



STATE OF AFFAIRS

The Problem of Fear

A Reflection on the Words of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh

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“Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent.” – Acts 18:9

“In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” – John 16:33

In June of 2000 Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh gave a long interview in London, part of which was published several days later by the Parisian Russian-language newspaper *Russkaya Mysl*. In that interview, Vladyka Anthony pondered the atmosphere of internal fear which was beginning to permeate the Orthodox Church:

I have a very clear or rather gloomy feeling that as we enter the third millennium we are entering some obscure and complex and, in a certain sense, unwelcome period. As for devotion to the Church, our faith must cer-

tainly retain its integrity, but we must not be afraid of thinking and expressing ourselves openly. Everything will eventually settle into order, but if we keep just endlessly reiterating what has been said long ago, more and more people will drift away from their faith (I mean not so much Russia as the world as a whole), not because everything that was stated before is erroneous, but because the approach and language being used are all wrong. Today’s people and the time they live in are different; today we think differently. I believe one must become rooted in God and not be afraid of thinking and feeling freely. “Freely” does not imply “free thinking” or contempt for the past and for the tradition. However, God does not need slaves. “I no longer call you servants, I call you my friends...” I think it is extremely important that we think and share our reflections with him. There is so much we could share with him in this new world we live in. It is so

good and so important to think openly without trying to conform. Intellectuals with great receptivity must come to the fore by their thinking and writing.

The Church, or rather clergymen and some of the conscious churchgoers, are afraid to do something wrong. After all these years when people could not think or speak openly with each other and thereby outgrow, as it were, the nineteenth century, there is much fear, which leads people to be content with mere repetition of what has been adopted by the Church long before and what is known as Church language and Church doctrine. This has to change sooner or later.¹

For Metropolitan Anthony, this developing fear of open discourse stood in sharp contrast to the years of his formation in Western Europe in the atmosphere of active and open Orthodox and interconfessional dialogue. The ensuing years have shown that this concern went far beyond the Church of Russia, which was the subject of Metropolitan Anthony's remarks. As the Church is being drawn deeper and deeper into the thick of the so-called "culture wars" and challenged with expectations to respond to contemporary issues at the speed and within the format of tweets and blog posts, its reaction, more often than not, is to retreat behind the safe walls of familiar formulae. Yet, as events everywhere seem to demonstrate, this approach does not appear either to further the Church's evangelical mission or to nurture the development of internal and external theological discourse. In the eyes of the world it seems to present, tragically, an image of a fearful tyrant on the defensive instead of a fearless witness to the Truth.

We must face the fact that much of our contemporary life in the Church is permeated by fear of thought, fear of

questions, and fear of discourse. This fear divides and silences us, or gives rise to loud and vitriolic defenses and expositions that seek to alienate and stifle new and challenging voices. The era of open dialogue, which has been associated in the West first with the "Paris School" and later with the luminaries of Russian Orthodox theological thought in North America, seems to have become a distant and almost fabled memory. No matter what challenges we face—evangelization, liturgical reform, gender and sexuality, political and socioeconomic issues—there seems to be no room for an open and respectful discourse, and self-censorship has become a sad norm.

"One must become rooted in God and not be afraid of thinking and feeling freely."² The freedom that Met. Anthony refers to does not translate into irreverence to tradition, contempt for Church history, or self-indulgence. It is rather the creative freedom of the Spirit which is nourished, as in patristic times, by contending with reality and engaging the questions that grow from that encounter.

These thoughts appear in Met. Anthony's writings and talks over the years as he wrestles with various topics that arise both inside and outside the Church. In May of 1989 he gave a series of talks under the general heading "Man and Woman." In them he both acknowledges the challenges of the time and describes, with characteristic sharpness, the failure of the Church to engage the challenges in a manner suited to its tradition:

The subject of man and woman has become more and more essential in the course of the last decades, not only because a number of people have been very vocal about the situation of women both in the Church and in society, but because more and more,

¹ Met. Anthony of Sourozh interviewed in *Russkaya Mysl*, June 18, 2000.

