

Reader Konstantin Todorov

The Glorification of St. Seraphim of Sofia by the Russian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church – Bulgarian Patriarchate

The Hierarchical Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (ROC-MP) that took place in Moscow on February 2-3, 2016, decreed to glorify St. Seraphim, Wonderworker of Sofia. The glorification is scheduled for February 26, 2016, in Sofia and it will be performed jointly by the ROC-MP and the Bulgarian Patriarchate (BOC-BP)¹. In connection with this the following questions arise:

I. Do the ROC-MP and BOC-BP have the moral right to glorify St. Seraphim?

First of all, the ecclesiastical glorification requires that those who are glorifying a certain Saint think like him and follow his spiritual legacy as a Patristic one. If that is not so, this means that they are not glorifying him on religious motives, but for some other ecclesiastical-political causes. Now, do ROC-MP and BOC-BP have the same faith as St. Seraphim had?

On the problem of the New Style:

During the last few years representatives of both the Moscow Patriarchate and the Bulgarian Patriarchate more than once promoted the thesis that although he made statements in favor of the Old Calendar, Archbishop Seraphim would have preferred the unity of the Church and would have never caused a schism on account of the calendar issue, as some of his spiritual children have done due to misunderstanding of his ideas (the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria

¹ St. Seraphim, Wonderworker of Sofia was glorified by the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria in 2002.

is meant here). This thesis cannot be understood in another way than as an assertion that St. Seraphim would have obeyed and would have accepted the New Calendar, although he did not agree with its implementation, but he would not have separated himself from the New Calendar hierarchy if he had been put in the position to choose between the two options.

The correctness of such speculative assertions can be examined if we refer to the works of the Saint himself. In his paper “Concerning the New and the Old Calendars” presented at the Congress of Moscow in 1948, he pointed out that on the issue of the celebration of the Pascha, the Apostolic Synod, the First OEcumenical Synod and some Local Synods delivered judgments, and whoever dared make changes went against their authority. Commenting on the Seventh Canon of the Second OEcumenical Synod and the Ninety-fifth Canon of the Synod in Trullo, which decreed how the heretics should be received into the Orthodox Church, Archbishop Seraphim brings to the attention the fact that the Holy Fathers treated the Quartodecimans, i.e. those Christians who celebrated Pascha on 14th of Nisan together with the Jews in the same way as Arians, Macedonians, Sabbatians, Novatians and other heretics and received them through Chrismation. Thus he underlines that the issue of the ecclesiastical liturgical calendar is far from insignificant and subsidiary.

But as far as the Orthodox New Calendarists (with the exception of the Finnish Church) have not yet dared to change the Paschalion, the Holy Hierarch pays more attention to the New Calendar in its compromise form – only for the fixed feasts, in which form it is practiced by the New Calendar Local Churches. He says about it: “Such a mixed calendar cannot possibly be accepted by the Orthodox, because it simultaneously gives rise to violations of other ecclesiastical ordinances, too, which are found in the Typikon and which we ought to observe sacredly and steadfastly, since we should not deviate from

obedience to our Mother, the Church. The New Calendarists are guilty of such disobedience.”

After exploring in detail all violations of the Typikon which result from the mixed, so-called “Revised Julian Calendar”, St. Seraphim concludes: “Furthermore, through their contempt for the Typikon, the New Calendarists commit the sin of disobedience to the Church publicly, conscientiously and audaciously.” And to those who claim that the violation of the Typikon is not a serious sin, because through it no apostasy from the dogmas of the Church is performed, the Holy Hierarch reminds: “But the words of Christ, “If he neglects to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican,” do not refer to the violation of one or another dogmatic truth of our Faith. And yet, according to the testimony of these Divine words themselves, anyone of us who does not show obedience to the Church is to be cut off from Her and enters into the ranks of great sinners, because in the case in question the severest punishment is imposed: excision from the Church... Just as contempt for dogmatic or canonical ordinances leads to apostasy from Orthodoxy, so contempt for the Typikon also leads to such apostasy.”

