

# *A Reply*

## *To Protopriest Stefan Sabelnik's "Declaration Addressed to Metropolitan Laurus".*

A few days ago, the Russian-language text with the title “*Заявление прот. Стефана Сабельника на имя митр. Лавра*” was forwarded to me. The writer, Fr. Stefan Sabelnik, who had been a classmate of mine at Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville, also has written several other open letters of similar content. All of these have been published on the internet, and besides that, circulated by ordinary mail.

Fr. Stefan's letter to the First Hierarch begins without a salutation, and starts directly with the following words<sup>1</sup>:

“With great sorrow I, and my spiritual children of our Holy Assumption parish who are faithful to our beloved, Genuine Church Abroad, are obliged to separate ourselves from you and your Synod, because of your adopting the Act of unity with the Moscow Patriarchate. By adopting this Act, you have broken the 30<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Holy Apostles, as well as the 45<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Apostolic Canons, which forbid communion in prayer with those who concelebrate with heretics and, consequently, you yourself (*or*: “you yourselves” — Tr.) are subject to excommunication. But the most ruinous aspect of your accepting the Act is this, that you are merging together with those who do not have Apostolic succession! Despite all their outward splendor, you have merged with a pseudo-church. Please read my Open Letter (*here follows an electronic link to another document* — JRS).

“On the basis of the 15<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Twice-Held Council of Constantinople, we are obliged and required to separate ourselves from you and your Synod.

“I write this with great sorrow and without any bitterness or haughtiness. My soul is filled only with deep sadness over what has taken place. But, taking into consideration the fact that you have chosen your path by the free will given by God, I ask you to respect us too, in the path we have chosen, and to let us go in peace, to pray to God in our small church, for the support of which, over the past 50 years, neither the Diocese nor the Synod has ever donated a single dollar.

“Protopriest Stefan Sabelnik  
Pastor of Assumption Church  
Trenton, NJ, USA  
March 5/18, 2007”

In discussing the letter quoted above, first of all we need to look at the full text of the 15<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Twice-Called Council of Constantinople, on the basis of which, according to Fr. Stefan, supposedly he and those with him “were obliged and required to separate from you and your Synod”.

### *The 15<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Twice-Called Council of Constantinople<sup>2</sup>*

*“The rules laid down with reference to Presbyters and Bishops and Metropolitan are still more applicable to Patriarchs. So that in case any Presbyter or Bishop or Metropolitan dares to secede or apostatize from the communion of his own Patriarch, and fails to mention the latter's name in accordance with custom duly fixed and ordained, in the Divine Mystagogy, but, before a conciliar verdict has been pronounced and has passed judgment against him, creates a schism, the holy Council has decreed that this person shall be held an alien to every priestly function if only he be convicted of having committed this transgression of the law. Accordingly, these rules have been sealed and ordained as respecting those persons who under the pretext of charges against their own presiding bishop stand aloof, and create a schism, and disrupt the union of the Church. But as for those persons, on the other hand, who, on account of some heresy condemned by the holy Councils, or Fathers, withdrawing themselves from communion with their presiding bishop, who, that is to say, is preaching the heresy publicly, and teaching it bareheaded in church, such persons not only are not subject to any canonical penalty on account of their having walled themselves off from any and all communion with the one called a Bishop before any conciliar or synodal verdict has been rendered, but, on the contrary, they shall be deemed worthy to enjoy the honor which befits them among Orthodoxy Christians. For they have defied, not Bishops, but pseudo-bishops and pseudo-teachers; and they have not sundered the union of the Church with any schism, but, on the contrary, have been sedulous to rescue the Church from schisms and divisions.*”

In the Canon quoted above, despite what Fr. Stefan wrote, nowhere is there a word said about anyone being “obliged and required to separate themselves from their First Hierarch and his Synod”.

Quite the contrary: it is those “*who under the pretext of charges against their own presiding bishop stand aloof, and create a schism*”, who are schismatics, and whom the Council repudiates as being “foreign to any Holy Orders, that is, deposed from the priesthood.