² *Ibid.*

the Christian vision has ripened, deepened, and problems which did not exist a century ago have come to the fore—not only forced upon the Christian consciousness by circumstances, but coming from within the Christian consciousness. . . .

The Orthodox Church in the last decades has spoken. It has spoken with great assurance and without any ground either for the assurance or for the affirmation that she has made.³

³ Met. Anthony of Sourozh, "Man and Woman," talk presented May 1989, <http://masarchive.org/Sites/texts/1989-05-09-1-E-E-C-EW01-002Man&Woman-Edited.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

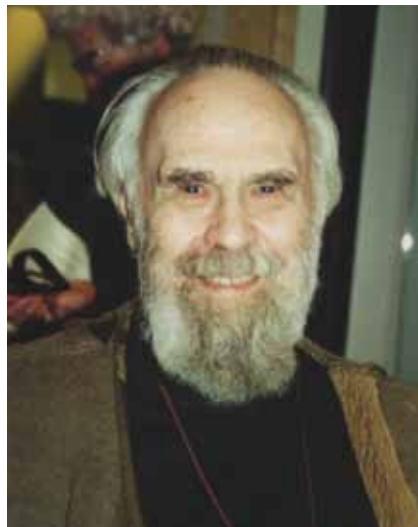
These harsh words come from a well-founded frustration with the growing rift between the closed mind of the Church and the reality of the world in and to which it is called to witness. This rift, for Met. Anthony, is the fruit of a misunderstood, claustrophobic vision of Church tradition and of a fear of engaging with an ever-changing culture.

What we call the tradition of the Church is something much less simple than how we see it. There is a great deal in the history of the Church that was the rule at a certain moment and has been discarded at another moment or has been created.

We must give thought and ask ourselves whether the rules which we observe, the situation which is ours now, is truly what the Gospel teaches and what Christ became man for.

. . . All the Orthodox and Orthodoxy as a body must begin to think, to think deeply, intensely, ask itself questions, question its own self before one can say radically yes or no to a question that has never existed in our Orthodox Church before.⁴

Repeatedly, Met. Anthony points out, the Church has reacted to contemporary challenges by rejecting them as "irrelevant" to its life and by declaring certain questions off-limits for discussion. Yet one may ask whether the ap-



proach to ignore or label as irrelevant is antithetical to the very mission of the Church. For Met. Anthony, there are no forbidden topics and no irrelevant contemporary challenges. The Church is present in the world *today* just as it is present in eternity. It unifies the time of humankind with the time of God, and therefore its duty is to preserve and foster this connection rather than sever it.

I believe we must, all of us, think, study the Bible, look into the history of the Church, look into the context of the Church's history in the secular world, try to see clearly what influences came upon the Christian community in different epochs. For the Church is at the same time a body in which God dwells and the Holy Spirit acts, but also it is a body of men and women who are deeply ingrained in the society, the history, the time in which they live and who therefore are influenced by a great many more factors than the action of the Holy Spirit or the sayings of the Holy Scriptures.⁵

But if the Church is present in its time, what causes this fear of engagement with the contemporary?

On the surface there is fear emerging from practical consequences of ex-

pressing a divergent or controversial opinion. How many can be expected to risk their livelihood and the well-being of their families—including, in the case of clergy, their parishes—in defense of an opinion? This fear is fostered and sustained by those in positions of authority throughout the Church, and it is very effective. Ironically, this fear sustained by the Church unveils its own inner fear stemming from a lack of trust in the Spirit.

Intolerance of discourse is an inability to process the complexity of our relationships with each other—the human complexity that accounts for each person’s absolute uniqueness. To see the other as a person rather than an object engages the need to become vulnerable to the other, to interact at a level where we are unprotected by a defined system of values and standards and are only guided by the commandment to love each other. We must never forget that our values, canons, commandments, and traditions are not an end in themselves. Rather, as Christians, we are called to “put on Christ” and to interact with the other from the place of vulnerability of love rather than from the place of superiority and safety of the Law. This responsibility is terrible and terrifying, and it is a responsibility that we reject, preferring the safety of prescribed rules and regulations. The challenge of much of the contemporary discourse having shifted into the realm of online forums, where we have become accustomed to interacting with abstract avatars, where the nuances of emotion are lost and the format does not permit careful exposition of thought, has further eroded our ability to view each other as persons.

