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# An Unlikely Reconciliation: The Path of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia toward Canonical Union with the Moscow Patriarchate\*

Irina du Quenoy

In late 2018/early 2019, the global Eastern Orthodox community was rocked by what appeared to be a seismic schism, between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, over the question of whether the Ukrainian Orthodox Church should be autocephalous (and if so, who has the power to grant that autocephaly). This event was cataclysmic enough to catch the attention of mass media that rarely, if ever, pay attention to the internal problems of the Orthodox ecumene.<sup>1</sup> The emerging narrative placed the schism within the broader context of the post-Soviet legacy, in which Russia's post-imperial pangs found themselves at odds with Ukraine's need to consolidate a strong national identity that would allow the still-fledgling state to survive on its own footing vis-à-vis the hostile eastern neighbor.<sup>2</sup> Within the Orthodox community itself, the situation raised the perennially painful question of "why can't we all just get along," as the world's second largest Christian community<sup>3</sup> received further proof of its tendency to splinter into competing jurisdictions, often for reasons more of (geo)politics than doctrinal disagreement.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Cf. Carlotta Gall, "Ukrainian Orthodox Christians Formally Break from Russia," *New York Times*, January 6, 2019.

2 Cf. (among a plethora of articles of this type) Neil MacFarquhar, "Russia-Ukraine Tensions Set Up the Biggest Christian Schism Since 1054," *New York Times*, October 7, 2018; Robert Person and Aaron Brantly, "The Ukrainian Orthodox Church Is Trying to Withdraw from Moscow's Control. The Kremlin Is Not Happy," *Washington Post*, October 31, 2018; "The Guardian View on the Orthodox Schism: Theology and Low Politics," *Guardian*, January 6, 2019.

3 Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer, *The Atlas of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 22.

4 While the so-called "canonical" Orthodox world includes fourteen mutually recognizing autocephalous (administratively independent) Local Churches (fifteen, if one counts the Orthodox Church of America, whose canonical status remains unresolved), there are numerous communities claiming to be Eastern Orthodox that are either not fully in communion with all the Local Churches or not in communion with any of them at all, comprising what may be thought of as "Alternative Orthodoxy." These include but are not limited to Old Calendar traditionalists in Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania, the competing "True

Within this context, it is useful to consider a counterexample, in which a schism within Eastern Orthodoxy ended in the reunification of two bitterly opposing sides, namely, the reconciliation of the émigré Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) with the Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (MP). Here, too, one sees the legacy of the Soviet Union—in this case, the formation of the USSR caused the breach, while its collapse allowed for its healing. In another similarity with the ROC-Ecumenical Patriarchate story, the reunification of the émigré church with its ostensible “Mother Church” elicited much commentary from both the mass media and more serious scholarly observers, the majority of it framing the ceremony of reconciliation that took place in Moscow at the Church of Christ the Savior on May 17, 2007, as the result of clever maneuvering by the Russian government to bring the émigrés into the fold of a resurgent Russian empire. According to this narrative, the reunification was cleverly orchestrated from the Kremlin, with the goal of cementing influence among naïve Russian Orthodox living abroad in a way that would permit the Russian Federation to extend its soft power and enhance its espionage abilities—in short, in this version of events, rather than an event of religious significance, the reunion between ROCOR and the MP should be seen as the personal foreign policy triumph of Vladimir Putin.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to this reading of events, this article seeks to clarify how the movement toward reunification actually unfolded, by looking at processes endogenous to ROCOR in the wake of the collapse of the USSR that led to its leadership taking the decision to enter into canonical union with the MP. I proceed based on the premise that the 2007 reunification was by no means a preordained fact. While the process of mutual recognition and acceptance of each other’s spiritual legitimacy was fraught with difficulties on both sides, ROCOR’s parishioners and clergy faced unique challenges shaped by the juris-

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Orthodox” jurisdictions that have broken off from the Russian Orthodox Church, and autocephalist movements that remain unrecognized in Montenegro, Turkey, and Macedonia. The reasons for their move away from their respective canonical “Mother Church” range from predominantly doctrinal (the Old Calendarists, for example, have raised the question of the Julian versus Gregorian calendar to the level of dogma, and also tend to accuse the mainstream churches of the “heresy of ecumenism”) to motivations based in nationalist politics (the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Montenegro, etc.), although often the two types of motivations are mixed together (e.g., Russian True Orthodox Church).

- 5 While examples of this type of analysis abound, it is perhaps best exemplified in chapters 24 and 25 of Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia’s Exiles, Emigres and Agents Abroad* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019), pp. 204–219. See also Y. Zakharovich, “Putin’s Reunited Russian Church,” *Time*, May 17, 2007 [<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1622544,00.html>], accessed on January 5, 2021; Daniel P. Payne, “Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation,” *Journal of Church and State* (November 2010), esp. p. 5. See also Robert C. Blitt, “Russia’s ‘Orthodox’ Foreign Policy: The Growing Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Shaping Russia’s Policies Abroad,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 33:2 (2011), esp. pp. 410–413.

diction's specific history and the attendant worldview that had long predominated by the time *perestroika* upended the familiar Cold War stalemate. This article, then, focuses on ROCOR's journey toward May 17, 2007, with attention paid when necessary to the perspective of its Moscow Patriarchate interlocutor.

The article progresses as follows. In the first section, I present an overview of ROCOR's formation and history up until the *perestroika* period. In doing so I provide background information to those readers who will not be familiar with this organization and its role within the Russian anticommunist diaspora; more importantly, I highlight internal developments that led to the emergence by the 1980s of an inconsistent ecclesiology, in which narratives of belonging to the "Greater Russian Church" competed with a vision in which ROCOR *was* in fact the true Russian church, and perhaps even the only legitimate Orthodox church left in the world. The remainder of the article (section two and the conclusion) examines how this contradictory worldview played itself out after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, via a decade and a half of often bitter debates that eventually resulted in the decision to unite with Moscow, at the cost of losing several dozen parishes that opposed this path.

In the end, I argue that two conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of internal ROCOR dynamics in the post-1991 period up to 2007. First, the question of reuniting with Moscow can be understood as an identity crisis, manifested in an internal argument between two distinct camps, each claiming to represent the true, unadulterated version of the émigré jurisdiction's Russian Orthodox identity. Second, the way in which this argument was resolved ultimately led to a consensus in favor of reunification, and thus the hierarchy's choice to sign the Act of Canonical Union in May 2007 was based on pressure to do so from within, which itself rested both on theological considerations and a romantic vision of ROCOR's role in the redemption of post-Soviet Russia, rather than any political influence wielded by the exogenous Russian state.

Methodologically, the article relies on careful document analysis to trace the stages within the internal ROCOR debates leading to the final decision to reunite with Moscow. Sources include official decrees of both the Synod and Council of Bishops of ROCOR, public and private correspondence between clergy, émigré periodical publications, and the Acts of the Fourth All-Diaspora Council (a gathering that brought together elected representatives of both clergy and laity to weigh in on the unification question, in San Francisco in 2006). Finally, I should note that while a full accounting of the reunification would also look at the parallel processes within the MP (which also, at the end of the day, had to decide whether or not to engage with ROCOR and on what terms) as well as at the existing (though not determinative) interest that the Russian government had in these events, reasons of space permit only the examination of ROCOR's side of the story, leaving the door open for future research into these questions by other scholars.

