

The Dominican Experience in Russia

Peter Knowles OP

Recently the Dominican Order has been formally and canonically established in Russia and the Ukraine. This is an event that would have been undreamt of only a few short years ago. But now the question poses itself very clearly: What lies ahead for this new phenomenon? To frame the question in more precise terms: What should be its field of action?

The history of the Dominican Order in the vast lands of Russia over the past five hundred years consists of spasmodic sallies, made by individual members of the Order which have left little trace. In the last decades of the 15th century there was a Croatian Dominican, Benjamin, among the equipe of scholars centred round the bishop of Novgorod, Gennady. One of this group's works was the translation of the Books of Wisdom from the Vulgate Latin into Slavonic. A more exotic and enigmatic Dominican figure who had a part to play in the history of Russia was Maximus the Greek. An admirer of Savonarola, he entered the Dominican community of San Marco in Florence in 1501. After abandoning that life he is next heard of as a monk on Mt Athos at the monastery of Vatopedi. From here he was invited to travel to Moscow to help in the labour of translating Greek texts into Slavonic. As was the policy of the Russians at that time, Maximus was never permitted to return to Mt Athos (it was thought that he had learned too much about Russia's internal affairs) and he was imprisoned for some years. He eventually died in the Monastery of the Holy Trinity and St Serge outside Moscow in 1556.

The connection between the Dominicans and the Russian people was continued in a desultory way over the next centuries, but a true high point of activity was reached in the early part of this century in Moscow. A wealthy couple, Vladimir Abrikossov, and his wife Anna (who had been educated in Cambridge at Girton) had been received into the Catholic Church in Paris in the first decade of the century; some years later, while on a visit to Rome, they became Dominican Tertiaries. From that time on the Dominican element became enormously significant in their lives. They set up their house in Moscow as a nucleus of Catholic

activity, and being in extremely easy financial circumstances, were able to devote all their efforts to this "apostolate". Educating the young, catechising children, assisting the poor, and evening study circles became their whole life. Vladimir was soon ordained a priest of the Byzantine Rite, and served in the domestic chapel. Young women were attracted to this life in increasing numbers, and soon had formed a community of Dominican Sisters around Anna, now become Mother Catherine. This small community barely survived the upheaval of the revolution, but in the early twenties this corporate manifestation of Dominican life faded away with the arrest and imprisonment of Mother Catherine and the exile to the West of Father Vladimir. It was then that began the long, dark hopeless years of Communism. Despite all, there were those of the Abrikossov Moscow circle that hung on doggedly to the Church and their links with the Dominican Order. The sisters trained in the ideals of Mother Catherine (perhaps, to our eyes, a somewhat over vigorous educator) plodded on forceful and faithful through those grey years of persecution, starvation, arrests and the whole desperate disillusionment that existence under Stalin offered. Their monument is the establishment of the Order of Preachers as a visible community in their impoverished homeland. Without them this might not have come about. The bones of these martyrs lie scattered and unremarked, just as their correspondence, pathetic notes, reports and requests lie scattered and unremarked in the archives of the Dominican Order. We know that the dead shall rise at the Resurrection, but what of the record of their martyrdom?

Constructed on the sacrifices and prayers of the past a new stage has been reached. It is a situation that has never occurred in Russia before. But, to quote a deservedly little known 19th century Russian novelist: "What is to be done?"

It must be recalled at this point that some years ago the Church in Russia and Ukraine celebrated the millennium of its baptism. The thousand years of faith in these lands have been centuries of a quite successful importing of the Byzantine construct of theology and worship from the Mediterranean world to a Slavonic one; so successful, on one plane, was this importation, that the Russian Church and the Russian State have always been synonymous, at least externally, until the temporary aberration of the past seventy Soviet years. The Orthodox Church was able to hold its place in any portrayal of Russian culture, even after the set-back caused by Peter the Great's founding of the Russian Empire, and the wholesale secularisation of Russian culture and life that ensued. Even today the liturgical phraseology of Church Slavonic can still be heard, however faintly, behind the modern Russian

language.

In principle, the interpenetration of Church and nation still holds true today. The believing and practising adherents of the Russian Church may be numerically very few, and their knowledge of Orthodoxy sadly weak, but none the less they are the established Church of the country. What is the newly-arrived Dominican presence to do in the face of this ancient and all pervasive structure? What do the Dominicans expect, and what does the existing local Church expect of the Dominicans?

