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FINANCIAL SITUATION OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND ITS CLERGY¹

by Sergei Chapnin

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Recently there has been increased talk of the severe financial state of clergy, parishes, and monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), because of the Corona-virus situation. Because of this some priests have appealed to Patriarch Kirill. This article discusses the seriousness of their plight.

In the spring of 2020, reports appeared indicating that the material status of the Orthodox clergy, their parishes, and of the monasteries had noticeably worsened. The media invariably link this to the Covid-19 pandemic, but that is not really the case. The pandemic has shown more acutely long-standing problems of financial crisis in the ROC, whereas the bishops had allowed themselves to ignore them.

Providing for the financial needs of the clergy is an old, I would venture to say, is an old systemic problem of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), tied not only to the Soviet past, but also with the way churches were re-opened in the post-Soviet years. During the 1990s, the ROC attempted to re-open as many churches as possible without planning for the sustainability of the church long-term. Ultimately, churches were re-opened in many villages that had once been large but had fallen into disrepair during Soviet times. If a parish could pull together 30-40 persons, then a priest was sent, usually a young priest, straight out of the seminary. Years passed, and the priest had children who would eventually grow up; conversely, the number of parishioners did not grow but declined rapidly. Initiatives for opening a church came primarily from retirees, who slowly began passing away. The youth in the first place were already notably less religious, and furthermore, they gravitated toward the city life. The culminating effect was that a priest was left

¹ Translated into English by Walter Sawatsky, from Natalija Zenger's German translation from Russian. The article first appeared online in *Nachrichten Oestliche Kirchen*, June 11, 2020.

with a handful of congregants, unable to support the church, or to become active in recruitment. The status of such a priest had not become miserable just this year, but they were somehow able to survive up to this point. Now, given the economic crisis that the pandemic brought with it, their situation has been elevated to a critical state.

Nature of the Problem

The average income of a village priest, far away from a city, is 100 Euro per month. Conditions are notably better in regions bordering on cities since summer guests in their *dachas* provide a major amount of the village church's budget to support a priest's salary. Other parishes in a comfortable situation are those in the residential high-rise apartments of a city. From 150,000 to 300,000 people would belong to a parish church in these metropolitan areas. I think that we must reckon with the closing of churches in dying villages, even if such a decision is very difficult for a bishop. The trauma from the Soviet period, when the communists were closing the churches, runs too deep. Nevertheless, it must be done, because trying to sustain them is already financially impossible. Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov) of Pskov, was the first to close four churches that only existed on paper, not in reality. He did that in mid-2019. Therefore, I do not rule out the possibility that there will be hundreds of closed churches within a few years.

A second financial problem is the issue of dues that every church must send to support both the diocese and the Moscow Patriarchate. These dues are usually referred to as "church tax" and is, in theory, drawn from the financial gains of the church. I am convinced that this is a profoundly reprehensible principle because the interests of the congregation are not being taken into account; rather, the financial health of the administrative bureaucratic structure takes priority. Let us assume a congregation no longer has the means to cover its own expenses. Neither the bishop nor the patriarch care about that, and the church treasurer is expected to send the tax to the diocese, otherwise he loses his post. In point of fact, that means that the criterium for a worthy shepherd of the flock is not really the ministry with people, but to show the capacity to pay the church tax, even when the church accounts are empty. This has led to the reality, that Orthodox congregations in Russia have developed a completely incomprehensible accounting system. The treasurer is forced to produce a three-fold accounting system. One financial report gets sent to the state taxation office, a second report he sends to the bishop, and a third report is kept for himself. Naturally, the real numbers are only visible in that third account.

Aware of that reality, Patriarch Kirill introduced a “strict optimizing” church tax; now churches in Moscow and surrounding environs, as well as a series of larger cities, no longer pay a specific percentage, but a fixed sum of money. Some of the clergy joke that their ministry reminds them of a “franchise” system: they are assigned a business (the church), and the appropriate business attire (robe and cross) and the bishop in turn demands monthly payments.

The budget of the ROC is quite opaque. No one seems to know the answer; so how much *does* it cost to support a bishop? How much does it cost to maintain a metropolitan? Finally, what does it cost the Church to support its patriarch? No one has ever presented those numbers. Sadly, that provides grounds for assuming that the current church administrative system is profoundly corrupt. More than once have I heard it said, that the bishops view the funds obtained from the churches as their personal money.

The third problem, in closing, is the rigid social class system of the religious life. There never was in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church such a system. There are poor beggar priests in the villages, and very rich administrators of church congregations and of monasteries in multi-million populated cities. The former, as noted above, may receive 100 Euros; the latter, however, get 3000 to 4000 Euros a month. That is 30 to 40 times more income, and the Moscow Patriarchate does nothing to mitigate the discrepancy.

How is the ROC, as a Whole Financed and Where Do its Assets Come From?

To describe the financial system of the ROC is very difficult, because it is so erratic and not discernable. The first source of income evident are the dues and offering of the members; added to that are also the sale of candles and related objects.

A second source of income is the gains from sale of books, icons, and various “Orthodox souvenirs.” Frequently the clergyman is forced to buy the products not from the manufacturer, but from the warehouse of the diocese at a higher price. In other words, here is a further diocesan tax imbedded. Such income-generating posts can be found only in cities or in places frequented by pilgrims. In all other cases, the income tends to be close to zero.

The third source of payment are the priest’s personal services. For baptism, weddings, funerals, blessing someone’s office, home or automobile, the priest expects compensation. Since this is officially not a matter of payment, but rather a gratuity, a new concept has emerged: the “recommended donation.” That has meant that the clergyman provides these services far from a

reduced donation. Should the service occur in the church building, then the donation gets divided between congregation and priest. When it takes place outside the church, then the priest can keep the entire amount. For many priests that is a very substantial, if not even the major source of income.

The fourth source of income, finally, comes from the donations of sponsors. Not all congregations have such sponsors, but as a rule, it is precisely such sponsors that “close the gap” in the church budget, and who find the money for paying the “church tax.”

I think, from circumstances illustrated above, this clarifies why the pandemic is revealing the painful effects on clergy and congregational income; when the church is closed and no worship services are performed, then there is also no income.

What Strategies or Ideas are there Relevant to Future Financing?

Unfortunately, there is no talk of a strategy for the future. Both the patriarch and the bishops act purely situationally. Yes, they have sought to accommodate the clergy, and *have cancelled the church tax for April, May, and June*. Furthermore, the patriarch promised to support the married clergy of Moscow materially. That is, the support could be about 1300 Euro per person. That too is a one-time payment, and it applies only to about 1500 Moscow priests and deacons.

It is obvious that the bishops have no interest in changing the current finance system, but I keep hearing ever more often from clergy that they cannot survive this way. The parish congregation must become the priority. The bishop and administrative diocese are a superstructure, which should be financed on the principle of left-over resources. That principle has been so far mostly talk; indeed, I would go so far as to say, only for dreams. But it is possible that after the pandemic, the voices of those fostering a re-thinking of the system of church finances will only get louder.