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IDEOLOGY OR ISOLATIONISM? RUSSIAN IDENTITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ORTHODOX-CATHOLIC RELATIONS

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PART II: RUSSIAN IDENTITY AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Introduction

We saw in Part I of this article (Vol. XXII, No. 1, February 2007) that the Russian Orthodox hierarchy are anything but enthusiastic about the modern concept of religious freedom as commonly enshrined in the laws of Western countries. Their unwillingness to embrace this concept stems in great part from the historical connection in Russia between the Russian identity and the Russian Orthodox Church. If being a Russian means that one is Orthodox, how can one justify the existence in Russia of other, non-Orthodox Christian churches? More importantly, how can a Russian in good conscience sit idly by while non-Orthodox evangelizers entice native Russians to become members of these churches? It is this attitude toward non-Orthodox believers that has led the Russian Orthodox hierarchy in recent years to lobby actively for the passage of laws protecting Orthodoxy, by recognizing that historically it is the one, traditional faith of the Russian people. While other Christian churches have in fact been operating on Russian soil for generations, Orthodox leaders assert that their presence in Russia was permitted solely in order that they might minister to their ethnically non-Russian members living within Russia.

We also saw that the religious freedoms permitted in post-communist Russia brought with them an influx of foreign Christian missionaries, who actively sought to convert citizens of the new Russia, who had grown up in officially atheist Soviet society. Since these new converts to non-Orthodox faiths are largely ethnic Russians, the Russian Orthodox Church protests that they are being pulled away from the Church of which they are natural members by reason of their ethnicity.

In Part II, I will focus on the activity of the Catholic Church, both historically and currently, on Russian soil. The general concerns of Russian Orthodox leaders about
proselytizing among Russian citizens can be seen to be particularly applicable in their less than amicable attitude toward Catholicism, which is numerically the largest branch of Christianity and one that exists worldwide.

The first section will discuss steps taken by the Catholic Church immediately after the downfall of communism in the Soviet Union, in order to assess the number of Catholics still living in its territories and to find efficient ways to minister to them. Since the religious repressions of the communist past had officially ended, Catholic leaders sought to regularize the organization of their activities on Russian land in accord with Catholic canon law. Given the Orthodox Church's traditional correlation of one's religion with one's ethnicity, it should not be surprising that the actions of the Catholic hierarchy in this regard drew swift protests from the Orthodox leadership.

In the second section, I will discuss the ecclesiological attitudes of Catholicism, which does not identify itself with any particular racial, ethnic or other grouping, and thus considers its activities to be quite apart from any territorial boundaries drawn by secular political powers. The ideological contrast with Orthodoxy should be evident.

Lastly, I will examine the specific argument made by Russian Orthodox leaders, that the Catholic Church is engaged in proselytism within its canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church. This is a charge that Catholic leaders have strenuously denied, citing the Catholic Church's own teachings against this very activity. It will be shown that the argument stems in great part from a disagreement about the definition of the term "proselytism" itself—a disagreement which in turn stems from the very different ecclesiological notions embraced by Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and one which cannot be solved merely by diplomatic negotiations and compromise, founded as it is on the theology guiding each Church. Meanwhile, it appears (although no firm statistics on this point are available) that the Orthodox hierarchy's concern may be grounded in the fact that numbers of ethnic Russians are, since the downfall of the Soviet Union, regularly joining the Catholic Church.

I. The Impact of Russia's Current Religious Freedom Law on the Catholic Church in Russia

With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the relaxation of the harsh restrictions imposed by the country's former communist leaders, the Roman Catholic Church
immediately took steps to assess the damage done to Catholic institutions in Russia during the preceding 70 years, and to arrange to minister in an open and more stable way to those Catholics still living in Russia. For these purposes the Apostolic See established two Apostolic Administrations in Russia in 1991. Eight years later, they were re-divided into four.

