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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN RESTORING A "CIVIL SOCIETY" IN USSR

by Boris Filippov

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1. The countries of our region are now [1991] in a situation which is unsteady economically as well as politically. More than that, the situation is complicated by the exceptionally high political activity of the people while there is neither a stable system of the state institutions nor a ripe civil society due to the crash of so called "real socialism." Civil society needs to be born and developed again in most of Eastern Europe through its basic structures of family, regional communities, and parishes where for centuries national consciousness and ability was rooted and able to resist destructive factors which were also part of the national and state renaissance.
2. Civil Society Within "Real Socialism."

To put an end to the civil society (as well as the family) was an unannounced but necessary condition of the socialist take-over. Proclaimed to be the "education of a new man" it then set forth this aim of destroying the family and other traditional structures of civil society. The advocate of anarchy M. Bakunin was the first in Russia to proclaim the idea of the destruction of the family in his work "Federalism, Socialism, and Antitheology." After 1917, this idea was taken up and spread widely in the speeches and works of the main ideologist of the Party, Nikolai Bukharin in the 1920s. Essentially a new and untraditional cult of Pavlik Morozov arose then in the context of those formidable destructive ideas. The society named its hero a boy who betrayed his own father. But regardless of the crushing state policy, the family and the parishes lived on preserving thus the very basis of the civil society.

After the war in 1945, there appeared in the USSR civil organizations, but their nature was formal and false. Growing in number after 1956, they were supposed to show off the

"democratic nature of socialism." However, they and their related organizations in Central and South European countries cannot be regarded as institutions of the civil society. They always were and continued to be purely state organizations under the direction of nomenclature officials, though the latter were subject to formal election. The same is true about cooperatives, trade unions, scientific and artistic societies. But currently civil society is being restored and is maturing alongside the state and in opposition to its pseudo-social structures.

3. Churches and Civil Society.

Churches and other religious communities may construct the civil society only when they are not institutions of state power, that is when religion is not state religion. B. Tsivinsky in his book, Where did the Rebels come from?, proposed the concept of "Julian church" as opposed to "Constantinian church," the latter being closely connected with the state and sharing its responsibility for state policy. High moral authority among the people is characteristic of the so called "Julian church," (bearing in mind that there is no support for emperor Julian as a person and a heretic.) Such a church that we call here "Julian" undergoes a specific temptation to get back the lost social position in return for its moral supremacy.

Thus, we can consider all the religious communities of national minorities (which are suppressed and suffering) units of the civil society. Protestant churches of our region arose and grew as institutions of the civil society.

4. Churches under Socialism.

Churches and the socialist state cannot live in peace. There are two reasons for that: 1)the ideologically aims are crucial for the socialist state and 2)the socialist state is totalitarian by its very nature and naturally plans to ruin civil society. Churches by their very existence shake the monopoly in the crucial, ideological spheres.

Currently there is frequent talk about normalization of the church-state relations, about the dialogue between Marxists and Christians, but this is the corruption of the "real socialist" system. Actual normalization can take place only there and then, where and when the state is free of any ideology. However, such a state cannot be called socialist in the Eastern-European meaning of the word.

5. Churches, Civil Society, and Democratization.

The family and local community are the main units of civil society. These are the prime and everyday human necessities. Through them, people fulfill their elementary physical and

psychological necessities and their desire for communication. Consequently, they also obtain psychological defense, support and control; they obtain preliminary culture, and they can express their own views. Thus, they form their main existential positions.

Civil society has special means to secure internal help for its members and forms their social responsibility. But civil society does not only guarantee for these members psychological comfort. According to Aristotle, a citizen must learn to rule and to be ruled. The process of forming a society of civil responsibility is rather slow. The role of the Church is exceptionally big in this process, as any church educates people and the state not only to obey but to be responsible. In practice, in our countries, the parishes fulfilled and continue to fulfill the role of local communities of the past. If a parish and its community failed, laymen and laywomen produced new forms of social and religious life such as basic communities and charismatic communities.

6. What Role does the Orthodox Church Play in Restoring Civil Society?

When the subject of our discussion was purely theoretical, we would refer to the experience of different countries. But to make our points concrete and precise, we would rather speak of our motherland phenomena. It is necessary to have in mind that countries under totalitarianism are inclined to issue documents and other sources of information which greatly differ from the real situation and sometimes make it quite obscure. Our Church does not put forward as its task the restoration of civil society, but the process in question is its byproduct; it is the result of the activity of church people undertaken on their own and at their own expense.

First of all, we mean that process of restoration of parishes and true parish life. This aspect of the Church activity is growing rapidly and transcends all expectations. To illustrate: in 1988, the chairman of the Soviet Department on Religious Affairs proposed to give to the Orthodox church 1,000 church buildings in honor of the thousand years since the Baptism of Russia. The Moscow Patriarchate had to refuse as there were not sufficient means for such a project. But by 1991, the Church took over from the state 4,500 church buildings and 60 monasteries, and that was due to the pressure of believers. Restoration of all those objects became an exceedingly difficult affair for the Church which had thousands of desecrated and ruined buildings, most of them having only walls. We must also bear in mind that the church in our country is oppressed with huge tax of 35 per cent. The state does not support the Church in any way; there are no materials nor funds, and believers themselves have to buy everything and do it unofficially at prices which are often ten times greater than official ones. In addition, the permanent and escalating rise of prices (esp. in April of 1991) drastically affected the believers and the Church.

Our Orthodox Church is reviving not only by restoring its buildings and monasteries, but by opening Sunday-schools, libraries, charity communities. They have growing church choirs (including those of children); the Church has a presence now in the hospitals, mental asylums, and the army. So we can testify great enthusiasm of hundreds and thousands believers.

Church brotherhoods also appeared with their programs of helping the Church. Those brotherhoods and parishes are units of true civil society. There are twenty such brotherhoods now in Moscow.