

Bishops and Synods: Testing the Spirits

Rev. Deacon Nicholas Denysenko, Ph.D.

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I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of this conference for inviting me to offer a public lecture. It is an honor to be in your company.

There is no simple response to the question on how to renew the ministry performed by an order of the Church in our time. Today, we are faced with the resurgence of trends that can alienate the scholar who is faithful to the Church. Orthodoxy is no stranger to theological speculation or disagreements that occur between theologians or cohorts of theologians. Deliberation on articles of faith central to the life of the Church can be healthy: we call the Creed we recite together at Baptism and Liturgy “Nicene-Constantinopolitan” because the title tells us something about its progeny. We inherited this Creed from the fathers of the Church who established its articles through a process of deliberation, and as any attentive student of Church history can tell you, that process was not always smooth or seamless.

There is a difference, however, between healthy deliberation on matters related to faith and order within the Church (whether that be an article of faith or a canonical matter related to ministry) and dismissing the possibility of discussing Church issues because of a lack of trust in scholars. The tendency to dismiss conversations about Church issues is fueled by an inherent distrust of theologians who were trained in academic disciplines. The rationale for dismissal is the assumption that an academic proposal for the Church bears a malevolent threat seeking to destroy the Church and her unity, or replace a traditionally ecclesial form with one established in the so-called secular world.

I have two examples that I believe illustrate this point, and more importantly, refer us to the larger thesis of my lecture: the role of bishops and synods in considering renewal of the diaconate. For my first example, let us consider the liturgical reforms considered by the Orthodox Churches. Proposed reforms such as reciting (or chanting) prayers aloud for the people to hear or reconfiguring the internal configuration of sacred space to maximize and encourage lay participation in and comprehension of the liturgy has both proponents and vocal opponents. The rationale underpinning appeals for reform is research into historical models belonging to the Orthodox tradition, and the recovery of an ecclesiology that honors the priesthood of the laity without confusing it with the ordained ministry of bishops, presbyters, and deacons. One narrative seems to dominate the arguments of those who oppose these kinds of liturgical reforms: they claim that the rationale for reform is inspired by either Vatican II or secular values of egalitarianism, or in some cases, both (e.g., secularism entering Orthodoxy through the influence of Vatican II). Opponents of the implementation of reform argue that each and every Church practice, structure, and office has been handed down to the contemporary Church through an organic process of growth. Implementing revisions requires major surgery to the organism (the Church), and that surgery threatens to distort Orthodoxy, much like any cosmetic surgery performed today could alter the appearance and even the identity of the person on whom it was performed. In our time, there are vocal cohorts in the Church who would go so far as to dismiss the history underpinning such proposals: unfortunately, alternative facts and revisionist history are alive and well in the debates dominating our twenty-first century Orthodox Church.

I'm sure my description of the current environment does not surprise you. Even if you're well-versed in navigating this bumpy road, here is how this environment applies to the question of bishops, synods, and testing the spirits on the renewal of the diaconate: how do we assess the status of the life of our Church in this time? I confess that I have been persuaded by the theologians who believe that specific historical and political conditions prevented the Orthodox Church from addressing modernity and postmodernity. I wonder if we are aware of the degree to which we absolutely adhere to the forms we have inherited from the previous generation. The parish with the priest as the one who offers mysteries

on behalf of the people is the only model of local community we can imagine. There is nothing wrong with this model, but it is also aspirational: emerging communities (missions) must aspire to become parishes, with a plan for purchasing land and building an edifice (with a four-part 'required' structure: sanctuary, nave, narthex, and iconostasis). What happens to this paradigm in a time of shifting demographics and a mobile workforce, when one cannot simply count on second, third, and fourth generations continuing to sustain the local parish established by the founding generation?