Under Catholic canon law, an apostolic administration is like a diocese, which is a portion of territory placed under the spiritual care and authority of a bishop (canon 368). The Pope can choose to set up an apostolic administration rather than a diocese in situations where special and serious reasons exist (usually political) that might hinder the stability of the operations of a regular diocese (canon 371.2). If, for example, a nation’s borders are not settled, or if a secular government in some way is regularly hindering the routine operations of the Catholic Church, it may not be feasible for Rome to establish a diocese(s) with set territorial boundaries within that particular country. Should the situation subsequently become more settled, canon law dictates that an apostolic administration be converted to a diocese, with permanent borders and greater stability.

Given the political and social upheaval taking place in the various parts of the former Soviet Union in 1991, with various nations rapidly (but not always predictably!) declaring themselves independent, it was logical for the Apostolic See initially to divide the territory of Russia into several administrative parts without yet establishing dioceses, so as to enable the church to begin to re-form itself in Russia before making any permanent decisions concerning Catholic administration there.

And re-formation of pre-existing Catholic institutions in Russia was desperately needed. Many are unaware of the significant number of Catholics who continue to live in Russia even after two generations of communist persecution seemed close to eliminating Catholicism from the country entirely. “According to official Catholic statistics, there are around 500,000 Catholics in Russia. This number, together with the Vatican’s projection regarding future growth of the church, points to an additional three million people for whom a conversion to Catholicism would represent a return to the faith of their forefathers.” As seen in Part I of this article, the Catholic Church had been operating in imperial Russia already for generations before the communist revolution of 1917. Its primary reason for existence in a country officially designated as Orthodox had been to minister to those Catholic foreigners, primarily Poles, who lived within Russia’s borders.

1 Filatov and Vorontsova, p. 103. A footnote in the original text notes that “the authors estimate the figure to be closer to 150,000, but that is still a significant number for a church just recovering from oppression.”
Yet this does not mean that all Catholics living in Russia were or are ethnically non-Russian. Catholic Poles, Germans, or Lithuanians living in imperial Russia naturally intermarried, leading at times to the conversion of Russian spouses and/or the raising of Catholic children with Russian blood. And with the 1905 Edict of Toleration granting some measure of religious freedom, Orthodox Russians were legally free to convert to Catholicism—and, as noted in Part I, many did precisely that. This has led to an interesting contemporary mixture of ethnicities and religions. Shchipkov notes that currently “the majority of Catholics in Central Russia are Germans and Poles, though ethnic Russians comprise up to 40 percent. In some Siberian regions like Irkutsk, though, Catholic parishes are almost entirely made up of Russians. ... Catholicism in Russia has tended to become russified, and not just as a result of proselytism [a tact which] both delights and appalls the leadership of the Apostolic Administration, which is striving to preserve a good relationship with the Moscow Patriarchate.”

Maintaining a good relationship with the Orthodox leadership has indeed proven an arduous task for members of the Catholic hierarchy in Russia. Virtually from the moment that the Catholic Church began to restore its operations in Russia in 1991, Orthodox leaders have accused it of setting up, in the words of Patriarch Alexei, “parallel canonical structures” which overlap with and reduplicate those of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Alexei’s objection stems from the notion, already discussed, that Russia is historically an Orthodox country, already organized into dioceses which are subdivided into parishes. As such it has no place for Catholic apostolic administrations and the building of Catholic parish churches. The Patriarch contends that the work of the Catholic Church in Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union constitutes proselytism.

And his contentions grew even more heated when, in 2002, the Vatican changed the status of those Russian apostolic administrations into dioceses, and officially assigned a bishop to each. Again, this move was in accord with Catholic canon law. The political situation in the former Soviet Union had been stabilized, and it became clear that the country of Russia had essentially settled its borders and established a more or less stable government system. No longer viewed as a totalitarian pariah, Russia was on its way to becoming a respected player in international affairs. The uncertainty of the future, which had led the Pope to create apostolic administrations in Russia rather than dioceses back in 1991, had been

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1 Shchipkov, in Witte, pp. 81 and 91.
replaced by a sufficiently consistent state of political affairs, and this led the Vatican to change the legal status of its administrative divisions in Russia.

The move was a matter of procedural canon law. For Catholics, it had no particular theological import. Few, if any, on the ground would see any visible changes in the daily operations of the Catholic Church in the Russian Federation.

