

A Thousand Years of Orthodox Latvia (1010-2010)

Introduction: The Latvian Orthodox Church

The Baltic State of Latvia has a population of 2.2 million, of whom only 60% are Latvian, most others being East Slavs. 40% of the people have no religion, 23% are Roman Catholic, 20% Lutheran and 16% Latvian Orthodox, of whom a large majority are of Russian background.

As a self-governing, that is semi-autonomous or 'pre-autonomous' Orthodox Church, the Latvian Orthodox Church (LOC) provides an example of Orthodox life for the rest of us who also live outside Russia, but within the self-governing Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR).

Like its members, many of us live in countries with Orthodox roots stretching back to ancient times, indeed even to times long before Latvia existed, but still where the Orthodox Faith has been renewed only relatively recently. Like its members, we too live in bilingual situations, using Church Slavonic and local languages in varying proportions. Like its members, we too live in westernised countries as a minority among a heterodox or indifferent population. The Latvian Orthodox Church should therefore be of interest to us.

1010-1934: The Struggles of Saints



Orthodoxy came to pagan Latvia in the eleventh century and even then stone churches as well as wooden ones were built. We do not know what proportion of Latvians became Orthodox at the time, but there must have been fairly substantial numbers. There were priests, icons, books

and spiritual centres of authority, such as the churches in Ersik and Koknes. The Latvian language was also directly influenced by Orthodoxy. Among many other words, the Latvian words for 'cross', 'baptise', 'bell', 'book' and 'candle' were all taken from Russian Orthodoxy. This is a field where archaeologists might be able to tell us more.

In the Middle Ages Orthodox churches in Latvia belonged to the Polotsk Diocese of the Russian Church. One of the most ancient monuments of the Latvian people is a Gospel book copied by a certain Yurgis (George), the son of a Latvian Orthodox priest. He served in the parish of Ersik, before it was destroyed by the barbaric Roman Catholic 'crusaders' or Teutonic knights. Although invading Teutonic knights destroyed much of Orthodox civilisation in Latvia, Roman Catholic persecution did not destroy Orthodoxy and Riga later became a new centre of enlightenment. In the 16th century the newly-founded monastery of Jakobstadt (Jekabpils) became a spiritual centre and the Jakobstadt Icon of the Mother of God was miraculously found there in Latvia's main river, the Daugava.

In 1710 the whole Baltic area came under Russian control. From then on the number of Orthodox churches in Latvia increased and were placed in the Diocese of Pskov. Church life developed quickly once a vicar bishop had been appointed to Riga in 1836. In the 1840s some 100,000 Latvians joined the Orthodox Church, fleeing the oppression of German Lutheran landowners, seeking spiritual solace in the Church of God. The first Latvian parish was opened in Riga in 1845 and within three years 38 Latvian parishes and 15 schools had been opened.

In 1850 Riga became an independent Diocese and many churches were built to meet the spiritual needs of the Latvian faithful. This was especially so in Vidzeme, which is the north-western region towards Estonia, north of the River Daugava, the centre of which is the town of Valmiera. Liturgical translations were made into Latvian and the first Latvian Orthodox priest, Fr David Balodis (1806-64) was ordained. By 1880 the Riga Diocese had a seminary, 200,000 baptised, 157 churches and 291 priests, as well as over 300 schools. Many very beautiful Cathedrals and churches were built. Services were conducted in Slavonic, Latvian and Estonian. On the eve of the First World War the Riga Diocese had 267 churches with 270,000 parishioners.

After the Revolution, Patriarch (later St) Tikhon and the Synod in Moscow wisely granted independence to those parts of the Russian Orthodox Church which found themselves outside the borders of the new Godless Soviet Union, on the territories of other States. Thus, in 1920, St Tikhon founded the independent ROCOR. In 1921 Latvian Orthodox were in turn granted their independence under the great friend of Patriarch Tikhon and ROCOR, the Latvian Archbishop (later St) John of Riga. In 1934 Archbishop John was barbarically martyred, the tragedy and the glory of Latvian Orthodoxy.

