Russia - Ukraine - Belarus: One Spiritual Space

Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, DECR chairman, at the conference on Russia – Ukraine - Belarus: A Common Civilizational Space? (Fribourg, Switzerland, 1st June 2019).

Russia, Ukraine and Belarus constitute one spiritual space framed by the Russian Orthodox Church. This space was formed over a thousand years, during which national borders appeared, disappeared and were moved many times, but spiritual commonality remained intact despite numerous external efforts aimed at shattering this unity. A witness to it is the thousand-year history of the Russian Orthodox Church.

As far back as the 10th century, the diptychs of the Church of Constantinople first mention the Metropolia of Rus'. Initially the title of its head had no additional naming of a city, but was just *τῆς Ῥωσίας*, that is "of Rus'"**[1]**. When Prince Vladimir Svyatoslavovich and after him the whole Rus' embraced Christianity, Orthodoxy became the main spiritual and moral pivot for all the East Slavic ethnic groups that soon appeared in these territories. That moment marked the outset of the history of "Holy Rus'" – a historical phenomenon which owed its existence to the powerful unifying role of the Russian Church in the vast territories of the Great, Little and White Rus' and in other territories which at different times were in the sphere of its influence. "At the outset of every nation, every nationality, a moral idea always preceded the rise of the nationality, for it was this idea that created it,"**[2]** Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote. Orthodoxy became such idea for the peoples of the Holy Rus'.

Throughout its history the Russian Church went through many ordeals, but managed to preserve its unity. During internecine feuds between the princedoms the Church would reconcile the conflicting parties. The most difficult moment of that period was, perhaps, when in the middle of the 12th century Grand Prince Izyaslav Mstislavich organized in Kiev an appointment of Metropolitan Clement Smolyatich without securing approval of the Patriarch of Constantinople, what, in fact, meant the declaration by Rus' of its ecclesiastical independence and self-willed separation from its Mother Church. The separatist sentiments of the Prince of Kiev influenced the Prince of Northeast Rus', Andrei Bogoliubsky, who appealed to the Patriarch of Constantinople with a request to grant him a separate metropolitan. However, it was the Church of Constantinople that defended the unity of the Russian Metropolia in the 12th century. Patriarch Luke Chrysoberges added a word "all" to the old title of Metropolitan of Kiev - *τῆς πάσης Ῥωσίας* – "of All Rus'" – in order to emphasize the indivisibility of the Russian Church**[3]**.

During the Tatar yoke the Russian Church was faced with the task of unifying and strengthening the

Russian lands. After the fall into the Unia in 1439 of Patriarch Metrophanes II of Constantinople and Metropolitan Isidore of All Rus', who became a Roman Catholic cardinal, the united Russian Church was forced to elect its own primate – St. Jonah, who had already received a blessing from the former, not Uniate, Patriarch of Constantinople, Joseph. And that "autocephaly" was ultimately accepted by the Church of Constantinople risen from the Unia. Thus, in 1561 St. Macarius becomes the "Patriarchal Exarch" and on behalf of the Patriarch and in compliance with the powers given by him, performs the ceremony of coronation of Ivan the Terrible**[4]**. The final act of recognition of the independent Russian Church was the adoption of documents establishing a Patriarchate in Russia: the Charter of 1589, the Conciliar Letter of the Church of Constantinople of 1590 and the Conciliar Act of the Great Council of Constantinople of 1593. The latter document stipulates that all Russian dioceses are subordinate to the See of Moscow, suggesting no idea of division of the Church of All Rus' into separate parts.

As new lands were being incorporated into the Russian state, the Church through its mission was reaching out to new ethnic groups, including indigenous inhabitants of Siberia, the Far North, the Far East, Alaska, Japan and China in the sphere of its spiritual influence.

The Orthodoxy found itself in a most difficult situation in the territories of today's Lithuania and Belarus after the Union of Brest with Rome was signed in the late 16th century. The state authorities of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth took the initiators of the Union under their wing. Persecutions of Orthodox Christians as those going against the will of the Polish and Lithuanian monarch began. For almost three centuries the Orthodox population was subjected to ordeals and oppressions, was regarded as an illegal confession and persecuted by the authorities. The Orthodox Christians were not allowed to hold posts in the city government; they faced hindrances when engaging in trade and crafts; serfs were forced to accept the Union. The clergymen who refused to recognize it were expelled and replaced by the Uniates. The gradual liquidation of the Union of Brest became possible only in the late 17th century after the reunification of the Western (Kievan, with the formal centre in Constantinople) and Eastern (Moscow) parts of the Russian Church, an idea of whose partition emerged in the 15th century.