From the witness of St. Seraphim himself it is not difficult to understand that he would not have fallen into “disobedience to our Mother, the Church” and would not have ventured “into the ranks of great sinners”, so as not to receive the “severest punishment”. It is obvious that the Holy Hierarch would have rather shown “disobedience” to the New Calendarist Hierarchy, which, according to his words, is precisely committing the sin of disobedience to the Church. Having in mind these words, can the New Calendarists claim that they have the same faith as St. Seraphim had and do they have the moral right to canonize him as a saint?

On the issue of ecumenism:

Let us consider some positions in the document entitled “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World,”² which was approved by the heads of all the official Local Autocephalous Churches at their Preconciliar meeting in Chambesy, January 21 to 28, 2016, and to compare them with thoughts that St. Seraphim laid out in his paper “Does the Russian Orthodox Church Need to Participate in the Ecumenical Movement?” delivered at the Congress of Moscow in 1948.

Concerning the essence of the ecumenical movement³

“One of the principal bodies in the history of the ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC)... As a structured inter-Christian body, the WCC, along with other inter-Christian organizations and regional bodies, such as the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Middle East Council of Churches, despite the fact that they do not include all Christian Churches and confessions, carry out an important mission, promoting the unity of the Christian world...

The Orthodox Church, due to the ecumenical spirit and love for mankind by which she is distinguished and in accordance with the divine dispensation to “have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4), has always fought for the restoration of Christian unity. Therefore, the Orthodox participation in the movement for the restoration of Christian unity does not run counter to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church. It is the

² This document was prepared for adoption by so called Pan-Orthodox Council, to be held in June 2016. The enclosed excerpts from the document are according to its text, published on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate - <https://mospat.ru/en/2016/01/28/news127362/>.

³ In the juxtaposition below the excerpts of the Chambesy document are given in normal font, while those from the presentation of St. Seraphim are in italics.

consistent expression of the apostolic faith and Tradition in a new historical context.”

“Who really stands behind the ecumenical movement? Freemasons, longtime foes of the Orthodox Church... Ultimately, when dealing with the ecumenical question, we must recognize that, going back to the very origin of ecumenism, there stands before us, not only the age-old enemies of our Orthodox Church, but the father of lies and ruin himself—the Devil. In former centuries, he sought to destroy the Holy Church by assaulting Her with all sorts of heresies, specifically, by trying to mix Orthodox with heretics. And he is doing this now by using ecumenism and its inexhaustible Masonic capital.”

Concerning the ecumenical understanding of the “churches” and the dogma of the Church. Is the Church divided?

“The unity by which the Church is distinguished in her ontological nature is impossible to shatter. The Orthodox Church acknowledges the existence in history of other Christian Churches and confessions which are not in communion with her, and at the same time believes that her relationships with them should be based on a speedy and more accurate elucidation by them of all ecclesiological topics, especially the teaching on Sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession as a whole...

The bilateral theological dialogues that the Orthodox Church conducts today, as well as her participation in the movement for the restoration of Christian unity, are grounded in her Orthodox consciousness and the spirit of ecumenicity, and are aimed at seeking the lost Christian unity...

Such manifold activities of the Orthodox Church derive from the sense of responsibility and from the conviction that mutual understanding, cooperation and common efforts towards Christian unity are of fundamental importance...

The Orthodox member Churches of the WCC consider sine qua non for their participation in the WCC the key article of its Constitution which states that only those Churches and confessions that acknowledge Jesus Christ as God and Savior, according to the Scriptures, and believe in God glorified in the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, may become WCC members.”

