

## THE BULGARIAN OLD CALNEDAR ORTHODOX CHURCH – BACKGROUND, STRUCTURE, STATISTICAL DATA

The Bulgarian Old Calendar Orthodox Church (BOCOC) comprises the clergy, monks and laity who, after the words of the Venerable Maximus the Confessor (cf. “Ecclesiological Position of the Bulgarian Old Calendar Orthodox Church”), strive to become faithful children of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church to the best of their ability by professing the Holy Orthodox faith correctly in order to attain salvation. They categorically dissociate themselves from the attempts at a new reading and understanding of the Orthodox Tradition in the spirit of the so-called ecumenism, which a number of Spirit-bearing Orthodox hierarchs and theologians of the twentieth century defined as an ecclesiological heresy, and even as a pan-heresy or ultra-heresy. As a theological vision and religious practice, ecumenism penetrated the life of the local Orthodox churches as early as the years between the two world wars, but it became especially intrusive from the 60ies of the twentieth century onwards. It is exactly ecumenism that lies at the root of the church calendar reform which took place in the diocese of the Bulgarian Patriarchate in 1968. This reform had shattered the liturgical unity of the local churches since the 20ies of the twentieth century and became a tool for the totalitarian state in Bulgaria for dealing a blow to the connection between the festive customs and traditions of our people and the church liturgy.

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Soon after establishing their political power in Bulgaria, the communist regime completely subordinated the hierarchy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) as well. Following the tried and tested method of the Soviet power, the political regime in Sofia did not contrive to destroy the Church physically, but started working towards its marginalization, moral weakening and transformation into an obedient means for the achievement of its own aims mostly related to its foreign policy.

During the first decades of the Cold War until the beginning of the 60ies of the twentieth century, in line with the antagonism between the Eastern bloc and the Western world, confrontation was created between the Orthodox churches from the socialist countries, grouped around the Moscow Patriarchate, and the Constantinople Patriarchate and the Greek Autocephalous Churches, which are treated as part of the political west, on the one hand, and

on the other – with the western Christian confessions – Roman Catholicism and Protestantism (at that time, a considerable number of protestant denominations had already united in the World Council of Churches). Meanwhile, in the socialist camp, intensive atheistic propaganda was being carried out and the religious freedom of citizens was violated. Attempts were simultaneously made to use the traditional views of bishops, clergy and laity of the local Orthodox churches for the foreign policy purposes of the USSR and their satellites from the Eastern bloc. Towards the late 50ies of the twentieth century, the Soviet foreign policy was redirected from a total opposition to the West towards attempts to earn adherents in different international organizations, in order to increase its influence on the international political stage. The church policy line also changed in accordance with this new state policy. The local Orthodox churches in the countries of the socialist camp had to adopt a different approach to establishing contacts with the heterodox denominations of the West within the framework of the ecumenical movement. This policy turned out to be in harmony with the aspirations for modernism and liberalism among a significant part of the hierarchy and the theological cadre of these churches. In pursuance of this new foreign policy strategy, in 1961, the Moscow Patriarchate, and after them the rest of the local Orthodox churches from the countries of the Eastern bloc, applied to and were accepted as members in the World Council of Churches.

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On 18<sup>th</sup> July 1968, the Synod of the Bulgarian Patriarchate published “Epistle to the Clergy and All Children of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church”, in which it announced the forthcoming reform to the church calendar. The starting date of the change in the calendar was determined to be 20<sup>th</sup> December (7<sup>th</sup> December old style) 1968. The reform was not embraced by Archimandrites Seraphim (Alexiev), Sergii (Yazadzhiev), Panteleimon (Staritski), hieromonk Seraphim (Dimitrievski), Abbess Seraphima (Liven) or the entire sisterhood of “Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God” convent in Sofia, Knyazhevo district. They sent the Bulgarian Patriarch Kiril a letter, in which they declared that they were unable to accept the reform in conscience since it was contrary to the liturgical Statutes, and to the liturgical and canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church. All of them – both Bulgarians and Russians – were spiritual children of St. Seraphim (Sobolev), Archbishop of Boguchar, the Wonderworker of Sofia, who until his repose in 1950 administered the parishes in Bulgaria formed by the Russian emigration after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. In June 1969, Patriarch Kiril prohibited