However, it was the 20th century that was the hardest and most tragic period for the Russian Church and for all peoples of the Holy Rus', bringing about enormous changes, such as world wars, falls of empires, collapse of the USSR, inter-ethnic conflicts and civil confrontations. The Universal Church did not know such large-scale unceasing persecutions as the ones which befell the Church after the October Revolution of 1917. Over a hundred million Orthodox faithful – Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and representatives of many other ethnic groups – were subjected to oppressions, torments, tortures and executions. Tens of thousands became martyrs and confessors of faith. Persecutions and oppressions of believers continued for seventy years.

Signs of crisis in the life of the Soviet Union were constantly increasing in the late 1980s. The fact that

the Communist party was losing control of the country became more and more obvious first to the ruling elite and then to ordinary people. On 17th March 1991, the all-Union referendum, the only one in the history of the USSR, was conducted on whether to preserve the united state or not. The majority of citizens of the Soviet Union voted in favour of its preservation. However, on 8th December 1991, leaders of the tree USSR Republics – Ukraine, Byelorussia and the Russian Federation – signed the so-called "Belovezha Accords" which established the Commonwealth of Independent States.

What is the Church's attitude towards these centrifugal processes? On the one hand, the fall of the atheist regime was welcomed, for it marked the end of years of persecution and discrimination against believers, of uprooting from people's consciousness any reminder of Christ, Gospel, Church. Religious freedom enabled our Church to break free: the revival of ecclesiastical life began in all spheres; thousands of churches and hundreds of monasteries were being restored or built anew. The Church began to actively carry out its mission of spiritual enlightenment and develop theological education and missionary activities. Priests received access to patients in hospitals, to servicemen and prisoners, whom they could render spiritual aid and support. Our Church entered into dialogue with society on such issues as values and morality, human rights, freedoms and dignity. A new era of relationships with the state began. In these relationships the Church focuses on a constructive dialogue, basing itself on two fundamental principles: of mutual non-interference in each other's affairs and cooperation in the spheres, in which it can be beneficial for people.

On the other hand, the disintegration of the united state and establishment on its basis of a whole number of independent countries with their own views on future development caused numerous divisions that affected not only territories, but also people, their families. Inter-ethnic and interreligious conflicts broke out in the young republics and in Russia itself: Nagorno-Karabakh, armed confrontation in Transnistria, Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, civil war in Tajikistan, two Chechen wars in Russia, etc.

Among the aftermaths of the collapse of the large country were severances of cultural and social ties, decline of economic activities, impoverishment of the population, degradation of educational, legal and cultural institutions. The quality of healthcare catastrophically deteriorated, and birth rate sharply decreased. Many people who had been born and educated in the era of planned economy, became neglected and forced out to the margins of social life.

Such dramatic situation was caused, according to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, by, among other things, "the decay of national consciousness, national pride, by the inability to comprehend history in all its complexity and to realize an immense importance of historical commonality of people for their material and spiritual prosperity"**[5]**.

By God's mercy the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not bring about the disintegration of our Church, which now, just like hundreds of years ago, carries out its mission in the lands of its historical presence.

The unity of the Russian Church is the most important aspect of spiritual and cultural commonality of the Slavic nations in the post-Soviet countries – of the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. Disregard for this historical fact and, moreover, attempts to shatter this unity, as well as interference of authorities and politicians in church affairs with the view of gaining momentary benefits are a crime against this and future generations.

