Metropolitan Hilarion: Đukanović paid no heed to the voice of the people

On 5th September 2020, in the Church and the World TV programme, which is broadcast by Russia-24 news channel on Saturdays and Sundays, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, answered questions from its host Yekaterina Gracheva.

Ye. Gracheva: Hello, this is the Church and the World on Russia-24 channel, and we are asking questions to the chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk. How do you do, Vladyka!

Metropolitan Hilarion: How do you do, Yekaterina! How do you do, dear brothers and sisters!

Ye. Gracheva: I would like to begin the new season of our programme with political developments in Belarus. Presidential elections have taken place, opposition rallies are not subsiding, and a split in society is evident. Moreover, this split has affected the Church as well. The head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus has spoken out in support of the opposition movement, saying that Lukashenko should be holding a constructive dialogue with demonstrators. And the Belarusian Orthodox Church has forbidden its priests to engage in protests, asking parishioners not to yield to provocations. How, in your opinion, can this conflict in Belarus be resolved at the church level?

Metropolitan Hilarion: The Russian Orthodox Church has the official position on how Orthodox Christians, especially clergymen, must conduct themselves in a situation of civil confrontation and in a situation of political confrontation. In the event of a conflict between two political forces clergymen must not take sides: the Church is to be above the conflict. The Church should draw the authorities' attention to infringements that take place, to facts of oppression, to violations of law and order, but to take sides in the conflict, to say, 'we support the authorities' or 'we support the opposition, this or that political party' – this is what members of the Church, at least clergymen, must not do. It is my understanding that the position of the Belarusian Orthodox Church in this conflict has been based on this very principle.

Ye. Gracheva: Against this background, the Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus, Metropolitan Pavel, has been relieved from office. After the elections he first congratulated Lukashenko on the victory and then withdrew his greetings and even apologised for his words. Was his dismissal caused by his statements?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First of all, I would not call it a dismissal. At the session of the Synod

Metropolitan Pavel presented an extensive report on the situation in Belarus. He himself said that, in his view, the Belarusian Church needs a new leader and it should be a man who was born and bred in Belarus. Vladyka Pavel was born and raised in Russia; he is a citizen of the Russian Federation. He spent many years serving abroad. I personally have known him for nearly twenty years. There was a time when I took from him the charge of the Diocese of Austria and Hungary which he had headed before me. Vladyka recommended appointing another man to Belarus, and the choice fell on the person who, indeed, is flesh of flesh of the Belarusian people, who was raised there.

It can be said that from time to time some sort of optimisation of church governing occurs. As you know, other decisions were also adopted by the Synod: several metropolitans were transferred to another sees; a new rector of the Moscow Theological Academy and a new abbot of the Holy Trinity and St. Sergius Lavra were appointed. All this was caused by the necessity to optimise church governing. At the same time, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and the Holy Synod always give a chance to the man who, maybe, did not do enough to show his worth at one post, to acquit himself well at another post. For it is not always the case that the failure of a particular archpastor in one diocese means that he will not do well in another one. The experience suggests that it is not the case. However, if there are serious violations of church discipline, then a bishop may be taken to the ecclesiastical court. At the Synod's latest session three decisions were taken with regard to the bishops dismissed from the administration, and now the Ecclesiastical Court will decide their case.

Ye. Gracheva: However, the most cited and talked about decision of the Russian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod which you mentioned and which took place in late August, was to inflict punishment on monks and priests for disclosing church secrets. Moreover, concrete punishments were specified, such as suspension from service for up to three years. What caused that? Was it numerous Telegram channels that appeared recently? It is clear that someone well informed about the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church shares the in-house information with these channels.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Of course, it was caused by certain data leaks, responsible for which are staff members of some church departments. The Holy Synod deemed it important to remind such employees about the responsibility they bear, working at church institutions. For there is such concept as "state secret." It is protected by the law. People employed by governmental agencies even sign special contracts which stipulate that. At least, I know what the situation is in the Department for External Church Relations which I head: every our employee signs a contract that contains a clause about non-disclosure of confidential in-house information. Therefore, if such disclosure takes place, the person who did it must be punished.