“We Orthodox Christians confess that, strictly speaking, only one community of true, faithful Christians can be called “the Church,” as established by God Himself for our salvation. To call every heretical community “the Church” is to have an incorrect understanding of the word and to trample upon the dogma of the Church as it is taught in our Faith, as laid down by the ninth article of the Symbol of the Faith. Evidently, ecumenists, pointing to the great number of denominations—so-called “Christian churches”—which are members of the ecumenical movement, attach great significance to their numbers. But the manifestation of a falsehood in many varieties rather than in few ones does not make it the truth; on the contrary, it all the more distorts and negates the truth.

However, the crux of the issue is that ecumenists, and unfortunately those from Orthodox milieu, have not a proper concept of the Church. They consider all those who have received Christian baptism, of whatever kind, to belong to the Church, thereby placing both genuine Christians and heretics in the same ranks and recognizing all of them as the Body of Christ...

Orthodox ecumenists are not only disobedient to the Orthodox Church; they also openly charge Her with the sin of division. True, they attribute this sin not only to the Orthodox Church but to all churches of other confessions as well. Yet it was heretics who created heresy, not the Orthodox Church; on the contrary, the Orthodox Church has defended, with the blood of Her Martyrs, the purity of the Orthodox Faith from heresies. Had the Church not struggled thusly, then Orthodox truth, through its having intermingled with heretical

falsehood, would have ceased to exist, and, together with it, the Orthodox Church would have vanished from off the face of the earth. Consequently, we must not fault the Orthodox Church for not mingling with heretics and for separating Herself from them; rather, we must bless Her for Her martyric decision to make such a division, a division that was indispensable because of the heretics' rebellion against the Church, against God-revealed and Patristic truths, and even against God Himself. However, the fact that ecumenists even make such an accusation shows just how great are the sins of audacity, self-opinion, and pride into which they have fallen: They have appropriated for themselves the right to judge the Orthodox Church."

On the way of achieving unity

“Upon the successful conclusion of a theological dialogue, a decision, based on the consensus of all Local Orthodox Churches, shall be made on the pan-Orthodox level, concerning the restoration of ecclesiastical communion.”

“There is only one instance in which Orthodox representatives can be present at ecumenical conferences, and that is if the conference organizers were to announce to the Orthodox Church, on behalf of all of the so-called “Christian churches”, members of the ecumenical movement, a readiness to renounce all of their heretical delusions and reunite themselves with the Orthodox Faith. But, of course, those in charge of ecumenical conferences have never made any such announcement nor will they ever do so, because heterodox Christians, in general, simply do not think about renouncing their heresies and reuniting themselves with the Orthodox Faith.”

On the benefit of the presence of the Orthodox at the ecumenical conferences

“It is necessary that the Orthodox Church continues to bear her witness to the divided Christian world on the basis of the apostolic Tradition and her faith.

We pray that all Christians work together in order to bring nearer the day in which the Lord will fulfill the hope of the Orthodox Churches, and *there shall be one fold, and one shepherd* (Jn 10:16)...

Accordingly, for theological and pastoral reasons, she has been favorably disposed to dialogue with various Christian Churches and confessions, and to participation in the present-day ecumenical movement in general, in the belief that she thus bears her active witness to the plenitude of Christ's truth and her spiritual treasures before those who are external to her, and pursuing an objective goal – to tread the path to unity.”

“One must not fail to bring attention to the negative impact the participation of Orthodox representatives at ecumenical conferences has. Their presence at these conferences confirms heterodox Christians in their belief that all Christian confessions belong to the One, OEcumenical, Orthodox Church.

For our part, we do not consider the presence of Orthodox ecumenists at ecumenical gatherings to signify at all that Christians of other creeds belong to the True Church of Christ. Just as far from the truth of the Orthodox Faith as they are on account of their religious errors, so do they remain. Orthodox representation at ecumenical conferences simply informs us that the Orthodox have begun to fall away from their Orthodoxy. It is difficult to decide where Orthodox fall away from the Orthodox Church more—in their writings or by their presence at ecumenical conferences? Their presence at ecumenical gatherings is, in essence, a betrayal of the Orthodox teaching on the Church, expressed in the ninth article of the Creed. Orthodox representation at such gatherings—which ecumenists call “all-church conferences,” “meetings of Christian churches,” and “the one, holy church of Christ”—is, to all intents and purposes, a confirmation of the Orthodox Church being “the One, Holy Church of Christ” together with every heretical error. Consequently, without one word, without anything written, Orthodox representatives, merely by their

presence ... will be contributing to the subversion of our faith in the dogma of the Church.

