The Predicaments of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church Today

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The affairs of the church have always been of special interest to me. As a graduate of the Plovdiv Theological Seminary and the Theological Faculty in Sofia, I had made close and lasting friendships with many of the present leaders in the Church administration, the Holy Synod, the Seminaries, and the Theological Academy. In exile, I have written extensively on Church matters and revealed the plight of religion under the Communist regime. I have vigorously attacked the accommodationism of the Church hierarchy in Sofia and abroad. Arriving in Bulgaria, I did not know what to expect since I had cut all my ties with friends and foes, not knowing who had done what all these years. I knew next to nothing as to how they fared in the conditions of the post-November era, how were they treated and what part, if any, they played in the processes of revival of freedom and democracy. Only dribs and drabs have reached me by way of occasional mentions in the press. I had written to some friends that I was coming to Bulgaria. Some responded to my letters. Most did not. As it turned out some of my letters were not received. I tracked down the people I wanted to see through friends and acquaintances. I had a number of extensive discussions with a few of them.

My first impressions of Church life in Bulgaria came from my village. The local priest is a gentle, pious, down to earth, intelligent, and practical servant of God. He lives in what once was the Church hall, now transformed into living quarters for him. In the church yard, some twenty feet from the Church is a pen where he keeps his goats. During the service, one can hear the bleating of the kids. The Church yard is overgrown with weeds. They have no lawn mowers there, and they do not cultivate the yard for any other purposes. The Church is the same as I left it, forty years earlier; it is presently over two hundred years old.
The bell tower seemed to have been painted. The cross, which was destroyed by gunfire in 1944, is now restored. Except for a new wooden ceiling, all is the same—the icons, the frescoes, the furniture. The painting of St. Elijah is still there. There is also a fresco where the eyes of a saint were gouged out by the Turks. It is still there. Father Nikolai explained some of the icons. He conducted the services with impressive mystical concentration. He was assisted by a small female choir which is something new for the village. They conduct services in the absence of trained cantor and they are doing very well indeed, under the circumstances; however, the book of the Gospels was rather ragged. In Sofia I purchased a new Gospel which I will have specially bound here and sent to them.

Father Nikolai is a district priest. He serves seven or eight villages which have no priests, and some of the churches are used as warehouses. The worshippers were old women, all dressed in black. I saw no young people there. In the cities—Plovdiv and Sofia—one could see young people entering the churches, lighting candles, and praying. My impression was that the Church is virtually dead, and it will take a lot to revive it. As of now, it looks like a lost cause. If the situation is the same in all villages, and I suspect that it is even worse, there is little hope. There are no priests. To be an optimist on that score is naive, and to be a pessimist feels like a betrayal. But this is what the situation is, and there is no point of misrepresenting it.

A great deal of my time in Plovdiv and Sofia was spent visiting churches, chapels, and cathedrals. They are national treasures of art collections. The iconography, the wood cuts, the frescoes, which make no impression to the natives, are masterpieces for appreciation by foreigners. In some instances, one begins to wonder how neglected these monuments of Bulgarian culture are. The wall painting outside of the Igoumen’s headquarters in the Bachkovo Monastery and the paintings in the entrance of the same church, as well as those surrounding the central church of the Rila Monastery are masterpieces of art. They are comparable to Michelangelo and considering the difference of culture and versions of Christianity, deserve better attention and special studies as to their meaning and morality. The iconostasis of the Bachkovo Church and the woodwork of other Bulgarian churches, are likewise masterpieces. The Church museum in the Theological Academy, especially if one is lucky to see it with the help of its curator, is a treasury which one rarely has a chance to enjoy. And the performance of the church choir of Alexander Nevsky will beat anything anywhere in the world where church music is concerned. In addition the Seminary choir in Sofia served the Vespers service with guests.

