

# On the Current State of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Photii of Triaditzia

*Selections from answers by Bishop Photii to questions posed to him by the faithful during his pastoral visits to the parishes of the True Orthodox Church of Bulgaria*

## Introductory Remarks

While not everyone (*viz.*, those who have remained in the ROCOR after its union with Moscow) may agree with the attached essay from the counsels of Bishop Photii, it is a balanced and fair article that deserves careful attention. In our Sister Churches, Bishop Photii, who is one Archbishop Chrysostomos' closest friends, is held in high esteem for his insights and for his humility. He is an extraordinarily gifted scholar (a former assistant professor at the University of Sofia) and a wonderfully sensitive and skilled pas-

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<sup>1</sup> Selections from Bishop Photii's talks with congregations in Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, and Blagoevgrad, which took place on November 16 and November 27, 2006.



His Eminence, Bishop Photii, First Hierarch of the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, was ordained to the Priesthood by Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle and consecrated to the Episcopacy by Metropolitan Cyprian and his Bishops. He is a former Lecturer (a European designation equivalent to the rank of Assistant Professor in the U.S.) at the University of Sofia, where he studied Classics and Theology and later taught the former subject. He speaks, in addition to his native Bulgarian, Greek, Russian, and French. He also reads English and Latin fluently. He was formed spiritually by the late Bulgarian theologian and academic, Archimandrite Dr. Seraphim, a spiritual child of St. Seraphim of Sofia and an Old Calendarist confessor, and Abbess Seraphima (Princess Olga Lieven) of the Protection Convent in Sofia. He is much loved and revered for his spiritual gifts and humility.

tor and confessor of Orthodoxy. He has built up an impressive witness in Bulgaria. The sincerity of his views is appreciated even by many who do not, as I said, fully embrace our resistance. This speaks highly of him. The nature of his enemies also commends him, as is often the case.

This is a rendition of His Eminence's comments from the Bulgarian, in which certain minor changes in expression have been made for the sake of an English-speaking readership, and one example, inessential to his argument and controversial for some readers, has been excised. Otherwise, the text is "vintage Bishop Photii," if I may express myself in that way.

*Bishop Auxentios of Photiki*

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**W**e are the witnesses of a profoundly tragic event. Before our very eyes, a Church which for more than seventy years constituted an extraordinarily precious witness for Orthodoxy is being destroyed. First, this was the Church that raised its voice in the West regarding the actual situation of the Orthodox Church, and religion in general, in Soviet Russia. It was precisely this Church that, for long years, was the only one to resist the great Soviet lie, which concealed the true conditions of the Church in the Soviet Union. Second, the Church Abroad, which almost covered the world with its dioceses and parishes, proved to be a missionary Church, acquainting the Western world with Orthodoxy.

This tragedy is difficult in numerous ways. One could in a few sentences treat with what is happening in the Russian Church Abroad today, but this would not be sufficient at all, since what we see now is the result of a process which has its roots in the past. What we are seeing should neither shock nor surprise us. We ought not to ask ourselves: "How can such a thing happen so abruptly to the Church Abroad?" The fact of the matter is that it did not happen abruptly.

First we should say that, in general, as evinced both in the history of the Old Testament Israel and in the history of the Church, the New Israel, prior to any difficult trial, the Lord always fortifies with His Grace those who are about to pass through such an ordeal. I could say the same, without any hyperbole, with regard to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad.

During its formation as a jurisdiction, the Church Abroad went through significant hardships. As you know, Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky) himself maintained incorrect views on a dogma which is central in our Christian doctrine—the dogma of redemption. This in no way diminished the quality of his skills as a spiritual Father and as the founder of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Indeed, Metropolitan Anthony held private conversations with St. Seraphim of Sofia in which the two Hierarchs discussed the notions underlying the Metropolitan's book *On the Dogma of Redemption*, along with several other of his publications. While the latter, being a man of extremely high ecclesiastical consciousness, did not renounce his views, he promised the Holy Hierarch, St. Seraphim, not to disseminate these views, lest they sow discord and occasion temptations in the Church. And this promise he fulfilled. Nevertheless, after his repose, his disciples and admirers commenced promulgating his erroneous views on a wide scale, by publishing his works on these subjects.

