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# **“THE AGENT OF JESUS CHRIST”: PARTICIPATION OF FR. VITALI BOROVOY IN THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL AS AN OBSERVER FROM THE ROC**

**Anastacia Wooden**

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## **Precis**

This is the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Russian Orthodox theologian and church diplomat Fr. Vitali Borovoy (1916-2008). He actively participated in almost all external engagements of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the second half of the twentieth century: from inter-Orthodox relations to work in the World Council of Churches (WCC). His ecumenical career unfolded during challenging times for his church. Internally, it was determined by the tension between the Soviet state's continual persecution of the ROC and its simultaneous demand that the ROC work for the state's benefit in external relations. Externally, it was affected by the Cold War and the solidification of the opposition between the West and the countries of the Soviet Block. No other assignment reflected these tensions as fully as Borovoy's participation in the work of the Vatican Council II (Council) as an observer from the ROC. This paper commemorates the life and work of this remarkable person and pays particular attention to the circumstances that enabled and shaped his participation in the work of the Council.

## **Prologue**

Fr. Vitali Borovoy is best known in the West as a prominent ecumenist and theologian. In Russia and his native Belarus, he is also remembered as a gifted pastor, passionate preacher, and talented pedagogue.<sup>1</sup> In 1975, he visited the Harvard School of Divinity as a member of an

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<sup>1</sup> It is not correct to call Borovoy “Russian.” His ethnicity was Belarusian and citizenship (nationality) was USSR for most of his life. The only time he called himself Russian was in the 1930s during his studies at Warsaw University in protest of the strong anti-Russian and anti-Orthodox sentiment there. For doing that he lost his scholarship. As he put it himself, “in Warsaw I am Russian, but in Russia I am Belarusian since Belarusians there are in the minority and need to stand up for their national interests.” See his 1999 interview with his younger friend,

ecumenical delegation from the ROC. Upon its arrival, the delegation was greeted by a group of protesters that objected to the presence of clerics from a communist country who, in their opinion, came to the USA as secret police agents to create an illusion of religious freedom in the USSR. Later, one of Harvard's professors recounted Fr. Borovoy's reaction to this protest: "Here we are called agents of KGB, in Moscow the atheists call us agents of bourgeois imperialism. But, we really are agents of Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup>

This brief story perfectly illustrates how Borovoy managed to transcend the tensions that shaped his life and accompanied all of the ecumenical activity of the Russian Orthodox Church. Caught between the oppressive control of the Soviet government and negative attitudes in the West in the wake of the Cold War, he remained faithful in his service to the Church. The intent of this paper is to commemorate the life and work of this remarkable person by providing a closer look at his participation in the work of the Second Vatican Council and his role in the political process that made this participation possible.

### **Protopresbyter Vitali Borovoy**

Vitali Borovoy<sup>3</sup> was born in Belarus in 1916.<sup>4</sup> His family was very poor and his father left for the United States in search of income. Apparently, Borovoy could have been born an American

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a priest in the Orthodox Church of Finland, Fr. Andrej Platonov, at <http://www.kiev-orthodox.org/site/personalities/1974/> (further referred to as Platonov). The audio recording of this conversation was passed on for safekeeping to the archives of St. Filaret's Orthodox Theological Institute in Moscow and parts of it are posted on their website.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Weiss. "Three Russian Clerics Take in Harvard: Called Police Agents by Picketers," *The Crimson*, March 1, 1975. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1975/3/1/three-russian-clerics-take-in-harvard/>

<sup>3</sup> Here I follow the way the Russian version of his name *Віталій Боровой* (*Bimali Baravy* in Belarusian) is transcribed in the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991. "Borovoy," 109. The World Council of Churches spells his first name as "Vitaly." In Russian his first and last name end on a letter that can be transliterated as "y," "i," or "j." Therefore, other spellings such as "Vitalij Borovoj" or "Borovoi" are acceptable.

<sup>4</sup> Borovoy was born in the predominantly Catholic region in the village Nesterovka (now Dokshytsy *rajon* in Vitebsk *oblast* of Belarus) when it was part of the Russian Empire. In 1921 this territory became part of Poland under the Treaty of Riga between Poland, Soviet Russia (acting also on the behalf of Soviet Belarus) and Soviet Ukraine

but his pregnant mother was turned down by sanitary controls in Klaipeda and could not follow her husband.<sup>5</sup> His father then got sick and died the year Vitali was born. Although his parents were illiterate, Vitali, who attended compulsory elementary school, soon discovered a love of learning and became, in his own words, “a bookoholic.”<sup>6</sup> His aptitude for learning was noticed and with the help of a local priest, his mother managed to secure the only free education he could receive—that in the Vilnia Theological Seminary.<sup>7</sup> He graduated as a top student and continued his studies in 1936 at the Orthodox Department of Warsaw University—which he did not finish in the wake of the German occupation of Poland in 1939. During the German occupation of Belarus, there was a certain revival of religious life and Borovoy found work in the ecclesiastical sphere—he served in clerical and secretarial positions in the diocese in Minsk. In 1944, fleeing German authorities tried to deport Belarusian clergy and other church activists to Germany, but Borovoy and his wife managed to escape from the train. However, he immediately fell under suspicion from the returning Soviet authorities,<sup>8</sup> and to avoid imminent arrest, agreed to be installed as a deacon and then a priest in an expedited fashion.

Borovoy’s first pastoral assignment was at the Sts. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Gomel (Belarus) where he blossomed as a pastor and homilist. He was one of a few priests who preached at every liturgy, no matter the number of the faithful present. So good were his homilies that he was forced by the Soviet authorities to leave this parish precisely because his

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following the end of the Polish-Soviet war. In 1939 the Soviet-Polish boarder was re-drawn again by the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, and Borovoy’s native village became part of Soviet Belarus. This is a situation similar to the one reflected in a popular joke about a “well-travelled” man who was born in Romania, studied in Hungary, got married in Czech Republic, worked in Poland, and died in the Soviet Union – all while he never left his village in Transcarpathia.

<sup>5</sup> Platonov.

<sup>6</sup> "Чем отличается прямота от правды: Памяти о. Виталия Борового." April 7, 2014. <http://psmb.ru/community/article/chem-otlichaetsja-prjamota-ot-pravdy-4760/>

<sup>7</sup> “Vilnia” is a Belarusian name and “Vilno” is a Polish name for the city that is now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania.

<sup>8</sup> About 90% of all Soviet soldiers and civilians that were held in any way – whether as POWs or as a forced labor – by the German occupants were later persecuted by the Soviet authorities.

preaching made him very popular with the faithful. In his later pastoral assignments in Geneva and Moscow, people continued to come to listen to Borovoy preach—despite his thick Belarusian accent and occasional stuttering. In the late eighties, Moscow *intelligentsia* risked their freedom to record his homilies with recorders hidden in their clothing<sup>9</sup> and stood in long lines after the services seeking his spiritual direction.<sup>10</sup>

After Gomel, Borovoy was directed by the ecclesiastical authorities toward an academic career: first re-organizing and teaching at the Minsk Theological Seminary (1944-1954), then teaching at the Leningrad Theological Academy (1954-62), where he also formally completed his theological education, and later teaching at the Moscow Theological Academy (1973-1978). Borovoy remembered his years in Leningrad as the happiest time of his life because he was working in the same place where his “idol,” prominent Russian Orthodox church historian, Vasili Bolotov (1854-1900), used to teach. In fact, young Borovoy never wanted to be either a church diplomat or even a priest. All he wanted to be was a church historian, if not as grand and famous as Bolotov himself, then, as he put it, at least like a “little Bolotov,” *bolotovchik*.