However, if the hierarch *openly preaches heresy*, then those who separate themselves from him because of this, and who “protect the Church from schisms and divisions”, are not punished, but deserve praise.

<sup>1</sup> This English rendition is my own; there may have been another translation on the internet. — JRS.

<sup>2</sup> Also called the “First-and-Second” Council, or the “Twofold” Council, held in 861-863 A.D.

But Fr. Stefan does not accuse Metropolitan Laurus of heresy. He only accuses him of subscribing to the Act of Canonical Communion with another part of the Russian Orthodox Church. Therefore it is Fr. Stefan, and not the Metropolitan or the Synod, who is in breach of this Canon.

Further on, Fr. Stefan refers to the 30<sup>th</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Apostolic Canons: “By adopting this Act, you have broken the 30<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Holy Apostles, as well as the 45<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Apostolic Canons, which forbid communion in prayer with those who concelebrate with heretics and, consequently, you yourselves are subject to excommunication”.

***The 30<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Holy Apostles:***

*If any Bishop comes into possession of a church by employing secular rulers, let him be deposed from office, and let him be excommunicated; and all those who communicate with him, as well.*

It would appear that Fr. Stefan, in referring to this Rule, wants to accuse the bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate of, as it were, “obtaining their Sees through secular authorities”.

But, as the text itself clearly shows, this refers to cases where someone *himself sought the rank of bishop*, and to this end made use of the support of secular rulers.

When secular authorities, on their part, interfere in the assignment of all the bishops, such as was the case in Imperial Russia from the time of Peter I up to 1917, then the bishops are not offenders against the Canon quoted above. If they were, one would have to reject all the bishops of the Russian Church starting in 1701 A.D., along with their successors “and all those in communion with them”, i.e. the entire clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church, and all Orthodox Christians along with them!

***The 45<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Holy Apostles:***

*Let any Bishop, or Presbyter, or Deacon that merely joins in prayer with heretics be suspended, but if he has permitted them to perform any service as clergymen, let him be deposed from office<sup>3</sup>.*

***The 65<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Holy Apostles:***

*If any clergyman, or layman, should enter a synagogue of Jews, or of heretics, to pray, let him be both deposed and excommunicated.*

Fr. Stefan brings the accusation against Metropolitan Laurus that “You have broken ... the 45<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Apostolic Canons, which forbid communion in prayer with those who concelebrate with heretics and, consequently, you yourself (*or*: “you yourselves” — Tr.) are subject to excommunication”.

However, these 45<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> Canons of the Holy Apostles, contrary to the assertion of Fr. Stefan, make no mention of “those who are in communion with others who concelebrate with heretics”; they speak only of those who themselves pray with heretics.

Exactly when Metropolitan Laurus “entered a Jewish or heretical synagogue to pray”, Fr. Stefan does not specify<sup>4</sup>.

To be sure, the 11<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Holy Apostles has the following content:

*If anyone who is a Clergyman should pray with a deposed Clergyman, he shall be deposed as well.*

Here, the penalty is not limited to someone who prays with someone else “who prays with heretics”, but covers anyone who prays with a defrocked clergyman, regardless of the reason for the latter’s having been deprived of clerical rank.

We should also note that the 6<sup>th</sup> Canon of the Council of Laodicea says:

*Heretics that persist in their heresy, shall not be permitted to enter into the house of God.*

The 9<sup>th</sup> Canon of that same Council says:

*Those belonging to the Church are not allowed to go visiting the cemeteries or the so-called martyria (i.e. shrines of martyrs) of any heretics, for the purpose of prayer or of cure; but, on the contrary, those who do so, if they be among the faithful, shall be excluded from communion for a time until they repent and confess their error, when they may be readmitted to communion.*

Alas: everywhere in the parishes of the Church Abroad, and indeed in Orthodox churches in general, the presence has long been permitted of people, not only non-Orthodox, but also non-Christians and even non-believers.

