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James E. Will

Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

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IN COMMEMORATION OF
METROPOLITAN NIKODIM

by Dr. James E. Will

This was written for a commemorative volume
on Metropolitan Nikodim published by the
Christian Peace Conference in Prague,
Czechoslovakia, but as the author was unwill­ing to excise references to Milan
Machovec and make a few other minor altera­tions demanded by the censor the tribute was
not included in that volume. We are repro­ducing it here as it casts light on a
significant domestic and international
prelate of the Russian Orthodox Church.
James Will (United Methodist) is a professor
at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary
and chairperson of CAREE. He has previously
contributed articles to OPREE.

It was my privilege to come to know Metropolitan Nikodim during
exactly the fateful decade which stretched between the Third All
Christian Peace Assembly in 1968 and the Fifth All Christian Peace
Assembly in 1978, both of which occurred in Prague. Though it was a
period of progressive decline of his earlier amazing vitality during a
decade of great strain, his spirit was communicated so powerfully to me
on the ten occasions we shared together that I am left with very vivid
memories of his presence. There were, of course, many obstacles to our
understanding each other easily. In March of 1968 as I participated in
the Christian Peace Conference for the first time, he was for me a
somewhat inscrutable hierarch of a church with a very different
tradition than my own who had an obvious loyalty to the policies of a
nation state with which my own nation state had been locked in cold war
conflict for two decades. Nevertheless, a difficult decade later he was
known to me as a faithful man of prayer, deeply committed to ecumenicity
in the church and reconciliation in the world, who was a skilled
administrator in many institutional contexts. But the way to such an
acquaintance was filled with many difficulties.

My introduction to the actual life of the Christian Peace
Conference in March 1968 coincided with my experience of the height of the
European Christian-Marxist dialogue which I studied during a period
of sabbatical leave in Berlin in 1967-68. The Christian-Marxist Seminar in Charles University, Prague, was a focus of such dialogue that held great interest for me as I experienced it several times during that year. The promise of reconciliation through such creative dialogue seemed very great. Thus the events following August 1968 which brought this dialogue to an end and sorely disrupted the life of the Christian Peace Conference for several years seemed doubly tragic. It was precisely in this difficult context that Metropolitan Nikodim had to assume new leadership functions in the CPC, at a time and under circumstances which made his leadership deeply suspect to many in the West.

Metropolitan Nikodim's and my second meeting occurred entirely by happenstance, when he happened to be in Chicago at exactly that time when Professor Milan Machovec of Prague was my guest during part of a long-planned lecture tour to introduce the Christian-Marxist dialogue to North American audiences. The Church Federation of Greater Chicago invited the three of us to be interviewed on the same television program. Metropolitan Nikodim defined with care at that time the "practical" dialogue which he supported while differentiating it from the "theoretical" dialogue which was so problematic to him but so important to Professor Machovec and myself. It was a difference in judgment upon which we never came fully to agree. But the character of the disagreement was revelatory of Metropolitan Nikodim's spirit. When I continued to advocate the importance of such theoretical/theological dialogue for common praxis in an address at the Continuation Committee of the Christian Peace Conference in Siofok, Hungary, in 1975, some colleagues found it necessary to reject vehemently this contention as alien to the "solidarity" of the CPC. Metropolitan Nikodim, however, as President, revealed the quality of leadership he gave during those difficult years of rebuilding the CPC, when his more quiet response in conversation was, no matter what the truth of my judgment about the importance of such theoretical dialogue, I should not undertake to advise persons in other societies when the right time for them to enter it had come. It was this kind of patient and creative leadership which rebuilt the Christian Peace Conference into the ecumenical and
international structure it had become by the time of the Fifth Assembly in 1978 when Metropolitan Nikodim had to resign his presidency for reasons of health.

Another dimension of the spirit of Metropolitan Nikodim was revealed in how he came to terms with the long struggle to maintain his physical health so that he could fulfill his many responsibilities. I was privileged to be part of the North American delegation which met with him privately in 1973 during the meeting of the Continuation Committee of the Christian Peace Conference in Zagorsk. He was recovering from his first heart attack, and someone remarked about their gratitude for the medical care which had guided his recovery. His genial but serious response was that he was grateful first to God for his grace, second to his mother for giving him a strong constitution, and third to Soviet doctors for their medical care. Setting the priorities of his gratitude in this order seemed to imply no derogation of the techniques of the medical profession in contemporary society, but only that this man of faith lived in our technological society with a continuing sense of organic dependence upon the Spiritual and familial traditions through which he received and continued to receive the gift of life.