It is a fact of history that during the past two hundred years the sharp, clear lines of Latin Church practice have provided an attractive allure for those Russians who have come into contact with them. This fascination can be seen especially during the doldrums of Church life in 19th century Russia, when many members of aristocratic families, knowing surprisingly little of their own Church's traditions, passed over to Latin Catholicism. The annals of that era are crowded with names that could compose a roll-call of families prominent in Russian history: Golitzin, Gagarin, Tolstoi, Volkonsky, Shouvaloff. The Western form of Christianity beckoned invitingly to members of a leisured society, who had from their youth wandered through the churches and monuments of Italy and France during their annual exodus to Western and Southern Europe. There they met and conversed with clergy and laity of the Latin Church. To some Russian eyes the Latin Church offered a self-assured ability to direct all comers along a well-swept path to salvation. The members of the 19th century Russian intelligentsia and nobility maintained only a minimal contact with their Church, and this contact was merely ritual and seasonal, not in the least liturgical or sacramental. Given this imbalance in their lives they sought the religious guidance they needed, and then avidly accepted, from the Latin world of spiritual directors, retreats and convent parlours. Among some sections of Russian society today, the same high regard for the seeming clinical hygiene of Rome's spiritual world is to be found. However innocently misinformed this evaluation of the Latin Church may be (clean houses come with their own demons), it is still favoured by some of today's former Soviet citizens just as it was by the Tsar's subjects a century or so ago. To our minds the style and patterns of the Latin Church have altered so much since the days of Pius IX and Leo XIII, but not to the modern Russian convert, for whom Rome remains the steady guiding light, clear, certain and above all authoritative. It may be that it is this authoritative clarity that the Dominicans with their history of preaching and intellectual life are expected to provide.

There are of course some Russian or Ukrainian citizens who are

both Catholic and native born, but the majority of such Latin Rite Catholics in Russia and Ukraine although they are citizens of those lands, are in fact Polish, Lithuanian, or German by blood and domestic tradition. These Latin Catholics have now come up out of the cellars of the past to set about obtaining churches where they can worship in tranquillity. Now they are busy forming parochial groups, catechising the young, and, generally speaking, publicly living the religious tradition that was until recently their secret heritage. The descendants of political exiles and deportees sent over the last 150 years "to Siberia" from their homelands in Eastern Europe are now to be found scattered in every part of Russia and the other republics. It is clear that after the long passage of time they cannot, and indeed they do not wish to go "back" to a country that may have been the background memory of their family life, but of which they and their parents and even grandparents have had no immediate experience. Those countries have been totally transformed since their ancestors were forced eastward into exile and even the language has altered with the years. Although the long period of time away from their forefathers' homeland has acclimatised them to their present region, they have never become acclimatised to the regional Church, the Russian Orthodox Church. They remain Latin Rite (or in many cases Protestants) and it is within that style of sacramental and devotional practice that they rightly feel at home and on sure ground. It is these believers that make up the flock awaiting the ministrations of the bands of Latin clergy who are now arriving among them in such numbers. Among these are the Dominicans from the West who are coming to join the handful of Dominicans who are native born. Their task is a delicate and exacting one.

At this point it should be recalled that there are other Catholics in Russia and the Ukraine. For four hundred years people in the South-West Ukraine have worshiped in the Byzantine Rite, while holding allegiance to the See of Rome. Buffeted by opposition and persecution in Tsarist as well as Soviet times, they have persisted doggedly in these two allegiances until the time has arrived when they too are free to emerge from the underground. Centuries of suffering as well as their comparatively large numbers have given these Ukrainian Catholics a firm foundation on which to stand and face the future. They know who they are, and have become adept at defending and promoting their position. They have their own hierarchy, have opened seminaries for the training of priests, and have received back many of their churches.