## BACKGROUND: ROCOR AND ITS SELF-UNDERSTANDING

The Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia came into existence as a direct result of the conflict that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917. The civil war resulted in a disruption of communications across much of the former empire, making it difficult, if not impossible, for the central church authority—which by November 1917 was vested in the first patriarch elected to lead the ROC in over two hundred years, Tikhon I—to effectively administer dioceses caught between the constantly shifting frontlines.<sup>6</sup> In May 1919, a council that included eleven bishops as well as numerous priests and lay persons, met in Stavropol, on territory controlled at that moment by the anti-Bolshevik Armed Forces of Southern Russia (*Vooruzhennnye Sily Iuga Rossii*), and formed a temporary Higher Church Authority (*vremennoe Vysshee Tserkovnoe Upravlenie*, or VTsU) with the goal of administering the local dioceses independently until such time as regular contact with the patriarch could be restored.<sup>7</sup> The vicissitudes of the war led the VTsU to relocate to the Crimea in 1920, under the protection of General Petr Wrangel, the last of the White Army generals to head effective opposition to the Bolshevik regime. Led from this point on by metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitskii) of Kiev, the VTsU assumed the right to address problems related to the ROC's activities outside Russian borders, due to the breakdown in contact between the patriarchal administration and its parishes and missions based abroad, the other Orthodox Local Churches, and other confessions.<sup>8</sup> By October 1920, the VTsU understood its jurisdiction to include all Russian parishes outside Russian borders, until such time as contact with Patriarch Tikhon could be restored, a situation given canonical footing by decree no. 362 from the “patriarch, Holy Synod and supreme church soviet” of November 20, 1920, which read, in part,

In case a diocese, as a result of shifting frontlines, changes in national boundaries, etc., should find itself outside of contact with the Highest Church Authority, or if the Highest Church Authority led by His Holiness the Patriarch should itself for whatever reason cease its activity, the diocesan bishop must immediately enter into contact with the hierarchs of neighboring dioceses, with the goal of setting up an [temporary] organized higher church authority for several dioceses that find themselves in similar circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

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6 A. A. Kostriukov, *Lektsii po Istorii Russkoi Tserkvi 1917–2008* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2018), p. 46.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

8 A. Kostriukov, *Russkaia Zarubezhnaia Tserkov v 1939–1964 gg.: Administrativnoe ustroistvo i otnosheniia s Tserkov'iu v Otechestve* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo PSTGU, 2015), p. 22.

9 “Ukaz no. 362 Sv. Patriarkha Tikhona: Postanovlenie Sviateishego Sinoda i Vysshego Tserkovnogo Soveta Pravoslavnoi Rossiiskoi Tserkvi ot 7/20 noiabria 1920 goda za no. 362.” Full text at [[http://russianorthodoxchurch.ws/synod/documents/ukaz\\_362.html](http://russianorthodoxchurch.ws/synod/documents/ukaz_362.html)], accessed on January 5, 2021.

The decree came shortly before the evacuation of the VTsU from Crimea to Constantinople, as part of the retreat of Wrangel's army and the beginning of the first great Russian emigration; it served, from this point on, as the canonical basis on which the nascent ROCOR would build the edifice of its post-Civil War existence. The definitive break with Moscow, however, would not come until 1927, in reaction to a declaration issued on July 29 of that year by Metropolitan Sergius (Stargorodskii) of Nizhny-Novgorod, at that moment the temporary head of the Synod of Bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>10</sup> The significance of this declaration for ROCOR's future cannot be understated: in it, Sergius declared the Moscow Patriarchate to be loyal to the Soviet authorities and demanded that all émigré priests and bishops swear a loyalty oath to the Soviet government, on pain of expulsion from the church.<sup>11</sup> From its home base in Sremski Karlovci in Yugoslavia, where the VTsU had moved following Wrangel's decision to lead the emigration to Yugoslavia from Constantinople in 1921, the émigré hierarchy roundly condemned Sergius's declaration as signaling the captivity of the Russian Church at the hands of an atheist regime hell-bent on its physical eradication, and issued a statement in September 1927 severing administrative ties with the patriarchate:

The émigré (*zagraničnaia*) part of the All-Russian Church must stop administrative relations with the Moscow church authorities...until the restoration of normal relations with Russia and the liberation of our Church from the persecutions of the godless Soviet regime...the émigré portion of the Russian Church considers herself an inalienable, spiritually unified branch of the Great Russian Church. She does not sever herself from her Mother-Church and does not consider itself to be Autocephalous.<sup>12</sup>

From this moment on, ROCOR positioned itself as the free voice of a "captive Russian Church," a trope that remained central to the identity of its clergy and laity over the coming decades. An uncompromising attitude toward the Soviet regime and Sergius's compromise with it did not come without costs; the

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10 Patriarch Tikhon had died in 1925; as the Soviet government would not permit the Russian Orthodox Church to hold a Local Council at which his successor could be elected, the church was nominally headed by a locum tenens, Metropolitan Peter of Krutitsa, one of three hierarchs named by patriarch Tikhon in his will as possible candidates for this position, the other two being metropolitans Kirill of Kazan and Agathangel of Yaroslavl. On December 10, 1925, metropolitan Peter was arrested, and spent the rest of his life in exile and prisons, dying in 1937; metropolitan Sergius was, upon his arrest, named Deputy Locum tenens, and remained as such until Peter's death.

11 Protoierei Vladislav Tsy-pin, "'Deklaratsia' 1927 g.," *Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Tserkovno-nauchnyi Tsent "Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopediia," 2007), pp. 328–334. For the full text, see "Poslanie Zamestitelia Patriarshego Mestobliustitel'ia mitropolita Nizhegorodskogo Sergiia I Vremennogo Patriarshego Sviashchennogo Sinoda Arkhipastyriam, Pastyriam i Vsem Vernym Chadam Vserossiiskoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi, 16/29 iulia 1927," available at [<https://drevo-info.ru/articles/2463.html>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

12 "Postanovlenie Sobora Russkikh Arkhiereev Zarubezhnoi Tserkvi," September 1927. Cited in protoierei Roman Lukianov, *Doroga Domoj* (n.p., 2016), p. 122.

émigré clergy, like the emigration more broadly, was in reality deeply divided over this question, disagreements that contributed to the splintering of the émigré church into three jurisdictions by the early 1940s (ROCOR proper, the so-called American Metropolia [future Orthodox Church of America], and the “Parisian Exarchate”).<sup>13</sup> Be that as it may, until the 1950s ROCOR remained in uncontested communion with the broader Orthodox world, as the other Local Churches recognized it as a legitimate representative of Russian Orthodoxy, for two reasons: 1) the Local Churches’ own reluctance to recognize the Moscow Patriarchate as fully legitimate, given the problematic canonical status of Sergius as its head and its subjugation to the Soviet state and 2) the personal international authority and charisma of ROCOR’s first two primates, metropolitans Anthony (Khrapovitskii) and Anastasii (Gribanovskii).<sup>14</sup> The conclusion of World War II inaugurated a shift in these dynamics, as the outsized role of the Soviet Union in the victory against Nazi Germany allowed the Moscow Patriarchate to strengthen its positions on the international arena and to reclaim its jurisdiction over former ROCOR parishes and monasteries in what was to become the Communist bloc in particular, as well as in the Middle East (including a portion of pre-Revolutionary Russian ecclesiastical property in Jerusalem).<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, ROCOR (whose headquarters by 1950 had moved to New York City, where they remain to this day) found its ranks swollen with the so-called second emigration, wartime refugees from the USSR who had chosen not to return home, many of whom had either fought on the side of or otherwise actively collaborated with the German side in the belief that Hitler’s victory would lead to the liberation of Russia from Stalin and the Bolsheviks.<sup>16</sup> Thus, on the one hand, by the 1950s ROCOR’s internal negative attitudes toward the Soviet regime were strengthened by this demographic shift, while on the other its ties to the global Orthodox community began to drift in the direction of marginalization.