Yet, the state of the Church, as we were able to assess from our conversations, was nothing to be excited about. It appears that the leadership of the Church is deeply compromised with its cooperation with the Communist regime. The Dean of the Theological Academy admitted; "Compromises were made. Compromises had to be made in order to
save the Church." Our charges, made in exile for years that the leadership of the Church had become a lackey of Zhivkov's regime, were confirmed. We heard these charges from many quarters—clergy and lay people, church and non-church people. The Dean of the Academy was somehow confused and embarrassed making these admissions. The previous evening when we had met him briefly, he received us with great enthusiasm. The next morning he was somehow restrained. Apparently he had discussed with someone our prospective meeting and had been warned of our positions. So there was the admission: compromises had been made in order to save the Church. We were told by others, close to the Church, that those who had compromised had done it for their own personal benefit—for career advantages and for all sorts of personal privileges. Protecting the Church was only a cover-up for their ingratiating betrayal. From all the stories which are circulated, it will appear that these same people who were saving the Church were deeply involved in persecution of other members of the Church hierarchy and the theological world who courageously had stood for the Church. The case for protection of the Church remains to be substantiated because not much of the Church has survived. Except for the full complement of bishops and a skeleton of teaching staff in the Academy and the Seminary, the clergy had been decimated; the number of Churches used as warehouses is still unknown, and the art treasures of the Church pilfered by government merchants are abroad. One is not impressed by the number of worshippers, even today, after the collapse of the Zhivkov regime.

We listened with pain to some of the charges made by the critics of the accommodationists. All criticism was directed against Patriarch Maxim, the Metropolitans of Stara Zagora-Pankrati, of Vratsa-Kalinik, and their proteges. We heard of a staged shameful incident involving the former Rector of the Seminary Bishop Gerasim and his subsequent trial, in which even Synodal metropolitans were apparently implicated. During the trial one of the witnesses against Gerasim had testified that the Bishop, in his capacity as Rector of the Seminary, had been recruiting priests and monks among the students. The presiding judge had reprimanded the witness and excused him with the remark: "And you think this is bad? But isn't this part of his responsibilities?" The Bishop had been acquitted. He was an old friend of mine, but for some reason for a long time I thought that he had been dead. He is still alive and is assistant to the Metropolitan of Sliven. We also heard the story of the gruesome death of Bishop Gorazd. I also heard some disconcerting comments about my old, very close friend, theology professor Todor Subev, General Secretary and for sometime one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches, protege of the same people serving the regime. He was said to have been an agent of the KGB, reporting and receiving his instructions straight from the KGB in Moscow. I heard similar stories about the Dean of the Theological Academy. He had closely cooperated with the Communist authorities. We wondered how the Theological Academy had survived for so many years. But he himself
revealed the secret. The Academy had been a free ticket for those from the provinces to live in Sofia for a few years.

Indeed, the immersion of the Church leadership in the Communist swamp has been so total, without parallel, so self-effacing, so deeply penetrated by a spirit of betrayal that when the regime collapsed on November 10, 1989, the Church was nowhere to be seen joining with the jubilant masses to celebrate the liberation. One would have expected that the Church would have been on the front line leading the nation with crosses and holy banners, with tears and exaltations of joy. Instead, it was nowhere to be seen. The Church hid, and is still hiding from the faithful. It was a refractory monk, styling himself as a Hieromonach, Christophor Subev, who posed as spokesman for the Church. All along his activities with the opposition somehow did not inspire confidence. Sometimes he committed gaffes which made mockery of the Church. His integrity and his mental capacities and soundness of mind appear to be of questionable state. Yet, he pretends to be the voice of the Church and claims that he personally consults with God on every matter. Thus, when the nation was all involved in a passionate search for new ways, no Metropolitan, no Bishop, no Patriarch, no clergyman with authority appeared on the national stage to lead or to speak for the Church, as if they did not exist or as if the Church was hiding its face. We asked questions to that effect, but we received no satisfactory answers. All we understood was that Church discipline zipped all mouths as if no one could speak or act without the authorization from the Holy Synod. The Holy Synod was numb. Could they stand up knowing how deeply they were involved with the old regime? We discussed those matters with the President of the Priests Union, an old friend of ours, forced by the Communist authorities into early retirement, professor of Cannon Law, Radko Poptodorov. He was far from being able to present an authoritative position of the Church. He himself, was persona non grata with the accommodationists, and his Union not yet recognized by the Synod (dissolved by the latter and forced to accept this dissolution by the Government in 1955) is unable to break the wall of silence surrounding the Holy Synod.