As a priest and bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church, he was deeply committed to its tradition. I remember vividly a part of the discussion between North American and East European church leaders, designated as Karlovy Vary III, which took place in Marriotsville, Maryland, in 1976. Some Americans had spoken to the point of the importance of youth in the church keeping us open to new possibilities in history. Metropolitan Nikodim's response was understanding but strongly in contrast. He recognized the importance of every age group in the church, but put strong emphasis on the importance of the elderly to those churches like his own who were trying to preserve a whole tradition.

An important dimension of the Russian Orthodox Church's tradition is, of course, the richness of its liturgical worship. It has been my privilege to participate in Orthodox worship on a number of occasions both in and outside of the Soviet Union when Metropolitan Nikodim
presided over the liturgical celebration. It was obviously a joyous and meaningful responsibility for him. What priority he gave it amongst his many responsibilities became clearer to me, however, during the meeting of the Working Committee of the Christian Peace Conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1975. Because of his several heart attacks his strength had to be husbanded as he presided over the Committee. Nevertheless, he chose to lead the liturgies both in the Russian Orthodox Church on Saturday evening and in the Bulgarian Orthodox Cathedral on Sunday morning. When it was necessary for him to be excused from the Monday meeting of the Committee to rest, everyone understood it was because of no lack of dedication to the work of the CPC that he had chosen to give his now limited energies to leadership in worship, but only because of his highest dedication to his priestly functions in leading persons into the presence of God through the liturgy.

Metropolitan Nikodim's concern for the whole life of the church was also confirmed to me when, while his guest in Leningrad in 1976, we were taken to visit the church in the village of Lisi Nos, outside of Leningrad. During conversations with its priest, Father Oleg Bekarevich, he commented with gratitude about his bishop's concern for the life of all of the congregations despite his many world-wide responsibilities. This word about Metropolitan Niokodim confirmed my own growing judgment that he was to be understood as first of all a faithful bishop of the church, responsible first to his own diocese of Leningrad and Novgorod, then to the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole, and finally to the ecumenical church world-wide. That his faithful leadership of the church universal had brought him in 1975 to the presidency of the World Council of Churches, as one of six Presidents, is, of course, well known. But perhaps not all, especially in the West, understand how richly deserved it was, because of his great care for the churches, extending from the humblest village congregation to the most inclusive of ecumenical assemblies.

It was not a great distance for Metropolitan Nikodim to move between his episcopal responsibilities in the church and his presidential responsibilities in the Christian Peace Conference. He clearly saw both as grounded in the Christian gospel. His leadership supported every
attempt to place the work of the Christian Peace Conference on a clear theological foundation. His patient work to forge an instrument fit to work for reconciliation and justice through the churches around the world was understood by him and by many who worked with him as an instrument of Christian mission. That it also had political dimensions which were more problematic and more controversial was also understood. But these ideological and political struggles could be endured for the sake, and in the strength of the gospel. Thus it is symbolic and fitting that the last words I was privileged to hear Metropolitan Nikodim speak were in his prayer with which he closed the Fifth All Christian Peace Assembly in Prague on June 27, 1978. Included in his petitions to God were:

Forgive us, Christ our God, if in the heat of discussion we were carried away by human passion. Help us to realize our good aspirations in striving to assist those who are under burden, who are out of strength, who are in need, who are with a broken heart, who are tired and striving after liberation, who are ailing and suffering. . . .O Lord, the Earth is in strife. Sin seeks to divide people, and only Thy strength, which we ask from Thee, helps us and will continue to help us in our struggle against every division and injustice.

The news of Metropolitan Nikodim's death in Rome came to me while a guest of the Polish Ecumenical Council in Warsaw on September 6, 1978. After ten years of coming slowly to know and surely to honor him, his death came as a shock and real loss. I was moved to cable Patriarch Pimen immediately in the following words:

The news of Metropolitan Nikodim's death in Rome has shocked and saddened many American Christians who knew him as a great ecumenical leader. The members of CAREE in the USA shall especially miss him as a leader of the Christian Peace Conference. As Chairman of CAREE I assure you of our sympathy and prayer.

These were words I could not have used a decade before, because of all
the barriers that stood between a rather typical North American Christian and a bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church. They are words that a declining number of North American Christians still would be unable to use. I am profoundly grateful for those experiences in the decade 1968-78 which made them, though inadequate, an authentic expression of my deep appreciation of Metropolitan Nikodim as a Christian brother and leader in the Church of Jesus Christ committed to peace and justice in the world.