

**Mission and Catechesis, Life of Communities and Brotherhoods in**  
**TRANSFIGURATION BROTHERHOOD**  
**(Transfiguration Fellowship of Minor Orthodox Brotherhoods)**

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The history of our movement begins in the late 1960s when its founder – Yury Kochetkov (future priest Georgy Kochetkov) – and several of his friends after him experienced a conversion to God and entered the church. In 1971 he began helping his friend to prepare for baptism this being his first experience of doing catechesis. His first catechumen was baptised in a few months' time the same year. From very early on all those who completed catechesis under the guidance of Fr Georgy sought for a fullness of life in the church. As Fr Georgy (under the penname of Nikolai Gerasimov) wrote back in those days about young people rediscovering the church and spiritual life after years of Soviet propaganda (and still under the pressure and intimidation of the Soviet regime), “What they were expecting was to be received with joy and offered – at last – something worthwhile to do, they were hoping to find a place where they could be sanctified, washed, and cleansed, and where they would be introduced to the great Christian, Russian, and universal culture, – but what they found in reality was such a level of universal ignorance, fear, lack of principle, deceit, greed, concern for the external to the detriment of the internal <...> as would often exceed even what you find outside the church. They discovered that nobody was there to receive them or give them something worthwhile to do, and as a result some of them were weakened by the temptation and, receiving no support in the hour of trouble, left altogether, while others set out to seek for God without God (or the Church), escaping into sects, false mysticism or losing themselves in Eastern occult teachings. It was only a small minority of these people who either found a place in the existing structure of the church – which they had to fight for and which was often dearly purchased <...> at the expense of sacrificing the depth of true ecclesiology <...> – or, in other cases, began to *fight for the Church in the church* preparing themselves at the outset to receive with patience all the possible forms of misunderstanding, censure, lack of support, with all the added grief of personal loneliness and inadequacy.

This last category of people, still not at all numerous, quickly arrived at a number of very simple conclusions or “*principles of fighting for the Church*” in the church:

- 1) not to separate yourself from Orthodoxy whatever happens for “any sin in the church is not a sin *of* the Church, but a sin *against* the Church”;
- 2) to seek full freedom and independence both for the church and for yourself;

- 3) to make every effort to bring unity into the church and to discover and reveal the true realities of church life;
- 4) to follow the Gospel in everything without exception, regardless of the existing contrary traditions, habits, external or internal resistance of any kind including that of “common sense”;
- 5) to insist on complete correspondence between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘literal’ meaning in every aspect of church life – no ‘spiritual’ without ‘literal’ or we “would have to go out of the world”, and certainly no ‘literal’ without ‘spiritual’ for “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life”;
- 6) not to be wrapped up in yourself or your own tradition, but to seek the truth everywhere, to accept and bring it into the church regardless of where you may find it;
- 7) to test everything in the Holy Spirit and “many counsels” bearing personal responsibility for your own mistakes and sins;
- 8) to fear nothing, to be ready for any suffering for Christ at any time;
- 9) to preserve all the existing forms in the church participating as far as possible in all the events and feasts of the church until something better is born following the principle: “examine everything, hold fast to that which is good”;
- 10) to judge nobody, to fight only with “word and behaviour” (the way you live).<sup>1</sup>

When these principles were put into practice it led to the formation of small groups, communities, mostly consisting of young people. Their search for the fullness of church life involved not only churching per se, but a process of bringing all aspects of their lives in accordance with the Gospel as well as learning to bear witness of their faith. All of this was impossible without mutual support, which really meant without community life. Another thing that became obvious was the need for a serious preparation process for the Holy Baptism in accordance with the teaching of the church, the way it was done in the early ages of Christianity when every new believer made this most important step in their life consciously and responsibly. From this early, informal (but regular) practice of preparation for baptism a fully-fledged system of catechesis gradually developed based on the tradition of the Holy Fathers.

