

Christmas Epistle

Of His Eminence **Valentine**, Metropolitan of Suzdal and Vladimir

To the God-fearing Flock of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church

Dearly beloved Children of the Church of God!

I cordially greet you with this all-joyous and soul-saving feast of the Nativity of Christ, and wish you all a Merry Christmas!

On this triumphant day, our hearts are filled with great joy, with perfect joy, for the great mystery of godliness is accomplished: God was manifest in the flesh... (1 Tim. 3:16). Christ, the Divine Infant, was born of the Virgin Mary: “Let Heaven and Earth rejoice prophetically this day..., let angels and men triumph spiritually..., shepherds proclaim the wonder..., Magi from the Orient bear gifts to Bethlehem. Let our unworthy lips, therefore, offer up words of praise to Him: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.”

During these days of universal joy over the appearance of the Divine Christ-Child to fallen mankind, sorrowful news coming from the city of Suzdal has traveled across the world. It was here, in Suzdal, by the providence of God, that long ago, in 1990, the spiritual and administrative center of the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church was established. And the news is of how the clergy and faithful of our Church have been forced out of their churches in the most crude and blasphemous manner, churches which had been given to them for their perpetual use. The actions of our government officials are enough to give any Orthodox Christian living in our so-called “legitimate, democratic society” cause for alarm and reflection. Our churches, so dear to the heart of any believing person, were taken away from us.

The Orthodox Church, Orthodox Christians kicked out of Orthodox churches, have been subjected to persecution in its most blatant and naked form. And this is happening at a time when our country, Russia, no longer calls itself an atheistic government, and no longer seeks to establish atheism or any other “generally required” ideology. Additionally, the Russian authorities tell us constantly that our country is free and powerful; that it is “rising from its knees;” that it is building a government based on law and order, and that its authorities guarantee freedom of religion, and respect the feelings and religious convictions of people of faith, especially of those who are Orthodox. They constantly assure us that Russia is experiencing a

religious renaissance, and that the Russian population is being cleansed from the defilement and the moral decay that it has inherited from the Godlessness of the Soviet era.

But how do we see things, who live in the very heart of Holy Russia – in the ancient center of Russian spirituality, Suzdal? The present government's law enforcement agencies are turning out, throwing out into the street, people who are Russians, and Orthodox, natives of Suzdal, citizens of Russia, from ancient Orthodox churches, which these people rebuilt from complete ruins with faith and with love, paying for the repairs with their own measly pensions and meager salaries, and in which, with the government's permission, and in accordance with the law, they poured out their prayers to God.

Crooked judges, submitting to the instructions of the authorities, ignored the reasoned and obvious proofs that the faithful had put forward at trial, and decided instead to mock their faith. They are utterly disinterested in the fact that, for us Orthodox Christians, these churches are not only, and not so much, “national and historical landmarks,” as they are holy places; places where the glory of God resides among men, and serve as reminders of God’s presence in this world. It is impossible to force a pious Orthodox Christian out of his church, and forbid him from praying inside it, without insulting his spiritual feelings and convictions in the process. The authorities of our so-called “spiritually reawakening Russia” have joined themselves to this travesty!

Such things have not been seen in Russia since the beginning of the 1960s, during the so-called “Khrushchev persecutions,” although there are many signs that the present persecutions are much more reminiscent of the darker period of our national history dating from the end of the 1930s. Why do we dare to say such a thing? Although the persecutions of the 1960s resulted in the number of active churches being cut in half; although they were accompanied by blasphemous acts or ridicule of believing persons; they were, as one might say today, “targeted.” That is, the authorities closed churches with the idea in mind that religious people could go to the services in the next closest active church in the neighboring cities or provinces. But the present persecution against our Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church has a total, all-inclusive, character to it – the authorities are forcing us out of ALL of the historical churches that are left in Suzdal, and they are planning to force us out of ALL of the churches in the villages surrounding Suzdal in

the near future as well.

In contrast to the organizers of the “Khrushchev persecutions,” our contemporary persecutors will not leave us even one church where, borrowing their idiom, people of faith might satisfy their spiritual requirements. So it seems that the present persecutions are aimed not at the limiting of church life, as in the 1960s, but at its complete annihilation, in any case, in its official, legal, forms, i.e. at driving our Church back underground; back into the catacombs. This official policy is reminiscent of the Stalinist terror of the late 1930s, albeit without the mass executions of the clergy and faithful (for now, it is enough to frighten us with the threat of labeling us as “enemies of the people” in the press).

How can anyone reconcile the affirmations of the authorities that there is a religious renaissance taking place in our country, and that the government is showing every kind of assistance to people of faith, with the facts, obvious to everyone, that in Suzdal, churches newly restored to their former splendor, which, until recently, resounded with the hymns of the divine services and continual prayer, are now standing closed, empty, sealed shut, and “returned to the government.”