The parish is not the only entity affected by the constantly changing dynamics of culture, demographics, and a mobile workforce. The people of the Church are the ones most affected by change, including Church leaders, namely bishops, presbyters, and deacons. In terms of the diaconate, the form we have inherited is one in which the deacon has a beard, knows music (hopefully), and is the master of performing the complicated rituals passed on from medieval Byzantium to today. It is another thing altogether to imagine a deacon who might preside at some liturgies, bring Communion to those who are sick, publicly represent the Church, anoint the sick, console the bereaved, instruct inquirers, preach – and essentially provide pastoral ministry in areas that complement the work of the rector, or even of the bishop.

So far, I have described two elements of our contemporary Church experience that lead up to the crucial question of “testing the spirits.” We live in an environment of inherent mistrust of change, attributing it to external (non-Orthodox) sources, and thus dismiss the possibility of reform. We treat the existing forms of the Church as untouched by the progress of time and the shifting of political and cultural sands, rendering the existing structural forms fully capable of flourishing in all places and all times. These two elements of contemporary Church life are fused by the way we understand and interpret history. If we accept that it is natural for Church forms and ministries to adapt to changes caused by time and context without relinquishing the essential content of Christian life (located in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and wherever the body of Christ has assembled), then we can imagine a renewal of the male and female diaconate for the building up of the Church and for the life of the world. If, however, we are convinced that Church forms are timeless

and it is society that needs to adapt – not the Church – then we have no business pursuing renewal.

In modernity and postmodernity, bishops and synods have taken varying approaches to test these spirits and ascertain what is needed, as long as whatever reform is implemented is from the will of God and is blessed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I will draw from select examples from the modern history of the Church to reflect on how the process of deliberating proposals and attempting to implement them requires the initiation and blessing of bishops and synods, but also depends on the participation and reception of the entire Church.

For Orthodox scholars, perhaps the most celebrated conciliar gathering of the twentieth century was the Moscow Council of 1917-18. It is likely that most scholars were intrigued by the scope of what the council might have contributed to the global Orthodox Church had the council not been interrupted by the Revolution and the ravages of war. The Moscow Council considered several liturgical reforms that had the capacity to breathe new life into the Body of Christ. Proposals for reciting the anaphora aloud and translating liturgical texts from Slavonic into the vernacular were declined or deferred, as was discussion on restoring the order of deaconess. For some Orthodox, the council's failure to act on these proposals overshadows the restoration of the patriarchate. But we need to consider how the Moscow Council influenced the life of the global Orthodox Church before we declare its proposals to be mere victims of history. The legacy of the spirit of the council outlived the convocation and its work was continued by leaders who made new lives for themselves outside of Russia.

Despite the absence of an authoritative call for reciting the anaphora aloud, many Church leaders encouraged the practice of reciting the anaphora aloud for all to hear (e.g., Schmemmann). The restoration of the patriarchate also provides us with a compatible parallel to our discussion on renewing the diaconate. In 1721, Tsar Peter I implemented a new form of Church governance called the Spiritual Regulations. This form of Church government temporarily abolished the patriarchal office and assigned an ober-procurator to be the state's liaison with the Church. The Church continued to have bishops governing

eparchies, and the bishops continued to convoke synodal gatherings, but for all practical purposes, the office of patriarch was paused for a period of just over two-hundred years.

In his study of the Moscow Council, Hyacinthe Destivelle argues that the patriarchate was not restored, but recreated.¹ The recreation of the office of patriarch was designed to strengthen the life of the church – the patriarch would strengthen and encourage the eparchial bishops and serve as a unifying figure for the Church to be working together, while also truly representing the Church to the state and all other entities of the world. The Moscow Council also “recreated” the parish by strengthening lay participation in and representation of the parish without compromising the priest as the proper head of the parish.² Both “recreations” were based on lessons learned from the history of the Church. For the Church to flourish as the healthy organism of Christ’s body, the office of patriarch needed to not merely return, but to address the turbulent issues of the times. The same was true of the parish: the bishops sensed that the people’s participation in the life of the local parish was steadily decreasing, so creating a structure that brought the laity into dialogue with the priest was one way to ensure that the laity would not be alienated from the life of the parish. It is crucial to note that this “restoration” was not an “innovation” – the formal inclusion of laity in parish structures simply honored an older tradition of Russian parish life.

