Better Relations Between Government and Church in Soviet Russia

IT is high time that the Christian public in this country recognized and hailed the signs of improvement in the relations of the Church and the Soviet Government. So late as 1937-38 there was serious hostility on the part of the Russian State, and certain leaders of the Church were falsely suspected of organized espionage on behalf of Germany and Japan. But with the outbreak of war, a change took place, due in part to the patriotic attitude taken by the Church. On the day of the declaration of war, the Metropolitan Sergius issued a message to all the parishes, in the course of which he said:

> "Our Orthodox Church has always shared the fate of the people. Together with the people she stood trials and shouldered burdens and rejoiced over successes. She will not desert the people now. We, the pastors of the Church, at this time when our motherland calls all to heroic deeds, would indeed prove unworthy if we remained silent and just watched what was happening around us without encouraging the faint-hearted, without comforting the distressed,

without reminding the hesitant of his duty and God's will."

The churches not only offered prayers, but also made gifts. The churches of Moscow alone, on the anniversary of the Red Army, collected one and a half million rubles for the soldiers.

More recently a handsome book has appeared, published in Russian by the Soviet authorities, with the title *The Truth About Religion in Russia.* The Metropolitan writes the preface, and makes the following significant statement:

> "The attitude of the Russian Church towards the Fascist 'crusade' is easy to define. The so-called 'crusade' has broken loose in our motherland, and already blood is flowing, already our holy places have been desecrated, our historical monuments turned into ruins and countless crimes are being committed against the unarmed citizenry. It is clear that we, the representatives of the Russian Church, cannot for a moment consider accepting from the enemy any immunities or privileges. . . . It is clear that the Church must forever join her fate to that of her flock, be it unto life or unto death. This she does, not from cautious considerations that victory will be on the Russian side, but simply because this is her duty, as that of a mother, to whom the meaning of life lies in saving her children."

The Nazis unquestionably hoped to receive help from churchmen. Indeed some of the emigrés had probably given them assistance. But the present leaders of the Church have refused to have any dealings with their country's foes. This book does not pretend to say that the Soviet rulers have not been hostile. It states frankly that the Orthodox Church has been unhappy that the ideology of the dominant political party is anti-religious. It does not minimize the injured condition of the Church. It speaks of the heavy numerical losses since the Revolution and of "the inconceivable chaos" which has reigned in the Church. But the preface is a Christian declaration of the Church's resolve to fulfill her mission to the Russian people. It also dwells on hopeful elements in the present situation.

This attitude on the part of the Church has had results. Last Easter, according to Professor Georgievsky, in Moscow throngs of believers filled the churches during Lent, and large numbers came to the Holy Communion. The Government aided church-going by announcing on the radio on Saturday morning that despite the siege, black-out regulations would be modified for that evening to permit attendance at the traditional midnight services ushering in the festival of Christ's resurrection. This produced an impression, and was greeted by fervent prayers for the civil authorities.

It is important that the American public should be aware of what has happened. The book from which we have quoted is temperately written. It does not state that there is religious liberty in Russia. Indeed there never has been religious liberty in Russia as we understand it. But the book is evidence that the Russian Church has gloriously survived most trying and painful experiences, that Christians in numbers frequent the churches, that there are earnest and able leaders who are seeking to carry on under present conditions, and that the authorities are not at present suppressing the Church nor pushing anti-religious propaganda, but rather are showing the Church some favor. This may be due to the Hitler "crusade" and the fact that Church leaders have shown their loyalty to a regime which has certainly been hard on them.

It is unfortunate that this book has been publicized in this country in a most hostile fashion by the press department of the National Catholic Welfare Council. Through its news service it has issued a release in which are suggested such titles as "Soviet Volume Misrepresents Religious Situation in Russia"—"Orthodox Metropolitan's Attempt to Deny Religious Persecution Condemned"—"Declared Insult to Historical Veracity." The material in the release insists on bringing up all the regrettable strife between the communist regime and the Russian Church and condemns Sergius for not dwelling upon it. It attempts to vilify the present leaders of the Church, and generally to show up the Orthodox Church and its representatives as hopelessly divided and frequently both unworthy and incompetent. It seems particularly angry because the Metropolitan does not protest against the separation of Church and State, and chides him for accepting its disendowment.

Unquestionably it has been a most grave difficulty to sustain the Church's work with all her former property suddenly taken from her. But there is a nobility in the Patriarch's statement:

> "The ecclesiastical bourgeoisie sees persecution principally in the Government's breaking away from its secular union with the Church, as a result of which the Church—or more appropriately church organization (e.g., monasteries) and the clergy considered as a social body or profession—was deprived of certain rights; land ownership and commercial enterprise with various other professional privileges. . . . In the meantime ordinary Orthodox people —hearing about Christ's exhortations to the Apostles in the Gospel, and reading the Epistles of Paul the Apostle, of the life of any hero of Christianity, such as St. John Chrysostom—are inclined to see in the change that has taken place not persecution, but a more rapid return to Apostolic times."

This surely is the correct attitude for the Church to take. She cannot insist on State support. If her property is taken from her, she must still go on with her task as best she may. She comes not to be ministered unto, but to minister.

One would think that the press department of the National Catholic Welfare Council was bent on increasing the enmity to Russia in this country, and in rendering the heroic Russian Church contemptible in American eyes. A wholesome corrective to the misrepresentation of this release is the article on "Religion in Russia" by Dr. N. S. Timasheff, Professor of Sociology at Fordham University, which appeared in *Christianity and Crisis* for March 22nd.

We cannot lay too much emphasis upon the necessity of holding Russia and our country together, both in the war and in the peace that must follow. We must have keen sympathy with the Russian Church confronted, not only with the results of past losses at the hands of the Soviet regime, but also with the poverty and destruction wrought by the Nazi invasion, and the deaths of millions of her sons and daughters. She has been through a mighty revolutionary upheaval and bitter trials. Many who might have been her most able leaders are in exile. But she has come through the storm and shows evidence of splendid spiritual vitality. It is unworthy of Christians here to speak disparagingly of her present leaders and members. We must understand their position, and honor them. We can learn from them. And we can be of service to them in the Ecumenical Church.

It is a cause of thankfulness to God that kindlier times seem here in the dealings of the Soviet regime with the Church. That regime is patently so well established that it can accord more liberties than in the years when it was beset by counter-revolutionary forces. We sincerely hope that the Government may grant the Church not only freedom to worship, but also freedom to educate young and old in the Christian faith, and freedom to propagate her faith. No church has liberty which is forbidden to be missionary. The heroic resistance which the entire Russian people have given to the brutal invader is proof of the solidarity of the nation behind its rulers. We should as a people manifest grateful friendship to the Russian nation, and as Christians most cordial fellowship with the present vital Russian Church and her leaders, who under handicaps we can scarcely imagine, are manifestly showing forth the Gospel of Christ.

HENRY SLOANE COFFIN.