

The 1917 Council of the Russian Orthodox Church

NICOLAS ZERNOV

The Russian Orthodox Church before the Revolution was exposed to strict bureaucratic control for two hundred years. The imperial government destroyed the independence of the parishes; it turned the bishops into state officials and transferred them from one diocese to another, although this was forbidden by the canons of the Orthodox Church. The office of Patriarch was suspended and in its place a Synod of bishops, selected by the Emperor, was declared to be the supreme organ of government in the Russian Orthodox Church. In reality the Synod was a state organ: the bishops were not allowed to raise questions and could discuss only those points which were presented to them by the lay Procurator of the Synod. This abnormal situation was naturally resented by many Russian Orthodox Christians. But they openly protested only at the time of the 1905 Revolution when public opinion demanded the restoration of the Church's independence.

Nicholas II under the pressure of these demands issued an imperial decree promising to convoke a Council. The best brains of the Church were gathered together and a commission prepared a programme for the promised Council. A thorough reconstruction of the entire ecclesiastical structure was needed. The projects for reform were incorporated in several volumes issued by this commission. However, the promise to convoke a Council was not fulfilled and when in February 1917 the Empire collapsed, the Church found itself without a proper constitution and with all the disadvantages of a body which for centuries had been deprived of independence.

It was obvious to members of the Church that the Council had to be immediately convoked. But circumstances were unfavourable: part of European Russia was under German occupation and public order began to disintegrate after the abdication of the Emperor. Violence, chaos, and general disorder increased every day. Although many believed that it was now too late to reconstruct the Church, the leaders of the Church were determined to do all that they could to restore order. On 15 August 1917*

* Dates are given in the old style (13 days behind the European calendar) unless otherwise stated. *Ed.*

an impressive gathering of 564 church members assembled in the Cathedral of St. Saviour in Moscow. Each diocese (72 existed at that time) sent its presiding bishop, two priests and three laymen. Besides these delegates the Council included representatives from the missions, the monastic communities, the universities and theological academies, from the Duma (the parliament) and other ecclesiastical organizations. The predominance of the laity was striking: the Council included 350 laymen. All members had one vote. The bishops, however, could meet together in a synod, and in case they felt that a decision taken by the Council contradicted the doctrine or other traditions of Orthodoxy, they were entitled to reject by a two-thirds majority the decision taken by the Council. On all other matters the voice of the Council was supreme. During the first days of the Council's work there was tension and suspicion among the delegates. Yet in a remarkable way this spirit of disintegration, so prevalent in Russia at that time, soon vanished (see document p. 21) and the Council started its work of reconstruction with the full cooperation of all its members. The contrast between the spirit of this Church assembly and the general situation in the country was truly striking.

There was, however, one point where the members of the Council divided into two camps. The majority, including the laity, wanted to restore the Patriarchate – the traditional form of church government. But a large number of parochial clergy, supported by the professors from the theological academies, were opposed to this plan. Here the traditional rivalry between the white (married) clergy and the black (unmarried) clergy reappeared. The white clergy feared that the restoration of the Patriarchate would enable the black clergy (from the ranks of which the candidates for the episcopate were recruited) to dominate the others, as had happened in the past. So the debate continued with both parties standing their ground.

While the Council was engaged with its work of reconstruction the political situation reached its turning point. The Bolsheviks under Lenin's leadership started a military rebellion and seized control of the capital on 25 October 1917. Moscow became the scene of fratricidal struggle and the meetings of the Council continued under bombardment.