These attempts aroused a great concern in our Church. On 22nd October 1991, the Holy Synod concluded that a change of the national borders resulting from the disintegration of the Soviet Union should not involve a change in the structure of the Russian Church or autocephalisation of any of its parts. "The present developments," the statement reads, "remind us to a certain extent of what followed the February of 1917. At that time, the disintegration of the Russian Empire and formation of states in its territory that declared their independence gave cause to ecclesiastical troubles… And now and then the voices of secular people can be heard, who are ready to see in the very fact of the Moscow Patriarchate's existence a certain 'last imperial structure' and to encourage in all possible ways the growth of separatist moods with the view of bringing about a pernicious schism among the Churches… According to the canonical practice existing in the Orthodox Church, dioceses and their unions within Patriarchates are allowed to have internal independence and self-governance. A Patriarchate does not fetter the independence of its constituent ecclesial entities but rather serves their unity and communion. The borders of a Patriarchate do not necessarily coincide with the national borders… A Patriarchate is not a political or national or even geographical notion. A Patriarchate is an ecclesiastical canonical reality formed for supporting the unity and conciliarity of its constituent church structures"[6].

In Ukraine, the political processes linked with the formation of an independent state have become a great test of the unity of the Russian Orthodox Church. The state authorities of this country provoked and supported a schism in Ukrainian Orthodoxy, which remains to be a running sore on the body of our Church.

Representatives of the old, still Soviet, elite who found themselves overnight at the head of a new state and sought to retain their power, stood in an acute need of support to rely on in that situation. They found such support in the person of nationalistic forces who declared the building of a sovereign Ukraine as impossible without the creation of an independent Ukrainian Church fully torn away from the Moscow Patriarchate. The demand of autocephaly, that is, full ecclesiastical independence, which was first formulated in the nationalistic milieu and soon after picked up by the authorities of the country, was embodied in the slogan: "Independent Church to Independent State". This slogan, which from the very

beginning was explicitly political, has a very weak base in canon law. In the Orthodox tradition, the boundaries of an autocephalous Church do not always coincide with national borders. For instance, the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem unites Israel, Palestine and Jordan, as well as a part of Egypt – the Sinai Peninsula. The jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria embraces 54 countries on the African continent.

It should be pointed out that even before the independence of Ukraine was declared, the Russian Orthodox Church in October 1990 granted independence in governance to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The status, which the Ukrainian Church received at that time and enjoys to this day, provides for full independence in all its internal affairs including the election and consecration of bishops, establishment and abolishment of dioceses, canonization of saints and many other things. At the same time, according to this status, the self-governed Church in Ukraine preserves spiritual unity with the Moscow Patriarchate. But even this unity with the Russian Church, which does not presuppose any administration from Moscow, was rejected by not numerous but very active nationalistic groups. Having adopted their rhetoric, the Ukrainian authorities set themselves the task to obtain autocephaly for the Ukrainian Church.

The implementation of this plan appeared not easy in a situation when a majority of the episcopate, clergy and laity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church did not support the idea of autocephaly. However, the authorities of the country soon found an ally in the person of then Metropolitan Philaret (Denisenko) of Kiev and All Ukraine. For Metropolitan Philaret, the prospect of becoming the head of an autocephalous Church was attractive for at least two reasons. First, it met his power ambitions since, as the *locum tenens* of the Patriarchal throne and one of the most obvious candidates in the 1990 Patriarchal elections, he still failed to become Primate of the Russian Church due to the least number of votes for him. At the same time, Philaret was aware of his shaky situation as many Ukrainian bishops and clergy were dissatisfied with his dictatorial manner of governance, and there were even more of those who heard about the Metropolitan of Kiev's private life incompatible with the monastic vows. The status of Primate of an autocephalous Ukrainian Church was seen by Philaret as a guarantee of immunity and life-long ruling and gave hope for becoming eventually the Patriarch, though not that of Moscow but of Kiev.

However, despite the powerful pressure by both the state authorities and personally Metropolitan Philaret, the latter's attempts to win the Ukrainian episcopate ultimately failed. At the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1992, a majority of bishops from Ukraine not only spoke against the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church but also brought accusations against the Metropolitan of Kiev. At the same Council, Philaret pledged on the cross and Gospel that he would leave the post of Primate and convene a Council in Kiev to elect a new head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. However, upon his return to Ukraine, he denied his own words and stated that he would never leave the See of Kiev.