The leadership of the Church is viciously attacked in the press for its accommodationist policies. We were given a book written by a priest, Dr. Yanko Dimov, on Patriarch Kiril. The author had documented an expose which, if not repudiated by a credible authority, reduces the former patriarch to a faker, an Albanian, an atheist, and the lowest moral character under the sun. If the book is allowed to stand, with its documentary evidence overwhelmingly damnable, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the reign of Kiril will appear to have been the most shameful period. Maxim ought to appoint a special commission with a mandate to verify the quoted documents, to publish them in photostats, and to let the general public judge him for themselves. Such a commission should consist of trained historians. If Maxim and the Synod fail to do that, the book, reminding us of Procopius'
Secret History, will be left unchallenged and the honor and dignity of the Bulgarian church tarnished forever. If it turns out that the documented facts are authentic, Patriarch Kiril had no place being buried in the church of the Bachkovo Monastery. We do not know Dr. Dimov, but the information which he gives of himself seems to confirm his claim to speak on this subject with authority. He has occupied a prominent position in the clergy of the capital.

There is not such secret history about Patriarch Maxim. The deeds ascribed to Kiril are of such nature, that only a charlatan could commit them. Maxim, whom we do not know, is not of the class of Kiril. The articles against him are appearing in leading newspapers and are left without answer. He is said to have retreated to his patriarchal quarters in a mood of depression and inaction, apparently in confusion and derision for all that is happening around him. He may be regretting the good old days under Zhivkov. Perhaps he should have taken the lead right after the days of change by holding a Patriarchal liturgy in Alexander Nevsky and together with all Metropolitans and Bishops, should have anathematized Communism and the Communist regime from Kimon Georgiev to Todor Zhivkov. Perhaps he should have confessed the sins of the Church leadership and resigned his functions publicly, retiring to some monastery in repentance for all of his errors. Not only did he not do that, but he allowed the biggest demonstration of hypocrisy, having Prime Minister Lukanov, President Peter Mladenov and Defense Minister Dobri Djurov, the three arch-Communists, to kneel down for prayer a few feet from him, the Patriarch. The example of St. Ambrose of Milan comes to mind when he had to receive the Emperor Theodosius in his Cathedral, after a massacre in Salonica. The Saint barred the Emperor from entering the Church. Maxim did not rise to the occasion, and the Church fell even lower than it was in Zhivkov's time. Probably the only dignified way for Maxim now, one by which he would best serve the church, is to retire and let the Church find its way on the road to renewal. Rumors had it, that Metropolitan Pimen was being considered as a Locum Tenens of the Presidency of the Holy Synod until a new Patriarch is elected.

After the Patriarch, the criticism centers mostly on the Bishops of Stara Zagora and Vratsa. Pankrati of Stara Zagora—a former classmate of mine, whose ordination in February 1949 in the Bachkovo Monastery, for some strange coincidence of events, probably (most probably) saved my life. If I had not gone to his ordination with a company of students and professors from the Theological Faculty, my bones, for long time by now, may have rotted in the cemetery of some concentration camp.

But, enough for our old friendship with Dyado Pankrati. He rose as the most passionate, the most dedicated, the most fanatic supporter of the Communist regime in Bulgaria. It is claimed that documentary evidence seen in Sofia confirm that he and his closest friend, Todor Subev, had been members of the young Communist League, however, I am not
inclined to believe it. After the change of November 10, Pankrati had continued serving the Communist Party. In fact, he had been elected to the Grand National Assembly by the Communist Party under a concocted Fatherland's Party, in opposition to the democratic candidate. In the Grand National Assembly he continues serving the Communists, which is an outrage in itself. The Bishop of Vratsa, Kalinik, is said to have been the most fanatic and loyal servant of the Communist Party and had used the State Security to manipulate diocesan elections where, with the help of the government, had prevented the election of Bishop Arseni for the See of Lovetch. Arseni subsequently had been elected as Metropolitan of Plovdiv. Some suggestions were made about the new Metropolitan of Varna, as having close ties with the State Security, but I could not very well understand what the case was. The Metropolitan of Sliven, Ioaniki, who some years ago delivered a shameful speech to ingratiate himself with the authorities (I published it), was excused to us as being young, inexperienced and lacking in good advisors.