One should not forget how stubbornly and fanatically heretics hold on to their religious convictions. Reunion with the Orthodox Church, as reality shows, occurs only in isolated cases, very rare and exceptional ones.

Orthodox ecumenists give the heterodox grounds to think that the Orthodox are ready to unite with them on the basis of a common belief in the Incarnate Christ, even though the heterodox still hold to their misbeliefs.”

Do Orthodox Christians need to participate in the ecumenical movement?

“The Orthodox Church, being the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, in her profound ecclesiastical consciousness firmly believes that she occupies a central place in matters relating to the promotion of Christian unity within the contemporary world...

The Orthodox Church, which unceasingly prays “*for the union of all,*” has always promoted dialogue with those separated from her, both far and near, playing a leading role in seeking ways and means to restore the unity of believers in Christ, participating in the ecumenical movement since its inception, and contributing to its formation and further development...

The participation in the current bilateral theological dialogues announced at the Pan-Orthodox Conferences is the result of a unanimous decision of all Holy Local Orthodox Churches whose duty is to always take an active and lasting part in their work...”

“Let us remember its essence and its aim, and let us wholly reject the ecumenical movement. It constitutes a falling-away from the Orthodox Faith, a betrayal of and treason against Christ, which are things that we must avoid in every way...

Our presence at heretical and Masonic societies will have, to a certain degree, the nature of an endorsement of those societies...

Therefore, let us have absolutely nothing to do with any association with the ecumenical movement; let us be guided in this matter by the words of Holy Scripture: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the impious” (Psalm 1:1)!”

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The juxtaposition of the two documents is so eloquent that it does not need any comment. It is about two diametrically opposite and mutually exclusive positions. And this is without even treating the specific ecumenical concepts of the Roman Catholicism as sister-church, the theology of the two lungs of Christianity, the baptismal theology and so on, which the creators of the document deliberately have not mentioned in order to make it less controversial. Therefore, do the “Orthodox” ecumenists have the moral right to glorify St. Seraphim as a Saint? Do they have the same faith he had; do they accept his words as patristic? Are they able to venerate as Saint, the person who uncompromisingly unmasks their movement as inspired by the devil and managed by the enemies of the Orthodox Church? The answer is obvious. Their behavior is also very eloquent. It was less than ten days since his canonization by the Hierarchical Synod in Moscow, when Patriarch Cyril of Moscow held his unprecedented meeting with Pope Francis in Cuba, as if to immediately blaspheme the memory of the Holy Hierarch and to show the true attitude towards his legacy of those who glorify him now.

II. Which circles opposed the current glorification of St. Seraphim?

First of all, these were the church liberals and the overt ecumenists both in Bulgaria and in Russia who to some extent are in certain opposition to the official hierarchy “from the left”. Some adherents of ecumenism in Bulgaria