In the ensuing critical situation, Ukrainian hierarchs elected a new Primate of the Ukrainian Church; it was Metropolitan Vladimir of Rostov and Novocherkassk, a Ukrainian by birth. Soon after that, Metropolitan Philaret joined small schismatic groups and after a while came to head one of them and arbitrarily appropriated the title of “Patriarch.” For his deviation to a schism he was deposed and later, when he persisted in his schismatic activity, he was excommunicated. Thus the schism was made formal and from the moment of its creation it enjoyed every kind of support from the state authorities and protection by nationalistic forces including very radical ones. At the same time, an overwhelming majority of the Orthodox Christians in Ukraine remained faithful to the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The deposition of Philaret by the Russian Orthodox Church was recognized by all the Local Orthodox Churches including in a written form by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. As far back as 2016, during the Synaxis of Primates of the Orthodox Churches in Chambésy, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople welcomed Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine, who succeeded the late Metropolitan Vladimir, “as the only canonical head of the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine, certainly with all his subordinate hierarchs.” At the same Synaxis, Patriarch Bartholomew promised not to take any unilateral actions linked with legalizing the schism in Ukraine or granting autocephaly to it. Regrettably, less than two years later, Patriarch Bartholomew did exactly what he had promised not to do.

In October 2018, the Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople made a whole number of unilateral decisions concerning the church life in Ukraine. In particular, it “revoked” the 1686 Charter of Patriarch Dionysius of Constantinople on the transfer of the Metropolia of Kiev to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. It also made a decision “on the restoration of the rank” of Philaret Denisenko and the leader of an even less representative schismatic group, Makariy Maletich. At the same time, all the consecrations and rites administered by these persons were recognized as valid. On 15th December, chaired by a hierarch of the Church of Constantinople and then President Petro Poroshenko, the so-called “unification council” was held in Kiev, at which the two Ukrainian schismatic groups headed by Philaret and Makariy were merged into one. The head of a new structure was elected and recognized straight away by the Patriarchate of Constantinople as canonical “Metropolitan of Kiev and All Ukraine”. All this was done with complete disregard for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which from the very beginning stated its non-recognition of all these actions. Out of 90 bishops of the Ukrainian Church only two decided to join the newly created schismatic structure. Finally, on 6th January 2019, Patriarch Bartholomew granted to the head of this structure the so-called tomos of autocephaly.

From the perspective of the canons of the Orthodox Church, all these actions are unlawful and invalid. The Patriarchate of Constantinople has entered into the Eucharistic communion with the schismatics who have no apostolic succession. As for our Church, it has encountered an impossibility for continuing ecclesiastical communion with the Church of Constantinople.

It is impossible to find explanations for the actions of the Church of Constantinople in the Orthodox canon law. They represent an evident and gross violation of the canons of the Church, Orthodox ecclesiology and the very foundations of inter-church relations. At the same time, one cannot fail to notice the presence of a non-ecclesiastical factor in the decision made at Phanar. Nobody tried and tries to conceal the exceptional role played by now former President of Ukraine in granting “a tomos of autocephaly.” Just as in the 1990s, the interference of politicians and secular authorities in church life did not only fail to unite Orthodoxy in Ukraine but, on the contrary, only inflicted new wound on it. So visible a political track in the problem of the Ukrainian autocephaly opens slightly the curtain of real motives for the decisions made by the Patriarch of Constantinople. It is impossible to believe that these motives are confined to complying with a request of an alleged majority of the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine to grant autocephaly. A different aim was pursued – to break the spiritual unity of Russia and Ukraine, as was openly stated by the highest-ranking representatives of the Ukrainian authorities.

Patriarch Bartholomew’s hope that all Orthodox believers in Ukraine, who allegedly do not want to be in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate, would at the first opportunity join this «autocephalous church» that he created, failed. The schism in Ukrainian Orthodoxy has not been healed, but deepened even more.

To this day, none of the Local Orthodox Churches, except for Constantinople, has recognized the unified schismatic structure or entered into communion with it. Moreover, a number of Churches officially and publicly declared their disagreement with Constantinople’s actions. There are good reasons for this:

Firstly, we all know that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church unites the majority of Orthodox believers in Ukraine. That is more than 12 thousand parishes, over 200 monasteries and millions of members.