Public indignation against the present leadership of the Church had been demonstrated recently during the visit of the Ecumenical patriarch to Sofia in the beginning of May 1991. A public protest meeting had been held in front of the ancient church of St. Sofia. After the service, when the two patriarchs had appeared in their limo, the angry crowds had pounced over the car, demanding the resignation of Patriarch "Marksim" [Maxim], and asking the Ecumenical Patriarch to free the Bulgarians from this Communist agent. This had gone too far—not on account of Maxim, but on account of the Ecumenical Patriarch, who, after all, should have been spared such uncivil treatment. This incident, ultimately, reflects on the civility of the Bulgarians. Church circles viewed this incident with dismay, but this further indicates how untenable the position of Maxim in the Bulgarian Church is. Indeed, the only dignified way for Patriarch Maxim would have been if he laid his office down and let the Church select a new leadership, in the spirit of the new times. The longer he stays, the longer this thing will fester and will poison the Church presence in Bulgarian society. I suggested this way out to Metropolitan Pimen, but I am afraid it would not go very far. He would not venture telling the Patriarch to go. It is for the Patriarch himself to make this decision. The best way left to him to serve the Church is to retire. Should he still insist on holding his position, then the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is a lost cause. He is a big man and a great leader who recognizes the time when he should step down. For Patriarch Maxim time has long past.

All those with whom I discussed the Church were keenly aware and alarmed that the new conditions in Bulgaria open the possibilities for foreign religious propaganda—coming from Protestant and Catholic missions. Already the Church of God or the Assembly of God had held a mammoth meeting in Sofia where thousands had attended. The Church leaders are stung by this event. They are afraid that these Protestant missions, generously subsidized
from America, may find a fertile ground in Bulgaria. I did not try to alleviate their fears because they are well founded. The Protestants will come, and will come big. Who will stop them? How could they be stopped in a system of democracy? But why should they be stopped? Does the Bulgarian Orthodox Church have a monopoly over religious life? How will the Church meet this challenge? With its compromised leadership which, until yesterday, cooperated with the Communists and today are still fearful of breaking up with them? Besides, the Bulgarian people at the present are so poor in religious knowledge and religious orientation, and the Bulgarian Church follows such obsolete methods that any propagation of any faith in Church is better than the religious apathy, the atheism, and the indifference to religion. Maybe this is what the Church and the nation need—a challenge. Such a challenge may stimulate Church and the nation for a new life. It would be preposterous to claim the Bulgarian people for the Orthodox, when there are very few practicing Orthodox Christians. That the Orthodox Church is far superior than any other Christian confession with the richness of its spirituality, its ritual, its worship, its history, and in the case of Bulgaria—with its enormous contribution to Bulgarian survival in its 1300 year history is above any question, in the view of this writer. But for how long could this Church survive on its past glories, without touching the soul of the Bulgarian people? The truth, the bitter truth is that this Church has lost touch with the soul of the nation, and what is worse is not interested in seeking the way to it.