In 1988 the first community was born. In 1990 the laws limiting the rights of believers in the Soviet state were officially recalled, which resulted in the church acquiring a right to teach and preach the faith freely, to provide religious training and education, to bring up children and

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Gerasimov, *Entering the Church and Confessing the Church in the Church* (published in the Russian Student Christian Movement Bulletin, 1979). p. 52-53.

young people in the faith. This was a time of true inspiration and hope. It became possible to discuss openly a lot of topics heretofore banned from open discussion.

In 1990 Fr Georgy invited all those who had completed catechesis in the previous years to celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration in the church of a small Moscow suburb Electrougli where he had a parish at the time. The feast and the Liturgy saw about 150 people gathered together. Restoration work was still under way in the church and the Liturgy had to be celebrated practically outdoors. Nobody expected then that this was to become the birth date for the Brotherhood. The meeting showed that the people who gathered together for that feast were indeed brothers and sisters, not just individual members of the church, but that they constituted a whole. Thus the Brotherhood was born and it took the name of the feast which was celebrated that day to be called the Transfiguration Brotherhood. Since then every year the Brotherhood has been gathering for the feast of the Transfiguration and since 2000 also for the feast of the Meeting of the Lord and these meetings have come to be called ‘sobors’ (councils or assemblies). In 2010 we had the 20<sup>th</sup> (jubilee) Assembly of our movement.

“The idea of the Brotherhood was quite a natural one... We decided that its work should be that of opening new churches, mission, catechesis, and educating people”<sup>2</sup>.

An informal brotherhood emerged consisting of small (10 to 30 people) communities. The backbone for the life of the communities is fellowship and mutual support in church life and personal spiritual growth, while the brotherhood unites people with a common ministry.

In 1988 Fr Georgy, then deacon, organized a theological school later to become St Philaret’s Christian Orthodox Institute (SFI). The concept of the institute had been in development since the early 1980s when it became evident that to prepare people for entering the church you need a person with higher religious education. “We needed to make up for what was still lacking in the church. It was necessary to give people a good overview of all aspects of the tradition of the church and then to introduce them to this tradition in a holistic, consistent, and all-embracing way.”<sup>3</sup> The first classes took place in private homes and the names of the students had to be encrypted. Thus this grassroots development led to the appearance of the first independent theological school in Russia giving lay people access to higher theological education.

Currently St Philaret’s Christian Orthodox Institute is licensed both by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government and in 2010 it also received government accreditation

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<sup>2</sup> Material taken from Transfiguration Fellowship website: <http://www.psmb.ru>

<sup>3</sup> Rev. prof. Georgy Kochetkov, “How SFI Came to Be” (SFI booklet, Moscow 2008, p. 2). See also [www.sfi.ru](http://www.sfi.ru).

allowing it to award officially recognised degrees in Theology. Over 200 students from different places in Russia and abroad study in the Institute every year. The work is carried out by 52 teaching and 70 supporting staff. The Institute also runs 2 Colleges (pre-bachelor programmes in Theology and Religions Studies) where 300 students study every year. SFI has its own Publishing House; it holds regular events in co-operation with different departments of the Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as various secular organisations. At the request of the Missions Department of the Moscow Patriarchate the Institute participated in the development of the Missionary Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church.

For the Transfiguration Brotherhood supporting the Institute and developing different forms of spiritual education is one of its priority areas of ministry.

Eventually the Brotherhood grew to become a Fellowship of Minor Orthodox Brotherhoods. Currently it consists of 25 minor brotherhoods in more than 10 cities in Russia and abroad. As its Mission Statement says, “The Transfiguration Fellowship of Minor Orthodox Brotherhoods is an informal association of Orthodox Christians who realise and implement their calling: to contribute to the revival of the fullness of life in the church and of all its ministries”.

Currently the Transfiguration Brotherhood focuses on a number of important aspects of its life and ministry. The main emphasis is on mission and catechesis of adults in every form possible, as well as on community and brotherhood life per se.