As a teacher, Borovoy stood out by his extensive knowledge of church history, passionate lecturing style, and generosity toward his students when they were in need either of his time and attention or his many books. For his theological contributions, Borovoy was awarded doctoral degrees from Moscow Theological Academy, University of Bern (Switzerland), Charles

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<sup>9</sup> Some of these homilies were published in Протопресвитер Виталий Боровой. *Быть свидетелями Христа. Проповеди*. Moscow: St. Filaret's Orthodox Christian Institute, 2006. They can be also found at <http://azbyka.ru/propovedi/byt-svidetelyami-xrista-propovedi-protoierya-vitaliya-borovogo.shtml>, [http://pravoslavnyayaobshina.ru/ebook/PO\\_n22.pdf](http://pravoslavnyayaobshina.ru/ebook/PO_n22.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> "Человек, который никого не предавал:" Интервью со свящ. Георгием Кочетковым к 95-летию со дня рождения протопресвитера Виталия Борового (1916-2008). <http://psmb.ru/community/article/chelovek-kotoryi-nikogda-ne-predaval-1874/>

University in Prague (Czech Republic), and St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (USA).<sup>11</sup>

As with many things in his life, Borovoy's engagement in the ROC's ecumenical activities was not part of his plan. In Borovoy's own description, his blissful teaching career "was ruined" after he "showed off" his knowledge of patristic fathers during the 1956 (July 16-23) Anglican-Orthodox consultation in Moscow where he presented the paper "Symbol of Faith and the Councils."<sup>12</sup> His contribution impressed the head of the Anglican delegation, Archbishop Michael Ramsey, caught the eye of the ROC's leadership,<sup>13</sup> and consequently ensured his transfer to the Department for External Church Relations in 1959.<sup>14</sup> Thus began his long and fruitful career in the ROC's external relations: participating in Pan-Orthodox conferences in Rhodes, preparing and achieving the entry of the ROC into the WCC, serving as a member and assistant director of the Faith and Order Committee (1966-1972), a member of its Central Committee and the Faith and Order Standing Committee, and a member of the joint Working Group of the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) (1965-1972), to name a few. From 1984 to 1995, Borovoy worked as the deputy director of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, and remained its consultant until his death in 2008.

His work at the Department for External Church Relations was conducted in complicated conditions determined by official Soviet religious policy. These conditions and the challenges they created for the members of the Department can only be understood in light of the Soviet religious politics.

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<sup>11</sup> This paper is not going to address Borovoy's theological contributions.

<sup>12</sup> Full text was published as: Прот. В. Боровой. "Символ веры и соборы," *Журнал Московской Патриархии*, [Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate] issue 9, 1956, 58-62.

<sup>13</sup> "Мне верили абсолютно: Памяти отца Виталия Борового." April 7, 2015. <http://psmb.ru/community/article/mne-verili-absolutno-5555/>

<sup>14</sup> In Russian: *Отдел внешних церковных сношений Московского Патриархата (ОВЦС)*, created in 1946.

## **ROC and Its Ecumenical Activity in Light of the Soviet Religious Politics<sup>15</sup>**

The communist doctrine of the Soviet state had an unequivocal negative view of religion as “the opium of the masses” that stood in the way of society’s progress and needed to be removed if a better future was to be achieved. In practice, it amounted to a continuous physical and ideological assault on all religious institutions and sentiments that began immediately after the 1917 revolution in Russia. The physical destruction of the ROC’s clergy and property was carried out with a particular intensity during Stalin’s regime in the 1930s. In total, between 1917 and 1935, 130,000 priests were arrested and 95,000 of them executed,<sup>16</sup> and all of over 1,000 monasteries and over 60,000 churches were closed (leaving only about 100 churches opened). Over 400 bishops were persecuted and 250 of them were executed or died in prison, leaving only four acting bishops. By different estimations, the total number of those suffered for faith ranged from 500,000 to 1,000,000.<sup>17</sup> This desperate situation meant that the physical survival of the ROC in the USSR was a very real concern.

World War II (WWII) brought real changes to the unrelenting battle with religion. As German troops quickly advanced through the Soviet territories, Stalin needed all the help he could get to unite the nation and raise its morale for battle with a common enemy. When Metropolitan Sergij (Starogorodskij), the head of the ROC, on the first day of the Great Patriotic War (WWII as it pertains to the USSR)—June 22, 1941, appealed to Orthodox believers to join forces against the fascist threat, they responded with energetic patriotic activity which included

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<sup>15</sup> For more detailed account see author’s research presented at the conference “Vatican II: Remembering the Future” (Georgetown University, May 2015). Full text is scheduled for publication in 2016 under the title “Russian Orthodox Observers at Vatican II in the Context of Soviet Religious Politics.”

<sup>16</sup> One of them was prominent theologian Fr. Pavel Florensky who was arrested in 1928 and executed in 1937.

<sup>17</sup> Н. Емельянов. “Оценка статистики гонений на Русскую Православную Церковь с 1917 по 1952гг.” *Богословский сборник Свято-Тихоновского богословского института*, № 3, 1999, 258-274. P. 264.

the collecting of funds and clothing for the troops and the blessing of the troops heading to the war zone.<sup>18</sup> To ensure the continual support of the faithful, Stalin responded by minimizing, but never completely ceasing, active persecution of clergy to its lowest level. In addition, he permitted the restoration of active ecclesial life and even authorized an unprecedented meeting with a group of the ROC's hierarchs, which eventually led to the election of the Patriarch for the first time since the death of Patriarch Tikhon in 1925.

This pragmatic approach to religious policy continued after the end of WWII. In exchange for physical survival and some breathing space for activity, the ROC was expected to serve the objectives of the Soviet interests abroad through its international contacts and engagements. The ROC's Department for External Church Affairs, formed in 1949, became the main tool for the implementation of this policy under the close supervision of specially designated government agencies—the Council for the Religious Affairs, and more specifically, the Council for ROC Affairs—which were customarily staffed with KGB operatives.

The work of the Department closely followed the objectives of Soviet foreign policies. Two of these objectives were directly connected with or led to the presence of ROC observers at the Council. First, the Soviet government wanted to establish tighter control over the countries of the so-called Eastern Block through the contacts between the ROC and the national churches of these predominantly Orthodox countries. Now that the influence of the USSR extended over the canonical territories of the Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish, Albanian and Czech Orthodox churches, and it had control over about 85 percent of the Orthodox population of the world,<sup>19</sup> Soviet strategists were actively looking for ways to unite the world Orthodoxy around Moscow

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<sup>18</sup> S. Bolotov. *Russian Orthodox Church and Foreign Policy of the USSR in 1930s-1950*. Moscow, 2011. In Russian. [С. В. Болотов. *Русская православная церковь и международная политика СССР в 1930е - 1950е годы*. Москва: Издательство Крутицкого подворья, 2011.] P. 50.

