His Holiness Patriarch Kirill's interview to Ethnos newspaper

Answering questions from the Greek newspaper's correspondent, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia told how Constantinople's anticanonical steps aimed at granting the "Tomos of autocephaly" to schismatics in Ukraine affected the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and why these actions pose a challenge to the pan-Orthodox unity.

– Your Holiness, in early January in Constantinople Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew granted the Tomos of autocephaly to the Orthodox church of Ukraine. What position will the Moscow Patriarchate take?

– In Ukraine, just like in Greece, there is only one Orthodox Church recognized by all the autocephalous Churches. This Church did not ask the Phanar for autocephaly, but officially spoke against it. However, Patriarch Bartholomew ignored the opinion of the canonical Ukrainian Church and granted the "Tomos of autocephaly,' yet, not to the Church, but to the schismatics. From the perspective of the canons this act is void. We do not recognize it and never will. The Ukrainian schismatics are still destitute of the divine grace. The only Orthodox Church in Ukraine that administers the salutary Sacraments was and is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church led by Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine. It unites the majority of the Ukrainian Orthodox believers.

– From the very beginning you had been warning of a possible schism within the Orthodoxy, but the Phanar was uncompromising, saying that now, after seven centuries, there was put an end to the injustice to Ukraine. In your opinion, what will tomorrow bring to the Orthodox population in Ukraine, both those who speak and do not speak Russian? Will peace and good sense prevail?

– Even before the so-called "Tomos" was granted, President Petro Poroshenko had threatened to banish from Ukraine those who would not want to join the "autocephalous church." And now, when this false church was created, the Parliament of Ukraine has adopted in the shortest possible time the discriminatory laws targeting the canonical Church. These laws imply a forcible renaming of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and provide legal grounds for forcible seizure of its church buildings and other church property. Seizures of churches and acts of violence against the clergy and laity who are defending their shrines have already started. By granting the "Tomos" to the schismatic structure Constantinople let loose the state authorities of Ukraine in their fight against the Ukrainian Church and doomed it to new, even greater sufferings.

– In the event that tension will rise and incidents will occur, affecting the clergy and parishes remaining faithful to the Moscow Patriarchate, how could you defend them? Have you thought of that?

– Suffering of the Orthodox Ukrainians is a matter of my unceasing concern. To support them the Church will use all means possible, first and foremost, prayer to our Lord Jesus Christ and trust in Him Who, we believe, will preserve His Church.

Despite the tremendous pressure exerted by the Ukrainian state, out of 90 bishops of the Ukrainian Church only one ruling and one vicar hierarchs joined the schism. The absolute majority of archpastors, clerics and laypeople are faithful to their Church and its Primate. What is going on in Ukraine is the grossest interference of the state in church affairs, a clear violation of the Constitution of the country and of fundamental human rights. Surprisingly, at the same time declarations are being made of Ukraine's commitment to the basic European values, one of which is the principle of Church's separation from the state. The international community should more often pay attention to this outrageous discrepancy between declarations and actual deeds.

– You used tough expressions when speaking of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and of the Phanar's financial gains for resolving the Ukrainian ecclesiastical issue. You have also called the unification council "politicized," hinting at the presence of the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko at it. In your opinion, what motives and reasons did the Ecumenical Patriarchate have to grant the autocephaly?

– No one makes secret of the fact that the Phanar and the Ukrainian authorities coordinated their actions in the matter of granting the autocephaly. Suffice is to recall that a special agreement on cooperation and interaction between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and Ukraine was signed on 3rd November last year. The presence of the Ukrainian President in the presidium of the "unification council," which you mentioned, is only one of many examples. We see the incumbent President going from one schismatic church to another, with the "Tomos" in his hands, and realize why on the threshold of the presidential elections in Ukraine he was in such haste to receive it. As for the reasons that induced Patriarch Bartholomew to grant the so-called "autocephaly," I would prefer not to speak about it now. Regardless of what they were, it has become clear to everyone that this "autocephaly" did not lead to the restoration of unity among the Orthodox Christians in Ukraine, but endangered the integrity of the whole world Orthodoxy.