One of the greatest fears known to mankind is the universal, gripping fear of the unknown. This fear is born of not having recognizable boundaries

within which our mind can always find a reference point. This fear is familiar to everybody: every one of us has to deal with it when we encounter a situation outside the realm of our frame of reference. Sickness, death, betrayal, crime—all kinds of crises challenge the boundaries of our experience and terrify us. This fear is personal and corporate. As a protective measure, the personal and corporate mind desires to be sheltered in a safe circle of the familiar and explicable and to have an answer to every situation and every challenge.

The Church offers solace, healing, and protection. But that does not preclude wrestling with doubt. To ignore doubt and therefore the possibility of conflict between the fixed ideal and the surrounding reality becomes unbearable and leads the way to a closed or sectarian mindset.

Yet Met. Anthony says that doubt is a good thing. It is the sign of the vitality of the human mind:

People are afraid of doubt, and they shouldn't be, since doubt is born of the fact that we do not know the entire truth, and pose a question.

... When doubts appear in me it means that I have outgrown my incomplete idea of God, my imperfect knowledge of Him, and God is telling me, “Look, you have learned all this, and now look at Me—I am bigger than all of it. You cannot be satisfied with the picture which you have painted for yourself. It is as small as you yourself, your intelligence, your education, as your imagination. Open yourself and pose the question: What can the others think of this? What other answers may be there? And do not be afraid. I will not be insulted by you questioning Me, because you are not questioning Me as Me, but your notions about Me ...”⁶

⁶ Met. Anthony of Sourozh in conversation with Valentina Matveeva, “Missionerstvo. Platochki. Somnenie. Vybor svjashhennikov,” 18 April 2001, <http://masarchive.org/Sites/texts/2001-04-18-R-R-I-EM04-017MissionaryWorkDoubtSelectionOfPriest.html>.

What Met. Anthony seeks to stress is that what we as Christians seek in the Church should not be reduced to a system of rules of conduct that would allow us to live “good lives.” As Christians we are called to be followers of Christ, who tells his disciples that whoever follows him will find the cross—that whoever follows him will be naked like him, homeless like him, hated and persecuted like him—all because those who follow him make themselves vulnerable to each other. St. Paul writes that Christians are called to *put on the mind of Christ*, which is not a system of moral conduct. If we follow the Gospel narratives, we see that time and again Christ transcends the Law but fulfills the commandment of love, which is the foundation of the Law. Christ shows us that he sees everyone he encounters as his child, as his image, as a unique person, boundless, not fitting into a system or code of law, and thus not as a Jew, a Gentile, or a Samaritan.

The challenge of encountering *the other* as Christ sees each and every one of us is fundamentally the challenge of overcoming the fear of our differences, the fear of how we challenge one another with our incomprehensibility, our unpredictability. Met. John Zizioulas has the following to say about fear of the other:

The fact that the fear of the other is pathologically inherent in our existence results in the fear not only of the other but of all otherness. This is a delicate point requiring careful consideration, for it shows how deep and widespread fear of the other is: we are not afraid simply of certain others, but even if we accept them, it is on condition that they are somehow like ourselves. Radical otherness is an anathema. Difference itself is a threat. That this is universal and pathological is to be seen in the fact that even when difference does not in actual

fact constitute a threat for us, we reject it simply because we dislike it. Again and again we notice that fear of the other is nothing more than fear of the different. We all want somehow to project into the other the model of our own selves.

