

# NOW IS THE TIME!

CONSECRATING RUSSIA WILL HELP, NOT HARM, CATHOLIC-ORTHODOX DIALOGUE

■ BY CATHY PEARSON

**Editor's note:** *The CDF's document on the message of Fatima of June 26, 2000 says explicitly that the consecration was done in 1984, and that Lucia said it was done. It follows with the terse comment: "Hence any further discussion or request is without basis." Of course despite this assertion, Catholics are free to discuss the matter. And that is what Pearson does in the following article. Cathy, an American Catholic laywoman of deep faith and traditional piety, argues that the Pope should once again call for the consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. We welcome letters from readers on this important and often controversial matter. —The Editor*



In mid-2007, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexi II predicted a positive effect on relations between the Catholic and Orthodox churches from the issuance of Benedict XVI's *Motu Proprio* on the old liturgy, *Summorum Pontificum*. "We strongly adhere to tradition. The recovery and honoring of an ancient liturgical tradition is a development that we can welcome." So much for fears that liberalizing access to the Traditional Latin Mass might impede reconciliation with other Churches.

It is time to call the bluff of those who similarly maintain that a key request of Our Lady of Fatima—consecration of Russia by name to the Immaculate Heart of Mary by the Pope together with all the bishops of the Church—cannot be fulfilled literally because doing so might offend the Russian Orthodox. Of all the reasons put forward over the past 60 years to explain why a succession of Popes shouldn't, couldn't or didn't perform the consecration of Russia as such, this is surely the least persuasive. On the contrary, Fatima offers perhaps the best key in our time for breaking the impasse in Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation.

Despite strenuous Vatican efforts to declare the Fatima story a closed book, persistent and

legitimate questions remain, one of which is whether Our Lady's request for the consecration of Russia has been fulfilled by a series of papal consecrations of the world, and if not, whether a Russia-specific consecration should now be attempted.

We assume that *Inside the Vatican* readers are familiar with the Fatima story, the series of Marian apparitions in 1917 to three Portuguese shepherd children—the now-beatified siblings Francisco

and Jacinta Marto who died not long afterward, and their cousin Sister Lucy, who lived to old age as a cloistered nun, and who in the convent continued to receive apparitions and locutions following up on those of Fatima. Aided by the spectacular "miracle of the sun," witnessed by 70,000 observers during Our Lady's final apparition in Fatima on October 13, 1917, the Church has long since approved the authenticity of the Fatima apparitions, miracle, and published messages.

And we assume that the reader, thinking with the mind of the Church, does not dispute the authenticity of the Fatima miracle, the reliability of Sr. Lucy as a witness, or the content of the already-revealed words ascribed to Our Lady, since the Church through a long succession of Popes has placed its stamp of approval on all these.

## OUR LADY OF FATIMA AND RUSSIA

So, to start at the beginning, what did Our Lady say about Russia? On July 13, 1917, during an apparition to the three children, she said something they were not allowed to reveal at the time, and which came to be known as the "second part" of the secret. After describing dire punishments about to befall the world if mankind did not stop offending God, Our Lady said: "To prevent this [the punishment of the world by war, famine, and persecution of the Church], I shall come to ask for the consecration of Russia to My Immaculate Heart, and the Communion of Reparation on the First Saturdays. If My requests are heeded, Russia will be converted and there will be peace; if not, she will



spread her errors throughout the world, causing wars and persecutions against the Church. The good will be martyred, the Holy Father will have much to suffer, various nations will be annihilated. In the end, My Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to Me, and she will be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world.”

So at Fatima, Our Lady described the consecration as something she would come to request *in the future*.

That promise was fulfilled on June 13, 1929, while Sr. Lucy, then in the Dorothean novitiate in Tuy, Spain, was praying alone in the chapel. Sr. Lucy recounted a vision of the crucified Christ, with Mary under the cross of her Son, appearing as she had at Fatima and saying to her: “The moment has come when God asks the Holy Father to make, in union with all the bishops of the world, the consecration of Russia to My Immaculate Heart, promising to save it by this means.”

It is interesting to note that while the request for the First Saturdays quoted above—and other Fatima requests such as praying the daily rosary, wearing the scapular, offering prayers and sacrifices for sinners, avoiding immodest fashions, and being faithful to the duties of one’s state in life—are addressed to the faithful at large, this one is directed specifically to the Pope. And Our Lady presents it as coming not just from Herself but from God: “...God asks the Holy Father.”

This was underscored two years later when Our Lord Himself told Sr. Lucy, “Make it known to My ministers, given that they follow the example of the King of France in delaying the execution of My requests, they will follow him into misfortune... they will do it, but it will be late. Russia will have already spread its errors in the world, provoking wars and persecutions against the Church. The Holy Father will have much to suffer.”