Secondly, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is a national Church with its center in Kiev. It is linked with the Moscow Patriarchate by spiritual unity dating back to the times of the Kievan Rus’, but it has neither administrative, nor financial dependence on Moscow.

Thirdly, the communities legalized by Constantinople, which made up the new “church”, are absolutely non-canonical: their hierarchy goes back to individuals who were anathematized or did not have the Apostolic succession.

Fourthly, the newly-institutioned structure is an unprecedented “two-headed hydra” that has two leaders with almost the same title, arguing and competing with each other. One is called the “Metropolitan of

Kiev and All Ukraine," while the other bears the title of the "Patriarch of Kiev and All Rus'-Ukraine." A rather expected conflict has broken out between them recently, which is likely to lead to a new schism within a schism.

Fifthly, the schismatics recognized by Constantinople show the inability and unwillingness to follow the letter of their "Tomos" of autocephaly, and their decisions are inconsistent. For example, according to the "Tomos", parishes outside Ukraine do not belong to the new "church" and thus should be transferred to the Patriarchate of Constantinople. However, the false patriarch Philaret Denisenko believes that they are still subordinate to him.

Sixthly, the transfer of communities to this new "church" is carried out by unlawful seizures of church buildings of the canonical Church. The clergy of this canonical Church is systematically subjected to illegal pressure from the state.

The legalization of the Ukrainian schismatics by the Patriarch of Constantinople and his complete disregard for the canonical Ukrainian Church at the time when its hierarchs, clergy and laity are openly persecuted, mean that he took the side of the persecutors of the Church. Moreover, the actions of Constantinople only further aggravated the sufferings of the Orthodox believers in Ukraine.

A number of hierarchs and clergymen of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church had to visit the Security Service of Ukraine for the so-called "conversations" and interrogations. In the artificially initiated criminal cases they were suspected of committing "high treason" and "inciting religious hatred". There were cases when clergymen with the Ukrainian citizenship were obstructed while crossing the state border of Ukraine. They were also detained under various pretexts and subjected to humiliating searches, which were sometimes performed in churches, church institutions and their places of residence.

Bishop Gideon of Makarov was deprived of the Ukrainian citizenship because of a trip to the United States and his meeting with a group of US congressmen, to whom, as the Security Service of Ukraine suggested, the hierarch could deliver the truth about the violations of religious freedom that had been committed.

Some hierarchs were seized by the Security Service of Ukraine and forcibly transported to Kiev, where they were asked to give consent to participate in the aforementioned "unification council" on 15th December 2018. The clergymen of the canonical Church are forced to perform their pastoral duties in a heavy atmosphere of surveillance, while living under threats of detention and house arrest, interrogations and searches.

In an attempt to find the accusatory material and provoke a negative public outcry, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture undertook indicative checks of the preservation of cultural property at the Kiev Caves Lavra (for the first time in 30 years) and the Pochaev Lavra.

State-run media launched a massive campaign to discredit the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which was wrongly accused of secretly supporting “separatists,” allegedly organizing armories at churches and refusing to conduct burial services for the deceased Ukrainian soldiers. In various regions, leaflets of extremist content were distributed calling for the destruction of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

During the pre-election tour in January-March 2019, Petro Poroshenko systematically made coarse and slanderous attacks on the canonical Church. He was imitated by other politicians, for example, Chairman of the Supreme Rada Andrey Parubiy and a Member of Parliament Dmitry Yarosh who declared that the hierarchy of the canonical Church “is not the servants of God, but the agent network of the FSB and Putin,”, and that “hunting those Muscovite priests who faithfully serve Putin and Patriarch Kirill pleases God and our Motherland.”

The state-supported information campaign against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church provoked a surge of attacks on its churches and holy places: there were dozens of acts of vandalism, robbery and arson. Outside the zone of armed conflict, in the territory controlled by Kiev, at least 81 churches were damaged in the years 2016-2018. At the end of 2018 - the beginning of 2019, this list was supplemented by the burning of churches in Rzhishchev and Krivoy Rog, and by an attack on a church in Kiev itself.

Threats are still being made to seize the largest monasteries from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The state took measures to change the status of the buildings of the Holy Dormition Pochaev Lavra, so that it could be transferred to another religious organization.