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13 See P. M. Andreev, *Kratkii obzor istorii Russkoi Tserkvi ot revoliutsii do nashykh dnei* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Press, 1951), p. 142; Mark Stokoe and V. Rev. Leonid Kishkovskii, *Orthodox Christians in North America (1794–1994)* (n.p.: Orthodox Christian Publications Center, 1995).

14 A. Psarev, “Razvitie mirovozzreniia Russkoi Zarubezhnoi Tserkvi v otnoshenii pomestnykh tserkvei i Inoslaviia,” in *Deianiia IV Vsezarubezhnogo sobora* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Moskovskoi Patriarkhii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi, 2012), pp. 180–188.

15 Ibid., p. 186; M. V. Shkarovskii, “Arkhieiereiskii Sinod Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi za granitse i russkaia tserkovnaia emigratsiia v Iugoslavii posle okonchaniia vtoroi mirovoi voiny (v 1945–1950-kh gg.),” *Khristianskoe chtenie* 6 (2015), pp. 219–272; D. Safonov, “K 60-letiiu vozobnovleniia deiatel’nosti Russkoi Dukhovnoi Missii na Sviatoi Zemle,” *Bogoslov.ru*, December 1, 2008 [<https://bogoslav.ru/article/360917>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

16 See Johannes Due Enstad, *Soviet Russians under Nazi Occupation: Fragile Loyalties in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. chapter 6; also on the second emigration see the collected works of Kirill Aleksandrov, especially *Protiv Stalina: Vlasovtsy i vostocnyye dobrovol'tsy vo Vtoroi mirovoi voine: sbornik statei i materialov* (Saint Petersburg:

Indeed, if from the 1920s to approximately 1950, the Moscow Patriarchate was understood by ROCOR's representatives as captive, yet legitimately Orthodox from a dogmatic point of view and, as a corollary, as the legitimate Russian Orthodox Church (which ROCOR could not submit to administratively because of its temporary captive status), in the 1950s attitudes within ROCOR began to harden, both toward the MP and toward the rest of global Orthodoxy. Factors here included the dissemination of new information about the existence of an apparently viable underground church in the USSR, the so-called "Catacomb church," which consisted of believers and clergy who did not recognize the Moscow Patriarchate's capitulation to the godless state;<sup>17</sup> the memorial service (*pannikhida*) served by the MP upon the death of Stalin; and the refusal of the Local Churches to sever liturgical communion with the MP.<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, the appearance of a traditionalist Old Calendarist movement within the Greek Church signaled to some within ROCOR that global Orthodoxy itself was not a monolith and that there were potential allies in the émigré jurisdiction's quest for maintaining ideological purity.<sup>19</sup> Very roughly speaking, by the end of the 1950s, ROCOR's hierarchy and clergy could, as a result of the above developments, be divided into two camps: a) the "open" (my terminology) camp headed by metropolitan Anastasii and likeminded hierarchs, including St. John of San Francisco (Maximovich), which (among other differences) understood the Moscow Patriarchate to be a genuinely Orthodox body and ROCOR as part of a larger global Orthodox communion in which non-dogmatic differences of tradition (such as the choice of Julian versus Gregorian calendars) were acceptable; and b) the "isolationist" camp, led by Archbishop Nikon (Rklitskii) and archpriest George Grabbe, head of ROCOR's Synodal chancellery, which saw in the Moscow Patriarchate's subjugation to the state not a (temporary) tragedy but actual apostasy and betrayal of Orthodoxy, and which also considered the other, non-Russian Local Orthodox churches to be infected with the spirit of modernism and either already heretical or on the verge of becoming such.<sup>20</sup>

Still, until the retirement of metropolitan Anastasii in 1964,<sup>21</sup> debate about whether or not a) the Moscow Patriarchate and b) the other Local Orthodox Churches were in fact Orthodox remained the subject of personal polemics, without being lifted to the level of dogmatic concerns that merited official pronouncements by ROCOR's highest governing body, the Council of Bishops (*arkhiereiskii sobor*). The election, in 1964, of Filaret (Voznesenskii) as the head

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Iuventa, 2003).

17 The idea that there was a well-organized Catacomb church in Russia was popularized in the emigration by professor A. Andreev, who fled from the USSR in 1944 and taught subsequently at Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, NY. See A. Beglov, "Poniatie 'Katakombnaia tserkov': mify i real'nost'," in *Menevskie Chteniia: Sb. Materialov pervoi nauchnoi konferentsii* (Sergiev Posad: Prikhod Sergievskoi tserkvi v Semkhozhe, 2007), pp. 51–59.

18 Kostriukov, *Ruskaia Zarubezhnaia Tserkov 1939–1964 gg.*, p. 282.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

20 See Psarev, "Razvitie mirovozzreniia," pp. 180–190.

of ROCOR signaled a change in direction, as for the next twenty-one years the émigré church pursued an ecclesiology that interpreted ROCOR and the “catacomb Church” as the true representatives of Russian Orthodoxy (and the MP as, therefore, an uncanonical, if not outright heretical, institution) and the mainstream Local Churches as modernist and apostate. Three factors stand out as contributing to this transmutation. First, from 1964 to 1985 the chancellery of the Synod of Bishops of ROCOR (functionally its executive branch) was run by Grabbe, who in 1979 was elevated to the rank of bishop of Washington and Florida. Whatever ambivalence metropolitan Filaret might have felt toward the MP (he had himself come to the priesthood under the MP’s jurisdiction in Harbin, China, only joining ROCOR after emigrating to Australia in 1962) was muted by the authority exercised by Grabbe, a figure simultaneously widely reviled within ROCOR for his authoritarian style and respected for his erudition and staunch anti-communist position.<sup>22</sup> Second, Filaret’s ascension to the metropolitanate coincided with an intensified period of anti-religious persecution in the USSR under Nikita Khrushchev, who famously promised to show the last priest on television by 1980.<sup>23</sup> The fate of the Russian Church seemed to hang in the balance, and the inability of the MP hierarchy to speak out about its increasingly precarious situation came to be interpreted within ROCOR as proof of its total cooptation by the “godless authorities,” particularly as the samizdat literature began to offer proof of the KGB’s infiltration of the highest echelons of the patriarchate.<sup>24</sup>

Third, and perhaps most importantly, in the mid-1960s ROCOR came to serve as a refuge for Greek clergy opposed to both the replacement of the Julian Calendar (Old Style) governing the annual liturgical cycle by the Gregorian (or New Calendar) and to the path adopted by patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople of reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church, manifested in the mutual lifting (in 1965) of the anathemas of 1054 that had solidified the Great Schism a millennium ago.<sup>25</sup> In response to these developments, ROCOR actively participated in the creation of an alternative Greek Orthodox hierarchy, the so-called Old Calendarist jurisdiction(s), which took a hardline stance both on relations with non-Orthodox confessions and on the issue of the Julian versus Greek calendars.<sup>26</sup> Crucially to what followed, in 1965 ROCOR welcomed into its ranks the Greek Holy Transfiguration monastery in Boston, headed

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21 Kostriukov, *Russkaia Zarubezhnaia Tserkov 1939–1964 gg.*, p. 256.