The Church circles do not hide their fear of Catholicism. Bishops and theologians look with alarm to the ingratiating gestures of the new political forces towards the Catholic factors—in and out of Bulgaria. The possibility of restoration of the Bulgarian monarchy—a traditional stronghold of Catholicism in Bulgaria—further stimulates these fears. On one hand the Church community feels great sympathy for the monarchy as a symbol of traditions or a fortress against Communism. But, on the other hand, when the question of Catholicism is raised, the monarchy is seen as an agent of a foreign religion. The Bulgarian dynasty, the Coburgs, is of Catholic origins. The Bulgarian bishops have been on the front lines of the opposition to Tsar Ferdinand a century ago. Ferdinand forced a change of the constitution in order to baptize his son, heir to the throne, Prince Boris, as a Catholic. Later, to obtain Russia's recognition, he had him confirmed in the Orthodoxy. Ever since, the Bulgarian Court paid lip service to Orthodoxy and the Church. King Simeon, in his long years of exile, has lived in a Catholic environment, his family is a Catholic family, despite perfunctory claims to the opposite. He has not done anything in exile to appear interested in the Orthodox Church. He has never appeared in any of our Churches abroad to worship with the Bulgarians. His gracious wife, the Queen, has never shown up in our Orthodox communities, to honor some welfare society of our ladies for assistance to poor and failing immigrants. His sons have never appeared in our Orthodox Churches. In fact they never
appear at any of our Bulgarian affairs. We deafened the world with the very little voice that we have. But we never saw our royal family to join us. Where were they? They were in the Catholic Church. Probably they have never believed that the day may come when they might claim the throne of Bulgaria. This is why they never cared about the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. For appearance purposes the royal family should have shown some interest towards the Church, to establish at least a Bulgarian chapel in Madrid and show their face there once in a while. The King could have established a Bulgarian Bishop in Madrid. His princes and princesses remained aloof from the Bulgarian Church. We do not know if Marie Louise has ever stepped in a Bulgarian Church. All this is a good reason that the Church in Sofia should fear a forceful Catholic propaganda in Bulgaria, especially when the democratic forces are flirting with the Catholic Church. And, on the top of it all, taking into account the sorry record of close cooperation of the Orthodox clergy with the Communist authorities, and the fact that the Catholics gave us as sacrifice their Bishop in Bulgaria, Rt. Rev. Bosilkov, one will understand why the Orthodox leaders would fear the Catholic propaganda.

I brought these points out to all those with whom I had contact on the highest and middle level, but I saw no signs of any policies as to how to confront the challenges. I could not stress enough the need for a new, younger, dedicated leadership, free from the compromised past of collaboration with the Communists. I could not see how these men, in their eighties and nineties were to respond to these challenges. Nothing seems to move them, to penetrate their aging brains. They cling to their thrones and will hold onto them to death, always expecting sycophantic praises and adoration for their rank, their age, and their crowns. They live in another world. They are dragging the Church into the grave and refuse to see it.

One question which I had specifically in mind raising with Bishop Pimen was the status of Bishop Kiril in America. Before leaving for Bulgaria, I discussed it on the phone with him. He assured me that he is in touch with Pimen and had plainly stated that he is interested only in spiritual communion with the Church in Bulgaria which would mean lifting the synodal condemnation of 1963. He was condemned in 1963 when the Synod, on orders from the Zhivkov government, moved to impose its authority over the Churches in America. This led to a split in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in America. The Synod found enough accommodationists among the parish membership, sent them priests and Bishops from Bulgaria and placed the Church firmly under the control of the State Security Services in Sofia. Kiril took with him all exiles who for decades had refused to submit to Sofia. The Synodal Churches became nests for Communist propaganda, hosting all sorts of Communist emissaries from Bulgaria and making their altars available to Embassy officials, giving them a forum to speak out from the Church pulpits. But now this is history. The Zhivkov regime is out and the Church is left on her own. It is a master of its own house. But the split in the Church continues. The legacy of Zhivkovism is still alive in the Church. Bishop Kiril and
his churches, and the body of the Bulgarian exiles who chose to follow him, anathematized by the Synod on orders from State Security, are still under condemnation. There, in the Synod, it is the dictatorship of the emissaries of State Security, Bishops Simeon and Iosif, who call the shots. But Bishop Kiril is not raising such questions. He pleads for spiritual communion only. I suppose he wants to visit Bulgaria, to visit it with honor and dignity, not as a man condemned as schismatic on order from the Communists, but as a worthy Bulgarian prelate who, in the dark days for the Bulgarian people had stood by their side. I promised to Bishop Kiril to raise this question.

