

## **The Society of Ecumenical Christians Before and After the Dissolution of the Soviet Union\***

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### **Christmas in Our Home**

Sermon by Sandr Riga given on 25 December 1991 in the *Tsentral'ny Dom Khudozhnika*

In the course of their 2,000-year history Christians have unfortunately been unable to agree on common holidays; there are many liturgical activities they cannot perform together; sometimes they are even unable to pray together. This is a great tragedy and a stumbling block for people who are seeking God: they cannot understand why, if God is love, if he is one Father of all children, Christians all do things in different ways. Faced with this situation, the Society of Ecumenical Christians in Moscow, Riga, Zhitomir and other cities prays for the unity of Christians. We do not deny the fine tradition of the Orthodox Church; the Catholic Church also has a great tradition; and the multitude of Protestant churches are seeking God in their own way – this is fine. But we are trying to find that which unites Christians and not that which divides them. We are trying to break down the barriers between Christians. And we hope that this evening will be the small mite we can contribute towards bringing Christian unity nearer. Much depends on this, maybe even the fate of humanity, since regardless of the divisions amongst them Christians play a major role in society, politics and social life.

You have made a choice. There are many other places you could have gone to this evening, and important events are being shown on television. [In the Kremlin Gorbachev was in the process of resigning and the flag of the USSR was being lowered.] But you came to us. We thank you and hope you won't be disappointed.

When God made the world, it was born from nothing, from the will of God, which was hidden and inscrutable. God created the world and human beings through his great love, his will, which desired that love, life and truth should exist. God was the creator and ruler of the universe. This first theocracy, chaos turned into cosmos, was a harmonious one. God was everywhere and everything was under his command. There was living communication between the Creator and his creation. But then there were cataclysms. The cosmos was created as a harmony, but this harmony was disturbed. We cannot say when, or how, or why: we can only guess. The Vedas talk about this, as do other holy books: the Bible, the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita. We do not have a clear answer. We know only that some kind of cataclysm occurred in pre-

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history. The angels who fell were those who were especially close to God, those to whom God had given much, spiritual beings who were 'light-bearers'. Lucifer had tried to do God's will but at some point his love had cooled and he had begun to fall away, to resist. What then happened to the cosmos and to humanity was the consequence of this resistance. Our world is not actually disintegrating, but its equilibrium is unstable. We can see how fragile it is, and how often what we have spent a long time building up to put to good use is destroyed. The source of this tragedy is self-will, will directed against God. A genuine theocracy can never be built in the name of humanity alone, but in the name of God. God has always existed, yesterday, today and for ever. God gives life to everything. Our own ideas and meditations on the will of God may lead us into error, but we must not persist in untruth: we must persist in our search for the truth even if we are still far away from the deep foundations.

The Bible begins with the assertion that God created the world. Then he made man and handed everything else over to him: animals, plants, mountains, waters. He gave man the task of naming all these things and gave him authority over them, because to name something is to extend your will over it. But as we have seen, man began to use this power egoistically, giving his own will priority over God's will. So although we are the crown of creation, the landlords of nature, it is we who have gradually led nature into deep crisis.

In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, we read of an angel holding the Eternal Gospel, the Gospel which was from time immemorial, which was written many thousands of years before the Gospel of Christ. This Gospel tells us to bow down before God and praise him because he made heaven and earth. Heaven and earth – the whole universe, the whole cosmos. God is also the source of living water, the source of the Spirit, the source of inspiration, that fluid which God pours out on us so that we live lives filled with inspiration and love, so that we are seeking not self-will or self-affirmation, but harmony, community and mutual sacrifice. A harmonious universe cannot be built without sacrifice.