It would be misleading to argue that these recreations were wildly successful. Our lens of assessment is somewhat obstructed because of the severe persecution endured by the Russian Church through the Soviet period, so a cautious approach is to conclude that the results are mixed. The very first patriarch of the Church in the modern era (St. Tikhon) left a legacy of vision and mission, and shed the blood of a martyr and confessor. On the other hand, some cynics have argued that Patriarch Tikhon’s successors have collaborated too closely with an adversarial state that have compromised the mission of the Church and its influence on the people. I would argue that even the most negative assessment of the recreation of the patriarchate should account for the possibility of continuing to work on

¹ Destivelle, 188-9, also referring to Florovsky.

² *Ibid.*, 98-105, esp. 100, where Destivelle links the rehabilitation of the parish to a spiritual awakening in Russian society.

the ministry of this office. In other words, the historical act of recreating the patriarchate would ideally be the first in a series of ongoing actions aimed towards developing the ministry of this office for the building up of the life of the Church.

I have reflected on Moscow's recreation of the patriarchate because it creates a parallel for our discussion of renewing the diaconate. The patriarchate is a particular office of the Church exercised by one who is selected among the order of bishops. The task engaged by those gathered here is to consider how the Church might renew the order of the diaconate. The Moscow Council provides us with a potential pattern on how to approach this task. I'd like to descend from this point of the paper by reflecting on two aspects of the pattern of recreation from the Council that can be applied to our discussion about renewing the diaconate:

- 1) Testing the spirits. The decision to restore the patriarchate was not impulsive, but the product of ascertaining a need in the Church's pastoral ministry. It would be inaccurate to claim that the Russian Church was bereft of any good leadership during the synodal period. On the contrary, the church produced formidable intellectuals, strong theological academies, and saints during this period. Church leaders noted the absence of the patriarchal office able to consolidate the Church and encourage the bishops in their local ministries, to serve as a unifying voice within the Church. In this vein, the appeal for the recreation of the patriarchal office was timely.
- 2) Churchwide deliberation. The decision to recreate the patriarchate was not made behind closed doors in a haze of white smoke among a group of privileged monastic and celibate men. The decision was made by the entire council, which consisted of lower clergy and lay representatives as well as bishops.³
- 3) Awaiting God's response. When the time to elect the actual patriarch arrived at the council, the Church left room for God's choice by having the final selection made by lot.

³ See Destivelle, 188-9, for a sober reminder that many were opposed to the return of the patriarchate, and the process of restoring it was not smooth.

The process of testing the spirits on pastoral ministry performed by the three major orders of the Church has been underway for quite some time now. The results have been uneven because the two prevalent patterns are colliding with one another. The predominant pattern of imagining Church ministry is one of continuity. The order most crucial for Church ministry is the priest: because the priest presides over the vast majority of sacraments and is the official representative in the parish community, we have seminary programs designed to form priests equipped to carry out these duties. Continuity places an overwhelming amount of the ministry in the hands of the priest; the only role for the deacon (in this paradigm), is to chant the lines of the liturgy appointed to him. The decay of diaconal ministry was so steep in Orthodoxy that many euchologia simply assigned all liturgical petitions to the priest. In the paradigm of parish continuity, the deacon's role is to be on hand to lead hierarchical liturgies or to serve as a temporary stepping stone on the path to presbyteral ordination (some priests were a deacon for one day). Permanent deacons were both rare and a luxury. I know this from my own experience: most parish priests don't know how to serve with a deacon because we are so rare.