It is easy to see why anyone who takes all these words at face value would consider this request for the consecration of Russia, and the Holy Father’s response to it, to be no small matter. Astounding blessings for the whole world are promised if Her requests are met; dire consequences are foretold if they are refused. (This “second secret,” revealed to the world when Sr. Lucy’s memoirs were published in 1942, had already been communicated to the Holy Father by private letter.)

Among those taking Fatima seriously have been a whole succession of Popes from Benedict XV to Benedict XVI, both

before and after the Church in its due process formally approved the apparition in 1930. Far from distancing themselves from this “private revelation,” they have openly embraced it with public prayers, granting of indulgences, instituting the universal feast of the Immaculate Heart, visits to the Fatima Shrine, and in correspondence or visits with Sr. Lucy. And several have carried out consecrations clearly in response to Our Lady’s Fatima request:

■ In 1942, Pius XII publicly consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, making an allusion that could be interpreted as referring to Russia, and later, in the encyclical *Ad Coeli Reginam*, he directed all the bishops of the world to join him in renewing that consecration in 1954.

■ In 1952, responding to a request by Russian Catholics, Pius XII consecrated Russia and her people to the Immaculate Heart, but in a private ceremony without bishops.

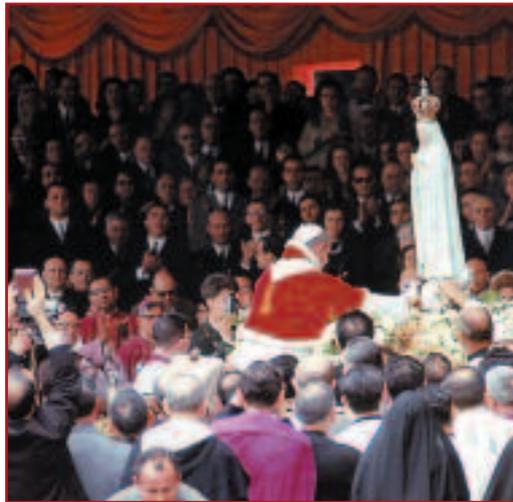
■ During the 1954 Marian Year, having invited the bishops to join him, Pius XII renewed the 1942 consecration.

■ At the 1964 closing of the third year of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Pope Paul VI renewed Pius XII’s consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart, and entrusted the entire Church to her care.

■ Pope John Paul II, who publicly credited Our Lady of Fatima for saving his life during the 1981 assassination attempt, consecrated the world to her Immaculate Heart during his convalescence in 1981, and again very publicly in 1982.

■ Again in March 1984, John Paul II consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, inviting all bishops to join him; many (but by no means all) bishops took part in simultaneous celebrations in various basilicas around the world.

■ Finally, in October 2000, Pope John Paul II, again in a very public ceremony with nearly 1,500 bishops present, “entrusted” the “world” to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.



Opposite, the three children of Fatima and, above, Russians with a statue of Our Lady of Fatima. This page, top, Pope Paul VI before the statue of Our Lady, and, here, Pope John Paul II with Sister Lucy

### WHAT ARE THEY AFRAID OF?

Despite that record, or in some ways because of it, the topic of the Fatima consecration remains controversial. What no one disputes is that, except for Pius XII’s private ceremony in the Vatican gardens, *none of these acts consecrated Russia by name*. What *is* disputed—and vociferously so on both sides—is whether these consecrations of the world, of which Russia is obviously a part, “counted” as an adequate response

to Our Lady's request to consecrate Russia.

Can Russia be consecrated without being mentioned? The Vatican says yes; its critics say no. But this is not the most important question. The question that begs answering, but which the Holy See has never addressed publicly, is simply this: Why *not* mention Russia? Why is that so unthinkable? What's the downside?

Pope John Paul II began his pontificate with the exhortation to the faithful that became, in a sense, his motto: "Be not afraid." But "afraid" is precisely the term that describes the Vatican's reaction to the thought of consecrating Russia by name, from the 1930's right down to today. So just what are they afraid of?

It is a topic worth exploring. During the Soviet era, fear of retaliatory persecution seemed a likely—and credible—explanation. Today a variety of reasons may be speculated upon. But the most widely expressed current explanation is fear of offending the Orthodox.

Certainly that concern loomed large in the mind of Pope John XXIII, who was keen on securing Russian Orthodox participation in the Vatican Council, leading to the policy of accommodation toward the Soviet Bloc that his successor, Pope Paul, also supported before and after his elevation to the Chair of Peter. The same logic that underlay their lamented promise that Vatican II and its documents would contain no condemnation of Communism might also serve to rule out a consecration of Russia.

Communism has bitten the dust, but keeping Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation on a fast track has continued to be a major concern of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI. As *Inside the Vatican* reported in November 2000, a leading cardinal, one of John Paul II's closest advisors, actually stated, off the record, that the Pope had been counseled not to make mention of Russia in any consecration ceremony because it would offend the Russian Orthodox. Apparently Vatican officials were not merely speculating when they articulated that fear. Just recently, a high-level Vatican source said that the Orthodox themselves have flat-out told the Vatican that if the Pope ever mentions Russia in a consecration, all dialogue between the Holy See and the Russian Orthodox Church will come to a screeching halt.