Thus we draw near to the secret of the Eternal Gospel: the Lord calls us to sacrifice, for in sacrifice lies the secret of existence. God sacrifices his son, God sacrifices his will, he comes to meet human beings, he watches over them. But humanity turns away. Of course we cannot understand where suffering comes from, why there is so much grief, why the world is steeped in evil; but what we can understand is why we ourselves are evil and unreconciled. We persist in our own will, we do not sacrifice ourselves, we cannot tear out from ourselves the roots of egoism, and because of this we suffer so many incomprehensible disasters as humanity stumbles onwards. When Jesus Christ came 2,000 years ago, he preached love, sacrifice and worship to us so that we might become like gods, shining like the sun on good and evil people alike. Nevertheless, we Christians still cannot say that we are strong in his love or that we are united. Sometimes we achieved great power, for example in the Middle Ages when all Europe was under Christianity – and I say 'under' because this was not an internalised faith, it was very often Christianisation by violence. Then came the Reformation which tried to reform the faith, but alas it did not preserve unity. This is obviously an unavoidable disaster for humanity, a blind alley. God suffers. He sacrifices his son. He endures the world.

In this darkness and chaos, an ecumenical awareness takes shape. 'Ekumena' means 'Universe'. This is a sense of unity, of participation in everything. It involves no desire to rule over others, but a readiness to pray for others, for all of them and for each of them.

We can see clearly the great destructive forces in this world. We have to decide

what side we are on. Are we with those who destroy, kill and push the falling, or are we with those who want to help and preserve, who confess Jesus Christ and believe that we are all children of God? Whether we like it or not we are under God's authority. We live and die and our death is not in our hands, but we can refuse to accept a meaningless death. Instead of responding in anger, we should accept it with joy, as something due to us, as children accept a gift. Why do we not believe that death is like birth, opening up new dimensions, new freedoms? When we stop fearing death, we will seek it, not as a suicide does, but in the sense that we are seeking a meeting with God. Those who are with God do not die but live for ever.

'Ekumena' began with a small group of enthusiasts who decided not to give way to the vanity of this world. Our prayers for unity were not in vain. Today there is a lot of talk about Christian unity. Clergy and lay people long for it. It is the subject of our book *Prizyv (The Call)*, which is not just a lecture or a manifesto, but a call to action, a call to people to transform themselves. We can be transformed, we can become new people, listening to God in our hearts, being reconciled to God. This evening I would like us to meditate on why Jesus Christ came to this world. It is not important when exactly He was born. We know that Christ existed, that He was no myth or human fantasy. He transforms our lives by an inner light, by speaking within us. We must simply listen to Him instead of all the noises outside, enter into ourselves and listen to the tender voice of God calling us. I hope that when you read *Prizyv* you will hear that voice which is clearly heard in the Gospels.

We are not changing our convictions, but our faith is being renewed. Let today's call be a call to action on the part of those who want to dedicate their lives to unity, the unity of Christians and of all people of good will. Nowadays we see an intensification of discord and separatism; people are increasingly ready to turn on those who do not agree with them. This is a frightening situation which could lead to disaster.

In the darkness it is sometimes possible to light one candle, which then illuminates everything. We hope that this gathering, Christmas in our home, will be such a candle, illuminating this evening and the coming days. Thank you, friends, for coming. You have made us glad, we will try to give you joy also.

Now we will pray. Draw near to each other in your hearts, please, and whoever wants to pray aloud do so together with us. Do not be shy before the Lord; before the Lord there is no need to be shy. It is hard to begin praying. Often we acknowledge the existence of God theoretically but we fear to open up to Him. Sometimes we think it is unnecessary as He sees everything anyway. Yes, God sees everything, and this is the important thing for us. When I meet you, I give you my hand and greet you. We say to the Lord, 'Lord, accept us, accept us as we are, reveal yourself to us, we open ourselves up to you.'