22 For a brief biography, see “Grigorii,” *Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopediia* [<https://www.pravenc.ru/text/166654.html>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

23 See V. Stepanov, “Rabota po otryvu ot tserkvi,” *Myrt* 1:66 (2009).

24 See in particular works by Gleb Yakunin, Nikolai Eshliman, and Lev Regelson, among others.

25 See A. Slesarev, *Starostil’nyi raskol v istorii Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi (1924–2008)* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Krutitskogo podvor’ia, 2009) for a history of the Old Calendarist movement; “Joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration of His Holiness Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I,” *La Santa Sede (Vatican)*, December 7, 1965.

by archimandrite Panteleimon (Metropolis).<sup>27</sup> Quickly finding common language with Grabbe, Panteleimon came to exercise significant authority over a wide swathe of ROCOR clergy and parishioners, particularly converts from non-ethnic Russian backgrounds, as the Transfiguration monastery became a locus of pilgrimage and the source of open letters and pamphlets circulating among ROCOR parishes lauding the émigré church as the refuge of the “True Orthodox” in a sea of apostasy. By 1974, the idea of ROCOR as not just the “free voice” of the Russian Church but as perhaps the *only* legitimate Orthodox church left in the world was given vocal formulation by metropolitan Filaret at the Third All-Diaspora Council held in Jordanville, NY: “We are alone in the world, because our Church is in essence the only one that is free, and can freely warn the world of the danger in which it finds itself.”<sup>28</sup>

Broadly speaking, three issues had emerged as central to ROCOR’s self-understanding as an (or *the*) ideologically pure Orthodox jurisdiction in the 1970s and early ’80s, issues that now crystalized as questions of dogma and not merely polemical disagreement: a) the calendar controversy b) ecumenism and c) “sergianism” (a broad term encompassing the MP’s capitulation before the atheist state). All three questions were now elevated, at least in terms of rhetoric by senior ROCOR clergy, to the level of heresy/apostasy: in this view, notional Orthodox Christians who observed the Julian Calendar, prayed with non-Orthodox, or considered the MP as a non-heretical Orthodox body were themselves dangerously close to slipping into heresy. Such a stance had obvious implications not just for ROCOR’s future relations with the MP but for its relationship with the Local Churches, most of which by this point had adopted the Gregorian Calendar, participated in the World Council of Churches, and continued to recognize the MP as a legitimate member of the Orthodox community.

Bolstered by increasingly strong ties to the Old Calendar Greeks ROCOR under metropolitan Filaret undertook two measures that starkly contradicted the still-operative, if increasingly faded, notion that the émigré church’s separation from the church in Russia was a temporary situation stemming from the anti-religious policies of the Soviet regime. First, as early as 1964, ROCOR engaged in a series of canonizations of saints, beginning with St. John of Kronstadt, St. Ksenia of St. Petersburg, St. Herman of Alaska, the Optina Elders, and, most significantly of all, the New Martyrs of Russia, including the last tsar, Nicholas II, and his family. As such canonizations are, within the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the prerogative of the Local Churches, they denoted ROCOR’s increasing self-identification as the legitimate/only representative of the Russian Church.<sup>29</sup> The canonization of the New Martyrs in particular

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26 Psarev, “Razvitie mirovozzrenia,” p. 188.

27 Ibid., p. 189.

28 Vassa (Larina), “‘Slava Bogu, Svoiu Tserkov’ ne ostavliaiushchemu:’ Samosoznanie RPTsZ na Tretiem Vsezarubezhnom Sobore 1974 g.,” in *XVI Ezhгодnaia bogoslovskaiia konferentsiia*

contrasted ROCOR's independent voice and stance against the atheist Soviet regime with the Moscow Patriarchate's submission to the latter, as the canonization of persons murdered by the Bolsheviks was unthinkable behind the Iron Curtain. Second, under the direct influence of the Holy Transfiguration monastery, in 1983 the ROCOR Synod issued an anathema to ecumenism, proclaiming the movement to be heretical and those engaging in it to be outside the Orthodox faith.<sup>30</sup> Here again, ROCOR acted in a manner that indicated it now saw its own authority as higher than that of global Orthodoxy, as normally the designation of theological positions as heretical would be the prerogative of the Local Churches, via conciliar consultation.

Importantly for what was to follow, the designation of ecumenism as a heresy implied that any Orthodox Church involved in the World Council of Churches (WCC) was, by virtue of participating in the ecumenical movement, heretical—from this moment on, the MP's membership in the WCC joined the list of obstacles standing in the way of reconciliation. Indeed, by the mid-1980s, in the context of a deepening Cold War, ROCOR had seemingly evolved from a temporary ecclesiastical organization ministering to the spiritual needs of the post-Revolutionary diaspora to an independent institution that, in addition to acting as a staunch voice against the depredations of Godless communism in Russia and elsewhere, stood poised to lead "traditionalist" Orthodox movements worldwide against the perceived apostasy of mainstream Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The unexpected collapse of the USSR in 1991, however, would issue in a prolonged identity crisis within ROCOR precisely over the wisdom of this path, to which the next section of this article now turns.

### 1991 TO 2006: IDENTITY CRISIS

The collapse of the USSR and the eventual proclamation of independence by the Russian Federation in December 1991 were accompanied by a radical change in the status of the MP vis-à-vis the state. The patriarchal election of June 7, 1990, was the first since 1917 to proceed without regime interference, and within a few months it was clear not only had the government given up control over the church's internal affairs but religious freedom was enshrined in federal law.<sup>31</sup> Under the new patriarch, Aleksii II, churches that had long

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*PSTGU: Materialy* (Moscow, n.p., 2006), pp. 203–207.

29 A. Kostriukov, "K voprosu o podgotovke kanonizatsii tsarskoi semii v Russkoi Zarubezhnoi Tserkvi," *Vestnik PSTGU*, 52:3 (2013), pp. 42–60.

30 Psarev, "Razvitie mirovozzreniia," p. 203. On the question of whether or not the anathema was adopted by the entire Synod or was instead inserted in the protocols of its meeting after fact by Grabbe see G. Maksimov, "O sovremennykh nedumeniakh v svyazi s Gavanskoi deklaratsiei i dokumentami na Krtitskii sobor," *Radonezh.ru*, April 18, 2016 [<https://radonezh.ru/monitoring/o-sovremennykh-nedoumeniyakh-v-svyazi-s-gavanskoy-deklaratsiey-i-dokumentami-na-krtitsky-sobor-ierey-156922.html>], accessed on January 5,

stood empty were suddenly overwhelmed by people seeking baptism, and the MP undertook a still ongoing project of restoring old churches that had been neglected/damaged during the communist years as well as building new ones throughout the country. Statistics regarding the physical rebirth of the MP in the immediate aftermath of 1990 can be found elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> but to ROCOR clergy and laity watching events unfold the message was undeniable: the Godless communists had fallen and the church in Russia was undergoing an unprecedented renaissance.

The changed circumstances in the former Soviet Union dictated a cardinal reassessment of ROCOR's mission and canonical status, particularly as the patriarchate itself began to express an interest in dialogue with the émigré church on the subject of reunification.<sup>33</sup> Fundamentally, the imperative of a rapprochement was seeded in ROCOR's own foundational charter (*Polozhenie o Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi Zagranitsei*), which contained language at the very beginning of the document characterizing the jurisdiction's independence as temporary:

The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, consisting of dioceses found outside the borders of Russia, is an inalienable part of the Russian Orthodox Church, operating temporarily on autonomous principles.<sup>34</sup>

A strict interpretation of this text would seem to dictate an immediate return to liturgical communion and administrative union with Moscow in 1990/91, as the ROC in Russia was manifestly no longer "captive" or otherwise persecuted. Indeed, for seventy years ROCOR clergy had intoned prayers at every liturgy asking God precisely for the liberation of Russia from "godless authorities," an event that had now happened and required a reaction. For some within ROCOR ranks, who were avidly following events in the "Motherland," Yeltsin's decisive victory over the coup plotters of August 1991 was seen as a miraculous event, as it coincided with the Orthodox feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord (*Preobrazhenie*).<sup>35</sup>

And yet, for reasons that should be clear from the discussion in the previous section, the anticipated "return home" did not occur at this stage. Fundamentally, the formula "Godless authorities are gone, ROCOR therefore should

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31 Constitution of the Russian Federation, Article 1.14.