<sup>19</sup> Bolotov, 126.



rather than Constantinople. Parallel to taking control over the Orthodox churches in the Eastern Block, Soviet foreign policy also desired to minimize Catholic influence in the above-mentioned regions. This objective was swiftly accomplished by suppressing, to the point of physical elimination, the Eastern Catholic churches in Ukraine, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Carpathian region within about five years of the end of WWII.<sup>20</sup>

Second, the Soviet government wanted to extend its influence past its Eastern European allies. It was looking for ways to nurture sympathy for the USSR's ideology and politics among the people of Western Europe. The Vatican's anti-communist stance was viewed as a major obstacle in reaching this objective. It was to be counteracted by an intense ideological assault, the main lines of which were well summarized in the authoritative *Grand Soviet Encyclopedia*, published in 1951, where the Papal State was named "an oppressor of free human thought, a messenger of obscurantism, a tool of Anglo-American imperialism, and an active instigator of a new imperialist world war."<sup>21</sup> In contrast to this papal anti-democratic force in the service of capitalist oppressors, the USSR was promoted as a true defender of people's interests. Ideological warfare was also designed to create discontent with ecclesial hierarchy within the RCC itself with a far-reaching goal of breaking the RCC into a number of local churches by dissolving their ties with the Holy See.<sup>22</sup>

Stalin's death in 1953 and the ascent of Nikita Khrushchev as the new Chairman of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) brought changes both to the general religious politics and to the attitude towards the Vatican. New religious policies had an ideological, rather than pragmatic, basis. At the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Khrushchev announced a grandiose

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<sup>20</sup> Anti-uniatic campaign in Ukraine was personally coordinated by USSR's future leader Nikita Khrushchev who reported directly to Stalin. See Bolotov, 135.

<sup>21</sup> See entry "Ватикан" [Vatican] in *Bolshaya sovetskaya enciklopediya* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Volume 7, (Moscow: BSE, 1951), 55.

<sup>22</sup> Bolotov, 200.

goal of completing the creation of communist society in 20 years (by 1980). Since the ROC steadily grew in the post-war years, liquidation of all religious institutions and sentiments had to be intensified in different forms to meet this “deadline.”<sup>23</sup> Persecution of the ROC now included not only closures of parishes and monasteries, loss of properties and additional taxation, but even meddling with the canonical structure of the Church. As the head of the Department for External Church Relations Metropolitan Nikolai summed up these efforts, “the objective is unmistakably to annihilate the Church and religion in general, more profoundly and broadly than in the 1920s.”<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the state’s expectations for the ROC to continue its international activity for the benefit of Soviet foreign interests remained unchanged. When Vatican II was called, the ROC was supposed to maintain the same negative position towards the RCC in general and the upcoming Council in particular. Interestingly, the possibility of sending observers to the Council was discussed already in March of 1959 during the meeting between Metropolitan Nikolaj and a Chairman of the Council for ROC Affairs G. Karpov, long before the intention to invite observers to the Council was officially announced on June 26, 1960.<sup>25</sup> Both sides concluded that the ROC’s participation could be further discussed only if the Council would not be an exclusively “unity council,” but would address other issues, such as world peace. Still, in April 1959, Patriarch Alexij spoke sharply against any participation, followed by a similar publication in the Patriarchate’s official publication, *Zhurnal Moskovskoj Patriarchii*.<sup>26</sup> When Cardinal Bea in his interview to *Giornale del Popolo* (March 1961), suggested that the ROC should show

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<sup>23</sup> Aleksij Marchenko. *Religious Politics of the Soviet State in the Years of Rule of N. S. Khrushchev and Its Influence on the Church Life in the USSR*. (Moscow, 2010). In Russian. [Протоиерей Алексей Марченко. *Религиозная политика советского государства в годы правления Н. С. Хрущева и её влияние на церковную жизнь в СССР*. (Москва: Издательство Круцицкого подворья, 2010),] 264.

<sup>24</sup> Shkarovskii, 78.

<sup>25</sup> "Ватиканский II собор," in *Православная Энциклопедия*, ed. Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus Kirill, <http://www.pravenc.ru/text/149919.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “Refutation.” *Zhurnal Moskovskoj Patriarchii* [*Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*], issue 7, 1959, 10.

some initiative in procuring an invitation to the Council, it was taken as an insult to which the Moscow Patriarchate indirectly replied with the anonymous article *Non possumus*, published in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* in May 1961.<sup>27</sup> This article, in a succinct way, presented two theological objections to the Council that were shared by all Orthodox churches. First, it expressed disagreement with the presumptuous way the Council was called “ecumenical,” reflecting Rome’s temptation of a monarchical centralization of power. It asserted that only the power of love could unite Christians in the Church as a Body of Christ. Second, the article voiced the suspicion that the RCC must have vaguely felt that an “ecumenical council” cannot be called without the participation of the Eastern churches and therefore, by inviting observers from the Orthodox churches and other Christian confessions to the Council, the RCC wanted to create an illusion of “ecumenicity.”<sup>28</sup> For these reasons, but without enmity towards the Catholics, so the anonymous author claims, the Moscow Patriarchate was compelled to reply with a resounding *Non possumus!* (like Peter in Acts 4:20) to Cardinal Bea and to any Orthodox participation in the Council. Later, at a pan-Orthodox conference, which took place from September to October of 1961 in Rhodes, the Moscow patriarchate also took a strong anti-Vatican and anti-ecumenical stance and promoted a resolution calling the Orthodox churches to make decisions in ecumenical relations only in the presence of complete consensus.

At a second pan-Orthodox conference in September-October 1963, however, the ROC’s delegation joined Constantinople’s delegation in promoting a resolution “to initiate an equitable dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>29</sup> This radical shift in the ROC’s position had to reflect an equally radical change in the Soviet leadership’s attitude towards the Vatican. It is a

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<sup>27</sup> “Non Possumus!” *Zhurnal Moskovskoj Patriarchii* [*Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*], issue 5, 1961, 73-75.

<sup>28</sup> Illustrating this concern of the Orthodox churches, Charles Napier speaks of “the genuine confusion which existed for a time as to whether the Council was to be a “Council of Union,” to which all would be invited, or not.” Napier, Charles. “The Orthodox Church and the Second Vatican Council,” *Diakonia*, vol 1 (3), 1966, 175-193.