– All the Primates of the Orthodox Churches will soon have to express their attitude and make official statements about whether they recognize the new Church of Ukraine or not. In

your opinion, how will the situation develop?

– So far not a single Local Orthodox Church has recognized the newly-created schismatic structure in Ukraine. I would like to note that in the current situation the question is not whether to support Moscow or Constantinople. The question is: do we recognize the exceptional authoritative powers of one local Church over all the other Orthodox Churches? Do we recognize that it has the right to declare, with the stroke of a pen, schismatics canonical and the universally recognized Local Church inexistent? We all are faced with an attempt to impose a new ecclesiology on the Orthodox Church. I do not think that the Local Churches will agree to that.

– By granting the Tomos of autocephaly to the newly-instituted church structure, Patriarch Bartholomew, in fact, ignored the existence in Ukraine of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the largest in number and recognized by all the Local Churches. In what way has its situation changed, when both the Phanar and the Ukrainian authorities are trying hard "not to notice" its existence?

– From the canonical perspective the situation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has not changed at all. It was and is the only canonical Church of Ukraine. However, from a legal perspective its situation has worsened dramatically. The discriminatory laws adopted by the Parliament of Ukraine, which I mentioned earlier, in fact, doom to persecutions those who remain faithful to the canonical Orthodoxy.

Despite all the efforts and pressure exerted by the Ukrainian authorities, clergymen and laypeople of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have shown exceptional faithfulness to their Church: except several clergymen and two bishops who joined the schism, the clergy supports His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry.

Of course, persecutions of the faithful in Ukraine are still taking place, but the truth is not on the persecutors' side: even now we see that the Ukrainian Orthodox Churches' parishes win suits of ownership of church buildings, that processions with the cross bring together hundreds of thousands of believers. For instance, taking part in the procession with cross that marked the 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia were 250 thousand believers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and in 2017 taking part in the procession with the cross were 100 thousand people. It shows that the faithful people do not take notice of and ignore actions of the Ukrainian authorities which are obsessed with the idea of creating a nationalistic "church."

– Your Holiness, recently you have celebrated the 10th anniversary of your Patriarchal enthronement. Have you managed to put into action the expectations that you had when assuming governance over the Russian Orthodox Church? What events over this decade

were of uttermost importance for you?

– While being the Locum Tenens, I prayed to the Lord, never asking Him to make me a Patriarch. I asked Him to reveal His divine will in the election. Witnessing the ministry of previous Patriarchs of All Russia, I clearly saw that this ministry is, first of all, a heavy cross. Now I know it from my own experience. However, I deem it my duty to carry this cross for as long as I have strength.

The past ten years were full of significant changes in the life of the Church and the entire Russian society. It is difficult to give prominence to some specific events and say that they had the utmost importance. The main thing is that I see how people's attitude towards the Church has changed, how atheists have failed in their hopes that the Church would be driven into a ghetto, how its revival is taking place before our very eyes. No external circumstances can destroy the Church, "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). I have learned that from the experience of my whole life.

Significant reorganizations have also occurred in the internal life of the Church. First of all, it concerns parish life that now, apart from the liturgy which, of course, remains its core, includes social, youth and educational activities. The number of dioceses, of diocesan bishops has increased considerably. The more dioceses there are in the Church, the closer bishops are to real life, to people. I want to believe that the seeds planted in this past decade will produce abundant plantlets in the years to come.

– The Greeks traditionally had and still have close ties with their Russian brothers. What message would you like to convey to the Orthodox Greeks?

– I visited Greece on numerous occasions and always felt that I came not to some strangers, but to my brothers. For centuries our peoples were linked by the bonds of spiritual unity. I believe that the brotherly and good relations between our Churches will help through joint efforts overcome the tragic division that affected our common Orthodox family. May the Lord, by the prayers of our common saints, preserve our Churches and our peoples in peace and unity.

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