the clergy who disagreed with the church calendar reform from officiating. Archimandrite Seraphim (Alexiev) prematurely retired as an associate professor in the Theological Academy, and Archimandrite Sergii (Yazadzhiev) was expelled from it because of “impropriety”. The Patriarch himself repeatedly exerted pressure on the clerics to surrender their views, and also planned to destroy the “schismatic nest” of the Knyazhevo convent, which attracted Christian believers willing to profess their Orthodox faith in its wholeness and purity. These Christians acquired the nickname “Old Calendarists”, with which they are still referred to. Patriarch Kiril prepared the closing down of the convent and the banishment of all nuns from Knyazhevo, in twos or threes, to different monasteries around Bulgaria. According to another plan for the banishment of all nuns, those who adamantly refused to obey would have been sent to a difficult to access derelict monastery lacking even basic living conditions. On the part of the Church authorities, measures of repression were consistently taken against the sisters from the Knyazhevo convent and against those Christians who sympathized with their ecclesiastical views. The nuns were deprived of their main convent church “St. Apostle and Evangelist Luke”, as well as of the primary activity with which they earned their living - painting icons for the needs of the Synod. They were even denied the right to receive church candles - another source of income. The sisters who made ecclesiastical items (icon-stands for the home, shrouds, decorative candles, etc.), were made redundant by “Church Monopolies”. Mr. Zlati Zlatev, who was in charge of this department at Sofia Bishopric, was also fired for expressing his disagreement with the reformed church calendar.

The clerics, who were prohibited from serving liturgies, complied with the imposed penalty, although in conscience they did not feel connected with it since the punishment itself contradicted the canons of the Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, the retaliatory attitude towards those rejecting the calendar reform – the group of clergy and sisters from the Knyazhevo convent – became known abroad. The news that the Russian emigration charity foundation “Tolstoy” in the USA expressed their readiness to give refuge and financial support to the Knyazhevo nuns reached the leaders of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church Committee and other religious cults. The authorities realized that the problem with the Knyazhevo convent could attract the public attention of the Western world. At the same time the nuns appealed to Patriarch Kiril with a letter asking to be allowed to restore the liturgies in the convent. Otherwise, they would seek for another ecclesiastical jurisdiction where they could freely profess and practice the Orthodox faith in its wholeness and purity. Due to the danger of this issue acquiring international proportions and through the mediation of the BOC Committee,

Patriarch Kiril was forced to informally concede the right to serve “behind closed doors” to the clerics in the convent. This, on 23<sup>rd</sup> September (n.s.) 1970 the divine services in the Knyazhevo convent were restored, though in catacomb conditions.

However, in practice, the convent remained outside the administrative subordination to the Bulgarian Patriarchate, a situation it found itself in as early as December 1968, not because of some willful decision, but because of the reaction of Patriarch Kiril himself. The humble written request by Abbess Seraphima and the convent sisterhood from 2<sup>nd</sup> December (n.s.) 1968 to be allowed to continue their liturgical life according to the church calendar (the so-called “old style”) was met with refusal. They received a letter by Sofia Bishopric as of 12<sup>th</sup> December (n.s.) 1968 quoting Patriarch Kiril’s resolution: “This would mean excommunication from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.” The annual budget of the convent for 1969 presented to Sofia Bishopric for the routine yearly approval was returned to the convent with enclosed letter № 364 from 1<sup>st</sup> February of that same year. It reads as follows: “To the ex-abbess of the former convent in Knyazhevo. We return the enclosed budget since such a convent does not exist within the jurisdiction of the Holy Bishopric of Sofia.” Letter № 1400 from 17<sup>th</sup> Feb 1969 sent by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Patriarchate says: “To the former convent ‘Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God’, Knyazhevo district, Sofia. According to the resolution of the Holy Synod as of 4.02.1969, Protocol № 3, we would like to inform you that since you have been removed from the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, you cannot receive candles for church use at the established prices for the stauropegial and diocesan monasteries ...”

