Patriarch Kirill: Papism is dangerous as it is much easier to influence one individual than a group of people

On November 4, 2019, after the Divine Liturgy at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Dormition in the Moscow Kremlin, a fraternal repast took place at which His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia addressed the gathering.

Speaking about the crucial developments in the world Orthodoxy, His Holiness said in particular:

‘Today we are going through certain difficulties, in the first place in the relations with Constantinople. However, unlike Constantinople – which violates canonical rules by invading into others’ jurisdiction by granting ‘autocephaly’ to those who did not ask for it and insists on other privileges that have never been appropriate to it – our Church does not strive for power at the pan-Orthodox level. We only wish to preserve the canonical order and we cannot allow that a likeness of papism, a ‘quasi-papism’, should emerge in Orthodoxy.

I will say perhaps a somewhat unexpected thing. Why is papism dangerous? - Certainly because papism does not follow from either the Word of God or the Tradition of the Church. I will still offer another, completely different argument: papism is dangerous in that it is much easier to influence one individual than a group of people. A pope and a patriarch who wants to become the pope become a very attractive target to the powers that be, and an outside influence made on one individual may ruin the Church.

When the system of synodal governance of the Church was developed, the holy apostles were well aware what they were doing. It was impossible in the context of the Roman Empire that only one individual should have borne responsibility for the whole Church – indeed, he could be arrested, he could be persuaded to cooperate, he could be scared. However, all these dangers come to naught when the Church is governed collegially, synodally.

Therefore, in our time too, it is necessary to uphold the synodal governance of the Universal Church. We do not challenge the Patriarch of Constantinople’s primacy in honour, but we disagree with any encroachments on the universal power. The Patriarch of Constantinople, who resides in the territory of Turkey, is very vulnerable personally, and for this reason it remains for us only to pray that the Lord may save him from influences that could have a pernicious effect on the life of the whole Church’.

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