

*Old Believers of Erie:  
English language and the Priesthood*

Phillip Calington

The Old Ritualist parish of the Nativity of Christ in Erie, Pennsylvania (USA), is mostly known around the world for its highly respected and appreciated translations of pre-Nikonian liturgical texts into English as well as their adaptation of the Znamenny chant into English. The parish was first legally established in 1916 – however the Old Believers that formed it started coming to Erie at the end of 1890's. These Old Believers came from the Suvalki region, in modern-day Poland. They were priestless Old Believers, known specifically as Pomortsi (shore-dwellers). In the 1970's, there arose a clear need for the people, who had now lived in America for at least three generations, to understand the services which were conducted in Church Slavonic. A large majority did not understand this language anymore, hence, they stopped to understand their faith. This led to the parish in 1980 starting to use some English in the services. This with time eventually led the parish to almost exclusively use English.

In 1982, two years after the introduction of English, the parish, under the leadership of its Nastavnik Pimen Simon, formed a study committee to analyze the events of the Nikonian reforms and the following schism. This led to the parish considering the acceptance of priesthood. In January of 1983, a full parish vote was conducted regarding this question. Around 80% of the members voted for the parish to accept priesthood and unite with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR).

This presentation will examine and present the processes of accepting English by the Pomortsi in Erie and their later acceptance of the Priesthood and unification with ROCOR. Backed by historical documents and accounts of people directly involved in the process, we will examine the details of these events as well as their consequences.

What social, cultural and theological reasons led to this? What consequences did these events have on the life of the parish? Why did the parish join ROCOR and not for instance other strictly Old Believer jurisdictions? What happened to the 20% of the Pomortsi who rejected the acceptance of priesthood? These and many other points will be examined and presented.

Keywords: Old Believers, Old Ritualists, Pomortsi, Priestless, Priestly, English, USA.