After a series of initial difficulties, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad passed through the Evlogian schism of the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> Then came the extremely hard blows experienced by the Russian emigration after the end of the Second World War. The emigrants who took refuge in former socialist countries, including East Germany, were forced to withdraw even farther to the West, while the immigration in Northern China (e.g., in Harbin and other cities), which was also rather populous, faced horrendous calamities. As you probably know, the Red Army forced its way into China in 1945, after war was declared between the Soviet Union and Japan, and seized all territories with substantial Russian populations. A significant portion of these immigrants were tricked by Soviet emissaries, in a very reprehensible manner, into returning to the Soviet

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<sup>2</sup> In 1923, the St. Sergius of Radonezh Orthodox Theological Institute was established in Paris, and it soon turned into a hotbed of ecclesiastical modernism. The disputes which arose around the activities of this Institute precipitated the outbreak of schism in the Church. In 1926, the Metropolitan of Western Europe, Evlogy, together with the Metropolitan of North America, Platon, separated from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad). This schism became a visible expression of the profound ideological split that existed between the “Evlogians,” who took the path of ecclesiastical modernism, and the “Synodal Party,” composed of followers of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, advocates of Traditional Orthodoxy.

Union. The latter persuaded these emigrants that their country had been devastated and depopulated by the war, and that it badly needed human resources. They impressed on them that they would receive amnesty and that nothing bad would happen to them. That is to say, in a repugnantly perfidious manner, they exploited the patriotic feelings of the Russians, and most of the immigrants in Northern China returned to the Soviet Union. There, they were deported—literally at border entries—to various concentration camps and, in some instances, murdered. These people were subjected to a monstrous mockery. There is no need to mention the frightful tragedies in the West, where brigades of the disbanded Liberation Army of General Vlasov, which fought against the Soviet army (together with other Russian prisoners of war), were also perfidiously surrendered by the English and the American occupation authorities into the hands of the Soviet forces. They were subsequently forcibly taken to the U.S.S.R., where they of course faced either imprisonment in a concentration camp or death.

After all of this, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, towards the end of the 1960s, on account of the ecclesiastical policies of Moscow, suffered utter isolation from the rest of the local Orthodox Churches. This, in fact, was the greatest success of the external ecclesiastical policies of the Moscow Patriarchate, at the time under the guidance of the Metropolitan of Leningrad, Nikodim. In 1969, Metropolitan Nikodim, having shuttled frequently between the principal national Orthodox Churches (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and others), managed to persuade these Churches to cease any communion with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, under the pretext that it was uncanonical and that the only canonical representative of the Russian Church was the Moscow Patriarchate. He never ceased spewing the lie that the Church in the U.S.S.R. enjoyed perfect freedom and that every word of the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad regarding persecution of the Faith was sheer falsehood. He portrayed them as political émigrés and enemies of the Soviet state. These were the principal insinuations of Communist propaganda at the time, and the Moscow Patriarchate—subservient to the Kremlin in all matters—became the mouthpiece for those insinuations.

Then another very important event occurred, one which shook the Orthodox world to its very foundations; *viz.*, the wholly unilateral initi-

atives, in the mid-1960s, by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras, for rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church. The virtually autocratic and illicit revocation of the Anathema of 1054 against Rome, Athenagoras' meeting with Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem, in 1964, and the overt super-ecumenical policies of Patriarch Athenagoras, a thirty-third degree Mason, created panic among many of the True Orthodox faithful, both in the Greek-speaking Orthodox world and in the Slavic Orthodox world—and particularly in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. On the one hand, this Church was at the time in isolation; on the other hand, and especially after Metropolitan Philaret (Voznesensky) became its Chief Hierarch, it took the manifest path of being a Confessor of Orthodoxy in the struggle against modernism and ecumenism and the policies that were strongly advocated by Patriarch Athenagoras in the mid-1960s. It was perhaps in the middle of the decade of the '70s and the beginning of the '80s that the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, under Metropolitan Philaret, reached its peak as a Church—as a Confessor of Orthodoxy and a missionary Church, which it had been, incidentally, even earlier on, during the time of St. John of San Francisco, who did much to spread Orthodoxy in the West.

Having thus briefly outlined its history, let us ask ourselves in what way the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad has benefited by that assistance from the Grace of God that comes on the cusp of difficult trials. In the twentieth century, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad produced, from among its Hierarchs, more holy men than any other Church. Not a single local Church produced so many Bishops of holy and righteous life during the past century as did the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Starting with St. John of San Francisco and the Holy Hierarch Seraphim, the Wonder-worker of Sofia, who carried out the larger part of his Hierarchical service in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, we can proceed to St. Jonah of Hankow, who was glorified quite recently (1997); and then we can cite, as well, Metropolitan Philaret (Voznesensky), the third Chief Hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, whose relics, when disinterred, were found wholly incorrupt,<sup>3</sup> Archbishop Averky, Archbishop Leonty of Chile, and an entire constellation of