1934-1992: The Struggles of Spiritual Maturity

After Archbishop John's martyrdom (probably at the hands of Communist torturers) in 1934 and his funeral, which was attended by over 100,000 faithful, there began a tragic period of instability and persecution. Amid political manipulation and pressure, for just four years in its thousand-year history, from 1936 until 1940, Orthodox in Latvia fell under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This was against the will of the people and the majority of the clergy and was felt as a yoke. Happily, after 1940 virtually all Orthodox in Latvia returned to the Russian Mother-Church. However, from 1939 on they suffered Soviet occupation, in 1941 a Nazi invasion and then Soviet occupation again after 1944.

From this point on conditions under the atheists were very hard, but serious persecution against the Church did not begin until the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s. Notably, in 1961 the Riga Cathedral was closed and many Latvian Orthodox churches were closed in 1963 and 1964. Altogether some forty churches, one convent and almost all the chapels were closed or destroyed in these years. Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s ninety churches and one convent still remained open. This was half of the original number of churches, a proportion in fact far higher than elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Many point to the wise diplomacy of the bishops of the period and the prayers of the many nuns of the Riga convent, which never closed throughout this time.

During the 80s more and more people asked to be baptised. This movement became increasingly strong as the decade wore on. In 1990 Archimandrite Alexander (Kudriashov) was consecrated as Bishop Alexander, the 21st ruling bishop of the Latvian land. So began a new dawn in the history of Orthodoxy in Latvia. In 1991, with the break-up of the old Soviet Union, Latvia became an independent country. The return to the Orthodox Faith which had begun in the 1980s was set to take off, including among Latvians, more and more of whom came to the Church.

Tens of thousands were to ask to be baptised and married, but there were few to reap the harvest. There was much ignorance and Soviet superstition, but as in the fourth century there were few to Church the newly baptised. And all this was taking place amidst a wave of Western permissiveness and debauchery which had come into the country with the fall of Communism. Unfortunately, a few who were unworthy were ordained.

Thus, in 1989 a Janis (John) Kalninsh was ordained. He soon turned out to be a 'kochetkovets', that is a neo-renovationist dreamer, who made a great noise in the media. Kalninsh wanted a 'national', 'latvianised' Orthodoxy and 'pre-Constantinian communities', a Christianity without the Church, in the Protestant fashion. This was simply enslavement to yet another fashionable Western import, confusing Orthodoxy with vulgar Western humanism. Typically, Kalninsh also had an unhealthy, 'Kovalevskian' interest in the occult and the esoteric, a pseudo-spiritual 'enlightenment', to be sought somewhere in Asia. It was another classic case of 'prelest', the spiritual pride and delusion of one who believed that he had seen God, when in fact he had only seen his own psyche.

In reality, Kalninsh had merely wanted to replace the spiritual beauty of the Church of Christ with Western modernism. He desperately sought to go under the Patriarchate of Constantinople, where other modernists had already gone and were later to seek refuge. These had included certain modernist, nationalistic Orthodox in Finland and in the Paris Jurisdiction in France in the 1920s, among them the Sophianist heretic Fr Sergius Bulgakov. Between 1936 and 1940 a few in Latvia, in the 1990s a few in Estonia and in 2006 a few members of the Sourozh Diocese in Great Britain did likewise.

Following a wave of Russophobic Latvian nationalism, which banned Russian and identified everything Russian with Soviet Communism (as some dissidents in ROCOR also later did), a few newly-ordained clergy sided with Kalninsh. Despite many warnings from the Church and a case of manslaughter caused by a car that he had been driving, Kalninsh continued to write books and speak in the Latvian media. He also contacted Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira in Great Britain, whose Archdiocese he attempted to enter. Sadly, Kalninsh refused to listen to the Church and despite the great patience shown towards him, eventually the Latvian Orthodox authorities had to defrock him.

Other cases of adolescent immaturity also took place. There was the case of Fr Ambrose Kliavinsh, an inexperienced young hieromonk who played at being a starets or holy elder, and the sad case of Fr Viktor Kontuzorov, who was also defrocked. Even the Patriarchate of Constantinople refused to accept the latter. All these were growing pains for the future LOC.

In 1991, the Riga Cathedral, which had been closed and desecrated by the Communists thirty years before was returned to the Orthodox of Latvia. In 1992 other former Church property was also returned. But since so many churches had been closed and misused by the Communists, often the Church property returned was in ruins. It would take years and millions of roubles to restore it.

