

**A Statement from the Diocesan Council of the Australian and New Zealand Diocese
of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia concerning
Abbot Christopher (Vakhabov)**

This statement has been prepared by the Australian and New Zealand Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia to explain the unfortunate situation of Abbot Christopher (Vakhabov), placed in detention in July 2014 by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Security (DIBS) and still in detention. It is regrettable that the Diocese finds itself obliged to answer certain falsehoods recently spread by Father Christopher and those who purport to support him.

By way of background, Father Christopher came to our Diocese from the Diocese of Tiraspol-Dubasări early in 2013. He was assigned to the parish of All Saints of Russia in Croydon, NSW, as rector. He was warmly welcomed by the parish and by the wider church community.

In receiving Father Christopher the Diocesan authorities were aware that his relative youth and inexperience, combined with a degree of impetuosity, had adversely affected his ministry in Tiraspol-Dubasări. It was nevertheless felt that he could make a success of pastoral service in our Diocese.

Aspects of Father Christopher's ministry were indeed successful and contributed positively to the life of the parish and the church community in Sydney. He was a warm and engaging pastor. His Bible studies and discussion groups were popular and well-attended and in this work he showed himself to be a knowledgeable and capable teacher.

There were nevertheless aspects of Father Christopher's ministry that were troubling, both to his own parishioners and to the wider church community. A tonsured monk, Father Christopher spurned monastic discipline, openly questioning the hallowed tradition of the Church in this regard. His conduct during the divine services and his manner of life was such as to cause confusion amongst the faithful.

Father Christopher was well aware of this. He was spoken to on many occasions by both the Diocesan authorities and the Parish Council. He also received formal written advice from Metropolitan Hilarion of the need to change his ways. Despite this, by mid-2014 concern with regard to his pastoral ministry in the Croydon parish was such that other positions within the Diocese were canvassed. Father Christopher steadfastly refused to consider all possible alternatives.

It was against this background that the Vicar-General, Mitred Archpriest Michael Protopopov, properly exercising the authority entrusted to him in Metropolitan

Hilarion's absence, advised DIBS in July 2014 that the renewal of Father Christopher's visa would not be supported. Had it not been for Father Christopher's own subsequent actions, he would have continued to serve in the Croydon parish until the expiration of his visa in November 2014, at which time he would have been farewelled fittingly.

Less than a week after DIBS was advised that Father Christopher's visa would no longer be supported, the parish authorities became aware that he had a 14 year-old boy staying with him in his one-room apartment. The boy was not a relative of Father Christopher's, but the child of a family in Belarus with which he had become acquainted online. Father Christopher had sponsored the boy's visit to Australia without the blessing of the Ruling Bishop or consultation with the Diocesan or parish authorities.

In view of the evident inappropriateness of the boy being accommodated in his own apartment, Father Christopher was on 14 July 2014 asked by both Bishop George and Father Michael Protopopov to find a family with which the boy could stay while he remained in Australia. Father Christopher agreed to this.

Alternative accommodation for the boy was arranged on 15 July 2014. A day later, Father Christopher refused to comply with these arrangements. Increasingly alarmed by Father Christopher's behaviour and his refusal to place the boy in an appropriate family setting, and mindful of its duty of care with regard to child safety, the Diocesan authorities contacted both DIBS and the New South Wales Police.

It is understood that on 18 July 2014 DIBS resolved to cancel Father Christopher's visa and that soon after it resolved to cancel the visa of the boy. On Tuesday 22 July the boy was taken into the care of the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and on Thursday 24 July Father Christopher was detained by DIBS. The boy was shortly after returned to his family in Belarus and Father Christopher was advised by DIBS that he would be deported in early August.

At no time has Father Christopher's reckless wilfulness been more evident than in his conduct in relation to this boy. Had he sought counsel from those who could have properly advised him, and had he complied with his own undertakings to the Diocesan authorities, he might not now be in the lamentable circumstances in which he finds himself.

Father Christopher has now appealed for assistance, stating that he has been abandoned by the Church and left without adequate means of support. Neither of these things is true. He has had been visited in detention by many of the clergy and laity of the Diocese and he has been paid in full – despite his suspension – up until the date on which his contract formally ended: 1 November 2014.

Father Christopher has also stated that he has no idea why he has been detained. In this he is disingenuous. He understands full well that it is because of his conduct in relation to the boy that the civil authorities have since extended his detention by means of a Criminal Justice Stay Certificate and that the purpose of this extension is to allow the NSW Police to complete their investigation of this matter.

In addition, Father Christopher has formally complained to the civil authorities that the Russian Orthodox Church has mistreated him because of his prayers for Ukraine. This is arrant nonsense. As the faithful of our Diocese are well aware, prayers for Ukraine have been offered in all our parishes at the request of Patriarch Kirill and of Metropolitan Hilarion.

Given his present circumstances, Father Christopher's continued criticism of his Diocesan and parish authorities calls into question his suitability for further ministry of any kind in any part of the Holy Orthodox Church. In this regard, his statements and actions since his detention are matters that will be carefully considered when, upon completion of the investigation of his conduct by the civil authorities, his case is considered by the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Court.

Sadly, some of those who consider themselves Father Christopher's friends and supporters have at times conducted themselves inappropriately, bullying and harassing Diocesan and parish officials and members of the wider church community. In addition, the family of the boy in Belarus have reported receiving harassing telephone calls from Australia. We implore those responsible for this shameful conduct to desist.

The Diocesan Council is at present carefully reviewing the whole matter to ensure that such a situation will not occur again. Within the scope of this review are such matters as the recruitment of clergymen into our Diocese from abroad, the handling of concerns in relation to child safety, and the application of the Diocesan Policy on Inappropriate Behaviour.

This episode has been an extremely painful one in the life of the Diocese and one that we all hope will soon come to an end. At this stage the best approach is to patiently await the completion of the police investigation, hoping that no crime has been committed and praying that peace in the Croydon parish and across our Diocese will soon be restored.