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<sup>3</sup> On November 10 (October 28, o.s.), 1998, Metropolitan Philaret's remains were translated from the cemetery Church of the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY, to a specially-constructed sepulchre annexed to the main monastery Church. It was then

righteous Hierarchs from the Far East: for example, Metropolitan Methody of Harbin, Metropolitan Innocent of Beijing, and others. It is not uncommon that the Grace-filled presence of righteous Bishops (holding correct spiritual and theological views), on the one hand, and manifold instances of miraculous intercession, on the other, should foretell impending trials, for Grace is given precisely to the end that ordeals might be endured. Now we can see what the significance of these things was. Nonetheless, the final choice of direction depends fully on the free will of man. Already, in the Old Testament, the Lord had shown that were two possible choices: a blessing or a curse.

To our great regret, the leftist leanings in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad became preponderant. This tendency actually surfaced as early as the 1970s and the 1980s, during the presidency of Metropolitan Philaret. Even at that point, dissent was beginning to occur among the clergy and the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, though in secret and covertly. It had not yet revealed itself in some form of factionalism or overt movement, but, rather, in the formation and declaration of simple opinions. For example, Archbishop Averky was not perceived in an unambiguously positive light; on the contrary, he was seen as too conservative and withdrawn from the modern world and its problems. The Archbishop was openly taunted, in Jordanville, as a brooding person who ceaselessly preached on apocalyptic subjects and who possessed no cheerfulness—albeit cheerfulness as seen from the Western mind-set. Cheer and optimism, from this view, exist solely within the realm of *this world*; otherwise, one is doomed to gloom, dejection, and boredom: “We will not listen to such people as Archbishop Averky, since they are killjoys.” So, even in those days, there developed tendencies that became quite distinctly delineated after Metropolitan Philaret’s repose, when the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad came under the guidance of Metropolitan Vitaly. These tendencies came to the surface at the very beginning of the 1990s (perhaps some of you remember the first visits of Archbishop Mark of Berlin to Russia, without Metropolitan Vitaly’s blessing, his meetings with Patriarch Alexy II, and so forth). Overall, there was formed in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad an opposition party, dissenting chiefly with regard to Metropolitan Vitaly’s ecclesi-

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that the saintly Hierarch’s remains were seen to be incorrupt. See *Pravoslavno Slovo*, June 1998, p. 23—Editor’s Note.

astical policies. One could feel implicitly—as in the stark letters written by Father Victor Potapov and many others in criticism of the Metropolitan—a distinctly liberal and progressivist mood: “In order to avert our degeneration into a sect, our road necessarily leads to unity with Moscow.”

At this juncture, we should be honest and candid, admitting that most unfortunately, with respect to the Moscow Patriarchate, the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad did not always hold to a theologically and spiritually consistent position. Many of the overly critical characterizations of the Moscow Patriarchate—as a “graceless assemblage,” “Soviet,” “the red church,” etc.—were extreme opinions, expressed in the Church press, rather than theological assessments *per se* of the extremely heterogeneous and intricate organism which the Moscow Patriarchate represents. For, if its leaders have been, sadly enough, individuals entirely subservient to the politics of Sergianism (and, in Sergius’ time, obedient tools of the communist régime in Moscow), this we cannot say unconditionally about all of its Bishops, Priests, and faithful. Nor, in this regard, can we apply, in a way both fanatical and formalistic, the maxim: “If their ruling Bishops are such, then all of them are such, and therefore they lack Grace.” Indeed, the situation in Soviet Russia after the Revolution was extremely complex—extremely difficult—and we cannot ascend the judge’s bench and require that every Bishop, every Priest and every layman should have become a confessor or martyr. We know that Sergianism led to horrendous consequences and that it was inadmissible treason. We know that the path of confessing the Faith is the way whereby the Church survives. But at the same time, we have no right to judge any person whomsoever, having not ourselves been subjected to such pressure and such horrifying conditions.

Unfortunately, the liberal clergy and laity in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad took advantage of these past errors in their characterization of the Moscow Patriarchate, in order to substantiate their “leftist” leanings. As well, many mistakes were made in relation to the rash establishment of parishes in Russia, after the fall of Communism, and especially with the hasty and unconsidered Consecration of Bishops there. And these errors, regrettably, very quickly and in rather short term eroded the lofty spiritual authority of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which accrued to it during the several decades in which it dauntlessly

spoke about the true conditions of the Orthodox in Soviet Russia, sending—insofar as possible, in the prevailing conditions—ecclesiastical and theological books everywhere within the boundaries of the U.S.S.R. of that time.

