

## The Local Church

a further attempt to get my head round the changes in our Church life in Britain

Orthodox Christians who are citizens of these islands have a role to play in the development of religious life here. When the Diocese of Sourozh split last year part of it chose to remain within the Moscow Patriarchate and under the supervision of the Department of External Church Relations, while the rest of us decided that our future lay with the Ecumenical Patriarch and his Western European Exarchate. This Archdiocese has a commitment to the growth of the Orthodox Church in the lands of Western Europe as distinct from the traditionally Orthodox homelands of Eastern Europe.

With the establishing of our Vicariate much thought is again being given to the nature and mission of Orthodoxy in Britain. Most of us are converts and we might well ask ourselves what we were converted to. I know that in my own case I was received by Archimandrite Barnabas, a Welshman, into the Orthodox Church, not into the Russian Church. He was a man who lived and prayed largely alone, except on Sundays and Feast Days when he was often joined by a great variety of people - Greek, Russian, English, Welsh. He did not attract the spectacular attention that others may have done; yet his lonely witness and his legacy were all the more sober and stable for that. I was never given the impression that I had rejected my past church life or had moved into a foreign enclave. Orthodoxy was a continuation and a fulfilment of all that I had inherited from my native environment.

One's experience of Christianity is affected by one's physical place in the world - geography, landscape and climate, flora and fauna - as well as by Word and Sacrament. We recognise that every Eucharistic community, standing before its holy table in every place, is the whole, universal Church, and is at the same time the local Church. Even when there has been an influx of strangers bringing their own traditions, these feed into the life of the local Church and adapt to the environment. The Catholic Church in these islands of ours was fed by the Christian experience of Egyptians, Romans, Celts, Saxons, Normans and many others. Its historic presence here goes back at least as far as the 2nd Century AD.

For first millennium, as we know, the Faith of the Church in Western Europe was not divided from that of the churches in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. The Pope of Rome was our Orthodox Patriarch, *primus inter pares* with those of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople. After its break with the Undivided Church the Roman Patriarchate underwent more and more division, especially following the Protestant Reformation that led to so much controversy and bloodshed across Western Europe. By the end of the second millennium wars, revolutions and genocide had given rise to a Diaspora of Eastern Christians who settled in Western nations. Greeks, Russians, Serbs, Romanians etc all contributed to a new Orthodox Christian presence in the West.

For the first time in a thousand years Christians in our islands were able to experience something of our lost Orthodox heritage here in our own land. For many of us this resulted in the recognition that this was the Faith in the form that we had always sought

and in which we had always believed. Over the last fifty years or so we converted to Orthodoxy, mostly in its Russian manifestation. This frequently produced a sort of artificial Russian-ness as in our enthusiasm we confused ethnic customs and traditions with the Tradition of Holy Orthodoxy. We are all familiar with this convert exuberance that causes some clergy and laity go around looking as though they had just fallen out of Nineteenth Century Russia and wish they were back in it. There is something rather worrying about such 'convertitis' in that it is not likely to bear lasting fruit. I spent several years myself with this mind-set - full beard, long hair and all - until I realised how irrelevant it was. Subsequent generations do not normally share their parents' wish to conform to a foreign identity.

This is equally true of the children and grandchildren of the Orthodox Diaspora who, despite their parents' best endeavours, will not grow up to be Greeks or Russians but will become enculturated by the lands in which they settled. This is what has always happened and as is it should be. The Greek Archdiocese in Britain has until recently been so anxious to keep the Church Greek that it has lost many of its young people who now know themselves to be simply British, and the same will be true of the new wave of Russian immigrants since the Moscow Patriarchate of today has a clear policy of keeping control of the spiritual, cultural and national allegiance of its Diaspora. The Orthodox church is only Russian in Russia, or in the chaplaincies set up to serve the spiritual and pastoral needs of Russian nationals spending a limited period of time abroad. It can have no claim on those who have chosen to live here permanently. Although Russian immigration to this country during the Twentieth Century brought a wonderful transfusion of renewed life into our Faith, it has not obliterated what was already here, namely our own Christian history of nearly 1800 years. It is a dangerous delusion to assume that any particular national or ethnic group is the sole possessor of the Orthodox Christian Tradition.

Fr John