

# Western Rite in the Russian Orthodox Church: an Historical Outline

**M**oscow is the third Rome, and there shall not be a fourth. So runs one popular summary of what Monk Philotheus of Pskov was writing in the year 1510. He meant that Rome had sunk into schism in 1054 A.D., the New Rome—Constantinople—was sinking before advancing Muslim armies, and it was now incumbent on northern Rus' (Muscovy) to champion the Orthodox Christianity—and not only protect it, but even proclaim it throughout the world.

## Pre-History of Russian Western Rite

The Russian Orthodox Church is a direct heir and conservator of the Eastern Christian heritage, of the legacy of Constantinople ( "second Rome"), and of her Byzantine liturgical rite. Less well known is that the Russian Church has historically fostered the Western liturgical rite of the elder Rome. The missionary work of Sts. Cyril and Methodius was carried out in both Eastern and Western rites, that is, both the Latin and the Greek rite. The oldest surviving Church Slavonic document in the world is a liturgical fragment housed at a museum in Kiev. It is from the 10th century, and it is a small piece of a Roman-rite missal. We do not know to what extent the Western rite was present in Russian lands in the formative period after the baptism of Rus in 988. But the royal houses of England and Rus' were intertwined in this period, and Western customs such as the use of bells and the erection of a wall between the sanctuary and nave (which in Russia took the form of what we now call the "iconostasis") appeared soon after Russia's conversion.

We know that the Western rite was preserved in Slavonic among certain groups of Russians, all the way up to 1963, when a significant group of Russian "Old Believers" (i.e., Old Ritualists) emigrated from Turkey to the U.S. As they departed Turkey, authorities confiscated their service books containing the Western "Liturgy of St. Peter" (a byzantinised form of the Roman Mass). We know about their celebration of this liturgy, thanks to interviews which were conducted in America with their adherents shortly after they arrived from Turkey. The extent of the Roman rite between the year 1000 and the year 1963 in the Russian Church is not known; she has always represented, in the main, the Byzantine liturgical family.

## Early Modern Western Rite

In 1868 the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church approved the use of a Roman Mass in Tridentine form. The Synod also evaluated the Sarum form of the Roman rite and found both of them worthy of use. The approval came in connection with the pioneering work of the

Anglo-German Dr. Joseph Overbeck, who worked to popularize the idea of Westerners returning to Orthodoxy, something which was not very well received by British and European people in his lifetime. In those years preceding the Russian revolution, the Russian Church was engaged in many inventive missionary endeavours. Certain priests used, between them, some twenty languages in celebration of the holy Liturgy. Furthermore, two different forms of Byzantine rite were in use in Russia, the Niconian usage and the pre-Niconian kept by the Old Believers (i.e., Old Ritualists). It need not come as a complete surprise, therefore, that even a different liturgical Rite should have been authorised.

In 1904 a Russian Church committee on Anglican and Old Catholic affairs published findings on Anglican liturgy. This St. Petersburg committee had examined an Anglican Book of Common Prayer (BCP), as requested by St. Tikhon, who was then serving as a bishop in North America. In one and the same report, the committee (a) declared the BCP rite to be wholly unsuitable for Orthodox worship, and (b) left an open door for a potential approval in future, provided specific alterations would be made.

In the early years of the 20th century, the Russian Orthodox cathedral of St. Nicholas on 97th Street in New York City hosted a Western Rite Orthodox group, who worshipped in a side chapel. This occurred when St. Tikhon was still a bishop in America. Because St. Tikhon returned to Russia in 1907, this means that this Western Rite community in New York was active over one hundred years ago. These were former Episcopalians, who may have used the Roman rite which was the only one approved in those years.