Hence, we come to the tragic events which took place around the year 2000. It was in that year that Archbishop Mark, who is doubtlessly the leader of the movement for union with the Moscow Patriarchate, succeeded in gathering around himself the rest of the Bishops. Metropolitan Vitaly's poor health was categorically misused both "on the left" and "on the right." "The right wing" issued a series of *Ukases* on his behalf. The contents of these, and what he was signing, he could hardly have known. Even in 1994, when I met him for the first time, he was suffering from advanced cerebral atherosclerosis. Such exploitation of an aged Hierarch was vile. It is disgusting that anyone should have taken advantage of the Metropolitan's ailment in order to promulgate his own line of ecclesiastical policies and, at the same time, to conceal himself behind the man's authority, while placing the entire responsibility on his shoulders. This is absolutely immoral, no matter who perpetrates the deed—the "left wing" or the "right wing".

What was for me very painful—first to see and then to ponder over—was the following: Unfortunately, the newer generation of Bishops in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad has been raised in the conditions of the Occident. To a great extent, in their mind-set, they were reared in the conditions of the West and, logically, do not possess that pre-Revolutionary leaven which the Bishops of the first émigré generation possessed. Precisely this new generation of Bishops and—alas!—some of the older Bishops, began to resemble, internally, the Bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate. When saying "internally," I do so wholly intentionally, since I have been supplied with firsthand information regarding concrete actions which, though I am not willing to adduce them here, unfortunately also place a seal upon what a man has within himself. To me, this was the cruellest truth: becoming convinced that these people had begun to resemble internally, in spirit, the Bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate. This means cunning; it means aspirations towards the benefits of officialdom and of worldly recognition, towards material profits and advantages. It means embarking on the path of ecclesial diplomacy and politics, flexibility dictated by self-interest, of double standards and the language of

ecclesiastical politics: “It may be both this way and that way. What matters is whether it serves our political line.” Alas! That for which the Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad were so highly respected in the past has now melted away. Of course, as humans, we all have inadequacies, foibles, and errors; but for the Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad of the first émigré generation the following was *de rigueur*: never did they consecrate anyone in haste, as was the case, at the end, during the presidency of Metropolitan Vitaly. They never ordained a clergyman to the rank of Bishop rashly, but always after circumspect investigation. They were honest, respectable, and moral people—such as those who would never sing the song of ecclesiastical politics. And this created a superb general image of the episcopate of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad: an episcopate which has always been highly esteemed.

Now you can see for yourselves the course of the Russian Church Abroad. After an internal change has taken place, following upon a fall, one proceeds to external apostasy, since apostasy starts in the human heart. Where principles are concerned, you either stand before God and measure all of your thoughts and actions with the standards of the Gospels—according to the Savior’s words: *Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay* (St. Matthew 5:37)—or you take another road, the road of compromise in matters spiritual, wherein compromise is equal to spiritual suicide, which is what in fact befell the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. This is indeed unpardonable compromise. The Church Abroad is truly dooming itself to self-destruction (not administrative, not jurisdictional—because the problem is not there), but spiritual, since therein lies the heart. The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad will see what the Moscow Patriarchate is. By the by, this is already self-evident, since the very initiative for rapprochement was initiated by none other than President Putin. The Moscow Patriarchate has always been extraordinarily calculating. It would never have undertaken such an initiative on its own, even if the initiative is, at the present stage, properly in its hands. In fact, the classical Sergianist norms of behavior are at present intact: the Church takes no initiative before it is certain what the civil authorities wish to undertake and where they wish to go. Afterwards, the Church itself follows the same route.

No one is opposed to dialogue. But prior to engaging in any dialogue, its preconditions and foundations must be clearly and categorically set;

and if it turns out that the very approach to dialogue is not entirely sincere, candid, upright, and well-meaning, then to engage in such dialogue is simply meaningless. Unfortunately, the dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and the Moscow Patriarchate was conducted completely in a manner and on a basis utterly inadmissible from the viewpoint of a consistent Orthodox ecclesiastical consciousness founded on firm principles. I stated this in an appropriate manner, but quite candidly, to the official representative of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, Archpriest Alexander Lebedeff, who, in April 2006, paid a visit to our Church, in order to inform us officially about the progress of the dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and the Moscow Patriarchate: “It is obvious that the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad itself will discontinue its communion with us<sup>4</sup>—we who were until yesterday a Sister Church, but who, starting tomorrow, will simply become, in its eyes, a dissident schismatic group, outside of the Church—since it intends to establish Eucharistic communion with the Moscow Patriarchate and, through this, with all of the rest of the ‘official’ local Orthodox Churches. We remain in our position, and it is the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad which, in the persons of its Hierarchy, is making a 180-degree turn in its position.” And what is the situation among the clergymen, the monastics, and the laity? What is happening among them, generally speaking?