I raised these questions and discussed them all across the church hierarchy. But I met with no interest and understanding of the problem. Hierarchy and bishops seem to be completely ignoring the role of the Communist State Security in the management of our church life in exile and refuse to touch this wound in the body of the BOC. They are somehow sold on the idea that the split in the Church abroad was a simple case of violation of church canons, a case of disobedience of a clergyman to the authority of the Synod. I raised this question with Bishop Pimen. He assured me most categorically that the question would be settled at the current session of the Holy Synod—"By the end of June." These were his words. As of this writing, [end of August], the question has not been settled.\(^1\) Someone quoted to me Todor Subev's remarks questioning the credibility of Bishop Pimen. But I stressed strongly enough before his Grace how important this question is for the exile community. Before meeting him I had prepared a draft resolution, a proposal to the Synod to settle this problem. This draft was in my pocket, but listening to his solemn assurances, I felt disarmed. How could I dare question the assurances of my eminent guest? This question, of Bishop Kiril, is very important for us abroad.

Finally, when we fought the Communists in defense of the Bulgarian Church, Bishop Kiril was with us. He was our leader. He encouraged us, he supported our faith in the liberation. Today, when the penalty imposed on him on orders from the Communist authorities continues to hang over his head, apparently there is no amnesty for him, and the executioner of the verdict against him is none else but the Holy Synod. Then, it could justifiably be argued that November 10 has never arrived for the Church. Irony of all ironies! My impression, after many discussions on this question, is that the rank and file of the Church hierarchy are deadly afraid to challenge the Metropolitans on this subject. Hoping for promotion in the hierarchy, eventually to become Metropolitans, the lower echelons are reticent to take a stand, out of fear of retaliation from above. I was left with

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\(^1\) The Synod has refused to reinstate Bishop Kiril. The Synodal Bishop in the U.S., Iosif, has started a vitriolic campaign against the American Bishop, calling him, among the other things, a traitor.
the unmistakable impression that the most fanatical opponents to the restoration of Bishop Kiril with dignity in the Church are the Bishops sent by the Synod to administer the diocese abroad. They, the emissaries of State Security, dispatched to America to rein the exiles, even now, after November 10, 1990, continue to be in charge of Church affairs abroad. The hand of Todor Zhivkov is still hanging over the head of our Church in exile. Indeed, the solution of Bishop Kiril’s question is a test for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church where the Synod stands to prove to our community abroad whether it has freed itself from the guardianship of the Communist Party, or it still is under its power. If this question is not settled, then the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is to be pitied.

After spending some time in Bulgaria, I could not escape the conclusion that the Church functions, even after the big change, in a spirit of business as usual, as if Bulgaria had never been under Communism, or as if Communism is still there. Much of the criticism these days is directed against the Holy Synod as a company of old, very old men, with diminished physical and mental capacities. One of the Metropolitans, Sofrony of Russe, a ninety-three year old man, a good friend and classmate of university times, when told that he should retire because he cannot walk any more, had retorted that he administers the diocese with his head, not with his legs. Another bishop, Stefan of Turnovo, my teacher of French in the Seminary, is also too old to hold office, rules the diocese with the help of some old lady, aunt or something, who acts as a vladichitsa (bishop’s wife). No one seems to have a say as to how to handle this situation. I made these points clearly and emphatically to Metropolitan Pimen. But he, too, is in his eighties. Once he was my teacher of literature. When I insisted that there comes a moment in one’s life when one no longer has the physical and mental abilities and that when such a moment arrives, it is better for the Church and for any institution, that such people should retire, that the age of 70 is a reasonable time for aging officers to go, he responded that they had tried this in Rumania, but it had not worked. I got the impression that there, in the Synod, they do not think of retirement. I spoke of the isolation of the Church from society of the need to have a younger leadership, with contemporary ideas, to respond to the challenges of the new times, especially after the big change. In the face of all criticism of the Church, the Church has to respond to it by a publication of its own, addressed to the general public. I saw the latest issue of Tsurkoven Vestnik [Church Messenger]. It is still published the way it was published during the long years of the Communist regime--stale, hagiographic, and empty. Pimen told me that I may have listened to their discussion in the Synod today. But he admitted they have no people. I told Pimen that at this station of my life, I could not move to Bulgaria for whatever purposes. Besides, they have all wallowed in accommodationism so much that they would be the first to feel the blows of my criticisms.
In general, my meeting with Metropolitan Pimen, over dinner went well. I said everything that I wanted to say, but I said it in the spirit of respect and courtesy. He was very receptive, elegant, attentive, a gentleman, captivating with his goodness, but nothing suggested that up there, in the Holy Synod, they entertain any ideas as to how to pull the Church out of its present debacle.

