Primate of Ukrainian Orthodox Church, addressing Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko: This is not the path that will lead to unity

On 21 March 2019, the Primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine, took part in a meeting of the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko with members of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations. The meeting was organized on the initiative of the state leader.

Accompanying His Beatitude were Metropolitan Antony of Borispol and Brovary, chancellor of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and Archpriest Nikolai Danilevich, vice-chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

In his address Mr. Petro Poroshenko noted the necessity to uphold principles of religious freedom. “As President, as guarantor of constitutional rights I will do all I can to defend the religious freedom in Ukraine. The religious freedom should be an object of our joint activities,” he said and added that

“violence can never be a means of problem solving.”

Taking the floor, His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine thanked the head of the state for the meeting and said the following:

“In this blessed season of Lent the Church calls for repentance, self-restraint, prayer and reconciliation with our neighbours. The task of the Church is to take care of things spiritual, moral, to lead people to God, to preach love, forgiveness and peace. The task of the state is to take care of the material dimension of human life, to enforce laws, etc.

“However, during this Lenten season, as well as during a long period preceding it, in our country such developments have been taking place in the religious sphere that grieve us. I mean seizures of church buildings, interference of government officials in church affairs and other offences.

“In particular, heads of village councils, city councils and administrations, as well as deputies convene meetings of territorial communities and initiate unlawful votes to change subordination of a religious community. It directly contradicts the law of Ukraine No.2683 (bill No. 4128-d) that says that only a religious community, not a territorial one, can do that with a two-thirds majority. As a result, our church buildings are being forcibly seized, our communities are being driven out. Our communities are forced to gather for prayer at houses in village. For instance, our communities gather for worship at houses in the Volyn region: in the villages of Nichegovka, Krasnovolya, Telchi and Godomichi (Manevichi district); in the villages of Zhidichin, Klepachi, Berestyanoye and Kulchin (Lutsk district); and in Berestechko, Peski, Zvinyache and Skobelka (Gorokhov district). Even for the Volyn region this is not the comprehensive data. There are many such cases in various regions. Often the police does nothing – just passively observes.

“I want to emphasize that it is not we who seize our churches, it is not our communities that cut off locks of their own churches, as mass media sometimes allege. People, alien to the Church and not churchgoers, come and do that.

“One of the recent outrageous incidents occurred in Baranovka town, Zhitomir region, where on the Forgiveness Sunday a deputy of the Radical Party, Oleg Kovalsky, convened “veche” and sent some 400 people to seize the Church of the Nativity of the Theotokos of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. As the result, the crowd poured into the church. Some 150 parishioners who were inside were beaten up, thrown down the church stairs and pushed out beyond the church fence.

“And for such illegal actions, for inciting interreligious enmity, for trying to seize church buildings none of the officials is held responsible. Instead, a priest of our Church who defends our churches and upholds

the rule of law (I mean Archpriest Viktor Zemlyanoy from the Rovno diocese) has come under pressure: criminal proceedings have been brought against him. He is said to be suspected of breaching articles No. 161 (part 1) and No. 300 (part 1). All the accusations are artificial. Besides, attempts are being made to impose a pre-trial restraint on him. As we have known, pressure is being put on our priest by the order of Vasily Bedriya, head of the administration of the Security Service of Ukraine for the Rovno region.

“Similar criminal proceedings have been opened in other regions of Ukraine as well. We regard them as corrupt ones, as a means of placing pressure on the clergy and faithful of our Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and deem such persecution in a democratic society inadmissible and violating the right to the freedom of religion.

“The mass media are being spreading false information about the transfer of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church’s religious communities (some 450 parishes). However, according to our data, only 42 parishes decided to move to the OCU, and nine of them did it without their priest. The rest 55 of the so-called “voluntary transfers” were in fact seizures, with locks cut off and believers beaten up. One hundred and thirty-seven cases were registered, when a territorial community voted for the transfer to the OCU against the will of a religious community. In such cases our faithful with their priests stay and gather for worship in their churches, while local authorities report that the “transfer” of the community has taken place.

“Facts of threats and intimidation of clergymen of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, of pressure being exerted on them, as well as of discrimination and other violations of the rights and freedoms of our Church have already drawn attention of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and published in his report of 12 March 2019.

“All that is now going on in villages in various regions of Ukraine has a negative impact on the authority of governing bodies and on the authority of the President.

“Therefore I would ask you, Pyotr Alexeyevich, to give instructions to local officials to stop artificially initiating changes in subordination. It will put an end to conflicts between people.

“It is my conviction that all the developments affecting our Church and the Orthodox Christians in general are not the path which we should follow. It is surely not the path that will lead us to unity. It is necessary to admit the fallacy of this path, to learn from mistakes and seek other ways of church unity. Seizures and “dragging” of parishes only throw the process of unity back, to what it was decades ago. We already endured the same in the early 1990s. Therefore, if we cannot completely rectify the situation, we should at least start with not aggravating it.

“Mr. President, I want you to get me right. We, that is our Ukrainian Orthodox Church, are pro-Ukraine, we are supporters of an integral and unified state, tranquility, peace, mutual understanding and unity between our people. We have always defended and declared it. All that I mentioned above only harms the state. Make sure that it stops. I believe that it is within your power!”

In response to the address of the Primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Mr. Poroshenko said that neither he nor any district state administration gave instructions at a local level concerning transfers of churches from one confession to another. The head of the state advised to file lawsuits in the aforementioned cases and proposed to His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry to hold a separate meeting to discuss these critical issues.

His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry handed over to the President a list of seized churches and a document describing other offences against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The state leader charged his assistants to examine the situation and take measures in each specific case.

When the official part was over, Mr. Poroshenko held a brief personal meeting with His Beatitude Metropolitan Onufry of Kiev and All Ukraine, the Information and Education Department of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church reports, citing the UOC DECR website.

DECR Communication Service

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