### **The Beginnings of Ecumenism in Russia**

Talk given by Sandr Riga on 24 January 1992 at the Ecumenical School

The ecumenical movement in our country is now in its third decade. It began to take shape in the late 1960s. The church in the Soviet Union was oppressed by the state authorities. There were small underground groups of active Orthodox, Baptists and Catholics. When these groups were discovered their members were persecuted. The 1950s saw the so-called Khrushchev 'thaw', which introduced a certain amount of liberalisation but which turned against the church with particular savagery. Khrushchev promised that we would soon be watching the last old lady closing the

doors of her church on television. Then came the 1960s. At first many thought things would be better under the collective leadership of Brezhnev, Kosygin and Podgorny, but this hope was unfortunately unjustified. There was not the same despotism and terror as there had been under Stalin, but you could certainly feel the frost. 1968 saw the events in Czechoslovakia. Alexander Dubček granted freedom of religion and the press and the people began to breathe freely. Brezhnev issued appeals and warnings and finally sent in the tanks. For the first time there was a public protest in the Soviet Union. A number of people demonstrated on Red Square. Of course, they were arrested. Some were imprisoned, some exiled; but the events in Czechoslovakia became an inspiration for many of my generation. They forced many people to think, just as in the 1950s the exposure of the cult of personality had done. People faced the challenge of rethinking their history. All these events were only indirectly connected with religion and the history of ecumenism, but they prepared the ground.

At that time the church played practically no role in society. Priests were allowed to 'perform the cult' and to 'satisfy the religious needs of believers' strictly within the confines of the place of worship. There were almost no sermons. Services in Catholic churches were held in Latin, in Orthodox churches in Church Slavonic. Baptists preached but they were not widely known and the attitude towards them was one of prejudice. Rumour had it that they sacrificed children. Pentecostals were also considered to be terrible people. Atheist propaganda helped to build up the pressure. In general, the public attitude to religious believers was one of scorn or indifference. Sometimes the patriarch received some medal or travelled somewhere but all of this was of little interest to people since the church was concerned only with the practice of the 'cult'. Of course the 'cult' is very important: the liturgy is the summit of Christianity and the reason why people come to church; but when it goes on in an unknown language and when there is no living Christian community then everything turns into a kind of ritualism.

In this situation, thinking people from the intelligentsia who were on a religious search had nothing to do with the official church. The history of ecumenism in Moscow and Riga is closely tied up with bohemianism. What was this 'bohemianism', as we understood it in the Soviet Union? It was people who thought unconventionally, who tried to say something new through art, but who understood that they could never realise their ideas through the state theatres and exhibition halls. They gathered in small cafes, met in homes, discussed all kinds of subjects, exchanged information on western art and listened to rare records. Rock and roll, for example, was copied on to old X-ray photographs and the joke was that it was 'rock and roll on bones'. These features of the bohemian life were very important because our mental and spiritual search is determined by the impulses provided by our everyday life. An interesting book or a meeting with a certain person often has a greater influence on us than any theoretical study or mass movement.

Then hippies appeared in Moscow. At the end of the 1960s they started to meet in the so-called 'Psychodrome' in the courtyard of the old university. Hippies loved freedom. They wanted to live a life without any problems, a life which would respond to everything with a smile and flowers, a triumph of nonviolence. I remember a long-haired person telling us once that in a certain western country a boy had gone to school with a jar hanging round his neck with a beetle scraping around in it. Following the boy's example, our narrator had made his own beetle-jar. To his great surprise he had met somebody else on the street with a jar round his neck. They had greeted one another with the two-fingered sign of victory, and this was the start of the hippy movement in Moscow. Unfortunately the hippies' starry-eyed ideals of

love and peace quickly degenerated into alcoholism and drug addiction. The bohemians' idea of good and of nonresistance to evil was remarkable, but nevertheless the hippies degenerated. It was terrible to see people collapsing into ruin before one's very eyes. The flowering of individual gifts did not materialise.

My friends, the first ecumenists, had not had a thorough religious upbringing. Although many of them had been baptised in infancy, they lived without the cross. We were thinking and searching along more or less the same lines as the hippies and bohemians. We began to associate with them around the end of the 1960s; and just at this time the Gospels appeared among us. Sometimes they were very old editions with pages missing. We read the Gospels and other religious books, breathing in like fresh air the words of inner liberation.

We see that the Gospel is ecumenical, addressed to all mankind. There are no divisions there, no different religious confessions. Christ's message is to living souls. Sometimes he reminds people who he is, but only in order to underline the idea of universal religiosity, of the fact that the Heavenly Father sent the Saviour for everyone. These ideas were in our hearts. We felt that Christ was calling us, seeking to meet people in spiritual crisis, people who had lost their way, who were seeking to escape from the treadmill of a life devoid of interest for the creative individual.

