Metropolitan Hilarion: We have supported and will support the canonical Church of Montenegro

In the evening of August 2, 2020, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, took part in the live stream of the Internet-Litija Montenegro program.

- Your Eminence, first of all allow me to thank you on behalf of Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral and other hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose jurisdiction extends to Montenegro, for having found a possibility, despite all your high duties as chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, to meet with us on this festive commemoration day of the Prophet Elijah in the Internet-Litija program.

After the adoption of a law on the freedom of faith and legal status of the religious communities, whereby the state can confiscate the property of the Montenegro dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church, people in Montenegro took to streets in protest against the injustice imposed on our Church. Our Church and our people have come out against the anti-Church law peacefully marching with dignity and prayer in procession with the cross. For several months, each Thursday and Sunday, our people called upon our authorities with love and prayer to revoke this contradictory law or change its most disputable articles.

In connection with the COVID-19 measures, the prayer processions were suspended and moved to the internet space.

We know that you are well aware of the process, which was going on in Montenegro for many years and which intensified last year as a law was unilaterally adopted in the end of 2019 that infringes on the rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The best testimony of your awareness of this problem is your public addresses and the statements made by the highest bodies of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Holy Synod and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.

How far is this problem known in the Russian Orthodox Church and in Russia on the whole? And how do you evaluate the developments, including the latest ones linked with the failed negotiations between the Church's expert groups and the Montenegrin government?

- I would like to greet all our viewers in both Montenegro and Serbia and all the Orthodox Christians

who are not indifferent to the fate of Orthodoxy in Montenegro. I would like to convey cordial greetings to His Eminence Amfilohije, Metropolitan of Montenegro and Littoral, and to all the hierarchs of the Serbian Orthodox Church who are serving in the land of Montenegro and, on behalf of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and on my own behalf and on behalf of the whole Russian Orthodox Church, in the first place to assure the Serbian Orthodox Church of our all possible support.

I admire the feat of confession accomplished today by the Orthodox faithful of Montenegro. I was very much impressed by the videos shown by Russian television central channels as well as the tens of thousands of people who took to streets of Montenegrin cities to testify to the faithfulness to their Church. These exposures have made a great impression on the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Of course, we in the Russian Orthodox Church are following today's developments in Montenegro with immense concern. And it is remarkable that in the coronavirus pandemic situation, the Orthodox faithful of Montenegro, who cannot take to street now, use the internet space to bear witness to their faithfulness of Orthodoxy.

We see the situation around the canonical Orthodox Church in Montenegro as a direct encroachment of the civil authorities upon the ages-old heritage of Orthodoxy in this country. It is an encroachment not on the Serbian Church but on canonical Orthodoxy.

The Orthodox faith is universal; it is not divided into Byzantine or Russian, Serbian or Montenegrin. At the same time, in each country and in each people this true faith has its own distinctive national expression. However, the canonical structure of the Church, her canonical order does not always coincide with state boundaries. And many Orthodox Churches are multinational.

For instance, the Russian Orthodox Church is not only the Church of Russia. The canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church also embraces Ukraine, Byelorussia, Moldavia, Baltic republics and Central Asia states. The jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church extends to Japan, Mongolia and China. In each of these countries, Orthodoxy has its own distinctive expression but for all the peculiarities of their national mentality, Orthodox Christians in these countries are members of the one Russian Orthodox Church.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is also a multinational Church and she is present not only in Serbia but also in other states. And when politicians wish to create an independent Church of Montenegro, tearing it away from the Serbian Orthodox Church, we cannot agree with it in any way because the administrative matters of a Church's order should be decided not by politicians but by the Church herself. Politicians should be engaged in political, international, social problems and in domestic policy

and concern over the material welfare of the population. But to interfere in the internal affairs of a Church and in her order is something they should not do.

- The Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, the leading force in Montenegro, has included the creation of its own 'autocephalous church' in its plan and aims for the future. Your Eminence, how do you see this development, considering that it is a secular party of civil orientation?

- The Lord Jesus Christ said, 'I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it' (Mt. 16:18). And here politicians say all of a sudden: I will build my own church. It is not political leaders' business to create Churches. Let them create political parties. And the governance of the Church is a prerogative of church people.