Frankly speaking, after my meeting with Pimen, I see no hope for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church for rising out of the present ashes in foreseeable future. The signs are just not there. I did not sense any energy, any inspiration, any dynamism in their present attitudes. This may go on for a whole generation, until a new generation takes over, or until some new regenerative movement explodes in some unsuspected corner. Hopefully, such a movement should start in the theological circles, among the students whom I did not see and could say nothing about. If it does not start there, then one has to look far ahead indeed, to the younger generation. I base my pessimism on my observations on the old leadership of the Church and the second rank prelates who did not impress me as very dynamic personalities. As of now the old ones have the Church by the scruff of the neck and would not bend a bit. It is to the theological schools that one should look for a new leadership, not to the clergy and the establishment, the nomenklatura.

The theological schools are the most significant gain for the Church after the November revolution. After decades of exile in the Tcherepish Monastery, reduced to a priests' school on reduced curriculum and number of students, the two former seminaries had recovered their buildings after the change. I understood that soon after November the Seminary staff had simply taken over the building of the Sofia Seminary and told the tenants, some youth organizations, to move out. No one had stopped them, and it was all over. I saw that part of the Plovdiv Seminary was still occupied by some musical school, but the wing of the Administration was already in the hands of the Rector, where he held his office. The front yard was stacked with building materials. They were in a process of restoring the dining hall. The South-Western corner, where the medical center once stood, was now a gaping hole towards the street. I could not see the class rooms and the dorms. They were still occupied by former tenants. The rector showed me the chapel. It had been restored or had been left intact. I was moved deeply by sorrow and sadness. In an instant, I felt the tragedy of the Church for forty-five years, not in the past. I felt as if I was in the presence of a long lost friend, having returned home from exile. I stood on the spot where for many years, in times long past I had stood in prayer, morning and evening, in our routine seminary life. I could not control my emotions. After so many years, I was again in the presence of this old friend returning from captivity in a lamentable state, needing my help. I reached in my pocket and gave what I could to the Rector, firmly determined when I return to America to do what I
can to further help them. These people, here in Plovdiv and Sofia, are faced with gargantuan problems in their efforts to restore their schools.

Discussing the seminaries with the rectors, I suggested, quite spontaneously, on the basis of my experiences abroad, where and how the Theological schools could improve their curriculums of old times—forty-five to fifty years ago. I see the mission of the Seminary in contemporary society not as a school of general education but as a school preparing missionaries for a reconversion of the Bulgarian people.

The Sofia Seminary is an island of peace. Its parks are a natural preserve. The blooming shrubbery of bridal wreath, the luscious greenery, and the concert of nightingales make a visit there a dream not to be forgotten easily. But the state of the buildings had much to be desired. Certain parts of the structures are of dire need of repair. They are uninhabitable and unusable before they see the hand of a plumber. But the most precious treasure which I saw there were the sparkling eyes of some one hundred or so young seminarians. I have been with young people for over thirty years in my professional capacity. I am meeting them every semester, every week, every day in my classes, but for the first time in my life, I had the delightful unique experience of reading in the eyes of so many young people so much innocence, curiosity, hope, bewilderment, irresistible quest for fulfillment in a meaningful calling and an unbridgeable abyss of uncertainty and frustrations separating these young individuals from their dreams, and the visible hopelessness of their present reality.

