



Metropolitan Anthony of Borispol and Brovary: Ordeals make us stronger

During his visit to Bulgaria Metropolitan Anthony of Borispol and Brovary, chancellor of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, gave an interview to pravoslavie.bg web portal, in which he spoke of the problems facing the Ukrainian Orthodoxy and of how Constantinople's recent decisions and actions jeopardize the unity and canonical order of the Orthodox world. The Russian translation of the interview was published by the Information and Education Department of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

– Your Eminence, the whole Orthodox world, including the Orthodox Christians in Bulgaria, is rather alarmed, keeping up with the recent developments in Ukraine. As the result of the so-called “unification council,” a new structure was created in your country – Orthodox Church of Ukraine – which in the beginning of this year received the tomos of autocephaly from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The enthronement of the OCU head has recently taken place in Kiev. What is the attitude of the faithful people of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church towards these developments?

– The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been carrying out its ministry in the territory of Ukraine for over a thousand years. Over these years our Church had different names and came under different jurisdictions, but has always been the only true Church. It often happens in history that in parallel with the true Church there appear heresies and schisms that masquerade as a Church and want to be called a Church, but they will never replace the Church. This is what we see in Ukraine as well.

In 1989 one schism emerged – the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). Later, in 1992, a second schism appeared – the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate (UOC KP). In December 2018 these two structures merged into one, called “Orthodox Church of Ukraine” (OCU). However, despite all these metamorphoses, the schism is still a schism, and our Ukrainian Orthodox Church was and remains unchanged, unified and true. Believers see and sense where the true Church is and where its distorted copy is. At the same time, our faithful take hard all the developments inflicting serious wounds on the body of the Church.

– What explanation can the position of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople have? In your opinion, why did the Phanar interfere in the internal affairs of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy?

– It is better to put this question to Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople himself. I cannot give an exhaustive answer, but can share with you some of my thoughts. In the early 20th century a new theory

of special powers of the Patriarch of Constantinople was actively developing. In the 1920s its leading ideologist was Patriarch Meletius (Metaxakis) of Constantinople. The way the Patriarch of Constantinople acted with regard to the Renovators in the Russian Orthodox Church a hundred years ago is practically the same as what the Phanar is doing now with regard to Ukraine.

If we analyze the texts of the tomes that the Patriarchate of Constantinople granted for the last one hundred and fifty years, we will see how limited the autocephaly of the OCU is. In the text of the tomos the Patriarchate of Constantinople tries to secure for itself a number of special powers: the right to grant autocephaly, the right to govern the diaspora, and the right of appeal. So, all the ambitions and innovations that the Patriarchate of Constantinople actively tried to implement since the past century were successfully entrenched in the OCU tomos. Here is the Phanar's own ideology which was unknown to the Orthodox mind up until the 19th century. However, this ideology only complicates the church life, not helping solve problems.

It surprises me that in all the problematic situations which sometimes arise in various Local Churches the Patriarchate of Constantinople, firstly, interferes, and secondly, almost in every case sides with the forces that are in opposition to the supreme authority of those Churches.

Such was the situation in the 1920s, surrounding the recognition of the Renovators and the support of the Soviet authorities. Back then the Patriarch of Constantinople recommended the Holy Patriarch Tikhon to abdicate. Such was the situation here, in Bulgaria, when in 1998, at the Council of Primate in Sofia Patriarch Bartholomew also suggested that Patriarch Maxim of blessed memory should abdicate. There are many other examples. In a similar way Constantinople acts in Ukraine. That is why I think that it is by no means an accidental, but consistent policy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. It only does harm to the Church.

– What is the reaction of the Orthodox world to the Phanar's actions? What is your prognosis as to further developments in the world Orthodoxy in the face of this unexpected challenge?

– The Orthodox world is trying to preserve its unity. As of today, we have not seen any Church unanimously supporting the actions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Moreover, the Church of Antioch, the Serbian and the Polish Churches, and the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia have already openly spoken against the recognition of the newly-created quasi-church organization (OCU). Patriarch Bartholomew's actions in Ukraine are bringing schism into the Orthodox world. We see this schism beginning to show today even on Mt Athos where some (yet a minority) monasteries receive the schismatics, while the majority refrain or even shut their gates before the schismatics. This is a challenge for the whole Orthodoxy.

I am deeply convinced that we in the Church must not be guided by mundane interests, that is, interests of either the Hellenism (Greek world), or the Russian world, or the Ukrainian world. We must think, first and foremost, about the Church, about its unity. In this regard it is gratifying to see that representatives of both Greek and other Churches state that it is not the Ukrainian autocephaly, but the unity of the universal Orthodoxy that is important to them. It is very good, it gives hope.

– We see that President Poroshenko played a leading role in establishing the OCU and that the U.S. Department of State actively interfered in this process. What is the role of politics and politicians in the developments in Ukraine?