Our first meetings were not very deep in a theological sense, but ours was a genuine faith. Many understood that the Gospel challenges us to change our life, to become new men and women. Hippies and bohemians had great difficulty meeting this challenge, because the bohemian is an individualist. He strives to become a superman, a genius; he recognises no conventions; but because he does not know the Teacher of life, death and resurrection, he is nevertheless walking down a blind alley. Egocentricity is agonising. It provides a great impetus to mature towards some goal, but then becomes a destructive force. While I do not recognise myself as an individual, while I am simply part of the crowd, I am vegetating. The bohemians were different: they painted pictures, wrote poems, composed music. They were rebels in their own way. Their rebellion drew them into a genuine and profound study of life, a search for its meaning; but at the same time it was a hindrance when they reached the threshold of the church, the threshold of religion, because at this point it is necessary to take the step towards self-sacrifice, towards a rejection of egoism. The hippies too were desperately seeking a way out. They did not want to give in to humdrum everyday life; they were seeking new human relationships. To begin with, drugs do actually give a sense of expanded consciousness and of joy, but then they enslave you just as alcohol does. All that drugs provide is an illusion of growth; then they bang the doors of the trap shut behind you.

Yet these hippies and bohemians wanted so much to break out, to break through into the world beyond. We were surrounded by official propaganda and mockery of the church. I believe that in this situation the new ecumenical consciousness played an important role. It is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, the Living God, who regenerates our entire existence, enabling us to take the step towards a meeting with Him, to cross the boundary, to win the victory.

### *The Community*

There were only a few people involved in this new ecumenism at the start. We wanted to witness to our faith and to preach, so we set out on missionary journeys. We learned much about other peoples, traditions and ways of life. We often went to the Baltic states. Riga and Moscow were two centres where many people were con-

verted and joined our movement. The atmosphere in the Baltic states is very ecumenical: in Riga there are Lutherans, Catholics and Orthodox; there are Latvians, Russians, Jews, Ukrainians and Poles. They live alongside each other without enmity. Sometimes there is tension; but having lived in Riga for 25 years and having often visited it since, I can say that there is a genuine friendship among the different peoples despite the fact that the Latvians naturally develop their own culture, Russians live in Russian style and the Jews preserve their ways. Church life in Riga, as everywhere else in the early 1970s, was fairly routine, but the churches did not quarrel and behaved as correctly as possible towards one another. The Riga mixture provided us with a certain impetus. Moscow was also an international city, a unique crossroads. There were Russians, Jews and Balts among the first ecumenists, but nationality was never an issue, never a cause of division.

We were looking for something holy, something for which we could give our lives, although we were sometimes ashamed to talk about this. We rarely used the word 'God'. We did not sound the trumpet about love, including Christian love, but tactfully tried to help one another in such a way that love would be made manifest rather than remain theoretical. Those early meetings and journeys saw some surprising conversions. People were being released from their sins and from their past, and they were living proof of the fact that Christ is alive and that the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts. Nowadays Christianity is being preached everywhere, and does not seem so special. But at that time, every such conversion was a real event and we saw that Jesus Christ was right when he said that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people. Each individual is a great mystery, a whole world, and Christ values every human soul more highly than the whole universe. Among the first ecumenists there was one girl who had been a drug addict. At the end of our meetings we usually sang something while holding hands. When we were doing this on one occasion she said: 'Friends, I believe you, I believe in Jesus Christ. I've been rejected by friends and boyfriends. I've despaired of life. I don't believe what my parents say or any of the propaganda all over the place, but now I believe what you say. So you have a great responsibility. If you're lying to me you will be guilty of my death, because I won't be able to go on living.' When you hear something like that you feel that you are called to go on to the end.