<sup>29</sup> Shkarovskii, 88.

widely held opinion among scholars of modern church history that this change began with the election of Pope John XXIII. The new Pope's "down-to-earth" personality, his tireless peace efforts,<sup>30</sup> and his commitment to defending the poor and the oppressed, which earned him a title of the "Red Pope," personally appealed to Khrushchev. Many of the Pope's actions—like his speech in favor of a peaceful settlement of the Berlin crisis (September 1961) and especially of the Cuban crisis (October 1962)—were interpreted as an indicator of an extremely anti-American stance,<sup>31</sup> welcomed by the Soviet leadership. For Khrushchev, this signaled a new opportunity to use contacts with the Vatican to promote Soviet interests by widening the social basis for communist ideas in Western countries, but also to find new sources of financial support for a struggling Soviet economy. Since Soviet politicians lacked any understanding of the Vatican's religious motives and interpreted its motives as strictly political in nature, the Vatican's concern for the situation of believers in the USSR was considered to be "more formal than essential in nature and thus could be ignored."<sup>32</sup> Consequently, in the midst of an internal anti-religious campaign, Soviet diplomats and security agencies began their efforts to reach out to the Vatican and the ROC was expected to contribute accordingly. As Borovoy himself summed up, "the high esteem in which John XXIII had come to be held in the eyes of Moscow with his politics of peace and reconciliation had shown the Russian Church the green light in closer relations with Rome."<sup>33</sup>

The ROC welcomed the new opportunity for engagement with the RCC. The new head of the Department for External Church Relations (since June 1960) Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) was

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<sup>30</sup> At this time the USSR saw itself as a leader in the world peace movement and the ROC had to support its many peace initiatives. As Borovoy later joked, "we fought for peace so hard that we barely survived."

<sup>31</sup> Karlov, 297.

<sup>32</sup> Karlov 297.

<sup>33</sup> Vitaly Borovoi. "The Second Vatican Council and its Significance for the Russian Orthodox Church" in *The Holy Russian Church and Western Christianity*. Ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Oscar Beozzo. (Concilium 1996/6) (Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1996), 135.

especially enthusiastic about it because he saw international outreach as the Church's main means of survival and improvement of its situation. Borovoy, who became Metropolitan Nikodim's deputy, also supported this position. Working closely together, Nikodim, a shrewd diplomat, and Borovoy, an expert theologian, played key roles in convincing the authorities to allow the ROC's participation in the Council. As Borovoy put it,

Our entry into all the aspects of the world ecumenical movement were bound up with our hopes of survival and of a change in our situation... For us these were the hard times of Khrushchev's attack on the church. It was for this reason, too, that we joined the World Council of Churches in Geneva and sent observers to the Second Vatican Council in Rome. We needed to exploit all this to the maximum in favor of the church.<sup>34</sup>

In this way, during the preparatory period of the Vatican II (1959-1962), the desire of the Soviet state and of the ROC for an international outreach auspiciously coincided with the Vatican's ecumenical outreach in inviting the observers to the Council. Perhaps the difference in the objectives of all three parties contributed to the complexity of what an original member of Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Fr. Thomas Stransky, called a "tangled mass of events and intentions" that surrounded the process by which the ROC received and responded to an invitation to send its observers to the Council.<sup>35</sup>

The invitations to the observers were handled by the recently created (June 5, 1960) Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU), headed by its President Cardinal Augustin Bea and the Secretary Bishop Johannes Willebrands. Prior to sending official invitations, the SPCU initiated contacts with various Christian churches to investigate whether a positive reply to these invitations could be expected. In February 1961, Msgr. Willebrands visited Constantinople and was assured by the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of his interest in sending observers. The Patriarch informed all the churches, including the Moscow Patriarchate,

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<sup>34</sup> Borovoy 137.

<sup>35</sup> Stransky, Thomas F. "The Foundation of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity" in *Vatican II by Those Who Were There*. London: Chapman, 1986, 62-87. P. 78.

about his contacts with Msgr. Willebrands. So in May 1961, when the Moscow Patriarchate's official journal published the already mentioned article *Non possumus*, it was received by the SPCU as a quasi-official negative response to its initiative. Therefore, when in July 1962, the SPCU's President Cardinal Augustin Bea formally invited Patriarch Athenagoras to delegate observers, similar letters were sent directly to other Patriarchates (such as Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Greece, Cyprus), but not to the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>36</sup>

Only through personal contacts between Willebrands and Metropolitan Nikodim (with Borovoy serving as an interpreter), at a meeting for WCC's Central Committee in August 1962, was it clarified that the ROC actually had an interest in sending its observers as long as the Council would not make anti-Soviet pronouncements. Around the same time, *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* published an interview of Patriarch Alexii where he clarified that in the absence of invitation, no definitive decision could be made.<sup>37</sup> To explore this interest, Willebrands visited Moscow in an official capacity and in strictest secrecy two weeks before the opening of the Council on September 27 to October 2, 1962. It was the first-ever visit of a Vatican official to the USSR.<sup>38</sup> In his talks with the ROC's authorities as well as representatives of the Department for Religious Affairs in Moscow, Msgr. Willebrands received an assurance that an invitation from the Vatican would be positively received.

Until this day, there is no agreement between Rome, Constantinople, and Moscow on the order of events that unfolded following this visit. According to Stransky, Cardinal Bea sent an invitation to the ROC by telegraph and express mail on October 4, 1962. On October 6, Patriarch Athenagoras contacted both Bea and Moscow Patriarch Alexis to find out whether the ROC

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<sup>36</sup> Stransky, 78.

<sup>37</sup> "Ответы Патриарха Московского и всея Руси Алексия на вопросы г-на Жана Булье," *Zhurnal Moskovskoj Patriarchii* [Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate], no. 9, 1962, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Stransky, 79.

would be sending observers, but he did not receive a definitive response. So the next day, on October 7, he declined the invitation to send the observers for lack of unanimity between the Orthodox churches (mainly, due to the dissent of the Greek Orthodox Church and the ROC) in accordance with the decision of the 1961 pan-Orthodox conference to act together in ecumenical matters. However, on October 11, the opening day of the Council, the SPCU received a telegram from Moscow about sending observers, who promptly arrived the next day.

In an interview given in 1963, Borovoy gave a slightly different account of the events.<sup>39</sup> Borovoy insisted that the ROC received the RCC's invitation only on October 10, one day before the opening of the Council. The Holy Synod of the ROC then immediately held a meeting, which made the decision to send observers. Borovoy also insisted that Athenagoras' decision not to send observers was not made in consultation with the ROC. He says that they received a wire regarding Athenagoras' decision on October 10, when it was too late to change their mind because on that day, the highest organ of Soviet power, the Politburo of CPSU, already adopted a resolution proposed by the ministry of Foreign Affairs and approved by the KGB to send Protopresbyter Vitali Borovoy and Archmandrite Vladimir Kotliarov as the observers to the Council.<sup>40</sup> Borovoy adds that he and his colleague Kotliarov were very surprised upon their arrival to Rome to find out that they were the only Orthodox observers at the first session of the Council.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Eva-Maria Jung, "Table-Talk with the Russian Observers," in *The Catholic World*, February 1963, vol. 196, no. 1, 277.

<sup>40</sup> Adriano Roccucci. "Russian Observers at Vatican II. The 'Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs' and the Moscow Patriarchate between Anti-Religious Policy and International Strategies" in *Vatican II in Moscow (1959-1965)*. (Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid. 1997), 69.

