

***Sobornost* Then and Now: The Fellowship of St Alban & St. Sergius Conference**

A Conference Report: August, 2025

By Fr Stephen Sharman

The Conference was held at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford, from the 20th of August to the 22nd of August, 2025, and considered the theme of *Sobornost*. The conference was named “*Sobornost* – Then and Now.” The printed programme for the conference began the discussion with these words, ‘As a theological and philosophical term, *sobornost* has been subject to various interpretations and emphases, but may broadly speaking be said to define the catholicity and oneness of the Church which reflects the unity and diversity of the Holy Trinity. It is a term which has great significance in considering the unity, conciliarity and synodality of the Church, not least in the context of relations and understanding between Eastern and Western Christians’. The printed programme then adds, ‘our conference will consider the role of *sobornost* in the history and contemporary life of the Church – and of our Fellowship – and the importance of a renewed understanding of *sobornost* in the quest for Christian unity’. This was the task which the conference set for itself.

The Fellowship assembled a panel of learned theologians who explored different aspects of the conference’s theme. They were the Revd Dr Callan Slipper, the Revd Dr Jan Nowotnik, Dr Tiffany Butler, the Very Revd Andrew Louth and Dr Razan Porumb. Fr Stephen Platt, the General Secretary of the Fellowship, introduced each speaker and moderated the discussion times which followed each presentation. Fr Mark Woodruff provided scriptural meditations.

Dr Slipper’s lecture was called ‘Living Communion: Ecumenical Possibilities Suggested by Focolare Spirituality and Receptive Learning’ in which he addressed

the theme of sobornost in the light of the experience of Focolare Spirituality, a Roman Catholic spiritual movement which builds communion by living relationships. Dr Nowotnik's lecture had the title "Sobornost and Spirituality." He discussed an ecclesiology of communion in which the Church has the task of discerning what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today. Hence fellowship becomes an avenue for this discernment. Dr Butler called her lecture "Sobornost in Dialogue." Her paper explored a Russian Orthodox understanding of *Sobornost*. She spoke about the life and teaching of Mother Maria of Paris. She identified herself as a 'Traditional Anglican', a term new to many of us. Fr Andrew Louth named his lecture "Sobornost and Sanctorum Communio." He began with a list of the saints of the Fellowship and embedded his understanding of *Sobornost* in an ecclesiology of holy people. He was very sceptical of the value of *Sobornost* in the light of the unhappy relationship between the Patriarchs of Moscow and Constantinople. Other scholars at the conference did not share his gloom. The last lecture was Dr Razvan Porumb's "Ecumenism as Aspiration towards Sobornost as lived Catholicity." He presented an Orthodox perspective on ecumenism and discussed the role that the Orthodox self-understanding as the one true Church has on ecumenical relations. These five lectures were of the very highest standard of scholarship and the discussions which followed were of the same standard. This reviewer hopes that the lectures will be published for the benefit of those who did not attend the conference and are interested in the topic.

The conference was devoted to prayer and worship. There were two Anglican services, Evening Prayer according to Common Worship and Holy Communion according to the Book of Common Prayer of 1662. There was a Latin Roman Catholic Holy Mass with some parts of the Mass in Latin and the important parts in English. There were two Orthodox services both in English, a Liturgy and Orthodox morning prayers and *litya* (short memorial service for departed members and friends). We particularly remembered the life and witness of Metropolitan Kallistos of blessed memory.

The conference had social times, meals together, coffee and tea breaks and gentle walks to a nearby pub where conversations continued. Not all the conversations were about the greater matters of the law. These times led to renewed friendships and greater understanding of various points of view. The participants in the conference became friends.

We were taken into Oxford where we visited two Orthodox Churches, St Nicholas Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity and the Annunciation.

This was a good conference. It was well organised and held in an excellent facility. The conference is highly recommended.

About the reviewer. Fr. Stephen Sharman is a priest at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.