Everywhere, too, one can find graves of our departed parishioners in cemeteries owned by other denominations, sometimes not even Christian; but the priests of our Church do not refuse to conduct Litiya services and Pannikhidas for them.

One does not have to spend long in reading the sacred Canons of the Church, to be convinced that it is impossible to carry out all of them literally. We can even find seeming contradictions of some Canons with others.

It should be clear that the Canons do not act of themselves, but that the bishops, the lawful hierarchy of the Church, must apply them in each individual case.

If the Canons, acting by themselves, were able to excommunicate people from the Church, then long ago all the bishops, priests, deacons and laity would have been excommunicated, would have “fallen under anathema”, and there would be no Church left on earth.

But the Lord said to His holy Disciples and Apostles: “I will found My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”.

Fr. Stefan writes: “You are merging together with those who do not have Apostolic succession! Despite all their outward splendor, you have merged with a pseudo-church”.

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<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky was photographed in 1925 in vestments together with vested Anglican clergy; Metropolitan Anastassy spoke and gave a blessing to the congregation in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London [Church of England]; there was a vested Anglican bishop in the altar at the consecration of the future Metropolitan Vitaly; and Archbishop Averky allowed the Coptic Church to hold services in the lower level of the cathedral in Jordanville. Were all of those Synodal hierarchs, along with those in communion with them, deposed and excommunicated?

<sup>4</sup> Such a date would be significant, since Fr. Stefan was ordained by Vl. Laurus and more recently accepted the rank of “protopriest” from his hands.

*Apostolic succession* is defined in the *Longer Catechism of the Christian Church* (Prepared by Metropolitan St. Philaret of Moscow, and Approved by the Holy Synod of Russia, for the Use of Schools and of All Orthodox Christians, in 1839) as follows (in Question 276, under the 9<sup>th</sup> Article of the Creed):

**Question:** *What ecclesiastical institution is there through which the Apostolic succession of the ministry is preserved?*

**Response:** *The Church Hierarchy.*

**Q.** *Whence originates the Hierarchy of the Orthodox Christian Church?*

**R.** *From Jesus Christ Himself, and from the descent of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles; from which time it is continued, in unbroken succession, through the laying on of hands, in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.*

In his “Abridged Orthodox Christian Catechism”, Archpriest N. Voznesensky (who later became Bishop Dimitri of Hailar in China, and was the father of Metropolitan Philaret, the First Hierarch of the Church Abroad from 1964 to 1985), published in 1938 in Harbin, on p. 34, gives the the following explanation of Apostolic succession:

**Q.** *In what way does our Orthodox hierarchy differ from the hierarchies of sectarian and protestant communities?*

**R.** *It is generally known that in those communities, their so-called Holy Orders had their beginning with relatively recent founders of the same communities: Luther, Calvin, Miller and others, when more than 1500 years had passed after the founding of the Church. On the other hand, our hierarchy is truly Apostolic, and traces its beginning from Jesus Christ Himself, Who sent forth His Apostles, and from the descent of the Holy Ghost. From that time, in succession and without interruption, all members of our three-rank hierarchy (bishops, priests and deacons) are ordained in lawful order in the Church, in the Sacrament of Holy Orders*

One should note that Bishop Dimitri did *not* write, “In what way does our Orthodox hierarchy differ from that of all the non-Orthodox?”: since there are non-Orthodox hierarchies, such as the Roman Catholic, Coptic Armenian, and Nestorian, that are seen by our Church as “having Apostolic succession”, even despite their separation from the Universal Church and the presence in them of heretical teachings.

In view of the fact that such non-Orthodox nevertheless retained, at least in a formal sense, Apostolic succession, they have been traditionally received into the Orthodox Church “in statu quo”, that is, priests without being reordained, but by renunciation of heresies and by vesting<sup>7</sup> laity through renunciation of heresies and confession. This is indicated in the Trebnik.

If the Roman Catholics and Armenians retained Apostolic succession, surely the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate did not lose its Apostolic succession?