On our travels we also saw another side of life: the state machinery, grinding everyone into a featureless crowd, into an easily manageable mass. We went to Tallinn with the first hippies. There were about thirty of us. It was obvious that we were being followed. They detained us at Tallinn station and took us to the local KGB headquarters. There they took down everyone's name, questioned us and took away from me the first issue of *Prizyv*, the logbook of ecumenism. When they had let us go we talked it over. One young man told us how he had asked them, 'Why have you detained us, what have we done wrong?' In fact, we were trying to free people from drugs. Hippies from the whole country were gathered in Tallinn and we wanted to share our experience of the Gospel with them. The officer answered, 'Better drugs than religion.' It was clear to us that our good intentions had come up against a brick wall. Our persecutors were motivated not by ignorance but by an unwillingness to accept the truth.

We had no particular school, no broad connections, no literature. It was difficult to obtain the Gospels and often a dozen of us had to share one copy. It was hard to free ourselves from accepted ideas, from the familiar 'there is no God', from the scornful attitude of most people towards metaphysical problems. Once some Christians came from Germany and wanted to record a conversation with us. They had not expected

to find young Christians in the Soviet Union, let alone ecumenists. One girl, who seemed to be a free, independent hippy, took the microphone and said, 'I represent the Kropotkin hippy organisation.' She had suddenly turned into an 'official spokesperson', showing how steeped in stereotypes we were. Ecumenism is not anarchy or capriciousness, but at the same time it involves a certain sense of freedom. When I want to talk freely with someone, I do not have to consider whether he is Orthodox or Catholic, Russian or Jew. Prejudice is always ready to rear its head. Ecumenists have to be open.

Whenever people accepted the Gospel they found the strength to give something up – depravity, drugs, tobacco. We learned this through living experience. Sometimes unexpected things happened. Once a sister and a brother from our circle were hitchhiking around Central Asia and witnessing everywhere. One man who gave them a lift listened with great interest, and it seemed that he was ready to repent. They were pleased that he was listening so attentively to the Word of God. Then the brother got out of the car for five minutes and the driver began to pester the girl. Our friends returned in horror. They had spoken holy words, talked about purity, but everything had turned out in a completely different way. We understood that when we preach we have to meet people on their level. The driver of the car turned out to be the 'unswept room' which the Lord had not entered.

### *The Call*

In 1971 we began to produce *Prizyv*, the first ecumenical journal in the Soviet Union. It was typed out, then passed from hand to hand and copied. Distributing it was dangerous: the authorities were vigilant and this kind of thing was forbidden. But because we had to work as a conspiracy the results were often quite profound. We had to think carefully about every word, every phrase; we pondered long over them. Today you can buy the Gospels, the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, books by Fr Aleksandr Men', hundreds of spiritual books; but when they became freely available people, alas, lost interest in them.

We put together a book, *Prizyv*, based on issues of the journal *Prizyv* over two decades. This book represents our platform, our credo, and it also includes a brief history of our movement. The first part, *Slovo* (Word), consists of sermons, reflections and confessions. The second part, *Delo* (Deeds) is about the persecution we suffered in the 1980s. The third part, *Posvyashcheniye* (Dedication), is on the inner meaning of ecumenism. The fourth part, *Yedineniye* (Unification), describes practical peacemaking initiatives.\*

'Ekumena' is a prayer for all people. At the same time we want everyone in the 'ekumena' to be an individual – not just an object, but a subject. Therefore we pray for all humanity and for every individual person. We have tried to encourage a spirit of chivalry in our brothers so that they go on to develop themselves, to perfect themselves, to become people of honour and duty; our aim has been that our sisters should be excellent in their nobility and purity. All of this has been hard to achieve. Of course, some people who are not religious have an innate aspiration for good; but as they go through life they often lose this aspiration, fall into bad company, go astray, become conformists. Often it is only when a person has worn himself out by trying everything harmful that he starts to look for a meaning in life. But God accepts everyone. Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son: in the person of the son's

\*See the review on pp. 421–2 of this issue.

father, the Lord went out to meet him, put his ring on his finger and said, 'He was dead but now he is alive.' Then we have the calling of Mary. From childhood Mary felt herself called to the temple, to purity. She was of the Jewish race. Although at that time the Jews were under Roman occupation they carried their mission in their soul. Mary probably knew that a Jewish girl must become the mother of the Messiah, and maybe even believed that the lot would fall to her. There are people – I have met them – who from childhood have sought purity, beauty and holiness. This does not mean that they are without sin, but nonetheless the aim of their lives is to be holy. There were only a handful of such people in 'Ekumena'. Most of us went through the hard school of life, through the Moloch which is still swallowing up so many young people. In *Prizyv* there are confessions written by people like this.

