Metropolitan Hilarion: consultations in “Amman format” will continue

In his interview to RIA Novosti news agency, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Department for External Church Relations, who had participated in the meeting of Primates and representatives of the Local Churches in Amman on February 26, dedicated to the problems of inter-Orthodox unity, commented on the results of the meeting.

– Vladyka, what problems did the participants in the meeting regard as the most pressing for the Orthodox world today?

– Some of these problems were enumerated in the Press Release adopted as the result of the meeting. The document notes that the gathering “was to strengthen the fraternal bonds between brothers and their Churches, to promote the bonds of peace in Christ among them, to advocate for the unity of the Orthodox Churches, and to renew dialogue in the prayerful hope of bringing reconciliation where there has been discord.”

As is emphasized in the Press Release, “decisions concerning issues of Orthodox-wide importance, including the granting of autocephaly to particular Churches, should be finalized in a spirit of pan-Orthodox dialogue and unity, and with pan-Orthodox consensus.” The Patriarchate of Constantinople claims today that it has the sole right to establish new autocephalous Churches, tearing away ecclesiastical territories from the already existing Churches. However, according to the agreements reached earlier at the inter-Orthodox level, the granting of autocephaly is only possible with the consent of the Mother Church (that is, the Church, to which the Church aspiring to autocephaly belongs at the moment) and providing that all universally recognized Orthodox Churches give consent to this. Constantinople declares such agreements void. As the meeting in Amman pointed out, pan-Orthodox consensus is needed for the establishment of an autocephalous Church.

It is in this context that we should consider what the Press Release says further: “Concerning the current ecclesiastical situation in the Ukraine the participants also recognised that a pan-Orthodox dialogue is necessary for healing and reconciliation.” There is a schism in Ukraine, and Constantinople claims to have healed it. However, the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople have only deepened the existing confrontation. In order to put an end to the schism, to return the schismatics to the bosom of the Church, a dialogue is necessary with the participation of all Local Churches, rather than Constantinople’s unilateral actions. This understanding was reflected in the Press Release.

With regard to the intention of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to grant autocephaly to the unrecognized church of North Macedonia, the document reads as follows: “In the matter concerning North Macedonia, the delegations stated that this matter is to be solved through dialogue within the Serbian Orthodox Church and with pan-Orthodox support.” In other words, the resolution of this issue is the prerogative of the Serbian Church which includes the Macedonian Church. At the same time, a mechanism of pan-Orthodox consultations can be set in motion. Constantinople’s unilateral actions without the consent of other Churches can only bring about a situation, similar to that in Ukraine.

– What resolution to the problem of the church schism in Ukraine was proposed at the meeting?

– As His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine brilliantly said in his address, the only way to return to the Church from schism is through repentance.

Metropolitan Onufry reminded all those gathered for the meeting that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is a part of the Moscow Patriarchate, has the status, closest to autocephaly: “Over time the external and internal circumstances, in which the holy Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian people lived, stimulated the process of perfecting the existing independence of church life and ministry. Today we have *de facto* a real autocephaly as we have our Holy Synod, the Bishops’ Council and the independent ecclesiastical court. We independently elect and consecrate bishops, open new dioceses. We have our own theological schools and various Synodal departments, for instance, of social ministry and external relations.”

The head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church dwelt on the history of schisms in the Ukrainian Orthodoxy, having underscored that by interfering in the Ukrainian affairs Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople violated a lot of church canons, and as the result, the schism was not healed, but deepened.

Many in the Orthodox world believe that resolution to the Ukrainian schism problem lies in the granting of autocephaly to the Ukrainian Church. They say that it will settle all the issues. As Metropolitan Onufry emphasizes, it is not true:

“Some people are saying that autocephalous status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will be a strong remedy for healing the schism. I would like to be honest before God and my conscience and state: I am confident that the autocephalous status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will not heal the schism. Some schismatics may return to the canonical Church, but not all of them. Autocephaly does not guarantee the absolute unity. There are schisms within the autocephalous Churches as well.”