Despite these difficulties, Bishop Alexander managed to prevent in Latvia a schism like that in Estonia, where much Church property and some 10% of the Church passed over to the Patriarchate of Constantinople amid a wave of Russophobia there. Through the prayers of St John of Riga, still only canonised by ROCOR at the time, Latvian Orthodox were spared schism to the American-backed, anti-Russian modernism of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This was surely due to the prayers of St John. Notably also, throughout the period between 1990 and 1992 there had been cases of icons weeping myrrh – a sign that heaven was comforting the Local Church.

1992-2010: Spiritual Victory

On 29 December 1992, His Holiness Patriarch Alexis II proclaimed a ‘Tomos’ (decree), restoring independence to Orthodox in Latvia. The Latvian Orthodox Church (LOC) was thus restored and now its main bishop would bear the title ‘of Riga and all Latvia’. From this point on there began the huge task of restoring, rebuilding and building churches. Many of them were in ruins. Others had been demolished. Others had to be built from nothing. But there was also the restoration and rebuilding of souls through instruction and Sunday schools.

Many were the tasks facing the LOC. In 1994 the seminary was reopened in Riga. Wonderworking icons, for instance the Tolga Icon of the Mother of God, visited Latvia, Church literature in both Russian and Latvian was published, a bilingual calendar was printed every year, a monthly journal appeared, education was taken into the Church’s care, the practice of public processions was restored. The Church raised its profile on radio, TV and in newspapers.

The status of the Church grew in Latvian society and high-level links were maintained with the political authorities. On 24 September 2001 there came at last the local canonisation of the martyred Latvian St John of Riga, whose relics were later found intact in 2003. In 2002 Bishop Alexander (already Archbishop by then) was made Metropolitan, the sign that the LOC was truly an independent Church. In 2003 the official website of the LOC, www.pareizticiba.lv, was launched.

In 2004 some 200,000 Orthodox came to greet the Tikhvin Icon which had been brought back to Riga. In 2006 a vicar bishop was consecrated, when Archimandrite Alexander (Matrionin) became Bishop of Daugavpils, Latvia’s second city. In 2008 the Latvian Parliament passed a new law recognising the LOC, which remains completely independent in all its administrative areas, though is spiritually dependent on the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 2008 the LOC had 350,000 baptised Orthodox. The Metropolitan area of the LOC consists of one Diocese, with a Metropolitan, one vicar bishop and is divided administratively into six deaneries. The Riga Deanery in the centre has 30 parishes, of which 11 are new. The

Valmiera Deanery in the north has 16 parishes, of which 3 are new. The Liepaja Deanery on the west coast has 11 parishes, of which 3 are new. The Madona Deanery in the south has 17 parishes, especially Latvian ones, and is the home area of him who can be called the Patron-Saint of Latvia, St John (Pommer) of Riga. The Daugavpils Deanery in the south-east has 26 parishes, of which 4 are new. The Rēzekne Deanery in the east has 20 parishes, of which 2 are new.

Conclusion

At present the LOC has 86 priests and 18 deacons, of whom ten priests and two deacons are Latvians. The LOC has a fully functioning seminary in Riga, a monastery and its famous convent in Riga, which never closed all through the Soviet years, as well as shrines like the Yakobstadt Icon of the Mother of God and the holy relics of St John of Riga.

The huge and magnificent Cathedral in Riga, which like many other Latvian churches was built in the nineteenth century, has been fully restored since the fall of Communism, together with the once ruined Cathedrals in Liepaja and Jelgava. The LOC has good neighbourly relations with the Lutherans and Roman Catholics in Latvia. Each faith respects the other, but the LOC keeps the Tradition and the Orthodox calendar, witnessing to the heterodox.

To be independent or self-governing, a Church must have its own episcopate, sufficient clergy and a large flock with its own church buildings. It must have its shrines and spiritual centres, a monastery, a convent, a seminary. This is what the LOC has, as does ROCOR. However, in ROCOR we also face other difficulties, inasmuch as we are not scattered across a small country like Latvia, but across all the continents of the world. Thus, although some of our challenges are similar, other of our challenges are more complex.

Archpriest Andrew Phillips

Feast of the Three Hierarchs
30 January/12 February 2010

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