

Response to Mikhail Roshchin, 'Old Belief and Work'*

The Old Russian Orthodox Church

Church Administration Centre of the Archdiocese of Novozybkov, Moscow and All Russia

1 October 1996

Dear Mikhail Yur'yevich [Roshchin],

In your essay you were kind enough to address the theme of the economic activity of the defenders of the old piety. Here, evidently, it would be pleasing to God to recall the fulfilment of the words of the gospel written by the holy apostle and evangelist Matthew: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and all these things will be added unto you' (Matt. 6).

These zealots for the Lord God, so as not to offend his greatness, renounced domestic life and, taking only service books, fled to the dense forest in order to preserve the purity of their faith in the Lord Jesus which they had received at baptism. Saint John Chrysostom, 'whose lips were as Christ's', so valued was his history by the holy Christian Church, writes in his discourse on these very gospel words, 'learn what the Lord's call is: if you search for the kingdom of heaven so as not to lose it then God will look after your earthly concerns'. In another of his discourses this great luminary of the Christian Church says that true faith is that which endures persecution and not that which persecutes others. This observation by a great teacher of the Christian Church strengthens these devout zealots ever more to risk undergoing all kinds of suffering in order that their true faith and piety will not waver during their earthly lives.

A slim volume on the history of Russia, published in the reign of Nicholas I, says that all Russian Orthodox believers were convinced that the schism was over, that the schismatics had laid down their arms and that there was nothing left of them. Nevertheless schismatic monasteries were again discovered in the dense forests, and laymen conducting church services. We should recall that Christ the Saviour founded his own Church on a hard rock, so that the gates of hell would never prevail against it (Matt. 16). It seems to me that this is a true miracle. Having left all earthly goods, fled to the dense forest and concealed themselves there, many of the defenders of the old piety were more successful economically than those who because of their attachment to the things of this world resorted to the crime of changing their religious views in order to pursue a peaceful life on Earth.

*Mikhail Roshchin, 'Old Belief and Work', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1995, pp. 263–67.

You will recall that the reign of Nicholas I was a particularly bleak time for the defenders of the old piety. The savage secret laws of the time are hidden away in encyclopaedias under the title 'schism'.

The Local Council of the 'Russian Orthodox Church' in June 1971 determined that Patriarch Nikon's reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church had been a result of his pride and ambition. This assembly rescinded the anathema placed on the defenders of the old piety by the Local Council of 1667. In his speech Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad disclosed all the attempts the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church had made to change the church's views of the defenders of the old piety, who remained faithful to the end. It was only now, however, in a Local Council equal in status and power to that of 1667, said Metropolitan Nikodim, that the church was able to rescind the anathema and recognise the sacred nature of all church decrees, rites and practices prior to the Nikon reforms. The Local Council took the decision to rescind all anathemas 'as if they had never been'.

Please forgive us for taking up your valuable time with our letter and for being so bold as to share our ideas with you.

ARISTARKH

Archbishop of Novozybkov, Moscow and All Russia

(Translated from the Russian by Geraldine Fagan)