



Archbishop Feofan of Korea: We continue the work that was initiated several centuries ago

*On February 26, 2019, at the session of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, a decision was made to establish a diocese of Korea as part of the Patriarchal Exarchate of South-East Asia. Bishop Feofan of Kyzyl and Tyva was appointed its ruling hierarch. In an interview to **Pravoslavie.ru portal** Archbishop Feofan told about the history and present-day situation of Orthodoxy in Korea, as well as about the life of parishes in the newly-established diocese.*

– Your Eminence, at the session of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, which took place on February 26, 2019, it was decided to establish a diocese of Korea of the Patriarchal Exarchate of South-East Asia. On April 4, you were appointed its ruling hierarch. What has prompted these decisions? How timely are they?

– The Holy Synod has rightly decided that the Russian Orthodox Church is called today to resume its pastoral and missionary work in South-East Asia – the work that was initiated several centuries ago.

The emergence of Orthodoxy in Korea is closely linked with the development of Russian-Korean relations in the 19th-20th centuries. In the second part of the 19th century, Koreans began resettling en masse in the Far East of imperial Russia. The missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church among the Koreans began in 1856 when St. Innocent (Venyaminov), Archbishop of Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands and the Aleutian Islands, began sending Orthodox preachers to the South-Ussuri Region with its inflow of Korean settlers. The Koreans embraced the Orthodox faith by whole settlements. Later many of them returned to Korea, thus forming the first flock of the Russian Ecclesial Mission in Korea established in 1897 and began functioning in the Korean peninsula in February 1900, and only the tragic events in the history of Russia and Korea prevented its normal function. I mean the 1917 Russian Revolution, which led to the formation of the Soviet state with its hostile policy toward the Church, and the division of Korea after World War II into North and South Korea with a subsequent civil war waged in the period from 1950-1953.

In 1949, the South Korean authorities banished the head of the Mission, Archimandrite Polycarp (Priymak). Due to certain political reasons, the Mission's work was suspended and its property was confiscated. Today, when there are no factors preventing missionary and pastoral work in Korea, we can speak of continuation of the work that began long ago.

The circumstances of the modern time when a considerable number of the faithful of the Russian

Orthodox Church – not only Russians but also citizens of other states under the canonical responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church – are coming to Asian countries for permanent residence and for temporary business trips, oblige our Church's authorities to take pastoral care of these people, who do not want to break their spiritual ties with their Church. Thus, in the Republic of Korea alone, the number of registered Russians is about 20 thousand people, and in 2018, some 300 thousand Russian tourists visited South Korea. Evidently, a considerable part of these people wishes to take an active part in church life and to attend divine services celebrated in accordance with the traditions and church calendar adopted in Russia.

As for the establishment of a Patriarchal Exarchate in South-East Asia, it is not an innovation either in the history of our Church but rather the rebirth of once existing church structures. In December 1945, the parishes in China and Korea were united into a Metropolis of East Asia, which, by the decree issued by Patriarch Alexis I in 1946, was transformed into an Exarchate of East Asia based in Harbin. The exarchate was abolished by a decision of the Russian Orthodox Church Holy Synod in 1954 due to the circumstances of the time. Today, it has been restored with taking in account the changed conditions.

I would say that we had better revive the Russian church structures in Korea earlier. However, when diplomatic relations were established between Russia and South Korea in 1990, the Russian Church in its homeland experienced a difficult period of revival after decades of atheistic captivity. The Russian parishioners who visited the Republic of Korea used to find spiritual support in the existing parishes of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Nowadays, the Church in Russia is actively developing its missionary service seeking to accompany her faithful in all the life circumstances. The flow of Russian-speaking people to Korea has grown by dozens and perhaps hundreds of times, and the need for the Moscow Patriarchate to open parishes in Korea has clearly ripen. In addition, because the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople has been discontinued, our faithful have found themselves in a situation where they have nowhere to go to, the opening of parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church in Korea and other countries of South-East Asia meet their vital need.

– Your Eminence, soon after our Church's Synod made these decisions, the Patriarchate of Constantinople's Metropolitan Ambrosios, who serves in Seoul gave an interview in which he criticized the actions of the Moscow Patriarchate in Korea. How would you comment it?

– I would like to pay respects and love to Metropolitan Ambrosios and all the clergy who work under his jurisdiction in Korea. For me personally, my ten-year long service in Korea has been a significant experience and I wish to preserve warm relations with them all for good. However, with pain in my heart I read now unfair reproaches heaped on the Russian Church, published in the internet editions and signed by His Eminence Ambrosios. I think they do no help pacify the minds and hearts of readers.