### *The Order*

As well as working among hippies and bohemians and going on missionary journeys, we felt the need somehow to make our calling more profound. Eventually, after a period of prayer and fasting, we decided to dedicate the whole of our lives to the Lord, to refrain from marriage and to live in frugal obedience. Several brothers and sisters took vows. They lived in the world, but differentiated themselves from others, not by special dress, but by the knowledge that they were dedicated to the Lord. It was not a large order, involving only a few people, but the very fact that the order existed was highly significant at that time. Because it was necessary to preserve secrecy, we gathered in flats, or sometimes in a forest or in the country; but nevertheless the sword of Damocles was constantly hanging over us. The need for secrecy pushes everything underground. The result is like an iceberg: on the surface only a small part is visible; but in the depths of the heart and in the community the work goes on and people gradually reach considerable depths. When persecution started, those who had taken a vow were ready for the ordeal. I know from personal experience and from the experiences of those who were imprisoned that we derived considerable help at difficult times from the fact that earlier we had read the Scriptures together, that we had gathered for prayer and had sought solitude for spiritual exercises. Words from the Scriptures came to mind; we remembered a brother or a sister who was also suffering. We were ashamed of ourselves if we complained. The iceberg principle, which originated in those different circumstances, today helps every member of 'Ekumena' who is striving for self-perfection to maintain proper contact with his mentor.

### *The Chalice of Peace*

When we were released, times had changed. We had religious freedom. There was no longer the need for secrecy or a special order. God is forever creating anew, prompting us to new paths and opportunities. While we were behind the walls of prisons and psychiatric hospitals, we gained many friends, new people joined us; it was as if they were waiting for us. After we were released it was our job to gather them together. We did this in 1989 at the 'Chalice of Peace' ('*Chasha mira*'), our first autumn meeting, which has become an annual event. The 'Chalice of Peace' was a sudden inspiration, a call to unity in spiritual communion. Even today Christians of different confessions are not yet united; but in earlier days they could not even pray together. I remember visiting an Old Believer church and asking if I could watch the service. They said I could but also said 'Just don't pray', as my prayers might defile the



church. Before the Second Vatican Council Catholics were forbidden to involve themselves in ecumenical relations. In the old catechism of the 1950s one question asked at confession was: 'Have you attended services in other churches, in the mistaken opinion that all religions are true?' After the Second Vatican Council the road to ecumenism is now open for Catholics, and that question has been replaced by a new one: 'Have you refused to participate in prayers for Christian unity?' Much is changing, and this is an excellent thing. Christians can meet together, read the Scriptures and pray. In fact everyone wants unity. Many people say that they believe in God but cannot go to church because they do not understand how believers can talk about love and about one God, but will not associate with each other.

Gradually a number of poets and artists joined us, and the *Chasha* society was formed. In addition to our theological-philosophical journal *Prizyv* we began to produce *Chasha*, a unique open forum for young talents. We also published new translations of New Testament texts in it. *Chasha* was very successful, but like the order it eventually ran its course. The main thing remained: 'The Chalice of Peace'.

### *The School*

The Lord often leads us along winding paths. When Israel left Egypt they could have crossed the desert in a week or two but they roamed for 40 years. Each person has a difficult path to God, and so does a community or Christian movement. Nothing is easy. The School of Ecumenism was founded in autumn 1991. At its meetings we study the Holy Scriptures and *Prizyv* and discuss our problems. We do not meet in a church, and there is no altar to be seen, but this does not matter: we each have an altar in our hearts. If the altar of the Good News were not in us, no icon, no temple could make us Christians. The ecumenists always remember this.