Despite the repressive attitude towards them, the nuns from the Knyazhevo convent, together with the small group of laity around them, did not cancel the ecclesiastical communion with the hierarchy of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, which was manifested in commemorating the Bulgarian Patriarch and the Bishop of Sofia at the relevant places in the church services. However, because of the new surge in the development of the ecumenical movement both as theory and practice during the 70ies and the beginning of the 80ies of the twentieth century, as well as due to the deeper and deeper involvement of the Bulgarian Patriarchate with it, the above mentioned clerics (with the exception of Archimandrites Panteleimon, who reposed in the Lord on 18<sup>th</sup> January, n.s., 1980 г.), together with the administration of the Knyazhevo convent decided that it was impossible to continue their ecclesiastical communion with the episcopate of the Patriarchate since this troubled their conscience in an unacceptable manner - the prayer

commemoration of the Bishop during every liturgy is a manifestation of complete agreement with him on all matters of faith. On 17<sup>th</sup> May 1983, the commemoration of the Bulgarian Patriarch and Bishop Maxim of Sofia was discontinued, which severed the ecclesiastical communion with the hierarchy of the Bulgarian Patriarchate. This originated the necessity to find a way out of an extremely complicated situation for a minority of Orthodox Christians, who found themselves without a hierarch. In a totalitarian state, it was absolutely impossible to try to openly and freely establish a connection with Orthodox bishops beyond the boundaries of the East-European bloc. It was unthinkable to receive some kind of legitimacy by the state authorities. The independent position of principle and the desire to protect the spiritual freedom of the Church from the interference of the state bodies contradicted the fundamental aspiration of the atheistic totalitarian regime to subordinate the Church, to drain it of its blood and to deprive it of its individuality in order to use it for the purposes of its policy. For all these reasons, the liturgical life of this small church community took place in strict catacomb conditions.

In the mid-80ies of the twentieth century, the administration of the catacomb community with the “Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God” convent as its centre established contacts with the Synod in Resistance of the True Greek Orthodox Church, which is not in ecclesiastical communion with the official Greek Church, either. During some “transit” travels through Bulgaria, the chairman of this Synod, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, secretly ordained new hieromonks in the Knyazhevo convent. In 1988, on a trip to Greece, in the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina, was ordained a priest Rossen Siromahov, who was eventually granted the monastic tonsure with the name Photii. Until the collapse of the communist dictatorship and for a short period of time after that, he served in the Knyazhevo convent in secret, while working as a lecturer in Sofia University.

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After the beginning of the political changes in the 90ies, the catacomb community was inspired with the hope that, in the new climate devoid of the threat of repression, the senior clergy of the Bulgarian Patriarchate would find the inner strength to firmly differentiate themselves from the destructive factors determining the decline, secularization and relativisation of the Orthodox faith and spirituality, and would start working towards their revival and towards the return to the traditional Orthodox values while taking steps to condemn ecumenism as an ecclesiological heresy officially, at a convocation, as well as to

restore the church calendar in the liturgical life of the Church. More than three years elapsed without any fundamental or constructive changes in the life of the official Bulgarian Church before it became clear for the community of clerics, monastics and laity in the Knyazhevo convent that it was not realistic to lay their hopes on the official episcopate. Therefore, they turned to the Synod in Resistance of the True Greek Orthodox Church requesting that a bishop was consecrated for their ecclesiastical and spiritual needs. The nominated candidate was hieromonk Fotii (Siromahov). The Bishop's cheirotonia was performed in the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina (Fili, Greece) on 17<sup>th</sup> January (n.s.) 1993 by four bishops from the Synod in Resistance and in the presence of a bishop from the Romanian Old Calendar Orthodox Church, too. The church community headed by Bishop Photii is self-governing, and this is explicitly specified in a document issued by the Synod in Resistance. In particular, it underlines the fact that "... Our Holy Synod in Resistance considers the Bulgarian traditionalists a sister-Church with whom we exist in a communion of faith and sacraments without any administrative subordination whatsoever, in exactly the same manner of communion as we have established with the Romanian Old Calendar Orthodox Church and with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia." (Bishops' Declaration sent to Bishop Photii of Triaditza, protocol № 175 as of 14 July /old style/ 1993).