We met Father Vladimir across the street from the university. I saw him from a distance crossing to reach the trolley’s stop. I stopped him and initiated the conversation. In a few minutes, I learned all about the Seminary. He soon understood that I have had extensive contacts and great interest in Church affairs. He invited us to join him in Vesper service in the Seminary. He was on his way there. He presented himself as Chaplain of the Seminary Chapel. Later on, I was informed that he was Deputy Rector and a Medical Doctor by profession. After a stroll in the park, meeting in our path many shy young seminarians, we entered the chapel for service. The Vesper service was indeed a religious feast. Nowhere do they sing the "O Gladsome Light" as they do in Bulgaria. I was touched. I was introduced to the young people by Father Vladimir as an American Professor who was once seminarian, graduate of Sofia Theological Faculty, instructor in Sofia Theological Seminary, and so forth.

I had to respond with a few words. I told them how pleased I was to be among them. I spoke to them for the value of the education received in the seminary, for the magnificence of Orthodoxy, for the need of missionaries of the church among the Bulgarian people, for the nobility of the priestly service . . . all in this spirit. I was looking at these raggedy young boys and compared them to my students in America. We too, were raggedy and sloppy as students some forty-five years ago. Nothing has changed. So are also our American students. But in America, it is out of negligence and slovenly attitude, and as a defiance of
social conventions, rather than out of need, as is the case with those youngsters standing in front of me. Here I met face to face the misery, the poverty, the dire need. This misery showed its ugly face in the dining hall where Father Vladimir invited us to join them for supper. At the door he reprimanded several students who had rushed from the chapel to grab a bite before the rest had gotten there. "Because we were hungry," one of them explained. The dining hall had a Spartan look. The supper consisted of lentil soup, rice pudding, and bread. The bread was stale, like the bread in the whole country. But it all tasted good. Only I did not know how long it would hold.

We were shown the class rooms. They exhibited the ultimate of poverty. The chairs and the tables looked as if they had been picked from the Salvation Army. The text books and the notebooks were some pitiful remnants of loose pieces of paper. Time and again, in Plovdiv and in Sofia, I heard desperate pleas for maps and the usual school supplies. I felt then, and I feel now, that something should be done to help these schools. One may have one or another opinion of the bishops and the metropolitans, of policies and politics in the Church, but one could not argue against the proposition that the future of the Church is in the hands of the few who would come out of these seminaries and theological schools, in the hands of these youth who, against all odds, for one or another reason, have come to study theology. If the Church is worth anything for anyone, it should come now and help with whatever it can. Such help could come only from America. And as I saw the value of the dollar at this time in Bulgaria, a few dollars would go very far, $100.00 much further and $1,000.00 is a fortune.

I did not form any opinions of the Theological Academy. Currently, it is being restored to the University of Sofia and is being renamed Theological Faculty. The few glances which I got from the theology professors while talking to the Dean did not leave me with much comfort. A clergyman, a Prof. Shivarov, apparently knew of my activities abroad and seemed embarrassed. The other man, Prof. Hubanchev, was very polite but restrained. All along I felt some sort of a tension in the office. The spirit of accommodationism had penetrated deeply into the Academy. I heard that when the question of reinstating the Academy as a Faculty of Theology in the Sofia University had been raised there had been some sort of resistance from the academic body. An argument had been produced that they would be better off if they stayed under the Synod. Firmly established in their freedom, they apparently feared the possibility of interference in their work, that somebody might reveal their ties to the regime of Zhivkov.

I did not meet the students. The professors, the Deputy Dean particularly, who was moved very much when we met the previous evening, now seemed cool and reserved. He may have discussed my visit with someone prior to my coming today, had been informed of my attitude on accommodationism and was reserved. He could have arranged for me to meet
the students, in one form or another. Nothing of that sort happened. God knows what might have transpired and who would have been embarrassed at such a meeting. I was told that during the dark years of the Communist era they did not suffer from lack of students. In fact, they had more than they could handle. The number of 400 was mentioned to me. Provincial young men used their status as students in the theological academy, when not admitted in any of the university faculties, to spend a few years in Sofia. Now they again seem to have a flood of students. With pride they speak of some thirty-five or so men holding bachelors or higher degrees but studying theology as a matter of personal interest.

The latest development which was reported to me by the Dean of the theological academy was an initiative taken by faculty and students at the Turnovo university for opening a theological faculty at that university.