First, the greater part of the clergy and the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in Canada and the U.S. are positively in favor of the union with the Moscow Patriarchate. A large part of the clergy and faithful in Western Europe are also in favour of this union, while the whole of South America (i.e., the entire flock—and particularly so in Brazil, Chile, and Argentina), together with their clerics, are categorically against it. A part of the clerics and the faithful of the Russian Ortho-

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<sup>4</sup> This supposition of Bishop Photii proved to be right. By their decision of September 6 (August 24, o.s.), 2006, the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad pronounced its cessation of ecclesiastical communion with the Old Calendar Orthodox Churches of Romania and Bulgaria (as they had with our Sister Church, the Orthodox Church of Greece, Synod in Resistance, earlier), without informing the Chief Hierarch of the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria to this effect, either in writing or orally. Bishop Photii learned of this decree almost half a year later, from outside sources—*Editor’s Note*.

dox Church Abroad in Australia are also against the union. You may perhaps imagine what frightful divisions will result from this.

A faction of the clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, of fanatical and extremist mentality, left the Church Abroad long ago, establishing their own jurisdictions, which began disintegrating in a fashion similar to that which we see in the extremist Greek Old Calendarist jurisdictions. By their existence, by what they speak, write, and do, they bring enormous detriment to our Churches and our witness, since they allow others to create a false caricature of us. By their fanatical and extremist conduct, they create a horrendous image of Orthodoxy. In so doing, they supply additional grounds for the modernistic and liberal-minded members of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, who are in favor of union with the Moscow Patriarchate, to declare: “Well, is this what you wish? That we become as these, as will be the case if we do not join Moscow? Is this the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad [that is to say, this caricature]?” In this manner, the advocates of union with the Moscow Patriarchate provide themselves with arguments drawn from the warped conduct of the fanatics, whereby they make apologies for their own theory: that, in order to survive as an Orthodox Church, they have to join “canonical Orthodoxy”—the Moscow Patriarchate and “the numerical (rather than right-believing) majority of the Orthodox Church”—fixing in place these notions, moreover, by substituting wholly external, contrived, and formal accidents for essential content! Generally speaking, this is the logic of the matter. And the signing of the “Act of Canonical Communion” is merely a question of time; it has been already approved by both Synods. This really signifies the end of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad as we have hitherto known it.<sup>5</sup>

All that is happening is quite depressing; but, unfortunately, it is a fact. Indisputably, finding themselves in the gravest difficulty are those clerics and faithful who are serious and responsible (and they are not just a few), who are still members of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad but who cannot possibly in good conscience accept this union. And the accomplishment of this union is knocking at the door. The hearts and consciences of these people are crucified and bleeding, believe me. I can

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<sup>5</sup> The “Act of Canonical Communion” was finally signed by Patriarch Alexy II and the late Metropolitan Laurus at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, on May 4/17, 2007—*Editor’s Note*.

say this in absolute candor, because there are Priests who write to me and who wish to converse with me by telephone. There are laypeople, wonderful faithful, who are pristine examples of a pure Orthodox ecclesiastical conscience, who are not in the least prone to judge their Bishops or speak personally against anyone, who are completely alien to the spirit of fanaticism and extremism, but who are suffering profoundly on account of what is happening. They see how their Church is simply destroying itself; i.e., how it is being betrayed by those persons who were called to be the supreme guardians of its legacy—by its Bishops.

So, I ask you to pray for these fathers, brothers and sisters of ours, whose hearts and consciences are literally crucified. In my opinion, the best outcome of this extremely dire situation is that there might eventually be elected, precisely from the midst of these responsible suffering clerics and laymen, people worthy of the Episcopal office, who will in fact continue the struggle of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, standing in the fullness of the Orthodox Faith and having as their goal spiritual victory, in their very lives, and the fullness thereof, not in words, not in phrases, not in writing, but in spirit and truth, which are essential and definitive.<sup>6</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of 2007, some of the communities within the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad which had rejected the aforementioned “Act of Canonical Communion” rallied around Bishop Agafangel of Odessa and Tauris (now Metropolitan Agafangel of New York and Eastern America) and subsequently reaffirmed communion with the Holy Synod in Resistance in Greece (Synod of Metropolitan Cyprian) and with the Romanian and Bulgarian Old Calendar Churches. Thus, the continuity of the identity and witness of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad has been maintained—*Editor’s Note*.