<sup>41</sup> In fact, ROC's representatives were not the only *Orthodox* at the first session of the Council: there were also present as guests of the SPCU Bishop Cassien from the St. Sergius' Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris and Fr. Alexander Schmemmann from St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary in Crestwood, New York; observers from the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia Bishop Anthony of Geneva, Fr. Troyanoff from Switzerland, and Prof. Grotoff from Rome; and the WCC representative, the Greek Orthodox Nikos Nissiotis. However, ROC was the only Orthodox *church* to send its observers. After Paul VI's pilgrimage to Jerusalem where he acknowledged *nostra*

It is possible that both accounts are correct in facts, but not in assumptions. For example, the fact that a wire was *sent* from Rome to Moscow on a certain day does not necessarily mean that it *reached* the intended receiver on the same day. After all, communications between the ROC, Rome, and Constantinople were closely monitored and controlled by the Soviet authorities. This hypothesis is supported by the fact, pointed out by Alberto Melloni, that “already in 1963 an article appearing in *Reforme* argued that the telegram from Constantinople with which the Ecumenical Patriarch informed Moscow of the decision not to send observers to Rome had been blocked by the Communist Party.”<sup>42</sup> This action would be perfectly in line with the desire of the Soviet authorities to undermine the influence of Patriarch Athenagoras, whom they saw as an American puppet attempting to “increase its influence on Orthodoxy to the detriment of the Moscow Patriarchate.”<sup>43</sup> Borovoy himself used this desire to convince the authorities to send the observers to the Council when he wrote in his influential report on Msgr. Willebrands’ visit that “thanks to the decision made in Rhodes for orthodoxy to act together, Constantinople had not sent its observers yet and the ROC still has a chance to do so and, consequently, be in position of influencing Orthodoxy in opposition to Constantinople’s Western orientation.”<sup>44</sup>

Needless to say, the way in which the ROC ended up being the only Orthodox church to send its observers to the first session of the Council caused considerable tensions between Rome, Constantinople, and Moscow. However, as Stransky stresses, “in all this muddle and its

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*culpa* of RCC in the relationships with the Orthodox churches, the Greek Orthodox Church finally consented to sending observers. So at the third session of the Council there were observers from the Greek Orthodox Church as well as the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Patriarchate of Alexandria.

<sup>42</sup> Melloni, 100, note 33.

<sup>43</sup> Roccucci, 52.

<sup>44</sup> Roccucci, 67. Borovoy’s other argument was that rejection of the invitation would undermine the reputation of the reforming Pope John XXIII and strengthen the position of reactionary-conservative camp, which now lost control over the preparation of the Council. Roccucci, 66.



aftermath, Monsignor Willebrands, Cardinal Bea, Pope John and Patriarch Athenagoras exercised holy diplomacy: all four uttered not a public word.”<sup>45</sup>

### **At the Council**

All the tensions of the secular and ecclesiastical politics mentioned above remained present at the Council and conditioned the work of the ROC observers, and especially of Borovoy, who was an acknowledged leader of his delegation at all four sessions. In fact, these tensions manifested themselves as soon as Borovoy and Kotliarov set foot in Rome. While they were warmly welcomed by the SPCU and the Pope, who saw in their arrival an opportunity for the development of genuine fraternal relations with the ROC, some bishops were resentful of the presence of the clerics from the communist country whom they perceived as secret KGB agents that arrived to the Council with a single goal of promoting Soviet interests. Of the latter, none were more “deeply shocked and offended” by the presence of the ROC observers than the Ukrainian Catholic bishops.<sup>46</sup> They were insulted not by the personalities of the observers or by their Orthodox faith,<sup>47</sup> but by their association with the USSR, which completely wiped out the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Ukraine in 1945 by physical destruction and forced conversions to Russian Orthodoxy. In their evaluation of these events, the Ukrainians bishops viewed the Soviet authority and the leadership of the ROC as one acting subject and did not see substantial difference in their motivation and goals.<sup>48</sup> So deep was their indignation at the mere presence of

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<sup>45</sup> Stransky, 80.

<sup>46</sup> Karim Schelkens, “Vatican Diplomacy after the Cuban Missile Crisis: New Light on the Release of Josyf Slipyj.” *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 97, no. 4, 2011: 692.

<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, the head of the Ukrainian Catholic delegation Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk stressed the need for the Orthodox presence during the preparatory period of the Council. See Peter Galadza. “The Council Diary of Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk and Turning Points in the History of the Catholic Church: An Interpretation.” In *Vatican II: Experience canadiennes/Canadian Experiences*. Ed. Michael Attridge, et al. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press. 2011), 232.

<sup>48</sup> It is significant to note that while serving as a Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad (now the Patriarch of Moscow and All the Rus) said in this respect in an interview to the journal *La Croix* on March 12, 1991: “It is not our church but Stalin

the ROC observers that they used all available means to “evict” them from the Council including—to the Pope’s displeasure—making their feelings public.<sup>49</sup>

At the Council the ROC’s observers had to fulfill a double duty of promoting interests of the Soviet propaganda as well as interests of their church. To ensure that ROC’s churchmen only made politically correct statements in line with the party interests, their delegation always included secretaries or translators who were real staff KGB agents,<sup>50</sup> like Nikolay Afinogenov at the first, second, and fourth sessions and Boris Neliubin at the third and fourth sessions. Moreover, Borovoy and other ROC representatives were not allowed to attend any official functions without such “translators” even though the translators at the Council were provided by the Russicum. As a result, ROC representatives did follow the script and formally made statements insisting on the existence of proper religious freedom in the USSR.<sup>51</sup>

In these conditions, any attempt to relate the true situation of the church in the USSR required diplomatic skill and personal courage.<sup>52</sup> Direct by nature, Borovoy had to learn the

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who banned the Uniates... I was always convinced that when our public life was normalized, the Uniates would certainly have the right to exist. In my view the Greek Catholic Church should give up proselytism and serve as a bridge between West and East. But if it is to do that, it should use the theology of the Second Vatican Council in its thought and praxis.” Quoted from Georgy Zyablitsev, “The Measures Taken by the Moscow Patriarchate between 1990 and 1992 to Settle the Interconfessional Conflict in West Ukraine” in *The Holy Russian Church and Western Christianity*. Ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Oscar Beozzo. (Concilium 1996/6) (Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1996), 128.

<sup>49</sup> For more on the actions of the Ukrainian bishops see *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk, C.S.S.R. (1960-1965)*. Transl. Jaroslav Z. Skira. (Leuven: Peeters. 2012), especially the entries right after the opening of the Council. According to Schelkens, “John XXIII personally asked Bea to prevent such an action by the Ukrainian bishops.” Schelkens, 699.

<sup>50</sup> As Borovoy used to joke, “where two or three Orthodox gather together, one of them is a snitch (*stukach*).” He himself lived by the principle, that only God can be totally trusted. See personal reminiscences of the staff members of the Department for the External Church Relations “К 65-летию ОВЦС: люди отдела. Протопресвитер Виталий Боровой” at <http://www.taday.ru/text/1156888.html>.