## Middle Period

In the 1930s, a dialogue was opened between the "Church of France," a Western Rite body, and the Russian Orthodox Church. The French people were received by the Moscow authority, under Metropolitan Sergius Stragorodsky, and still later by the Russian Church Abroad, under her bishop St. John Maximovitch. There were also Western Rite communities in the Low Countries. During this interval the Western Rite of the Russian Church included both Roman rite and a Gallican rite which had been reconstructed and was blessed by St. John. A Western Rite bishop was consecrated at Paris. After St. John was transferred to America, these communities fell under stricture and passed out of the Russian Church. They were next independent, then with

the Romanian patriarchate, then independent again. Nowadays there are still a few bi-ritual parishes under Romania, including the parish of St. Genevieve and St. Martin at Paris. In its heyday, the “French” Church counted adherents in North and South America, England, and elsewhere.

Now we return to the decade of the 1930s. A Western Rite bishop, William Brothers, was consecrated in St. Nicholas Russian cathedral in 1934 by a wandering Albanian bishop. This occurred without proper authorisation from the Church in Russia, so it does not, strictly speaking, constitute a part of our little history. But it was a foreshadowing, for in 1962 Archbishop John Wendland of the Russian Church received this little group’s clergy, including the church of Christ on the Mount at Woodstock. The cluster of parishes was called the Patriarchate’s “Western Rite Vicariate” and they appear under that title in the 1967 “New Catholic Encyclopedia.” Brothers soon left again, but their Abbot Augustine Whitfield stayed on in the Russian Church as superior of Mt. Royal monastery. Dom Augustine mentored many Orthodox clergy of Western origin in his lifetime, especially as to Benedictine monastic formation. He used a form of Roman rite right up to his repose in the bosom of the Church Abroad in June 2010.

Also in the early 1960s, St. John Maximovitch continued celebrating Gallican rite Liturgies on occasion, though he no longer had oversight of the French communities.

In Europe, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Russian Patriarchate received a number of Italian convert parishes. These were permitted to retain the use of the Roman rite in its Tridentine form. Entire groups of former papal-Catholics in Italy, including some whole villages in Alpine regions, were celebrating daily Mass and divine office, in Latin, while affiliated with the Russian Church. This burgeoning movement proved short-lived, for when the Vatican protested, the Patriarchate withdrew its patronage.

In the early- and mid-1960s, in the United States, there were a number of Western Rite communities in the Church Abroad, in New York, Florida, Alabama, and the Midwest. Fr. John Shaw made contact with these people and also with Russian Old Ritualists. He himself celebrated the old Roman rite (Sarum Use) frequently. As the 1970s wore on, however, Western rite in the Russian Church waned. In 1975 Fr. John convinced the Brothers group to go to the older Roman tradition. There followed two or three decades of translation and publication on a massive scale, and in the end the old rite became accessible to modern man. During this time, so it is

rumoured, there was some Western rite activity in the Moscow Patriarchate, but this has proven impossible to substantiate.

### **Late 20th Century**

In the early 1990s, a Western Rite hieromonk, Fr. James (Deschene), was made head of Christminster. This house was a direct descendant of the Mt. Royal monastery but was located in Rhode Island (and now it is in Canada, in Ontario). Dom James uses a form of Roman rite. In these same few years, the then-Bishop Hilarion (now Metropolitan) visited St. Hilarion Western Rite monastery in Austin, Texas, and blessed its liturgical publications of the older Roman rite to be sold in Russian Orthodox bookstores. St. John of Kronstadt Press promoted these materials starting in 1994.

In the mid 1990s, some time after Brothers had died, David Pearce, assistant to Abbot Augustine, was ordained by the Brothers group and served the old Roman rite (Sarum). For a brief time, Abbot Augustine joined the Brothers group, but returned to the Russian Church Abroad in 1997. In 1997 the Brothers group joined the old calendarist “Milan Synod.”

In the late 1990s, in Tasmania, an Anglican priest of independent affiliation, Fr. Michael Wood, was received into the Russian Church Abroad and commenced missionary activities. In 1997, he was blessed to use an Anglican (BCP) type of liturgy. Thus the allowance the St. Petersburg committee had made in theory in 1904, was realised. Fr. Michael uses both Anglican and old Roman (Sarum) liturgy.