As a courtesy, Vatican representatives in Moscow informed the Orthodox Patriarchate there of this impending change several days in advance. The Vatican had also taken steps to avoid any appearance of creating parallel canonical structures by deliberately avoiding giving the new dioceses names that would be identical to Russian Orthodox ones. Rather than naming the dioceses after the cities where the bishops’ cathedrals are located, as is typical, they were named instead after the cathedrals themselves. For example, the Catholic archdiocese which has its bishop in Moscow is not called the Archdiocese of Moscow, as would be expected, but rather the Archdiocese of the Mother of God, located at Moscow. The Catholic cathedral church in Moscow is named after the Mother of God. The other three dioceses were officially named the Diocese of St. Clement at Saratov, the Diocese of the Transfiguration at Novosibirsk, and the Diocese of St. Joseph at Irkutsk.

With this diplomatic gesture, the Pope sought to avoid any appearance that he intended to set up administrative structures that would be competing with those of the Russian Orthodox Church. As Jesuit Father Jozef Maj, of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, later wrote in the Vatican's newspaper, "one might have hoped that in this procedure one might recognize not just an act of courtesy but the deep sensitivity which must define relations between the Churches."  

But the Moscow Patriarchate thought differently. After the dioceses were officially erected, an upcoming official meeting in Moscow with Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the above-mentioned Pontifical Commission for Promoting Christian Unity and the Catholic counterpart to the Orthodox Church’s Kirill, was abruptly cancelled. Patriarch Alexei had broken off ecumenical relations with the Catholic Church.

Repercussions were quickly felt elsewhere as well. The Polish-born bishop of the new diocese in Irkutsk, Jerzy Mazur, had been operating in Russia on a one-year visa, with a pending request for permanent Russian residency as a prelude to Russian citizenship.

3 "Relations of the Patriarchate of Moscow with the Holy See," L'Osservatore Romano, English edition, February 29, 2003, p. 8. While this newspaper is not technically designated as the Vatican’s official mouthpiece, it is tacitly acknowledged that the statements it contains do in fact accurately reflect the official position of the Vatican.
Arriving back in Russia after a trip abroad within days of his diocese's official establishment, he was suddenly informed in the airport that his visa had been cancelled, and was promptly ushered back out of the country. Despite protests by the Vatican to the Russian government, Bishop Mazur never received a new visa and thus was unable to re-enter Russia. After months of operating his four million-square-mile diocese via telephone from Poland, Bishop Mazur was finally replaced by a new bishop who is a citizen of Russia, and Mazur himself was made the bishop of another diocese, in Poland. While never publicly acknowledged as such, it was and remains clear to all involved that the Russian government had acted at the urging of the Moscow Patriarchate, as a retaliatory gesture in response to the creation of the four dioceses in February 2002.

Cardinal Kasper has, in fact, subsequently visited Russian Orthodox officials, including Patriarch Alexei himself, most notably in 2004 in order to return the Icon of Our Lady of Kazan, which will be discussed at length in Part III of this article. But for two years, Alexei refused to have any official, high-ranking contact with the Catholic Church, in continued protest of what he termed its violation of Orthodox "canonical territory," in order to proselytize among Orthodox Russians—a charge strenuously denied by Catholics.

II. Theology Underlying the Actions of the Catholic Church in Russia

The term "Catholic" in itself means "universal," and the Catholic Church exists in virtually every country on earth. While there have been countries throughout history whose political leaders have declared Catholicism to be the official religion of the state, Catholicism does not identify itself with any particular country or nationality. Its goal is unity under a central authority, the Pope, who is traditionally also the Bishop of the diocese of Rome.