**BUT WHY SHOULD IT OFFEND THE ORTHODOX?**

If that is true, it may solve the long mystery of why no Popes—no matter how Fatima-minded—have dared consecrate Russia by name, but it just takes the mystery to a new level. Why should the consecration of Russia offend the Orthodox?

A consecration of a country, after all, is not an anathema or an exorcism. *It is an invocation of a special blessing and protection.* That Mary should single out a particular nation for

such a request is a sign of Her special maternal affection.

When Our Lord told St. Margaret Mary to get the King of France to consecrate that nation to His Sacred Heart, France was a Catholic country that treasured its title as "eldest daughter" of Christendom. It was only much later that the Revolution and Reign of Terror manifested the evils against which the consecration might have protected that nation had it been carried out when requested.

In contrast, when Sr. Lucy conveyed to the bishops of Portugal Our Lady's special request that they consecrate their own country to her, they happily complied in an episcopal act that many later believed kept Portugal at peace through both the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

One might expect that any nation that honors the Blessed Mother would consider it an enviable privilege to be uniquely selected for such a dignity by Holy Mary herself. The Russian

Orthodox *do* honor Mary, and while they may not accept the Fatima miracle and message as such, unlike some branches of Christianity they do believe that She can and does intervene personally in human history. Their own tradition is rich with officially accepted Marian miracles and private revelations, often associated with particular icons.

So, if theological issues do not appear to pose an impediment, why might the Fatima consecration offend the Russian Orthodox? This is important to explore, because, if the real underlying issues can be identified and addressed openly, perhaps they can be resolved together on the basis of reason, good will and true dialogue. Perhaps, then, the impediment can be removed, rather than the benefits of the consecration forfeited.

Again, speculation brings to mind several possible explanations:

1. *Canonical territory:* Because numerically there are so many more Orthodox than Catholics in Russia, would *any* papal action specifically about Russia seem presumptuous, an invasion of "Orthodox turf"? If this is the problem, it should be easier to work out now that the Catholic diocesan presence is at least accepted there, and the action could be seen as pertaining primarily to Catholic Russians, even though the benefits (if they do occur as Catholics expect) would be felt by everyone. When Russian Catholics petitioned Pius XII for the consecration in the 1950's, they were not only a numerically small group but an oppressed and largely underground minority.

2. *Pride.* Would Russians be insulted by the suggestion that they need to convert more than the people of other nations do? Our Lady's request for the consecration of Russia came in the context of discussing not only its need for conversion (something which all people, even those in the state of grace, need to strive for constantly) but also its future errors, persecutions, and responsibility for wars, martyrdom, and annihilation of nations. Would this context make the consecration seem like a



## BUT WASN'T IT ALREADY DONE?

Over the past 70 years, at least three Popes on multiple occasions have carried out consecrations of the world, of which Russia is obviously a part, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Didn't these "count" as an adequate response to Our Lady's request to consecrate Russia?

While the Vatican says "yes" and many speculate yes or no, the most enlightening sources are Sister Lucy—the surviving Fatima seer who lived through all those pontificates—and the Popes themselves.

Until 1989, from the first consecration of the world by Pius XII in 1942 through John Paul's then-most-recent attempt in 1984, Sr. Lucy herself always stated that they did not count, because Russia must be named specifically (and also because the bishops must participate).

Back in 1936, she told her confessor that she herself asked Our Lord, during one of her privileged conversations with Him, why He would not convert Russia without the Holy Father making that consecration, and that He had answered her, "Because I want My whole Church to acknowledge that consecration as a triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, so that it may extend its cult later on, and put the devotion to this Immaculate Heart beside the devotion to My Sacred Heart."

In 1982, when Salesian Fr. Umberto Pasquale, who knew her well, asked her if Our Lady had ever spoken to her about the consecration of the world to Her Immaculate Heart, Sr. Lucy answered, "No, Fr. Umberto! Never!" and reiterated that Her requests concerned only Russia.

Rome wasn't comfortable with Sr. Lucy's comments. Even in Pius XII's time, the Vatican indicated it would be happier if Sr. Lucy kept more quiet on this subject and if people would assume that the Fatima consecration had effectively been accomplished through the 1942 and 1954 consecrations of the world. But she was still permitted to speak out, and she did so quite publicly, regarding the consecration, the "third secret" then expected to be revealed in 1960, and other Fatima issues.

But in 1960, under Pope John XXIII, the Vatican announced that the third secret would not be made public then or perhaps ever.

Meanwhile, in obedience to an order from Rome, Sr. Lucy had stopped speaking publicly about Fatima. She was now also restricted from receiving most visitors, though in conversations with priests and in private correspondence she continued to insist that the consecration of Russia remained an unfulfilled—and urgent—task.