At the initiative of the Ministry of Culture, the Supreme Rada adopted discriminatory laws against the canonical Church.

On 20th December 2018, a law was passed to change the name of religious organizations, “which are a part of the structure of a religious organization, whose administrative center is outside Ukraine — in the state which, as recognized by the law, committed military aggression against Ukraine and/or temporarily occupied a part of the territory of Ukraine.” The law is aimed against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, forbidding it call intself “Ukrainian,” although it is the oldest and largest of the country's currently existing religious organizations that unites millions of its citizens.

Secondly, the law significantly narrowed the area of the permitted presence of the UOC in society. Thirdly, it created prerequisites for the abolishment of the UOC communities or for putting an administrative pressure on them. Communities received a re-registration deadline of 26th April 2019. The very possibility of such successful re-registration depended on governmental bodies interested in dismantling the UOC. If the communities had not re-registered on time, their bank accounts would have been closed with all the ensuing consequences.

Procedural violations committed during the adoption of this law prompted the Kiev District Administrative Court to temporarily suspend it. However, Chairman of the Supreme Rada Andrey Parubiy does not recognize the court's decision and calls it "absurd."

The second discriminatory law changed the registration procedure for religious organizations. It prescribes that the decision to "change the subordination" of a community has to be made with votes of two thirds of community members, but the law does not contain any clear legal criteria for belonging to a community, which makes it possible to legalize the seizure of churches according to the following scheme:

1) Under the guise of voting by a religious community, a fictitious vote of a territorial community takes place. Such voting is often held in the absence of the majority of local residents, with the participation of persons of other faiths and strangers, or by collecting signatures, the authenticity of which is not verified.

2) The results of the "vote" are fictitiously recorded as a decision of a religious community. At the same time, the decisions of the true parish assembly of a valid religious community to establish a fixed membership and to voice their unwillingness to join schismatics are ignored; the changes that such community makes to its charter would not be registered.

3) By the decree of a regional administration, a new community of the so-called "Orthodox church of Ukraine" is created. It receives its registration with all the details of a legal entity. The religious community of the canonical Church is thereby abolished.

From 16th December 2018 to March 2019, only 42 "transitions" of religious communities of the canonical Church to the "Orthodox church of Ukraine" were voluntary (9 of them were without a priest). In the same period, there were 55 violent seizures of churches on the basis of illegal "referendums" of territorial communities. At least 137 churches remain under threat of capture: their religious communities headed by their rectors have decided to stay under the jurisdiction of the UOC, but the territorial communities voted to transfer their church buildings to the "Orthodox church of Ukraine." However, the communities of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, despite the pressure from the authorities, refused to join the schismatics and continue to gather for worship at private houses and utility rooms. In

a number of cases, communities are compelled to hold services in the open.

There are cases when hundreds of schismatics attack churches, beat up old men and women, and do not allow to film what is happening. The police present do not obstruct them, and the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture declares such incidents to be “machinations of the Russian secret service.”.

The efforts to seize churches plummeted immediately after the victory of Vladimir Zelensky in the presidential elections. There have even been cases of taking action to prevent such abuse.

As soon as Vladimir Zelensky won presidential elections in Ukraine, the activity of seizing church buildings has sharply reduced. Sometimes, even measures for preventing trespasses were taken.

For instance, the Volyn region state administration stalled the process of raider “re-registration” of communities. After the beginning of the legal proceedings on the unlawful re-registration of some communities of the canonical Church, the newly established communities of the “Orthodox church of Ukraine” started getting mass refusal in re-registration.

The UOC Chernovtsy diocese sued out the opening of criminal proceedings against the acting head of the regional administration and his officials on the case of forgering instructions on a mass “transfer” of the UOC communities, doing this contrary to the norms of the new legislation and in defiance of decisions of these communities. The court acknowledged the fact of infringement and ordered the police to open proceedings.

The seizure of church buildings is still taking place, but in less number.