Despite all common sense and applicable law, the so-called “courts” have removed these sanctuaries, these national historical and cultural monuments, from the faithful, who are the ones who rescued these buildings from utter ruin, who turned them into the veritable jewels of Suzdal and its environs, and have turned them over to the faceless, nameless, government – to the very bureaucrats that turned these churches into ruins in the first place! What law, what logic, can justify the “decision” of these judges in deciding between the two sides who wish to use these churches – one side restoring the churches, and the other ruining them? Their choice can only bear witness to their participation in some kind of blasphemous, Stalinist act, or else their blind obedience to some order from above, without the slightest indication of their own human feelings and values.

The present government continues to “fill up the measure of its fathers” (Matt. 22:32), i.e. to fill up the measure of those persecutions and blasphemies perpetrated by the Godless Soviet atheists, who turned our once charming and beautiful homeland into a land of devastation and ruin, and who bear upon themselves the seal of condemnation by the Almighty.

From a spiritual point of view, for us true Orthodox Christians, the present Russian government is no different from the God-hating Soviet government, which, by the way, it finds no fault with, and considers itself to be the heir of. The holy Confessor of Russia, St. Patriarch Tikhon, who was tortured by that government for his honesty and loyalty to the Truth, anathematized that government specifically for that government's wholesale desecration of our holy places, persecution of the faithful, and repression of the clergy. And now, because we bring these points up and speak about them, point out the spiritual ties between the Soviet government and the present one in Russia, witness to the facts of persecution and discrimination against Orthodox Christians as they continue to take place in our much-suffering homeland, we are about to be labeled as extremists, and subjected to even more persecution. If this "extremism" is the same "extremism" for which the holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia were shot, then we answer that the Church of Christ would be honored to bear this false accusation.

Persecutions not only unite us to the spiritual exploits of our Fathers, the holy New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia, they make us true followers of the Incarnate Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who told His disciples, i.e. all of us Orthodox Christians, "A servant is not greater than his Master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." (Jn. 15:20).

To those who are now persecuting the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church, we pose the following question: What do you hope to gain with your present vain campaign of persecution? Have not two thousand years of the history of the Church of Christ taught you that witness to the Truth cannot be wiped out? Why do you not heed the combined experience of the hundred generations of persecutors, which have preceded you? Do you think that you are stronger than they were? In the Holy Scriptures it is made plain to all of us that even the strongest and most influential representative of your community, the Antichrist, who will seize power over the entire earth, and before whom all of the tribes and peoples of the globe will bow down, will not be able to destroy the true Church.

Perhaps you require our Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church, the little flock of the last times, to be reborn and become "one in spirit" with you, as the Sergianist, ecumenical Moscow Patriarchate did? Indeed, several of you have already openly suggested to us to meet with the false patriarch Kirill, and to "follow the example" of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, i.e. the part of that church that united with the Moscow

Patriarchate with its right to pseudo-autonomy. With your false promises you may well be able to lead astray some of “these little ones,” perhaps even some of the clergy. “Many will be led astray,” our Lord Jesus Christ foretold before His Passion, “and will betray each other, and despise each other. And many false prophets will arise, and lead many astray.” (Matt. 24:10-11).

There have always been such apostasies in the history of the Church. They were especially numerous in the twentieth century, when the Church was introduced to a new kind of persecution for the first time in Her history, when the persecutors invented a new, “more effective” method of seduction – the establishment of and forced submission to a false church. In the 1920s and 1930s, our country witnessed the almost complete physical destruction of the older generations of active clergy and faithful, after which, on the rotten foundation of “Sergianism” and Renovationism, the Soviet government founded its lying church, in all outward appearances similar to the true Orthodox Church, “but denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5). You, our persecutors, already have such a “church,” in everything obedient to you, in everything supporting you, with its incalculable riches, enticing millions of our fellow countrymen with the gleam of its golden cupolas and iconostases.

What is our little Church in comparison with the Moscow Patriarchate with its millions and millions of followers? “A microscopic jurisdiction” as it is called by some of the publicists in Moscow. But judging by the strength and scope of the present persecutions against our Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church, when speaking of the Truth, size and external appearances have no significance. By all earthly considerations, our few dozen communities, and several thousands of faithful should not be able to constitute any kind of threat, or “compete” at all with the tens of thousands of parishes and millions of parishioners that belong to the Moscow Patriarchate. You could not even put the two churches on the same scale! But you, our persecutors, persecute us relentlessly and cruelly. That can only mean that you cannot feel secure in your victory and position of power as long as even one quiet little voice still speaks the Truth. You are not worried about statistics, but about the unmasking of the unrighteousness of your authority itself, and about the false church that you founded. It is for this reason that you cannot calm down and leave us alone, for there can be no compromise in issues of faith. As St. Mark of Ephesus once said, it is the same thing as if to say, “Take off your head and proceed further.” Even if you were to be successful in convincing someone of our faithful to