I would also very much like to remind His Eminence Ambrosios in a brotherly spirit that despite the problems existing now in relations between our two Churches, there is no need for anybody to indulge in an aggressive tone intended to insult hierarchs of other Local Churches. It does not at all stimulate constructive dialogue.

I believe that instead of sorting out who has more rights to engage in mission in Korea, we had better work peacefully and calmly, preserving mutual love and communion. It will be a more real testimony to the unity of the Church before the non-Orthodox and secular world. The field for work is large and there is enough room for all.

– Is it possible to speak of certain ‘premeditated plan’ to which Metropolitan Ambrosios refers in his interview?

– It would be more correct to speak of the work to order church life for compatriots abroad and of concern for those who live far from their homeland. Indeed, for many of our compatriots, Orthodox parishes are not only places where the faithful assembly for worship, but also places for fellowship, mutual aid, support of national traditions and celebrations. In many countries, precisely a church becomes a place for people to help preserve their cultural identity.

Of course, the fact that the Eucharistic communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople is impossible has stimulated to some extent the formation of new parishes, but even without it the Moscow Patriarchate parishes would eventually emerge in the Republic of Korea because the need for them is ripe.

The absence of canonical community between the Russian Church and the Church of Constantinople is a painful situation for any Orthodox believer. We continue to hope that it will be resolved with time and the faithful will be able to participate in sacraments in any Orthodox church regardless of its jurisdiction. At every Divine Liturgy we pray for the restoration of church unity.

– Your Eminence, tell us please about how you see the work in Korea at the present stage. Is any property of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission has survived in Korea? What is already there and what is to be done?

– At present, unfortunately we have no land for construction. The old plot of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, which was located in the center of Seoul in the Chondon district and bought with the joint funds allocated by the government of the Russian Empire and donated by people in Russia, does not belong to us now. By the decision made by His Holiness Patriarch Tikhon on November 4, 1921, the mission in Korea was subjected to Archbishop Sergiy (Tikhomirov) of Tokyo. For this reason, the land and

buildings were registered as property of the Japanese Orthodox Church. Later, the local Orthodox community, which had joined the Patriarchate of Constantinople by that time, was given by court the right to own all the property of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea and after selling it a new lot was purchased in Seoul in the Mapo district, where later a St. Nicholas church was built...

At present, a small facility is rented for the new Parish of the Resurrection in the Yongsan district, in which divine services are celebrated. On the Easter day now, it was already a little tight as over 100 came for the service. The parish in Seoul consists of citizens of Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the USA. In spite of the fact that the services are celebrated in Church Slavonic, they are attended by citizens of Korea as well. Some Orthodox Koreans, having expressed disagreement with the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Ukraine or for some other reason come to our parish in Seoul. There are many Russian-speaking parishioners residing in the city of Busan. Divine service were organized for them several times, also on Easter. In addition to Seoul and Busan there are other cities with Russian-speaking people who live in compact groups, and everywhere we are to arrange full-fledged church life.

– And who serve in the new Parish of the Resurrection?

– From the very beginning of organizing the parish in Seoul, priests were sent on short missions from the parishes of the Patriarchal Exarchate of South-East Asia. Now we will have to select permanent clergy. Serving in Seoul is also Archpriest Paul Kang, a national of the Republic of Korea, a cleric of the Russian Church Outside Russia. Another priest from South Korea, Hieromonk Paul Chkhwe from South Korea, is now finishing his training at St. Petersburg Theological Academy. I hope that after that he will come back home and help us.

– It is known that in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea there is an active church of the Trinity in Pyongyang. Tell us about it.

– The decision to build the first Orthodox church in the DPRK was made by the DPRK leader Kim Jong-il in 2002, after he visited the church of St. Innocent of Irkutsk in Khabarovsk. Soon after a church was built in Pyongyang and in July 2006, the community of the church of the Life-Giving Trinity was admitted to the Russian Orthodox Church, The church was consecrated in August 2006 by Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad (now His Holiness Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia). The clergy of the church were trained in the theological schools in Russia and were ordained by Russian hierarchs. At present, the church is attended mainly by staff members of the diplomatic missions in Pyongyang.

– Your Eminence, what else would you like to say to our readers?

– I would like to address through your edition all the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church who live in Korea with a call to unite around your Church and its Primate and to express my support for His Beatitude Onufry, Metropolitan of Kiev, and for all the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, who are going through hard times today. At a time when the parishes in Korea are only being formed, your active help is needed for the building of new communities. I invoke God's blessing on you all!

– **Thank you for the interview.**

– My thank you to you too.

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