The boundaries of the Church are known to change in history. It is not some immovable fact; it is a living process. However, it does not befit politicians to create some boundaries within a Church. It is exclusively an internal church affair. And if a political party sets itself the task to create a church of its own, then one may ask whether this party has nothing else to do? So they have solved all the social problems or what?

There is a notion of 'freedom of conscience' and 'freedom of faith'. And if a political party comes out with slogans that they will create some church of their own, then it is a direct interference and direct intervention in the sphere that politicians should not trespass at all. It is exactly a violation of the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of faith.

I will give an example. The Roman Catholic Church has her own dioceses and structures in many countries of the world. At the same time, the church centers are located in Rome. Until recently in China there was a situation in which the Chinese leadership demanded that the Catholic Church of China be actually separated from Rome. But from the Catholic point of view, it is an abnormal situation. Ultimately, the Chinese leadership entered into negotiation with the Vatican and an agreement was reached that the Chinese Catholics would be able to recognize Rome as their church center.

Rome is the church center for the Catholics of the world. And for the Orthodox Christians, not only in Russia but also in the countries I have enumerated, the church center (not political but precisely spiritual) is located in Moscow.

The same concerns the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has her own structures in many countries, but its spiritual center is the Serbian Patriarchate, which is located in Belgrade now, but once it was in the city of Pec. Similarly, the historical center of the Russian Orthodox Church is located in Moscow now,

but once it was in Kiev.

Therefore, it is not the business of political parties to embark on the shaded enterprise of creating a Church. The church people should be given an opportunity for solving their own issues and problems.

- The other day the president of Montenegro stated that the Serbian Orthodox Church is reluctant to meet half-way the Montenegrin authorities because she receives such instructions from Moscow and Belgrade. Generally, in recent times such accusations can be heard coming from our various officials. Your Eminence, what relation does the Russian Orthodox Church have to fraternal Local Churches including our Serbian Orthodox Church? Are there such opinions?

- The Russian Orthodox Church cannot give instructions to fraternal Local Churches. But the Russian Church always helps and prayerfully supports fraternal Orthodox Churches.

I will remind you that relations between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches are ages old. I would also like to point to the deep relations existing between our Orthodox nations. It is not in Russia but in Montenegro that these words have passed into a proverb: the number of us, the Montenegrins together with the Russians, is this (citing the common population number).

The unity of our nations is sealed with the blood of our soldiers who gave their lives for the liberation of the Balkans from the Turkish domination. For us this is a sacred history. Therefore, certainly we supported and will support the people spiritually nourished by the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches. We have supported and will support the Orthodox Church in Serbia and Montenegro. The point, however, is not the canonical Church, not the schismatic entities who call themselves Orthodox but actually are imposters and self-ordained persons.

- In the last two decades, during various turbulent situations in the church-state relations in Montenegro, the Russian Orthodox Church has given her support to any initiative for improving and regulating inter-church and inter-state relations. Along with regular meetings and contacts with representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Russian Church has had contacts with high representative of the Montenegro civil authorities. It is known that Mr. Jukanovic met in Moscow with the late Patriarch Alexis II. And the present Patriarch, His Holiness Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, met with President Jukanovich during the consecration of the cathedral in Podgorica. During your visit to Montenegro in 2011, you had meetings with the state leaders of our country. What is your message to the Montenegrin authorities today?

- Our message is very simple: hands off the Orthodox Church. It is our deep conviction that the politicians who encroach on the Orthodox Church are pursuing an anti-popular cause – they are going against their people. The testimony is the tens of thousands of people who, until recently, took to the streets. The testimony is the teachers, medical doctors, seamen, the military who are collecting signatures for the defense of the canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church as part of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In this situation, if the state goes against the Church, then it thus acts against its people. Therefore, our message to the Montenegrin authorities is very simple: Stop, come to your senses; put an end to the persecution against the Church that you have launched now.

Already before the pandemic, I had a meeting with Montenegro's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in Russia, who came to me apparently on the instruction of Montenegro's President M. Jukanovic. The head of the diplomatic mission of Montenegro brought to me on that occasion a Russian version of the law on freedom of faith and beliefs and the legal status of the religious communities, already adopted now, and tried to prove that there was not discrimination of the Church in it.