A dramatic change occurred in July of 1989. A priest close to Sr. Lucy announced in Fatima that she had received an instruction from unnamed sources in the Vatican that she must now acknowledge that the 1984 ceremony had accomplished the Consecration of Russia.

After that, she bowed out of obedience, either remaining silent or indicating that God was satisfied with the 1984 consecration.

In doing so, Lucy herself appeared to take an 180° turn from the position she had maintained consistently for over half a century. Even third-party witnesses who had quoted Sr. Lucy in the past suddenly retracted their testimony. While some typewritten letters from Lucy propounding the

new position were denounced by opponents as fakes, she clearly "got with the program" and stayed there for the remaining 16 years of her life, obediently refraining at least from openly contradicting the official line and trying to reconcile it as best she could with her own understanding.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone reported having interviewed her at length in 2001, during the course of which she told him that "the consecration desired by Our Lady was made in 1984, and has been accepted in Heaven."

While the first half of that sentence is impossible to reconcile fully with her longstanding insistence that Russia must be named, the latter point that it "has been accepted in heaven" is not totally at odds with a position she had taken all along—that God and the Blessed Mother welcome even flawed attempts to comply with Her wishes, even if they fall short of fulfilling Her requests and thus of bringing the promised benefits.

For instance, Sr. Lucy insisted that Pius XII's 1942 consecration of the world helped bring World War II to a end, even as many today (and perhaps Sr. Lucy herself) credited John Paul's 1984 consecration with helping to bring about the collapse of Soviet Communism. As great as those blessings are, however, they are not the conversion of Russia nor the period of peace that Our Lady promised if the Holy Father would consecrate Russia as she requested.

Perhaps the world at large, even the "Fatima followers," would long since have given up on ever seeing the unfolding of Mary's 3-part scenario—the consecration of Russia, the conversion of Russia, the era of world peace—if the Popes themselves, especially Pius XII and John Paul II, had not seemed so earnestly to desire it, even

when unable to bring themselves to take the needed steps to make it happen. If it had clearly been done right the first time, why did each of them keep trying it over, again and again, at least three times each? Why did Pope John Paul II, less than a week after the 1982 consecration, explain the failure to mention Russia with the words—quoted in *L'Osservatore Romano*—that he "tried to do everything possible in the concrete circumstances"? Two years later, why did he feel compelled to add, after completing the consecration formula in 1984, an extra prayer that was not in the script—"Enlighten especially the people whose consecration and entrusting you yourself are awaiting from us"—much as Pius XII had included a veiled allusion to an unnamed Russia in his world consecration of 1942? Why did John Paul feel he had to do still another consecration in 2000, after the Vatican had been insisting since 1989 that even Sr. Lucy must endorse the 1984 consecration as having been everything needed? Why did both these pontiffs repeatedly send high-level emissaries to question Sr. Lucy about what, exactly, Our Lady had required, and why did John Paul II repeatedly ask close aides, after one or the other of his world consecrations, whether they thought what he had done had satisfied Our Lady's conditions for the consecration of Russia?

Clearly, they sensed that more was needed; they wished to comply but felt they could not. They tried to do as much as they possibly could without mentioning Russia by name—the invisible line they dared not cross.



Opposite, the Portuguese newspaper report in 1917 of the "miracle of the Sun" at Fatima. Above, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone with Sister Lucy

rebuke or exorcism, even though it is not so by its own nature? But since those latter evils are so widely identified with Soviet Communism rather than with the Russians as a people, it would seem that Orthodox Christians—many of whom also suffered greatly under the Soviet regime—would more likely see any rebuke as directed toward their former oppressors rather than to themselves.

It should be possible to make clear that being consecrated to Our Lady—whether by oneself or someone else—does nothing to limit the freedom of an individual or a nation, and serves only to make them the special beneficiaries of the loving protection of the Mother of God. This thought might be anathema to an atheistic regime, but could not be a more natural honor for a culture as steeped in Marian devotion as Russia, and Russian Orthodoxy, have been. Indeed, it is the Russian Orthodox Church that has always promoted the idea that “Holy Russia” has inherited a truly unique role in Christendom and salvation history.

3. *Sectarianism.* Would any Catholic prayers aimed at “the conversion of Russia”—especially in this post-Soviet era when some feel it has already converted from Communism—be interpreted as aiming at a conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism? (The latter, though a perfectly appropriate desire and prayer intention on the part of Catholics, would understandably be a sensitive point for the Orthodox.)