One can immediately see a difference between the Catholic world outlook and that of Orthodoxy. As Schlafly puts it, "Rome always has had a strong missionary tradition... A key element in Catholic evangelization is centralized direction by the papacy," whereas in contrast, "The theology and practice of the Russian Orthodox Church have been quite different. Rejecting, like its sister Orthodox churches, the concept of a visible juridical center, it looks instead to a community of faith and tradition uniting local bishops and their flocks." The historical Orthodox notion of symphonia, the balancing of a spiritual authority and a secular ruler within a nation, has never been embraced by the Catholic Church, which

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4 Schlafly, p. 682.
as a rule defines its local churches in territorial, not ethnic or national, terms. When ministering in countries where Catholics are in the minority, the Catholic Church makes no distinctions concerning their ethnicity or that of the non-Catholics living in the same region.

Consistent with its "centralized direction" as described by Schlafly above, the Catholic Church tends to articulate its theological positions in a public and formal manner, so it is possible to find its positions on various issues in its official documents. And the Church's authoritative teaching on ecumenical affairs was addressed directly during the Second Vatican Council, in its November 21, 1964, Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis Redintegratio. Its general attitude toward non-Catholic Christians is clearly stated:

For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church. But it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church. The same document dealt specifically with the issue of relations between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. It should be clear that the Catholic Church officially does not seek the conversion of Orthodox believers to Catholicism:

This holy Synod solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, while keeping in mind the necessary unity of the whole Church, have the power to govern themselves according to their own disciplines, since these are better suited to the character of their faithful and better adapted to foster the good of souls. The perfect observance of this traditional principle—which indeed has not always been observed—is a prerequisite for any restoration of union.

Catholic teaching on matters relevant to Russian Orthodoxy is not always so devoid of controversy. The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty (December 7, 1965) conflicts directly with the Social Concept document of the Russian Orthodox Church on the issue of religious freedom.

It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law. He is bound to follow this conscience faithfully in all his activity so that he may come to God, Who is his last end. Therefore he must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters... to deny

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6 Ibid., paragraph 16.
man the free exercise of religion in society, when the just requirements of public order are observed, is to do an injustice to the human person....

It should be clear that the Catholic Church’s position on freedom of conscience dovetails with that enshrined in Russian law in the early days following the breakup of the Soviet Union. When Pope John Paul II protested to President Yeltsin about proposed restrictions to Russia’s laws on religious freedom, he was not simply acting according to self-interest. His position accurately reflected the teachings of Catholicism on the subject.

If the Catholic Church asserts that all should have freedom to seek the true faith, how does that affect its position on missionary activity in lands whose inhabitants already follow other Christian, but non-Catholic beliefs? Vatican II’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity was issued on the same day as the Declaration on Religious Liberty, and makes it clear that its definition of “mission” definitely does not pertain to other baptized Christians:

The special undertakings in which preachers of the Gospel, sent by the Church, and going into the whole world, carry out the work of preaching the Gospel and implanting the Church among people who do not yet believe in Christ, are generally called “missions.” ...a tremendous missionary work still remains to be done. There are two billion people—and their number is increasing day by day—who have never, or barely, heard the Gospel message....

It is evident that such a description of missionary activity could never be applied to Orthodox believers, who have been baptized and who practice a Christian faith. There is no way that such official Catholic teachings can reasonably be construed to permit, let alone encourage, its members to attempt to pull Russian Orthodox Christians away from their faith and into the Catholic Church.

Catholic missionary activity is also addressed in the official Catechism of the Catholic Church, published in 1994. While the Catechism postdates the Council documents cited above by three decades, it is clear that there has been no shift in the Catholic Church’s position: “the missionary task implies a respectful dialogue with those who do not yet accept the Gospel. Believers... proclaim the Good News to those who do not know it...”

When applied to the Catholic Church’s activity in Russia, we can perhaps get a better idea of precisely how Russian Catholic leaders are to view their role. They minister to those who were already Catholic long before the breakup of the Soviet Union permitted them to

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1 Declaration on Religious Liberty Dignitatis Humanae, paragraph 3.
2 Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity Ad Gentes Divinitus, paragraphs 5 & 10.
3 Paragraph 856 (emphasis in original).
practice their faith freely and openly. They welcome anyone who, professing no faith, expresses interest in Catholicism.

