

Response

RE: Fr. V. Malchenko reaction to Dr. Bennett presentation

The Very Rev. Archpriest Vladimir Malchenko, Rector of Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (Toronto, ON), has taken the initiative to e-mail – in wide distribution to Orthodox clergy, parishes and faithful, primarily throughout eastern Canada – his personal response to a presentation by Dr. Andrew Bennett, Canada’s Religious Freedoms Ambassador. We, too, are recipients of this e-mail and, considering its confrontational tone and highly subjective content, we feel a profound responsibility to offer a response.

Fr. Vladimir responds to Dr. Bennett’s presentation to the *Conference on the Ecumenical Patriarchate* held in Toronto, this fall. Having lauded Dr. Bennett on his noble successes in the important mission of defending Christians throughout the world, he, nevertheless, accuses him of bias and falsehood in denouncing the actions regarding limitations, encouraged by the government of the Russian Federation, led by its president, Vladimir Putin, of religious freedom in Ukraine, and especially in Crimea – presently in a state of illegal annexation by Russia. Dr. Bennett has stated that these actions appear to be geared at propping up the Moscow Patriarchate (the Russian Orthodox Church), building upon Russian nationalism united to Orthodoxy.

Mr. Putin’s actions in Ukraine, together with a vast media campaign of disinformation, have already called forth strong criticism and condemnation on the part of the world community, coupled with economic and political sanctions, which have placed Russia in a most difficult – and deteriorating – position. Fr. Vladimir seems determined to continue the wave of disinformation issuing from his leaders. Claiming the authority of “our Orthodox Church in Toronto, Canada and worldwide”, he speaks of “the persecution of the Orthodox in Ukraine”, referring to the (internally autonomous) Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the omophorion of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Fr. Vladimir’s message echoes the document issued by the Russian Congress of Canada entitled “An Open Letter Regarding Comments by Andrew Bennett from the Orthodox Community of Toronto”, which, again, appears to be part of the above-mentioned wave of disinformation. The very title of that document is misleading, in that the above Congress does not have a mandate to speak on behalf of the entire Orthodox community of Toronto. It contains the same sort of accusations against the legally-elected government of Ukraine (recognized as such by the world community) and its armed forces, as levelled by Mr. Putin’s propaganda campaign, i.e. that it is not the militant Russian-supported separatists in the oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk, but the Ukrainian forces that have indiscriminately shelled civilian areas.

The tragic, horrendous conditions in those oblasts make it difficult to obtain precise, objective information about all that is going on. It is quite clear, however, that it was the aggressive actions of those separatist forces, led by officers of the Russian army (e. g. Igor Girkin, a.k.a. “Strelkov”), starting with the seizure of government offices and the murder of a Ukrainian politician, Volodymyr Rybak, which finally prompted the Ukrainian government (initially reluctant to do so) to respond with its on-going Anti-Terrorist Operation.

A pluralist democracy, such as Canada – and such as Ukraine is slowly recognizing herself to be – assures all registered religious bodies, including those of the same confession but diverse authorities, of equal protection and freedom. There is every sign that Ukraine seeks to give such protection to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, both of the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate

and the independent Kyiv Patriarchate, as well as the Ukrainian Catholic Church. There is a great deal of evidence that the first is the only one of these three faith communities which enjoys such protection and freedom in the separatist-controlled areas and in Crimea, annexed illegally by Russia. Various Protestant communities, and especially the (Muslim) Crimean Tatar communities, have found themselves in a similarly precarious situation in those areas.

The above document of the Russian Congress, which Fr. Malchenko declares to be representative of all the Orthodox, accuses Dr. Bennett (and the Canadian government) of intervening in Orthodox Church affairs and that this “will send alarm signals to all Orthodox Churches in Canada.” The defence of religious freedom is one of the prime values of Canadians and no other community except the Russian Congress (and Fr. Vladimir Malchenko, on a personal level) seems to be alarmed at Dr. Bennett’s criticism of Mr. Putin’s policies.

Dr. Andrew Bennett speaks of dialogue between religious communities. The Russian Congress, too, spoke of an, alas, interrupted dialogue with the Ukrainian Canadian Congress. Dialogue is indeed important and it is in this spirit that we respond to Fr. Vladimir Malchenko. True dialogue, we remind Fr. Vladimir, requires good will and honesty, otherwise it is mere argumentation which resolves nothing.

In the spirit of the present season of fasting before the approaching Feast of the Nativity, we seek to hear and proclaim the life-changing message of the Angels who greeted the Shepherds of Bethlehem: “Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth. Good will to men.” May that peace and goodwill continue to flourish, for the glory of God, in our Canadian society, and may it touch all regions and all peoples of our ancestral homeland, Ukraine!

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