This, even more than the “turf” issue, is a potential objection that truly affects the Russian Orthodox not simply as Russians but *as Orthodox*, and relations between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches as distinct religious entities and thus as potential rivals for the hearts of the faithful. To the extent that the religious-conversion issue underlies opposition to the Fatima consecration, it is only a symptom of an underlying and genuine issue that Catholic-Orthodox dialogue would have to confront in any event. But as will be shown below, any concerns that Orthodox—or Catholic—Russians may have about losing their own faithful by conversion to the other church would, paradoxically, be ameliorated rather than exacerbated by the consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

4. *Pressure from secular sources.* Just as it is possible that the Popes or other Vatican officials have feared to consecrate Russia due to pressure from threat-wielding forces outside of and hostile to the Church, bent on stopping the supernatural benefits the consecration would bring, it is also possible that while the Vatican may instead merely be afraid of offending the Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox themselves could be motivated in their objections by pressures from threat-wielding non-ecclesiastical forces within Russia. It is easy to see how this might have been the case during the Soviet era, for instance during the time when Pope John XXIII was negotiating for Russian Orthodox participation at the Vatican Council, at a time when the Orthodox Church in Russia—those few, that is, who had survived the vicious persecution and martyrdom that claimed so many lives—were tightly controlled by the Soviet state and, in some cases, infiltrated by KGB operatives. It would have been hard for Vatican negotiators to know whether a demand from their Orthodox counterparts originated from them as churchmen—for instance, regarding theolog-

ical or sectarian issues—or originated as demands from the state, which the churchmen were constrained to put forward by subtle or overt pressure.

The fact that the USSR is history does not mean that the Russian Orthodox Church is immune from potential pressures from hostile or self-interested secular sources, whether of a political, military or economic nature, any more than the advantage of operating in its own Vatican City State has made the Catholic Church immune from similar pressures from inappropriate non-ecclesiastically motivated outside forces. Nor has the Vatican been immune to infiltration, as instances have come to light in which Soviet spies at the height of the Cold War, and some say even Satanists in sheep’s clothing, have managed to insinuate themselves inside the Vatican bureaucracy. Since Christianity is in a constant state of spiritual warfare, it should neither surprise nor offend anyone, whether Catholic or Orthodox, to realize that Satan is a master of modern warfare and utilizes covert operations to attack his enemies wherever possible—especially those in Holy Orders or other positions of leadership in Christian communities.

**COLLABORATING WITH YOUR FRIENDS, RECOGNIZING YOUR ENEMIES**

Interestingly, one can look back over both groups of potential impediments to the Fatima consecration of Russia—reasons deterring the Vatican and reasons motivating the Orthodox to object—and see that the impediments are really of only three types: (1) Dismissing or doubting the power of the Mother of God; (2) Pressure from those who recognize Her power and oppose it (whether they bring that pressure to bear on the Holy See or on Russian Orthodox leaders or both); and (3) Genuine points of potential disagreement between Catholic and Orthodox, both of whom acknowledge the Mother of God and consider themselves on Her side, even if they don’t always agree with each other about where that is.

The first is a faith issue, encompassing, for instance, such potential problems as recalcitrant bishops, Marian-dismissive Church ideologues, or pontiffs fearing the scandal if Russia is consecrated and then nothing happens. There is little one can do but pray that all clerics with a role in the process, whatever it might be, will be given the grace to bring the right attitude to their tasks.

The second and third categories call for action, though action of a very different kind one from the other. Both, however, represent impediments that Catholic and Orthodox leaders can and should work together to overcome. This statement might come as a surprise to both. But on closer look, one can see that the potential of Fatima to unite the great Eastern and Western branches of Christianity is much greater than its potential for further dividing them.

The tragedy of the Great Schism is that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are so close in belief, in prayer, in culture, in devotion, in liturgical and sacramental life, and yet for all these centuries have remained divided. Both trace their theology and hierarchy to apostolic roots. Their creeds differ in only a handful out of countless articles of faith. They call together on common saints who shared their millenium of

joint history. Their liturgical practices—especially looking at the Orthodox alongside Catholicism’s Eastern Rites—would be hard for casual outsiders to differentiate. The exalted position of the Mother of God—not only in theology, personal piety, and art, but even in the practical experience of Her intervention in history and in the lives of men—is a powerful unifying dimension that the Catholic and Orthodox Churches share.

Having so much in common on earth—and so powerful a friend in heaven—requires that Catholics and Orthodox face each other as friends with a common agenda of tackling honestly the points that divide them, and face together the forces they both recognize as genuine enemies. Distinguishing the two challenges, and responding appropriately, is of signal importance.

### **BREAKING AN ECUMENICAL IMPASSE**

Let us look first at the differences between friends. Fatima has the potential for breaking the centuries-old impasse keeping the Orthodox Churches from reconciling with Rome. We must start by recognizing that despite the desire for unity professed by both sides, despite the many hours that have been devoted to dialogue and theological discussions, despite the top priority with which recent pontiffs have embraced this mission, and despite the major breakthroughs even in this present pontificate, the fact is that unity remains as elusive as ever. Centuries have seen little movement on the few but major ecclesiological and doctrinal differences that divide Catholic and Orthodox. Ironically, they cannot get closer together precisely because they are so close already.