32 Cf. among many other sources Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

33 The patriarchate did so as early as 1988, in the context of loosening restrictions on religious freedom during perestroika. See Kostriukov, *Lektsii*, p. 338.

34 *Vremennoe Polozhenie o Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi zagranitsei* (utverzhdennoe obshchim arkhieieiskim soborom 9/22 i 11/24 sentiabria 1936g.) [<http://synod.com/synod/documents/polozhenie1936.html>], accessed on January 5, 2021. While the *Polozhenie* underwent various iterations over the twentieth century, the first paragraph proclaiming this fundamental principle never changed.

35 Sentiments expressed to the author over the course of many conversations over the past

reunite with Moscow” was unworkable in an environment where the 1927 declaration of Metropolitan Sergius was no longer uniformly understood within ROCOR as signifying the Russian Orthodox Church’s captivity but had been elevated to the status of heresy, and where ROCOR saw itself as a globally significant bulwark against modernism/ecumenism. Thus, in response to overtures from Moscow, respected hierarchs and priests in the émigré jurisdiction put forward what were now ROCOR’s conditions for reunification: a) renunciation of sergianism (and penance for engaging in it) b) the glorification of the New Martyrs and c) renunciation of ecumenism (via exiting from the WCC).

Two factors in particular contributed further obstacles to any dialogue with the patriarchate at this stage, one internal, the other external. First, while metropolitan Filaret had died in 1985 and the influence of Grabbe had been curtailed, the “isolationist” wing of ROCOR still held considerable sway, particularly among the senior bishops, including the new metropolitan, Vitaly (Ustinov). Despite the departure of Panteleimon and his monastery after an investigation into the Greek archimandrite’s sexually abusive practices was launched by the Synod in 1986, ties with the Old Calendarist movement (both Greek and otherwise) at this stage remained strong, and indeed intensified, as from 1992 to 1994 ROCOR entered into communion with Bulgarian and Romanian Old Calendarist jurisdictions.<sup>36</sup>

Second, the coming of religious freedom to Russia in 1990 did not only benefit the Moscow Patriarchate: it also allowed for the emergence of groups that identified as the semi-mythical Catacomb Church that had survived underground for seventy years without compromising with the Soviet regime. Complicating matters, it turned out that, during the height of the Cold War in the early 1980s, ROCOR had secretly consecrated the old émigré French citizen Varnava (Prokofiev) as a bishop, and sent him on a mission to Russia, where he in turn secretly consecrated Lazar (Zhurbenko) as bishop for the Catacomb Church (which by this stage had long been without a hierarchy).<sup>37</sup> An action that could charitably be understood in context as an attempt to provide spiritual leadership for persecuted Orthodox Christians in the Soviet Union now posed an embarrassing problem, as the collapse of communism permitted “catacomb” clergy consecrated by ROCOR to begin legally registering their religious communities as “doctrinally pure” alternatives to the parishes of the Moscow Patriarchate. Furthermore, as the press swelled with reports of the collaboration between MP hierarchs and the KGB (accusations swirled that Aleksii II himself had been a KGB agent), the reputation of ROCOR as a staunchly anti-communist jurisdiction led to several hundred MP parishes leaving the patriarchate to join the émigré church, leading to a paradoxical

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two decades with ROCOR clergy.

36 Psarev, “Razvitie mirovozzreniia,” p. 191; Kostriukov, *Lektsii*, p. 339.

37 A. V. Slesarev, “Nekanonicheskoe pravoslavie: Russkaia Istinno-Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’ (RIPTs) (‘lazarevskaiia’ vetv’ Rossiiskoi Katakombnoi Tservi),” website of the Minsk Theo-

situation in which, by 1992, ROCOR found itself heading dioceses competing with the Moscow Patriarchate on the territory of the Russian Federation and Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the potential for reunification appeared increasingly remote, as functionally ROCOR entered into competition with the patriarchate over the question of which branch in fact represented the “true” face of Russian Orthodoxy, both abroad and within the borders of the former Soviet Union. Suddenly, instead of being the “free voice” of the Russian Church, ROCOR leadership increasingly positioned the émigré jurisdiction as the being both de facto and de jure the Russian Church in its entirety. Accusations that the present-day MP was not in fact the legitimate institutional continuation of the pre-Revolutionary church abounded, based on two arguments. First, the MP as an institution was granted juridical status by the Stalin regime in 1943, at a moment when the Soviet leadership found it expedient to temporarily loosen restrictions on religious life in the context of World War II—giving rise to the accusation that the patriarchate was a Stalinist (ergo Godless) institution. The second argument stemmed from the first: the first three persons who occupied the patriarchal throne after Tikhon I (Sergii, Aleksii I, and Pimen) were not elected freely but in fact selected and controlled by the KGB, making their canonical legitimacy suspect, which in turn implied that, if the patriarchs who headed the church were not legitimate, the sacraments that they and clergy under their jurisdiction carried out were not in fact sacraments—i.e., the Moscow Patriarchate had lost God’s Grace and was not, therefore, a church at all.

True, such arguments were not expressed in any decrees by ROCOR’s *arkhiereiski sobor* and therefore could not, even at this stage, be considered the official position of the church. In practice, however, the ideology described above found full support among key members of the hierarchy, most crucially metropolitan Vitaly, archbishop Anthony (Sinkewicz) of Los Angeles, and the retired but still influential Grabbe. In December 1996, for example, metropolitan Vitaly wrote the following in a letter to archbishop Mark (Arndt) of Berlin and Germany:

For us, it is the church of deceivers, the Church of the Antichrist...the Moscow Patriarchate has completed and sealed its final move away from the body of the Church of Christ. We now have the holy duty and inalienable right to declare openly that the Moscow Patriarchate is without grace, and to refrain from ever having any relations with her.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time the “open vision” of ROCOR also had its advocates among the bishops, particularly archbishop Anthony (Medvedev) of San Francisco, archbishop Anthony (Bartashevitch) of Geneva (up to his death in 1993), bish-

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logical Seminary [<http://minds.by/news/99#.X48XrNBKq2w>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Kostriukov, *Lektsii*, p. 339.

<sup>39</sup> Letter of metropolitan Vitaly (Ustinov) to archbishop Mark (Arndt) of Berlin and Germany from December 12, 1996, cited on [[http://vishegorod.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&](http://vishegorod.ru/index.php?option=com_content&)

op Alexander (Mileant) of Buenos Aires, and bishop Mitrofan (Znosko-Borovskii) of Boston. One example stands out as demonstrating the degree to which the tenor of ROCOR's relations with Moscow depended on the outcome of a conflict within the hierarchy over the correct path to follow. In July 1994, at a *sobor* held in San Francisco, the bishops adopted a resolution acknowledging positive developments in the situation of the Moscow Patriarchate and calling for the beginning of dialogue. Interpreted by clergy of the time<sup>40</sup> as signaling a turn toward reunification with Moscow, this document was, however, superseded by the resolution of a follow-up council held in France in November of the same year, at which the "isolationist" party seemed to take the upper hand, as much of the council's activity was oriented toward solidifying intercommunion with Greek and Bulgarian Old Calendarists and the administrative regulation of ROCOR parishes in the Russian Federation.<sup>41</sup> The text of the council's encyclical characterizes the MP as having left the "thousand year-old path of the Russian Orthodox Church," in particular by defending the principles of "sergianism" and actively consorting with the non-Orthodox (i.e., ecumenism). At the same time, the encyclical declared that, "Being aware of our responsibility before God and men, we, bishops of the Russian Church who are free of all external interference, find that it is now time to seek out live interaction with all parts of the One Russian Orthodox Church, hitherto divided by reason of historical circumstances."<sup>42</sup> Ambiguity reigned, as dialogue here seemed to hinge on the patriarchate's return from the "path of apostasy" to true Orthodoxy, as interpreted by ROCOR.