To the North the story of the Russian Catholics of Byzantine Rite is quite other than that of the Ukrainians. It is a very sad story, with a heroic past and a confused present. The "Russian Catholic Movement"

started in St Petersburg some 80 odd years ago, with the opening of a small house church for a handful of Russians, presided over by the heroic Leonid Fedorov, Exarch for Russian Catholics of Oriental Rite. We have already spoken about the Moscow parish and the Abrikossov couple and their direct connection with the Dominicans. Their fate was shared by their fellow Russian Catholics of St Petersburg. All the hopes of the fledgling flock were stifled at the Revolution. A few managed to escape to the West, but most of the remainder spent long years in Soviet prisons and camps. Those who were left at liberty were not able to support the Church structure, and, at least within the Soviet borders, the movement appeared to have sunk without trace. Even today we can only form a confused picture of the state of this group of Byzantine Rite Catholics within Russia.

The Dominicans in Russia and the Ukraine are there precisely as members of a Latin Rite Order with its own long history of traditions, customs and cast of mind. Their field of mission is the pastoral and educational care of the multitude of Latin Rite citizens of those countries and not (unless in the most exceptional of circumstances) the Catholics of Eastern Rite. In their encounters with Oriental Catholics a generous minded respect, born of a maturity of faith, will be required of them. The potential for the Dominicans to create obstacles to the progress of the local Church cannot be ignored. There are two obvious ways that would harm the delicate relationship and balance of encounters between Eastern and Western Catholics. The first is born of misplaced missionary zeal, and consists in "converting" local people who come to them irrespective of the ecclesial origins, potential or actual, of the neophyte. It is an example of Latin Rite imperialism that sees conversion to "the Faith" as the only desideratum, and is impatient of such secondary questions as the native Rite of the individual. The "follow-on" of entry into the Church is vital, and must be experienced in the ecclesiastical ambience that by mentality and culture have been long present in the region. It is also a hereditary right that should not be withheld. The overwhelming numerical preponderance of the Latin Rite throughout the world (the inheritance of the first wave of Western colonialism) does not permit it to disregard the equally lawful, if less numerous, other Rites that join with the Latin Rite to form the Catholic Church. The crisis within the Latin Rite itself that is now seeking a resolution in "enculturation" should be a clear message that Church unity is not Church uniformity.

The second attitude can be just as damaging to the Church. This method is a sort of "miscegenation" by which is understood here the setting apart of a section of the Latin Religious Order as an Eastern Rite

branch, or province. Several Religious Orders adopted this practice in the last century. It was thought to offer the best of both worlds: the religious training, theological education and discipline of the Latin Order, and the opportunity to administer the sacraments and have the services and Divine Liturgy in an Oriental Rite. Considered to be an efficient means of combining the most positive elements of both traditions, it in fact results in a frustrating serving of two masters. One master always comes out as the winner. Because the domestic regime and formation of the members belong to the Latin Religious Order and its style of functioning, the "internal" spirituality is of necessity Latin: the external display of liturgical worship is all that is Oriental and its influence finishes at the church door. This is a hollow simulation of one form of church practice, since the engine that directs it comes from another tradition. In such a situation there can be no inner harmony, but only a constant shifting from one plane to another. A Rite cannot be reduced merely to one among many ways of performing external liturgical actions. A Rite is born of a theological, cultural and artistic historical interplay: Rite is the face or person of a Church and cannot be taken away from its own history to mask the history of another Church. This "masking" attitude, born of a desire for quick returns and sure-footed efficiency, has never achieved anything of depth or permanence. It pursued the Abrikossov circle, who attempted to use a Dominican system of religious formation with the Sisters, and even combined elements from the Dominican Office books into the Byzantine Services. Rumours of some such plan of hybrid life for Dominicans in Ukraine and Russia have been heard in the past years. Any attempt to create a formal structure to preserve such an aberration will in the short term prove damaging and in the long term futile. Of all the Latin Religious Orders the Dominicans should be the first to eschew this curiosity, since they were the first ones to institute such a missionary device, the "Friars of Unity", to work among the Armenians. By erosion, all that the Armenian Friars had of their own was their language. The Armenian Rite, at first so respected and honoured by the Order, was laid aside for the Dominican Missal and Breviary, translated into Armenian.

These clear lessons of the past cannot be passed over. One must not seek to "erase the register of time". How simple and straightforward it seems to ignore the past and make a new start. Nevertheless alive to the complex and rich history of faith in Christ in Russia and Ukraine, the Dominican "missionary" has to have a generous mind and a sensitivity of spirit towards a people who seek God in such appalling and confused conditions. This state of affairs unfortunately will not be cured for decades.