The Council unanimously decided to restore the Patriarchate. On 31 October 1917 the vote was taken. Three bishops gained the largest number of votes in the following order: the first was Anthony (Metropolitan of Kiev), a well-known conservative who had long fought for the restoration of the Patriarchate; the second candidate was Bishop Arseni; the third was Bishop Tikhon who had been recently elected as the presiding bishop over the Moscow diocese. The Council, however, considered that a majority of votes was not a sufficient guarantee of divine sanction. So on 5 November a solemn Eucharist was celebrated at the Cathedral of St. Saviour in the presence of several thousand faithful. At the end of the

service a box containing three names was brought into the middle of the church. After further prayers an old and greatly venerated monk was asked to draw the lot (see document p. 22). The name which he announced was that of Tikhon, the bishop who received less votes than the other two candidates. A delegation was despatched to Tikhon who had spent that morning in one of the monasteries. After he received the announcement of his election, the future Patriarch spoke prophetically: he was aware that this election would mean martyrdom for him, that tears, suffering and humiliation lay ahead. But he accepted this unbearable burden, trusting that this was God's will for him and for the Church.

With the election of the Patriarch the Council was faced with the problem of his enthronement. Traditionally the Patriarchs of Russia were enthroned in the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin. But by November 1917 the Bolsheviks had established control over Moscow and had made the Kremlin a forbidden area. They consented, however, to allow the Council to use the venerable Cathedral once more, and on 21 November the Patriarch was enthroned. This solemn ceremony was at the same time a sad one: the Cathedral had been damaged by shells and its dome was pierced.

After the election of the Patriarch the Council continued to work energetically. The reconstruction of the Church proceeded smoothly. According to the new constitution the supreme organ of the Russian Orthodox Church was the Council, composed of bishops, priests and laity. The Patriarch was responsible to it. A synod of bishops and a council composed of elected representatives were added to help him carry out his duties. Other decisions of the Council were related to the revival of the parishes, the strengthening of missionary work, the reorganization of church schools and other urgently needed reforms. But these reforms were never executed because the Bolsheviks immediately launched a fierce campaign against the Orthodox Church.

After the Christmas recess the Council met once more and after Easter its third and last session took place. The Council ended its deliberations in August 1918. One of its last decrees was important for the future of the Church: from henceforth the Church was to maintain a neutral position in the political sphere. The Patriarch, bishops and laity could have their own political opinions and sympathies but none of them were to commit the Church as an organism to any political party or political system. Such was the end of the Council's deliberations.

The 1917 Council was undoubtedly a great landmark in Russian church history. It was the first Council which represented the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole. The Councils convoked in the 16th and 17th centuries were composed only of clergy, and in many ways they were unable to voice all the tendencies within Russian Orthodoxy. But this Council was different. It vindicated the ideal of *sobornost* (see document p. 21) which

was expounded by the Russian theologians and Slavophiles of the nineteenth century – for example, Khomyakov, Kireevsky, Dostoevsky and Solovyov. They all stressed that the Church is a body in which both clergy and laity have their responsible part to play; only unanimity, only the consent of all can guarantee that a decision is truly inspired by the Holy Spirit. This was true of the Council in 1917: dissension disappeared and the Council became one body, animated by the same faith and trust in divine assistance.

The reforms proposed by the Council were not carried out. Nevertheless they remain a basis for reconstruction should the Russian Orthodox Church in the USSR regain its freedom. At the 1917 Council the Church found amongst its members men with wisdom, courage and faith who remained faithful to tradition while understanding the requirements of the new age. These men became the target of fierce Bolshevnik attacks and many of them ended their life as martyrs.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Information on the 1917 Council can also be found in the following:

Johannes Chrysostomus: *Kirchengeschichte Russlands der neusten Zeit*, Vol. I, Munich and Salzburg, Anton Pustet, 1965.

A. Wuyts "Le Patriarcat russe au concile de Moscou de 1917-1918", *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* CXXIX, Rome, 1941 (based on published minutes of the Council).

Igor Smolitsch "Die Russische Kirche in Russland", *Ostkirchliche Studien* XIV, 1965, pp. 1-34.

G. M. Bennigsen "The year 1917 in the History of the Russian Church", *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* VII, 1963, pp. 115-32.

Lev Regelson: *Tragedia russkoi tserkvi*, YMCA, 1977, pp. 19-57.