Ye. Gracheva: It is just that the majority of people in a secular society believe that the Church can have no secrets from the society, as opposed to commercial structures. What exactly is being protected

today?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I can tell about the sphere in which I work. Church politics, just like civil politics, require certain actions, negotiations, and sometimes such negotiations are prepared in the mode of confidentiality. And if someone begins to disclose details of a certain decision at the preparatory stage, it can be damaging for this decision. These are quite obvious facts. It does not mean that the Church has some secrets which it wants to conceal from people. I am talking about in-house activities and confidential correspondence. A person employed by a particular church department must not disclose in-house and especially confidential information.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, while our programme was on vacation, parliamentary elections took place in Montenegro. Although President Đukanović's party got into the parliament and won, its preponderance is symbolic. Someone calls it a defeat. We also remember that Đukanović is in a continuing sharp conflict with the canonical Church in the country. How can the current political situation and the new cabinet change the plight of the Church in the country and affect this long-brewing conflict?

Metropolitan Hilarion: First of all, I would like to say that Đukanović has indeed lost most of the support he enjoyed over the past thirty years. I think it is a direct consequence of the conflict with the canonical Church that he started. Why did he do that? Perhaps, he wanted to get additional points for the election, but instead he lost them. We warned him about it in our programme. I reminded him about the example of Petro Oleksiyovych Poroshenko who in the same way had tried to score points by supporting the schismatics to the prejudice of the canonical Church. We know well how Poroshenko's political carrier ended.

Now Đukanović is facing a situation when the opposition blocs (there are two in Montenegro) have collectively received more votes than his party. It means that if they come to an agreement they will be able to form the government and have the majority in the parliament. It means that *de facto* Đukanović will lose control over the country. In my view, it is one of the consequences of the conflict that he started, because the canonical Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which is a part of the Serbian Church, is the Church of the Montenegrin people. He tried to create a legislative basis for expropriating the property of the canonical Church so that later its churches could be given to schismatics. People realised that; the Church raised its voice in defence of its shrines; all summer mass processions with the cross were being held in Montenegro to protect the shrines. Regrettably, Đukanović paid no heed to the voice of the people. He went against his people and now he is going to reap what he sowed.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, in the end of August the Army-2020 International Military Forum competed its work. Among the military defence novelties designed in our country and presented at the forum was a new uniform for priests – cassocks in khaki. Almost immediately the Russian Orthodox Church stated

that it had given no blessing to making such cassocks. Whose initiative was it? Are you in favour of or against such vestments for priests?

Metropolitan Hilarion: I do not support the idea of such vestments for priests. I believe that priests have the vestments, formed over the centuries, for performing their pastoral duties. Now I am wearing a black cassock and respective insignia. Clergymen in the army, when taking pastoral care of the military personnel, of course, must wear their own robes, and not some hybrid between military uniform and church priestly cassock.

It is a different matter when clergymen find themselves in a situation of hostilities and for some reasons have to wear a battlefield uniform. However, I cannot imagine that a clergyman, in the event that he is expected to be involved in the hostilities on the battlefield or, for example, to save the wounded, will do it in a cassock. It will be rather difficult. Therefore, perhaps, in such situations clergymen might change into a military uniform. As for creating some hybrid between the military uniform and priestly robes, it seems to me a very bad idea.

Ye. Gracheva: Vladyka, in the conclusion of the programme let us talk once again about the decisions of the Holy Synod. It has turned out that the Russian Orthodox Church is now widening the area of its pastoral responsibility. Now it includes, among other territories, Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea. The mass media are starting to joke that our priests will be preaching among the Papuans. What is the total number of non-Christians that the Russian Orthodox Church receives into its bosom every year?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Almost at its every session our Holy Synod takes a decision to open new parishes in far abroad countries. If someone is joking that we are going to preach among the Papuans, well, as they say, there is a grain of joke in every joke. We already preach there, and there are already people who have received baptism.

As a matter of fact, the Patriarchal Exarchate in Southeast Asia, which was established not so long ago, is developing quite dynamically. And the fact that at the Synod we took a decision to consecrate the bishop of Jakarta who will assist the Exarch, and received into the bosom of the Russian Church a group of believers from Papua New Guinea, is an indication of the dynamic development of the Russian Orthodox Church's mission in far abroad countries. This mission is being carried out among people regardless of the colour of their skin or the shape of their eyes: we embrace everyone who wishes to appeal to the Orthodox Church.

Ye. Gracheva: Thank you very much, Vladyka, for answering our questions.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Thank you, Yekaterina!

In the second half of the programme Metropolitan Hilarion answered question from TV viewers, which had been sent to the website of the Church and the World programme.

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Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/45414/