Metropolitan Hilarion: US Secretary of State Pompeo cancelled the meeting an hour before it, under the pressure of ill-wishers

Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external church relations, told the KP daily how he was received in Washington, how the church situation has changed under Zelensky and whether Russia needs building 'three churches a day'.

Under Zelensky the faithful have been able to sigh with relief

- Your Eminence, you were the first in the Russian Orthodox Church to congratulate Vladimir Zelensky on his victory in the Ukrainian presidential election. Later you thanked him for his non-interference in the Church's affairs. Have any positive movements been made with regard to the canonical Church oppressed there? If the Ukrainian schismatics wished 'burning in hell' to those who had voted for Zelensky, does it mean that he does not support them, at least tacitly?

- President Zelensky stated in pubic that he would not support either side of today's interreligious confrontation in Ukraine and that he would not interfere in church affairs. This very favourably compares him with his predecessor Mr. Poroshenko, who made 'Ukraine's obtaining autocephaly', as it was described, a part of his pre-election campaign. The faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate could sign with relief because the campaign for capturing churches, which was carried out with the support of Poroshenko's regime, has actually fizzled out today. The discriminatory laws introduced by Poroshenko have not been revoked as yet but there is a hope that under the new president, justice will be established in this respect as well.

- Did the UOC primate, Metropolitan Onufry, tell you about his meetings with the new president?

- He did not, but I know from other sources that these meetings are constructive.

Why have the Greeks recognized the Ukrainian schismatics?

- **What has made the Orthodox Church of Greece recognize now the schismatic 'Orthodox Church of Ukraine'?**

- We regret that the Greek Church has recognized this schismatic structure legalized by Constantinople. We are certainly aware that the Greek Church is not autocephalous in the full sense as it is very dependent on Constantinople; it has neither external relations or foreign policy of its own. Moreover, a half of the hierarchs of this Church are at the same time hierarchs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and Constantinople, as is known, threatened to take these dioceses away from the Greek Church if it would show disobedience in the matter of recognition of the schismatic 'Orthodox church of Ukraine'. That is to say, it is a quasi-autocephalous Church. It has endured an unprecedented pressure from Constantinople, which used all means to obtain this recognition and announced this recognition as an accomplished fact a few months before it took place. Besides, it is known (from Greek sources) that Archbishop Hieronymos of Athens endured an unprecedented pressure from the US Embassy in Athens, too.

- What is Moscow's response?

- The response is described in the Holy Synod Decision of October 17, which states that in case the Archbishop of Athens recognizes the so-call OCU, he will be deleted from the diptychs of the Russian Orthodox Church. It has already been done. We also suspend communion with all the hierarchs of the Greek Church who, in this or that form, recognize the OCU. But as for the hierarchs who refused and will refuse to give their recognition, we will preserve the full Eucharistic communion and will keep precisely through them our relations with the Greek Church.

- According to your information, can some other Local Churches follow the example of the Greeks?

- I very much hope that none of the Local Churches will follow this regrettable example.

- Has the incorporation of 'the Russian Exarchate' in Europe into the Moscow Patriarchate now been a severe blow for Bartholomew?

- He himself has delivered this blow on himself, as has it the well-known saying about a man who cuts down the branch on which he is sitting. The Archdiocese of Western European Parishes of Russian Tradition used to be part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but for some reasons unknown to us, it became necessary to abolish it. The archdiocese did not wish to be abolished and after negotiations it decided by a majority vote to return to the Russian Church. Originally, it was part of precisely the Russian Church. In fact, this action has completed the reunion of the Russian diaspora in the fold of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Pompeo cancelled the meeting an hour before it

- The other day you flew to Washington where you, among other things, had a meeting with the head of the American archdiocese of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. How did it go on in a situation of the rupture of relations with Phanar. And what impressions have you brought from America?