### *The Council*

Another step we have taken towards creating an ecumenical society and an ecumenical Christianity is the setting up of an ecumenical council. Its members are representatives of different churches, both priests and laypeople.

To summarise: 'Ekumena' originated in the early 1970s with a small group of people who are travelling in search of something, who did not live organised lives – they were pilgrims of the spirit. As a result of our meetings and travels we eventually set up the Society of Ecumenical Christians. During the years of persecution the core of Ekumena turned itself into a spiritual order. After liberation, from 1987, we met freely. The Chalice, the School and now the Ecumenical Council made their appearance, and all the time the pages of *Prizyv* have been the chronicle of Ekumena.

## **We Are Used To It, But It Is Unnatural ...**

Interview with Sandr Riga by Mariya Romanova

### *Ecumenism is on everyone's lips today ...*

This ecumenical movement evokes sympathy and enthusiasm in some people and fierce hatred in others. The dispute goes on both in secular circles and in the church, where followers of ecumenism are often accused of 'heresy', 'communism' and other

deadly sins. The most passionate are the new converts, yesterday's militant atheists. This is symptomatic. And it is dangerous. Not so much for ecumenists as for the churches themselves.

Ekumena continues its work: it does not justify itself or rise to criticism. It is a many-layered movement; like any movement, like life itself, it is sometimes inconsistent; but it is never aggressive.

*After the Interconfessional Meeting of 25 January in Moscow's Roman Catholic church, many people are demanding an explanation ...*

We have got used to the fact that from time immemorial different churches have existed – Orthodox, Catholic, Old Believer, Protestant churches of various kinds – and that they do not recognise one another, that they sometimes make compromises, but that they are usually quarrelling. Seas of blood and tears have flowed in the name of the 'true faith'. We have resigned ourselves to schism. We are born into it, we die in it, forgetting that it is unnatural. After all, the Saviour of the world founded one Church and the apostles called it the Body of Christ. By accepting the present state of things, for whatever reason, we sin against the Body of Christ.

It was just pain, and no proselytising, political or commercial motives, which lay behind the initiative to hold the first combined prayer service for Christian unity in Russia, involving representatives of various confessions. That evening in the Roman Catholic church of St Louis we once again felt ourselves to be children of one God, brothers and sisters. Standing in the sanctuary, I was part of the joyous wave of harmony which filled the church. For many it was a miracle, an echo of Fatima, where on the eve of the October Revolution in 1917 words of hope were spoken for the salvation of Russia and the salvation of the world.

*So you're not crypto-communists, then?*

The Soviet authorities persecuted us no less than they did the Orthodox, Catholics or Baptists. Ecumenists imprisoned under Articles 190.1 and 227 of the Criminal Code did not inform on one another or renounce their convictions, and they paid for this with prison, labour camps and psychiatric hospitals. We were not political dissidents. Our path was spiritual; our goal to build the church.

*How did the Society of Ecumenical Christians originate?*

Our motto is charity and truth. We try to love everyone, not in the abstract, but concretely. We also reserve the right to speak the truth. Sometimes this is unpleasant. But of course we are ready to listen when people speak the truth to us. Self-righteousness blinds people and leads them to death.

Not long ago the Society celebrated its twentieth anniversary. The Society's creed can be found in *Prizyv*. A whole generation of ecumenists has been brought up on it.

Our meetings are simple. A table, with a lighted candle, prayer, a psalm and deep immersion into the Word of God. This is the secret of spiritual communion.

No one who comes to us has to give up his or her confessional convictions. Father Aleksandr Men' was once asked, 'Aren't you afraid that your spiritual children will cool towards Orthodoxy if they take part in ecumenical meetings?' He answered, 'They will become better Orthodox if they are enriched with the knowledge of unity.' We saw this as the highest praise.

Unfortunately, there is much that grieves us. First of all, our own unworthiness. Our unity is often put to the test. Several times internal and external difficulties have led us into crises. Perhaps someone has rejected us, or someone else has become our enemy. But as it says in *Prizyv*, 'We do not dissociate ourselves from any brothers or sisters who leave us, but we pray for them, we pray that whatever happens to them may be to their benefit, for the glory of the Lord.'

