

Chapter Thirteen

Tuesday, June 16, 2015.

Offices of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow, Russian Federation.

By eight o'clock Tuesday morning in Moscow, just twenty-two hours after the papal proclamation, Russian Orthodox bishops from all over Russia, and affiliated bishops of the now-reconciled Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia from all over the world, began calling the offices of Filaret III, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. There were even calls of complaint from Orthodox bishops from the national Orthodox churches of other countries, including Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia, expressing concern that their nations might be "targeted" next – even though Fatima had never mentioned any specific nation except Russia. All callers were united in their shock and dismay that Filaret had been quoted in *The Moscow Times* as suggesting that Catholics would have a right to their own opinion about whether the Orthodox Church should convert. Filaret sensed that they were more motivated by emotion and self-defense than by reason, and so he agreed to a special meeting, called a Sobor, to be held in Moscow on Friday, in which the Russian Orthodox bishops and certain Russian seminary theologians of high renown could voice their opinions in open fraternal debate. Those unable to attend in person would be connected by remote videolink.

A smaller storm was brewing at the Russian presidential headquarters. Many of the same bishops were calling there to lodge protests against President Polzin's seeming agreement with the errant Moscow Patriarch, as reported in *The Moscow Times*. Interestingly, there was not much protest coming from any other quarter. There were no calls from regional governors within the Russian Federation. The Russian people seemed mostly unfazed by the Pope's pronouncement, and certainly did not think it any issue for the Russian government.

When the Sobor convened on Friday, twenty-two bishops attended in person, and a dozen more by remote videolink. Five seminary theologians also attended. The discussions focused on the very same issues that Filaret had discussed with George and Katarina privately, before sending them as envoys to the Pope. Filaret pointed out to the Sobor that, in a world that has almost completely turned its back on God and on His Christ, there is no excuse at all for the two main branches of Christianity to remain separated. The world, he reminded them, is rushing headlong into hell, yet the Orthodox like to fight against Catholics over contrived doctrinal differences that have no real justification and only serve to justify the separation due to ancient habits of nationalistic caesaropapism. This launched a heated debate about whether the Catholic-Orthodox differences were in fact contrived. It turned out that a majority of the Sobor attendees were well aware of the arguments of the great Russian Orthodox theologian

Vladimir Soloviev, who had insisted that to be truly Orthodox one must be in union with the Chair of Peter in Rome.

Most of them also acknowledged that both Saint John Chrysostom and Filaret I of Moscow, patriarch and founder of the Romanov dynasty, had agreed with what Soloviev said. The majority agreed in principle that the Bishop of Rome should be first among equals, but they also insisted that until such time as Rome gets its own house in order, they have to continue to remain separate in order to preserve true Orthodox doctrine and praxis.

Several of them argued that the liturgical revolution which followed Vatican Council II was absolute proof that the hand of God had to be with the Orthodox Church, which had not changed its liturgy for centuries except in the normal slow, organic manner of minor changes from time to time which characterized Church history right back to the time of the apostles. They expressed the fear that what the Pope was going to pray for would amount to an Orthodox Vatican II that would destroy what remained of the belief of the Orthodox Faithful, forcibly modernizing everything into irrelevance.

“Brethren!” said Filaret III, seeking to halt the heated debate as it became increasingly redundant. “You are right in all your concerns. But you have to listen carefully to what Pope Nicholas actually has said. In his proclamation he said that every nation on earth needs to convert, not just Russia.

“He said that Heaven is inviting Russia to be the first nation, to lead the way for all the others. Is that not exactly what we have always argued: that the Orthodox Church preserves purity of doctrine and practice, and that until Rome comes around to reforming herself, we have had to remain separate?”

“But that is not what most Catholics think!” protested one outspoken bishop. “Didn’t you read what the liberal German Cardinal said, quoted in *Der Spiegel*?”

“The German Cardinal is widely known as the most extreme modernist in the College of Cardinals,” retorted Filaret. “That is why the world news media love him so much. But what he thinks is irrelevant to our discussion here, which has to do with what Heaven thinks. We all agree in principle with Vladimir Soloviev, Saint John Chrysostom, and Filaret I of Moscow that the Bishop of Rome is in the primary place of honor among all Bishops, do we not?”

The Sobor attendees begrudgingly agreed that such was the long-established doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church.

“So then the real issue is this,” said Filaret III. “What does the Pope think it means, when the Mother of God says that Russia will be ‘converted’?”

The Sobor made clear what they feared: that it would mean the Russians would all become good modern Catholics attending Roman Rite Masses with guitars and tambourines, with the priest no longer performing the consecration in holy secret behind the veil, but instead the priest would turn his back on God and begin facing the people behind a simple table,

and very soon thereafter people would begin losing their belief in the real presence of Christ in the Holy Mysteries. This is exactly what the bishops in the Sobor feared.

Filaret countered that such a catastrophe of liturgical devolution would not be “conversion” according to the mind of Heaven; and it was Heaven, speaking through the Holy Mother of God, which was calling for the consecration and promising conversion. So, if it was Heaven promising to convert Russia, then it would have to mean that the nation would become truly Orthodox, in widespread belief and practice, and that Rome would have to reform itself to come into union with this situation.

“What could be so bad about that?” asked Filaret. “You know how the Anglicans who so chose were able to keep their rites and customs, and yet come into union with Rome, right? Well, what if suddenly we Russians could become much better at being truly Orthodox, and in so doing the Pope would become our chief supporter and guide?”

Some of the bishops began to see Filaret’s point.

“Guess who was most opposed to the idea of the Anglicans coming into union with Rome?” asked Filaret. “It was the liberal German Cardinal, because he doesn’t want any more seriously Catholic people coming in to the Catholic Church. He wants the Catholic Church to become like the liberal Protestants. So for a while he tried to tell the Anglicans that they could not convert *en masse*. But he was eventually overruled by the Pope. And now the very same thing is going to happen for us, I think. We Orthodox will vastly outnumber the liberal Catholics, and so we will help to steer the ‘Bark of Peter’ back onto the path of true Orthodoxy!”

But the majority of the bishops stubbornly insisted that Russia could never give up the right to run her own internal Church the way Russians saw fit. They could never allow a foreign potentate, such as the monarch of Vatican City, to have any say over how they ran their Church. Filaret pointed out that such stubborn resistance to clear apostolic authority was classic Protestant thinking. He warned them that in speaking this way they were showing themselves to be schismatic and, in spirit, outside the one true Church founded by Christ, because they were in essence denying the rights of the one to whom Jesus had given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Heated debate again ensued, and it became clear that there was going to be no real consensus. But neither were the majority able to raise arguments that would justify removing Filaret III from his office. Instead, his stronger opponents, a significant minority, warned him that he was going to bring the judgment of God down upon their nation, and that God might strike him dead at any time for failing to resist the anti-Orthodox forces now mounting their assault through the pending public consecration in Rome.