- I did not initiate this meeting. It happened in the residence of Archbishop Joseph who heads the Archdiocese of America of the Patriarchate of Antioch. It had been preceded by mediatory initiatives of a certain layman of the Church of Antioch. Archbishop Joseph invited Archbishop Elpidophoros and me to dinner. When it was proposed that I should take part in this meeting, I did not deem it necessary to refuse it because an exchange of opinions, even if we hold opposite positions, can hardly do any harm. Naturally, we did not come to any agreement and did not even intend to try to agree. It was an exchange of already well-known positions.

As far as expressions are concerned, I visited America for the first time a quarter century ago, and it was a completely different country – much more open and well wishing, much less polarized. Nowadays, the American society is strongly divided and this not only into republicans and into democrats as there is a whole mass of issues involved in the political struggle. A very large segment of the American society absolutely cannot stomach the incumbent president. Moreover, the negative attitude to Donald Trump is very high in most mass media. Dragged in this negative attitude is an anti-Russian theme. My visit, though I did not represent the Russian Federation but the multinational Russian Orthodox Church, was one way or another made tied-in with the Russophobic hysteria that is dominating in the political establishment and mass media.

- There was also an announcement about another important meeting, that with the US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. What was the atmosphere in which it was held?

- This meeting did not take place. I, again, was not its initiator; it was arranged by the Archdiocese of Antioch. It had been proposed as far back as August that I should meet with the secretary of state but I did not have the opportunity at that time. In October, a date was found to suit both me and the secretary of state. Until the meeting was announced, the preparation for it followed it customary routine. On the eve of the meeting, it was reconfirmed; in the morning, I received a call from the State Department with a clarification of protocol details. It was said in particular that it would be a tete-a-tete meeting, but an hour before the appointed time a call came to say that instead of the secretary of state I would be received by his deputy. I would not meet with a deputy. I do not doubt that after the secretary of State's schedule was published, our ill-wishers in America took steps to prevent his meeting with me. There are persons and structures that are concerned to ensure that the secretary of state and generally the American leadership always hear only one side and have no opportunity to hear the other. It is not accidental that the following morning the secretary of state met with the leader of the Ukrainian schismatics, Yepifaniy.

The latter told him about, I cite, ‘violations of human rights in Donbas and Crimea occupied by Russia’, while the secretary of State once again gave assurances of support for the Ukrainian church independent of Russia.

- It’s too bad. And you do not exclude for yourself a new attempt to meet with Pompeo but now without any announcement?

- I have never made this attempt at all; it was an outside initiative that I agreed with. And I am not going in the future to make any attempts. If a new secretary of state appears in America and if he wishes to meet with me, I will be ready to do it. However, I will ask not to announce the meeting; otherwise, the same story will be most probably repeated.

- Has not time come for Patriarch Kirill to make a pastoral visitation to America?

- I think the time has not come yet because, against the background of all that I have seen, it hardly would be right now to come to that country.

Is the statistics gratifying?

- The VTsOM summer poll has shown that 63% of the Russians claim to be Orthodox, 34% are for adult baptism. Atheists amount to 15%; among the youth from 18-24 year of age, 37% claim to be atheists while only 23% claim to be Orthodox. The figures do not seem to be very good...

- I believe the figures are good. First, they show that the most of the population of our country are Orthodox people. Secondly, they show that atheists do not amount to even a one fourth of the Russians. The generation of my parents remembers very well how the leader of the Soviet state maintained that in twenty years’ time the last parson would be shown on television. Moreover, everybody was sure that the Orthodox faith would die out. However, it is not dead but is actually the majority faith. The human religiosity and inchurching is beyond analysis and statistics. Who is to be considered Orthodox? – Those who claim to be Orthodox or those who regularly come to church to make confession and take communion? Very different figures can be obtained depending on the criteria. I think that overall this statistics points to a stable grow of people’s interest in religion and to a great influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is quite natural that the figures show a lesser percent of believers among youth and greater one among those of mature age. Questions to which religion gives the answer normally begin to interest those who have reached a mature age.