<sup>51</sup> For example, at the height of Khrushchev’s persecution in August of 1963 Metropolitan Nikodim stated in an interview to *Detroit Free Press* (on the occasion of the ROC’s delegation coming to the meeting of the Central Committee of the WCC) that the relationship of the Orthodox Church to the government in Russia is comparable to the relationship of U.S. churches to the government in the U.S., because both are separate from the government “but operate within a constitutional framework that permits communication with the government.” *Detroit Free Press*, August 31, 1963 page 4. Can be found at <http://freep.newspapers.com/newspage/99125412/>.

<sup>52</sup> Borovoy used to tell an anecdote that well illustrates how the churchmen from the Soviet Union on an everyday basis had to find ways to “feed the wolf but save the sheep.” At his first meeting with the General Secretary of the WWC, Visser’t Hooft, Borovoy decided to make a gesture that would demonstrate that he was not a Soviet spy. So

difference between directness and truthfulness in diplomatic engagements.<sup>53</sup> On their part, Western colleagues knew about the ROC's overseers and made sure that candid discussions took place only on a one-on-one basis. In general, at the Council, the SPCU encouraged by all means such informal contacts between the observers and the other participants and the development of the "community-in-dialogue."<sup>54</sup> All Eastern and Asian, and most Anglican and Protestant observers and SPCU guests lodged (room and meal) together at the *Pensione Castello*, sat together at the General Congregations in a reserved tribune next to the patriarchs, prayed together at the daily Mass at St. Peter's Basilica,<sup>55</sup> and spent free time together enjoying receptions regularly organized by different host organizations and communities in Rome.<sup>56</sup> The SPCU provided all observers with qualified translators, and starting from the second session of the Council, made daily digests of the previous day's speeches in the native languages of the observers. Therefore, they could attend fewer meetings but spend more time in informal discussions. It is hard to find records of such informal contacts, but judging by the evaluations of his ecumenical colleagues, Borovoy managed to earn their trust and respect. As one of them put it,

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he addressed the Secretary in a mixture of different languages none of which he knew well enough to speak at that point: German, English and Latin, saying, "We wish to learn what WCC is doing for the Christian *unity*." This shocked the Secretary and infuriated his KGB-appointed interpreter Alekseev as a flagrant violation of a direct order to inquire only about what WCC does for *peace*, not Christian unity. In this case Borovoy's risk paid off: from ROC's perspective, Visser't Hooft understood Borovoy's intention and welcomed him as a true representative of his church; from the KGB's perspective he "succeeded" in getting access into circles that were previously out of reach for any other "Soviets." See "Мне верили абсолютно: Памяти отца Виталия Борового." April 7, 2015. <http://psmb.ru/community/article/mne-verili-absolutno-5555/>.

<sup>53</sup> "Чем отличается прямота от правды: Памяти о. Виталия Борового." April 7, 2014. <http://psmb.ru/community/article/chem-otlichaetsja-prjamota-ot-pravdy-4760/>

<sup>54</sup> Thomas F. Stransky, "Paul VI and the Delegated Observers/Guests to Vatican Council II." In *Paolo VI e l'ecumenismo: Colloquio internazionale di studio*. Brescia, September 25-27, 1998. Pubblicazioni dell'Istituto Paolo VI, no. 23, 129.

<sup>55</sup> "But perhaps the thing which did most to draw us together was that we worshipped together every morning. Each morning began with a Mass in St. Peter's at a nave altar close to where the Observers sat. In the early days some of the Observers felt that they could not attend this service... [eventually], though some of them began by sitting rigidly in their chairs, gradually they began to follow the service in their books, to stand for the Gospel, to bow their heads at the elevation of the Host, and so on." John R. H. Moorman, "Observers and Guests of the Council," in *Vatican II by Those Who Were There*. (London: Chapman, 1986), 167-168.

<sup>56</sup> According to the author's private conversation with Stransky, because of these receptions Fr. Borovoy could not visit Paulist's weekly Sunday brunches because anything "American" was strictly forbidden to him.

“[t]here were surely those who thought that he worked for KGB, but I saw him as a faithful Orthodox Christian who found ways of maximizing the elbow room for his beloved Church’s mission and activities in the world.”<sup>57</sup> Borovoy himself admitted that he had an “absolute, hundred-percent trust” of Visser’t Hooft and all other presidents and leaders of the WCC, and also heads of the churches including Pope Paul VI, leadership of the SPCU, and heads of states and state secretaries<sup>58</sup> because they recognized him as somebody who represented his church with exceptional sincerity and expertise despite his double duty as an instrument of the Soviet propaganda. On his part, Borovoy felt safe to tell them the truth about the situation of the ROC in the USSR because as he saw it, popes and presidents were not likely to be double agents.

During his time at the Council, Borovoy had to make daily written reports for the department of the External Church Relations and deliver them together with all Council materials to the Soviet Embassy in Rome. He refused to go there himself because as he put it, “already everybody considered us spies.” So his colleague, Vladimir Kotliarov, had to do it because his image was already “tainted” by his likeness to Vladimir Lenin noted by the Italian press.<sup>59</sup> To serve the interests of the church, Borovoy used these reports not only to inform the authorities but also to influence their decisions—as will be shown later.

Borovoy’s work at the Council was not only politically complex but also physically and mentally exhausting. Almost every weekend he had to fly to Geneva to fulfill his responsibilities as the ROC representative in the WWC and to celebrate Sunday liturgy at his parish there.<sup>60</sup> He even complained that between General Congregations and trips to Geneva, he could not take

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<sup>57</sup> “In Memoriam: Archpriest Vitaly Borovoy (1916-2008),” signed by the co-editor Paul Mojzes, *Religion in Eastern Europe* XXVIII, 3 2008: 78.

<sup>58</sup> See “Мне верили абсолютно: Памяти отца Виталия Борового.” April 7, 2015. <http://psmb.ru/community/article/mne-verili-absolutno-5555/>

<sup>59</sup> Platonov.

<sup>60</sup> While Borovoy spend most of his time abroad, his wife and son were not allowed to join him— perhaps, as insurance that he will be coming back.

advantage of the invitation by the mayor La Pira to visit Florence because “all I have free is Thursday. But one day is not enough to get to Florence.”<sup>61</sup> Still, he found time and energy for meaningful theological discussions and contributions. As one of his ecumenical colleagues remembered, Borovoy “was clearly the theologian among the Russian delegation, the most articulate in discussion, the clearest in explanation, and the one who was reaching out most for ecumenical ideas and contacts.”<sup>62</sup> Although observers could not speak or vote at the General Congregation, they had another way of making their voice heard. Every Tuesday afternoon, the SPCU gathered them for two and a half hour long meetings (presided by Willebrands) in order to receive their comments on the documents under review. Bishops were also welcomed to these meetings. Borovoy described these meetings as part of the Council’s guarantee to provide all the observers with the possibility “to express their own opinion, make their own observations and state their own feelings at regular meetings with Catholic theologians and those taking part in the Council,”<sup>63</sup> and he regularly made his contributions to these theological discussions.<sup>64</sup>

Of all the challenges that Borovoy faced at the Council, nothing tested his intelligence, his ability to hear and communicate with opponents, and most of all, his courage, as his involvement in the Vatican’s negotiations with the Soviet government to release Ukrainian Catholic Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj. Slipyj was arrested in April of 1945 as part of an effort to eliminate the Eastern Catholic Church in Ukraine. Convicted for alleged anti-Soviet activity and

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<sup>61</sup> Jung, 274.