In the event, hope for dialogue at this stage dimmed, as the MP began to react to ROCOR's seeming intransigence by hardening its own positions, which now came to increasingly characterize the émigré church as a schismatic organization.<sup>43</sup> Conflicts over property in the Holy Land and Europe (France in particular) erupted during this period, further exacerbating the problem, as (for example) images of Palestinian police expelling ROCOR monks from a monastic property in Hebron and transferring the site to the MP only contributed to a perception among ROCOR clergy and parishioners that the MP was a ruthless institution willing to lean on state power to achieve its ends.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, a parallel phenomenon developed that augured a possibly different outcome. The fall of the Iron curtain meant it was now possible to visit the former Soviet Union, and indeed hundreds of ROCOR members

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task=view&id=682&Itemid=44], accessed on January 5, 2021.

40 Author conversations with ROCOR clergy.

41 "Opredelenie Arkhiereiskogo Sobora 1994 g.," *Pravoslavnaiia Rus'* 17 (1994) [<https://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/Arh%20Sobor%201994%20Opredeleniya.htm>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

42 "Poslanie Arkhiereiskogo Sobora RPTsZ 1994," November 30, 1994 [<https://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/Arh%20Sobor%201994%20Posl.htm>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

43 Cf. *Deianiia IV Vsezarubezhnogo Sobora RPTs zagranitsei*, session of May 9, 2006, p. 172.

44 M. Kozlova, "Ierikhonskaia drama," *NG-Religii*, January 26, 2000 [<https://www.ng.ru/>

availed themselves of this opportunity. As they did so, and as they returned home with descriptions of services they attended in MP churches not just in Moscow but in the provinces, it became increasingly difficult to convince ROCOR parishioners the two jurisdictions were not fundamentally part of the same Local Church. For their part, intensified contacts between the lower clergy and their MP peers began to have the effect of lowering tension, as frank conversations about lived realities and (more importantly) theological positions made it more difficult for the émigrés to paint all MP clergy as “sergianist/ecumenist heretics.”<sup>45</sup>

Nor did the exchanges remain on the level of lower clergy—as it emerged later on, several ROCOR bishops during this period began to make fairly regular pilgrimages to Russia and Ukraine, usually incognito, with the goal of ascertaining for themselves whether or not the “isolationist” point of view was correct or if, instead, the MP in post-Soviet Russia was an institution with which one could engage in good faith. Crucially in this respect, these hierarchical visitors included the senior and widely respected archbishop Anthony of San Francisco and his younger friend, archbishop Laurus (Skurla) of Syracuse and Trinity, abbot of ROCOR’s largest monastery and rector of its only seminary in Jordanville, NY.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, in Germany, ROCOR’s archbishop Mark (Arndt) of Berlin and Germany began to hold roundtable meetings with his counterpart from the MP, archbishop Theophanes (Galinskii) of Berlin, which included frank discussions between both clergy and laity of both jurisdictions of the obstacles in the way of restoring communion and possible means of overcoming them.<sup>47</sup>

Pro-union sentiments also began to be influenced by a demographic change: if, by the late 1980s, ROCOR’s parishioners consisted of a mix of descendants of Russian emigres and a smattering of non-Russian converts, by the mid-1990s the influx of thousands of economic refugees from the former Soviet Union transformed the character of the parishes, paradoxically strengthening their “Russian” identity while infusing it with a dose of post-Soviet characteristics. While in general these new parishioners came to ROCOR because they perceived it as a welcoming “Russian” church, an island of “home” in the unfamiliar West, they were for the most part people who had been baptized in Russia in the MP, which for them was indistinguishable from ROCOR in principle—few among them had in-depth knowledge of the émigré jurisdiction’s history or understanding of its prevailing negative attitude toward the patriarchate as sergianist/ecumenist.

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facts/2000-01-26/2\_drama.html], accessed on January 5, 2021.

45 Author’s conversations with ROCOR parishioners and clergy during the mid-1990s to early 2000s.

46 V. E. Danilova, “Itogi ob”edineniia RPTs MP i RPTsZ: Problemy i perspektivy,” *Martianovskie kraevedcheskie chteniia* (Krasnoiarsk: n.p., 2008), pp. 213–218.

Meanwhile, developments transpired within the MP that would have significant repercussions for the acceleration of pro-unionist sentiments among ROCOR members. Namely, a council of bishops held in Moscow in August 2000 undertook two actions that seemed to respond directly to ROCOR's list of prerequisites for reunification: the bishops approved the canonization of a wide swathe of individuals as New Martyrs, including the Nicholas II and his family;<sup>48</sup> and adopted the *Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* (*Osnovy sotsial'noi kontseptsii Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi*), a document that detailed, among other things, the proper distance between church and state. Two clauses stood out as a de facto renunciation of "sergianism":

- 1 The state should not interfere in the life of the Church, its administration, teachings, liturgical life, practices of spiritual leadership (*dukhovnichestvo*), etc., or in general in the activities of canonical church institutions... [and]
- 2 If the state authorities demand from Orthodox believers that they renounce Christ and His Church, or otherwise engage in sinful, soul-damaging actions, the Church must refuse obedience to the state.<sup>49</sup>

Without officially condemning Sergius and his 1927 Declaration, then, the patriarchate here codified principles diametrically opposed to the type of cooptation embodied in the former.

Given the centrality of "sergianism" and the New Martyrs in ROCOR's stance toward the MP, the émigré bishops responded to the Moscow events almost immediately. At a *sobor* of their own in October 2000, they promulgated a resolution that assessed the canonization of the New Martyrs "with special hope and gratitude to the Lord God," interpreting it as "an act of penance" and declaring that "one of the main reasons for the division between our Church and the Moscow Patriarchate ... is, by the mercy of God, for the most part removed." Similarly, the bishops found that the Moscow Council "partially" resolved "another issue dividing us, so-called 'sergianism'" by adopting the *Social Concept*:

For the first time, on the conciliar level, the Moscow Patriarchate has attempted to defend the independence of the Church and separate itself from the state, thereby rejecting the principles laid out in the unfortunate Declaration of metropolitan Sergius (Stargorodskii) in 1927 and implicitly accepting as praiseworthy the path of those confessors who did not accept metropolitan Sergius's course of action.<sup>50</sup>

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47 Kostriukov, *Lektsii*, pp. 339–340.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 340.

