper; this is a spiritual question which our Superior, Father Herman, decides individually in confession. In cases of the dying, of course we will not refuse Holy Communion to any baptized Orthodox Christian who desires it and repents of his sins.

No matter what you may think of all this, I hope that our relation will continue to be a friendly one.

With love in Christ,
Unworthy Hieromonk Seraphim