The Brotherhood sees itself as heir to the tradition of several different movements in the Russian Orthodox Church who pursued the task of the ‘churching of life’. We recognise the unique value of the experience of the church in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> – first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the experience of the Great Moscow Council of the Russian Orthodox Church of 1917-1918, the experience of the new martyrs and confessors in Russia, as well as the experience of those who contributed to the Russian religious and philosophical revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We realise that this experience is yet to be fully understood and properly received in our church.

The tradition of the new martyrs and confessors has been consciously concealed and even destroyed in Russia for too long. “There is a danger of profaning the heritage of the new martyrs if we only go about restoring different forms of church life forgetting its spirit, or if, as it often happens nowadays, we put every effort into rebuilding churches yet forgetting the living stones

of the body of the church, forgetting the members of this church, including the new members, who are beginning their life in the church virtually from scratch”.<sup>4</sup>

This is why the Transfiguration Brotherhood sees entering into the fullness of the heritage of the new Russian martyrs and confessors as key to restoring spiritual and church life in Russia and beyond.

We believe it would be a mistake now to simply copy the forms of church life of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century if only because we know that it was that life that led to the collapse of both the church and the state, to the horror of the Russian Revolution of 1917. The fact that the church was subjugated by the state authorities also played its role in the events.

A confessor of faith of the XX century bishop Athanasius (Sakharov) who is now canonized by the Russian Church said that it was impossible to celebrate pompous pontifical liturgies according to the Byzantine rite after we had to celebrate Liturgies in homes, forests, prisons, and really anywhere we could. Indeed the whole experience of the new Russian martyrs and confessors of the XX century clearly points to the revival of communities, the experience which even the first Christians knew, and these communities must be both truly personal and truly of the church.

Yet for this to happen the first thing you need to do is to help people enter the church not as an organisation or a storehouse of antiquities. For a real witness about God the church needs a dynamic informal mission when the mouth speaks “from the fullness of heart”. And this mission is to be followed by catechesis which helps people find a way into the church, catechesis as a responsible, consistent, and holistic instruction in the basics of Christian faith, prayer, and life, aided by entering an actual church community.

The continuous uninterrupted experience of catechesis existing in the Brotherhood for 40 years is unparalleled in contemporary history of the Orthodox Church. The number of people who have had the experienced of this form of catechesis currently exceeds ten thousand.<sup>5</sup>

Practical missionary work of the Transfiguration Brotherhood is supervised by the Centre for Mission and Catechesis, which collects and analyses experience of this work existing in different Orthodox parishes and brotherhoods, as well as in other Christian churches. The Brotherhood

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Georgy Kochetkov. Presentation at the conference “Historic Way of Orthodoxy in Russia since 1917”, St Petersburg, 31 May – 2 June 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Material taken from SFI website: <http://www.sfi.ru>.

also has a Missionary Society and publishes a newspaper – “KIFA” (<http://www.gazetakifa.ru/>), which has two missionary supplements.

We also use different web resources (forums etc.), and create special websites for missionaries and all those who have an interest in the subject. The cultural aspect of mission tends to take the form of various types of excursions, discussion clubs, dialogue meetings in different research, cultural, and educational institutions, especially universities and libraries.

We use various forms of mission and catechesis, which can be longer or shorter depending on the specific needs of the catechumens and depending on whether we are dealing with ‘normal’ or ‘special’ catechumens (old people, children, young people, sick and dying people). We lead people to God and the church giving them a chance to experience church life in a community and a brotherhood. The principles our Fellowship of Brotherhoods endorses are those of belonging to the church, personal emphasis, non-hierarchical structure, responsibility, ministry, constant renewal, and comprehensive churching of all aspects of our life.

Our life in communities and brotherhoods is both an inspiration to us and at the same time a sobering experience setting us free from any illusions. However the most important thing we must remember is that far from wishing to constitute a "narrow circle" of adherents our purpose is to revive something that lies at the very heart of Christianity: the possibility, in spite of the spirit of division raging through this world, for Christians to be together and to be united so that ‘Christ may be in our midst’.