If the Catholic and the Orthodox were Protestant denominations, Christian splinter groups, theological movements, or gatherings of self-ordained ministers, they could sit around a table and rethink their doctrines and compromise their differences, because all those are entities created by human beings.

But neither the Orthodox Churches, nor the Catholic Church, feel they have the right to compromise on doctrine, worship or jurisdiction.

Catholicism and Orthodoxy each professes that it has faithfully transmitted authentic Christian doctrine from apostolic times, that its liturgy has developed organically from earliest times, and that the authority claimed and exercised by its hierarchy are rights and responsibilities of unbroken apostolic derivation.

These claims to immutable truth and authority stand in such striking contrast to the rest of the Christian world that they should create a powerful bond between Catholic and Orthodox, pulling them together. And they do, but only to the point where both, to be faithful, must insist that further compromise is impossible. It is clear that such an impasse cannot be broken by mere human means.

That leaves the two as rival Churches whose parallel efforts to be faithful to Christ’s call to evangelize bring them into potential clashes when they find themselves trying to advance their sway in the same geographic territory or in the hearts of the same people. Russia and Russians, in this case. To what extent, for instance, should the Catholic Church defer to the Russian Orthodox Church as the presumed major voice of Christianity in Russian society? To what extent should the Russian Orthodox Church make room for Catholic congregations, diocesan structures and outreach efforts, not just serving expatriate communities or “ethnically Catholic minorities,” but among the mainstream Russian population? To what extent should each Church accept or promote individual conversions from each other’s faithful?

Recent decades have seen conversions of prominent individuals in both directions—Orthodox believers who find their way individually, Newman-like, to Rome, and not a few western Catholics who have fled liturgical upheaval in their own parishes and found a home in Orthodoxy.

It should be no impediment to friendly Catholic-Russian Orthodox relations if the Orthodox were to admit that they would like nothing better than to see all Christians in Russia adhere to Orthodoxy, and if the Catholics were to admit that they would like nothing better than to see every Christian in the world profess Catholicism. Both Catholic and Orthodox leaders, after all, have made it amply clear that they would in fact prefer, even more, a solution that would end the schism without extinguishing the identity of the formerly schismatic church, as opposed to either a mass conversion of individuals

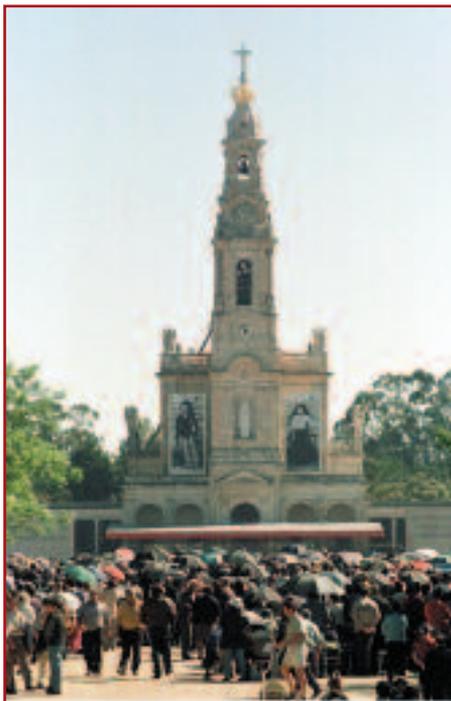
or to just letting the separation continue as it is now.

Yet no amount of progress at the dialogue table can meanwhile relieve an individual of the duty to adhere to God’s truth where it can be found in its fullness, nor of one who believes he possesses the truth to share it with others. Where conflicting claims to truth are being advanced, whichever does not accord with God’s eternal truth is in error, and all sincere believers can only pray that they and others will be converted from any beliefs they hold that are in fact wrong.

### **OUR LADY’S STARTLING SOLUTION**

Enter Our Lady of Fatima, and her promise of the conversion of Russia. At first blush, she appears to be treading on the very ground from which Orthodox would recoil. Do Catholic prayers for Russia’s conversion mean the Russians would all desert the Orthodox Church and become Catholic? Catholics may indeed envision such a scenario, but the point is, it does not matter what the Catholics think would happen; they aren’t the ones who will decide. Mary will.

There is not a Catholic Mary and an Orthodox Mary; there is just one Mother of God, to whom both have had recourse throughout Christian history, and to whom both can



look with entire confidence. Whatever erroneous interpretations of doctrine or Church governance the Catholics or the Orthodox may have fallen into—actually or in the eyes of the other—Mary cannot do or will anything other than the Will of God. Surely if either a devout Catholic or a devout Russian Orthodox could actually *know* the will of God and the desire of Mary's heart, that is what they would want, whatever their preconceptions might have been.

