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Codevilla's "Lo Zar e il Patriarca: I rapporti tra trono e altare in Russia dalle origini ai giorni nostri. [The Tsar and the Patriarch: The relations between throne and altar in Russia from the origins to the present day]" - Book Review

Francesco La Rocca
University of Bologna, Italy

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BOOK REVIEWS
Giovanni Codevilla, Lo Zar e il Patriarca: I rapporti tra trono e altare in Russia dalle origini ai giorni nostri. [The Tsar and the Patriarch: The relations between throne and altar in Russia from the origins to the present day] Milan: R.C. Edizioni La Casa di Matriona, 2008. 
Reviewed by Francesco La Rocca, University of Bologna, Italy.

The end of the Communist regime in the USSR allowed the Russian Orthodox Church, which was in a position of absolute marginalization during the Soviet times, to regain its position and its prestige both inside the Russian society and abroad. The Church, and more broadly the faith, is no longer regarded by the state as the opium of the people, but rather as an important element of Russian identity. In this framework, the Russian State and the Orthodox Church look determined to augment their ties in order to strengthen Russia from their respective view points. It is consequently crucial, for those who want to understand contemporary Russian society, to take into consideration the role of the Orthodox Church and its relations with the Russian state. For those who have this aim, Giovanni Codevilla’s Lo Zar e il Patriarca: I rapporti tra trono e altare in Russia dalle origini ai giorni nostri. (The Tsar and the Patriarch: The relations between throne and altar in Russia from the origins to the present day) is almost compulsory reading.

Giovanni Codevilla, who is professor of Comparative Ecclesiastic Law at the University of Trieste, is an Italian scholar with a long-time experience in Russian studies, particularly focusing on the role and history of religions in Russia. The book, as of now accessible only to those who understand Italian, has been released by a publishing house, La Casa di Matriona, which is fully committed to the dissemination of works on the history and tradition of the Eastern Christianity to the Italian audience.

The book is divided into four chapters, each of them dedicated to the most important periods of Russian history, i.e. the early centuries, Peter the Great’s times, the Soviet era, and the new Russia. Lo Zar e il Patriarca starts with the report of the early centuries of Rus’. Codevilla explains the key concept of the “symphony of powers,” that particular relation between secular power and the altar which characterizes all the cultures coming from Byzantium. This idea is the key to understanding all the developments reported in the book.

The first chapter describes the evolution of the Church in Russia from its birth until the age of Peter the Great. Codevilla stresses the importance of the historical events of those times, like the establishment of the Patriarchate in Moscow and the Old Believer’s schism, as well as the importance of those ideas (e.g. “Moscow as the Third Rome”) which were shaping the attitude of the Church towards the power and vice versa.

The events that occurred between the reign of Peter the Great and the end of the tsarism are reported in the second chapter. Peter’s ecclesiastical reforms are carefully analyzed, especially Peter’s “Ecclesiastical Regulations,” the law which regulated the Church’s life until the October Revolution. The ecclesiastical policy of Peter’s successors, like Catherine II, is also presented.

The last two chapters deal with the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, which fill more than half of the book. Actually, this is the most interesting part of Lo Zar e il Patriarca. In fact, the description of the events reported in the first two chapters, even though very well presented, is not so different from many other works on Russian history. However, the analysis of the twentieth century sources, allow Codevilla to offer an original study on the contemporary relations between power and Church in Russia.

The Soviet era, the evolution of the Soviet religious policy and the persecution of the Church (the Orthodox one, as well as all the other confessions and faiths in the USSR) are the main
topics of the third chapter. The author reports and analyzes several documents, laws, and articles, which give an impressive picture of the Church’s position, which then drastically changed with the collapse of the Soviet regime.

The fourth chapter describes the revival of the Church in the 1990s, as well as the new legislation concerning it. Codevilla points out the complexity of the present time, where the Orthodox Church and the state attempt to revive a sort of new “symphony of powers,” while on the other hand the other confessions and faiths ask for a more equal legislation. An added value of Lo Zar e il Patriarca is that Codevilla, along with the events of the Orthodox Church, often deals with the other faiths that are present in Russia. Many facts concerning the history of Catholicism (both Latin and Greek-Catholic), Protestantism, Islam and Buddhism are reported. This contributes to give a broader and more accurate description of the Russian religious situation.

The main defect that one can find is the extensive usage of footnotes. If the huge amount of information put there guarantee the historical accuracy of Codevilla’s work, on the other hand they make the reading sometimes too heavy; some pages are entirely filled with footnotes, which compromises the understanding of few passages in the book.

Moreover, the reader of Lo Zar e il Patriarca is expected to know some basics of Russian history and Byzantine tradition, otherwise some passages, and especially the ecclesiastical terminology, may be challenging.

The rule of Orthodoxy in contemporary Russia is a phenomenon that deserves the utmost attention. Giovanni Codevilla’s book provides the reader with that information, which will help her or him to understand one of the most important aspects of Russian civilization.