However, it follows from this law that all the church property, which had been created before 1918, shall become a property of the state, and some state body shall decide to which church structure this property is to be transferred. And during the meeting with Mr. Ambassador I said, you are creating conditions for alienation of the church property for the possible transfer of church facilities to some other structures. It is a very dangerous road.

Addressing the Montenegrin authorities today, I would like to say this: if you want the people's support, do not go against the Church. Support the Church and then the people will support you.

- In your previous interviews, especially in the Church and the World program, you drew a parallel between the situation of the canonical Church in Montenegro and Ukraine. One cannot help noticing that the problematization of this matter – the attitude to the Church in both Montenegro and Ukraine – does not come from the faithful, not even from society but rather from the secular authorities. Why is it so?

- True, the situation in Montenegro reminds of the situation as developed in Ukraine under President P. Poroshenko. Mr. Poroshenko also set as one of the aims of his pre-election campaign to create an autocephalous Ukrainian church separated from the Russian Orthodox Church, in his belief that he will thus secure his political future and his second presidential term.

For this sake P. Poroshenko conspired with Patriarch Bartholomew. And, to our deep regret, Patriarch Bartholomew supported those political ambitions and legalized the schism in Ukraine, which certainly did not solve the problem of the Ukrainian schism, because the canonical Church remains as it was in

unity with the Russian Church, while the schism remains a schism as it was. In this schism, there are those who did not have even a semblance of hierarchal consecration, i.e., they are imposters and self-ordained persons. And no ‘tomos’ from Patriarch Bartholomew will be able to make them legitimate.

As for the end of Mr. Poroshenko’s political carrier, everybody knows that, although he had gone through all Ukraine with the notorious ‘tomos’, he still was voted down, as we say with a bang, in disgrace, and ‘the tomos’ did not help him.

I believe, the political leaders who seek to stake on some church projects in their political pre-election struggle make a great mistake. The more so that in this case the point is not that a politician seeks to enlist the support of the Church. On the contrary, to achieve his political goals he seeks to destroy the acting Church. That is to say, he does not like the Church existing in Montenegro today and wishes to create some new church.

- Despite the extremely burdened relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople, we could see – when the decision was made about changing the status of Agia Sophia and making it into a mosque – the strong disagreement of the Russian Orthodox Church with this action. What can you say about it?

- I would like first of all to recall that His Holiness Patriarch Kirill was the first Orthodox church leader to raise his voice in defense of Agia Sophia at the time when the decision to make it a mosque had already been announced, but was not adopted as yet. And later the State Duma of the Russian Federation, following the Patriarch, adopted a statement on this matter.

Some mass media representatives in Russia and Ukraine, too, assert that Patriarch Bartholomew himself is to blame for the fact that Agia Sophia has become a mosque because he split up the Orthodox Church and God has punished him for it. But I in no way can agree with it.

Hagia Sophia of Constantinople is a common Orthodox shrine. For us, Russian people, it has a utterly special significance. When Prince Vladimir thought over the choice of a faith for the Russian people, he sent his ambassadors to various countries for them to look how and where people worship God and then they came back and told him about it. The ambassadors visited Jews, Muslims and Western Christians and finally found themselves in Constantinople. And when they entered Hagia Sophia and saw all the divine beauty of that church, its precious adornment and priceless mosaics decorating the church, and heard church singing and saw the solemnity of the worship service, then upon their return they told Prince Vladimir, ‘We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth’. That visit predetermined the historic choice made by Prince Vladimir in faviour of the Orthodox Christianity.

Making Hagia Sophia a mosque is a blow on the whole Orthodox Christianity; I would even say on the entire world Christianity. We, Orthodox Christians, are enduring this blow together and enduring it painfully.

Again, some say that Patriarch Bartholomew could prevent the turning of Agia Sophia into a mosque but he did not do it. I cannot agree with this either. He could not prevent it just as he cannot achieve for long years the opening of the theological school on Halki Island. The Turkish authorities ignore Patriarch Bartholonew.

We are very disappointed of course by the fact that the world Orthodoxy met that sad event being internally divided. It is very sad.

