



Russian Orthodox Easter Celebrates Freedom Anew in 2008

By Derek H. Davis

The St. Nicholas Cathedral and the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Sign, both historic Manhattan cathedrals, are planning their first-ever joint Easter service which this year will be celebrated on April 27. The event is historic because the former is affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the latter with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA). The two have been separated since 1927 due to the former's pledge of loyalty to the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution. The ROC, today comprised of about one hundred million members, claims that the compromise with the Bolshevik state, coming on the heels of severe persecutions against the church and the certain prospect of even worse sufferings, saved the church. The compromise document was signed on behalf of the ROC by Patriarch Sergius I, literally from a prison cell. But so many Orthodox church members were discouraged by the event, believing that compromise with the Communists was literally a flight from God, they immediately formed ROCA, which today carries a world membership of about a half million from its headquarters in New York City.

A reasonable comparison to the Orthodox split might be the controversy that emerged between traditional Catholics and the Donatists in the early part of the 4th century AD. Angry that many Catholics had "compromised" with Roman authorities after a severe run of persecutions against Christians, the Donatists deemed only themselves "pure" since they had suffered through a range of torture tactics, banishments from the Empire, demands that they give up copies of Scripture, and even executions for refusing to renounce their faith. The Donatists condemned most Catholics for "giving in" to Roman authorities to avoid persecution, pronouncing themselves the only legitimate Christian body. They wanted strict standards for readmission to the church following the persecutions; they even denied the efficacy of the sacraments administered by any priest who had compromised his faith. Although Augustine considered the "madness of the Donatists" to be a heresy of the highest order, the group grew rapidly in the 4th century and in some places in North Africa outnumbered traditional Catholics. The rift continued for at least two centuries and was never effectively resolved.

But unlike the 4th century dispute, the 20th century rift between the two Russian Orthodox groups apparently has been resolved. In May 2007, a formal reunification agreement was signed amid feelings on both sides that since the Communist era is over, and because the ROC authorities who declared loyalty to the Bolsheviks are no longer living, there should be a restoration of ties based upon mutual trust and a common commitment to God and Orthodox doctrines.

There is no better occasion to celebrate the two churches' renewed ties than Easter, which is a celebration of the love of Christ and the offer of salvation to all humankind. The reunification is a welcome act in a day when splits and divisions seem to plague religious groups across the globe. Moreover, reunifications of this type are only possible in a framework of freedom. The two Russian Orthodox bodies in New York City will shortly celebrate Easter, but they will also celebrate their ability to freely come together, indeed an outcome of religious liberty, which is in turn an expression of the new political freedom we

find in Russia today. Hopefully the spirit of what takes place in New York City on April 27 will find similar expression throughout the Orthodox world and beyond.