



Metropolitan Hilarion: Transformation of Hagia Sophia into mosque in situation of today would be inadmissible violation of freedom of faith

On June 4, 2020, in the Tserkov i Mir talk-show broadcast by Russia-24 TV channel, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, answered questions from presenter Ekaterina Gracheva.

E. Gracheva: Good day, Ekaterina Gracheva is with you. It is the Church and the World program. We are talking with Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate. Good day, Your Eminence.

Metropolitan Hilarion: Good day, Ekaterina. Good day, dear brothers and sisters.

E. Gracheva: The vote on amending the Constitution has been completed this week: 78% those polled have spoken for introducing amendments to the Constitution. It might be said that it is even more than what had been forecast by opinion polls. I know that you voted too. Generally, how active the clergy were in this voting and does the ROC have data on the clergy's turnout?

Metropolitan Hilarion: We have not collected specially the data on the turnout of the clergy but we do know that most of the hierarchs and clergy took part in the voting. Certainly, the strong showing reached is due, first of all, to the fact that people had scrutinized these amendments; they were published in good time; they were manifold, and I think many of the voters paid attention to some particular amendments.

For instance, believers give a very special importance to the fact that the Constitution now mentions the faith in God, and this Constitution item unites all the traditional confessions of the Russian Federation. You are aware that when the formation of these constitutional amendments was yet in process, the Interreligious Council in Russia assembled under the chairmanship of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, which included representatives of Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, as well as the Inter-Christian Consultative Committee, which includes representatives of Christian confessions in our country. It was a joint meeting at which the two organizations agreed to request the inclusion of this amendment to the Constitution. The meeting also discussed and unanimously resolved that it was necessary to include in the Constitution an article about marriage as union between man and woman.

Even if there were only these two amendments, the faithful of the country would still vote for them, and

they constitute a vast majority of our population. There were also many other amendments including those which guarantee the indexation of pensions, and these are very important amendments of course, which is why they have received such a broad support.

E. Gracheva: President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is going on July 15 to say namas in Hagia Sophia, the first to be performed in nearly 100 years. This week, there has been a voting that should have repealed the decision of the cabinet of ministers made in 1934 to recognize this monument of history and architecture as a museum. In other words, if it is a yes vote, it is now a mosque and namaz can really be held in it. As was stated during the voting, the decision will be announced within two weeks. Do you have any information, may be from your own sources, about what this decision most likely be and is it necessary to wait for some joint response to it from the Orthodox Churches of the world?

Metropolitan Hilarion: Judging from the propaganda carried on in Turkey, the point was to decide to transform Hagia Sophia into a mosque. If such a decision is finally made, it will cause a great grief among Orthodox Christians throughout the world because Hagia Sophia is a common Christian shrine.

Certainly, we cannot revise what happened in the past when Constantinople fell under an onslaught of Turkish troops and became Istanbul and Hagia Sophia was transformed into a mosque. It is a fact of the past. However, it should not be forgotten that for almost one thousand years before it was precisely a Christian, Orthodox church. It was built as such by Emperor Justinian; it was the main church of the whole Byzantine Empire. It was in it that the envoys of Prince Vladinir were present at the worship service and when they came back home they said, 'We did not know where we were – on earth or in the Heaven, for there is no such beauty anywhere'. After this church was transformed into a mosque, from the Christian point of view it was desecrated: in particular, the mosaics with sacred images were battered. And the mosaics, which are there in the church today, have miraculously survived because they were covered with plaster and uncovered only in the modern time.

What will be the fate of these mosaics? How will this edifice function if it is turned once again into a mosque? And why do Turkish leaders disrespect the feelings of millions of Christians, millions of Orthodox believers? We cannot but ask all these questions now. It seems to me that the decision made by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1934 was a decision aimed to reconcile all so that the building could function precisely as a museum open to everyone. This is why it will be a great regret and grief for us if such decision will be finally made and the church will be transformed into a mosque.

E. Gracheva: But it is clear: obviously, it is a certain 'slap in the face' to the successors of Byzantium by the Turkish secular authorities. What will be the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church? Has the ROC prepared a response?

Metropolitan Hilarion: We have already stated our position and we will not disavow it: one cannot return to the Middle Ages now. We are living in a multi-polar, multi-confessional world and it is proper to respect the feelings of believers. It is clear that Turkey at present is a country with the prevailing Muslim population, but I know Istanbul very well and there is no lack of mosques. Right next to Hagia Sophia stands the acting Blue Mosque and one can come to it.