apostatize from his confession of faith and join the Moscow Patriarchate, or if you take all of our churches away and liquidate our church corporation as a juridical entity, nothing will change. The witness to true Orthodoxy will nevertheless continue in our country; even more so – if this witness comes from catacomb confessors, persecuted by you, it will only become more authoritative and spiritually legitimate in the eyes of the people. The Church of Christ is not organized like your political setup, including your false MP church. The more the true Church is persecuted, the stronger it becomes. Is it difficult for you to believe that? Yes, your well familiar Moscow Patriarchate lives according to your laws (or, as you say yourselves, “mutual agreements”); for it, worldly might is a life or death issue. But the true Church is a “kingdom not of this world,” and its laws often contradict yours. Listen to what the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to the highly placed Roman official, Pontius Pilate, whose position was roughly equal to that of one of our governors today: “My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is My kingdom not from hence.” (Jn. 18:36). In the same way, neither does our Church have any power or juridical mechanism with which to counter persecution or the authorities, but is still, nevertheless, indestructible. The Church is itself that very kingdom, not of this world, which has come in power. And the hour is near when the faithful remnant of our nation, just like the first Christians, will abandon your fake, shiny churches, and will draw near to the Uncreated Light, Who once shone forth, not in a luxurious palace, but in a humble cave. The Church of Christ, persecuted by you, is returning to its roots – the catacombs, where there is neither luxury nor wealth, but where “God dwells with men” (Rev. 21:3), and where the breath of the Holy Spirit is tangibly felt.

Let this Christmas Epistle serve as an instruction for our persecutors. Perhaps there will be a few people among them who have not yet hardened their hearts completely, and are still capable of hearing the Word of God. Let this exposure to the Word of God become for them the first step on the way to their salvation. We are far from expecting that we will be able to win over the major part of our persecutors, however, or from placing our “hope in princes, in the sons of men.” The Lord specifically forbids us from placing our hope in them (Ps. 145:3), for this would be tantamount to idol worship, or the reincarnation of the Church into a **commercial enterprise**, as we regretfully see happening in the case of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Now, however, we would like to say a few words with the aim of

strengthening you, our dearly beloved in the Lord, Brothers and Sisters, the holy, elect flock of Christ, whom the Lord has accounted worthy of great mercy and honor in being chosen to be the Persecuted Church, and to carry upon yourselves the visible seal of sufferings for Christ. You have received a great and holy destiny! “Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them” (Matt. 13:17). For that which you see is not the vain and false earthly glory of cupolas and iconostases covered with a thin layer of gold leaf, but what you see is rather the true greatness of the Church of the New Martyrs, and you join company with the Confessors in their labors, even if only in a small and easily sustainable measure. What an ineffable gift from God! What a limitless ocean of His goodness and mercy! The only thing left to do is carry this title with honor and dignity to the end – Children of the Persecuted Church – and be careful not to lose the martyr’s crown.

We would like to remind you of the words of our Savior, which He spoke to His disciples after His resurrection: “Be not afraid... All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” (Matt. 28:10, 18-20). Our Church has not stained its garments; it stays unwaveringly loyal to the Truth, without any compromise, but is nevertheless fully free, and enjoys the fullness of grace. To the joy of the powers that be, “the rulers of the darkness of this world” (Eph. 6:12), She has no need to become skilled in diplomatic formulas, or to artificially mix bits of God’s revelation together with servile, accommodating lies. Our Church will carry out its mission under any circumstances, with or without church buildings, openly or in the catacombs, through the efforts of many people, or of one alone. The outward historical circumstances can change, but the inner make-up of the Church remains immutable, in accordance with the Lord’s promise: “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

For these reasons, dearly beloved in the Lord, I call upon you yet again: Rejoice, be not afraid, witness to the Truth, call all to the saving bosom of the Church of Christ, persecuted upon the earth, and triumphantly victorious in the heavens! Do not fall for lying fairy tales about “spiritual renaissance,” or give in to threats, or pressure. Be not afraid even of death. The Lord has freed us from fear. He has conquered death, and it no longer has any power

at all over Christians. Remember: The Lord was persecuted by His contemporaries in the government for exposing them, and they sentenced Him in the end to a shameful death. But Who, after all, was victorious in this skirmish between Good and evil, Truth and lies, Love and hate? So must you also not fall for any compromise, be not afraid of losing anything pertaining to this world, do not be afraid even of losing your own life for Christ, for this life is but an instant in comparison to eternity, and death for Christ is the most glorious and worthy goal of all.

Remember also, that the Church of Christ on earth cannot be destroyed by any means, for the Lord promised to preserve Her right up to His second coming, even though She may be nothing more than a very “little flock” indeed. Numerically, the Church will continue to grow smaller, but be not dismayed by this, for, as the Russian proverb says, “God is not in might, but in right.” The most important thing is that you yourselves do not become seduced by the delights of this world and apostatize from the Church, or betray true Orthodoxy.

And if you will remain loyal to the end, you will inherit the blessedness of the kingdom, prepared for you from the beginning of the world. There “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” (Rev. 21:4). “Even so, come, Lord Jesus! May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.” (Rev. 22:20-21).

May the Divine Christ-Child not leave you indifferent to the Truth and the fate of the Church of God! And may the song of Bethlehem resound forever in your hearts: *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.”* (Lk. 2:14).

With an abundance of love in Christ Jesus,

Valentine,
Metropolitan of Suzdal and Vladimir

2009/2010
Christmas
Suzdal