When fear of the other is shown to be fear of otherness, we come to the point of identifying difference with division. This complicates and obscures human thinking and behavior to an alarming degree, with serious consequences. We divide our lives and human beings according to difference. We organize states, clubs, fraternities and even Churches on the basis of difference. When difference becomes division, communion is nothing but an arrangement for peaceful coexistence. It last as long as mutual interests last and may easily be turned into confrontation and conflict as soon as these interests cease to coincide. Our societies and our world situation today give ample witness to this.⁷

The Church, therefore, if it is to overcome a communion of peaceful coexistence, has to strive toward fulfilling the commandment of love. If we put on the mind of Christ, we learn to love each other *as he or she is* and thereby acquire the unity of *sobornost* (catholicity), in which each one of us by rejection of self and acceptance of the other mysteriously acquires all others as part of his or her person.⁸ *Sobornost* in the Church is the catalyst of creative thought, whereas the fear of otherness stifles personal ascent and transforms the community of persons into a faceless mass which can easily be turned into a mob. It is only in the unity of *sobornost* that we can truly become life-giving to each other:

Let us be aware of the extraordinarily rich presence of God and of all those who have ever lived, in our midst, around us, together with us, because their life gives us life.⁹

⁷ Met. John Zizioulas, “Communion and Otherness,” Orthodox Peace Fellowship Occasional Paper 19 (Summer 1994), <https://incommunion.org/2004/12/11/communion-and-otherness/>.

⁸ See Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1972), 37–55.

⁹ Met. Anthony of Sourozh, “Retreat at Ennismore Gardens: Opening Talk by Metropolitan Anthony,” March 1972, <http://masarchive.org/Sites/texts/1972-03-00-1-E-E-R-EW03-160OnStayingYourselves.html>.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 11:19.

Metropolitan Anthony echoes the words of St. Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians: “for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”¹⁰

*I believe it is extremely important that we start thinking and sharing our ideas, even at the risk of falling into error. Someone will always correct us, that’s all.*¹¹

The conciliar mind of the Church is the living mind of the people inspired by the Holy Spirit, always wrestling with reality and coming to consensus as the body. If this work ceases, if we replace this work, as Met. Anthony said, with “endlessly reiterating what has been said long ago,” whether it relates to the ever-evolving nature of our experience of reality or not, then our true witness to the world will cease and we will turn into a museum of beautiful—perhaps even educational—but lifeless artifacts. When we eschew the responsibility of engaging with the challenges of the world, we risk becoming irrelevant not only to our surrounding culture, but also to ourselves, as we fall into the heresy of excluding the complexity and the boundlessness of each other and of all creation.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his journal entry on September 26, 1977:

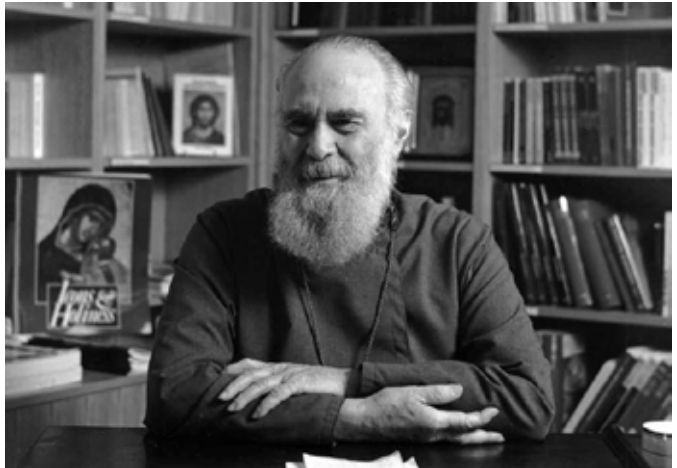
Feast of St. John the Theologian. Early Liturgy. Apostle: “Perfect love casts out fear.”

*(1 John 4:18). Love is contrasted not with hate, but with fear. How deep and true it is. ... Fear is, first and foremost, the absence of love, or rather that which, like weeds, grows where there is no love.*¹²

Manifesting Met. Anthony’s love and commitment to the essence of the spirit of *sobornost*, the transcript of the talks on “Man and Woman” ends with a very simple line: “Let us think together.” It is worth noting that while many of his talks and writings have become a staple of Orthodox bookstores in Russia, the key part of his legacy—the ever-present challenge of a living discourse—is being summarily neglected. If we are to be faithful to his spirit, we must assume responsibility for furthering this work. ✽

¹¹ Met. Anthony of Sourozh interviewed in *Russkaya Mysl*, June 18, 2000.

¹² Alexander Schmemmann, *Dnevnik, 1973–1983* (Moskva: Russkii put’, 2005), 386. Translation by author.



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