## STATISTICAL DATA ABOUT THE BULGARIAN OLD CALENDAR ORTHODOX CHURCH

### FIRST HIERARCH AND CLERGYMEN

The Bulgarian Old Calendar Orthodox Church is headed by His Eminence Bishop Photii (Siromahov) of Triaditza. Currently, the jurisdiction of BOCOC comprises 24 clergymen, of whom 7 belong to the regular clergy (1 archimandrite, 4 hieromonks and 2 hierodeacons) and 17 to the secular clergy (14 priests and 3 deacons).

The administrative centre of BOCOC is at the "Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God" Cathedral in Sofia. The official publication of BOCOC is the "Orthodox Word" journal.

Official Internet site: <http://www.bulgarian-orthodox-church.org/>

## CHURCHES AND CHAPELS

In the years following 1993, the congregation of BOCOC quickly expanded, and later on it grew gradually but steadily. It is organized into parishes and communities.

One cathedral and 14 parish churches and chapels fall under the jurisdiction of BOCOC. All of them were built after 1993.

1. “Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God” Cathedral, Sofia
2. Church of the Seven Saints, Enlighteners of Bulgaria, Blagoevgrad
3. “St Knyaz Boris-Mihail, Equal to the Apostles” Church, Burgas
4. “The Blessed St. Xenia of Petersburg” Church, Varna
5. “The Venerable St. Phylotheia of Turnovo” Church, Veliko Turnovo
6. Church in honour of the “Joy to All Who Sorrow” Icon of the Mother of God, Velingrad
7. “Sts. Constantine and Helen” Church, Vratza
8. “St. John of Rila” Church, Dupnitsa
9. “St. Onoufrios of Gabrovo” Church, Gabrovo
10. “Holy Trinity” Church, Gotse Delchev
11. “St. Prophet Elias” Church, Pleven
12. “St. George the Victorious “ Church, the city of Stamboliski, Plovdiv and Pazardjik parish.
13. “St. Nicholas the Wonderworker” Church, the village of Polikraishte, Veliko Turnovo district
14. “The Life Giving Spring Icon of the Mother of God” Church, Sandanski.
15. “The Holy Martyr Dimitar of Sliven” Church, Sliven.

In a number of other towns and villages in the country there are groups of believers belonging to BOCOC who still do not have their own temples, and travel in order to attend divine services in other towns and cities. They are taken care of spiritually where they live, too, by the BOCOC priests.

There is a functioning Sunday school at the cathedral in Sofia.

## MONASTERIES

The jurisdiction of BOCOC extends over the monastic brotherhood at the Bishop's home, one monastery and one convent.

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2. The monastic brotherhood at the Bishop's home with "St. Mark of Ephesus" chapel consists of the governing Bishop, one hierodeacon and one monk.
3. "St. Theodosios of Turnovo" hesychasterion, the village of Bogdan, Karlovo district. Inhabited by two monks – one archimandrite and one hierodeacon. Monastery temple - "The Entry of the Most Holy Mother of God into the Temple of Jerusalem".
- 4.
5. "Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God" convent, Knyazhevo – Sofia. With its 49 nuns and catechumens, it is the largest monastic boarding-house in Bulgaria.

Convent temples: "St. Apostle and Evangelist Luke", "St. Seraphim, the Wonderworker of Sofia", "Protection of the Most Holy Mother of God" chapel.

## CHURCH JURISDICTIONS WITH WHICH BOCOC IS IN CANONICAL COMMUNION

The Bulgarian Old Calendar Orthodox Church is in full ecclesiastical communion with the Greek Synod in Resistance of the True Greek Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Old Calendar Church and with this part of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia which does not accept the Union with the Patriarchate of Moscow from 2007.