– The interest of the United States in the autocephaly of the Church of Ukraine is quite obvious. We can say that, basing ourselves on official comments and other actions coming from the Department of State and the U.S. ambassadors to different countries. As for the latest characteristic examples, I would like to recall a recent meeting of the U.S. Ambassador to Greece, Geoffrey Pyatt, with the Civil Governor of Mt Athos, Kostas Dimtsas, that took place exactly on the day when a delegation of the so-called OCU visited Athos. Some U.S. officials repeatedly spoke in support of the OCU's autocephaly. For example, the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, stated that the creation of the OCU is a manifestation of "religious freedom" in Ukraine. Yet, in reality the manifestation of such "religious freedom" led to the seizure of dozens of church buildings of our Church in Ukraine. Besides, a desire has been expressed to rename our Church, contrary to the Constitution of Ukraine and all the basic human rights principles. Our Church is being placed under colossal pressure, and for some reason it does not cause concern or produce statements of high representatives of the United States who stand up for religious freedom.

– The Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has not yet made an official decision concerning the creation of the OCU and its canonicity. In this regard, a question arises, very important for us: is there priesthood and grace in the OCU? Are the Orthodox sacraments being administered there? Can an Orthodox Christian go to its churches?

– Our Church's attitude to the creation of the OCU was expressed in the decision of the Council of Bishops of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of November 13th, 2018, and of the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of December 7th, 2018. We do not regard the OCU as a fully fledged Church. There were two schisms – the UOC KP and the UAOC, which merged into one organization, but it is still a schism. They were and still are outside the fence of the Church. Nothing has changed in fact; they did not return to the Church by repenting of the sin of schism, and the apostolic succession of their hierarchy was not restored.

Here, in Bulgaria, there was also a schism. In 1998 all the Bulgarian schismatics came to the Council of Primates of the Local Churches with letters of repentance, whereafter the plenitude of the Orthodoxy in

the face of Primates of all the Local Churches accepted their repentance and restored them into communion with the Church. In our Ukrainian case no repentance was shown by the schismatics, no letters of repentance were written. The schismatics were recognized without repentance by a forcible and unilateral decision of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Therefore, there are no ecclesiastical reasons to regard them as a fully fledged Church. The fact that the Patriarchate of Constantinople recognized them is, indeed, a great ecclesiological problem. Did the schismatics become a Church or, on the contrary, did the Patriarchate of Constantinople disgrace itself by communicating with them? How canonical is the Patriarchate of Constantinople itself today? It is the plenitude of the Orthodoxy that must give answers to all these questions.

Yet, in this regard I would like to recall the reply of Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky) of September 22nd, 1925, to a letter of a Renovationist hierarch who claimed that the Renovationists had become canonical, because the Patriarchate of Constantinople had recognized them. Metropolitan Sergius wrote in response that the fact that the Patriarch of Constantinople had exchanged messages with the Renovationist Synod was far from convincing. “We know,” Metropolitan Sergius wrote, “that there are only those in the unity of the Church who are in communion with their legitimate bishop and patriarch; that a person excommunicated by his patriarch cannot be accepted into communion by others... And that a person who enters into communion with the excommunicated one, shall be excommunicated (Apostolic Canons 10 and 12). It means that if the Patriarch of Constantinople has entered into communion with the Renovationists, so much the worse for the Patriarch. No one is above the law of God: neither patriarchs, nor laypeople. When in the 15th century the Patriarch of Constantinople fell into Unia with Rome, the Russian Church did not follow him, and the Roman Catholic priests living in Russia at the time did not become Orthodox. In the same manner, communication between the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Renovationists can only make the Patriarch a Renovationist; it cannot make the Renovationists Orthodox.”

Moreover, we see that the plenitude of the Orthodox Church did not agree to this, the Church is not ready to accept the legalization of schismatics.

– What would you say in response to accusations against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of “lack of patriotism,” “disloyalty” to its own country, of orienting itself towards Russia?

– The Ukrainian Orthodox Church artificially, I emphasize, artificially was presented and is still presented as an enemy of the Ukrainian society. It is a flagrant slander. Our faithful serve in the army, pay taxes, pray “for the authorities and the armed forces,” are law-abiding citizens. All these allegations are artificial, groundless and planted.

– Are the Ukrainian authorities oppressing the Ukrainian Orthodox Church today? Can we speak of persecutions?

– As of today, some 45 our church buildings have been seized and in a hundred and fifty cases there is still a conflict situation. When people are being driven out of their own churches, forced to find premises for celebrating divine services and praying, what is it if not a persecution? When every day the Ukrainian mass media throw tons of informational mud at the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, discriminating against it and presenting the Church as an enemy, what is it if not a persecution? Persecutions have different forms; they do not only mean killings.

– And in conclusion, what would you, dear Vladyka, like to say to the Orthodox Christians in Bulgaria?

– I believe that the Lord allowed this ordeal to befall us so that we all may get stronger – we, Orthodox Christians in Ukraine, as well as Orthodox Christians all over the world. You in Bulgaria survived the schism, and to some extent the body of the Bulgarian Church still remembers and feels the pain of the schism. It seems to me that your people, who went through the tragedy of schism, feel the pain and are aware of the problems we are facing today. Therefore, we ask for your prayers and your support for our Church and wish you to be faithful to your Holy Bulgarian Church. And I ask you to pray for the unity of the whole world Orthodoxy.

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