A SOCIAL DOCTRINE FOR THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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In the Christian jubilee year 2000 the Russian Orthodox Church held a Council of Bishops that may be termed a milestone in Russian church history. The Council of 146 bishops was the end of an internal discussion within the hierarchy of the Russian Church which had lasted for several years. It resulted in the acceptance of the important document: The basis of the social concept of the Russian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, a declaration was accepted on ecumenism: Basic principles of the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church toward the other Christian confessions. This second declaration is no more than a confirmation of the actual reserve of the Russian Church versus the World Council of Churches and its troubled relations with the Roman Catholic Church. The social document, however, was something completely new in the Russian Orthodox teaching.

For the outside world another event may have attracted more attention, viz. the canonization of Tsar Nicholas II, murdered by the Communists in 1918. Though unanimously pronounced by the bishops, the canonization of the last Tsar is controversial in Russian society. Historians agree that Nicholas II was a poor ruler and that his reactionary policies furthered the Communist revolution. In general the church leaders share this opinion. Nevertheless, as a patient sufferer of his year in prison and because of his cruel death he was canonised, together with his wife and his five children who were killed with him. The canonization of the imperial family was made part of a mass canonization of 1154 persons, most of them victims of the Communist regime.

Theologically more important than the religious folklore of the canonization is the promulgation of a social doctrine by the Council. For the first time in her existence the Russian Church formulated fundamental principles in the relation between Church and society. It marks a turnabout in the traditionally internal orientation of the Orthodox Church and an end of the age-long blind obedience of the Church to the state, not only in the Orthodox Church in Russia but in the Eastern Orthodoxy in general: no other Autocephalous Orthodox Church had ever expressed her social view in an official document.

The document The basis of the social concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (Osnovy sotsial' noi kontseptsii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi) was
written by a committee led by Metropolitan Kirill, head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate.¹ The title does not speak of “social doctrine” but of “basis of the social concept”, which may be motivated by a desire to avoid any reminiscence to Roman Catholic terminology. It is said in the introduction that the document gives “a principal theological answer on questions concerning the relations between church and state and church and society” and that it “consciously avoids discussion of the situation in concrete states, because almost half of the parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate are nowadays situated outside the borders of Russian Federation”. By this is meant Ukraine, where a rather complicated ecclesiological-jurisdictional situation exists. The document is a “long-term program for the Church in a pluralistic and secularised society”.

The document does not contain a systematic treatment of the Soviet past and the word “communism” is not mentioned. This may be disappointing for those who consider it necessary that the Russian Church leaders should give a critical assessment of the recent past. However, in numerous places the Soviet system is indicated by terms like ‘state atheism’, ‘age of religious persecution’, ‘totalitarian ideologies’, ‘massive repressions’ and ‘the year 1917’. More important is the basic notion which pervades the whole document and which is a novelty in the public political position of the Russian Church, that the State is not an aim in itself, that its power is subject to that of God and that Christian are sometimes bound to civil disobedience.

The Council document consists of more than eighty pages and is divided into sixteen chapters:

1. Basic theological provisions
2. Church and nation
3. Church and state
4. Christian ethics and secular law
5. Church and politics
6. Labour and its fruits
7. Property
8. War and peace
9. Crime, punishment, reformation
10. Personal, family and public morality
11. Personal and national health
12. Problems of bioethics

¹ The document is published in the collection Yubileinyi Arkhiereiskii Sobor Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi. Materialy (Jubilee Bishops Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. Materials), Moscow 2001. The English translation of the document on the social doctrine is on the website of the Patriarchate: http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/s2000e01.htm. We follow this official English translation although there are small stylistic deviations from the Russian original (e.g. “ethnic” for natsional’nyj = national; “national” for pomestnyj = local; “russian” for otechestvennyj = fatherland).