49 "Osnovy Sotsial'noi Kontseptsii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi," article 3, section 3, paragraph 5; and "Osnovy," article 3, section 5, paragraph 4. Full text at [<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/419128.html>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

50 ROCOR Council of Bishops, "Rezoliutsiia ob otnoshenii k Moskovskoi Patriarkhii," October 17, 2000, found at [[https://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/Sob00\\_04.html](https://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/Sob00_04.html)], accessed on

However, the same *sobor* decreed that the positions expressed by the Moscow council on relations with non-Orthodox (and by implication, ecumenism) were imprecise and “often ambiguous.” Particularly worrisome was the lack of condemnation of joint prayer with non-Orthodox, and an apparent “justification of all present and current ecumenical activity.” As a result, even as the problem of sergianism and the New Martyrs appeared almost resolved, “the question of the MP’s participation in ecumenism takes on primary importance in the question of the separation of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and the Moscow Patriarchate.” Despite this, the ROCOR *sobor* found the decisions of the Moscow Council to be important enough to warrant the creation of a permanent Synodal commission on “questions of the unity of the Russian Church.”<sup>51</sup> Further confusing matters, the encyclical issued by the same *sobor* contained far harsher language than the above-discussed resolution, criticizing the “aggressive actions of the Patriarchate in the violent takeover of the Church Abroad’s monasteries and churches [referring to property disputes in the Holy Land, Europe and Canada]” and declaring that the Moscow Council “de facto confirmed the Moscow Patriarchate’s adherence to broad participation in ecumenism and failed to safeguard its younger generation from this All-Heresy.”<sup>52</sup>

The tension and indeed ambiguity evident here can be convincingly explained by an increasingly overt conflict between the “isolationist” and “open” wings within ROCOR over the correct path to take in the new historical circumstances. On the one hand, the decisions of the 2000 Moscow Council made it impossible for the bishops gathered for the October *sobor* to continue characterizing the MP in unequivocally negative terms, as they had as recently as March 2000 (in a public appeal promulgated that month, in which the ROCOR Synod went as far as stating that “attempts at dialogue had not led to any fruitful results” and accused the patriarchate of seeking to “strangle” ROCOR by physically taking over its parishes and monasteries).<sup>53</sup> On the other, a number of bishops and senior clergy, led by no less than metropolitan Vitaly, remained categorically opposed to even the possibility of dialogue: as already mentioned, the metropolitan had by this point moved in the direction of declaring the patriarchate to be bereft of grace and its sacraments invalid, and while this position was a personal one not supported by any conciliar decisions, the fact that it was held by the head of the church gave it substantial weight among both clergy and parishioners. Thus the decisions of the 2000 ROCOR *sobor* may be read as an attempt to reconcile the two sides, establishing a commission to

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January 5, 2021.

51 Ibid.

52 “Poslanie Arkhiereiskogo Sobora Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi Zagranitsej Vozliublennym Chadam Tserkvi vo Otechestve i v Rasseianii Suschim,” October 27, 2000 [[https://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/Sob00\\_01.html](https://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/Sob00_01.html)], accessed on January 5, 2021.

53 “Obrashchenie Arkhiereiskogo Sinoda Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi zagranitsej k russkomu pravoslavnomu narodu,” March 2, 2000 [<http://synod.com/synod/documents/>

explore reunification while unequivocally proclaiming the continued existence of (possibly intractable) obstacles thereto.

Despite these attempts to balance the two sides, on December 4, 2000, metropolitan Vitaly published an open letter to the ROCOR flock in which he proclaimed his disagreement with the decisions of the October *sobor*:

There is one point, which is disturbing to many of you, namely, the creation of a Synodal Commission that will discuss questions related to the unity of the Russian Church. I ask myself, how can one think of unity, when it should be clear to all that the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which has maintained its spiritual freedom for eighty years, will never unite with the Moscow Patriarchate...<sup>54</sup>

In addition to airing his disagreement with the conciliar decision, he also appeared to encourage the flock to rebel against the hierarchy should it continue to move in the direction of reconciliation with Moscow: “There will be many temptations, but remain as always faithful to the Lord and His Church, and do not forget that for us the most frightening outcome is to stray from the Truth, that is, from Christ.”<sup>55</sup> Here, the years of rhetoric elevating “sergianism” to the status of heresy culminated in the equation of any possible union with Moscow as a direct betrayal of Christ Himself.

The brewing conflict over the future path of ROCOR, which had hitherto been carried out in the realm of private conversations between clergy and often heated personal debates among parishioners, now spilled into the open even on the hierarchical level. In May 2001, a group of clergy from ROCOR’s Western European diocese published an appeal to the faithful, asking them to “resist the new path taken by our Church;” they were bolstered a month later by a public letter signed by metropolitan Vitaly in which he proclaimed that the *Social Concept* could not and did not nullify the “traitorous Declaration of 1927,” denied that Russia was undergoing a religious renaissance, and declared the creation of the commission on unity to be a mistake.<sup>56</sup> As an internal schism loomed, a meeting of ROCOR’s Synod of bishops in July 2001 found this public letter to be “mistaken” and accepted Vitaly’s resignation from his post.<sup>57</sup> At a *sobor* at the end of October of that year, the bishops elected archbishop Laurus (Skurla) as metropolitan.

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poslanierussianpeople2000.html], accessed on January 5, 2021.

54 “Poslesobornoe Poslanie Mitropolita Vitaliia,” partial text available at [[http://vishegorod.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=682&Itemid=44](http://vishegorod.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=682&Itemid=44)], accessed on January 5, 2021.

55 Ibid.

56 “Okruzhnoe poslanie vysokopreosviashchenneishego mitropolita Vitaliia, pervoierarkha Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi zagranitsej,” <http://karlovtchanin.eu/index.php/documents/135-okrujnoeposlanievitalia>, June 22, 2001, found at [<http://karlovtchanin.eu/index.php/documents/135-okrujnoeposlanievitalia>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

57 Complicating matters, by this stage metropolitan Vitaly was quite elderly and showing signs of dementia, raising questions about the extent to which his actions as head of the “isolationist” wing were independent or were, rather, directed by persons in his immedi-

Far from settling matters, however, Laurus's election heralded a period of intensified conflict, as on the day before the new metropolitan's investiture in office at the ROCOR's main cathedral in New York City, Vitaly was spirited away by his personal secretary and a group of clergy opposed to union with Moscow and driven to ROCOR's monastic community in Mansonville, Quebec, where he would remain for the remainder of his life as nominal head of a newly created ecclesiastical jurisdiction that claimed to embody the true ROCOR.<sup>58</sup> From this point on, the possibility of ROCOR's further fragmentation loomed large, as the bishops attempted to calm the flock while at the same time finding a way out of the crisis that would reflect the jurisdiction's historical path and self-understanding without seemingly capitulating to the behemoth patriarchate. Two documents to come out of the 2001 *sobor* are indicative of this continued attempt to balance possibly irreconcilable positions. First, the encyclical to the flock proclaimed that, despite certain positive developments within the MP, "the question of reunification has not been raised and no one plans to raise it at present," as there remain "many factors still dividing us." Of these, the encyclical specifically references the MP's continued involvement in the ecumenical movement, and the continued efforts of some Russian clergy to justify the path taken by metropolitan Sergius in 1927.<sup>59</sup> A second document, however, offered a glimpse into the bishops' willingness to enter into good faith negotiations with the patriarchate: apparently in response to a letter of greeting from Patriarch Aleksy II which called for an end to division, the 2001 *sobor* issued a letter to Aleksy and the MP Synod of Bishops, which read in part:

For our part, we bear witness that the unity of the Russian Orthodox Church was desired by the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad from the beginning of its existence. This desire did not merely accompany the life of the Church Abroad but was woven through the very thread of prayer life in the Russian diaspora.<sup>60</sup>

Crucially for what was to follow, the ROCOR bishops in this letter propose a mutual search for the principles on which the path to unification could be built, as they "would like for you to understand the essence of our approach to the problem of the church's disunion. In this matter we believe there should be no compromises, as at issue is the very salvation or damnation of all the members

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ate orbit.