The meeting in Amman was a clear confirmation of support which the Local Orthodox Churches render

to the canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine. Furthermore, the address by His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry helped destroy the myth about the Moscow Patriarchate keeping hold of the Ukrainian Church against its will. This myth was being aggressively thrust on the Greek press and Greek society by Constantinople's propagandists for a long time.

– Could you please comment on the position of the Amman gathering concerning the situation in Montenegro?

– In Montenegro the governmental authorities adopted a discriminatory law which opens a possibility for tearing away property from the canonical Church and transferring it to schsimatics. Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral, who had arrived in Amman as a member of the Serbian Church's delegation, highlighted the consequences of this decision which had already caused mass protests and thousands-strong demonstrations all over the country. The participants in the meeting called upon the leadership of Montenegro "to respect and uphold the fundamental right of ownership of property including that of the Church."

– What is the position on the issues raised in Amman of the Local Churches that did not participate in the meeting, for instance, of the Church of Antioch, of the Georgian and Bulgarian Churches?

– The Church of Antioch fully supports the Russian Church in major issues of the inter-Orthodox agenda, including the Ukrainian issue. However, the Church of Antioch has a conflict with the Church of Jerusalem, which resulted in the severance of Eucharistic communion between them. Despite the recent weeks' attempts, the final agreement was not reached. For this reason the Church of Antioch did not take part in the Amman meeting.

We often hear rebukes coming from the Greek milieu that our reaction to Constantinople's actions was too harsh. We should not have severed communion, they say. But let us consider the following: the Patriarchate of Antioch broke off communion with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem because of one parish in Qatar. And the Ukrainian Church has over 12 thousand parishes, over 250 monasteries, over 100 hierarchs, and millions of faithful. And all this the Patriarch of Constantinople tries to tear away from the one Russian Church. More is to say, the Patriarch of Constantinople "restored to the rank" those who had never had lawful ordination. How else could we react?

For many decades in Greece there has existed the Old Calendar schism that includes "hierarchs," as well as "priests," parishes, monasteries, and faithful. Why doesn't the Patriarch of Constantinople, in cooperation with the Church of Greece, concern himself with healing this schism? There are different Orthodox jurisdictions in America. Why doesn't Constantinople, in cooperation with other Local

Orthodox Churches, concern itself with creating an autocephalous Church in America? Should there be a desire to solve real problems, there are many of them beyond Ukraine. The major goal of Constantinople's incursion into Ukraine was to weaken the one Russian Church. For the same purpose in the 1920s Constantinople supported the Renovationists, and in 1996 split the Church in Estonia.

All Constantinople's talks about the healing of the Ukrainian schism are just a disguise. An in the majority of the Local Orthodox Churches people realize this, including in those Churches which for various reasons did not take part in the meeting in Amman. They also realize that in its actions Constantinople relies on the support of the Unites States, taking advantage of the political confrontation between the USA and Russia.

It is not fortuitous that in his letter to Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem, published on the day of the Amman meeting, Patriarch Bartholomew states that the aim of this gathering is "to serve the obstinate refusal of a certain Local Church to indentify its position with and conform it to what has been customary in Orthodoxy since the earliest times, in which it is helped, if not urged, by the state Russian Federation." It seems that the Patriarch of Constantinople believes that today the observance of the centuries-old principles of Orthodoxy is been ensured by the United States, and not the Russian Federation. Otherwise it is difficult to explain the fact that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as well as U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback and U.S. Ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt, who earlier had been Ambassador to Ukraine, in the most outright way possible promote Constantinople's project of creating an Orthodox structure in Ukraine, separate from the Russian Church.

On the matters discussed at the Amman meeting we are in contact with many Churches, including those that did not participate in it. Consultations with them will be continued in the bilateral format; yet, there is hope that at the next stages of discussion initiated in Amman they will join it.

– Going back to the topic of the schism in Ukraine: why, in your opinion, did the Council in Crete held in 2016 fail to prevent the escalation of tension in church sphere in Ukraine and the creation of a pseudo-church out of schismatic structures?