Testing the spirits collides with continuity when we imagine how the diaconate might complement presbyteral ministry. In exceptional cases, deacons might teach, preach, provide spiritual direction, anoint the sick, distribute Communion to those who cannot attend liturgy, and represent the parish or diocese in some official capacity, in addition to leading the assembly in liturgical prayer. Presbyters delegate these ministries to deacons when their time and energy is occupied with other ministerial duties. When deacons perform these ministries, the assumption is that the action was blessed as a result of testing the spirits, ascertaining the need for deacons to minister in these areas.

The question for bishops and synods is this: are they willing to take the step of testing the spirits to identify areas of need in the Church and determine how these areas can be addressed through diaconal ministry? In certain pockets of the Church, the diaconate has re-emerged and deacons do contribute to pastoral ministry in the Church at the parish and diocesan levels. Is this re-emergence of a permanent diaconate in

certain pockets of the Church a product of the outpouring of the Spirit upon us? I am convinced that the resurgence of the diaconate is inspired by the Holy Spirit; I am also convinced that the serious conciliar deliberations and decisions to reinvigorate the order of deaconess are also inspired by the Holy Spirit, evidenced in particular by the 2004 synodal decision of the Church of Greece and the recent decision of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, with ordinations, to ordain and appoint deaconesses for pastoral ministry.

The point here is that bishops and synods must be willing to test the spirits: if the *sitz im leben* of today's Church differs from that of one-hundred years ago, there is plenty of justification for bishops to bless the study of renewing the diaconate to address contemporary pastoral needs, to train and educate ordained deacons and candidates for ordination to do the work addressing today's needs, and to ordain and appoint deaconesses to pastoral ministry.

Because the diaconate is a Church order, the courage to test the spirits and appoint deacons and deaconesses with expanded ministerial roles will result in the recreation not only of the diaconate, but also of the presbyterate. In other words, a renewed diaconate sharing in the work required by Christ's high priesthood might not be an exact copy of the diaconate from the previous generation or of any given era. This same reality applies to the order of deaconess: a recreation of this order may not result in an absolute replica of the medieval version of the Byzantine order of deaconess. If we are willing to test the spirits and be honest about effective pastoral and liturgical ministries, we have to be open to the possibility that ministerial roles might shift. Acceptance of shifting roles is particularly crucial if renewing the diaconate includes the ordination of deaconesses. We cannot assume that the deaconess will simply be a copy of the deacon, or the deacon a copy of the priest for that matter. Complementarity is sure to enrich the ministries performed by all the orders, much more so than copying.

When bishops and synods deliberate this issue, it is essential that they bring it to the whole Church. A proposal to renew the diaconate should be introduced to the Church first before it is implemented, to avoid the perception of forcing an issue on the Church.

This is particularly crucial when we reflect on the collision of forming candidates for ministry for the sake of absolute continuity versus truly testing the spirits. The only way we can conclude that the need for a renewed diaconate is real is through consultation of the whole Church. Practically speaking, at this point, the matter would have to be discussed at the local level of an autocephalous Church. The point is to introduce something that will be received within the Church; if a renewed diaconate is not received, then it has been imposed on the Church.

In this lecture, I have focused on prevailing patterns in the life of the Church that tend to prevent leaders from testing the spirits: the primary pattern is one of fear, where any proposed change is depicted as innovation, foreign, and threatening to the Church. I attempted to show how the Church can benefit from change by referring to the pattern established by the Moscow Council of 2017-18 where the office of patriarch was essentially recreated. I also cautioned that following through with the renewal of diaconate could require some adjustment on the Church's part, as deacons and deaconesses perform ministries that complement the orders of bishop and priest. By far, the most important task is the first one: the willingness to test the spirits and ask, how can we all serve Christ and build up his body today? An affirmative yes responding to this question is not a challenge to something we all hold true: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever – it is a commitment to obeying the will of God and raising up men and women who will preach that message to the ends of the earth.

Thank you for your attention.