All the bishops of the Moscow Patriarchate have Apostolic succession: otherwise, the Church Abroad would not have been able to receive clergy from the Patriarchate “in statu quo”, as has always been done.

If the MP were without Apostolic succession, then its Chrismation would have been “invalid”, and it would have been necessary to receive all the laity that have come from Russia and been baptized in the MP, by Chrismation.

The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia certainly has never declared the MP “without grace” or “lacking Apostolic succession”.

Most unexpectedly, in his conclusion, Fr. Stefan refers to “our small church, for the support of which, over the past 50 years, *neither the Diocese nor the Synod has ever donated a single dollar*”.

Such words could have been meant to influence the parishioners of his church and dispose them against the Synod. But the Synod and the Diocese do not “donate” to their parishes; it’s just the other way around: the parishes make donations for the support of the Synod and the Diocese (cf. Paragraph 32 in the *Regulations of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia*).

By the same token, parish churches do not support their parishioners financially: it is the parishioners who donate to, and support, their churches.

In Fr. Stefan’s “Declaration” there is also an electronic link to his other writing, called “An Appeal”.

In his “Appeal”, one could say that each sentence contains false statements. I have no doubt that the author himself believes everything he has written, but this only bears witness to his having lived so long apart from the rest of the Church Abroad, not having anything to do with either the hierarchy or with his former colleagues. Therefore he has developed a very distorted view of current developments in Church life.

Here is one example, taken from footnote No. 3 in the “Appeal”:

“It was sad to see how fast ROCOR (L)<sup>5</sup> has begun to employ KGB tactics: they presented their flock with disinformation, claiming that the MP has renounced Sergianism. Nothing of the sort has happened. The MP will never condemn Sergianism. It never ceases to glorify Metropolitan Sergius, is planning to canonize him in this 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his “Declaration”, and in this way to make permanent its unlawful control over the Russian Church”.

First of all, these words give the impression that the author himself does not understand the term “Sergianism”.

“Sergianism” does not mean “a cult following of Patriarch Sergius”, and does not consist in venerating or glorifying him as an individual.

By “Sergianism”, we mean the proclamations, made under pressure from the Bolsheviks, that there was “no persecution of the Church and of believers in Russia”, that there were “no New Martyrs or persecuted confessors of the holy Orthodox faith”.

Such “Sergianism” has long since ceased to be. It is easy enough to convince oneself of that, for anyone who reads the news and articles on the websites of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In those articles, one can gain more information every day about the sufferings of the Church during the years of persecution, and about the destruction of churches, about the killings or incarceration of the clergy and faithful.

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<sup>5</sup> “ROCOR (L)” is a favorite designation for the Church Abroad by the members of ROCiE (the small Mansonville schism), which has already split up into 3, mutually hostile, even smaller jurisdictions.

And virtually every day, one can also read of the present struggles of the faithful against those who still resist the return of churches that had been turned into museums or put to secular uses; of the battle for teaching of the Orthodox faith in the public schools, or the fight against those who tried to close down an Orthodox orphanage outside Moscow — and much more.

Incidentally, the MP does not plan to “glorify” Patriarch Sergius (in the sense of adding his name to the list of Saints).

Archbishop Nikon of Washington and Florida, who once assigned Fr. Stefan Sabelnik to the Trenton parish, and whom I had the honor and good fortune to serve for the last 5 and a half years of his earthly life, once said the following to me, concerning Patriarch Sergius:

“I understand how he was thinking: ‘Let me put the Church in order, because he knew that God’s grace would overcome this evil (of Bolshevism)’”.

And Vladyka Nikon was right: that is what happened. The grace of God overcame godless communism.

But Satan never stops whispering in the ears of those, who hearken. And although the godless regime and the persecution of the Church fell apart, Satan still can confuse the minds of some, turning them against the Church and luring them into schism, setting them to rise up against the hierarchy of the Church.

Archpriest John R. Shaw

March 16/29, 2007

(Rewritten in English on April 5/18, 2007).