*What is the Moscow Ecumenical Council?*

Last autumn we wrote to Metropolitan Kirill suggesting that he give his blessing to a representative to participate in the work of the Ecumenical Council, which had just been set up by the Christian community in Moscow. His reply was cordial and constructive. We made the same suggestion to Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz and to Baptist representatives. Many clergy and laypeople expressed an interest. The Lutherans agreed to participate in the work of the Council. We hope that the circle will widen. Tension between the churches may well lead to disillusionment for people who are standing on the threshold of faith. Once they have lost moral authority, Christians will not be able to do anything to prevent the degeneration of society. Whether we like it or not, ecumenism is knocking at our door. Ecumenism is the watchword for our times.

The Ecumenical Council is not an administrative body for research, consultation and coordination, but first and foremost a community, in which the various Christian churches, denominations and communities will be able to share information about their lives. More often than not prejudiced attitudes amongst Christians originate in inadequate or unreliable information.

The voice of the church can be heard in charitable work and the creative activity of poets and artists. As the Council gains support from believers in other countries all kinds of new areas of activity will open up.

*Is there any contact between ecumenists in Russia and ecumenically-minded Christians abroad?*

We have a longstanding friendship with the Italian movement *Comunione e Liberazione*. During the years of persecution the members of this movement prayed for the Christians in the Soviet Union and wrote letters of protest to the Soviet government. In Britain, the Quakers spoke up in our defence, and so did Keston College, the famous centre for the defence of believers' rights. Since the borders opened, we have had many visitors from different countries. Members of the Society are now able to take part in ecumenical meetings abroad. For several years young ecumenists from Moscow and other towns have been going to Taizé, a monastery for Catholics and Protestants, and to European youth meetings organised by Taizé. Not long ago we began a theological dialogue with the monks of the Benedictine monastery of Chèvetogne in Belgium. They study *Prizyv* and we receive their journal *Irénikon*, which promotes understanding between the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

*The press recently published material about KGB agents infiltrating the top levels of the World Council of Churches through the Moscow Patriarchate. What is your attitude to the WCC?*

We welcome any initiatives which will aim to overcome differences between Christians and therefore would not want to cast aspersions on such an influential

interchurch organisation. Of course it is a great pity that in the recent past church workers in our country have been used for political purposes.

We believe that every priest still has time to come to repent and come to terms with his conscience for what he may have done. We must not forget that the apostle Paul was Saul before his conversion. And Peter corrected his terrible mistake by repentance.

*Are there any kinds of serious obstacles today on the path to ecumenism?*

Unfortunately, there are many obstacles. In some quarters a false form of ecumenism has been pursued, and this has put believers off. No one actually puts his objections into words, but people have their reservations. Many think that 'ecumenism' is just church diplomacy, without a deep religious basis. Secrecy about ecumenical contacts 'at the highest level' has also militated against the successful development of ecumenical awareness.

Another problem is that we have to give up many of the things we plan to do because of the impossibility of producing newspapers, journals and books and because there is nowhere to accommodate the ecumenical centre.

In conclusion, I would like to put on record a passage from *Prizyv*.

We come together as a united community, and once and for all we reject schismatic isolation. We see the fragmentation of the universal church only as just an external necessity while we strive for inner unity. We respect the forms of worship of all churches and are glad to participate in them willingly when it is possible to do so. Those Christians who come to us themselves define the level of their involvement in the religious life of the ecumenists. ... We are not creating a new church, we want to be peacemakers in the existing Church of Christ, which is His Body, fulfilling itself in all (Eph. 1:23). We welcome all people of goodwill.

## **Note**

Please be careful about material on the ecumenical movement which comes from sources other than *Prizyv*, as journalists have their own way of conveying what has been said and interpreting events. The further you go from the source, the muddier the waters get. Let the documents and *Prizyv* correct any rumours being spread by people who are starting to write memoirs.

S.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)