<sup>62</sup> In Memoriam, 78-79.

<sup>63</sup> He also acknowledged two other guarantees of the Council such as “complete freedom of discussion and examination of all the questions by all those taking part in the Council” and “an attitude of an extraordinary attention towards the observers... Those in charge of the Council were always ready to defend the observers and the dignity of the Russian Orthodox Church.” Borovoy, 134.

<sup>64</sup> For Borovoy’s comments on episcopal collegiality see Dom Emmanuel Lanne. “La perception en Occident de la participation du Patriarcat de Moscou à Vatican II.” In *Vatican II in Moscow (1959-1965)*. (Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid. 1997), 126-127.

cooperation with the Fascist regime during the occupation, he remained for 18 years in deplorable conditions in a Siberian labor camp. Pope John XXIII, who was truly concerned with Slipyj's condition and even kept the Metropolitan's picture on his desk, was continuously advocating for his release. The presence of the ROC's observers at the Council provided an opportunity to reach out to the Soviet government. According to Stransky, Borovoy was the one who played a key role in securing the success of these efforts.<sup>65</sup>

To better understand the events surrounding Slipyj's release, they should to be placed in the context of what was happening in the world at that time. Only a few days after the opening of the Council (October 16-28), the so-called Cuban Nuclear Missile Crisis unfolded, when for twelve days, the world hung on the brink of a nuclear confrontation between the USA and the USSR. In search of a peaceful resolution of this crisis, the heads of these countries for the first time in history established direct contact. The Vatican also played its role in the peace process. On October 25, Pope John XXIII, in a radio address, appealed to all sides of the conflict with an urgent plea to avoid the nuclear disaster. This was the first time in Vatican history that it did not take the side of the capitalist West in a conflict with the USSR, but spoke simply on behalf of humanity. Soviet leadership acknowledged this new approach and the papal address was published simultaneously by the major Soviet newspaper *Pravda* (*Ипавда*) and the *New York Times*.

Right after the end of the Cuban crisis in November of 1962, the Pope asked his personal friend, the Secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, Cardinal Gustavo Testa, to reach out to the ROC's observers with a request to intercede for Slipyj's release. The timing was right for this request because after the Cuban crisis, the Pope and Krushchev started to establish personal contact and even exchanged hand-written cards. In response, Borovoy mentioned

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<sup>65</sup> For detailed account of these events and analysis see Schelkens.

Testa's request in his January report on the first session of the Council and then used all of his diplomatic skills in an effort to change the initially negative reaction of the Soviet authorities. He even gave a personal guarantee that the Vatican had no intentions of using Slipyj's release for anti-Soviet propaganda or for any other political gain. Finally, in the end of January 1963, Slipyj was granted amnesty and was required to permanently leave the USSR. As promised, the Vatican informed of his arrival to Rome in February 1963 in a very restrained and non-political manner.

This incredible story of what Schelkens calls "a surprising act of confidence and good will from all sides"<sup>66</sup> has a sad postscriptum. Since the first day at the Council, Borovoy was trying to personally contact the head of the Ukrainian Catholic delegation, Metropolitan Hermaniuk. However, even after Slipyj was released and he himself met with Borovoy on several occasions, Hermaniuk refused Borovoy's request.<sup>67</sup> In my opinion, this was a lost opportunity, if not for institutional, then for a personal encounter and reconciliation.

Years later, Willebrands asked Borovoy about the personal risks that he took in securing Slipyj's release. Borovoy replied that in doing so, he served the Lord's Church. He also added that two problems still remained after Slipyj's liberation: a big problem of the development of the Catholic Church in Russia, and a small problem of his own role and his personal risk.<sup>68</sup> Others who worked with him also remember him as a wise, courageous, and humble person, who moved them by his "dynamic vision of renewal and cooperation among Christians and other

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<sup>66</sup> Schelkens, 681.

<sup>67</sup> Galadza, 237-238. I cannot agree with Galadza when he, "abstracting from the observers' personal merits," justifies Hermaniuk's decision simply by the fact that they were present at the Council on the assignment from the Politburo. (Galadza, 234)

<sup>68</sup> "je suis convaincu qu'en agissant ainsi j'ai servi l'Église, non seulement votre, église, mais l'église du Seigneur... La libération du Metropolitain Slipyj peut devenir le signe d'un développement nouveau qui aura une importance très grande pour la situation de votre église dans notre pays et d'une manière indirecte aussi pour l'église orthodoxe. Deux problèmes se présentent encore, un grand problème, c'est le développement de votre église en Russie. Le petit problème, c'est ma part et mon risqué personnel." Schelkens, 705-706, note 83.

people of good will...[h]is penetrating intellect, broad knowledge of church history, and witty conversational style.”<sup>69</sup>

Although Borovoy did not consider the Council to be “ecumenical” in the historical, canonical and dogmatic sense,<sup>70</sup> he shared its “completely positive valuation” by the ROC.<sup>71</sup> From his perspective, the Council demonstrated positive changes in the RCC, a new welcoming attitude toward Orthodoxy, and effectiveness of the ‘eastern policy’ of Paul VI through “a reasonable and deliberate substitution of unjustified bellicose and primitive forms of anti-Communist and political anti-Sovietism from the 1940s and 1950s by changing them into more flexible and more effective ideological and diplomatic efforts to weaken the external and internal dynamic of the Soviet system (from within the Socialist camp) by means of domestication and assimilation.”<sup>72</sup>

Noticing that some documents of the Council were written under the influence of the Russian Orthodox theology and philosophy, he even expressed hope that its work will be helpful in preparation of the future pan-Orthodox council and Orthodox *aggiornamento*.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

Fifty years later, how can we evaluate the participation in the Council of the observers from the ROC in general and Borovoy in particular?

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<sup>69</sup> Paul Mojzes. “In Memoriam: Archpriest Vitaly Borovoy (1916-2008),” *Religion in Eastern Europe* XXVIII, 3 2008: 78.

<sup>70</sup> Borovoy, 130.

<sup>71</sup> Borovoy, 137.

<sup>72</sup> Borovoy, 135-136.