showed openly their exasperation and discontent with the glorification. In two consecutive broadcasts of the TV show “Faith and Society” a number of vilifications and slanders were hurled against the Saint (including those of an impure life). The campaign aimed at convincing the audience that St. Seraphim does not deserve to be glorified by the Church. The main objection against the glorification was that he was in complete disagreement with the contemporary ecumenical politics of both the Moscow and the Bulgarian Patriarchates, because the personality of the Saint by no means can fit in it. This objection of the church liberals and ecumenists is completely well-grounded. The attempts of the ecumenical hierarchy of both official Churches to use the name of the Wonderworker of Sofia for their ecclesiastical-political purposes through his glorification are totally indecorous. As shown above, he is not only a convinced opponent of ecumenism, but he also subjects it to theologically substantiated criticism and annihilating exposure. Yet from the viewpoint of the True Orthodox Christians, this is not in the least an obstacle for the veneration of the Archbishop among the Holy Hierarchs of the Orthodox Church; on the contrary – it was one of the most important grounds for his glorification by the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria in 2002. As it is well-known, the Orthodox Faith is a *sine qua non* for the glorification of a Hierarch. The charges, which sounded on behalf of some Russian liberal theologians, that during all of his lifetime Archbishop Seraphim was allegedly “looking for heresies everywhere” and that with his critiques he destroyed “what was the pride of the Russian theology in XX c.”⁴ are even another convincing confirmation of his Orthodox views.

4 These are words of Dr. Protodeacon Andrey Kuraev during the TV show from February 20th this year, in which he took part from Moscow. The famous liberal theologian meant mainly the critique by St. Seraphim of the liberal trends in the Russian theology at the end of the XIX c. and the first half of the XX c. and especially “the achievements” of some representatives of the Theological Institute “St. Sergius of Radonezh” in Paris. Another author some time ago wrote that St. Seraphim “has trampled down with his crude monastic boots the filigree article” of Archpriest Sergey Bulgakov – his heretical teaching of the Sofia the Wisdom of God.

III. The critical attitude of some True Orthodox Christians towards St. Seraphim

In 1944, as a result of the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria, Archbishop Seraphim and his flock were torn away from the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and did not have any connection with it. By the way, at the end of the war the Synod itself did not exist for a certain period of time. In 1946 St. Seraphim joined the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. This fact is the reason why some True Orthodox Christians look upon the veneration of Archbishop Seraphim as a Saint with some reservations. The current glorification by the two official Patriarchates was the reason for the voicing of some opinions that he is “their” Saint and for assuming this act is a confirmation that the reservations towards his holiness are grounded – if he was not “theirs”, they would not have glorified him.

Indeed, it would have been very easy and clear if the ecumenists and New Calendarists glorified only “theirs” and left to us “ours”. But the reality is much more complex than such a black and white picture in which we can easily become oriented only on the basis of a few formal signs. Let us recall the words of the ever-memorable Hieromonk Seraphim (Rose) from his famous article “What does the Catacomb Church Think?": “The information from Metropolitan Philaret that Archimandrite Tavrion was a catacomb priest who joined the official church (the Moscow Patriarchate) without betraying his catacomb convictions and genuine Orthodoxy – may at first sight seem surprising. How can such a thing be? Are these two church bodies not entirely separate and mutually exclusive? Is the very joining of the official church not a betrayal of the catacomb position? In theory it would seem so, but often church life cannot fit convenient rational and canonical categories. So it is in this case.”

From 2000 onwards, the Moscow Patriarchate included in its ecclesiastical calendar a whole series of New Martyrs and Confessors who were glorified in

1981 by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and who had ceased both their communion with her and the commemoration of Metropolitan, later – Patriarch – Sergius (Stragorodsky). These are Metropolitan Cyril (Smirnov), Archbishop Seraphim (Samoilovich), Archbishop Peter (Zverev), Bishop Victor (Ostrovidov), Bishop Damszene (Tsedrik), Bishop Vasiliy (Zelentsov) and many other Hierarchs, Priests and laymen. Furthermore, in the heat of the fight for the independence of the Church, some of these Martyrs and Confessors considered the betrayal of Metropolitan Sergius so serious, that they regarded both him and his subordinate Hierarchs and clergy as apostates from Christ, and the Mysteries performed by them – as graceless and invalid. Here, for example, is what Bishop Victor (Ostrovidov) wrote:

“Mingling in one at the great and most holy Mystery of the Eucharist, in spite of the word of God, “those that believeth with the infidels” (cf. 2 Cor. 6, 14-18), the Holy Church and her foes⁵ who fight with her to death, the Metropolitan with this blasphemy of his, violates the prayerful meaning of the great Mystery and destroys its graceful significance for the eternal salvation of the souls of the Orthodox. Hence, the service not only becomes graceless due to the lack of grace of the serving person, but it becomes abomination in the eyes of God; therefore, both the performing and the participating persons are subject to double condemnation.”