In the late 1990s, a Russian Patriarchate monastery in Illinois is known to have used the Sarum rite on occasion. The Russian Patriarchate monastery in Belgium used an old Irish rite (from the Lorrha Missal) as an alternate liturgy, for a time. Both these Western Rite utilizations appear to have been sporadic, rather than enduring.

### **21st Century**

Beginning in 2004, Milan Synod clergy, both Eastern and Western in rite, started to turn themselves to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. After the election in 2008 of Metropolitan Hilarion (Kapral) as first hierarch of the Church Abroad, some ten Milan priests were received, many of them serving in the Western Rite. In late 2010, another independent group with Orthodox beliefs, headed by Fr. Anthony Bondi, was received into the Church Abroad. Their group formed the basis for what is now called the Fraternity of St. Gregory, an association which has now taken in clergy of other origination as well. Seven months on, ordinations are still occurring to serve

the needs of the Fraternity's churches. Meanwhile, from Europe comes the news that the Milan Synod itself, in Italy, is negotiating to come under the Russian Patriarchate. The outcome is uncertain.

In the year 2010, all Western rite people and clergy in the Russian Church Abroad were placed under the immediate supervision of the Metropolitan, so that they are all "stavropigial."

Fr. John Shaw, having been previously consecrated to the episcopacy as Jerome of Manhattan, was named Vicar Bishop for Western Rite. A Western Rite Vicariate was established (the RWRV). Abbot James Deschene was made assistant to the Metropolitan for North America. Fr. Anthony Bondi, a monastic, was made assistant to the Metropolitan for Western Rite affairs. By the time of this writing, Bishop Jerome has ordained Western Rite clergy using both Byzantine and Roman rite forms, and has celebrated the pontifical form of the Roman mass.

There are now over thirty Western Rite and bi-ritual clergy serving in the Russian Church Abroad. There are monks and nuns, and three Benedictine abbots, Dom James Deschene, Dom David Pearce, and Dom Martin Hohlfeld. There exists a diversity of Western usages, including the Roman rite (in Tridentine and Sarum versions); the Anglican (BCP) rite adapted; a Roman-type

rite created by the Fraternity; and the Gallican rite (kept in an Iowa parish). The liturgical forms found in the Antiochian Western Rite Vicariate are approved for use in the RWRV. RWRV people and clergy are not particularly homogenous in origin, but spring from a variety of backgrounds, including various national Orthodox Churches; the Old Catholics; the Roman Catholics; the conservative Anglican movement; various Protestant groups both liturgical and non; the Greek Old Calendarist movement; and others. There are now communities functioning in Tasmania, the United States, Canada, Brazil, England, and the Philippines, with new communities in current formation. Within the U.S., fully eighteen states have at least one RWRV church in them.

The influx of Western Rite people has been dramatic and indicates high potential. It remains to be seen how church life will develop in this rejuvenated Western Rite Vicariate of the Russian Church. Its cordial relations with the Antiochian Western Rite Vicariate certainly bode well for inter-Orthodox cooperation as to Western Rite matters.

In October this year (2011), a large Western Rite Orthodox Conference is scheduled to occur in New York. As of July, the number of registrants is near to maximum. Clearly, these most recent developments are unfolding even as we describe them here.

### **Did You Know?**

Moscow, like ancient Rome, is built on seven hills.

### **Further Reading**

Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia: <http://www.rocor.org>

Fraternity of St. Gregory: <http://www.theorthodoxchurch.org>

Christminster: <http://christminster.org>

Occidentalis Website for Western Orthodoxy: <http://www.allmercifulsavior.com/Western.html>

Occidentalis—a Western Orthodoxy Discussion Group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Occidentalis>

*Oremus: Roman Rite in the Orthodox Church*—a blog: <http://www.sarisburium.blogspot.com>

Liturgical Texts Project: <http://www.allmercifulsavior.com/Liturgy/Liturgics.html>

Essays on Western Rite Orthodoxy: <http://www.allmercifulsavior.com/Liturgy/Essays.html>

*This summary was written by a monk of the Russian Church pending revisions and additions. It does not delve into the history of Western Rite Orthodoxy as a whole, which involves other of the national Eastern Orthodox Churches.*