What type of conversion does God seek from Russia? Catholics and Orthodox would no doubt answer that differently if asked, but the beauty of Fatima is that no one has to figure out who has it right in order to bring it about. The key is in the actual wording of Our Lady of Fatima's request and promise: "I shall come to ask for the consecration of Russia to My Immaculate Heart... If My requests are heeded, Russia will be converted and there will be peace... The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to Me, and she will be converted, and a period of peace will be granted to the world."

Notice who gets assigned which tasks. She does not say, "If *you* convert Russia, *I* will bring peace." The Pope is simply asked to consecrate Russia to Her, to be heaven's instrument in performing this act. He is not asked to convert Russia, or to decide what type of conversion Russia needs. Neither are the Catholics or the Russian Orthodox or any other human agency.

Instead, the conversion is part of what She promises in return; "Russia *will be converted*." It is *her* job, not ours.

This distinction is profoundly significant. It means, first of all, that no one has to figure out, decide or agree together on what type of conversion She had in mind, in order to fulfill Her requests and claim Her promises.

Let us suppose that Russia is consecrated by the Pope together with all the Catholic bishops, just as Our Lady asked for. Catholics and Orthodox alike will be able to take their cue for conforming to the will of God in their relations by watching what happens next.

If the most visible changes were instead in the public arena—a different standard of public service, an end to every type of abuse of authority, flowering of social justice, emergence of harmonious institutions of governance, reconciliation between regions and ethnic groups, disappearance of political corruption and organized crime, international policies reflecting a deepseated civilian and military commitment to peace, an accounting for and disposing of nuclear weapons, honoring of God in the public square—well, then that's the type of conversion She had in mind.

Or if Orthodox leaders and ordinary faithful suddenly find themselves seized with a desire to reconcile with Rome and no longer feel an impediment to submitting to papal authority and magisterial teaching, it would suggest that was indeed the type of conversion God willed.

Or if—aside from religious affiliation—a great moral revival spontaneously arose among the people at the individual level, prompting Russians to turn with loathing from vices such as abortion and pornography and drunkenness, stirring great longing for chastity and lifelong marital commitment, revolutionizing the conduct of business and education, mani-

festing itself in an elevated level of unselfishness marked by acts of charity and desire for children, and cementing all the above with a flowering of faith and religious fervor, then that type of conversion of life will obviously be what Mary had intended.

And if, in the context of such a revival, there followed a surge of religious vocations, a rebirth of monasticism, greatly increased participation in the liturgy and the sacraments, and if this occurred not only among Catholics in Russia but also, or even especially, among the Orthodox, then it would be clear to Catholic and Orthodox leaders alike that heaven looked with great favor on Russian Orthodoxy and wished to preserve it in a special way within the universal Church.

The conversion of Russia, whatever form it took, would cause mankind to look with great hope for fulfillment of the next promise—an era of peace—and would surely also have the result that Our Lord told Sr. Lucy was its ultimate purpose: a great outpouring of gratitude and devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

The conversion of Russia, whether it led Russians to embrace the Catholic faith or deepen their Orthodox faith or both, may or may not have a direct impact on Catholic-Orthodox dialogue. The Orthodox could be inspired to move closer to the Catholic position, or the Catholic hierarchy and theologians may be inspired to see certain issues in a new light that brings the two sides closer together, or both could be left to continue working out their differences to their best human ability. But the new level of virtue, kindness, and openness to the truth of the Holy Spirit would certainly make the task, in any event, sweeter and more productive.

The Russian Orthodox have no reason whatever to oppose a papal consecration of Russia on religious grounds. There is no downside for them. If the gesture was in fact empty, meaningless, inappropriate and/or not a fulfillment of a genuine heavenly request, or brought no visible results, it would have no impact at all.

But if in fact God *does* will it, and it has any or all of the impacts described above, it would prove to have been an inestimable blessing for the Russian people, for Orthodox-Catholic relations, and for the entire world.

### FACING THE COMMON ENEMY

The battle—the Holy Spirit tells us through St. Paul—is "not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in high places." (*Eph.6:12*) Since, in fact, faithful believers whether Catholic or Orthodox have nothing to lose and everything to gain—indeed exceedingly much to gain—in the consecration of Russia as Our Lady requested it, it would behoove both of them to look carefully—once the impediments caused by their own fears have been overcome—at the question of who or what outside the Church might be working to prevent it from happening.

External—perhaps we should just say infernal—forces could be exerting pressure either within the Vatican or within the ranks of the Orthodox or both. They could be wielding actual threats of dire harm, or they could simply be positioning themselves in places where they can manipulate the

thoughts and fears of others, reinforcing the perception that the consecration of Russia is something that would be problematic in a variety of ways, something it would just be better not to do, or at least not to do *right now*.

