

**The Briefing and Information Team
of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada**

**Message on the Female Punk Rock Group Protest in the Christ the Saviour
Cathedral in Moscow**

World attention was focused last summer on the Orthodox Church as the result of a protest action by five young Russian women in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, Russia. The young women were part of punk rock group calling itself Pussy Riot. Their performance, as they explained, was aimed at protesting the unduly close ties between the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and the government of President Vladimir Putin.

Such ties have, alas, often been a feature of political life in Russia and its dependencies in the days of the Tsars and the late unlamented USSR. Thus, many Orthodox Christians would find affinity with the *intentions* of the young women since our ethos views the ideal form of relations between the Church and the state as a *symphonia*, i.e. two notes harmonizing with each other but *not* intruding or interfering with each other. For Church leaders to call upon their faithful to vote for one or another candidate for State office, as is said to have been the case in the Russian Federation, definitely strikes a discordant note which would clearly trouble the consciences of Orthodox believers.

Such affinity is nonetheless greatly challenged by the form of this protest for it was a parody of prayer and carried out in a sacred space where it was very much out of place. An integral feature of Orthodox spirituality is reverence for all of God's creation and most especially for holy temples, which are the focus of such reverence. To perform a parody of prayer in a sacred space, no matter what the intention, challenges this reverence. This may be seen in the faces of the faithful present in the temple during this action, shown on the video that appeared on Youtube. Thankfully, this protest did not occur during a Divine Service, as some commentators have reported. Nor did it occur in a place where females may not approach, as it was not inside the Altar area.

It is difficult not to accept that such a protest may be justified, especially in a democracy that the Russian Federation is striving to become. One cannot, however, be comfortable with its form, and the place where it was held. The Orthodox Christian will pray that justice and righteousness may be victorious and that the matter might be resolved by mercy, humility and love on the part of believers of all ranks in the Church Militant.

Such an ideal resolution is beautifully described in this work, *A Modern Parable in the Style of the Desert Fathers* by Kevin Maurice Alton Honeywell, which appeared on Facebook shortly after the trial. The three young women allegedly involved in the protest were charged with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" (although the protest was not directed solely against the Bishop): "Four women entered the church at Scetis because the Bishop had angered them. They went to the Screen and danced in front of it and sang a coarse and vulgar song while praying to God and the Holy Virgin to drive the Bishop out. When the Bishop heard of this, he came to the women, bowed to the ground before them, and with tears begged their forgiveness. The women also wept and in turn begged the Bishop's forgiveness, which he gave and blessed them and

they departed in peace. The Bishop then amended his life and served the Church in quietness and grace."

Alas, as we have noted, Russia has a history of "symphonic imbalance" that even led to the development of the distinctive community of Orthodox Old Believers in response to the repressive actions of the State in effecting liturgical reforms. It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of world governments as well as prominent figures in the world of pop music have raised their voices in defense of the three young women (two have fled Russia) who have been tried and sentenced for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." The issue has also been somewhat divisive for Orthodox Christians in Russia and abroad.

A group of sympathizers in Ukraine, the controversial Femen, expressed their support in an action that for many Orthodox Christians is as troublesome, if not more so, than the action of the young women in the Moscow Cathedral. They sawed down a Cross erected as a memorial to the victims of Stalin's enormous repressions in Kyiv. Such an action is a most confusing protest against perceived tyranny – and at least one of the young women incarcerated for the action in Moscow has expressed disapproval of it.

The appropriate response to all the above actions seems to be fervent prayer for all the parties concerned, and perhaps most especially for those who are likely to be most hurt by the consequences of these events, the two young children of the two mothers who have been sentenced to prison. These mothers received a lighter sentence than that demanded by the prosecution, which was already lighter than that established by the law in such cases. It seems very clear that reverence and faith cannot be legislated and/or coerced. When such is the case, it is not the community of Faith that is built up, but rather the transitory vehicles of fleeting earthly power, at the expense of that community which must, however, rise to the challenge of holding on in hope, faith and forgiveness. We are strengthened in this by example of the Saviour Who endured unimaginable irreverence and violence against Himself – and emerged triumphant, trampling down death itself by His life-giving Passion.

Questions, comments or concerns regarding this article may be directed to the Briefing and Information Team of the UOCC:

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