In spite of that, in 2000 the Moscow Patriarchate glorified this Confessor, who considered it a graceless earthly organization. His relics were uncovered and translated to the Transfiguration Convent in Kirov and now lie there exposed for veneration. Should the fact that MP usurps the memory of those Martyrs and Confessors make us feel uncomfortable and renounce their veneration? On the contrary, we must unmask the wickedness of Sergianism, for which it is very

⁵ Bishop Victor means the order of Metropolitan Sergius to commemorate the Soviet government during the services.

important to include in its “pantheon” Confessors who shone forth in the struggle for freedom of the Church.

Likewise, for the supporters of ecumenism it is extremely important to include in the ranks of “their” Saints righteous persons like St. Seraphim, who shone forth in the struggle against the ecumenical heresy and the modernistic deviations from the patristic Faith. Thus the leaders of the apostasy mingle lies with truth, mix up concepts, and use the authority of the champions for the purity of the Faith in order to confuse the church people and to overcome their resistance against the betrayal of the Faith by the ecumenists. Through the glorification of the Wonderworker of Sofia they seem to say, “Behold, we are glorifying such a champion for the purity of the Faith, how can you think that we shall betray the Faith?”

But still a question is being posed, “Has St. Seraphim abandoned his principled position when he joined the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate in the middle 1940s?” With regard to ecumenism and the New Calendar, there cannot exist any doubt. St. Seraphim himself delivered his famous presentations against ecumenism and the New Calendar at the Congress of Moscow in 1948, after he joined the Patriarchate. But what about the Sergianism – did he not submit to Patriarch Alexis?

In this respect we must carefully take into consideration the specific historical conditions. In the 1940s, during World War II and immediately after it, the Soviet authorities gave some freedom to the development of church life, which started to recuperate. Owing to this relative freedom, St. Seraphim personally remained uninvolved in the sins of Sergianism – he never cooperated with the Soviet services in their destroying the Church and restraining Her freedom; he never permitted the subordination of the internal church life to please the Soviet authorities; he never cooperated with the authorities to achieve their political goals; he never uttered a praising word about the communist regime. Yes, it

must be said that he had this relative freedom and never experienced the pressure of the repressive apparatus. Precisely these were the historical circumstances until the end of the 1940s and the specific conditions in which he found himself in the relatively short time of these last four years of his life. And when this period was over and the first repressive measures against the Saint – deprivation of his position in Bulgaria and recall to the Soviet Union, which usually ended in exile to a remote monastery or sending to a camp – were going to be applied, he reposed in the Lord. From the distance of time, based on the information we have today from the published archival documents, and also taking into consideration the historical development after that, we can say that the hopes of St. Seraphim for further expansion of the church freedom in Russia and the opportunities for missionary work among the Russian people remained unjustified. His expectations that the change in the politics of the Soviet authorities towards the Church would remain permanent and that the positive tendencies would deepen were illusory. These hopes and expectations were an important factor for his decision to join the Moscow Patriarchate. They proved to be erroneous. The positive trends turned out to be only temporal tactical retreats of the atheistic regime that shortly thereafter once again began to restrict the church life. It is typical of men to make mistakes in their assessments and St. Seraphim is not an exception in this regard. Yet we must note that the absolute purity and unselfishness of the motives that guided him in his decisions and actions are above any suspicion. Ultimately, beyond doubt is his holiness, which is confirmed by God Himself through the immeasurable graceful help that constantly pours through the intercession of the Wonderworker of Sofia upon the faithful who address him in prayer.