Timing is of the essence. It is tragic to think of the toll in human sorrow arising from the evils of the past century—the “worse war” (World War II) that Our Lady predicted, the scourge of Nazism, the subjugation of Eastern Europe, the persecutions of the Church in Russia, Spain and still today in China, and the countless millions of murders spewing from the Pandora’s box of Bolshevism (Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, numerous local revolutionaries as Russia’s errors spread throughout the world)—even the worldwide abortion holocaust got its start in Soviet Russia. All these could have been avoided had Our Lady’s requests been acted upon, say, in the early 1930’s.

And the Enemy of Souls never rests. Who knows what plans he might be fine-tuning at this very moment—new charismatic tyrants being groomed to lead tomorrow’s mobs somewhere in the world, new scandals being orchestrated to destabilize and bring down governments, new visions of evil being nurtured in the minds of terrorists, new ways to undermine marriage and family life, new wars between nations or whole civilizations, new scandals and persecutions to cripple the Church? Who knows where he might be hiding nuclear weapons, conspiring to put them in the wrong hands? Who knows what horrors he might be perfecting in some unknown laboratory, almost ready to move from the drawing board to the evening news—a new disease, a new type of natural disaster, a genetically manipulated monstrosity, or a new weapon of mass destruction?

### **A RACE TO THE FINISH**

Mary and her Enemy since the dawn of history are in a race for time. The Catholics and the Russian Orthodox are uniquely positioned to form a vanguard against this wily foe.

The 90’s and now the 21st century have brought a range of new evidence that the Enemy is not sleeping. The worldwide moral crisis has worsened exponentially—the war on the unborn has morphed into cloning and embryo exploitation; homosexualist demands have morphed from tolerance for perversion to intolerance for contrary views; popular culture has sunk deeper into violence and degradation. In the geopolitical arena, we have seen unabating wars in the Middle East, the September 11 attack and the whole rise of militant Islamism, genocide in Africa, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, nuclear saber-rattling in Korea, acceptance of torture, and the global spectre of terrorism. There is the phenomenon of globalization—increasingly concentrating economic and political power in fewer hands and larger entities—that offers the potential for human advancement but also makes individuals more powerless and evil potentially harder to fight.

In the shadowy gray areas where “acts of God” are not always easily separable from the work of human hands—perhaps human hands aided by diabolical interference—we have seen a cascade of humanitarian and ecological disasters—starvation, drought, desertification, strange weather patterns, tidal waves, hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, breakthroughs in technology for electronic snooping and data col-

lection, frightening new diseases, designer babies, global warming, and advances in chemical and biological weapons technology.

### **BE NOT AFRAID!**

It would seem obvious that if there is a means to introduce into this dangerous and volatile contemporary environment such transforming heavenly gifts as the wholesale conversion of one of the world’s largest nations and a period of peace for the entire world, it would be better to do so sooner rather than later. And, that from the Devil’s point of view, even a short delay may represent a coveted victory if it enables him to unleash some as yet unknown new plague—literal or figurative—upon mankind.

This writer is perhaps not the only person to have been fascinated, as a first-year Latin student, with the word “*time-bam*.” (Its meaning is “I was afraid.”) If pronounced half in English, half in Latin, it evokes the English word “timebomb.” It seems, somehow, a fitting evocation of the Holy See’s mothballed mandate to consecrate Russia by name: a ticking timebomb, crying out to be defused, while Vatican officials eye it warily from a distance, gingerly pushing it out of sight, saying in effect, “I would have dealt with it but *I was afraid*.”

It is time to ask the Holy See the same question posed earlier to the Orthodox: What is there to be afraid of? What is the downside?

Clearly, there need be no embarrassment about doing the consecration again just because it is supposed to have already been done before. That didn’t stop any of the previous seven or so repetitions, even the one in 2000 after heaven’s acceptance of the 1984 version had been proclaimed so definitively. It can always be presented merely as a renewal, or even openly as a desire to conform even more perfectly to God’s will and Our Lady’s wishes. The announcement could even echo Our Lady’s own words in 1929, after the unexplained 12-year delay from her original broaching of the subject in 1917: “*The time has now come . . .*”

If the consecration has in fact been fully accomplished already, a needless repetition would be, at worse, superfluous. And if, indeed, it ruffled the feathers of the Russian government or the Russian Orthodox or anyone else, how long and how strenuously could they be expected to protest a meaningless gesture, even if it constituted a *faux pas*? If serious dialogue can be derailed for so flimsy a reason, it wasn’t going anywhere anyway.

As elaborated above, there is every reason to believe that Orthodox objections—if founded on religious concerns and not resulting from political pressure—could be overcome in advance, if a serious effort were made to reach out to them to explore their objections. There is no reason in logic for the Russian Orthodox to oppose or feel threatened by the consecration, whether it were meaningless or effective. In the latter case, Our Lady’s response in Russia would help both Catholics and Orthodox to better understand and more perfectly conform to God’s Will, something both presumably want. If the Russian Orthodox have indeed fought the consecration up until now, it could only be a result of misunderstanding—precisely the type of issue for which genuine dialogue and discussion is an appropriate remedy. ●