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Communism Absent from the Council

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METZ

There is being published in Italy and presented in Rome a book by Jean Madiran on "The Agreement of Metz", which, according to the author, would have allowed the participation of Russian Orthodox delegates in Vatican II

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The lack of debate on communism during the work of Vatican II is a topic little addressed in research on the history of the Council. Over the past few years there has been published in France a slender volume by the Catholic essayist and journalist Jean Madiran, close to the conservative "contemporary counter-revolutionary school", devoted entirely to the subject, which tells the story through a series of short articles and documents. **The booklet is now available in Italian ("The Metz agreement" between the Kremlin and the Vatican, published by "Pagine" in the "libri del Borghese" series) with an**

introduction and afterword by Roberto de Mattei.

After the announcement of the convocation of the Council by John XXIII, and after the invitation to send observers, the reaction of the Moscow Patriarchate appeared to be completely negative: in March 1961 an anonymous article in "Zhurnal Moskovskoj Patriarkhii," **the Bulletin of the Patriarchate, opposed the global "claims of hegemony" by the Catholic Church, maintaining that Vatican II would become a "weapon" for taking up political positions "incompatible with the Christian spirit."**

In August 1962, almost on the eve of the opening of the Council, an emissary of the Russian side, Serge Bolshkoff, had organized a meeting between the Metropolitan Nikodim, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, and Cardinal Eugene Tisserant. The meeting took place in Metz, France. **An initiative that contributed to the decision of the Holy Synod of Moscow to accept Rome's invitation at the last minute, sending two observers to the Council, the archpriest Vitaly Borovoy and Archimandrite Vladimir Kotliakov.**

From a report by the Head of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, a Soviet governmental body, we learn that Nikodim was assured that the Council met to renew the life of the Catholic Church and not to deal with political issues.

The first to speak of the meeting in Metz would have been the bishop of the city, Paul Joseph Schmitt, during a press conference: "It's in our region that the "incognito" meeting took place between Cardinal Tisserant and Archbishop Nikodim. [...] Archbishop Nikodim accepted to bear an official invitation to Moscow with the guarantees of the apolitical character of the Council". The bulletin of the French Communist Party, "Nouvelle France", reported the news in the January 16-22 issue of 1963, writing that, given the "undeniable superiority" of the "world socialist system," strong with the "approval of hundreds and hundreds of millions of men," the Catholic Church **"can no longer simply settle for crude anti-communism. She herself made a commitment, on the occasion of the dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church, that in the Council there would be no direct attack against the communist regime."**

Even the Catholic newspaper "La Croix", on February 15, 1963, would have informed readers that there had been "guarantees made" of the "apolitical" nature of the Council. The existence of an agreement, not written but in the form of a "promise," would be confirmed by German theologian Bernard Haring, who had been secretary-coordinator of the editorial board of the conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: **"I knew with certainty that Pope John had promised the governing authorities in Moscow that the Council would not issue any condemnation of communism, to make it possible for observers of the Russian Orthodox Church to participate."**

Important documentary evidence of this is found in the archive of Cardinal Tisserant, where there is a letter, dated August 22,

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1962, in which the French cardinal wrote to Serge Bolshkoff, informing him about the meeting with Nikodim. The French Curial Cardinal wrote: **"I hope that the Council will not address politics, either directly or indirectly. The Church has always benefitted when she has remained within her own territory, which is not that of politics." It is clear that this insurance, repeated by the cardinal to the Russian emissary, reflects the message sent from Rome to the Orthodox in Moscow.**

These contacts and their contents would become relevant three years later, when a petition from more than four hundred fathers demanding a mention of communism in the conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* would be rejected without making it to the assembly hall. Even Paul VI, John XXIII's successor, seems to have been aware of the guarantees of the "political neutrality" of the Council, because in a memo, dated November 15, 1965, **he will mention explicitly "the commitments of the Council", including that of "not talking about communism (1962)." The date alongside this last sentence penned by Paul VI is significant and refers directly to the meeting and negotiations in Metz between Tisserant and Nikodim.**

Cardinal Giacomo Biffi wrote about this in his autobiography ("Memoirs and Digressions of an Italian Cardinal"): «Communism was undoubtedly the most imposing, most lasting, most overpowering historical phenomenon of the 20th century; and the Council, which had even proposed a Constitution on the Church and the contemporary world, doesn't talk about it. [...] Communism (for the first time in the history of human folly) had virtually imposed atheism on the subjected people, as a sort of official philosophy and a paradoxical "state religion", and the Council, although it speaks about the case of atheists, does not speak of it. In the same year in which the Ecumenical Council was held, the communist prisons were still all places of unspeakable suffering and humiliation inflicted upon numerous "witnesses of the faith" (bishops, priests and laypeople who were convinced believers in Christ), and the Council does not speak of it. And some want to talk about the supposed silence towards the criminal aberrations of Nazism, for which even some Catholics (even among those active at the Council) have criticized Pius XII!"

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