Perhaps, it also explains the opinion that people should be baptized at mature age. Although the Church unambiguously says that infants can be baptized, too, into the faith of their parents and godparents.

When we are asked whether it is a violation of a child's freedom, I always give this answer: Is the breast-feeding a violation of his or her freedom? One way or another we are responsible not only for physical but also spiritual state of our children. If children begin listening to classical music because their parents love it, it is not a violation of their freedom either. This is a part of educational process. Nobody can make one to preserve the faith in a mature age if one does not wish it. But every child has a right not only to physical but also spiritual nourishment.

To introduce the Gospel in the school curriculum

- You have proposed that the school curriculum should include a course on the study of religious texts. The KPRF fraction have supported you by proposing to give up *The Gulag Archipelago.* At the expense of which course is the change to be made and are you ready for a new wave of criticism for the interference in secular affairs?

- It is not my problem and my not my question as to which course is to be given up to give room for a study of religious texts. I spoke about a very simple thing: in school, studies is conducted in such monuments of literature as *War and Peace* by Tolstoy, *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoyevsky, stories by Chekhov, plays by Ostrovsky. The Gospel is a monument of literature, very authoritative at that, the most read in the world. Why is this monument is absent from the literature course in the school curriculum? I believe it richly deserves to be studied exactly like a monument of literature.

- At what age?

- The Gospel in the unadapted version is quite comprehensible for schoolchildren beginning from 12 years of age.

Need Russia building 'three churches a day'

- Another question concerning criticism. The Patriarch's statement about the construction of 'three churches a day' in Russia has provoked a wave of indignation among opponents. What answer can be given to those who speak about the need to build hospitals and kindergartens instead of churches? And are such claims addressed rightly at all?

- No, not rightly because these two topics are not linked in any way. They can be linked only by demagogues and those who want to create a conflict out of nothing. Churches are built for believers, at their initiative, at their request, and with their money. Nobody forbids the same people to invest their funds in the construction of kindergartens and hospitals, although it is a prerogative of the state. I know

quite a lot of people from among businessmen who invest personal money and the company's funds in the building of churches and in the building of kindergartens, orphanages and hospitals. I also know quite a lot of people who do not invest their funds in the first or the second or the third.

When the Cathedral Notre Dame de Paris caught fire, the whole world was looking at how the monument of architecture was being destroyed. It concerned people of diverse worldviews and confessions. How much could be spent on hospitals and orphanages with the money used to build the cathedral? I think an endless number of them. But every nation has its own cultural, spiritual and architectural heritage. When people come to see the Kremlin, they admire the cathedrals and when they come to the Diamond Fund, they contemplate beautiful diamonds. One could say, let us sell out these diamonds and build hospitals and orphanages; let us sell out the Tretyakov Gallery and build something useful. To compare the number of churches and the number of hospitals-kindergartens is the same as to compare the number of art masterpieces in Tretyakov Gallery with the funds that charitable projects are lacking. The fact that for the last 30 years about one thousand churches have been built annually in the Russian Church is a direct response to the requests of the faithful.

A book useful for the Americans

- Once in an interview to KP you said that you compose music on airplanes due to a lack of time (composer is His Eminence's first profession – ed.). You must make many trips in line of duty. Shall we expect another premier?

- Do not expect for now because in the last ten years I have actually stopped composing music even on flights. For instance, it took me ten hours to fly to the USA, and a considerable time was spent on the work with documents which tend to accumulate and chase me anywhere. I devoted the rest of the time to reading a very interesting book entitled *Centennial Marathon* about how China is preparing to push America from the first place on the podium of superpowers. It is written by an American, a longstanding staff member of the Department of State and an expert in China. If this book had been read in America, it would probably have sobered up those who believe that the main threat to the USA comes from Russia.

Interviewer Yelena CHINKOVA

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/45938/