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“LE VÉCU CHRÉTIEN DANS LES PAYS BALTES”

**Table-ronde avec Mgr Urmas Viilma, Soeur Helvi Pulla, Père Mattias Palli**

*Père Mattias Talli, orthodoxe “L’Eglise orthodoxe en Estonie”*

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Estonia is now often called a “post-Christian” nation, with about 1/3 of the population adhering to Christianity. While Eastern Orthodoxy is the confession with biggest number of followers, this is mostly on account of the Soviet-time Russian-speaking population. Among the citizens, Lutheranism is the most wide-spread denomination, while Roman Catholics and free churches have their less numerous, but nevertheless significant role. Traditionally, however, before WWII, some 20% of the population, mostly Estonians, belonged to the Eastern Church.

Historically, most of modern Estonia (and Western Latvia) came under the Roman Catholic crusaders (mostly of German descent) in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. A small tribe speaking South Estonian came under Russian princedoms and accepted Orthodoxy in the Middle Ages, partly due to the influence of the famous Petseri (Pechory Pskovskiy) Monastery. They are known as Setus and are now mostly living in our Republic.

After the crusades, the German nobility remained in power for about 700 years, while the overlords changed. The Estonians were mostly serfs or lower artisans. The nobility changed their faith in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. to Lutheranism and this was also adopted by the natives.

When Estonia came under the Russian Empire in early 18<sup>th</sup> c., the privileges of the Baltic German nobility and the Evangelical Lutheran Church remained. However, Orthodox churches were built for the Russian military, merchants and officials. Some 17% of the peasants in Southern Estonia and Northern Latvia (this was the province of Livonia) converted to Orthodoxy in 1840s, partly hoping for the improvement of their conditions if they belong to the “religion of the Emperor”. Hardly any material or social improvement followed, except a little in the 1880s, when the Empire adopted a policy of Russification and the Church was to some extent used for this aim. Most converts and their descendants however, remained in the Eastern Orthodoxy and found their spiritual home there. The services were conducted in Estonian and liturgical and spiritual literature was translated into our language. In Riga, a seminary was founded to train clergy and choir leaders. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. was also a time of national awakening, many Orthodox took part of this movement along with the Lutherans.

After the fall of czarism, Estonia got its first native Orthodox bishop, Platon (Paul Kulbusch). He actively organized the Church in the difficult years of war and the 1<sup>st</sup> German occupation. He was martyred by the Bolsheviks in Tartu 14<sup>th</sup> January 1919, as were many of our clergy. When Estonia became independent in 1918 and the war for independence ended, the Orthodox

appealed for an autonomy from the ROC. This was granted by the Patriarch St Tikhon in 1920, but the terms were unclear and limited. Alexander (Paulus) was ordained the 2<sup>nd</sup> bishop of Estonia and remained as such until his death in 1953, keeping the continuity of our Church alive in the emigration after the war. As connections with the ROC were hindered by the Soviet authorities and the future of the Church in Russia unclear, the Estonian Church leaders took contact with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, who granted a full ecclesial autonomy in 1923. A period of building and consolidating of the Church followed.

The Soviet occupation of Estonia during and after the WW II brought an end to the autonomous Church. The faithful suffered from persecutions and atheist propaganda had its influence. Many churches were closed and in the 1940s, some clergymen and people were martyred. Immigration from other parts of the Soviet Union changed the ethnic consistence of the Church people. Nevertheless, the believers managed to keep their faith and Church practices alive as far as was possible.

The *perestroika* opened new possibilities for the Church, and in the twilight of the Soviet regime, calls for the restoration of autonomy in the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople were heard again. Finally it was realized in 1996, five years after the restoration of the independence. This was facilitated by the fact that the Church structures had been kept alive in emigration. But the restoration of autonomy was not an easy task due to the opposition of the Moscow Patriarchate and internal organizational and economic difficulties. However, with time our Church has consolidated her structures and despite many tensions, also found a way of co-existence with the local diocese of the Moscow Patriarchate.

As local candidates for bishophood were not found, Archbishop John of Karelia and All Finland was the first *locum tenens* of our head of Church. In 1999, Bishop Stephanos (Charalambides) was enthroned at the suggestion of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The same year, Church Administration and other organs were elected. In 2009, two other bishops (Elijah of Tartu and Alexander of Pärnu and Saaremaa) were chosen. The Church has managed to build herself anew. We have some 25,000 faithful (both Estonian- and Russian-speaking), 36 priests and 8 deacons. New clergy is trained at the St Platon Seminary, which from 2014 works in co-operation with the Theological Institute of the EELC. A newspaper, "Metropoolia" and a theological annual "Usk aj Elu" (Faith and Life) are published, as well as spiritual literature. A youth movement exists and arranges summer camps and other activities. There are close contacts with other Orthodox, mostly the Churches of Greece and Finland. The ecumenical relations are good and our Church belongs to the Estonian Council of Churches. As the Petseri monastery remained in the Russian-occupied territory and the Pühtitsa (Kuremäe) Convent belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate, a small skete of St John the Baptist, a filial of a convent in Ayia, Greece, was founded in Saaremaa, the nuns being both local and from other places. There are plans to found a male monastery on Setumaa.

The Orthodox Church of Estonia, a minority church in a small nation, has a quite unique history and present. Her existence on the borderland between Eastern and Western, Central and Northern Europe and her roots in popular conversion movement and conciliar traditions involving all faithful are something that can give their share in the Orthodox and Christian reflection on the Church and her place in the world.