However, there are also some joyful moment in our life. Not so long ago, a huge church was opened in Moscow in which our military will pray. And in Belgrade, works are almost completed for the interior adornment of St. Sava's Cathedral. Participating in the adornment are also the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church, and our remarkable masters of mosaic. I hope that in the near future this work will be completed and that during our visits to Belgrade and our visit to St. Sava's Cathedral we will be able to feel what the Prince Vladimir's ambassadors felt ten centuries ago at Hagia Sophia.

- Your Eminence, we are very grateful to the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state for the help with adorning St. Sava's Cathedral, which will become the central cathedral of not only Belgrade but also our whole Serbian Orthodox Church.

I would like also to touch upon the topic of relationships between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian authorities. Recently some amendments have been made to the Constitution. The Russian Orthodox Church has taken an active part in this process by offering her own proposal for amendments to the Constitution. How important these amendments are for the Russian Church and Russian society as a whole?

- First of all, our Constitution now mentions the name of God. It is very important of course for all the faithful, not only Orthodox, but also for Russian Muslims, Judaists and even Buddhists, who have unanimously supported this amendment.

And all our traditional religions have also supported the article, now already part of the Constitution, about marriage as the union of man and woman.

There were many other amendments, in particular, those aimed to raise the social welfare of our population. For instance, the article on the obligatory indexation of pensions. There also appeared

articles on the state protection of motherhood and childhood. That is, the adopted articles of the Constitution meet the aspirations of the people. That is why an absolute majority of the population voted for them.

In conclusion of the program, Metropolitan Hilarion answered questions that came from viewers.

- Recently, your Paschal message to the president of Montenegro was published, and the authorities of Montenegro wanted to present your message as allegedly supporting their policy. How can you comment this?

- Annually I send the Nativity and Pascha greetings to heads of approximately 100 or may be 120 states with which the Russian Federation has diplomatic relations, as well as to the heads of the states in which Orthodox faithful live. In my turn, I also receive message of greetings from heads of states and heads of Churches, and from very many people. Annually I receive approximately one thousand Easter and Christmas greetings, but it is off the top of my head to interpret these messages as, for instance, support of my views.

- In connection with the adopted law "On Freedom of Faith and Beliefs and Legal Status of the Religious Communities", we, Orthodox believers in Montenegro traditionally greet each other. Just as during Pascha it is a tradition to greet each other with words 'Christ Is Risen', so today, in connection with the recent events, the faithful in Montenegro greet each other exclaiming, 'We'll not give up shrines'. It means that people will defend their shrines, their values. How do you perceive these words?

- In the beginning of our talk, I already said and I would like to repeat once again that I admire the courage of the Orthodox Montenegrins, who were not afraid of taking to streets. They are not afraid to collect signatures in defense of their shrines, as we say, 'to defend them with their own lives'.

- I would like to address the Orthodox faithful of Montenegro and ask them to continue standing just as firmly in defense of canonical Orthodoxy and their shrines and to not yield to the promises of the political leaders who say that we have a wrong Church and that they wish to give us a 'right' one.

There may be only one church – the Church built by the Lord Jesus Christ. And the so-called churches created by schismatics or politicians are not true churches. If a politician has some questions to ask the Church, then we should sit down at the negotiation table and come to an agreement. But regrettably, the attempts to draw the canonical Church into dialogue on the conditions proposed today by the authorities of Montenegro cannot be understood as a full-fledged desire of dialogue; because the law, which has been adopted, is openly discriminatory. It is a direct encroachment upon the Church. And evasive

measures for suspension of the law or its particular articles do not solve the problem created by the Montenegrin authorities.

When we are told that by our commenting on the situation in Montenegro we allegedly interfere in the internal affairs of this country, we cannot agree with it. The Orthodox Church throughout the world is the one Body of Christ. And, as St. Paul says, ‘If one part suffers, every part suffers with it’ (1 Cor. 12:26).

That is why all that is happening now in Montenegro induces deep pain and sincere compassion in us. We do not interfere in political matters, nor show the people of Montenegro for whom to vote, for which party to vote. But we have supported and will support the canonical Church in the land of Montenegro as part of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/45456/