58 Cf. "Blazhenneishii mitropolit Vitalii (Ustinov)," website of Rossiiskaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' [<http://www.rospc.org/index.php?newsid=7>], accessed on January 5, 2021; and "Sotrudnik russkoi redaktsii Radio Kanada Evgenyi Sokolov: Vladyka Vitalii byl poslednim podlinnym pervoierarkhom RPTsZ," interview with Portal-Credo [<http://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=authority&id=1042>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

59 "Obrashchenie Arkhiereiskogo Sobora Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi Zagranitse k svoei pastve," October 29, 2001 [<http://synod.com/synod/documents/obrascheniepastve2001.html>], accessed on January 5, 2021.

60 "Otvét Arkhiereiskogo Sobora Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi zagranitse na Bratskoe poslanie patriarkha Aleksii," October 2001 [<http://synod.com/synod/documents/responsetomp>]

of the Church.” To this end, the ROCOR *sobor* suggested that it was time for “constructive meetings between our representatives, who could help reveal the essence of our division and define mutually recognized obstacles dividing us, and [propose] means of overcoming them.”<sup>61</sup> Six years later, the dialogue initiated by this letter culminated in the signing on May 17, 2007, of the Act of Canonical Union between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Church Outside of Russia.

### AFTERMATH OF 2001: CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Outside analysis of the reconciliation between ROCOR and the Moscow Patriarchate tends to privilege the role of the Russian state in this process, pointing in particular to a meeting between a delegation of bishops headed by metropolitan Laurus and Vladimir Putin in New York in 2003 as the supposedly seminal moment wherein the ROCOR hierarchy “understood the Russian president to be genuinely Orthodox,” which realization led to the willingness to enter into dialogue with the patriarchate.<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, it is true that the meeting with Putin had the effect of jumpstarting negotiations (he came to the United States bearing a personal letter for the ROCOR bishops from patriarch Aleksy II). Yet, as the discussion above demonstrates, the decision to engage in dialogue that heralded the possible end of *de facto* jurisdictional independence was taken by ROCOR’s bishops a full two years before the encounter with Putin in New York. Indeed, this decision was made after more than a decade of agonizing debates within ROCOR as to its relationship to both the Moscow Patriarchate and to the broader Orthodox world—in short, the choice to even consider rapprochement with the MP was the end result of a prolonged identity crisis driven by disparate understandings by ROCOR members of their past and the theologically appropriate future path.

Moreover, evidence for this thesis abounds in the period between the 2001 *sobor* and the signing of the Act of Canonical Union on May 17, 2007. The confines of this article do not permit a detailed discussion of this point, which may be briefly summarized as follows: The six years after the election of metropolitan Laurus were by no means characterized by the unquestioning acceptance of unification with Moscow by ROCOR members. In contrast, the debates described earlier continued, often in vituperative terms, as supporters

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2001.html], accessed on January 5, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Soldatov and Borogan, *The Compatriots*, esp. pp. 212–217; also Felix Corley, “Metropolitan Laurus: Conciliatory Orthodox Leader,” *Independent*, April 1, 2008 [<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/metropolitan-laurus-conciliatory-orthodox-leader-803137.html>], accessed on January 5, 2021; “80 Years On, Putin Blesses the End of the Schism within the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Asia News*, May 17, 2007 [<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/80-years-on,-Putin-blesses-the-end-of-the-schism-within-the-Russian->

of reunion cautioned that if it did not occur, ROCOR would lose all claim to canonicity (as the Local Churches were likely to react to the émigré jurisdiction's intransigence by definitively cutting all ties).<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile opponents continued to raise the specter of apostasy, upbraid the patriarchate for its close relationship with the Putin state, and question the extent to which the transformation in Russian religious life after 1990 was genuine or, rather, a Potemkin village set up to dupe gullible Orthodox Christians.<sup>64</sup> The launch of bilateral talks in 2004, which consisted of seven substantive meetings between representatives of ROCOR and the MP over the course of two years, was accompanied by numerous meetings within ROCOR itself, on both the diocesan and parish levels, at which disagreements continued to be aired, often in terms threatening additional schism.

The culmination of these discussions occurred in May 2006, at the so-called Fourth All-Diaspora Council, held in San Francisco, whose 126 delegates included bishops, lower clergy, and lay representatives from the parishes. An examination of the Acts (*Deianiia*) of this council shows that even at this late stage, when a draft of the Act of Canonical Union was presented to the delegates for discussion, the outcome was far from certain to be in favor of reunification, as arguments back and forth raged along the parameters described earlier. Perhaps most importantly for the overall thesis of this article, the All-Diaspora Council was framed by its conveners as an almost liturgical act (*sviashschenno-deistvie*),<sup>65</sup> in the course of which questions related to ROCOR's understanding of itself as an ecclesiastical body were to be resolved—and while delegates (on both sides of the debate) certainly referenced the contemporary political situation in Russia as they attempted to make sense of ROCOR's future role vis-à-vis its country of origin, the broader context was clearly of a religious organization attempting to find a way forward in specifically religious, not secular terms.<sup>66</sup>

Additionally, it should be said that the discussion presented here does not pretend to be the last word in understanding either ROCOR's history or its path toward unification with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007. Certainly, further analysis of factors other than ROCOR's internal dynamics need to be considered, including but not limited to the actions/positions of its patriarchal interlocutor and the efforts of the Russian state to facilitate (if not steer)

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Orthodox-Church-9291.html], accessed on January 5, 2021.

63 Even at this stage, ROCOR maintained ties to "canonical Orthodoxy" via the Serbian patriarchate and the patriarchate of Jerusalem, as both continued to concelebrate with ROCOR clergy—the decision to categorically reject dialogue with the MP threatened to end these relationships and place ROCOR firmly in the realm of marginal "alternative Orthodox" jurisdictions. See the *Deianiia IV Vsezarubzhnogo sobora*, esp. the presentation by Psarev.

64 See the *Deianiia IV Vsezarubzhnogo sobora* for a full spectrum of views held by ROCOR clergy and parishioners in 2006.

65 For a description of how the ceremonies accompanying the opening of the council reinforced this paraliturgical aspect, see "7 maia: Otkrytie IV Vsezarubzhnogo sobora," *Deianiia*, p. 50.

66 See *Deianiia* in their entirety.

the outcome of events. Related to the latter question, it should be emphasized that this article does not claim that the Russian state did not have an interest in the outcome; rather, the point is that the narrative that the whole story can be summarized as “what Putin wanted Putin got” does not make sense given ROCOR’s history and strong sense of ecclesiastical identity, and that any external pressures on the hierarchy to choose one path over another were secondary to the forces driving the decision from within the church itself. In any case, an analysis of the Russian state’s actual involvement in this process would have to begin by looking beyond the 2003 meeting between Putin and metropolitan Laurus for evidence of direct influence and/or a coordinated plan to exercise the latter.

Finally, the case examined here suggests the relevance of future research into the significance of the ROCOR-MP reunification for the broader Orthodox world. As referenced in the introduction, cases of reconciliation between branches of the Orthodox Church that had broken communion with each other are exceedingly rare, coexisting with widespread centrifugal tendencies within the Local Churches that have led, over the twentieth century, to the proliferation of “noncanonical” jurisdictions, a phenomenon that remains understudied and little understood by scholars not only of religion but of post-Soviet nation building (as many of these schism have occurred on nationalist lines), transnational networks, and anti-globalist movements. The counter case of ROCOR stands as especially interesting in this regard, as it argues against a reading of developments within the Orthodox communion from a deterministic point of view, but calls for attention to a multiplicity of voices and a variety of possible outcomes.