We do not understand why Hagia Sophia needs to be transformed into a mosque precisely now. That is to say, it is clear that it is provoked by the internal political situation in Turkey, that the Turkish president, in this case, takes the side of those who call to transform a church into a mosque. But we believe that this act represents today an inadmissible violation of freedom of faith, and this certainly is not an internal affair of Turkey alone, as many Turkish officials maintain now. It is a monument of common Christian significance, global significance; it is a world monument of culture, and we are profoundly grieved by what is now happening around this Christian church.

E. Gracheva: And in Montenegro, the developments around the Serbian Orthodox Church, are they an internal affair, because thousands-strong rallies have continued there? We have talked about it on several occasions and even appealed from our program to Jukanovic personally. Why do Montenegrin authorities fail to react to the developments around the canonical Church?

Metropolitan Hilarion: The Montenegrin authorities have decided to create their own 'pocket' church, which would be located within the boundaries of the Montenegrin state and would reinforce the independence of Montenegro by its existence. Exactly the same concept was presented by former Ukrainian president Poroshenko, who for some reason believed that an independent state should have an independent church. However, for instance, there is the Roman Catholic Church whose head lives in the Vatican while this Church has its dioceses and structures all over the world. And for some reason nobody says that this Church should be separated from Rome. Even in China, a compromise has been now reached between the Vatican and the Chinese authorities that the election of bishops will be approved in Rome, and nobody says that it is interference in one's internal affairs.

In Montenegro, the posing the problem in itself is false, mistaken and dangerous. It has already made the Montenegrin society explode, and the processions with the cross, which were held throughout the spring and are held now in summer despite the quarantine measures, show that the Montenegrin society is discontent with this decision. From the very beginning, this decision was discriminatory because a law was adopted for the actual nationalization of the church property, with an opportunity for the state to hand this church property over to any structure including the uncanonical church of Montenegro, which is extremely small, has no authority whatsoever, but can apparently be used by the Montenegrin authorities to create a national church.

The attempts to arrange dialogue between the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and the Montenegrin authorities has been unsuccessful so far. The Montenegrin authorities do not want to hear the reasoning of the faithful, and this explosive situation does not benefit either the Montenegrin state or the people of Montenegro. Therefore, we very much hope that the president of Montenegro will reject this pernicious tactics and will not repeat the mistake made by former Ukrainian president Poroshenko and will give to the canonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which is part of the Serbian Orthodox Church, an opportunity for a normal activity and development.

E. Gracheva: Now that we have begun speaking about Ukrainian schismatics: the non-recognized Ukrainian church and its self-proclaimed Patriarch Philaret now demand that Constantinople give them a new tomos. Last year, we devoted many of our programs to the developments in Ukraine and that very tomos on which the life of this new structure would have depended. But now it turns out that, generally speaking, nothing depends of this tomos. As Philaret himself has admitted, the tomos received last year actually 'does not make the Ukrainian church independent but rather subjects it to Constantinople'. First, is there a chance for them to receive a certain new tomos? And generally speaking, do not the developments invalidate this very tomos in itself? If they receive a second, a third one, will the life of this church change?

Metropolitan Hilarion: All this speaks of the fact that the Ukrainian schismatics have decisively entangle themselves in an adventure they met with through the help of the-then Ukrainian president Poroshenko, who managed to secure a tomos from Patriarch Bartholomew. But this tomos does create a certain inferior half-autocephalous church, with building it on the basis of schismatics who have no canonical ordination. Accordingly, all that is happening in this community now is a natural consequence of what has happened. Uncanonical schismatic communities everywhere have this tendency for splitting. First there may be one group, later there will be two of them, still later three, etc.

For over a quarter of century Philaret struggled for the so-called autocephalous church, and when it came to the granting of tomos, he was simply pushed aside. Allegedly, something was promised to him orally but was not fulfilled later. This structure has come to be headed by another man; Philaret was hurt and declared his former structure as existing, that is, there is now a schism in a schism.

But from history we know of many situations when schisms were created and later began dividing. Once there was in Greece an old-calendar schism and now there are already eight or nine groups of schismatics. So, there is nothing surprising in it.

I think, for the Patriarchate of Constantinople this story is now closed, but for the Orthodox Church in the world it is not, because under the pressure of Constantinople this schismatic structure has been

recognized by some hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the Greek Orthodox Church, while other Orthodox Church do not recognize this structure. That is to say, the schism, which has appeared in Ukraine for purely political reasons and because of Patriarch Bartholomew's actions, is now growing into a common Orthodox schism and we all will have to deal with this problem until it is resolved.

E. Gracheva: Thank you very much, Your Eminence, for answering our questions.

Metropolitan Hilarion: thank you, Ekaterina.

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