– We are often being told that the Council in Crete was our missed opportunity to raise the issues which concern us. However, it is not true. The procedure rules and agenda of the Crete Council had been agreed upon in advance, and no pressing issues, such as the healing of the Ukrainian schism, were supposed to be discussed at it. Moreover, such rather burning issue as who and how will grant autocephaly in future had been removed from the agenda of the Council beforehand, although the general agreement on this matter had been reached and it had only remained to finalize details.

We had known in advance that the Council in Crete would not have made any decisions, but intended to attend it anyway – not so much out of desire to resolve certain issues, but rather out of respect for the Patriarch of Constantinople who had convened it. Everything was ready for the trip – hotel rooms and charter flights were booked, texts prepared. However, when one by one the Local Churches refused to participate, we were faced with a question of legitimacy of decisions to be taken. For we always insisted that decisions are legitimate only with full consensus of all universally recognized Orthodox Churches. And what if there is no such consensus?

In that situation Patriarch Kirill sent a letter to Patriarch Bartholomew, suggesting that a pre-Council preparatory meeting should be held with the view of resolving the arisen problems. It was met with flat refusal. We had no choice but, with profound regret, to take decision not to participate in the Council.

At the same time we did not refuse to discuss the Ukrainian problem either in the bilateral or multilateral format. It was with the view of discussing this problem that Patriarch Kirill visited Istanbul in August 2018. Yet, the discussion led to nothing. Patriarch Bartholomew, completely misinformed by those around him, was convinced that as soon as the tomos of autocephaly was signed the majority of canonical bishops would have joined the newly created church. Warnings that it was not going to happen fell on deaf ears.

And today the Patriarch of Constantinople reaps the fruits of what he has sown. His name is no longer commemorated in the Russian Church, and for millions of Orthodox believers in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltic and Central Asian countries, as well as for the faithful of our diaspora, large in number, he has become persona non grata. In the Local Orthodox Churches, his decisions are subjected to severe criticism. He only gains support when managing to set in motion the American diplomacy.

– Can we say that on February 26, in Jordan, a new "Amman format" of inter-Orthodox consultations was born? Will there be a follow-up?

– An important result of the meeting in Amman was a decision to continue inter-Orthodox consultations. The participants in the meeting expressed their hope that the next consultation would take place in the near future, preferably until the end of this year, and that Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople would take part in it. His current self-isolation, his unwillingness to initiate inter-Orthodox consultations or participate in those initiated by others only result in the deepening of confrontation between him and the other Churches. Despite his canonical crimes, unlawful incursion into the territory of the Ukrainian Church, and legalization of the ungraced schismatic community, his participation in the dialogue is possible and important. He must hear the voice of the Local Churches. Otherwise his unilateral actions will lead to the consequences irreparable for the world Orthodoxy.

In 1054 the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople failed to reach an agreement concerning church jurisdiction over south Italy and some other issues. The severance of Eucharistic communion occurred, and the Churches in the East and the West went along different paths. Today the similar schism has arisen within the Orthodox Church. For a thousand years the Pope's claims to universal supremacy met with resistance of the Orthodox Churches. Today within the Orthodoxy there has appeared a hotbed of claims not only to universal supremacy, but also to a kind of infallibility.

A well known proverb *Roma locuta causa finita* ("Rome has spoken, the matter is settled") points to the role of the Pope in the Catholic Church. Yet, now in the Orthodox Church an opinion is being promoted that since a decision is taken in Istanbul, it means that a matter is settled. The decision was taken in Istanbul to grant "autocephaly to Ukraine" and now everyone is required not to discuss, but to recognize this decision. "You must admit that Ukraine's autocephaly is a *fait accompli*," our interlocutors from Constantinople are saying to us. Yet, we have never had an infallible earthly head of the Church whose decisions would be binding whether there is or there is no pan-Orthodox consent. And Constantinople's claims to infallibility provoke justified rejection in the Local Churches, as evidenced by the Amman meeting.

In order to find a way out of this situation, one meeting does not suffice. For this reason the participants in the Amman gathering agreed to continue consultations, invited to which will be Primates and representatives of all universally recognized Local Churches.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/45649/