One might expect that they also welcome any Orthodox believers who sincerely wish to become Catholics. Surprisingly, perhaps, this is not the case. As Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz in Moscow stated publicly, "I always repeat, that for me Russia was, is, and will remain an Orthodox land. In Russia... conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism is a rare occurrence. And I am against such conversions." 10

This is not simply the personal opinion of the Archbishop. In 1992 the Vatican’s Pontifical Commission for Russia published its principles and norms for evangelization in the territories of the former Soviet Union. The Commission stated unequivocally that “in full respect for religious freedom, which is an inalienable right of every person, bishops and priests will take care to consider attentively the motives of those who ask to enter the Catholic Church. Such people must also be made aware of their obligations toward their own community of origin” (I, 3). 11 Church hierarchs operating in these territories are to “take care to ensure that no activity undertaken within their ecclesiastical circumscriptions can be easily misconstrued as a ‘parallel structure of evangelization’” (II, 2), which could be perceived as competing with existing Orthodox structures in the same territory.

Once again, this position is not merely an example of Vatican diplomacy. It accurately reflects the teachings of the Catholic Church concerning ecumenical relations with other Christians, and concerning missionary activity.

III. The Question of Proselytism and of Definition of the Term

During the roughly two years that Patriarch Alexei refused to meet with Catholic leaders, his official position was that the Catholic Church must first cease to proselytize among the Russian people. Members of the Catholic hierarchy, in response, insisted that no proselytizing was taking place, and that Catholic institutions operating in Russia were ministering to the spiritual needs of those Russians who were already Catholic. While they welcomed any interested persons of no faith at all—of whom there are many in Russia today, after 70 years of official atheism—Catholics were not actively seeking to convert Orthodox believers. Moscow’s Catholic Archbishop Kondrusiewicz repeatedly requested that the

10 Quoted in Schilfky, p. 688.
Moscow Patriarchate provide specific examples of this alleged proselytism, so that they could be addressed and corrected where necessary.

On June 25, 2002, Patriarch Alexei released a document in which he provided details in support of his allegations, and addressed the repeated denials of Catholic officials that they were engaging in proselytism.

The problem of proselytism is aggravated by the fact that the Catholic side denies flatly its very existence, referring to its own interpretation of the term ‘proselytism’ as enticement of people from one Christian community to another through ‘dishonest’ means (for instance, bribery). At the same time, it alludes to the preaching of the Gospel to ‘non-believers and non-baptized’ people who come to Catholic churches exercising their freedom to choose a religion that suits them. ...Catholics reject the very notion of canonical territory... Catholic clergy... come to a country with a millennium-old Christian culture imbued with the Orthodox tradition... it has been evident for a long time that the object of the Catholic mission in Russia and other CIS countries is the traditionally Orthodox population... they cannot be called non-believers or atheists to a man..."12

It is evident that the Patriarch is not so much focusing on the Catholic Church’s ministering in the former Soviet Union to those who were already Catholic. Rather, his chief concern is that other Russians, who may have been raised with no faith during the communist period, are joining the Catholic Church. And as has been seen above, this conflicts with the Orthodox notion that those who are ethnically Russian are supposed to be Orthodox believers, as Orthodoxy is part of the Russian identity.

Cardinal Kasper had, several months previously, published an essay in the Italian Jesuit journal Civilta Cattolica, pondering the current state of relations with Moscow. There he also addressed the notion of proselytism, pointing out that the Catholic Church itself is also currently dealing with “new sects” which are evangelizing among traditionally Catholic people in Latin America, adding, “unlike the sects, all the so-called historic Churches are agreed in their rejection of proselytism, understood in its original sense: they are unanimous in their claim that it is wrong to work for the Gospel by illicit means... Because the Catholic Church recognizes the Orthodox Churches as true Churches and their sacraments as true sacraments... it is entirely inappropriate to undertake missionary activity among the Orthodox faithful.”13

Clearly Kasper is here discussing the notion of proselytism using a definition that is much narrower than that of Alexei. When Kasper and other Catholic leaders insist that the

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13 Civilta Cattolica, 2002 I: 531-541 (March 16, 2002).
14 Ibid. (This and the quotation on the following page are my translations).
Church is not engaging in proselytism in Russia, they mean that there is no attempt being made actively to convert Orthodox Russians away from Orthodoxy. Receiving into the Catholic faith those Russians who either profess a non-Christian faith or no faith at all, however, is not considered to be proselytism. Such persons are always welcome in the Catholic Church, which, as noted earlier, perceives its mission to bring all souls to Christ as over and above any territorial limitations.