<sup>73</sup> “Ecco il motive per cui molto della ricchezza teologica e dell’esperienza conciliare del Concilio Vaticano II ci può essere utile nella fase preparatoria dei nostri Concili e del nostro aggiornamento.” Vitalij Borovoj, “Il significato del Concilio Vaticano II per la Chiesa ortodossa russa.” In *Vatican II in Moscow (1959-1965)*. Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid. 1997, 73-90. P. 90



From the perspective of the ROC's well being, this participation contributed to the assurance of its physical survival in the USSR, helped to overcome the stereotype that there was neither church nor religion in the communist Soviet Union, and allowed the international Christian community to get to know the ROC and its perils. As a result, even in the conditions of physical assault on its property and structure and poisonous anti-religious propaganda, the ROC not only survived but grew. Despite the fact that the numbers of clergy and active parishes diminished almost by a half by the end of 1965, the number of baptisms grew and so did the church's income.<sup>74</sup>

From the political perspective, through the ROC's involvement with the Council and with the WCC, the USSR indeed managed to silence many of its Christian critics. Decidedly anti-Soviet Orthodox emigrants held that the creation and widening of relations with the RCC mostly strengthened the communist regime in the USSR. Referring to Metropolitan Nikodim's vast international outreach, émigré newspapers cried out: "The red metropolitan reaches out where the red tank could not."<sup>75</sup> In line with this position, Borovoy himself later was attacked by the American popular magazine *Reader's Digest*, which implied that he ran WCC as a Soviet agent.<sup>76</sup>

From the perspective of the Catholic Church, this participation laid a foundation for the normalization of the relationships between the ROC and the RCC and "objectively opened a chapter of brotherhood between the churches."<sup>77</sup> It was followed by numerous theological conversations, starting in 1967 in Leningrad, and even the ROC's presence at John Paul I's

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<sup>74</sup> "In 1965 the revenue of the Moscow Patriarchate increased by 5,000,000 rubles, to 90,000,000 rubles (in present-day values)." Shkarovskii, 94.

<sup>75</sup> О. Сергей Голованов. "Очерк истории католического апостолата в русском зарубежье в 1017-1991гг." [http://www.krotov.info/libr\\_min/04\\_g/ol/ovanov\\_04.htm](http://www.krotov.info/libr_min/04_g/ol/ovanov_04.htm).

<sup>76</sup> "Мне верили абсолютно: Памяти отца Виталия Борового." April 7, 2015. <http://psmb.ru/community/article/mne-verili-absolutno-5555/>. Here Borovoy probably refers to an article by Clarence W. Hall "Which Way the World Council of Churches?" *Reader's Digest*, November 1971, 177-189.

<sup>77</sup> Melloni, 94.

inauguration on September 3, 1978.<sup>78</sup> In practice, however, not much was done for the improvement of the existence of the RCC in the USSR, while the Eastern Catholics had to wait until 1989-1990 to regain their right to exist.

From the perspective of intra-Orthodox relations, some say that the manner in which the ROC got to the Council seriously injured Orthodox unity, an injury that played out even in preparations for the pan-Orthodox synod in 2016.<sup>79</sup> Clearly, the rift between Moscow and Constantinople was not created in connection with the Council; it was growing at least since the beginning of the sixteenth century when the See of Moscow started to identify itself as a “Third Rome”—a final incarnation of the Christian empire.<sup>80</sup> This rift was certainly deepened on the eve of the Council by the meddling of the secular political forces in ecclesial relations. Perhaps, the healing of this injury can be accomplished only if all sides free themselves from the dangerous mingling of national, political, and ecclesial interests.

There still remains the thorny issue of the sincerity of the ROC’s ecumenical efforts. There are many today, especially in Russia, who minimize the significance of the ROC’s past ecumenical engagements, including the participation in the Council, insisting that it was motivated solely by the need to survive under the pressure from the Soviet authorities. Paradoxically, this argument is used by those who want to purify and increase the ROC’s ecumenical efforts as well as by those who want to backtrack on their church’s ecumenical commitment made in the past.

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<sup>78</sup> Sadly, the head of the delegation Metropolitan Nikodim who in 1970 received a degree of master of theology for a dissertation on the life and work of Pope John XXIII, had a fatal heart attack right in the papal study. His sudden death followed soon by the death of Pope John Paul I also from a heart attack, gave rise to various conspiracy theories, including one that Nikodim’s death was a result of an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Pope.

<sup>79</sup> Radu Bordeianu. “The Role of Orthodox Observers at the Second Vatican Council,” a presentation at the conference “Vatican II: Remebering the Future,” May 2015, Georgetown University.

<sup>80</sup> This claim was based on a belief widespread in Russian ecclesial circles that in the late Byzantine period Constantinople succumbed to Latin theological positions while Moscow in its adherence to tradition preserved the purity of the Orthodox faith and life. This idea is reincarnated today both in Russian political and ecclesiastical affairs in the doctrines of the *Russian World*.

Methodologically speaking, it is impossible to definitively resolve this paradox on an institutional level; the best one can do is to assess the actions of the involved individuals in light of their whole lives and through testimonies of “those who were there.” From this perspective, there is no doubt that Borovoy was entirely sincere in his motives not only to protect his Church but to work for true Christian unity. He managed to transcend his required role as the government’s mouthpiece and became a true voice of his Church. Through him, the ROC demonstrated its commitment to tirelessly search for new ways of Christian reconciliation and unity of all people. Thus, Borovoy’s participation in the work of the Council is a compelling example of the importance and fruitfulness of *personal human encounter* in ecumenical work, especially when churches and institutions are not friendly with each other.

In his life, Borovoy managed to combine seemingly incompatible things: born as a poor fatherless peasant, he received a world-class education and achieved world renown for his scholarship; he did not want to be either a priest or diplomat, yet became a nurturing pastor and an influential diplomat; he had a mild speech impairment and a “peasant-like” accent yet became a sought after preacher that touched the hearts and minds of both simple and refined; he had an international reputation and was held in high regard by people in power yet he did not use it to his benefit and until the last day, remained humble, dying in relative obscurity and poverty surrounded by his many books. Finally, in circumstances of external coercion, preassure, and control, he maintained inner freedom of spirit and creativity of the mind and met all hardships with endless wit and humor.

Borovoy’s paradoxical life reminds of a paradox of Christian ministry described by St. Paul:

We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained;  
perplexed, but not driven to despair;  
persecuted, but not abandoned;  
struck down, but not destroyed... (2 Cor 4: 8)

We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful;  
as unrecognized and yet acknowledged;  
as dying and behold we live; as chastised and yet not put to death;  
as sorrowful yet always rejoicing;  
as poor yet enriching many; as having nothing and yet possessing all things. (2 Cor 6:8-10)

Each of these lines accurately describes the life of Fr. Vitali Borovoy, a true “agent of Jesus Christ.”

### **Post scriptum**

In his long life, Borovoy met many in Europe and in the United States. Perhaps, there are some of those who knew him and would like to share their memories of this remarkable person. Hopefully, this will help to shed light on unknown pages of his long ecumenical career and maybe even solve the following mystery. In the east apse of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., there is a mosaic depicting Pope John XXIII and 19 participants of the Council. One of them is Fr. Borovoy! How did the Russian Orthodox priest from a communist country come to be selected for this small group of people that were probably meant to represent the Universal Church?

I would greatly appreciate any comments or suggestions at [anastacia wooden@gmail.com](mailto:anastacia wooden@gmail.com).