A good many time Vladimir Zelensky made it plain that he denounces his predecessor’s policy on religion. He defined his line of conduct for religious confessions right after his election: he met with religious leaders and underscored that he did not want to interfere in the internal life of religious organizations. During these meetings he declared himself a politician striving for unity, reconciliation and mutual forgiveness. Almost all Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders of Ukraine responded to his call to take part in the video address to people in the Crimea and Donbas. In its spirit this statement contrasts with the ideology of aggression and irreconcilable hatred so characteristic of the outgoing regime of Petro Poroshenko. The only one who did not appear on video was the nominal “head” of the so called “Orthodox church of Ukraine” Epiphany Dumenko.

We are looking with hope to the first moves of the new leadership of our fraternal country. We hope for the establishment of peace in Ukraine, elimination of hatred and enmity, protection of the rights of believers of all confessions and non-interference in the affairs of religious communities in the country.

The intrusion of Constantinople upon church life in Ukraine done with support of the preceding Ukrainian authorities can be considered only as an attempt to undermine the spiritual unity of peoples of the historical Rus'. We understand that most probably Ukraine is not the last attempt of such kind. From the point of view of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, the cancelation of the Charter on the transfer of the Metropolia of Kiev to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate means that all territories that historically were a part of this metropolia had returned to the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Constantinople. It should be noted that the territory of the present-day Belarus was also once within the Metropolia of Kiev.

However, the claims of the Church of Constantinople will hardly find support in Belarus. Its people do not strive for autocephaly. The Belarusian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is the largest confession of the country. Being the true Church of its people and bringing considerable contribution to the development of national culture, the Belarusian Church, like the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, cherishes its unity with the entire Russian Church that unites the fraternal Slavic nations – the inheritors of Vladimir's Baptism.

Our Church respects national borders, yet it does not think that these boundaries should entail the establishment of such within itself. Therefore, the unity of the Church is a treasure and a gift of God for us which we cherish and cannot sacrifice.

I would like to note that the Russian Orthodox Church is the only social institution that has not lost succession during all years of existence of the countries in its canonical responsibility: from the old times to our days. The reason is the theanthropic nature of the Church, the meeting of the heavenly with the earthly and of the visible and invisible worlds. This helps the Church to look at human problems and difficulties from the position of belonging to the eternity and gives the Church an opportunity to serve the unity of people.

We believe that the one Church is the strong Church. Its strength lies not in the secular attributes of power, welfare or might, but in its ability to exert spiritual and moral influence on human souls, on the attitude to those near and those far off, and even on the relations between nations and people on the global level.

We pursue the upholding of Gospel values in the life of European society because Orthodox people in many countries of pastoral responsibility of our Church live in Europe. Their faith, spiritual ideals, culture and traditions bring an important contribution to the European Christian heritage. Therefore, we bear our part of responsibility for civilizational space of the European continent.

We cannot stay indifferent to the attempts to destroy the traditions of the family, to erode the notion of

Christian marriage and the God-commanded foundations of relations between man and woman, and to abortions and euthanasia that devalue human life.

At all international forums, including the European ones in the first place, we bear witness to the Gospel truth. This witness, as well as acts of mercy and peacemaking serve to the reinforcing of the Christian roots of Europe and foundations of its civilization.

As to the question put in the title of our conference, I would like to underscore that Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are one spiritual space. We contest neither national self-identification of the three Slavic nations, nor the boundaries of the independent states, but we will continue our struggle for the preservation of the unity of the Russian Orthodox Church which assures spiritual unity of all Orthodox believers living within its space irrespective of their national and ethnic belonging. Simple words of the holy elder Lavrenty of Chernigov “Russia, Ukraine, Belarus – all these are Holy Rus’” remain topical and resound in the hearts of millions of people.

[1] Cf. *Zheltov Mikhail, priest*. Historical and Canonical Foundations of the Russian Church’s Unity // Church and Time, №3(84), 2018, p. 29-95.

[2] *Dostoyevsky Fyodor*. Collected Works in 15 Volumes. Vol. 14: A Writer’s Diary, St. Petersburg, 1995.

[3] Cf. *Zheltov Mikhail, priest*. Historical and Canonical Foundations of the Russian Church’s Unity // Church and Time, №3(84), 2018, p. 29-95.

[4] Cf. Ibid.

[5] Patriarch Kirills calls the breakup of the USSR the collapse of historical Russia // **https://vz.ru/news/2011/11/11/537962.html**.

[6] Church and Time, №5, 1998.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/46324/