We can see here a fundamental disagreement over the correct usage of the term "proselytism," that is grounded in two very different ecclesiological frameworks. The Moscow Patriarch holds that any Russian who is not Christian should be converted, but converted to Orthodoxy, the historical religion of Russia. Catholicism, in contrast, makes no distinctions as to an individual’s ethnic or national identity, seeking to bring any and all persons to Christianity. Thus Orthodox officials are able to provide evidence that Catholics are proselytizing in Russia, according to the Orthodox definition of the term; while Catholics are equally able to deny that they engage in proselytism, according to their own understanding of what the word means.

A question might here be raised: if the Russian Orthodox Church desires all Russian non-believers to embrace Orthodoxy, why are Russians converting, in numbers that are apparently significant enough to alarm the Moscow Patriarchate, to Catholicism rather than to Orthodoxy?

In his essay, Cardinal Kasper raised the possibility that “the Orthodox Church is conscious of its own pastoral and evangelizing weakness, and therefore fears a Catholic presence that is basically more effective at the pastoral level, even if it is small numerically.” Alexei responded directly to this suggestion in his July document, noting that

one can state confidently enough that the successes of the Catholics in Russia have been indirectly conditioned by the influence of Orthodoxy on the life of the Russians... It is this predisposition of our people, who were weared with longing for faith during years of state atheism, rather than the effectiveness of the Catholic ‘pastoral level’ in Russia, that accounts for the relative success of not only Catholic, but any preaching of Christ.15

Metropolitan Kirill had, some years earlier, given an indication of the way the Russian Orthodox Church leadership had expected other Christians to react to the downfall of communism in the Soviet Union. Instead of entering the territory to evangelize it themselves,

15 See note 61.
they should have proffered assistance to the Orthodox, so that they could have re-Christianized Russia on their own:

We expected that with the coming of religious freedom, other Christians would support us in a new, no less difficult situation, as the Russian Orthodox Church suddenly found itself before a door wide open to the broadest possible religious freedom and a huge field for missionary work. We sincerely hoped that we would be supported in this task. Our hopes, however, were not fulfilled.¹⁶

Are huge numbers of Russians becoming Catholics, because of the presence now of Catholic institutions throughout the country? Obtaining accurate statistics on genuine conversions is hampered by the fact that there are Russians entering the Catholic Church now whose families had already been Catholics in the imperial era. It could be argued that such persons are not actually converting to Catholicism, but are returning to the faith which they would have been practicing all along, had communist persecution not hindered Catholic parishes from operating freely.

Additionally, however, scholars Filatov and Vorontsova observe that there is currently a sort of intellectual movement among some of the Russian intelligentsia, that is leading many of them to embrace Catholicism irrespective of the increased visibility of Catholic charitable institutions on Russian soil:

The increased participation in contemporary Russian Catholicism cannot be explained in terms of the missionary activity of the church, for it is negligible. Rather, there is a natural, spontaneous attraction to Catholicism among certain sections of Russian society. The majority of parishioners are young, mainly students and members of the intelligentsia. The generally high level of education among the parishioners gives Catholicism greater influence and appeal. Catholics are, as a rule, well-educated with a Western outlook; for many of them the concepts of culture and freedom are linked primarily with the Catholic Church.¹⁷

It appears that there is more here at work than simply the efforts (alleged or real) of Catholics in Russia to attract Russians to the Church. Given that Russian law—even with the restrictions imposed in 1997 at the urging of the Orthodox leadership—permits Russians to embrace any or no faith in accord with the dictates of conscience, there will evidently be some conversions to Catholicism among educated Russians regardless of whether or not proselytizing is truly taking place.

¹⁷ Filatov and Vorontsova, p. 104.