

The Church Needs a Few Martin Luthers

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Clarification appended

On Sunday, more than 50,000 people gathered at Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow for a prayer service in defense of the Russian Orthodox Church. A week before that, a group of bikers organized a motor rally also in defense of the church. Joining the bikers were the Union of Russian Citizens, a group that recently staged a rally in support of convicted arms dealer Viktor Bout. Now in addition to Bout, the group is defending Patriarch Kirill.

The church has effectively turned a few hooligans into martyrs. True, the young women of Pussy Riot pulled off a tasteless prank and PR stunt. But imagine if they had done the same thing in front of Jesus. Would Jesus have appealed to the Roman authorities to give the women a long prison sentence? This reminds me of the joke:

Question: "Why did you kill him?" Answer: "Why did he call me names?"

But we are told that those young women offended the sensibilities of church-going people. OK, so some believers were offended, but does this mean the Pussy Riot girls should get seven years in prison?

There is a village near Nizhny Novgorod called Bolshaya Yelnya, and in that village an imposter who goes by the name of Mother Photinia supposedly has an icon of President-elect Vladimir Putin, whom she believes to be the reincarnation of Vladimir the Great, the ruler who baptized Kievan Rus.

Mother Photinia's words are heresy, and people have been excommunicated from the church for much less. But for some reason the church remains silent regarding her absurd icon of Putin but wasted no time in condemning Pussy Riot as blasphemous for chanting, "Holy mother, throw Putin out!"

The Russian Orthodox Church didn't seem to mind when Christ the Savior Cathedral was turned into an exhibition center where half-naked models sold consumer goods between religious services. Nor does the church have a single word of reproach for Patriarch Kirill's penchant for luxury Breguet watches and the latest Mercedes models, even though he took a vow of celibacy and restraint.

Then there is Kirill's third cousin who is registered to live in a luxury apartment that has a spectacular panoramic view of Christ the Savior Cathedral. Apparently, this multimillion-dollar Moscow real estate gem is not enough; Kirill's cousin is reportedly trying to appropriate the apartment one floor below from its owners, who she claimed sent some dust through the ventilation shaft into her apartment when they were doing repairs.

The church finds none of that worthy of censure but cannot tolerate the words, "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!"

For its part, the church has responded to the Breguet watch and apartment scandals exactly as Rome responded in the 16th century to charges of debauchery and selling ecclesiastical privileges. For Rome, the episode sparked the Reformation.

Will there be an Orthodox reformation in Russia? To be sure, there are many potential Martin Luthers in the Russian Orthodox Church. These might be people who are angry with the Pussy Riot stunt, but even angrier over the scandals involving Kirill's watch and apartment and the luxurious lifestyle of the clergy as a whole. These are people who want to serve God but who do not want to work for the Russian Orthodox Church.

Clarification: The translation of the name of the song performed by Pussy Riot in Christ the Savior Cathedral on Feb. 21 has been improved. It has been changed to "Mother of God, Cast Putin Out!" in place of "Holy Mother, Throw Putin Out!"

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